

## ASSERTING LOCAL TEXTURE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING

**Surya Kiran**  
Ph.D. Scholar  
Department of English  
University of Hyderabad,  
(A.P.)

Ngugi Wa Thiong’O in his famous essay “The Language of African Literature” has pointed out the adverse impacts of the colonizers language and culture on that of the colonized. After the withdrawal of the colonizers from the land, not many people preferred to preserve and develop the ancestral language and impart it to the next generation. Instead, the colonizers language takes over and mastering the foreigner’s language had by then been established as the key to climbing the charts of social status. This resulted in the development of a “look down up on” attitude towards the regional literatures. This phenomenon is found more in South India, Kerala in particular where English learning has taken importance over Malayalam. The importance given to Dan Brown or J.K. Rowling over Vaikom Muhammad Basheer or Thakazhi Shivashankara Pillai is not the real concern here, but the fact that there are no many writers in the present day scenario who manage to get past the overwhelming influence of foreign writers using the flavour of regional literature.

Globalisation which had brought the English language so close to ordinary people through internet played a crucial role in this development. Blogging and social networking made the English literary arena familiar to one and all and gradually took over the regional writing. Ironically, some excellent pieces of dialectic writing are found in blogs. The advent of transcription tools and Unicode fonts popularised writing in Malayalam among people and many people have started maintaining a blog of their own. Since these writings are extremely personal and not meant for any publication, they don’t follow the rules of print language. People often go dialectic and many stereotypical characters and clichéd usages which were once an inevitable part of our writing are reborn here. This paper is an attempt to analyse how social networking can be helpful in retaining the regional literature and how it helps the people to identify themselves, especially those who have migrated to foreign countries, under the shade of their regional writing.

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“Unity in diversity”-a slogan that has been used to uphold the pride of our nation for decades since independence. A nation of numerous ethnic groups, copious modes of apparel and myriad mannerisms with more than 1,650 languages spoken, most of them with dialectical and regional variations, India, the seventh largest country in terms of land area and second largest in terms of population accounts for its diversities. Add to these a number of religion, caste, sub caste etc. Yet the country holds itself together under one name-India.

One may argue that this slogan cannot be considered as an all assertive statement as it hides some major socio-political issues that happen within the country. The demands of Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra for forming their own country at various moments in the past are examples of such hiccups that has caused disharmony in the country. Keep apart the socio-political issues, it is these diversities that truly constitute the soul of India. The greatest pride of the nation, our culture-it's past, present and future-is built on these diversities.

Some months back a *Pravasi* (a common term in use in Kerala for people working abroad but not a permanent settler in any of those countries) had updated his Facebook status this way: "My boss was just back from his tour of India and I walked up to him to ask what he felt about my country. He replied "it was a wonderful experience, the land was beautiful and people were awesome. I saw Punjabis, Tamilians, Malayalis, Odiyas and more but I couldn't find any Indian." One must infer this as the upper hand of regional identities in a state that try to preserve the simultaneous existence of unity and diversity. A similar example could be cited from the movie *Chak De India* where each of the players who are nominated to represent the country introduces themselves to the coach on the basis of their regional identity (the name of the state they belong to) and the coach reminding them, in the form of a warning, that they are all Indian with their first identity.

Accepting the fact that regionalism has its own drawbacks in the socio-political context, the impact it had in the growth and development of our art and literature has been, more often than not, constructive. "Art, considered as the expression of any people as a whole, is the response they make in various mediums to the impact that the totality of their experience makes upon them, and there is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment " (Austin 130). The prosperity of various art forms owes a lot to the regional rivalry between people and local rulers in the ancient and mediaeval India.

A very good example for this practice could be that of the poets in the court of Samoothiri and Kolathiri Kings in the mediaeval Kerala. The rivalry between both these kings are well known and they never missed out an opportunity to prove themselves superior over the other. It was not always the military battles they opted for to express the superiority over the other. Instead, they invited and honoured poets from various parts of their own kingdom and the nearby kingdoms as well so that they would write poems praising the generosity of the King and the greatness of the land.

But this is the past. The regionalism that existed at a point when the country was divided into numerous small kingdoms. Things have changed over the years. The post-independent India was divided into different states on the basis of language. It is a fact that the regional dialects of every language were utilised to produce some excellent piece of literature even in the post-independent state. The best example from Malayalam would be the writings of "The Sultan of Beypore"- Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. But a change was inevitable; the language left behind by the colonisers slowly took over the control.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O in his book *Decolonising The Mind: The Politics Of Language In African Literature* has pointed out the adverse impacts of the colonizers language and culture on that of the colonized. After the withdrawal of the colonizers from the land, not many people preferred to preserve and develop the ancestral language and impart it to the next generation. Instead, the colonizers language takes over and mastering the foreigner's language had by then been established as the key to climbing the charts of social status. This resulted in the development of a "look down upon" attitude towards the regional literatures.

Today we have a number of writers who have earned name and fame all over India ranging from Kashmir to Kanyakumari; some of them have even managed to gain international recognition. Unfortunately most of them, if not all, are writing in the global language, that is, English. The regional writers are often left unnoticed, at times intentionally, and are often denied the respect and recognition they deserve for their talent. This demoralizes the budding generation of writers who eventually gives up the attempts to write in regional languages and goes after the tradition of writing in the global language which offer them more opportunities in terms of publicity, publication and money.

The 21st century Malayali generation is thus no more bothered about the brilliant works of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer that was filled with the flavour of dialectical language and enormous experience. Renowned linguists such as Ronald E Asher have struggled and struggled quite a lot in translating Basheer's works as he could not reproduce the subtle humour and the beauty of dialectical usages in his translation. Quite unfortunately the present generation prefer the so-called "Mallu jokes" over the subtle humour of Basheer which utilises dual meanings and vulgar connotations to attract the audience. They even fail to recognise the fact that the term "Mallu" is a derogatory word that was initially used to refer to the soft porn industry that was minting quite a lot of money in the late 90s and early 2000s.

So what is the future of regionalism in Malayalam language? Regional writers are not much of a consolation. They don't receive much reception; the younger generation varying from college students to nursery kids know JK Rowling and Harry Potter. At the same time, if they are asked about *Adujeevitham* by Benyamin, a work that has received much critical appraisal off late, more than 95% of the same generation would wonder who or what it is. Such works are known only to those who are really into reading regional literatures and to students of Malayalam language. The fact is that this too is not much of a consolation as the younger generation is not interested in learning their mother tongue. The problem of possessing a "colonised mind" is haunting the Kerala society and more than half of the B.A. Malayalam literature seats are left vacant in most of the colleges in every academic year.

The Malayalam film industry tried its hand in utilising regional dialects and local colour characters in many movies. Movies like *Rajamanikyam* which utilised the Trivandrum dialect and *Pranjiyettan and The Saint* which utilised the Trichur dialect are commercially successful but the movies that followed the track by imitating dialects of other regions failed to create the same impact precisely because of poor screenplay. Further, even those movies that received good reception at theatres had to face some harsh criticism. Many critics were of the opinion that the dialects used in these movies does not exactly reproduce the original dialects existing in their respective societies. This was a criticism that was faced by *Chemmeen* as well, a movie that had won National award for best feature film in 1965.

So how to remind these so-called "global citizen" about the importance of local texture and regional literature? How to make him/her understand that the region they belong to place a crucial role in defining their identity? Lectures and conferences won't reach the common mass. Then how to go about it?

An old proverb in Malayalam says, "Mulline mullu kondedukkanam". The nearest equivalent for this proverb in English would be "Play fire with fire". If globalisation has made us move away from our language and culture, then one possible tool to trace back the path could be globalisation itself. This idea may sound a bit far-fetched at this point of time but a chance is worth taking.

The intervention of Internet is often quoted as an important factor that has radically increased the rate of globalisation. It has not only shrunk the world into a global village but also have minimized the life of individuals to himself/herself and his/her social networking id. People had started spending hours in front of Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and what not. Anything and everything, from taking bath to going to sleep has become status updates. People have created a microcosmic world to express themselves through such media.

Keralites didn't take much time to get into the groove; more than 90% of the Keralites who have access to Internet are a part of at least one of the social websites. Internet access provided by mobile operators at cheap rates also played a crucial role in increasing the number of people who access the websites through their mobile phones. This has eventually exposed the Kerala society to the outside world and in no time the topics discussed at the global level became a concern for an average Malayali. They started discussing the release of the next novel of the Harry Potter series or the controversies regarding Dan Brown's novels in the Malayalam literature was left behind. It had its own advantage too; Hollywood movies and soundtracks are not copied anymore without proper acknowledgement.

If this was the initial phase of social networking among Keralites with people showing greater interest in international affairs, global issues etc., then last two or three yearshave witnessed a significant change in attitude; thanks to the *Pravasi* Malayalis and Unicode fonts and transcription tools that made typing in Malayalam an easier task. A number of *Pravasi* Malayalis came up with Facebook pages that narrated their struggles in foreign lands and also portrayed a true to heart feeling of coming back to Homeland.

This feel for Homeland is a very crucial factor in the sense that it attracts the empathy of other *Pravasi* Malayalis all around the globe and at the same time it also reminds the people back in Kerala about the culture and tradition. One particular page that is worth mentioning here is *Kanjiyum Payarum*. *Kanjiyum Payarum* is one food item that is loved by 99% of the Kerala population. The very name brings in nostalgia not only to people who have migrated to foreign countries but to all those who have moved out of state to other parts of India on various purpose.

Regular updates on this page in forms of poems, short essays, comparison of foreign land and Homeland etc. have attracted more than one lakh people and still counting. A Facebook page being compared to a novel may not sound acceptable to many. But I can't stop myself from comparing the title of this page to the title of Pakistani Diasporic writer Kamila Shamsie's Novel *Salt and Saffron*. Both the titles are an attempt to invoke a feel for Homeland, especially in terms of food but the former makes greater impact in the sense that it directly addresses the most favoured food item of Keralites while the latter failed to do so. A comparison of the content of the page and the novel and the impact they create on the readers is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another noteworthy attempt in the arena social networking is the development of an alternative to Facebook. <http://w.suhrthu.com> is a website designed by a group of Malayalis adopting the idea and concept of Facebook. Now into its fourth year, this website is uses only Malayalam fonts in its interface. The reception it receives among the new generation and also the increasing number of posts in the forms of photos, historical narratives, short stories, poems, descriptions on landscapes and tourist spots etc. are good enough to increase our hopes in preserving our language and culture.

Any discussion on the language, literature and culture of Kerala would be incomplete if a reference is not made to the humour sense of Malayalis. Kerala is the land of people like

Kunchan Nambiar and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer who have satirized the society with their sense of humour; the land of people who enjoyed the innocent humour of *Namboori phalitham*. It is so refreshing to see that those jokes are reproduced in the modern political context of both Kerala and India through the Facebook page titled *Angamaliyile Pradhanamanthri*. *Angamaliyile Pradhanamanthri* is an imaginary character who made his first appearance in the movie *Kilukkam*. He is representative of the hypocrisy, false pride, madness and of sorts. The administrator of this webpage utilises folklores, riddles and jokes to mock the socio-political scenario of our country. A very recent post made on this page was an old *Namboori phalitham* in which an intelligent Brahmin escapes a number of robbers who have caught him and demanded a huge ransom. Though the post made no direct references, it is evident that the target was the failure of Indian government to bring back the Italian sailors who had murdered some Kerala fishermen and later on those culprits were sent to Italy on special request from the Italian government.

One major drawback with these Facebook pages is that the lifespan of a post is often limited to a day. It is a herculean task to go back to a piece of poetry or short story for a second reading after, say, a month's time. Blogging gets the upper hand in terms of lifespan in comparison to Facebook and Orkut. But in terms of audience reception, blogging falls behind.

A major difference that should be pointed out between blogging and social websites is that writing a blog has some targeted readers. Bloggers consider themselves as creative writers and hence the posts they put up are meant for other bloggers and creative writers expecting them to make comments and criticism of the work that has been put up. On the other hand Facebook and Orkut posts are often a pastime.

Most of these blogs contain narratives of personal experience. The blog <http://orunimishamtharoo.blogspot.in/> is the experiences of a soldier, most of them from battlefield and training camps but portrayed with a Malayali viewpoint. <http://apnaapnamrk.blogspot.in/> is a blog maintained by a *Pravasi* whose posts are excellent narratives of his own life stories from his childhood to his *Pravasi* life. This blog gives a detailed description of Malappuram, the native land of the blogger; his school life, his first love, friendship etc.

These are all glimpses but glimpses nevertheless. They have a larger audience and wider reception. There can possibly be two reasons that had worked in favour of the portrayal of local texture in social networking. One is that these posts are often put up with one intention in mind to express oneself. The grammaticality and acceptability of the language used is not a concern here. Name and fame earned through writing does not matter either. Wordsworth's concept of "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and Keats's concept of poetry should come "as naturally as the leaves to a tree" are all applicable here.

The second factor is the recurring nature of these posts. A book can be hidden safely inside a shelf and it remains hidden till somebody goes and pulls it out. On the other hand these posts are unavoidable. One has to face these posts every now and then as long as he/she remains active in the arena of social networking. With the present day generation considering a person who is inactive in the arena of social networking only next to being in a vegetable state, these posts have a crucial role to play in asserting the regional identities.

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