

The local features in Malaysian Tamil novels before independence

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Introduction

No literary genre totally alienates itself from the land of its origin. Novel literature is no exception. It reveals details about the people, society, language, arts, civilization, culture, politics and economics directly or indirectly. "The Novel is capable of reflecting the period of its origin.... contributing to the glory and beauty of the language in which it has been written" (Ramalingam, 1975:185).

The Malaysian Tamil novels too to a certain extent depict some Malaysian features. "It presents the social life from different angles.... It reflects clearly and minutely the life, beliefs, customs and habits of the people of the times" (Loganayaki, 1971/72:21). The Malaysian Tamil novels before independence emit the fragrance of the Malaysian soil and reflect the life of the Malaysian Tamils.

Local features

Local features are the aspects which are unique and help to identify Malaysia. These aspects are revealed through the society, language, arts, civilization, culture, politics and economics of Malaysia.

Most of the Malaysian Tamil novelists before independence were migrants from Tamil Nad, India and Sri Lanka. K. Vengadarattinam the author of *Karuna cakaran Allatu Katalin Matci* (1917) was from Tamil Nad, India. K. Subramaniam, the author of *Palacuntaram Allatu Cannarkka Jeyam* (1918) hailed from Puloli, Sri Lanka. G. Parthasarathy the author of *Tottakkolai Marmam Allatu Pattumalaik kalvan* (1932) was from Tamil Nad, India. Mu. Ci. Selvadurai, the author of *Korakantan Allatu Tenmalayakiriyil Vata Ilankaittuppali* (1933) came from Kantarodai in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. M. Kathiresam Pillai, the author of *Cayampunatanum Cannaciyarum Allatu Arivali* (1935) was from Sri Lanka. Sivanyanam the author *Necamalar Allatu Karrorin Kana* (1936) was the son of Arunacala Pulavar of Culipuram, one of the greatest poets of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Dominic, the author of *Alakananta Puspam* (1936) hailed from Jaffna, Sri Lanka. But M. Arivanandan, the author of *Mallika* (1957) and M. S. Mayadevan and M. Ramaiyah, the authors of *Nirculal* (1957) are Malaysians, born and bred here. As most of these novelists were foreigners the question whether these novels were Malaysian in nature is raised.

An analysis of these novels shows that these novelists while using the background of the land of their origin have been very keen in including the Malaysian features in their work. Therefore, all these novels without doubt deserve to be classified as Malaysian Tamil novels. Though many of these novelists are from outside Malaysia, their life have

not been different from that of the local Tamils. Hence Malaysian features are found in their work. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country. Though each ethnic group has its own language, culture and civilization but they interact with the other groups, especially the Malays. The Tamil migrants of Malaysia freely use Malay words in their Tamil speech because of the local influence.

Such a situation enabled the Tamil migrants to write novels that were realistic and set in the Malaysian environment. They used Malay words and Malaysian characters in their work. The then Malayan society formed the setting for these novels. These novels also made references to historical information about Malaysia. The Malaysian features in the local novels are very clear and serve to differentiate the Malaysian Tamil novels from the other Tamil novels.

Among the novels written before independence, *Korakantan* is the only novel with an entire Malaysian setting. *Pattumalaikkalvan* also uses Malaysian places and village environment in their novels but it has not dealt with the life, customs and habits of the Malaysian people. All the other novels use Tamil Nad or Sri Lanka as the setting probably because the novelists were more familiar with those settings.

Malaysia did not gain its freedom until 1957, and most of the Tamils in Malaysia considered Tamil Nad or Sri Lanka as their homeland. These novels thus appeared relevant to such Tamils. *Nirculal* and *Mallika* written at the beginning of 1950 has an entire Malaysian setting.

The local features in these novels are revealed through characters, settings, events, historical references and Malay words.

Characters

Most of the characters have Tamil Nad or Jaffna as their homeland in the novels which appeared before 1940. They have been depicted as born and bred in their homeland and came as migrants to Malaya. For example the main characters of the novel *Palacuntaram*, Balasundram and Neelatci, are shown as migrants to Malaya from Sri Lanka (p. 62). In the novel *Pattumalaikkalvan* Zamindar Renganatha Mutaliar who visits Malaya from Tamil Nad for sight-seeing is found missing at Kuala Lumpur (p. 6). Kunavalli, the daughter of his elder brother and her friend Nyanasambanthan come to Malaya in search of him. Durairajah, the expert detective in the novel *Korakantan* as well as his parents are immigrants to Malaya from Sri Lanka (p.117). Necamalar and Necakamalan visit Malaya and return to Sri Lanka in the novel *Necamalar* (p. 117). Ramalingam, a friend of Kanagarattinam, stays in Malaya for sometime and returns to Sri Lanka, according to the novel *Alkanananta Puspam* (p. 145). In these novels native Malaysians have also been included as characters. The Malaysian Indians, Malays and Chinese have been used as characters in the novel *Korakantan*. In this novel the mistress of Somasundram is a Malay woman who talks to him in Malay (pp. 63-64). After a robbery, *Korakantan*'s men escape in the car owned by a Chinese named Boh Khoo Goh (p. 93). Durairajah saves Mohanasundram and leaves her under the care of a Malay man (p. 194). Rengasamy, a man from the gang of *Korakantan* buys diamond ornaments

from a Chinese diamond merchant in Singapore (pp. 199-202). Durairajah, the detective, releases fifteen Chinese richmen from the control of Korakantan (p. 259). The detective later hands over the gang to a police Inspector who is a Malay (p. 294). Rengasamy and a Chinese die in the end (pp. 298-309). Thus the Malaysian feature is revealed through the characters in this novel.

In the novel *Nirculal* a Malay named Abdul Rahman is depicted as a peon in the office where Kamalanathan, the hero of the novel works (p. 98). All the characters in this novel are Malaysians having Malaysia as their homeland. They have been depicted as born and bred in Malaysia. There is also a reference in this novel about Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia (p. 98). Therefore, it is clear that the characters of Malay and Chinese origins effectively help to add to the Malaysian features in the novels which appeared in the beginning of the fifties.

Malaysian Settings

Another Malaysian feature is the setting or location of these novels which includes the towns and villages of Malaysia. The novel *Palacuntaram* commences its second part from its twenty second chapter. Every chapter in this novel has a Malaysian setting. As an example, the events centering around Balasundram and Neelatci may be cited in this novel. Both of them reach Penang by ship from Jaffna (p. 62). He works in Kuala Lumpur (p. 82). Neelatci after losing her husband and her stepmother stays in several places like Klang, Teluk Anson (Teluk Intan), Taiping, Batu Road, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bukit Tengah, Seberang Perai, Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Langat Road, Kajang, Sultan Street, Java Street and Petaling (pp. 2-182). These places add to the Malaysian features in the novel.

The novel *Pattumalaikkalvan* depicts events as occurring in Malaysia. Though the characters have been shown coming from Tamil Nad, the events occur only in Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding places form the setting. Clerk Ponnambalam imprisons Zamindar in the caves near Kuala Lumpur (p. 1). Zamindar has been searched for in several places including Klang, Penang, Fraser's Hill, Singapore, and Port Klang (pp. 5-11). Different areas of Kuala Lumpur find place in this novel. Paul Newton, a detective is in search of the dacoits in different areas like Clyne Street, Brickfields, Chetty Street, Church Street, Java Street, New Petaling Road, Kampung Muthu Pillai, Sultan Street, High Street, Rodger Street, Railway Station, Ampang Road, Parry Road, Circular Road, Pudu Road and Pudu Jail (pp. 5-82). This shows the effort taken by the novelist in giving the Malaysian setting in this story.

The whole novel *Korakantan* is set in Batu Loban in Johor (p. 108). Durairajah, the main character in this novel searches for his father who first lives in Port Klang (p. 23) and then in Penang (p. 276). The dacoit in this novel buys things from Singapore (p. 11). These provide a Malaysian feature to this novel.

The novel *Nirculal* has a complete Malaysian setting. The hero Kamalanathan and heroine Mallika were born and bred in Kluang, Johor (p. 60). In the course of the novel other places like Ipoh (p.65) and Kuala Lumpur (p.65) are mentioned.

Events

The Malaysian feature has also been depicted through events in the Malaysian Tamil novels before independence. The novel *Palacuntaram* shows the events in an estate background. Ramasamy who searches Neelatci goes to Manjanir Coffee Estate to look for her (p. 99). Mentions have also been made of Batu Caves Estate near Kuala Lumpur (p. 106). Neelatci attends the Thaipusam festival at Batu Caves (p. 169). Batu Caves Estate is not a fictitious one. This estate was sub-divided only in the seventies. Similarly the annual festival of Thaipusam is not a fictitious one. These two events have been employed by the novelist for his fictitious story not only to make it Malaysian but also to add a realistic touch to his work.

The events in *Pattumalaikkalvan* also show the story of a Malaysian nature. Most of the events occur in an estate setting. The story takes place in Nallur Estate and the surrounding lime caves (p. 1-34). It also presents a village environment of Kampung Muthu Pillai with the house of Ramachandran in Pudu Road (p. 45). The events also take place in Kuala Lumpur Railway station, Bukit Bendera, Penang and Frasers Hill providing a total Malaysian setting (p.6-55).

The events in *Korakantan* also depict the rubber estates, the rivers with crocodiles and the dense forests of Malaysia. Raman and his lady love Seethai meet secretly in the rubber plantations. Rengasamy and his wife throw away the dead body in the river full of crocodiles. Korakantan and his gang live in the dense forests (pp. 38-141).

In the novel *Alakananta Puspam* a character named Ramalingam makes a lengthy description about Malaya (pp. 145-161). He speaks about Kulai, Johor and Seremban. He also describes the rubber estates near Kulai. He mentions the Chinese in Malaya and brings out the pitiable condition of the Tamil labourers and the Kangany System. He also speaks of the multi-ethnic people and the life of the people in the estates. Though the events of the story occur in Jaffna, Malaysian features have been provided through the above description.

The novel *Nirculal* which appeared in the middle of the 1950s, explicitly deals with the Malaysian aspects. Mallika, the heroine reads the Short Story Collection called *Iratatanam* given as a gift by her uncle. Actually this collection was written and published by M.S. Mayatevan, who is one of the authors of this novel. This novel also mentions a monthly Tamil magazine called *Iratcinitya Teepikai* which is not a fictitious one. Reference to the Malaysian poet Krishnatacan and the book called *Malayavil Tamilarkal* written by M.S. Mayatevan has been made in this novel in passing thus making it a Malaysian one.

Historical References

Novels are the mirrors of the age in which they are created. Thus the concept of time is an important aspect of the novel. The task of unifying the flow of the story and time without making the swift passage of time noticeable is no mean feat (Ramalingam, 1974:159). The novelists make historical references knowingly or unknowingly to give

a realistic touch.

The Malaysian Tamil novelists before independence also included information, references and ideas of their times. Even if the novels do not contain a complete depiction of their times, at least the barest minimum to help the flow of the novel has been utilised. The historical references found in these novels pertain to Malaysia alone. These add to the local features in these Malaysian Tamil novels. The historical features found in each of these novels are as follows.

i. *Palacuntaram*

This novel was written in 1918, but it deals with the later part of the nineteenth century. This is clear from the following internal evidences: Lily's father attends a meeting on the 7th Nov. 1884. (p. 159). Neelatci is taken to the hospital in 1883 (p.98). There is no advocate in Malaya in 1886 (p. 189). Velupillai, the secret lover of Neelatci worked as a contractor during 1888 (p.161).

The historical events which took place during that period have been handled in this novel. In the history of Malaysia the establishment of the Federated Malay States at the end of the nineteenth century and its consequences are important. The novelist has aptly made his reference. In 1896 Federated Malay States were established. Kuala Lumpur was chosen as its capital. Important Secretariats were established there. There was a demand for personnel to work in these offices. People were invited from Jaffna for this purpose. Balasundram, the hero of the novel is one such person who came to Kuala Lumpur (p. 24).

In a dialogue of this novel references are made to the Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya which stood as a challenge to their British Government. When Balasundram and Lily's father converse, the novelist brings about the reasons for the establishment of the Chinese Secret Societies, their activities and the action taken by the British Government to wipe out the secret societies (pp.13-14).

This novel was written before the emergence of nationalism in Malaysia. The novel describes that the people were under the impression that the British are the born rulers and were grateful to the British rule. This novel reflects such sentiments of the people (pp. 175, 183).

This novelist was working as member of Kerian Licensing Board at Perak. He was therefore aware of the historical events of Malaysia. This knowledge has helped him to make references to some of the historical events in his work giving a Malaysian touch to the novel.

ii. *Pattumalaikkalvan*

The novelist covers the first part of this century especially the twenties and the thirties as depicted by internal evidences. Clerk Ponnambalam, a frightening character in the novel is suspected for the crimes he had committed in 1902, 1909 and 1920 (p. 4).

The great depression in the Malaysian economics has also been referred to in this

novel. There was a sharp decline in the price of rubber and tin. Malaysia's international business was affected. The government could not concentrate on the development programmes owing to the scarcity of funds (p. 45).

This novel also refers to the Tamil daily, 'Tamil Nesan' which is still in existence. The marriage between Kunavalli and Nyanasambanthan is said to have been announced through this daily (p. 87). The 'Tamil Nesan' was established in 1924. All these references provide a Malaysian setting to this novel.

iii. *Korakantan*

This novel refers to the fall of the price of rubber in Malaysia. The period covered by this novel is the thirties of this century. It mentions that the Chettiyars suffered a lot during the recession period (p. 123).

This novel also refers to the Indian ship Rajula rendering travel service between India and Malaysia. The government prosecutor who was arguing against the terrorist-dacoit Korakantan, was afraid of him and went to India by the ship Rajula (p. 324).

iv. *Necamalar*

The period covered by this novel is the thirties of this century as pointed by the novelist. The heroine Necamalar when speaking to her husband Necakamalan says that it is the year 1936 (p. 114).

The author also points out through the dialogues of Navaranjitammal and Jeyalakshmi the divide and rule policy of British rulers of Malaysia. This novel appears to have been written when there was a national awakening in Malaysia. Unlike the novel *Palacuntaram*, this novel expresses anti-British feelings of the Malaysians.

The novelist clearly explains the status of Jaffna Tamils in Malaysia. Jeyalakshmi points out that the Jaffna Tamils were suffering from unemployment problem. All these provide a Malaysian nature to this novel.

v. *Alakananta Puspam*

This novel also covers the period of the thirties of this century as pointed out by the novelist himself. The decline in the price of rubber and the subsequent retrenchment of labourers are the historical events of the thirties (p. 114).

Though the main events of the story take place in Jaffna, it also includes information about Malaysia. There are references to Chinese Secret Societies and their activities (p. 150). The way in which Indians were brought to Malaysia by the British, the way they were treated here, their wretched life and India's efforts to protect them have been dealt with in the novel (p. 151-153).

It seems that when this novel was written the people were fully aware of the true nature of the British rule. This is the time when there was national awakening in Malaysia due to the injustice done by the British. This is clear in the novel. This

novel though set in Jaffna contains lengthy sections on Malaya which seem to stand conspicuously apart from the story. This shows the author's desire to add a Malaysian nature to the novel.

vi. *Nirculal*

This novel covers the fifties of the century. This is the period when Malaysia was subjected to the Communist terrorist activities as pointed by the novelist in the course of the novel. The train which Mallika travels in meets with an accident because of the bomb placed on the railway track by the terrorists (p. 93). The novelist also makes references to Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia. One of the characters speak about the duty-consciousness and the sacrifice of Tunku Abdul Rahman (p. 78).

Malay Words

The use of Malay words in these novels has also contributed to Malaysian features

In the novel *Palacuntaram* Malay words like *tongkang* (p. 94), *Kerani* (p. 96), *lapan kupan* (p. 141), and *topi* (p. 144) have been used. In *Pattumalaikkalvan* words like *baju* (p. 94), and *tukang* (p. 81) have been used. In *Korakantan* words like *rokok*, (p. 16) *roda* (p. 37) *taukch* (p. 199), *rotan* (p. 288), and *mati* (p. 288) have been used. This novel also uses dialogues in Malay. This is one of the characteristics of the style of this novel.

- "Malay Lady : Apa Kerani, siapa mati bilanglah?
Somasundram : Tidak, satu kawan mati, lu apa peduli, pergi! pergi!
Malay Lady : Jangan marah tuan. Saya tanya saja. Kalau tak suka bilanglah! lainkali ada ingat mahu datang sini?
Somasundram : Pergi, pergi. Lu celaka, pergi. Saya tak mari tahu. Pergi!" (p. 63).

In the novel *Alakananta Puspam* Malay words like *Keris* (p. 142) and *satu ringgit* (p. 150) have been used.

Conclusion:

The Malaysian Tamil novels before independence contain many local features. These local features are found in the characters, settings, events, and historical references and the use of Malay words. Among them novels like *Korakantan*, *Nirculal* and *Mallika* may be said to be totally Malaysian. *Korakantan* reveals the life of the Malay people, the life of city dwelling Malay women and the economy of the country. It also uses a Tamil style blended with Malay words in the context when the Tamils speak with Malays or Chinese. *Nirculal* and *Mallika* are the two novels fully Malaysian in nature.

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