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The Unsung Annals of Mappilas: A Study of Arabi-Malayalam Literature

Shibila A

The aim of this paper is to introduce the dormant history and vibrant literature of the Mappilas of Malabar, which have been silent in the pages of Indian history and literature. Mappilas exemplify the successful confluence of two cultures- the indigenous culture of Kerala and the foreign culture of the Muslim traders of Arabia, as they emerged in the shores of Arabian sea owing to the longstanding trade between the Malabar coast and Arabian Peninsula. The poetic genre of Mappilas, *Mappilapattu*, written in Arabi-Malayalam (Malayalam words laced in Arabic script) or Mappila Malayalam, has been vocal about the ethos of Mappila culture, and assisted in expressing the collective identity of Mappilas as a community. With myriad thematic expressions and poetic devices that render these songs acoustically engaging, *Mappilapattu* bears the weight of centuries old neglect as the first ever written document of *Mappilapattu* appeared in 1607- *Muhyudheen Mala* written by Qazi Muhammad. Even though Mappila language and its literary texts assisted in the break-away of Malayalam language from the shackles of elitist Sanskrit, the chronicles of history fail to voice even the presence of Mappila language and literature in the maturing of Malayalam from a vernacular dialect into a full-fledged language. This paper attempts to trudge the neglected paths of history of Mappilas from a subaltern perspective utilizing the war-songs composed by this indigenous populace.

Keywords: *Mappilapattu*, Subaltern, *Muhyudheen Mala*, *Padappattu*, Mappila rebellion.

Introduction

The age-old maritime trade between Arabia and the coastal areas of India has left its indelible mark in the form of several Muslim communities, and the ports of Malabar (Kerala) flourished with Mappilas. Earlier the honorific title Mappila used to address the Christians and Jews in the Southern Kerala and the Muslims in Malabar alike. However, recently the term tends to be used as an exclusive title for the Kerala Muslims. The etymology of the term Mappila, a combination of two Dravidian terms, *Maha* and *Pillai* denoting 'great' and 'child' respectively, suggests that the foreign traders were well received and respected by the natives of Kerala, as Mappilas were essentially the progenies of the sea-faring merchants who wed the local women. Nevertheless, the chunk of Mappila Muslims of Malabar comprises the converts from the lower strata of the society who embraced Islam to escape the hegemonic and oppressive feudal system that predominated then. Conversion to Islam not only unchained the low caste from the traditional disabling social bondages, but also welcomed them to a community which, along with sharing their dissention with the prevalent social hierarchy and the hegemony of the landlords, exceedingly resisted the *Janmi* tyranny. Moreover, the rulers, especially the Zamorins of Calicut, showered special regard to the well-being of the Mappilas, because the alliance between the Zamorins and the Muslim traders existed on mutual benefit. The Muslim merchants could monopolise the Arabian sea trade, and Zamorins enriched themselves with the revenue from custom duty. In addition, Mappilas contributed to the military of the Zamorins, and with their aid Zamorins annexed the adjoining provinces as well as established their throne in Malabar.

From the very infantile stages of their evolution as a community, Mappilas have tried to propel a collective identity through their dressing, lifestyle, language, literature and cultural artefacts. Mappila identity has been derived from the plenitude of exposure to varied historical experiences; constructed through diverse embedded social practices and greatly shaped by the political economy of the region. Their literary texts, both prose and verse, disclose their world view and encapsulate their heritage. They have written extensively on myriads of matters,

and their poetry took form from and in turn considerably influenced every walk of their existence. *Malappattu* (primarily devotional in tone), *Padappattu* (war-songs), *Khissapattu* (poetry on historic events), *Kessupattu* (deals with romantic themes), *Kalyanapattu* (celebrates the conjugal union and sung during the rejoicing of marital ceremonies) and *Kathupattu* (epistolary songs) constitute a few categories that exemplify the range of their poetic excellence, and there are songs that carry medicinal knowledges, social satires, lullabies and so on. To some degree, the Mappila community communicated through spontaneous composition of poetry, and they adhered to humming it at moments of labour to minimise their hardship. However, a prevalent scholarly neglect hovers over Mappila studies, and the vibrant literati of Mappilas haven't hitherto received the attention it justly demands. As Roland E. Miller notes, the "Mappilas have been rarely noticed in scholarly writings, and when noticed it has usually been in unflattering terms"[1]. Moreover, the pages of dominant history scarcely represent the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles of Mappilas which span more than a century. In this light, the first part of the paper exposes the negligence displayed towards Mappila literature with the specimen of *Muhyudheen Mala,* and the later sessions examine the verses penned by Mappilas to unravel the faithful history of their struggles against organised oppressive forces.

The poetic tradition of Mappilas, *Mappilapattu* or Mappila song, written in Arabi-Malayalam language (Malayalam words scripted in Arabic letters) proclaim the collective ethos of Mappilas, and *Muhyudheen Mala* (1607), written by Qazi Muhammed in praise of the Sufi Abdul Qadir Jilani, is considered to be the first datable Mappila song. The custom of memorising *Muhyudheen Mala* and reciting it every day in the house holds preserved the song from generation to generation till Arabi-Malayalam printing was established around 1850 at Nathapuram and Thirurangadi. Enough scholarly investigation hasn't yet conducted about neither the author nor the work, even though the contemporaries of Qazi Muhammed have been the heart of academia. Bhakti Movement dominated Indian literature during the 16th and 17th century A. D., and it was characterised by bringing slight changes in subject matter and style of the literature during the Aryan invasion.

Even though *Muhyudheen Mala* qualifies the thematic and stylistic standards to recognise as part of the grand narrative literary form Bhakti Movement, it received marginalisation along with other literary texts that rooted in Budhist-Jainist tradition and other forms of works that were alienated through elitism.

Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, hailed as the father of modern Malayalam, wrote substantially devotional poems including retelling of great Hindu epics, and he is considered as a significant voice of the Bhakti Movement in the literary milieu of South India. Similar style is apparent in *Muhyudheen Mala* and subsequent *Malas,* which utilised the *Muhyudheen Mala* as a template. M. Keely Sutton in her article, 'Contested Devotion; The Praise of Sufi Saints in Three *Mala Pattus*' originally published in the journal *Asian Ethnology* observes that the "content of the Sufi *malas* includes brief details of the saints' birth, education, initiation, miracles or powers (*karamat*), enemies, and death" and the emotional tone prevalent in *Muhyudheen Mala* echoes that of Ezhuthachan's[2]. Yet, as Dr. Umar Tharamel rightly points out, even though "Khali Muhammed's *Muhayudheen Mala*, written before Ezhuthachan's *Adhyatmaramayanam,* and considered to be the first one discovered in Mappilah literature, is a work in which the devotional tone is prominent, it does not figure among the great works of the Bhakti Movement"[3].

T T Sreekumar attempts a comparative study of the disapproval and negligence exposed towards *Muhyudheen Mala* and the acceptance and recognition bestowed to *Jnanappana* written by Poonthanam Nambuthiri, which is a legendary text in Malayalam literature and considered as prominent among the pioneer texts of Bhakti Movement, and criticises the politics behind the exclusion of the former by literary historians, while celebrating the later work. He notes that information about the life-time of Poonthanam and the date of composition of *Jnanappana* is still a conjecture, and with the evidences available, it is apparent that either both texts have been composed during the same period or *Muhyudheen Mala* preceded *Jnanappana*. Both works align thematically, conjuring the aura of devotion which dominated the literature of Bhakti Movement. However, *Muhyudheen Mala* and its allied Mappila literary texts

like *Ummahathumala, Thahirathumala, Fathhul Bahnas, Muhimmathul Mu'minin* and so on haven't been considered as a part of the Bhakti literature of Kerala[4]. Moreover, like the Sanskrit mixed Malayalam of Ezhuthachan, the Arabi-Malayalam texts of Mappilas have aided in the fledging of Malayalam language, and that aspect as well has been overlooked by linguists and cultural historians.

Similarly, the history of the struggles of Mappilas against the colonial regime in Malabar and how they represented and voiced it in their literary texts is another forgotten aspect. Studies of Indian freedom struggles have been executed by four major schools of historiography, namely Imperialist or the Cambridge School, Nationalist, Marxist and Subaltern. The Imperialist historiographers and Nationalist historiographers failed to voice the struggles of Mappilas in the right sense, as the former group of historians perceived colonialism as a foreign rule, and pictured Mappila struggles as basically communal riots. They approached the Mappila revolts from the perspective of British authorities, and relied on British documentations rather than Indigenous sources. The latter group of historians, governed by elitism vocalised only about the participation of the dominant groups in the Indian freedom movement, and regarded indifference to the struggles of the powerless minority. Nationalist historiographers focused on the high-level politics of Gandhi, Nehru and the congress. The Marxist school of historiography tried to study the struggles in Malabar, and they provided the Mappila revolts an agrarian appearance, and even this viewpoint could not fully accommodate the contribution of Mappilas to the Indian freedom fight. The marginalised social groups including the tribes, peasants, minority groups and outcastes who have been engaged in the freedom struggle and other social movements, and rarely mentioned in the pages of celebrated historical narratives found their place in subaltern historiography as it tried to reclaim the history of the marginalised sections of society. Subaltern historiography introduced by Ranajit Guha and Gyan Prakash centers on the representation of the history of the disenfranchised, oppressed and otherwise marginalised groups. Ranajit Guha points out that, in the "un-historical historiography" of India, the "politics of the people" is an under-developed chapter, since "parallel to the domain of the elite

politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities, but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population"[5]. Yet, the subaltern historiographers who primarily explore the history of the silenced subjects through the scrutiny of their folklore, poetry, proverbs, songs, riddles and oral history have not probed the multi-faceted consciousness of Mappila revolts which were essentially anti-feudal and anti-colonial. The great oral tradition of Mappilas and their splendid cultural artforms and songs are great sources to retrace Mappila history and their involvement in the freedom movement.

Padappattu (war-song), the sub-genre of *Mappilapattu*, thematically vigorous with the accounts of the local wars of Mappilas against the feudal landlords and colonial masters, assists in revisiting the abandoned history of Mappilas, and unravel the consciousness of Mappilas during the tumultuous period to counter the twisted and knitted stories recorded by colonial historians. Resistance against imperialistic motives has commenced from the very arrival of Portuguese ships in the land of Malabar. Dr. Hussain Randathani notes that,

> Prior to the emergence of the Portuguese, control of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean was established peacefully. Over the centuries, a mutually beneficial relationship developed between Muslim traders and Hindu merchants and the Portuguese could offer little in the way of goods or services to supplant the established network… The Portuguese quickly surmised that they could only change the status quo by resorting to brute force[6].

Portuguese, determined to establish their monopoly over the Indian Ocean spice trade resorted to war and brutal means, and Arab traders and Mappilas opposed the Portuguese commercial ambitions in Malabar. In this scenario, Sheikh Zainudhin Makhdum of Ponnani composed the resistance poetry *Thahreelu Ahlil Imani A'la Jihaadiabadathissulban* to motivate the Mappilas to fight against the carnages of Portuguese, and to a certain extent, it could be considered as the first *Padappattu* in Mappila literature. Later numerous *Padappattu* singing the valor of martyrs who battled against

the Portuguese were written and *Kunjimarakkar Shaheed* and *Chaliyampada* exemplify *Padappattu* composed on the occurrences of that period. Another *Padappattu, Kottupalli Mala* composed by Nallalam Beeran, centres around the confrontation between the Portuguese and Mappilas at Kottupalli in Calicut district, and the song recounts the tales of martyr Kunjimarakkar. These songs record the chronicles of unacknowledged war-heroes of Malabar who sacrificed their life to protect their home land from the imperialist powers, and their names are not recorded in the great records of history.

Following the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British arrived the scene, and with the battle of Plassey in 1757, the victory of British East India company inaugurated the period of British colonialism in India. In 1792 the British occupied the territory of Malabar by replacing the Mysorean rule, and the nineteenth century Malabar witnessed numerous upheavals and revolts resisting British colonial imperialism and regional landlordism, which was then sponsored by colonial powers. Numerous agrarian policies introduced during the time of the Mysorean administration have started impoverishing the peasant folks, and the torment elevated during the subsequent British rule as they insisted on enforcing the fissure between Muslims and Hindus, exploiting the social climate in which the preponderance of agrarians were Muslims and the feudal lords reveled the high caste Hindu status. The land settlement policies in Malabar, reinstated the social and economic position of the dominant caste, and the cunning colonial masters encouraged the landed gentries to initiate ruthless regulations to bankrupt the fate of Mappilas and the lower caste peasants. Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. observes that, reduced to "insecure tenancy, vulnerable to rack renting and eviction at the hands of Hindu landlords (*janmi*) sustained by British courts, the Mappillas responded in a series of outbreaks"[7]. The dissatisfaction and dissent under the colonial rule caused disobedience and organised oppositions, ensuing about three hundred Mappila uprisings between 1791 and 1921. Malappuram (1834), Panthaloor (1836, 1898), Mankada Pallipuram (1841), Muttyara (1842), Cheroor (1843), Pandikkad (1843), Manjeri (1849, 1896), Angadippuram (1894), Kulathoor (1851), Kottayam (Thalasseri- 1851), Parol (1865), Thootha (1873), Melattoor (1880), Melmuri (1884),

Mannarkkad (1894) and Chembrasseri (1896) constitute a few among the major uprisings of this epoch. A vital element that enthused Mappilas to fight, devoid of any trepidation, against powers mightier than their flocks is *Padappattu*, and this age witnessed the fine tuning and upsurge in the composition of the genre, *Padappattu.* These war-songs act as rich treasures of Mappila history as these songs are an indigenous art form of the community and penned from their own perspective.

Cheroor Padappattu, jointly written by Muhammed Kutty and Muhayudheen Kutty in 1845 demonstrates the historical dimensions of Cheroor revolt on which seldom historical archives are available. *Cheroor Padappattu* eulogises the seven young Mappila men who protested against the local feudal lords and the British who safeguards the interests of the landlords. The Mappilas joined the oppressed classes of the region, and rebelled against the local representative of the British regime, Kaprattu Krishnapanikkar under the leadership of Mamburam Saydalavi Thangal at Cheroor in Malappuram district in 1843. Seven Mappilas fought against a military unit consisting of sixty-four well equipped and armed army men. William Logan in his *Malabar Manual* describe this incident from the prejudiced perspective of the coloniser. Logan reports that, "1 subedar and 3 sepoys were killed, Captain Leader and 5 sepoys were wounded, the former in the neck and the stomach and, besides these casualties to the regular troops, 7 peons were wounded (3 of them severely). The fanatics, 7 in number, were killed by the Taluk peons and the villagers"[8]. Mappilas revolted for their right and honour, yet they are addressed as 'fanatics' and the way Logan display the statistics of the wounded expose the unarmed Mappilas as barbaric and brutal, and the slaughter of the seven Mappila youths comes as the desired climax to a chapter of bloodshed. Moreover, the entrance of villagers in the scenario is a fictitious and fabricated one, and Balakrishnan Vallikunnu in his book, *Mappila Sahitya Padanangal* advocates that the seven Mappilas were assassinated by Taluk Sepoys and *Amsam* employees[9]. Logan's account portrays Mappilas as essentially anti-social and the British as the supreme saviours. Here, the *Cheroor Padappattu* gains relevance as it counters the narrative of Logan,

and it contradicts many imperialist perceptions about Cheroor revolt. It clarifies the character and underpinnings of the revolt, and unmask the Mappila consciousness, and the immediacy of the composition of the song undeniably makes it a reliable source. The poets have vividly picturised the gory episodes of the Cheroor revolt from the unadulterated perspective of the oppressed class, and this informal text carries the history of contestations and insurrections against organised political dominance. The *Cheroor Padappattu* instigated many struggles against the British after its publication, and considering its tremendous influence on the people, *Cheroor Padappattu* was banned and its copies were confiscated by the British Government[10]. *Cheroor Chinth*, written by Khayyath, another song which valorise the Martyrs of Cheroor revolt, was immensely popular among Mappilas and they used to chorus this song during social gatherings and celebration of blissful matrimonial union. However, the British authorities restrained vocalising this song at ceremonious occasions, and the ban restricted the printing and publication of the same.

Malappuram Padappattu, penned by the renowned Mappila poet Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar in the year 1883, another popular war-song that inspired the populace and enraged the British authority, narrates the peasant struggles in Malabar in the eighteenth century. The feud between Para Nambi, a local land-lord and Ali Marakkar who collected taxes on behalf of the British authority is the central incident that prompted the Malappuram revolt, as Para Nambi conspired to assassinate Ali Marakkar and demolish the mosque of the Mappilas. The British authorities along with some local Nair feudal lords tried to take advantage of the hostility between Nambi and Mappilas, and the dispute turned into a full-fledged revolt. More than forty Mappilas and a lower caste Hindu, from the oppressed caste that supported the Mappilas in their struggle, died in the revolt and Malappuram *Nercha*, an annual ritual is conducted in Malabar, to commemorate the martyrs of this agrarian revolt. Partha Chatterjee observes that the "history of medieval India is replete with instances of peasant communities acting to protect what conceived to be their communal right against unjust encroachment by an external state power, whether it be local feudal lords or the functionaries of an imperial bureaucracy," and it is no

wonder that Mappilas, essentially a peasant community which inhabits the collective spirit and audacity of the agrarian India, to resist the exploitation of the landed gentry and to protect their rights, fought against an armed battalion numerically far greater than theirs[11].

Malappuram Padappattu is a factual and faithful representation of the otherwise neglected local historical episode of the struggle against British imperialism, and the song stresses on the compulsion to overthrow British empire from the land as their policies like 'divide and rule' demolishes the religious harmony of the nation. The colonial construct of otherness is installed in the consciousness of people, and Mappilas become the 'other' of Hindu. Colonial discourse fabricated Mappilas as religious fanatics and intolerant, as the account of Logan mentioned above, and *Malappuram Padappattu* subverts and resists this colonial notion by exhibiting rational Mappila community which respects the plurality of social life. Mappilas request Para Nambi not to initiate violence against a community for the transgression of Ali Marakkar, and the characters of Arumukan and Mukunthan who appear in the song to advice the Hindus not to rebel without considering its subsequences, highlight the Mappila vision of the requirement of Hindu-Mappila harmony to dethrone the suppressive colonial powers.

Malappuram Padappattu motivated many proletariats to protest against the British, and it is documented that the pages of *Malappuram Padappattu* were seized from the hands of the martyrs of the 1921 Malabar Mappila rebellion. F. Fawcett was appointed by the British government to study Vaidyar's poems and its tremendous impact on the public, and it eventually brought forth "A Popular Mopla Song" and "War Songs of the Mappilas of Malabar" in *The Indian Antiquary; A Journal of Oriental Research* in 1899 and 1901 respectively.

Mappilas fought the British force at Mannarkkad and Manjeri in the years 1891 and 1896 respectively, and *Mannarkkad Padappattu* (1891) and *Manjeri Padappattu* (1896) verbalises these British-Mappila confrontations. These songs celebrate the uprisings

against the British, and it is placed among the songs officially banned by the British government.

Further, plenty of rhymes have been composed on the rebellion of 1921, which came to be known in the history as the Malabar rebellion or Mappila rebellion. The peasant rebellion broke out on 20th August 1921 at Thirurangadi, and the rebels who protested against the atrocities of the British and their leaders who opposed the authorities were addressed in the tainted historical records and documents as ignorant religious fanatics and brutes. However, Mappila songs clear their names and vindicate their heroic deeds. The song "*Thollayirathiyirupathi Onnil Mappilamar*" written by P M Kasim enumerates the brutalities of the British and exculpate the consciousness of the revolutionaries. He venerates the war heroes Ali Musliyar and Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji who led the rebellion. Adding on, Melattur Kunjimoythutti Haji's *Malabar Lahalapattu*, P. Bhaskaran's *Ambuttoru Malayalam Pettulla Thumbaram Mappilaveerare* and K T Muhammed's *Khilafat Lahalapattu* are prominent among other songs that commemorates the rebellion. In 1944 Kambalath Govindan Nair penned the song *Annirupathonnil Nammalimmalayalathil* on the occasion of the protest against the monument of Hitchcock, who directed the outrage of 1921, installed at Valluvambram, in Malappuram district. In the song he vigorously clarifies the motives behind the uprisings, and he asserts that the resistance was against the *Jenmies* ruthlessly reaping the yields borne out of the toil of the peasants, and the British plundering their wealth and shipping it to England.

Conclusion

In sum, Mappila literature, even though prominent from the very elementary stages of Malayalam literary tradition and influential in the shaping of Malayalam language, has been neglected for centuries and demands inclusivity in academia. *Muhyudheen mala*, even though thematically and stylistically shoulder-up with celebrated works of the Bhakti Movement, the work hasn't yet methodically investigated or acknowledged. Moreover, dominant schools of historiography have not done justice in representing the role of Mappilas

in the of history of struggles against the British, and *Padappattu* or Mappila war-songs unravel the authentic history of Mappila participation in the war against colonial supremacy and feudal oppression. Since the wars-songs are a product of the indigenous culture of Mappilas, and relied on the oral history, it could be considered as a reliable source to accurately reconstruct the chronicles of Mappilas. *Cheroor Padappattu*, *Malappuram Padappattu* and songs that honour the rebellion of 1921 faithfully document the perspective of the oppressed and the motivations behind their fight, and only by retracing and documenting the authentic history of these battles, one could exhibit reverence to the martyrs who died fighting diversified forms of oppression.

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Shibila A
Research Scholar
Department of English
Govt. Victoria College Palakkad.
Pin: 679321
India
Ph: +91 9745636103
Email: shibilarasheed619@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-9402-5447