



INDULEKHA: A NARRATIVE DESCRIBING THE TRANSITION OF A SOCIETY AND CHANDUMENON'S SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE SHAPING OF MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT:

Change is an inevitable reality and is a continuous process. Every society undergoes a process of change. It is Heraclitus, a Greek Philosopher, who said "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." In some cases, while embracing newness, traditional values and principles are sacrificed. In some other cases, meaningless and outdated practices give way to novel and meaningful services. Literature being an essential ingredient of society and the culture of people, serve as a tool to understand these sociological changes. There is an underlying relationship between society and literature. According to Milton C. Albrecht, Literature reflects norms and values and the ethos of culture. Chandumenon could not isolate himself from the various events that happened in the society during his time. *Indulekha* by Chandumenon is striking piece of literature which describes the transition taken place in Kerala society. Chandumenon as a critique of the various events that happened in the society also describes the journey of a society, particularly Kerala society, to modernity by leaving behind the vestiges of old customs and practices. A critical analysis of transition to modernity also calls for a detailed study of the events that led to this transition. An in-depth analysis of *Indulekha* reveals certain striking factors that led to this transition.

KEYWORDS:

INDULEKHA, TRANSITION, MODERNITY, CULTURE, LITERATURE.

Mulk Raj Anand in an essay titled "Tradition and Modernity in literature" talks about modernity as "difference in historical times." Again he says that "What is today called tradition was once modern and contemporary." (45) He also says that in every age there is something of modern and what is modern today will become traditional after few years. This indicates the reality of change and it is an inevitable reality. "Modernity is a post traditional or post-medieval historical period that characterized a radical shift away from traditions. It is the epoch marking the rise of the age of reason which began with the Enlightenment." (Modernity and Modernism in Literature) Critics like Foucault consider modernity as an attitude of the mind, which raises certain fundamental questions about the present. (Foucault 303-320) *Indulekha* too presents the attitude and spirit of an age troubled by the conflict between tradition and modernity. Modernity is also characterized by the inquisitiveness, confronts the traditional values and principles, stresses on the spirit of individuality, establishes identity, freedom, equality and rationalizations. All these elements find expression in *Indulekha*.

Susie Tharu in the 'Foreword' to the English translation of *Indulekha* says that "the novel took shape in a vortex of social and jurisprudential upheavals." (Chandumenon ix) Taking us back in time and space, the novel anchors firmly in its social, cultural and historical context. The invasion of the foreigners and their influence on the indigenous culture has drastically affected the outlook of people. The rich spices of Malabar drew the attention of the British and they captured Malabar as early as 1792. The British also

entered into fierce battle with the Portuguese to establish their supremacy and they subsequently won the battle. In the meantime, we also notice changes taking place in agricultural activities and the wealth of the Nairs increased in relation to that of the Nambuthiris. There were already visible signs of changes taking place in the socio-cultural spheres in the society. (Chandumenon ix-x) These aspects significantly contributed to the shaping of modernity in Kerala and *Indulekha* became a platform to express these ideas.

An important factor that contributed to the shaping of modernity was the English education received by people, particularly the Nairs, as we see in *Indulekha*. Having learned English, they were equipped to receive employment in the Government and occupied positions of importance. We already notice signs of disparities as English educated receiving preference over the non-English educated. This eventually led to vociferous protest against certain customs like Nair marriages and inheritance. The young men of the Nair community were at the forefront of this movement. They were disturbed by the joint family life, the marriage of Nair women by Nambuthiri men and the collective ownership of property – preventing individual ownership of property. The British were interested in the individual ownership of property, by doing that they wanted to challenge and undermine the importance of *taravad*.

The novel *Indulekha* discusses three important points: "One, the suffering of the junior men in the family (*anandravan*) who had no right to separate property and were victims of *taravads* who would not even pay for their

education. Two, the informal and temporary nature of Nair alliances as reflected in the contractual, non-sacramental *sambandam* ceremony. Three, the strange (to the British) practice of inheritance through the female line and the relative unimportance of the father in everyday family life." (Chandumenon x) These three points are fundamental to the understanding of the novel. The series of discussions taking place in the novel are in conformity with the above mentioned issues. These are also issues that triggered rebellion and brought about changes in the society.

Indulekha cannot be isolated from the life and culture of the people of Kerala. It is deeply rooted in society and reflects certain fundamental social issues. The themes are carved out of the life, customs and practices of people. Anitha Devasia in the 'Preface' to the English translation of *Indulekha* says, "Unlike the classical texts, this work makes the land and its people accessible to him in a way that he finds useful." (Chandumenon xv) John Willoughby Francis Dumergue, the then collector in Malabar writes: "Mr. Chandumenon has quit the well-known track, paved with plagiarism; modern Malabar is depicted in his pages and the language of *Indulekha* is the living Malayalam of the present day." (Dumergue vii)

Kerala has witnessed several reforms in the past, affecting various walks of life. The journey to modernity has been a herculean and painful activity. *Indulekha* by Chandumenon is an extraordinary piece of literature describing some of the factors that contributed to the shaping of Kerala modernity. "Kerala is an experiment in radical reforms as a modern development strategy." (Frank 98) The time when Vasco da Gama landed in Kerala in 1498, there were as many as 90 principalities. (quoted in Jeffrey 19) The region was characterised by differences and uniqueness in customs, traditions and practices and had its own complexities. These differences and uniqueness have added to the making of contemporary Kerala.

Nairs, one of the prominent communities in Kerala, had been living in matrilineal joint families for several years. (Jeffrey 34) The rising generation was unhappy with the practices in the joint family and demanded for freedom and individual ownership of property. "Intense and widespread, the problem drove people to try to change laws relating to inheritance and marriage. It thereby drew a larger proportion of people into public political activity than occurred elsewhere in India where family structures did not break down so completely." (Jeffrey 34) In the joint family, it was the *karanavar* who had absolute control of the family and women always played a secondary role in the family. In Europe, wrote James Lawrence in 1792, "marriage seems ordained exclusively for the comfort of the man, that of the woman being entirely unconsidered". (quoted in Jeffrey 34) All these statements clearly speak about the male dominated nature of families existing in India and even abroad. One of the issues that Chandumenon tried to address in *Indulekha* was the suffering of the junior men in the family who had no right to property. *Indulekha* goes against the wish of her

parents and marrying Madhavan of her choice was the indication of her effort to establish her own individuality and identity and manifests her courage to break away from the established customs and practices. This is the new modernity that Chandumenon envisaged in the novel, *Indulekha*.

There were certain taboos associated with the Nair women and therefore, there was a need to establish a new identity for Kerala women as part of its social commitment and awareness. (Lindenberg 10) The taboo was that the Nair women entered into *Sambandam* with the junior Nambuthiri men and that relationship had no binding and was not considered to be sacramental. It was therefore, temporary and contractual in nature. "He is very attracted towards women, He has got about twenty *sambandams* now. One woman for two months." (Chandumenon 99) Again, the ruling matrilineal context and high literacy of women do not guarantee them absolute freedom and independence. The women continue to play a secondary role in spite of their significant contributions in the cultural, political, social and educational scenario of Kerala. They are discriminated even today. So the transition to modernity as envisaged by Chandumenon continue to remain an unaccomplished project.

It may not be wrong to consider that today's image of women of Kerala can be traced to some extent to the past, where they were treated as commodities to be exploited by the dominant caste and sex. Chandumenon wanted to give new identity to women by liberating them from the stereotype existence. The sarcastic statement of *Indulekha* reveals her disinterestedness in the arrangements made by her relations. She says, "Has the Nambuthiripad begun a *sambandam* with me? How is that I don't know about it?" (Chandumenon 86) Chandumenon very meticulously describes the traditions and customs that prevailed in the ancient Kerala society. To comprehend the transformation that the State has gone through particularly in view of the gender relations in the society, we need to take into account a glimpse of the historical past of Kerala.

Some Sangam works already indicated certain changes introduced in the society. One such change was the introduction of polyandry. Another important concept was the issue of chastity of women. Women were expected to be chaste, whereas men could associate with any number of women. A third concept was regarding the isolation of widows. They had no right to attend any public functions. Only the widows had restrictions like shaving their heads, wearing white clothes, taking light meals and sleeping on the floor, and none of these things had affected a widower. (Menon 134) This clearly indicates the disparities existed between men and women. There was a practice called the 'Pandavachara', i.e. a bride getting married to all the brothers in a family. This practice was prevalent among Mala Arayar, Ullada, Urali, Pulaya, Paraya and some other communities. *Aranadar* used to marry their eldest daughters. Among certain tribes, the nephew could marry the youngest wife of his uncle. (Jesudasan 99) All these practices were for the advantages of men folk. Women

were always at the receiving end. These practices called for a renewed vigour and vitality to establish a just society – a modernity shaped less by consent and more by confrontation.

In the midst of all these, we notice the advent of a new category of women called the 'new women'. *Indulekha* belonged to the category of the 'new women' and depicted an image of a radical middle class Nair women who tried to inaugurate and establish their own individuality and distinctiveness. The novel, *Indulekha*, provided a fresh environment in which the emblem of woman had already witnessed changes due to education and other various social movements. The spread and access to English education offered additional benefits to establish one's own uniqueness, although some may consider it means of colonial control. (Panikkar 2002) *Indulekha* and *Madhavan* are beneficiaries of these advantages.

There are different views regarding the origin of *Makkathayam* and *Marumakkathayam* system of inheritance in Kerala. What we understand is that all these systems have evolved over a period of time – describing the transient nature of society. The Brahmins propagated the view that the *Makkathayam* system of inheritance was unknown to ancient Kerala. But P.T. Srinivasa Iyenger, the author of *History of the Tamils*, is of the opinion that *Marumakkathayam* was unknown to Kerala till the tenth century. Again K.P. Padmanabha Menon has expressed the view that *Marumakkathayam* was not existing in Kerala till thirteenth century.

In Kerala, novel as a literary field, began to appear only towards the end of the 19th century. Most of these novels were centred around some social themes and discussed social issues. Therefore, some scholars and critics might call them social reform novels. The early novels in Malayalam were also concerned about the issue of fashioning a new self, particularly by women. This idea was very strongly brought out by Chandumenon in *Indulekha*. In fact, *Indulekha* was the 'new woman' that Chandumenon wanted to project to society, a progressive and radical woman who wanted to establish her own individuality.

According to some critics and scholars, *Indulekha*, was the first perfect novel to be written in Malayalam. The novel dealt with a wide variety of themes and issues pertaining to man in the society. It was a critique of the matrilineal system of governance and inheritance, joint family, the power of the *karanavar* in the *taravad*, issues related to Nair-Nambuthiri *Sambandams* and the impact of English education in the fashioning of a 'new self.' In the words of Davika, "One undisputedly significant development of the late nineteenth century in Kerala was the emergence of an English-educated class which began to review the existent social order, ideas and institutions in sharply critical terms." (2002: 6) As part of its transition to modernity, *Indulekha* endorsed new social ethics and upheld individual rights to choose their own life-partners as opposed to the arrangements made by elders.

Indulekha's progressive ideas are the positive results of her education. Though *Madhavan* also is educated, he is not portrayed as strong-willed or as prudent as *Indulekha*. By the time *Indulekha* was being written, English had slowly begun to replace Sanskrit as the language of learning and culture. The mistakes made by *Surinamboothiripad* while reciting Sanskrit *slokas* are considered to be the result of his lack of education.

The issues of marriage discussed in the novel is of importance as we consider the transition – a journey to modernity. *Madhavan* and *Indulekha* decide to move away from an old system to embrace a new one. They decide to marry against the wish of their parents and relatives. Their marriage strengthens their individuality, because it is in uniting themselves in marriage they decide to move away from their families. It is a fresh beginning and a new step in their lives. Their decision to settle down in Madras, away from the joint family, has two implications. On the one hand it is a break away from the tradition by embracing nuclear family and on the other, it is a move from the village to urban space. Most of the rigid practices are prevalent in the villages and therefore, moving away from the village would also mean moving away from some of these traditional practices.

Modernity and material things are interconnected in *Indulekha* but can also be considered from different points of view. In *Indulekha* there are persons like *Surinamboothiripad* who is interested in expensive and gaudy items and clothing. On the contrary, we have *Indulekha* who wears minimum jewellery and does not believe in superfluous appearance, but her attitude and personality reveal elements of modernity. *Indulekha* and *Madhavan* also possess material items like piano, books, divan, etc, which disclose their attitude to modernity. *Surinamboothiripad's* and *Indulekha* represent two contrasting worlds and their values are represented by the things they possess in life. In fact, *Indulekha's* values are represented by the absence of any of the things that *Surinamboothiripad* had in life. (Menon 2004)

Chandumenon also discusses a misconception that prevailed among a few that marriage, loyalty and home are the domains of women, while religion and politics are of men. There are two standards of operation in society – one for women and the other for men. There is also chasm existing between the older and younger generations and the older generation believes that the modern generation is devoid of faith in God, religion and morality and failed to love and show respect towards their elders. By the first quarter of the 20th century, a large number of Nair women and men had been educated in the modern schools, which triggered certain changes in the matrilineal system of inheritance and marriages. The 'new class' raised certain criticisms on the existent social order, ideas and institutions. Therefore, it is a modernity that challenged certain custom and practices, not only for the sake of challenging them, but also to bring about reforms in them.

The core of this debate takes us to a level which attempts

to define women's enlightenment and their freedom. The notion of 'freedom of women' has limitations and is bound by socio-cultural circumstances. It does not suggest any free or unrestricted pathway between diverse socio-cultural domains. Home is considered to be the rightful place of women in most of the societies. Among the Malayali Brahmins, the inner-quarters of the *Illam* was largely the space inhabited by women-folk. They were restricted from moving freely outside that inner space. (Devika 14) Indulekha tried to liberate herself by breaking this custom. This is the 'new journey' that every woman desires to undertake in the 'new society'.

Therefore, following the thought patterns of Foucault, that modernity is an attitude, and the description of it by Mulk Raj Anand as a "shift from tradition", Chandumenon voices the concerns of an age that desires a shift from the traditions that prevent them from giving expression to their identity and individuality. However, he does not present a rebellious objection to all that is 'traditional', but a comprehensive mood of a rising generation who dream of taking path-breaking steps that would enable them to explore themselves and their environment. Indulekha can be considered a narrative that describes the changes taking place in the society – a change to establish reason and enlightenment.

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