

Diasporic Resonance In Malayalam Literature: Letter Songs -The 'Sandesakavya' Of The Expatriates

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Abstract:

Expatriation has so many phases as far as the Malappuram diaspora is concerned. Begun after 1960s, the First Generation Migrants (FGMs) faced so many barriers in the way of transportation and communication. Due to the absence of electronic communication media they relayed letters to communicate with their family and other relatives in the host countries. The departed agonies and worries of the migrants and their legal life partners were communicated only through letters. So a rare type of literature aroused in Kerala, especially in Malabar region called Letter Songs. Pulikkottil Haider and SA Jameel, the Mappila poets are the main exponents of these types of songs which were musicalized and released all over Kerala as a part of Mappila Songs.

Key Words: First Generation Migrants, Letter Songs, Kathu Pattus, Sandesa Kavya or Messenger songs, Tape Recorder. part of Mappila Songs.

Introduction

Letter Songs (kathu Pattus) are the indigenous messenger songs of the expatriates especially for the first and second generation gulf migrants from Kerala. Such songs started during the first Generation Migrants (FGM). The Letter Songs are popularized by the Muslim community in Kerala. It is in the forms of Letter and its Reply performed by two teams¹. Letter songs are parts of Mappila Songs born imitating the Messenger Songs (Sandesakavyas). So it is one of the most important literary forms based on expatriation.

The contents of the letter songs are innumerable such as love proposals, parting agonies, messages, etc.

Letter Songs are a boon to the entire Mappila literature emerged in 1980s. It's the new forms of old messenger songs. It emerged as the expatriates began to jot down their feelings and agonies in the form of letters. Earlier, Mappila poets used to write the letters in the form of letters. That was a creative experimentation during that decade. Those who are not able to write songs used to pay for such writings. The notable writes during that period is done by Pulikkottil Hyder, Nallalam Beeran, PT Beerankutty Maulavi, Lahaji, Nechimannil Kunjikkamm Master, Moyinkutty Vaidyar, Alppalli Unnipa, etcⁱⁱ.

Mariyakutty Kathu Pattu by Pulikkottil Hyder

Pulicottil Haider (1879-1975) was the poet who popularized correspondence in poetry. One of his most famous works is the poem 'Maryamkutty's Letter'. The poem tells the story of Hasan Kutty, a young man who was forced to go to Ballari prison during the freedom struggle, and his wife Maryakutty. Maryakutty, despite facing unwarranted attention from various individuals, chose to maintain her integrity and refused to resort to any kind of deception. As the scoundrels continued to approach her, Maryakutty frowned upon their advances and stood her ground. Angered by her rejection, these individuals spread slanderous rumors about Maryakutty throughout the land.

The news of these slanders eventually reached Hasan Kutty, who was still imprisoned. In an attempt to uncover the truth, Maryakutty's mother wrote a heartfelt letter from jail. Fearing that the letter would only bring sadness to her beloved husband, she approached Haider in Pulicat with great despair. The letter itself was written in two languages. It begins with Malayalapattu, one of the most famous Arabic poems, a song of devotion. Through the following lines, Mariyakutty reveals her innocence and expresses her unwavering loyalty to Hasan Kutty. The letter serves as a reminder of their love, and with each reading, it brings back precious memories of their time together.

vallēārūṁ phasādurayunnat kēṭṭ muṣiyaṇṭa

vaṭivurṛēāru maiyenne upēkṣikkaṇṭa

manamil valutāya veṛuppeānnum vicārikkaṇṭa”

“Don't be so tired don't give up on me, don't feel any hatred in your mind”. I want to convince you of my innocence. Can women come to Ballari Prison? I'm ready to come to you soon. See this section for details.

“ballārikkuṭane ṇān varāneāṭṭ valiyuṇṭēā

vallikaḷkkaviṭēkk varān pāṭuṇṭēā-umate

varukil kaṇṭiṭān valla nivr, ttiyuṇṭēā...”

“Is there a way I can come across Ballari? Do you want to come to the wall? Is there anything you can do for me? The next e-mail says that you will only meet one person and die the same day.

“uṇṭateṇkil vann kāṇānuṇṭ mēāham peānnē

orṛa nēākk kaṇṭ mariccēāṭṭe ann tanne.”

“If there is, I would love to come It's just a matter of time before you die. At the end of Mariyakutty's letter, praying for a speedy recovery from the grief, the whispers of the entertainer are drenched.”

The Mappilapattukal Noottandukalilude (Mappilappattu Centennial Telegraph) says that the correspondence of Mappilappattu is a rich source of tender love and most of the correspondence originates from the grief of the lovers or their husbands, Says Muhammad Ali.

Letter Songs by SA Jameel

The letter Songs of SA Jameel opened a new era for the expatriates for communicating with their relatives in the host countries. The most important works of SA Jameel are Dubai Letters and its Replays. He was a Mappila poet from Alathur, Plakkad district from Kerala. A psychologist by profession, the late singer S A Jameel is believed to have written the first kathu pattu song, gathering the material by listening to Gulf wives as they shared their struggles with him. Sung for the first time in 1977, Dubai Kathu Pattu quickly reached the top of the music charts in Kerala. The musician, who died in 2011 at the age of 75, received dozens of letters from wives of migrant workers, many of whom accused

Jameel of stealing their privacy. The Abudabi Kathu (Abdudabi Letter) and its reply (written out of peoples' pressure) composed in 1977 made SA Jameel very famous in this fieldⁱⁱⁱ.

The motif of the letters is the monologues out of solitude and agony from the hearts of the women folk from the host countries even though the males members became expatriates to look after their families. The letters are filled with their emotions and disappointments and the poet shows how to depict all these elements in common language. Each gulf wife became astonished thinking that how this poet did compiled these true emotions^{iv}.

In the Latter songs, SA Jameel depicted the mile stones of the yester years of gulf migration from Kerala. It's more eventful and emotional than the military campaigns of the bygone age. The elements of adventure, hard work, the broken dreams from the heat if the desert, etc. reflected the letter Songs. Scholars called the Letter Songs as the great music of the modern expatriates. Through the letters the poet exposed the worries and agonies of both the gulf wives and their counter partners. Today even though Dubai was made in Kerala or Kerala was born in Dubai, the letter songs of SA Jameel are being sung throughout Kerala binding deep connections among human hearts^v. More over all these songs enriched the gulf literary traditions in the northern districts of Kerala.

Actually the family life was occurred once in two or three years as far as the expatriates are concerned. The only source of solace of the youth who migrated to the gulf countries seeking jobs is the letters from their family. The letter songs have a deep relation with the social life of Kerala. The letter songs became a trend where there was no other way of communication and people were waiting for the letters from both the sides. All the news regarding family, children, neighbors, relatives, etc. were intimated through letters only. The Tape Recorder of National Panasonic was a status symbol of each gulf expatriate during that time. Even though the letter songs are in accordance with the traditional Mappila songs, all these songs are filled with the real lives of every expatriate.

To be aggrieved by separation or bereavement is beyond time. So the messenger songs are relevant in all era. The transformations in time also affect the changes in messenger

songs. The medium of messages changes in accordance with the time. The place of clouds, peacocks and letters have shifted to audio cassettes.^{vi} The separated wife from Kerala writes letters at midnight to her husband in Dubai depicted all her worries regarding remote parenting and looking after the family alone. These sorrows are not by one person but by thousands of people around us. Letter songs are all about the lakhs of youth who are dwelling in the sand forests and their separated counter partners who are waiting for their arrival. That is why the letter songs have got unprecedented social relevance.

The expatriates return generally once in two or three years and shows all types of behaviors of a 'true gulf man'. They will appear in best of their dresses in public holding triple five cigars in between fingers and Rolex watch on wrist. They will keep the golden colour Schaefer or Parker pen in pocket. This is the picture of a typical gulf man. Meanwhile the family members will provide many problems for him regarding fiscal aspects and he will be the soul responsible person to resolve all the issues and for that purpose he is compelled to return to the gulf countries. The question of why do you earn like this moved many migrants and even though there is less earning you could have lived together as a family, made many male members cry in solitude. The lines like 'Think, I am not angel, I am an ordinary woman' made the migrants lose their sleep^{vii}. Thousands of Mappila women believed that Jameel is talking for each and every one of them.

After 1970s the process of expatriation increased due to many factors. In spite of the economic remittance and welfare the families stayed separated in two countries. The girls who suffered a lot from separation and over burden in families because of the absence of their husbands became the motif of the letter songs. The letter songs made immense influence in the migrant society as they were eager to visit their home land and family with lots of audio cassettes in their bags with the National Panasonic Tape recorder.^{viii} Many critiques blamed SA Jameel for the over sexuality in some of the lines. But the author defended the criticisms scientifically arguing that physically and psychologically it is a mistake to separate a girl from her family^{ix}. The life leading in two countries is like a hell, lamenting gulf wives. The migrants followed a serene concept regarding family. They earn money by working hard at day and night forgetting even their stomach and send all

the wealth to his family without making them know the hardships abroad.

The letter songs are the life itself not only for the adorners of Mappila songs but for each migrant who experienced expatriation once in their life.^x The gulf countries were moving towards a boom during that time. So the migrants could send money and gold to the native countries and that created a collateral society of gulf wives who were expecting all these materials each time. They could feed their children decent food but life without partner became intolerant. Separated youth became a common sight during that time. The age where there is no phone, letters proved the only way for communication and that is why letter songs became prominent. The letter songs became very famous where the Malayalees work, both in Kerala and abroad.

The letter songs received immense influence among the women folk in Kerala. Many gulf wives sent letters to SA Jameel hailing the letter songs. Later many letter songs were written based on these songs but not received any reach as the letter songs of SA Jameel. The replay songs which were written due to the utmost demand by the expatriates too gathered huge popularity in Kerala^{xi}.

The expatriations which started in early 70s and reached its apex in 90s have influenced a lot in Kerala and Malayalee life. The economic depression made migration an inevitable element. The transformation in agriculture, the uncertainties in the industrial field due to frequent strikes, the political instabilities, changes in the structure of education were some of the push factors of expatriation. So the migration has influence on the socio-economic life of Kerala. It altered the structure of family and relations. Within two decades the nuclear families increased in to 62 percentages. It is reported that 45% of the Malayalee families are led by the women folk in Kerala due to migration.^{xii}

The institution of family, which is meant for living together and to satiate many psycho-physical and social necessities, is now questioned by the process of expatriation. Prolonged separation became one of the traits of the Kerala families. Separation for somebody was intolerable pain which created many health issues for them. The expatriates are the people who deserted home and

families for the sake of home and family. The separation created many psychological issues among the relatives in host countries. Many cried out of agony by listening to the letter songs. K. Ibrahim, an expatriate from Jeddah has listened to the letter songs even thousand times.^{xiii}

The study shows that emigration from Kerala is mainly a male affair. Migration increased the number of single-member households by 33%, 2 member households by 43% and 3 member households by 25%. As a result, the female headed households were 25%. While nearly 50% of the emigrants were Muslims, less than 5% of the Muslim emigrants were females and the husbands of about 24% of married women in Malappuram live outside India. In the case of about 2.4% of the gulf wives (about 24 thousand women), their husbands had left for Gulf within days after marriage; almost a third left within three months of marriage, and about 45% left during the first year of marriage. One can read the contents, and the tone of the letter songs against these data. It's telling effects, as we found out from the data are two: a breakdown of the family system, and the high rate of consumption of migration on the letter songs, which, when juxtaposed with the data, is speaking for itself. However, to add to these points are the increased prominence of individual consumption of cultural goods made possible at this time first by the arrival of tape recorders, which coincided with the second wave of letter songs, and later that of the TV (In 1998, 54% of the emigrant households had a television set each.), which is then to be juxtaposed with the current form of Mappila albums in Malabar, which can make for another interesting study. The tape recorders made the appropriation of the songs possible in a very domestic setting, and this along with the emergence of nuclear households meant that the song was now an object of personal consumption as never before. Gulf remittances made mobility in the social scale a possibility, with the gulf remittances mostly spent on consuming, which would then be the entry point of the Mappila into the material order of a higher social class. This period does not just witness the middle class Mappila but of the Kerala society as a whole, its material practice being that of conspicuous consumption. In the study by CDS, 86% of the households mentioned living expenses as the main expenditure item met out of remittances. The consumption rate of Kerala, which was .2% less than the Indian average (.47 against .67) in 73 rose 41% above the

national average by 1998. The obsession with money and gold, found in the second wave of the letter songs has then to be understood against this possibility as well strife towards the symbolic power it offered^{xiv}.

After the digital revolution at the turn of the millennium, smartphones, video calls, social networks and messaging apps such as WhatsApp superseded the written letters that inspired kathu pattu, and the songs became less relevant. But, while such songs are not released as prolifically as they once were, the musical genre remains a vibrant cultural tradition that lingers in the music of Kerala. Now kathu pattu have entered the collective memory of Kerala's Muslims. The lyrics and melodies commemorate the sacrifices made by immigrants: the people who worked hard to help develop their state, and to make it a more prosperous place for future generations to live.

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