

Excavations from Ground Reality: Exploring Colonial Aspects in K. N. Panicker's *Karimkutty*

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ABSTRACT

K.N. Panikkar, the renowned Malayalam playwright has left his indelible mark on both literature and performance art. His works have consistently explored the fundamental human experience through songs and narratives. *Karimkutty*, is a work that delves into the rich tapestry of Malayalam folklore, confronting the harsh realities of casteism within the existing social order. Panikkar exposes the lingering influence of colonialism on traditional narratives, questioning how spirituality can coexist with the deeply entrenched social inequalities in Kerala. Through *Karimkutty*, Panikkar compels us to re-evaluate the role of traditional and spiritual literature in the broader human experience.

KEYWORDS

Malayalam Theatre Literature; Colonial Aspects.

Introduction

K N Panikkar was a pioneer in handling the traditional writings and teachings involving folk elements especially in the fields of performing arts and theatre. The work *Karimkutty* is an attempt to bring the existing glory and beauty of the folklore engaging the traditions of literature and culture of Kerala into theatre. In the genre of theater literature promoted by Panikkar, he attempts the modern parable through his plays *The Lone Tusker* and *Karimkutty*. These plays are treated experimental and welcomed by the audience as reflecting a transition from tradition to the modern world. In the play, *Karimkutty* the invisible spirit represents the slave community with no voice or agency. By compromising his freedom, he fulfils the exercise of self-will and freedom in other Chathans. The storyline, thus stands as a parable on modern-day relations between the

exploiter and the exploited. *Karimkutty* is a treat to watch and a visual extravaganza on the stage. It is dark, mysterious and powerful. The suppressed, marginalized colour black is the mood of the play.

The theme of the play is rooted in the deep ritualistic base of Kerala. In the beginning, people gradually become aware of forces that appear to control their food supply and other determinants of existence. Having no clear understanding of the natural causes, they attribute them to supernatural or magical forces. Then, they begin to explore for ways to win the favor of these powers. Over time they begin to perceive an apparent connection between certain devices they have used and the outcome they set out to bring about. These devices are then repeatedly refined and formalized until they become rituals.

At this stage, the entire group usually performs the rite, while the

audience is the supernatural force. So, rituals and supernatural interferences are ideas which are not new to the Indian audience. They always fascinate Indians. This interest has been carried over into the art and literary forms of India. Several Indian playwrights have made use of these rituals and superstitions to portray an illusory and imaginative world called the theatre. Prominent among them has been Kavalam Narayana Panikkar whose plays have served as a bridge between traditional and modern life of Kerala. The people of Kerala are known to have a strong ritualistic base with myths and romanticized stories related to Yakshis and Chatthan.

In the play, Kavalam has made use of the supernatural vehicle for the subtle commentary on feudal society. Karimkutty is a slave spirit who has been equated with the working class people. Chathans are spirits which can be tamed, made your own and then they will bring you anything. Chathan is a concept, it is a spirit and there is a sorcerer in the play who controls 390 Chathans.

The leader of all these Chathans is Karimkutty. Like the Chathans they can do wonders, they are like the spirits. They are not bad spirits; they can help with goodwill. Kondadimadan, a sorcerer is Karimkutty's master, representing the traditional family and caste-specific master of a certain order of magical practice. Kondadimadan enjoys his position by being the master of Karimkutty, one such instance is when Kondadimadan says to Kudunni that if he doesn't like Karimkutty then he could leave. Even though Karimkutty is invisible and powerful he has no choice or freedom but to remain a slave. Panikkar portrays the imaginary boundaries of master and slave where the powerful becomes the keeper and the master of traditional power. In Kondadimadan's conversation with Kudunni, he declares himself under the protection of 390 Chathans and says of

them as "who gather about my family as a cluster of slavish cadavers" (Panikkar 26). He proclaims himself as the master of all, a traditional powerful colonizer and invokes the spirit to develop a modern approach to power domination. When they are about to call Karimkutty he says to Kundunni, "But to see him, you must touch me, or rather, I'll have to touch you, But if I 'touch you or you touch me, in either case I'll have to cleanse myself. Do you understand?" (Panikkar 31)

In reply, Kundunni says that their courage is the knowledge that the master will always be there to correct them and lead them as one who always needs someone to show power to them as a master. When Kundunni touches the audience several people join him and it turns out to be a chain created by the audience, and they are the reflection of the society which is born free but everywhere in chains. It also suggests the advancement of the phenomenon of globalization that has affected third-world countries and enslaved them through modern capitalism. When Kondadimadan invokes Karimkutty as the powerful driver of 390 Chathans, the ones seen in dry season, rainy season, when the wind rises in the guise of the workers, in the paddy fields, in the enclosure within the home of untouchables or presented as a pariah worker. Madan admires the power of his powerful spirit and mourns the decline of this powerful relationship when he gives Karimkutty to Manthraivanan in the rise of modern colonialism.

The arrival of Karimkutty is represented using the black curtain and in Kathakali the black curtain is used to welcome the *Kathi vesham*, where the entire colour of the play becomes black. The black cloud is the colour of Karimkutty which could be seen reflected in the eyes of his master. Kundunni faints when he feels the presence of the spirit and says he can't see Karimkutty and the master tells him to close his eyes and

leave. The blindfolded eyes of Kundunni can signify two things. Firstly, that Kundunni always admires his master and in fearful respect or worship of him, he leads the life of a slave. Thus, it is his reality as the powerless 'other' that makes him blindfold his eyes because for him his master is always the knowledge. Secondly, that he cannot bear the reality of being a slave. He is neglected while Karimkutty is wholeheartedly accepted. The difference between Kundunni and Karimkutty is on the border of these imaginary powers of magic and so Kondadimadan is grateful to the invisible spirit that helps him in distress. Kundunni thus comes to the realization that the ones who have power are the ones who are valued.

All the slave spirits are given one day, a free rein in the village. On this day, a handsome young Chathan called Sundaran and the master's daughter Poomala fall in love with each other. When the father realizes this he chastises the young spirit and banishes his daughter. Mantravanan, a former disciple of Kondadimadan, has learned enough of the sorcerer's magic to enable him to garner considerable wealth and put his former master in his debt. When Mantravanan offers to take one chathan- a power he has long desired to possess in payment of the debt, the chathans become so incensed that they drive him away from the scene. After the play, Kondadimadan agrees not only to give Mantravanan control of one chatthan, but it will be Karimkutty himself. After this event, the whole host of chathans rise against Kondadimadan in outrage, leading to the fall of the traditional master.

The colonial aspect as said in *Colonialism Revisited: Recent Historiography* that "Colonialism, as we generally use the word today, has nothing to do with the settlement on foreign soil. It has instead to do with the domination by a strong state over the weaker people..." (Van Neil 109).

Through Karimkutty, Kondadimadan performs real magic with the help of the magic wand. The audience sees Karimkutty as the leader of the slave spirits, and the interdependence of these spirits reveals both the positive as well as negative aspects of the feudal relations. Kondadimadan takes pride in the magical powers of Karimkutty. But when it is time for Kondadimadan to repay his debt to Mantravanan he asks Karimkutty to loot people and bring him the wealth, which he refuses.

The State of Kerala in India, there was a predominant practice of a feudal system in which the masters always had an upper hand over the working class. One was owned by the other and the worker could not work for any other person, his body and spirit were in chains. Once there used to be a temple in a tribal area where there was a festival during which the slave exchange used to take place. It is a universal phenomenon and comes from man's desire that somebody should work for him. The powerful masters hold the working class under their sway and possess the power to buy and sell them. Although based on the social system of the hierarchical feudal order that was supposedly swept away with land reform in Kerala the play keeps in the foreground the interplay between today's exploiters and the exploited, even though presented in a parable form. Indeed, the parable form of Panikkar's dramas allows for a freer play such resonances between the traditional and the modern, the old and the new. . As stated in one of the articles, "the folk sensibility is not something which belongs to bygone era, but is something very contemporary, which can be very useful for contemporary man while interpreted to the modern sensibility" ("Kavalam Narayana Panikkar: Meaning into Action" 11).

Karimkutty, a loyal and powerful spirit, never abused his magical abilities. Despite Karimkutty's unwavering love and

dedication, his human master violates his trust by handing him over to Manthraivanan. Karimkutty is deeply affected by it and curses his master. This betrayal leads Karimkutty and his fellow spirits to revolt against their masters, breaking free from the chains of slavery. The spirits, for the first time, take control of their own destinies, seeking liberation and freedom influenced by Karimkutty's sacrifice and trauma. The narrative draws a parallel between the Chatham and the working class. The play amplifies the societal conditions of the working class in the State of Kerala in India, where a feudal system had once dominated, mirroring the power dynamics between masters and workers. The play thus depicts the enduring exploitation faced by the working class, emphasizing the struggle for autonomy and freedom. While rooted in historical feudal structures, the themes in the play resonate with contemporary issues of exploitation and control, showcasing the timeless struggle between oppressors and the oppressed in a symbolic and allegorical manner.

While considering certain resonances in the play *Karimkutty*, Kondadimadan can be considered as representative head of a long family, in a caste specific role of master who imposes certain order through magical powers. His awareness of the limits of his own power over the spirits turns into an existential dilemma. Manthraivanan is not of a traditional practice, he is there at the periphery of the tradition, ready and willing to literally 'buy' a Chathan. Kondadimadan's fading power over his traditional practices places him as a representative of all such masters in today's world, in the dilemma of questioning his powers. His anger is the anger of the confused self-doubting artist or ritual specialist in a world on which he no longer has any control.

Another resonating set of relationships in *Karimkutty* is the parallel

between the Chathans and the working class. The powerful masters hold them under their sway and possess the power to 'buy' and 'sell' them. Although based on the social order of the hierarchical feudal order which was supposedly swept away with land reform in Kerala, the play keeps in the foreground interplay between today's exploiters and exploited even if presented in a parable form.

Characters in *Karimkutty*

The central character in the play *Karimkutty* with whom the whole play revolves around is a slave spirit equated with the working class people. Karimkutty is invisible but powerful and has a supernatural element with him, which is purposefully used by Panikkar to consider the reality and magic in feudal society. The identity of Karimkutty is revealed through 390 Chathans to whom he is the leader, those Chathans are supernatural spirits which can be tamed under the master's command. Karimkutty is also like the Chathans who can do wonders using these powers, he is loyal to Kondadimadan. Karimkutty never misused his power even when he was asked to loot by his master. The approach of the spirit as a determined personage makes the audience give him high esteem and Karimkutty always proved to be more powerful than his master with loyalty, which lasted until his master gave him to Manthraivanan. Karimkutty at the stage is compared to a wide imagination drawn by the audience. He is given shape and characteristics by the audience perceived by them. At last, Karimkutty gave up his freedom and self-will to free other Chathans from slavery.

Another form of example is taken from an African narrative and in an article, Kenworthy writes of the role of Christian education and its impacts on Africans: "Often it was unconscious, merely a direct result of his Christian way of living; sometimes it was planned with a

knowledge of the bitterness and enmity which existed.” (184)

Kondadimadan is the master of Karimkutty, who represents the traditional head of a long family and – caste—specific role of master in a certain order through the practice of magic. His confrontation with the limits of his power over the spirits supposedly under his control reflects the existential crisis that traditionalists would face in their lives during progress. His condition is equated with traditional artists who are ‘power hungry’ and ‘wealthy’. He admires Karimkutty more than Pandunni and is grateful for the help the spirit gave to him. He performs caste-specific magic to invoke Karimkutty then though the spirits reveal positive and negative thoughts on the feudal system rationally. When the time came to repay Manthraivanan, Kondadimadan asked Karimkutty to loot people and bring him wealth and thus broke the compatibility, they had shared. Finally, Kondadimadan betrays his loyal servant by handing him over to Manthraivanan, this signifies the decline of the traditional system.

Maantravanan is not just tradition bound, he is willing to buy and sell the Chathan that was there to be bought and sold. Mantravanan, a former disciple of Kondadimadan had learnt enough magic to enable him to garner considerable wealth and put his former master in debt. In return, Manthraivanan offers to take one Chathan instead of money because this ownership of spirit will give him the power he has long desired to possess, for which he finally receives Karimkutty, the invisible.

Chathans are part of Kerala’s folklore and myth which relate to supernatural elements, the feudal system and working-class people. The spirits to which Kavalam refers are 390 in number to whom Karimkutty is the leader. To bring the traditional myth alive, Kavalam uses traditional costumes, music, other art

forms and even intervention by the audience. The Chathans, in the play have supernatural powers which can be tamed only by the master’s command. When Karimkutty is relieved of his leadership and handed over to Manthraivanan, the Chathans become helpless. Challenging the traditional power relationships, they express their outrage by revolting against their master and decide on their own to break their chain of slavery.

Kundalini, a follower of Kondadimadan acts as a listener to his master, a trustworthy slave who follows his master. He thinks it is he who manages his master but Kondadimadan does not seem to think so. Kundunni feels insecure about his position but afraid to touch his master owing to the caste system. He feels alienated when his master shows gratitude to Karimkutty and his blindfolded eyes represent the reality he wishes to ignore.

Sundaran, a slave, and Poomala, the master’s daughter, fall in love when the spirits are given a free day. When the father realizes the relationship he chides the young handsome spirit and banishes his daughter. The relationship between Sundaran and Poomala is beautifully depicted. It represents reality, when on the 28th day of a particular month of the year the farmers who worked the fields were given a day free, on that day they could even take ladies if they were seen outside. The Chathan on such a day got a free ride and decided to take the master’s daughter. He takes her away with the help of other Chathans. From then onwards the master’s downfall starts, owing to a curse of Karimkutty who had been betrayed and sold.

Conclusion

The play, thus delves into colonial themes, intertwining them with traditional structures which often tend to disregard human rights, depicting humans in a quasi-divine light while emphasizing

power differentials within communities. of them from the rise and fall of an
The colonial timeline is expressed in each emperor.

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