



Interface of Evangelical Realism and Modernity: A Re-reading of the Novels *Sukumari* and *Phulmoni*

ISSN 2583-1836

N. Sajan

Department of Studies in English
Kannur University, Kerala

Abstract : *The study discusses the two nineteenth century novels Sukumari_ by Mooliyil Joseph and Phulmoni by Catherine Hanna Mullens as two seminal texts on the beginnings of protestant Christianity in North Kerala. As fictional discourses they reveal and document the early phase hiccups of the rise and spread of Christianity under the aegis of Basel Mission. The novels foreground the sociocultural issues of assimilation and resistance that the Mission had to encounter during the stage of establishing itself as a beacon lamp of renaissance among the less enlightened communities of the coastal region of erstwhile Malabar. Ideas and perspectives drawn from the critical discourses on Evangelical Realism and colonial modernity are interwoven with the tropes of regional history to have a contemporary understanding of the two fictional texts which apparently deserve re-appraisal and re-contextualisation against the backdrop of the modernity in Kerala. The article inquiries into how dialogic imagination comes into play as the novels navigate the binary conflicts of colonial / national, privileged/under privileged, upper caste / lower caste , and modern/conservative. The interplay of the thematics of evangelical realism and Christian philosophy are brought into critical cognisance as the novel Sukumari is closely examined in terms of its characters and major narrative constituents. The novel Phulmoni is treated as a background text that paved the way for the rise of a new, but less recognised, genre of evangelical fiction.*

Key words: Dialogics, Evangelical Realism, Fictionality, History, Metaphysical Reality, Modernity, Proselytisation, Resistance, Social Transformation.

The tag line below the simulated version of the novel *Sukumari* (1897) by Mooliyil Joseph, located in the library of Basel Mission in Switzerland goes like this: “A story that narrates the missionary activities of the German Mission in the land of Malayalam,” and it is footnoted by George Irumbayam in his pioneering Malayalam critical text, *Malayala Novel : Pathombathaam Noottandil*, that meticulously analyses the novels published in the nineteenth century (155). Veering away from this tag line critical cue, the main argument advanced in this study is that *Sukumari* reveals an evangelical vision of life, simultaneously documenting and fictionalising the social paradigms of assimilation and those of resistance encountered by Basel Mission Christianity during the early 1840s in North Malabar, under the evangelical and reformatory stewardship of the Swiss missionary Rev. Samuel Hebich. Apart from the evangelical realism which is evolved through the writing of the novel, *Sukumari* could be seen as a novel of the education and progress of an individual woman subject who extricates herself from the the agency of caste and age old traditions prevailing in Kerala. Dilip M. Menon critiques this phenomenon of the inviolability of caste despite all the project of colonial modernity and goes on to argue that “fundamentally hierarchical and inegalitarian notions of caste came to preside alongside religion as an irreducible essence of Indian civilisation, amidst colonial professions of the institution of equality” (1662). It is under such an impasse like situation that such novels foreground social alternatives to resist and overcome caste politics. *Sukumari*, as a novel, tries to explain the sociological undercurrents of conversion

by revealing what Meredith B. McGuire explains as “ the connection the individual’s meaning system, social relationships, and very identity”(77).

An earlier evangelical novel that might have fired the imagination of Mooliyil Joseph is the one published in Bengali by Catherine Hanna Mullens in 1852, and later on translated into Malayalam by Rev. Joseph Peat in 1858, as *Phulmoni Ennum Corunna Ennum Peraya Randu Sthreekalude Katha*. Both these novels are pragmatically anchored in contemporary literary studies as part of the genre of conversion narratives. And more often than not, these novels are not treated as part of the canon of fiction by early writers in Malayalam. Menon is of the view that “Joseph Mooliyil encountered the novel *Saguna* by the Christian convert Krupabai Sathianathan (which inspired him to write his own novel *Sukumari*), in the journal *Keralopkari* ” (1663). In 2013, Chintha Publishers brought out a series of fifteen novels of the nineteenth century entitled *Novel Pazhama* edited by N. Santhosh Kumar with his foreword “The Context of Kerala Renaissance: Reading Nineteenth Century Novels Today” (*Sukumari* 8). The publication of this series is arguably a juncture in the diachrony of such novels as they began to be re-located and re-examined with the contemporary critical perspectives concerning relations of production, gender issues, everyday life, sexuality, morality, casteist politics, customs, beliefs, oral tradition, aesthetics, political consciousness, and narrative modes. Santhosh Kumar is of the view that the renaissance in India had heavily influenced the rise of the genre of novel, and the novels written by Indian writers are not sheer imitation of British novels. He tries to establish the fact that these novels do “bear ample evidence of a sensibility and experiential domain which

had seeped into those who who received colonial education; and these Malayalam novels document this domain of experience and they have also come to stand as precursors to the strivings for renaissance in Kerala”(Kumar 7-8). Before closely examining, in detail, the reformation and enlightenment in *Sukumari*, it would be well in place to examine how far the two novels bear the characteristics of evangelical realism, by going into the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which they were written, published, and translated for the reading public in certain parts of India in the later half of the nineteenth century.

Historically, the two novels appear on the horizon of literary reading during the span of the fifty years when Queen Victoria made her Proclamation in 1858, and soon afterwards the British dissolved the East India Company in 1874 and consolidated their political / colonial governance in India. The towns of Calcutta, Surat, Madras, and Bombay became busy trading hubs where the British set up their offices of governance and alongside these, there were social re-organisations and new kinds of consolidation of power in tandem with the various evangelical fractions. The Basel Evangelical Mission from Switzerland set up their mission stations in Calcutta and in the coastal towns of South India like Mangalore, Kannur, Calicut, and Thalassery. The social, economic, political, and cultural facets of life of the people in these regions of India can be seen in the novels of the nineteenth century that came to be written as a result of the spread of English education. Such novels were soon translated into the vernacular languages to foster rational thinking and modernist sensibility among the local communities who were under the yoke of outmoded superstitious beliefs and customs.

Today, to a certain extent, it is possible to understand the “the diverse forces that influenced the social formations of Kerala” from the reading of such narratives (Kumar 8). These novels foreground binary conflicts like colonial/national, privileged / under privileged, upper caste / lower caste, man /woman, and modern /conservative. One significant aspect of these narratives is that they used the dialogic imagination of the medium of the novel to highlight the socio-historical contingencies of women’s education for a country’s progress.

The novels *Sukumari* and *Phulmoni* project the vision that evangelisation and proselytisation salubriously led the communities of North Malabar and Bengal towards the upliftment of the downtrodden, fomenting a world view that subsequently built up of ideas of justice and reason. *Phulmoni* and *Sukumari* fulfil an evangelical mission rather than an exclusive literary purpose of delighting the society by its sheer fictionality. Writing novels was an extension of evangelical activism in the mid -nineteenth century, and much more than that, such works can be seen as contributing towards the enrichment and enhancement of modernity and prosaic reason. P.P. Raveendran, in his introduction to the novel says, “*Phulmoni* is the clarion call of colonial modernity in the nineteenth century, and also that of the the social reformation that happened in Kerala , and it presents the desirable face of modernity as well (*Phulmoni* 12). In Kerala, western missionaries like Hermann Gundert worked in the spheres of journalism, lexicography, scripting rules of grammar, translation, and compilation of text books. The Basel Mission commissioned a printing press at Mangalore in 1842 and later on at Nettur, Thalassery, in 1845. When the litho press became a reality, Malayalam books began to be printed and published for the public to read. Earlier, in 1821,

the Church Missionary Society had established a printing press at Kottayam, and the first Malayalam book was published by this press in 1824, with the title *Stories Translated from English*. George Irumbayam maintains that this is “the first Malayalam book to be printed in Kerala” (46).

In 1877, when Richard Collins’s English novel *Slayer Slain* was translated into Malayalam as *Gadhaka Vadham* by Arch Deacon Koshy, a new pathway to the enlightenment of Kerala society was being made as it was the first novel to be written in the socio-economic context of Kerala. Works from English, when they were translated into Malayalam, created unprecedented socio-economic ripples among the readers in Kerala. The readers were able to attain a new lease of life with re-formulated notions of well-being, mobility, equality, cosmopolitanism, and societal progress.

K. Chidambara Vadyar adapted and indigenised Charles and Mary Lamb’s prose tales of Shakespearean plays to suit the socio-cultural ethos and aspirations of the people of Kerala during the span of five years 1880-85. *As you Like It* was adapted to Malayalam as *Kamakshi Charitham* and *The Winter’s Tale* as *Varshakala Katha*. In 1884, he is supposed to have done the adaptation of Catherine Hannah Mullens’ *Phulmoni and Coruna* as *Padminiyum Karunayum*. This, in brief, is the socio-cultural context in which Joseph Mooliyil, a Christian convert from the Thiyya community at Kannur, writes the novel *Sukumari* as part of his committed evangelical activism in the region which was ridden with the social malaise of casteism, discrimination, and superstitious beliefs.

Society was compartmentalised on the basis of caste hierarchies and there was little space for the progress and

mobility of backward communities, especially within the domains of education and job opportunities. There was the opening up of one large opportunity of conversion to Christianity in the mid- nineteenth century, and this was largely due to the advent of the missionaries of Basel Mission from Switzerland and Germany.

Narratives on the social phenomenon of conversion and its rich material and spiritual benefits began to appear and *Sukumari* is one such prominent narrative that documents the struggles and social transformations of the people of backward communities who reaped the benefits of religious conversion. *Sukumari* is an evangelical novel in which Joseph Mooliyil thematises the trials and tribulations of a few families that embraced Christianity as a result of the missionary activities of Basel Evangelical Mission in North Malabar. Mooliyil Joseph himself was a teacher-activist of Basel Mission and he draws the fabula of the novel from his own evangelical experiences in different areas like Kannur, Taliparamba, Chirakkal, Trichambaram, Mangalore and Belgaum. The real timeline of the represented incidents in the novel could be the span two or three decades beginning from the year 1840. George Irumbayam rightly argues that this is not a historical narrative but much more than that it is a social narrative that realistically represents and problematises the issues of conversion, assimilation, acculturation, and the formation of a cosmopolitan society in North Malabar: “*Sukumari* is not a historical novel, but a narrative that illustrates the recent and contemporary incidents of the author’s own times” (156). The novel is focussed upon the incidents spread over three generations of people who originally were of the socially and economically backward Thiyya caste.

The narrative begins with the description of the myth of the temples at Taliparamba, Thrikkaloor, and Trichur where the feet, torso, and head of Lord Shiva are respectively laid. The whole of North Kerala is spatialized in sync with the Hindu myth of the head, body, and soul. The area centred popular mythology says that a few sages reached North Kerala and mapped a rounded space similar to a *talika* which means a plate, and so it got named as Taliparamba. The little hamlet of Taliparamba is spatialized as a consecrated land “tali” which literally means sprinkling of the holy water intended for purification. Matha, the old woman; Manikkyam, the young maid; and Chirutha, the little child are the three characters who go for the temple festival at Trichambaram where the people have separate gathering spaces based on caste hierarchy. The three lower caste *Thiyya* women were walking towards a congregation where Christian hymn singing alternated by sermons were keeping a crowd of people in rapt attention. Evangelisation by Basel Mission is initiated by hymn singing and sermons; and this is a germinal incident in the novel that ignites a dialogic exchange on Christianity and its different worship patterns between Manikkyam and Matha. Their dialogue focusses on themes like worship without idols, baptism, and beef eating. They meet the European evangelist and he welcomes them offering plantains; but Matha and Manikyam are ambivalent about getting closer to the hymn singing sermoniser. He asks Chirutha to sing a song, and she sings a devotional song about the “Tamburan of Taliparamba.” In continuation another man in the crowd sings a folk song about the ravaging conquest of North Kerala by Tippu Sultan, the Muslim ruler of Srirangapatanam. As a sort of coda to the two songs, the evangelist asks a follower to sing the hymn of the birth of Jesus and spread the gospel of love and kindness to humanity:

“God, out of kindness to the suffering masses,

Divinely conceived Immaculate Mary with Christ, the Redeemer,

To relieve them of their endless miseries” (*Sukumari* 37).

Meredith B. McGuire, in his brilliant study of the sociology of religion, discusses the shaping of the individual child’s religion and the ways a child would develop a sense of meaning, belonging, and identity: “Like all identity projects, the individual’s religion develops and changes over the life course. A person is not born with a set of religious beliefs and practices; religion is developed and nurtured (or ignored) in the socialisation of the child” (53).

Manikyam picks up the lost thread of their family’s link with Christianity by letting the European evangelist know that her brother Raman had embraced Christianity and his conversion to the alien religion was disliked by his mother Matha, and so he had to leave his native town, kith and kin, as a rebel recluse. The past of Matha’s family gets revealed here and it is a story of loss and estrangement from the mainstream society. Manikyam gets into a secret relationship with a strange woman Chiranjeevi, who comes to her house asking for fire. The relationship with this Christian woman whom she first looks down upon as *Pattanichi*, a gypsy woman of Pathan origin from Pakistan, grows into a crucial phase in Manikyam’s life. She progressively learns the values and tenets of Christianity through several dialogic exchanges with Chiranjeevi.

Chiranjeevi is a middle aged lady whose husband and sole daughter had embraced Christianity. Her husband is

believed to have died leaving the young daughter Jnanbhranam to fend for herself at a mission orphanage at Chirakkal. Once she grew up she was married by a parish counsellor based at Thalassery, who later died of smallpox, leaving his wife Jnabharanam and her surviving son Sathyadasan Supriyan. Inheriting and imbibing the evangelical zeal from her European husband, Jnanbharanam remained a widow in her later life and dedicated herself and her son to the services of the mission. Her mother too converts herself to Christianity and assumes the name Chiranjeevi. Again, it is Chiranjeevi who metaphorically carries the enlightening fire of religion into the consciousness of Manikyam who, in due course, prevails upon her mother to help her fulfil two of her lifetime wishes; one, to become a Christian, and the other one, to see her daughter and her own mother embrace the same religion. Manikyam gets her mother Matha's support for conversion and fulfils her wish but she soon dies of fever. However, her mother keeps her word and gets herself and her granddaughter converted and they are christened as Jeevi and Sukumari. By this consummation of conversion, they both provide themselves with an altogether new sense of meaning and belonging. Conversion, in McGuire's view, "means a transformation one's *self* concurrent with a transformation of one's basic *meaning system*" (73). Conversion re-defines and re-configures the modes in which a subject perceives the societal surroundings and his/her personal space in them and it also substantially changes one's perception of the world of reality. This happens in the case of both Jeevi and Sukumari. They sculpt their self-identity through their own "biographical arrangement of meanings and interpretations that form a somewhat coherent sense of "who am I?" (McGuire 52). Self-identity is a social construct evolved through a ceaseless relationships and

encounters with other social beings beyond the domains of parents, spouse, and close friends. The self-identity of Sukumari and Jeevi is constantly evolved in the modern eclectic socio-religious context opened up by Christianity and its wide range of culturally available options. To them, religion offers an “optional resource for the ongoing project of constructing personal identity” (McGuire 53). Protestant Christianity brought about enlightenment and household prosperity to the converts from backward communities in North Malabar. Evangelisation was, in many ways, a way to material prosperity and modern standards of living. Pradeepan Pambirikkunnu, in his introduction to *Sukumari* maintains the view that the reader ought to “move beyond the text as Frederic Jameson says, in order to build up an explanatory schema to understand the novel *Sukumari* which was written in 1897” (12).

The novel throws light upon the cultural evolutions brought about by proselytisation. Conversion to Christianity was a sort of deliverance mainly to the untouchable *Thiyyas* who were struggling to make both the ends meet due to their socio-economic backwardness. This is relevant with regard to all the characters who resort to conversion to Christianity as they all get culturally baptised into the dialogics of religious discourses on overcoming sin and attaining salvation from sinful existence. In ways more than one, this interface with the discourse of a well grounded community was similar to the Indian renaissance which happened in the later decades of the twentieth century as part of various reform movements. Dilip M. Menon maintains the stand that, “Evangelical Christianity saw inequality and superstition as the defining features of the indigenous world view, starting off a chorus of assent as much as revivalist dissent” (1663). Hindu religious

nationalism was responsible for the creation of a segregation between the upper castes and the lower castes. Alongside this, the lower castes who conceived of god and religion as integral part of their everyday life were hard put to encounter the difference between the spiritual and the materialistic categories of life. The spiritually oriented statecraft was a strange new phenomenon to the lower/backward communities. In such circumstances, conversion brought forth a new religion to the lower caste communities which were not an integral part of Brahminical Hinduism. The Brahminical communities did not accord a human status to the lower castes and so they had to be converted as Hindus first. This conversion to Hinduism is problematised and explained by Pradeepan Pambirikunnu as “integrally related to the formulation of a nationalist Hindutva identity through Indian myths and traditions to counter the colonial forces” (16). He continues with the argument that it is “with the advent of the Portuguese that religious colonialism gets evolved by making the worship of Christ more a part of a large attempt to transform the socio-political system conform to colonial religious beliefs” (16). *Sukumari* reveals the complex ways in which religious colonialism is negated and thereby becomes a part of the genre of “liberation oriented literature” (16).

Conversion to Christianity made modernity and its materialistic consciousness accessible to the backward and lower caste people. Christianity came to North Malabar side by side with colonial rule and the socio-economic changes brought about by them challenged all prevailing caste hierarchies and superstitions. Menon advances the argument that “Christianity was the interface through which lower castes experienced modernity. And it was Christianity that

allowed for their entry into a public sphere generated by inter-religious discussions” (1663).

The colonial administration found evangelisation a convenient tool to put in place jurisprudence, taxation, civil code, railroads, and educational institutions. Ideas related to everyday life like cleanliness, human dignity, right to means of livelihood, right to equality of worship, and self-reliance were propagated and initiated into the lives of lower caste communities by means of conversion to Christianity. All these are dialogically problematised in the novel *Sukumari* by Joseph Mooliyil, a *Thiyya* who had married a Christian convert from Namboodiri Brahman caste. Mooliyil, in his personal life, used novel as a discursive tool of his evangelical activism directed towards modernisation and socio-cultural reform of the backward castes like *Thiyyas* and *Pulayas*. Menon conceives of the novel as projecting a space where the backward castes find themselves “in an enclosed world of Christians trying to negotiate new forms of self, family and community and is replete with anecdotes of mobility and salvation” (1665).

Sukumari does offer an inside picture of the transformation happening in North Kerala. Conversion and evangelical activism was not an anti-Hindu phenomenon as such, but it was more of a work intended towards the enrichment of a particular faith in tandem with furtherance of social progress and material welfare. Going by such a thinking Dilip M Menon pertinently observes, “Christianity was the interface through which lower castes experienced modernity” (1663). Christianity and the conversion of indigenous backward community of *Thiyyas* is dialogically portrayed in the novel through the exchange of deep thoughts and ideas

about life, morals, suffering, endurance and death. The six major philosophic questions raised by Manikyam to Jnanabharanam to delve deep into the metaphysical aspects of life are:

- Where did the duality of good and evil originate from?
- Why is the tempter serpent condemned as stealthy and cunning even before the birth of Sin?
- Did human conscience originate simultaneously along with the origin of man/woman or did it rise after the fall of man/woman from grace?
- Were good and evil there as one single unit or were they two different units.
- Did all humans have identical or different conscience?
- If the Fall of humanity was due to the sin of one person, would not there have been an effortless deliverance for all, if that one person had lived a life of obedience to Divine Will?

Such puzzles of life were resolved during the long dialogues between Manikyam and Chiranjeevi. A social cohesion is brought about by this solving of puzzles of existence within the domain of Christianity.

The dialogic narrative satirically problematises the internal and external conflicts that arise out of the evangelisation of Raman who is said to be mysteriously lost

after his conversion to Christianity or rather captured by slave traders from the neighbouring French province Mahe. The spirit of Christianity persists in the two survivors in the family, Matha and Manikyam. A prolonged incurable fever that Manikyam suffers is assumed by her mother Matha as the consequence of some ghostly visitation on account of their transgressive conversion to Christianity. She summons an astrologer to treat the suffering patient but there is no respite for Manikyam's fever. The astrologer superstitiously prevails upon the mother to seek out an exorcist *Peruvannan* and perform the task of disembodiment of the ghost out of Manikyam's body and then make her wear a talisman on her body. Manikyam adamantly replies "I need no talisman or anything like; I will tie a knot on my own" (*Sukumari* 51). She further reveals the ruse behind the astrologer's clairvoyance by finding out from the errand boy who was sent to summon the astrologer. The boy had given all the background history of the evangelisation of the family even before the astrologer arrived to treat Manikyam. Judgement and rational thinking assume an upper hand in this situation and this is what is reflectively brought into the dialogic imagination of the novel.

Death, disease, penury, and caste discrimination were the most serious problems that were to be overcome or rather efficaciously encountered in the society. The Counsellor realised that "it is very arduous a task to convert to Christianity a low caste person who has no literacy or education; especially when his/her belief is firmly rooted in a religion, even if he/she is hard put to undergo a life of misery (*Sukumari* 55)."

This realisation is very crucial in the process of conversion as McGuire argues that there is a transformation of the self that has to happen on three planes namely, “social, psychological, and ideational components” (77). The social component involves the interface of the convert with parents, friends, and colleagues. He goes on to explain that the “psychological component refers to emotional and affective aspects of conversion as well as to changes in values and attitudes” and that the “ideational component includes the actual ideas the convert embraces or rejects during the process” (77). The phase of enlightenment begins five months after the death of Manikyam when her mother Matha gets transformed after she ontologically realises that she is sinful as she too is a descendent of the sinful Adam and Eve as said in *The Bible*. The wages of sin is death but Matha undergoes an inward transformation and adopts the name Jeevi and proclaims “I will live even if I die” (57). The Counsellor christens Chirutha as Sukumari at a tender age of seven and then she begins her life of experience. She meets the old hard working Thejopalan at Burnassery who does public sanitation work during day time and takes care of the old destitute inmates of his colony. After the death of Jeevi, she is orphaned but taken care of by Thejopalan. She gets to meet good Samaritan people like Dinakaran and his ailing daughter Paripoornam.

Life as an orphan in Christian orphanages and schools is a phase of severe adversities in Sukumari’s early life of childhood and adolescence. The German Basel Mission had established their parish schools at Chirakkal and Thalassery to educate the children by teaching arithmetics, English language, and catechism. Even though an orphan girl, Sukumari is initiated into a life of mobility and co-education.

She meets Jnanbarnam's son Sathyadasan and the relationship opens up a new world of knowledge and cosmopolitan sensibility in her life. The first lessons of friendship and life skills are learnt through this relationship. She sees photographs of unknown men and women from the west and she also gets acquainted to the basic courtesies and behavioural niceties people ought to observe for maintaining good social relationships. Sathyadsan observes that "eventhough we have the word 'gratitude' we do not have the practice of saying 'thanks;' so the westerners have "taught us to say 'salaam' instead of saying 'thanks' when someone gives us something" (*Sukumari* 64). The divergent modes of expressing respect and obeisance in the East and the West and are discussed minutely by Thejopalan and Sathyadasan. Silent bowing or thankful smile are considered as ways of expressing respect and gratitude in India while in the west people speak out their gratitude profusely using the word "thanks". Sathyadasan wonders if the people of India do say "thanks" irrespective of their age or status like in the "west where even the elders say thanks" (*Sukumari* 65). The various dimensions of social life and social equality are foregrounded through such dialogic exchanges in the novel on several occasions. Sathyadasan completes four years of education from the parish school at Kannur and goes to earn his living to take care of both his mother and grandmother. He is skilled in arithmetic and writing letters in English so he gets employed as an apprentice under an accountant and clerk. Skilled writers enjoyed better socio-economic status and were very much in demand among the British administrators who needed educated document writers with clerical skills in both descriptive writing and maintenance of company/ business accounts. Sathyadasan becomes an apprentice writer in a shop at "Camp Bazar" and earns a monthly salary of three rupees

(*Sukumari* 66-69). Making one's living and earning bread by the sweat of the brow was understood by the people as a means of gaining not only economic independence but also as a way towards self-identity. Social mobility and cosmopolitan values were imbibed by the converts along with the values of simple living and frugal spending practices. Sathyadasan befriends a "Marakkar" from Burnassery and teaches him English. The Portuguese were then commonly called "Marakkars" in Kannur. Out of his Good Samaritanism, he saves an old Portuguese man who had slipped and fallen in the roadside cesspool when he tried to retrieve his hat and umbrella blown off by wind and he refuses to accept "the quarter half rupee coin" offered to him in gratitude.

Sukumari too learns life skills and values like frugality, austerity, cleanliness, orderliness and she brings into practice all these values by her dexterous efforts towards systematising herself with western aesthetics of everyday life and sense of propriety. She maintains her obduracy in leaving the school at Burnassery when a few boys insult her godfather "Muthappan" Thejopalan on the road. She soon decides to join the orphanage school at Chirakkal to keep up her sense of dignity and self-respect even in times of adverse physical circumstances.

The orphanage school has a history of cosmopolitan coexistence and tolerance as it is built up on a vast stretch of land donated by the benevolent ruler of Kolathiri Dynasty. The narrative interweaves strands of the local history of North Malabar with the experiences of ordinary men and women who resort to better life and modernist material prosperity. It is arguably a sort of evangelical realism and evangelical vision that tempers the novel. The different facets of

evangelical realism and local history are revealed through the ever-renewing experiences and incidents that criss-cross the arduous life of Sukumari. Mooliyil Sukumaran who was a teacher of English might have modelled the narrative after a picaresque novel like Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or *Joseph Andrews*. In place of all the roughshod experiences of the picaresque character he weaves out the intricate plot through the life of a young girl who goes through her trials and tribulations in getting herself educated and enlightened to acquire the status of an independent liberated woman freeing herself from the clutches of caste discrimination, death, disease, and other such casualties that were prevalent in Kerala during the nineteenth century. Potheri Kunhambu's *Saraswathi Vijayam* and Mrs. Richard Collins's *Slayer Slain* (*Ghadhakavadham*) engage themselves with the social malaise of caste hegemony and deliverance of the society from casteist discriminations. The victory of "Saraswathi" signifies the overcoming of casteist practices through education and modernity , the "Ghadhaka" (Slayer) is the outmoded feudal caste hierarchy which is to be slain by an antithetical force of progressive modernist ideology.

The trying phase of life as an inmate of the mission school at Chirakkal and the quick transformation of Sukumari to adolescence and responsible living are progressively built into the novel with both historical realism and fictionality. The curriculum at Chirakkal school bears ample evidence about the epistemological concerns in the nineteenth century mission schools. The students numbering about four are to go through rigorous training in Christian liturgy, English, Malayalam, Arithmetics, Geography, History, Health Science, calligraphy, sewing, and singing. These disciplines came to North Malabar as part of the pedagogic system of

Basel Mission of Germany. These disciplines were very much instrumental in determining the societal discipline and culture of the region.

Women's education and empowerment were accorded great emphasis: "The welfare of a society will be directly proportionate to the wellbeing of women.... Unlike the practices found among other communities, your cosmetics, ornaments, and clothing have to be austere and less expensive. Acquire sacred mind, sacred speech, and sacred movement" (*Sukumari* 78).

Sukumari is put under the wardenship of a cruel lady Valsala whose name means "a lady of profuse affection." But ironically enough she "did not have the human trait of affection anywhere around herself" (*Sukumari* 79). Valsala might have been modelled after a ferocious motherly warden of a boarding school in a Victorian novel like *Jane Eyre*. She used all methods of tormenting the little girls with needle pricks, kicks and corporeal punishments. Once she even sewed together Sukumari's tender skin with her torn frock and this gruesome act was discovered by the school head and immediately, she was removed from the care of the rude warden Valsala. Marriage and individual freedom become a subject of the sermonising dialogic of the novel. This is elaborately dwelt upon in the pre-marital counselling session of Valsala and her fiancé. The complementarity and mutual respect involved in the proviso of the Christian canon of married life are emphasised: "The unfreedom of married life is essential for a happy married life even though one may feel that the other's presence hampers freedom" (*Sukumari* 91).

The Christian values of do-gooder Good Samaritanism and benevolence are represented through the character

Karuna whom Sukumari meets when Thejopalan falls sick. She sees Karuna and recognises her as her benevolent benefactress as on every Christmas many useful gifts were anonymously received during her school days. As Sukumari cares for her aged Muthappan (Thejopalan) from his home at Burnassery she gets more education about the humanitarian responsibilities of the younger generation from Karuna. The evening beachside conversations among the convalescent Thejopalan, Karuna, Sathyadasan and Sukumari shed light upon various institutional changes happening in North Malabar as a result of the advent of the British East India Company. The socio-economic changes were taking place at a faster pace as the British were tightening their hold on Malabar region with administrative reforms and economic enterprises. Government schools were coming up for anglicising the people and coffee estates were put up in the high ranges of Coorg. Basel Mission activities had to be re-tuned to accommodate the British socio-economic ventures. All these socio-economic and political changes are reflected in the conversational references of Thejopalan and Sathyadasan. They both express informed concerns about the changes happening in the society about indented plantation labour on coffee estates, hybrid Anglo-Indian culture, and women's education which may go off the track from their intended objectives and outcomes.

The so called "Chattakkaran" could be an Anglo Indian or one who mimics the British English of a native of England to act as a go between to facilitate the activities involving both the English and the local people. The contractor at the coffee plantation who comes to Kannur to get conscripted labourers is called "Chattakaran" and Sathyadasan describes him as a classmate who was found absconding and long afterwards he

appeared as a person “who knew to speak a little English and was working as a writer on a coffee plantain at Wyanad.” When Sukumari enquires about his attire as a “Chattakkaran” Sathyadasan explains, “If one goes to Wyanad attired like a white man he will soon get a salaried job; and this man whose original name is Devadasan is now going about as D. Watson” (*Sukumari* 98). He further satirises such hybrid class of creolised people who are “half papas and half pallas” as bats which can get along with the category of both birds and animals. “Chattakars” are a sort of mulatto community who are accepted neither by the local community nor by the western colonisers (*Sukumari* 98). Karuna sarcastically comments that such people do not convert themselves wholly, but only superficially change their names: Vasu is changed as “D’Vaz,” Raman as “Raymond,” Achuthan as “Aitchison,” Perean as “Pereira” (*Sukumari* 130).

With the coming of the government schools under the initiative of the colonial British government the mission schools were going to lose their significance as “institutions that empower women to take up major responsibilities in their worldly life” and become sheer institutions that “mould women to harbour their lazy husbands or else to live a wayward permissive life” (*Sukumari* 99). Sathyadasan loses his job in the shop as the shop owner shifts his enterprise to Coorg. But there is a rich businessman Gulab Singh from Bombay who appoints him as his manager at his office in Calcutta. He comments on the reluctance of Sathyadasan as a typical character trait of Malabar people who are yet to become used to a life of mobility and adventure. Gulab Singh motivates him to be “bold enough to take up such assignments at far off destinations to acquire more experiences and achieve prosperity for himself and the community as well” (*Sukumari*

106). Thejopalan stoically and poetically resigns himself to death by asking Sukumari to read out a paasge from the Book of Revelations and then sing a hymn on the epiphany of the crowned wisemen going to the throne of God holding aloft palm leaves. Sukumari has an epiphanic vision of the her godfather Thejopalan seated with his near and dear ones, with a haloed face in a beautiful garden, beckoning her to be with him . When she asks the gardener to let her in, the reply is in the negative, “It is not yet time for you to go in; when your time comes the door will be opened for you” (*Sukumari* 110).

The implied narrator hermeneutically explains that the novel covers a real time span of twelve long years dotted with the death of five people young, old , and middle aged : Manikyam, Jeevi, Chiranjeevi, Thejopalan and Jnabharanam. Death is a universal metaphysical reality which the Christian missionaries might have striven to explicate to bring solace to the followers associated with Basel Mission in North Malabar.

Menon contends with the theodicy of death in *Sukumari* as a “re-embodiment of the drama of redemption; just as Christ died to save the sinning, so the characters die to redeem” (1666). Manikyam has the book *Pilgrim’s Progress* read out to her as she is about to breathe her last. She has the firm belief that “out of the sorrow caused by her death, her mother will emerge as a believer” (1666). Jnanabharnam dies to redeem her mom from straying into a life of debauchery. Thejopalan yearns to listen to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “Death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy Victory?” (*Sukumari* 109). Karuna’s tells her bad experiences with the men who really loved her and wanted to marry her. Similarly, the tale narrated by Sukumari’s former warden Valsala about

her married life is that of domestic violence and rude male chauvinistic domination. She is a despondent woman who has lost all her three children in an unhappy married life. It is at this time that Sukumari unexpectedly happens to read a letter from Tharabai Gulab Singh, the young daughter of Sathyadasan's employer Gulab Singh. She has written of her new relationship with Sayhyadasan and this infuriates Sukumari to the point of losing all her trust in him. A crisis develops in the close relationship between them and Sukumari is at a loss as to how this could be resolved.

The ferry accident in Valapattanam River is a turning point in the novel when Sukumari shows her self-sacrifice and endurance to save her rival in love, that is Tarabai. She later confesses to Sukumari that, out of jealousy, she had purposefully played a ruse to deflect Sathyadasan's attention and be a deterrent in their love relationship. Sacred Heart, the strange old man, who had arrived at Kannur a few weeks ago and had been in the company of Sukumari and Karuna rescued Sukumari and Tarabai who were all going to be drowned in the ferry accident.

A few days after the shocking ferry accident, Sacred Heart reveals all his past in a long letter he writes to Sukumari. He reveals that he is Sukumari's own father and her own mother had died immediately after giving birth to Sukumari. On embracing Christianity, he was expelled from home and had to go to work at Belgaum for about three years. After being fed up with the rivalry with Dinakaran who was then at Belgaum, he had to return to his native town. Dinakaran did not like the relationship between him and ward Karuna; so he decided to leave his job and return as a disgruntled man. But, on his way back, he was captured by a local slave trader at

Mahe and sold to a sugarcane plantation owner at Bourbon where he had to work as an indentured worker for three long years. Later when he was on a travel assignment on board a ship he befriended the British captain who rescued him and dropped him in Australia where he got himself employed in a gold mining company. One night three burglars break into the gold mine safe locker room but they are cleverly trapped by Sacred Heart and the policemen come to the site and arrest them, though one thief gets killed in the melee. Sacred Heart is rewarded with five thousand rupees which he invests in the same gold mining company and reaps rich returns. After becoming rich, Sacred Heart returns home as he is now and this surprises everyone as if in a fairytale. He reveals his original identity as Sathyarthi and gets re-united with his daughter Sukumari and her foster parents Karuna and Dinakaran. The advent of Sathyarthi after many years of disappearance is in a way the morphological pattern of the story of Jesus who remains incognito and appears as a saviour when he is into his thirties. The ending of the novel is a sort of unconventional self-styled wedding ceremony at the graveyard, at midnight, where Sukumari and Sathyadasan place flowers on grave of their foster father and mother respectively. The strange ghostly scene of this midnight wedding is witnessed secretly by three security guards who could not decipher whether it is fantasy or reality.

Sukumari is a landmark novel that brings into reality the fictional genre of evangelical realism where the process of conversion and its sociological aspects are dealt with in all its complexity and multi-dimensionality. Conversion is not a process that ends when the convert formally joins a religious congregation. As McGuire states, it continues as a “commitment process, by which the individual increasingly

identifies with the group, its meaning system, and its goals” (84). Conversion means a resolution of the subject’s conflict with the earlier signifying system and the earlier identity. Sukumari and Sathyadasan become part of the commitment process and they dedicate themselves to what their religion does and believes.

Works Consulted

- Collins, Richard. *Ghathaka Vadham* . Chintha Publishers, 2023.
- Irumbayam, George. *Malayala Novel : Pathombathaam Noottandil*. Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2012.
- Kumar, Santhosh. “Keraleeiy Navoathanathinte Bhoomika : Pathombatham Noottandile Malayala Novelukal Innu Vayikkumbol”. *Sukumari* . Joseph Mooliyil, Chintha Publishers, 2013, pp. 7-9.
- Kunhambu, Potheri. *Saraswathi Vijayam*. Chintha Publishers, 2021.
- McGuire, Meredith B. *Sociology of Religion*. Rawat Publications, 2012.
- Menon, Dilip M. “Religion and Colonial Modernity : Rethinking Belief and Identity.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, no. 17 (April 27-May 3, 2002), pp.1662-1667.
- Mooliyil, Joseph. *Sukumari*. Chintha Publishers, 2013.

- Mullens, Catherine Hanna. *Fulmoni Ennum Coruna Enrum Peraya Randu Sthreekalude Katha*. Chintha Publishers, 2013.
- Pambirikkunnu, Pradeepan. “Kaalam Enna Velicham.” *Sukumari* Joseph Mooliyil, Chintha Publishers, 2013, pp. 11-27.
- Ramakrishnan, E.V. *Malayala Novelinte Desa Kalangal*. Mathrubhumi Books, 2018.
- Raveendran, P.P., “Fulmoniyudeyum Corunayudeyum Katha.” Catherine Hanna Mullens . *Fulmoni Ennum Coruna Enrum Peraya Randu Sthreekalude Katha*. Chintha Publishers, 2013, pp. 11-18.