

**THE DARK GOD: AN EXAMINATION OF THE
BIBLICAL INFLUENCES IN LITERATURES
OF KERALA**

Dissertation Submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Award of the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in English Language and Literature

By

Roopa Philip



**Center of Linguistics and English
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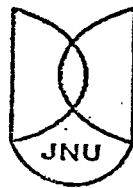
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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation entitled, *The Dark God: An Examination of Biblical Influences in the Literatures of Kerala* submitted by Roopa Philip to the Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is her original work and has not been submitted, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university/institution.

Signature 

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Date: 20 JULY 2005

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CERTIFICATE

Date: 20, JULY 2005

Certified that this dissertation entitled, *The Dark God: An Examination of the Biblical Influences in Kerala*, submitted by Roopa Philip to the Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is her original work and has not been submitted, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university/institution. This may, therefore, be placed before the Examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. G.J.V Prasad for guiding me through my dissertation. I am indebted to him for his time and guidance. Also, I am grateful to him for allowing me to work at my own pace and patiently correcting my rough drafts.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof Santosh K. Sareen, chairperson of the Center of Linguistics and English, as well as the other professors in the center for teaching and helping me to grow academically, these past two years. I am also grateful to the staff at the CLE office, for patiently clarifying my numerous doubts about the formalities regarding the submission of this thesis as well as the help that they have extended to me during these two years.

I have to also thank the staff at D.C Books, Kottayam for helping me find the primary texts for this thesis. I am indebted to their enthusiasm in finding the books that fell within my area of research, and ordering and delivering, as soon as they could, those books that were not in stock. I would also like to thank the Sahitya Akademi Library in Delhi and the JNU library and the staff there for all the books that helped me in the process of writing and researching the dissertation.

I am also grateful to Communication Point for printing out my dissertation. And, last but not the least, I would like to thank my friends and family for debating with me and asking me questions that helped clarify a lot of my arguments and made me think of issues and concerns that I would not otherwise have thought of.

Roopa Philip

INTRODUCTION: The Bible as an Imperial and Interpretative Text

There are two traditions or beliefs on how and when Christianity came to India. One tradition states that St. Thomas came to India by land and arrived in the north-western part of the subcontinent, ruled by a Parthian king. Ancient records name the king as Gundnapur. This is what is stated in the manuscript, Acts of St. Thomas, which is not part of the biblical canon, but fall under the Gnostic gospels.

Then there is the belief of the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala that St. Thomas came to the Malabar Coast. But, both these traditions are little more than beliefs since there is no written proof to support either one of these traditions. But even though none of the written accounts concerning the mission of the disciple Thomas preserved in India is ancient, “it would not however be wise to sweep them all away as having no historical value”.¹

According to Stephen Neill, “oral traditions linger longer in the East. In all Syriac sources relating to the early history of the Thomas Christians and to the coming of Thomas to India, certain features constantly recur and through all the differences a common pattern appears”.² So, looking at all the written records on St. Thomas and India, it can be concluded that the tradition of the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala is the more plausible of the two.

There are records by European travelers that mention the presence of Nestorian Christians in Mylapore and the Malabar Coast, before the arrival of Vasco da Gama to India.³ Also, Marco Polo reports that the body of St. Thomas, ‘venerated by the Christians and the Saracens’, lie in the ‘province of Mylapore’.

There are other later records that corroborate his statement. Paulinas da sun Barlolomeo states:

All Christians of the East, Catholics and heretics like the Nestorians, Jacobites, Armenians, the Catholics of Bengal, Pegu, Siam, Ceylon, Malabar and Hindustan come to make their devotions....confirm the ancient and universal tradition that St. Thomas died at Mylapore.⁴

Neill records that excavations have been carried out at the supposed site of the grave and a skeleton discovered. However, there is no other factual evidence to prove conclusively if the remains belong to the Christian saint or someone else. But, the grave in which the remains were found was unique enough to signify that it belonged to someone special.⁵

So, the answer to the question, did St. Thomas come to India, is inconclusive:

We cannot prove that the Apostle worked in South India any more than we can disprove the fact; but the presence of Christians of undoubtedly ancient origin holding firmly to the tradition (and other favorable factors) may for some incline the balance to belief that the truth of the tradition is a reasonable probability. The evidence we have cannot do more than this.⁶

However, 'the story of the ancient church of the Thomas Christians is of great significance for the whole history of Christianity in India.' So, it is a matter of regret that 'when all the evidence has been collected and sifted, much remains uncertain and conjectural'.⁷

So, if the arrival of St. Thomas in India was a legend or a myth, then it is highly unlikely that the early Christians in India were a part of the indigenous population of the country. The only historical record that suggests the possibility that the early Indian Christians Indian converts is Arian Philostorgius which is a Roman record of the history of the church from AD 313 to 425. However, this is not a very reliable piece of work.⁸

So, as Neill puts it:

It is almost certain that there were well-established churches in parts of South India not later than the beginning of the sixth century and perhaps from a considerably earlier date; but it is probable that these were at least in part churches of foreigners, worshipping in Syriac and cared for by foreign priests and bishops.....It is possible that in this dark period (before 800AD) the apostle Thomas came to India and that the foundation of the Indian church goes back to him; we can only regret the absence of any sure historical evidence..... Millions of Christians in South India are certain that the founder of their church was none other than the apostle Thomas himself. The historian cannot prove to them that they are mistaken in their belief. He may feel it right to warn them that historical research cannot pronounce on the matter with a confidence equal to that which they entertain by faith.⁹

But when the Christian community of Kerala emerges into the clear light of history, it seems to have been a rather prosperous body, enjoying the favor of the local rulers, with guarantees for protection against injury.

But the Bible as a text was not available in Malayalam till the advent of colonialism.¹⁰ This was the case in most countries that had been colonized by the

European colonial powers — Portuguese, English, French and to a lesser degree, the Dutch. Therefore, according to R. S. Sugritarajah, the influence of the Bible in the third world can be divided into three broad categories. They are, the pre-colonial phase, the colonial or imperial phase and the postcolonial phase. The pre-colonial phase is characterized by the lack of a monarchial authority.

The Christians as a community during this period were basically governed by their status as a minority. And in India, during this phase, there was no organized move till the coming of the Portuguese, to convert the non-Christians. Neill states that 'there is no clear evidence of attempts by the Indian Christian community to propagate its faith among the non-Christians, in the midst of which it had its existence'. There are many reasons for it.

If the Thomas story is just a myth, then the early Christian settlers must have been merchants or sailors whose aim would have been commerce. So, religions would naturally take a back seat. However, even if they were religious minded, it would be detrimental for their trade to displease their patrons by attacking their religion as idolatrous and pagan. Also, they could not afford to displease the local chieftain or king under whose protection they were allowed to set up their trading posts.

However, the indigenous population would have become members through marriage to these Christian settlers. Local women must have married or at least had relations with these men, and as a result the ancient Christian community in Kerala would have increased in number. Christianity when it came to India would have encountered a wide range of religious beliefs like, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism.

Other than these beliefs it would also have been in contact with village folk rituals, beliefs and myths. And it is impossible, in such a cosmopolitan setting, to remain unchanged. And the influence of these other religious and cultural belief systems is revealed in one of the many versions of the legend of St. Thomas' death:

The saint was in the wood outside his hermitage saying his prayers; and round about him were many peacocks, for these are more plentiful in that country than anywhere else. And one of the idolaters of that country, being of the lineage of those called Govi.... Having gone with his bow and arrows to shoot peafowl, not seeing the Saint, let fly an arrow at one of the peacocks; and this arrow struck the holy man in the right side, insomuch that he died of the wound, sweetly addressing himself to his creator.¹¹

This legend resembles the Ramayana story, where Dasharatha accidentally shoots the son of a rishi mistaking him for a wild animal. And, what is unusual is that all the versions state that St. Thomas' death was an accident. So, he will be one of the few Christian saints who were not martyred. And, this is a testimony of the tolerance and flexibility of Hinduism.

But, regardless of where Christianity came from, Neill states and I agree that:

Christianity has maintained itself in India through the centuries and has established its right to be regarded as one of the Indian faiths. It is this that makes imperative the attempt to see it at all times against the Indian background and to interpret its history as that of an endless dialogue with the other forms of religious faith by which it has been surrounded.¹²

This attempt at interpretation should not just be confined to a study of its history, but also of its ideas and beliefs. And, one area where this interaction will be reflected is in the literature and language of the state.

However, the constant contact with other religious faiths is most obvious in the religious rites and customs of the Christians in Kerala. Therefore if we look at the mass and other Christian celebrations in the country, it is a queer mixture of the rites of the other religions that it had come in contact with, basically Hinduism. Thus the churches have “arti” during regular mass. And there is the veneration of statues and especially in South India, the use of elephants to carry the statues of the saints during days of the feast of saints.

Also during the pre-colonial period the standing of the text as a sacred one was dubious. It occupied “an ambiguous and liminal space” in the network of other religions. But with imperialism making its presence felt, everything changed. However, during this pre-colonial phase, the number of followers was few and they were just one more religion among the already existing ones.

Also, their long association with other indigenous religions resulted in an assimilation of philosophies and customs. The resultant Christianity was almost unrecognizably different from its European counterpart. Initially, they had no connection to the Catholic or Protestant Church.

They looked to Persia for guidance and it was only much later that the split occurred which led to a group of them joining the Catholic Church. The Syrian Christians, as they were called, looked to the church in the middle-east, especially Persia, for guidance and as a result the Bible was available only in Syriac, the language of the clergy.

The lack of the Bible in the vernacular meant that the common man could not read the text for himself. However, the Biblical stories were transmitted orally through sermons or bedtime stories. The interesting thing about oral transmission of stories is that they leave room for personal interpretation as well as flexibility in terms of themes, narrative and even facts. There can be never one interpretation in this tradition. Each narrator brings his own something into the story thus changing it sometimes subtly, and at other times drastically.

But with the arrival of the colonial powers the scene changed. The Bible and Christianity became an imperial religion. And almost overnight there was a move from harmonious assimilation and integration with other religious faiths to oppression. It became a tool of oppression. When the Portuguese set out to India their aim was commerce and Christians — to search for Christians in the subcontinent. However, for the Dutch and the English, their initial aim was only trade. Missionary work and conversion was a later addition to their agenda, after they had established themselves as imperial powers controlling different states in India.

But once the religious angle was established, the missionaries zealously preached a return to rigidity. There are various European records that speak of the need for reform and more control over the already existing clergy in India. They were considered as something of a headache by the churches.¹³ Also, there is evidence of discrimination between the white Christians, especially the Portuguese, and the Indian Christians who were called the 'mixed breeds':

...in the sixteenth century no one of Asian blood was admitted to the Misericordia, and that sometime was to elapse before similar charitable care was extended to the Indian population.¹⁴

2.

T.R Wright in his book, *Theology and Literature* differentiates between the two (theology and literature):

Much theology, for example, tends towards unity and coherence, a systematic exploration of faith which attempts to impose limits on the meaning of words, while literature, as Ezra Pound insisted is often dangerous, subversive and chaotic, an anarchic celebration of the creative possibilities of language.¹⁵

But what he fails to realize is that theology is also an interpretation of a literary text that has transcended the realm of literature into the sacred. And this makes it a dangerous thing.

A sacred text has with it, unlike a literary text, a whole backlog of faith. Also it is commonly believed that there will be particular authorities who have exclusive or supreme right in interpreting the texts for the masses. Also for a sacred text the common reader is rarely allowed to bring his personal experiences or feelings into the interpretation.

So, there is no possibility of multiple interpretations. Instead, there will be an institution telling them what to make of the text or at least setting down a framework within which the text should be interpreted. This has been especially true of Christianity.

Christianity has been a religion that preaches love and sacrifice but this has been propagated through a lot of violence and bloodshed. Initially the bloodshed was that of Christian martyrs. But with the spread of Christianity to Europe after

the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine, the violence was directed towards the heathens.

Christianity became with the crusades, a tool for conquering the “pagan” lands and converting the “heathen”. But the actual motive was less spiritual and more economic. And the church became an active participant in this. Thus we have the Papal Bull Dum Diversas of 1452 which allowed the King of Portugal to attack and enslave the “pagan” Saracens.

Another factor to keep in mind is that theology has never been constant in the history of Christianity. This is evident from the number of sub-sects that exist within the category of Catholics. The foundations of biblical criticism were laid in the first four centuries of the Christian era and initially there was an attempt at constricting the believers to one theology or belief. But the reformation broke down this attempt. By making the Bible available to all, the reform movement, created space for multiple interpretations.

This movement to popularize the scriptures had its origin in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and it led to the translation of the bible into English (by Wycliffe):

His contention was that the laity, being God’s vassal, should be able to instruct themselves in His law.....This movement paved way for the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The restoration of the bible to the laity was a major plank in the reformers’ platform. If, as the church had always taught, the Bible contained God’s revelation to man; every man (they urged) ought to be able to read for himself and not be dependent upon what might reach him by indirect channels.

In thus opening the entire canon of scripture to the free study of the laity, the reformers did not intend to abandon the ancient framework within which it was to be understood.¹⁶

However, even within the early church there were voices of dissent to the creation of one authoritative interpretation of the laws and commandments. Jesus Christ himself can be considered the first Christian radical. His work was a protest against all forms of dehumanization. The Bible is full of instances when he aligned himself with the poor and downtrodden and questioned the very basis of Jewish religion as practiced by the high priests, their idea of God and the rigidity of their laws. But what started in such a positive manner in Christianity soon became negative with the institutionalization of the religion.

Once the church appointed itself the center of power and became an organization, any writing against the church hierarchy became heresy or blasphemy against the position of the church as a "sacred and divine" institution. In other words it becomes a form of rebellion against or repulsion of the autocratic, absolutist and oppressive nature of the church. By the end of the medieval period the Roman Catholic Church had begun to wield enormous power. And it is during this period that the question of church's authority versus human freedom was raised. The reformers were the first to raise the question. But can the sacred text be a source of literature or worse can it be considered literary?

I feel that the Bible can be read as literature. It is of course a sacred text, there is no denying that, but all sacred writings are interpretative in nature. As is evident from the history of theology, no interpretation is free of ulterior motives. The church, for instance, interpreted the Bible so as to consolidate its position as a necessary institution. Its interpretations of the Bible and the human condition are intended to accentuate its position as the only path to salvation. For example, there

is the theory that God's saving grace is available to only a select few — the baptized Christians.

Also, a text qualifies as literature depending on how it is read — the objective of the reader on reading it. If the reader reads the bible with the intention of examining the narrative styles, then it becomes a literary exercise. But if the focus is on the content or the themes then in light of its status as a religious text, the purpose or objective becomes religious. The Bible is a constant source of fresh meanings. It is the source of all Christian theological writings.

All the theologians refer back to the Bible to substantiate their claims. It has also provided material for many secular writings, even though many writers have been against mixing the two. Samuel Johnson was of the opinion that, “the ideas of Christian theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction and majestic for ornament.”¹⁷ But poems, stories or plays can also express the shortcomings in theological debates while others can be used to further theological concepts.

The Biblical myths like other myths serve symbolical and allegorical functions. Myths have existed long enough in the consciousness of a race to have acquired a power of “spontaneous identification”.¹⁸ In the re-telling of myths, these ancient myths and symbols are used to generate new meanings. And it is this openness to different interpretations in different times that help them survive. Re-telling embodies an improved perspective of the situation, a clarified vision.

It also implies that the writer has the freedom to alter, modulate or improvise on the original tale, as would suit the modern perception of the story's mood and dynamics. Re-telling also places texts in a “broader perspective” of special significance today. According to Frank Kermode, myths provide total or

adequate explanations of things that are. For him history can also substitute myth because it is “the imposition of plot on time”. They are agents of stability. But when there is a re-telling of a myth, it changes the myth to suit the needs of the time, i.e. they change as the “needs of sense-making change”.¹⁹

In India with colonization, the Bible went from being the religious text of a minority religion to the religious text of the people in power. And conversion as an agenda began in the 17th century with the proposal by Father Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, a German priest for the translation of the Bible into the vernacular languages. And a great supporter of missionary work in India was Michael Vaz, the vicar general of Cochin from 1532-47. The Europeans believed that they had divine sanction to enslave the natives and therefore tended to view the natives as savages or deprived. To them, Christianity was synonymous with civilization.

And in the postcolonial context we witness an internalization of this religious racism by the converted natives. Therefore in India the Christians think that they are better than the other religious denominations and therefore urge conversion. Their attitude to the other religions is one of superiority. This is all the more dangerous because most of them earnestly believe that the Bible is divine word and as a result the supreme authority in all things moral and religious.

In the pre-colonial situation, the Bible was used not only as sacred writing but the text itself was considered holy and consequently worshipped. Sugritarajah gives the example of how Bibles were covered in gold or silk and kissed and worshipped on special days.²⁰ This practice, which the imperials termed as pagan and corrupt, actually evolved out of the contact with other religious beliefs.

The Christianity as practiced by the Europeans has a lot of pagan symbols and practices but they have been so well assimilated and their earlier sources

destroyed or forgotten that the worshippers were unaware of the pagan rituals amalgamated into their own so called Christian rites. But when it came to the question of pagan beliefs and practices within the native Christian tradition, the imperialist powers were quick to term them as corruptions and advocate a return to the “purer” form of worship practiced by them.

Thus there followed side by side new conversions, an attempt to purify and abolish these “idolatrous” practices among the native Christians and bring the religion back to its “unadulterated state”. Therefore the Bible was to be read and contemplated and not worshipped and venerated. And to encourage this it was translated into the vernacular languages. Even though Christians around the world profess that the Bible is a text for reading and contemplation, it is hardly practiced.

Instead the idea of worshipping it as divine word has been so internalized that the believers do so without even realizing it. It is because of this attitude that the Christian churches are ready to shoot down interpretations of the Bible that go against popular or accepted interpretations. This can be further seen in the objection that the Christian community made against a scene from the movie ‘Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge’, where in one scene the hero flips casually through a Bible. The accusation made was that he did not show the book respect.

The underlying belief then is that the Bible is a sacred text that has to be, if not worshipped at least venerated. This is a continuation of the pre-colonial belief that it should be “an icon or treasured relic”. In the pre-colonial period, the book remained a “holy object, unread and unreadable” (because it was available only in Syriac and therefore out of the realm of the common believer). But this does not necessarily mean that the people were unaware of the teachings of the faith. The faith and the stories in the book were passed on by word of mouth, i.e. the oral tradition kept it alive.

The sermons, bedtime stories etc, resulted in a more multicultural philosophy. Also, it would be totally wrong to say that Christianity in Kerala in the pre-colonial period occupied an ambiguous and insecure position. There are ample stories to contradict the statement put forth by R.S Sugritarajah. Stephen Neill states that the Syrian Christians of Kerala have in their possession a bronze plaque which states that they are under the protection of the king. Also, there are records which reveal that the king or ruler gifted the community titles, land and slaves. So, their position could not have been ambivalent if they received so much attention from the king. And these records also point to the fact that they have had a largely peaceful existence with the other religious orders.

One of the evidences of the peaceful coexistence of different religions in Kerala is the annual pilgrimage made to Sabarimala by the devotees of Ayyappan, where they visit the shrine of Mohammed Nabi on the way to the Ayyappan Temple. And while returning they go to St. Stephen's church in Alapuzha. Also, Hindus and Muslims visit Christian shrines. And the religious amity exists both ways.

Every year, the Christians of Kerala begin the education of their young children with the traditional custom of the Hindus called, 'ezhuthiniruthuka'. There is also the story of how Veluthamby Dalava of Travancore was given shelter in a Christian household in Adoor, when he was besieged by enemies. Thus the Christian community of Kerala had a firm hold in the state. So, it is only natural that their presence is felt in the literary scene as well.

However, translation of the Bible by the imperial power went hand in hand with the professions of the inadequacies of the vernacular languages. The lack of suitable vocabulary or concepts to convey the ideas of the gospels were seen as a

proof of its inadequacy and the inability of the natives to witness and accept its civilizing mission. The Christian natives already present did not count as believers since their beliefs were 'corrupted', and they needed to be re-converted before being recognized as worthy of the title Christians. The result of the translation was the Christianization of the vernacular language.

Though the Bible during this period was projected as a "universal and ecumenical book" this was hardly there in practice. Only the Bible was the book of the "whole human race",²¹ but there was a catch in this profession of universality. The world was not one of equality. Some, the Europeans, were superior to the others, the blacks, browns and the yellows. Thus the Bible became a tool for furthering colonialism.

The imperial powers used the Bible to prove their superiority over the natives. R.S Sugritarajah, uses the term, "scriptural imperialism" to denote this period of colonialism. He states that scriptural imperialism introduces the concept of the other.²² But I feel that it would be wrong to believe that the pre-colonial community was free from such notions of the other. Everyone has an inbuilt notion of the self and the other. The other is what you are not.

It is true that it was enhanced during the period of colonialism but it existed, maybe in a milder form, in pre-colonial times in the caste-system as practiced between and within the different churches and even in the relations between the different religions. The bible was used by the imperial powers to justify colonialism and the subsequent sufferings of the natives. And the colonizers portrayed themselves as the "hand of God" punishing the natives for their sins.

Also, the Bible was basically translated with the purpose of furthering orthodox Christianity. However the result was totally unexpected. The colonized appropriated the text and in turn used it as a means of resistance to counter imperialism. The Bible was assimilated by the native and in turn used to counter imperialism. The Bible therefore performed two functions, one of oppressor and other as a source of liberation ideology. The Europeans did not realize that to educate is to give power to the native; the power to interpret the text the way he or she wants to.²³

There are different levels of resistance. One option is to write against something while remaining within it. Another kind is where there is re-interpretation and re-reading of a text from a different perspective and thus bringing something new to the ideology professed. The third kind is where there is assimilation of the text into a culture.

Pandita Ramabai refers to the fact that all texts, religious and otherwise, are interpreted and negotiated by people to suit their particular needs when she asks the question, “Is Christianity the teachings of Christ or the teachings of a certain body of men?” She points to the subjective nature of all religious discourse.²⁴ Basically all religious texts are interpreted to suit the needs and wants of the dominant culture or at least the culture that is in power at that particular point.

Therefore, Christianity becomes the dominant religion in Europe when the conquering Romans accepted it as their official religion. Also, religion is closely associated with power. The ones in power have the ability to control and interpret religion. Likewise the one who interprets a religious text has power over it.

That is why the churches have struggled long and hard over whom has the power to interpret the Bible — the ecclesiastical authority or the laity. The nexus

between power and religion is similar to the one between history and the victorious. History is written by the winners. It is a way of making sure that the defeated are denied any chance of revival.

The Christian churches have used guilt to ensure that no one deviates from the set pattern. In the colonial context, the bible became a cultural weapon by which one culture de-legitimized and destroyed another culture. The colonized retaliated by reworking on Christian themes through their specific cultural, linguistic, regional and religious idioms.

There are various methods by which the postcolonial re-claimed the bible, which was an imperial text. One method was “vernacularisation”²⁵. Under this method, the remoteness and strangeness of the Biblical text was overcome through cross-cultural reading. The reader’s own cultural and social experiences were used to illustrate or substantiate the biblical narrative. The new reader sought textual and conceptual parallels between the Bible and the other indigenous religious or cultural texts to bring it closer to him.²⁶

The parallels can be “ideational”, i.e. in terms of world views, values or rules. It could also be “performantial” parallels, i.e. of rites and rituals or “material” parallels, which were language, symbols, food, clothing etc. Sugritarajah gives the example of African trickster tales to illustrate this point. The African trickster tales were used to interpret the motives of those marginalized or silenced biblical characters considered dubious by the mainstream; the trickster tales explain the trickster role played by those who were otherwise powerless—Delilah, Rachel, Jacob, Abraham.²⁷

The “vernacular hermeneuticians” write either against the western hermeneutics, or they combine both to evolve a new one, the purpose being to

appropriate and adapt the western text to suit their own cultural situation.²⁸ But in both cases the west plays an important role. In the first case it is the center against which the other is resisting and in the latter case it is the ideology that is being re-appropriated. Either way there seems to be no escape for the postcolonial from the west.

But in all this resistance and assimilation it would be wrong to assume that the natives were untouched by the ideologies professed by the imperialists. The postcolonial is not innocent of prejudices. They carry a lot of cultural baggage. And in the case of the Christians in Kerala this cultural baggage is double fold, i.e. from the pre-colonial time as well as the colonial.

This is evident in the presence of the caste system within the Indian Christians — dalit Christians scorn tribal Christians, recent converts are looked down upon by the earlier converts or the “originals”, the Latin Church is considered inferior to the Syrian church. There is also the fascination for white skin and the imperial hangover, i.e. the belief that Christianity is better than all other religious beliefs. So, the Indian Christians have tended to assume an attitude of snobbishness with regard to people from other religions.

However, vernacular hermeneutics does not make saints of the postcolonial. In fact, “vernacularism can easily degenerate into chauvinism, jingoism or narrow minded communism” as has been witnessed.²⁹ In the context of Bible and postcoloniality, the text can be a source of scrutiny for ‘colonial entanglements’. It can be perceived as a collection of documents that have evolved from various colonial contexts — Egyptian, Assyrian, Roman etc, and not divinely guided as professed by the church. It can be read as a set of writing evolving from colonial contacts and not as reports that have been divinely guided.

It can also be a source of reconstructive readings from the perspective of the colonized or the marginalized, like the Canaanites, the Egyptians and Leah, to name a few. It can also be used to investigate and question colonial and imperial interpretations of Christianity and the Christian God, like it was done in liberation theology. Closer home Gandhi could have been referring to the Book of Job, where it is stated that God prefers the poor, when he used the term 'harijan' to refer to the dalits.

And one of the main issues of Christianity has been whether the Bible can be interpreted freely or should there be guidelines since it is not just literature but sacred writing. The bible is believed to be the "word of God" and therefore holy. As a result it has to be protected from interpolations. This is what most Christians believe till date.

The first revolution for freedom of interpreting the Bible came from the west with the Reformation. But even then, personal interpretation and reading was allowed provided it remained within an accepted framework set down by the ecclesiastical authority. But to these writers is the bible the word of God to which they bring their own theology or do they contest the validity of the text as divine word and instead attempt to base it among human prejudices and issues?

So, integral to my thesis is the necessity to look at the Bible objectively, as not just a sacred text but as literature, a philosophy written down by men of a particular time and therefore containing within it their prejudices and problems. Another fact that needs to be acknowledged is its influence on people.

Christians grow up within its tradition. Therefore it is almost impossible to be ignorant of the themes, symbols, and narratives from the bible. And, literature will invariably draw on these themes, symbols and language. Therefore it is

important that the bible should be open to multiple interpretations without inviting the stake. And, for this a closer look at the Bible and its compilation is required.

How did the Bible come into being? Christianity has always based itself on historicism, i.e. its authenticity rests on its claim that the incidents mentioned in the Bible are historically true. Therefore the church has spent a lot of time and money to prove that a man named Jesus existed and that the places and incidents mentioned have really occurred. But the Bible as a religious text came in to being only sometime during 300AD.

Before that there existed a number of gospels written by, we assume the various apostles, stating things that were at times contradictory, each with its own group of followers. In 350 AD, the church fathers “tarredas heresy....dozens of other early scriptures with names like the Gospel of Mary, the Acts of John, the Homilies of Clement and the Gospel of Truth”. These texts are now being re-explored and re-validated. And the term, “lost Christianities” is now used to refer to them. They are lost because of the church indictment against them as heresies.

³⁰But the question then arises why did the church term them as heresies?

These gospels offer “alternative interpretations of the Christ story” and this could be why they were de-legitimized. The variety of visions of Christ and Christianity that these gospels offered were gradually suppressed by the “orthodox vision”. The church termed them as “misguided teachings” since they contradicted some of the doctrines of the churches.

Some of these texts contain echoes of Buddhism and appreciate women’s spiritual role which the church, as a patriarchal institution where women are considered the root of almost all evil, cannot accept. The only common thread

through many of them is the presence of Jesus. For example, the Gospel of Thomas, which the church categorized as heretic, contains passages that indicate that man has divinity within him: “that which you have will save you if you bring it forth from yourselves”³¹. This is in total opposition of the church doctrine that man is sinful and fallen and therefore low and worthless.

Therefore the church chose the Gospel of John to be part of the “orthodox” Bible. John opposes Thomas in this and states, “no one comes to the father except through me”³². Thomas is a heretic because he writes of a possibility where man can reach God without the intercession of the church, while John reinforces the church doctrine that God can be reached only via the church.

In fact, one of these so called heresies narrates the story of man’s fall from the perspective of the serpent while another writes from the point of view of the woman.³³ So, some texts that were one of several sacred writings were inducted into the canon and their position as sacred writings were reinforced, while other texts were de-legitimized and branded as heretic or blasphemous.

Everything boils down finally to perspective. Even the church ideology is based on perspective. This is evident from the character Abraham. He is common to Jewish, Muslim and Christian narratives. But these three sects have, regardless of their shared history, been enemies. They each took a figure that belonged to all, and “tossed out what they wanted to ignore, ginned up what they wanted to stress and ended up with a symbol of their own uniqueness”³⁴.

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Like how all history is a perspective, all religion evolves out of perspectives or prejudices. This is evident from the disappearance of the alternative Christianities in the late 300s (the Ebionites, Marcionites, Thomasines and the Gnostics), because of the imperial laws constituted by Constantine against the possession of “heretical texts” which in other words were the alternative interpretations of Christianity and teachings of Jesus. Thus all the Gospels are actually perspectives or interpretations, by different disciples, of the teachings of Jesus.

And the Bible as it exists now is a collection of interpretative narratives of the teachings of Jesus that cater to or serve a particular ideology that is endorsed by the church. Since the Bible is itself an interpretation, there is room for further interpretations of Christianity. And the religion should have a healthy attitude towards them and not raise a hue and cry about how these new interpretations contaminate the purity of the whole doctrine, because it was never pure.

3.

In my thesis I intend to examine two novels, two novellas and one short story written by four contemporary Christian writers of Kerala. They are not the only works of literature that contain evidence of how Christianity and the bible influenced the literature of Kerala. However, it would be spatially difficult to examine all the stories written in Malayalam that have made use of biblical themes, characters or words that are distinctly Christian in its origin.

Therefore, I have chosen five contemporary texts to illustrate the influence that the bible has had on Malayalam literature. And the five texts chosen are, Luciferinte Athmakatha (2004) by K.P James, Vishudha Likhithangal (2001) by

Johny Miranda, Allahayude Penmakal (1999) by Sarah Joseph and What News, Pilate? and “Till I See the Looking-glass” by Paul Zachariah.

Except for the novella and short story written by Paul Zachariah, the rest have not been translated into English. So the texts that I have used for my analysis and interpretation are all in Malayalam. Therefore the quotations from the texts in this thesis are my own translations. Also, because these texts are in Malayalam, I have included an appendix with brief summaries of these three novels.

¹ From *The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707* by Stephen Neill.

² From *The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707* by Stephen Neill : Thomas went first to Mylapore (Myilapuri)....And setting forth again, he preached the Way, and he built seven churches — Kotta-Kayalil, Gokamangalam, Niranam, Chayil, Kurakeni, Quilon and Palur....The number of seven churches constantly recurs though there are variations in the names. Milne Rae gives the list as Cranganore, Quilon, Palu, Parur, Pallipuram or Kokamangalam, Niranam, and Nellakkal also called Chael or Shail. A. Mingana translates a letter written in Syriac by Mar Thomas the Bishop of Malabar in 1721 to the Dutch scholar Charles Schaaf of Leiden. Here the list appears in another form—Mailapo, Corignalore, Parakar, Irapalli, Kokamangalam, Niranam and Tiribancore. Thomas the apostle is presented in this source as having spent the greater part of his time spent in India in Kerala and there to have had great success in his mission...On the other hand, none of the traditions speak of his having suffered martyrdom in Kerala. This everywhere reported as having taken place in the Pandiyan country.....and the name of Mylapore, the city of peacocks, constantly recurs in the story.(33)

From The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 by Stephen Neill.

⁴ Page Number: 34. From The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 by Stephen Neill.

⁵ From The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 by Stephen Neill: When the Portuguese arrived in India, they found the Thomas tradition widely accepted, and were shown the church at Mylapore in which it was held that the apostle had been buried in a chapel on the gospel side;...In 1523 it was feared that the dome might collapse and it was decided that the grave of the apostle, which formed part of the foundation of the dome, must be excavated.....the investigators found loose earth to a depth of three spans; the four walls (of the grave) had been built up with bricks and whitewashed. When this had been removed, they came upon a layer of bricks and mortar two spans thick, then upon a further depth of loose earth three spans thick, then a second layer of bricks and mortar like the first.....they broke the brick covering and found underneath in three spans of earth and under that a layer of cement two spans thick, so hard that they had difficulty in breaking it up with their iron crowbars. When they had removed the cement, they found two slabs of stone bound together without any inscription, which covered the entire space. These were removed and then a further layer of loose earth revealed....At this point the brick lining of the walls came to an end. Then three of four more spans of earth were removed and they had reached a depth of 15/16 spans. Here they found a bed of sand and of lime which had crumbled into dust. Then they came at once upon bones — of a skull, then of ribs, then parts of a whole body. They found also an earthenware jar which could hold an almaude, full of earth, at the foot of the grave. A thigh bone was sticking out from it; and inside it was the blade of a 'Malabari' lance or spear in the shape of an olive-leaf, perfectly preserved and in the shaft part of a piece of wood.

They took all the fragments of bone, which were much decayed and the Rev. Fathers placed them in a chest, which they did not fill. These bones together made up far less than a complete human skeleton. (pgs 34-35)

⁶ Bishop L.W. Brown expressed this opinion. He is Quoted in The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 by Stephen Neill

⁷ From The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 by Stephen Neill

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ In The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 by Stephen Neill it is stated that Marco Polo recorded this version of the legend during his travels in the country.

¹² From The History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 by Stephen Neill

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Theology and Literature by T. R Wright

¹⁶ From The Bible To-day by C.H Dodd

¹⁷ From The Bible and the Third World by R.S. Sugritarajah

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ ibid

²¹ ibid

²² ibid

²³ ibid

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ From The Bible and the Third World by R.S. Sugritarajah

²⁶ ibid

²⁷ ibid

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ From The Time (22 Dec, 2003): “The Lost Gospels”.

³¹ From The Bible and the Third World by R.S. Sugritarajah

³² *ibid*

³³ From The Time (22 Dec, 2003): “The Lost Gospels”.

³⁴ *ibid*

Chapter1: Evidence of Christian and Biblical Images, Language, Themes and Setting in Three Malayalam Novels

The biblical influences in literary texts can be in different ways. The influence can be in the form of words, titles names of characters, setting or metaphoric use of themes and philosophy that have a distinctly biblical flavor or origin. Another kind of influence is the more blatant one where the story or the subject of the book is a story or incident recorded in the bible, which has been reworked upon, from a different perspective, by the author. Sometimes, the biblical story would be placed in a different context or narrated from a different perspective, most probably from the viewpoint of a character that has been marginalized or silenced in the original.

In the first instance the influence is more subtle. Also, the use of the biblical themes are usually to add grandeur to or contrast the situation that they are presented in. An example from literature is the novel, The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway, where the struggle of the old man with the marlin is raised to the level of Jesus Christ's struggle in the world. So, the old man is compared to the Christ figure, adding a sense of grandeur and majesty to what would otherwise have been an old man's attempt to land a fish.

In the second instance, when a biblical story is rewritten or reinterpreted from a different perspective, the aim is usually resistance or rejection of the established mainstream ideas on religion and morality. This technique can also be used to satirize, mock, or reject outright, the original story or narrative or a contemporary situation, or to read a contemporary situation in a different light. An

example, where a religious myth or legend is used to satirize a contemporary situation is Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel.

And, the same is the case in Malayalam literature, if we were to look for biblical influences. Two contemporary novels, Luciferinte Athmakatha and Allahayude Penmakal and the novella Vishudha Likhithangal are influenced by the bible and the Christian community of Kerala, in terms of title, language, themes and images.

All the three authors of these works are Christians, and therefore, whatever their beliefs as adults, they have grown up within the largely conservative Christian community of Kerala and therefore must be familiar with the stories and language of the bible. And, this influence is evident in the way they construct and represent the bible and its themes in their writings.

Luciferinte Athmakatha uses words and phrases that have biblical overtones. When the bible was translated into Malayalam, it is most likely that these words entered the language too. This is similar to what happened in the English language. When the bible was translated into English the language was found lacking in ability to express certain ideas and meanings that were present in the text. Therefore, the translators had to borrow words from other languages or coin new ones.

Likewise, in Malayalam language the translations of the bible made it necessary to coin or formulate new words to express the particular ideas expressed in it. So, the Malayalam dictionary has an abbreviation to denote those words in the Malayalam language that have a Christian source — 'Christian Malayalam'¹. For example, the word, 'koodasha' in Malayalam means the holy mass. And if you look it up in the dictionary, it will be given as a 'Christian Malayalam' word. Then

there are some words that have been associated with the bible so much that they have taken on the biblical meaning, and the earlier meaning has been obscured or forgotten.

So, when the novel, Luciferinte Athmakatha has chapter titles 'velipadukal', which is the Malayalam equivalent of 'revelations' and 'Ramante pettakam', which means 'Raman's ark', the biblical overtones are difficult to miss. The word 'revelation' means 'that which is revealed' or 'making known something that was secret or hidden'.

But it is also the name of the last book in the bible, and has associations with the end of the world or the apocalypse. So, both the inferences are there in the chapter title. Likewise, the reference to the 'ark' conjures in the memory the concept of the Noah's ark in the bible, and what it stands for, namely hope and refuge. Therefore it is definite that these are not random uses of words that have biblical connotations and have become commonplace in the usage of Malayalam language.

However, their language is not wholly biblical. It also reflects the philosophy and influence of the other religions that they have come into contact with. No writer lives in an ivory tower and this is especially true of writers in Kerala, where there is constant contact with religious and cultural systems outside their own.

So, it would be correct to state that though most western Christian writers wrote within an almost exclusively Christian setting, the Christian writers of Kerala find themselves in a multi-religious world. And this contact with more than one religion is reflected in their novels, in terms of characters and philosophy.

Also, the novels depict the influences of Hinduism in the religious practices of the Christians in the state.

This multi-religious aspect is present also in the use of words in these novels. In Luciferinte Athmakatha the protagonist, the Lucifer figure, is called 'Raman'. Then there is the farmer who dies for the cause begun by Raman, called 'Yeshu'. Like the biblical figure, Yeshu comes from a humble background, a laborer, and is killed when he tries to save the movement started by Raman. But, unlike the biblical figure who speaks to the father and rejects Satan, the 'Yeshu' of the novel is a follower of Raman, the Lucifer figure.

Since, the influence of more than one religion and myth is unavoidable in the circumstances that the writer is writing in, there are words that are Christian in origin or context, but used in combination with words that have reference to other religions. One example is the sentence from the Luciferinte Athmakatha, "ithanu devalayam. Raman innu muthal pujariyavukayanu" (this is the church. And from today, Raman will be its pujari).

In English, the word 'pujari' will be translated as priest. But in Malayalam, a pujari refers to the priest in a temple, and a priest in a church will be referred to as 'palleel achen'. So, in the sentence two words that are at odds with each other are used together. And, there is nothing to indicate that this is an unconscious use. Therefore, it is an image that consciously brings together two different religious contexts, the Christian and the Hindu.

Also, there is the concept of 'satan' which is largely a Judeo-Christian one, with its ideas of good and evil. In most other ancient religious systems, Hinduism, Buddhism and Greek or Roman religions, there is never really a satanic figure which is wholly evil. But, Christianity is all about black and white. So, the Satan

figure, the other of God, becomes totally evil and black, so that the Christian god can be a pure, 'white' figure. So the figure of Satan is as important as God, in Christian life. The Christian God is understood in relation to Satan: God is what Satan is not.

Therefore, Satan, or at least the word figures in all the three texts. He is like the Christian God, male except in one instance in Luciferinte Athmakatha where the protagonist sees Satan in an old woman. To Christians Satan is synonymous with evil and is a figure to be feared and avoided. However, the Christian God, especially in the Old Testament is the one to be feared and obeyed. So, though they are opposites, they have their similarities.

And, in Luciferinte Athmakatha this aspect of God is brought out in the first chapter, when God or the person depicted as the creator figure states with contempt that the world is his excreta. In Allahayude Penmakkal, Satan represents everything that falls beyond the realm of the church and its ideology. Therefore, women who deviate from the rules set down by the church and prayers that the church does not acknowledge are entirely the 'devil's own'. And, the patriarchal attitude of the church comes to the fore when it categorizes certain things as satanic.

The prayer, 'allahayude namaskaram', in an incomprehensible language is delegitimised by the church. And, Anne's mother represents the church in her rejection of the prayer as hogwash. But, if the church represents patriarchy, the prayer can represent the matriarchal or other side of religion that is outside its realm.

The fact that the prayer is passed on from women to women, makes it the counterpart of the male tradition of the church where the authority is passed on

from one male pope to another. If that is a male tradition within religion, this prayer could depict the female tradition, where one woman, who has knowledge of the prayer passes it on to her chosen successor at her death bed. So, Ammama (Annie's grandmother) learns it from her mother and Annie learns it from her grandmother.

Another area where the bible makes its presence felt is in the names of the character. There are characters with names that have biblical origins or at least names that are recognizably Christian. And, except for Luciferinte Athmakatha, they are all set in Christian communities or families. Luciferinte Athmakatha has an unspecified setting. And all that we get to know is that it is set somewhere in rural Kerala. But, there are characters with biblical names and biblical overtones in the novel.

Allahayude Penmakal is the story of a poor Christian family living in the outskirts of Thrissur town. And, their Christian background is revealed through the names of the characters, their language, style of dressing and activities. The most striking thing is the language used in the novel, especially for the purposes of direct speech.

It is written in the local dialect of the people of Thrissur, especially the Christians of the place. Therefore there are sentences that are written in the manner that they are spoken. An example is when, in the first chapter, Anne's mother challenges her grandmother regarding what she considers the blasphemous prayer, 'allahayude namaskaram':

Oke a chekuthan thallede davanu. Allengye a namaskaram evidennu padichathanenna parayatte. Malayalathilu athinarthantha parayatte. (All this

is that evil woman's strategy. Otherwise, let her say where she learnt the prayer from; what it's meaning in Malayalam is.)

This is not the literary Malayalam. The words in this passage are spelt in the way it would be spoken. The words are therefore, incomplete at times and at other times combine two words to make one. Writing in this way helps to capture the essence of the place and the people that the writer is writing about. So, to someone familiar with the dialect and the language, this passage is enough to identify that this novel is about the Christians of a particular area.

The background and setting of Vishudha Likhithangal is also definitely Christian. The day that Sunny lands in the village for the first time, is the day of the dead. It is the day that Christians remember the dead souls in this world and pray for them. It is not a day of celebration, but one where the living are reminded of their own mortality.

Also, a major part of the action takes place in the old discarded church with its altar and the adjoining graveyard. The solemnity of the day and the weather, which is overcast and gloomy, reflect not only the mental condition of Sunny, haunted by the legacy of drink and rape left by his father, but the general mood of the story as well.

The weather, with the rains being compared to the tears of the mourners, complements the general solemnity of the day being observed and Sunny's past. So, the symbolism of the day that begins as a Christian festival, i.e. if the word festival can be used for such a morbid and gloomy occasion, comes to represent the gloom and morbid state of mind of the protagonist and the general mood of the story.

Since the settings are Christian communities or families, it is not unusual to find characters with biblical names or at least Christian names. So, in Allahayude Penmakal, the young protagonist is called Anne, which is the name of a biblical character. However, the names of the characters in a book have a metaphoric function as well.

When characters are named Yeshu, Mercy or Sunny, they bring with them their own connotations that get imposed on these characters. As a result, the reader's interpretations of these characters are invested with multiple layers. So, when the laborer in Luciferinte Athmakatha is named Yeshu, the reader expects him, at some level, to have the characteristics and suffer the fate of his biblical counterpart. Also, there is a tendency to draw parallels between the two.

In one sense, Yeshu, like the biblical figure comes from a humble background and in the end is killed for the 'movement'. So, there is the accompanying image of the sacrificial lamb that is fulfilled in this novel as well. But, the biblical original is subverted in the sense that, while the biblical Yeshu is the son of god, sent to establish God's kingdom on earth, the Yeshu in the novel follows Raman, the 'Lucifer' figure. And, in the bible, Lucifer is another name for Satan.

The whole novel is set within what can be recognized as the communist movement. Raman gives birth to this movement for the workers and he is that sense, the 'light bearer'. And, Yeshu dies trying to save a movement that had lost its initial ideals. So, Raman (an incarnation of Vishnu) and Yeshu, both incidentally saviors, though within two different religious contexts, work to help and save mankind from impending doom.

And they do so through communism. However, it would be wrong to believe that communism is the writer's solution to the problems of the workers. Before the novel is half complete, communism as an ideology is rejected because it gets warped and distorted in practice. And its total rejection comes when it loses its agrarian ideals and becomes a movement that seeks political power.

Sunny, if his name is to be taken at face value, should be someone with a 'sunny' disposition or at least outlook in life. But, in Vishudha Likhithangal it is far from true. It is difficult to not think that his mother was being too optimistic or trying to compensate for the lack of happiness in her life by naming her son Sunny. He can hardly be called happy or optimistic.

Throughout, his thoughts are preoccupied with death. When he first arrives in the village, he likens the coconut tree fronds to people who had hanged themselves. And later, the houses remind him of large gravestones in a graveyard. Mercy is depicted as pure and innocent, like a sacrificial lamb. And though she begs for 'mercy', she gets none from Sunny, who goes ahead and rapes her.

There are also uses of images borrowed from the bible. They are used to enhance or represent the situation in the novels. An example is the passage:

bhumiyil vidhveshathinte pralayajalam pongunnu. Enikuvendi oru pettakam nirmikkapettu. Yeshuvinte veedanu ente pettakam. (The waters of hate are rising in the world. An ark has been created for me. Yesu's house is my ark).

The context here is unmistakably from the bible. The rising resentment and hatred against the protagonist in the novel is likened to the biblical flood and he (Raman) finds his refuge in Yesu's house, which is to him akin to Noah's ark,

also from the bible. So, by using the image of the Noah's ark and the flood, the anger and hatred of the people against Raman are given the undertones of divine wrath. So, in this instance it is used like an epic simile, to add dimension and grandeur to the situation.

The same image of a flood of biblical proportions is used in Allahayude Penamakkal as well:

Noah's story is one of rain and floods. It rained for forty days without stopping! And the floods lasted for one hundred and fifty days! And during this massive flood, the only thing that managed to stay afloat was Noah's ark and Kokkanchera," said Kuttipappen.....Even though Annie had her doubts, she was proud that Kokkanchera did not get submerged in the floods. To find out if the water had subsided, Noah sent out a dove. After flying over water for many days without sighting any land, the dove finally came and landed on Kokkanchera. And it never returned. Allah was sad that he had destroyed the whole world with the floods. And, he made a heartfelt promise to all those who were left on earth that he would never destroy earth in this way again.....but Annie feels that he will break his promise this time. This is also a flood. And who will make an ark this time? Annie will definitely get in the ark. How would the inside of an ark be like?

Here, the biblical flood is not just used to convey the feeling of doom and fear experienced by the family. But, it also represents in a sense their growing isolation from the outside world. The flood is also the poverty and despair that is threatening to engulf them. And there is the accompanying sense of having been forsaken by both god and man. As the flood situation worsens, everyone around this little house leaves, leaving them alone, to fend for themselves.

In another instance, the image of the shepherd and the sheep is used in the context of Raman and his followers in Luciferinte Athmakatha. This is a repetitive and very popular image from the bible, where Jesus is compared to the good shepherd who takes care of the flock (the Christians).

And, when the same image is used with reference to Raman, who is not only not a Christian name, but also likened to Lucifer (in the end the protagonist himself says that he is Lucifer, 'the king of pain', thus affirming what was stated in the first chapter), the qualities of Jesus is juxtaposed on to the protagonist. He thus becomes the savior but fails to save the world or even himself. So, the 'good shepherd' is the image that Raman conceives for himself, but fails to fulfill, because in the end Raman does not save anyone, instead he helps to destroy a couple of lives. Also, he is the one often in need of saving.

Then there are the titles of the works that have biblical overtones. The title Luciferinte Athmakathaka when translated into English, means 'The Autobiography of Lucifer' and it is the story of the fall of Raman, from a revolutionary and idealist, loved and revered by all, to someone hated and branded as insane.

The Lucifer of the title is another name for the biblical fallen angel. It is Satan's name before he was thrown out of heaven. But, now, 'Lucifer' is synonymous with 'Satan'. Therefore the earlier meaning of the word has been largely forgotten. However, the word originally meant, 'light bearer' and he was the most glorious of all angels. That is, until his fall.

Throughout the novel at different instances, the protagonist refers to himself as Lucifer, 'the last king...the king of pain'. But the author plays with the

concept and idea of Lucifer, as put forth in the Bible and by the Christian world. And the word 'Lucifer' in the novel is used in both its sense. It is used in its earlier sense as 'light bearer' or hope as well as the later one of 'evil and destruction'.

And, both meanings are present in the protagonist. He is the light bearer, as well as the one who is the cause of pain and destruction. In the novel, towards the end, Raman asserts his identity as Lucifer, when he sates that he is 'Lucifer, the king of suffering'. But, he suffers more in the novel; more than others.

But, he does cause some amount of suffering, though unwittingly. When he conceives and begins the agrarian movement for the upliftment of the workers, he is the 'light bearer' or figure of hope. But, at the same time, he is a destroyer. His movement results in the destruction of forests and animals, and when he comes to realize this, it is too late.

The movement has become an entity separate from him, moving in a direction, of political power, that he did not expect or desire. So, he falls in a sense; his first fall in his attempt to make the world a better place and save man from eventual destruction. And, later on he is responsible, indirectly, for the death and destruction of Yeshu's family, whom he was protecting.

Again the inferences cannot be missed. Yeshu is the Malayalam equivalent for Jesus, and in this novel is the laborer who believes in and supports Raman's cause. And he dies for it. After Yeshu's death, Lucifer (Raman) takes it upon himself to protect his wife and child. Then, for them he becomes the 'light bearer'. But, soon he unwittingly destroys them as well. So, while he tries to be the hope of the world, he invariably moves it closer to disaster. And it is best seen in the destruction of Yeshu's family.

Raman's confession to Yeshu that the movement is corrupted leads to Yeshu's death. Raman's intentions are noble, when he decides to take Yeshu's wife and child under his wing. But there is a social backlash which ends in their death. So, in the end the realization that he is Lucifer, originally hope, but destruction and death as well, leaves him ineffectual and nearly insane.

And, in contrast, God or what comes close to God, is not really a pleasant character. In its conception of God, the novel is similar to Jose Saramago's The Gospel According to Jesus Christ. In both books, the Christian God is depicted as capricious and selfish, only interested in his power and glory and least bothered about the people and their suffering. And in Luciferinte Athmakathakal in the first chapter, the God or the figure of the creator states: "you are the worker. An idiot; the worm who will die for my throne."

Also, in the first chapter, there is a reference to world as the excreta of God. So, it not only establishes God's meanness, but also rejects any hopes of greatness in the creation and existence of man. It also establishes the relationship of man and God as one devoid of sympathy. The relationship is like that of a slave and master, one existing to serve and satisfy the other.

The other title that needs to be closely examined is that of the novella, Vishudha Likhithangal. When translated into English, the phrase means 'holy records or writings'. The Bible, to the Christians is a holy text. It is believed to be the word of God and therefore, extremely sacred. So, the title evokes the sacredness of the Bible.

And by doing so, a story about a man who fails to achieve salvation or escape from his past is put on the level of the Bible. So, the title in this case, is

intended to play on the word holy. What can be considered holy? It tries to tell us that a story of man's destruction is as important as a story of man's redemption. So, in that sense the protagonist Sunny, in the novella would be an inverted Christ figure.

Also, by using the phrase for the title, the author could be deliberately drawing the reader's attention to the biblical nuances and influences in the novel. Keeping aside that the novel is set in a Christian background; there are still other biblical and Christian nuances in the book. The biblical influences are present in the narrative structure as well.

Biblical quotations and extracts from liturgical services, Latin prayers and the stories of saints' lives are used in the narrative, to reflect, contradict and enhance the situation:

.....Maria Goretti was extremely beautiful. Once, a bad man tried to lead her into sin, but she did not agree. She resisted all the attempts by the evil man to seduce her, by meditating on God. She was stabbed to death by that rakshasa. There were fourteen stab wounds on her body....

This story makes Sunny distinctly uncomfortable because it reflects his inner desire for Mercy, which culminates in the rape.

Another example is the quotation from the bible given in the first page: "the sea gave up its dead. The earth and the underworld also gave up the dead..." Later on in the novella, there is a sentence from the funeral service of the Christians: "and let eternal rest shine on him". Also, there are instances when Mercy tells Sunny about the books she has read and tries to help in find sense in his life through her faith in the Bible and God:

“Then why does God still give us only sorrow and suffering, girl?”

“...haven’t you read the story of Job? God is testing us.

Mercy stands for almost blind faith and acceptance of the scriptures and the church’s ideology of salvation. But, Sunny is the skeptic, as he himself ones admits: “in my case it is the opposite....with every minute, I am losing my beliefs.”

Initially, Sunny resembles the Cain figure of the Old Testament. He is the outcast and the wanderer. Like Cain he is condemned to wander by his father. If Cain has to wander because of his sins, banished by God, the father, Sunny is running from what he sees in himself as his father’s traits. So, he is in a sense running from his father; he is trying to escape the only inheritance that his father has left him—alcoholism and self destruction. Mercy is depicted as pure and innocent—like a sacrificial lamb.

Also, in most mythology and literature, women depict nature while man stands for civilization. If taken in that sense, Mercy becomes the sacrifice that Sunny (the Cain figure) makes to his father to please him. Also, in the last scene where he rapes Mercy on the altar of the old church; she becomes his sacrifice to his father:

Sunny spread a mat on the low, old alter in the room. He laid her down on it.....then it was like a painful journey to Golgotha....Mercy, twisting and turning like someone who is whipped....

The Malayalam word for altar is 'balipeedam'. If translated literally, the word 'bali' means sacrifice, and 'peedam' stands for 'a pedestal for placing an idol etc'. So, the idea of Mercy as the sacrificial lamb, the Christ figure is reinforced.

However, it is difficult to ascertain who the Christ figure is or if there is only one Christ figure in the novella. At times, it is Mercy. But, at some level it is Sunny as well. So, there are multiple Christ figures. Sunny is Christ like, in that the story is of a father and son, which reminds one of the divine father and his human son. Mercy is Christ like in her sacrifice and exploitation.

So while the crown of thorns on the crucifix that he is making, reflects his own past and his attempts to escape it, it also points to the futility of his struggle. Like Jesus Christ who knew that his death was inevitable, deep down Sunny realizes that his struggle to escape his father is as futile. Therefore, Sunny's father becomes the God figure. And he is depicted as cruel and selfish. This could be a reflection on the Christian God who has often been considered autocratic and hard.

The gentle, loving God that Christ talks about is not anywhere in the book and this is reflected in the total lack of any saving graces in Sunny's father. He is at his best insensitive and selfish. And at his worst, he is cruel and abusive. So, on one level Sunny is Cain, only here he is running away from the father.

But on another level, he is Christ, the son, who died for his father's kingdom. If Christ died for his father, God's kingdom, Sunny's death happens when he realizes that he is like his father. In The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, Jose Saramago states that Jesus did not die for man but for the sins of the father. And this is evident in the plight of Sunny—he cannot escape his father's sins and they cause his downfall.

So, this is a story also of his struggles to overcome his desires, a legacy of his father and his subsequent failure. The moment when Sunny realizes that he is like his father, is a moment of salvation as well as curse for Sunny. It is a moment of salvation because he is able to realize the futility of his attempts to run away from his father.

At that moment he realizes that though he might have succeeded in putting a physical distance between him and his father, he still has his father's character within him. And, that is his curse. For Jesus, the moment of acceptance of his need to die for his father and man, in the garden of Gethsemane, is one of peace.

But, for Sunny it is the opposite. So, while one is a tale of salvation the other is one of destruction. When Sunny first arrives in the village, though his mental state was morbid, it had a sense of calm that was reflected in the landscape: 'the sighs of the believers who had swallowed silence.'

But in his return there is no such peace or silence. The unrest in his mind is reflected in his preoccupation with noise and disturbance all around: 'there is noise everywhere. If only there were no noises.' This is also reflected in his behavior.

The second time he comes to the village, he does so like a thief, uneasy and edgy. So, while the biblical parallel is a story of redemption, this one is a story of fall. In that sense Sunny could be the inverted Christ figure.

Also, Mercy's experience of rape is portrayed in the language that evokes the crucifixion of Jesus Christ:

In the end...a pain as intense as nails being hammered into outstretched hands.....spurting blood...the sticky wetness of blood. Moans of pain....It

was around the sixth hour. There was darkness everywhere. A thunder, like the tearing of the curtain in the church, was heard.

Now compare it to Jesus' death on the cross, in the Bible:

From noon on darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.....At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks were split.²

The similarity in the language and images is striking. There are references to whips, pain, and blood, scratching of nails, and the question, where is Simon? In the bible Simon is the person who helps Jesus to carry the cross to Golgotha. The question does not need an answer because nobody comes to help Mercy. And, Mercy's rape is contrasted with extracts from the saint's lives that she reads all the time.

The invoking of Jesus' death through Mercy's rape could mean two things. Either the author does this to mock the bible and what it stands for, or it could be to enhance the tragic effect and portray the inhumanity of man in destroying something that is harmless. In the first instance, the likening of the rape to the crucifixion of Christ lowers the latter, especially since at some level, Sunny himself has been perceived as the Christ figure.

The rape of Mercy destroys all that she stands for—belief and devotion to the God. And the fact that it is the atheist Sunny who commits the rape, could be taken to mean the erosion of belief in the face of disbelief. Also, when you compare the death of the Christian savior to the horrific act of rape, the death of Christ takes on the horrific properties of the other. And the death is then perceived as not a redeeming act, but murder.

But, if we consider that the purpose of the comparison was to add poignancy to the rape, then Mercy becomes the sacrificial lamb and Sunny the wolf. She is sacrificed so that Sunny may attain his moment of revelation. Mercy becomes the casualty in the struggle between Sunny's mind and desires, with desire triumphing. And the use of the biblical parallel enhances the horror and violence of the act — our sympathies are with Mercy and we condemn Sunny. So, the reader who had identified and pitied Sunny all along turns on him.

Also, these books depict the Christian way of life, especially in relation to women. In Allahayde Penmakkal, the title itself reveals the importance given to the female characters in the novel. The title, when translated means, 'the daughters of Allah'. Allah here is another term for God.

Though the Christians do not call God by this name any more, the Allah referred to in the title is the same God. Also, the use of the word 'Allah' to refer to the God invokes the common heritage of the Muslim and Christian religions. The emphasis here is on both words. So, it is concerned with the plight of women in this world, but in particular the Christian women.

In Vishudha Likhithangal Mercy's grandfather expresses his opinion on women's education: "Anyway, what is the use of women studying? They should be able to read the bible. That is all that is needed." So, the important thing in women's lives should be the bible. Anything more is considered deviant. For the women protagonists of both Allahayude Penmakkal and Vishudha Likhithangal, religion is important.

It is a means of mental solace. Therefore, Annie's mother is active in the church activities and goes for mass and rosary without fail. Likewise, Mercy

idealizes the stories of the female saints that she has read. Her ideal of womanhood is to a large extent decided by these books that she reads. And all these women characters have an affinity and special devotion for the Virgin Mary which is a reflection of what is seen in Christian communities, world wide.

The Virgin Mary is a paradoxical figure of both mother and virgin being an impossible situation. She has been responsible for the over importance given to virginity in Christianity. In a study among Christian prostitutes in India, it was found that many of them entered the profession not only because they needed the money, but also because they felt ashamed of losing their virginity:

The overemphasis on virginity has made Catholic women, especially, feel like trash when they lose it. Many prostitutes interviewed cite the loss of virginity, in incest or rape, as the precipitating factor in their entering the trade, along with the economic needs as the basic reason.

(Sr. Mary John Mananzan, 2002, 61)³

But, still women look up and worship her. In fact there are many shrines and churches all over the world that are dedicated especially to her. After Jesus, she is the person most Christians (that is, the ones who believe in her) pray to. And majority of these devotees are women. The cult of the Virgin Mary can be likened to the 'bhakti cults' of South India. Why this attraction? Is it because she is a woman and therefore, women feel that she will be better able to understand their requests. Or is it because she is the mother figure?

The Christian God is a male God, the father figure. And a father figure is rarely as comfortable as a mother. Fathers are good but, there is always a limit to their mercy. Part of what you feel for them is awe and fear. So, the distance is

always there. On the other hand, mother figures have always been perceived as compassionate, loving and not threatening.

They are always more approachable and there is no fear element. Also, the Virgin Mary, according to the bible suffered a lot — she was nearly socially ostracized for becoming pregnant before marriage and she watched her son die a horrible death, so she has had her share of sorrows. Is that one of the reasons women are drawn to her? Because she has suffered, is she receptive to her devotees' suffering, anyway more receptive than a male God who you have been taught to fear and respect, more than love?

But whatever the reasons for their devotion to the Virgin Mary figure, to all these women characters, religion is an escape from reality. Whatever their situation at home, the religion offers a solace from the reality at home. So in conclusion, these novels make metaphoric use of the Bible and the biblical characters.

Also, often the criticism is leveled against the church and the community and their way of functioning than against the actual religion. However, most of the time, the biblical stories and characters are used to enhance or contrast the situations depicted in these novels. This is because myths, both religious and secular, are so grounded in the human consciousness that they add to the richness of a narrative that alludes to them.

¹From The Malayalam English Dictionary

²From The Holy Bible: Mathew 27: 45-51

³From Gendering the Spirit: Women, Religion and the Postcolonial Response

Chapter 2: Re-writing and Re-interpreting the Biblical Stories

The other way that biblical influence has made itself felt in Malayalam literature is in the novels and stories that re-tell the original biblical narrative. Myths are stories that have existed long enough in the consciousness of a race to have acquired a power of 'spontaneous identification'.¹

Reclaiming the mythos of a religion goes beyond blind adherence to ritual towards imaginative engagement with the intellectual issues of meaning and interpretation.²

The word 'mythos' here represents one of the ways thinking. According to Karen Armstrong, there are two ways of thinking, 'mythos' and 'logos'. 'Mythos' is concerned with, 'making sense of the complex, often emotional experience that is life'. For example, the stories in mythology are not to be interpreted literally.

They are 'imaginary, psychological; metaphors for situations and experiences which are simultaneously ubiquitous to humanity and have a powerful impact on the individual.' And the way we construct the meaning of 'mythos' affects the way we behave.³ So in that sense it can be considered the realm of the imagination.

Thus, the figure of the Virgin Mary is representative of purity and virtue in the context of not only Christian religion but the cultural milieu of the world as well. She contributed to the western notion of the women as the 'angel in the house,' pure and delicate that need constant protection. Also, to some extent the figure of the Virgin Mary was responsible for the emphasis given to the virtues of

chastity. However, often the implications of the myth change and get distorted with time. So, the original figure need not be anything like the ideal.

So, myths have allegorical and symbolic functions and in re-telling myths generate new meanings for the old myths. The openness to new and varied interpretations is one of the reasons why myths survive the changes of time. They have the ability to adapt.

So is the case with the figure of the Virgin Mary. Though she would not necessarily be considered a mythical figure since she is more of a religious one, but she is a suitable example because of the way her image has changed with the years. Earlier the focus was on her virginity.

So, Queen Elizabeth 1 compared herself favorably to Virgin Mary, when she gave herself the title of 'the virgin queen, wedded to England'. And the image worked for her. But, as a result of the recent Virgin Mary cults that have sprung up all her divinity and status as the mother of the son of God is emphasized and she has become as powerful and revered as God himself. So on and so forth.

Re-telling also embodies an improved perspective of the situation, a clarified vision. And it is different from interpretation. What is meant by reinterpretation is to re-examine or re-define the materials already provided and come up with a whole new meaning or at least perspective. But with re-telling the implications are somewhat different.

In re-telling, usually there is re-creation of material or incident is re-told from a different perspective. The story is re-told from the perspective of a character that had been silenced or marginalized in the original narrative. Therefore, in re-telling, the writer has the freedom to alter, modulate or improvise

on the original tale, in terms of the story's mood and dynamics, to suit modern perception. Then the question that arises is how can the bible, which is a religious text, be allowed to change to suit modern tastes?

So, the first thing required is to establish why the bible can be re-interpreted or re-told. It would be wrong to assume that the entire bible is sacred in nature. The bible is a collection of books. So, it contains prose narratives that are both historical as well as fictional, proverbs, moral maxims, lyrical poetry as well as what can be termed as 'prophetical'.⁴

In that sense it can be considered a collection of literary works that have transcended the realm of the sacred. However, there are, as a result, large sections of the text that cannot be termed sacred. Also, these scriptures are interpretative in nature. And many critics have expressed this view that bible is not meant to be read literally. It is an interpretative and symbolic text:

...the universal rule then in interpreting the scripture is to accept nothing as an authoritative scriptural statement which we do not perceive very clearly when we examine it in the light of its history.⁵

The element of symbolism is deeply embedded in the structure of biblical thought. It pervades the poetical language of the prophets, and enters into the parables of the Gospels. Again, religious ritual is inherently symbolical wherever it occurs, and not least in the bible.

The prophets, too, were accustomed to perform actions having about them something of the solemnity of ritual, with the intention that they should symbolize truths which they wished to enunciate. It would clearly be a

However, a major contemporary writer who has written stories that are based on biblical myths is Paul Zacharia. His stories are not really re-interpretations of the bible, but re-telling of the biblical stories. The possibility of classifying these stories as re-interpretation is rejected, because for re-interpretation, what changes is usually only the perspective.

But, in re-telling a change in the facts and plot of the original narrative is also implied. However, these two terms are not wholly separate from each other. They are inter-related. There is re-interpretation within every re-telling. And every re-interpretation involves a measure of re-telling. But, in the case of Paul Zacharia's works, the word re-telling is more appropriate, because most of the time, the biblical stories are re-written from a different perspective.

In his stories he takes the New Testament to re-tell and propound his own theology. In his novella, What News, Pilate?, Zacharia uses as his base, the four gospels. The gospels are the records of Jesus' life and activities on earth. And it ends in his resurrection. However, there are a lot of contradictions in what is recorded in the gospels.

And when writing his novella, Zacharia picks and chooses the instances and incidents that satisfy him the most. In Zacharia's novella, Pilate, in his letter, mentions that he sent Jesus to Herod, in an attempt to save him. And there is also a letter from Herod requesting the reinstatement of friendly relations between the two. This is from the gospel of Luke:

.....he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod.....The same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies. ⁹

But, none of the other three gospels mentions such an incident. In another instance, Ruth mentions how Julia had sent Pilate a letter requesting him to spare Jesus' life and she also mentions in passing, how Pilate had washed his hands to symbolize that he had nothing more to do with the death of Jesus Christ. This is taken from Mathew's gospel:

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.....So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."¹⁰

However, the other three gospels are silent on this letter of Pilate's wife and the symbolic act of washing hands. So, it would be wrong to conclude that this novella is based on any one gospel. Instead, the author has picked and chosen those dramatic events that can accentuate his imaginative rendering of the death and resurrection of Jesus from a different perspective.

But, what is his new perspective or purpose in re-writing? His stories are definitely provoking. And there are elements of satire and humor in his re-workings. But, who is he satirizing in his work? Is it the biblical narrative or the church as an established institution with its ideologies that is the butt of his satire?

Or is he making fun of the reinterpretations of the bible, in his re-working? If he is why does he do it? Is it to resist all interpretations that try to tie down the bible to their perspectives? Or is he just having fun exercising his own

imagination? These are all the various questions that the reader is perplexed by, when he reads the stories.

There are four perspectives in the novella What News, Pilate? — Pontius Pilate justifies himself, Ruth demolishes his arguments and puts forth her own views, the resurrected Jesus who rethinks some of what he had believed in till then, and Herod who gets to give his point of view. And among these four narrators, Pilate and Herod are definitely sketched with sarcasm and fun, Herod more so, than Pilate.

In the letter to Pilate, Herod has no inkling of having committed a crime or even done something that generations of Christians will hate him for. Pilate on the other hand is more aware of having failed the world in some way. His depiction includes pity as well. The reader takes the cue from Ruth:

In one sense, this Pilate is a harmless creature. He has absolutely no idea of what is happening in the world....Life for him is what he sees in front of his nose.....And just as you do not love anyone, you bear no malice towards anyone either, I think. But, what's the use? The simpleton within you carries out evil work too, with equal dispassion.

So, in such circumstances, can Herod and Pilate be blamed for what they did? Especially since, it was already foreseen that Jesus was to die on the cross. So, they are in one sense fulfilling the prophecy. And can they be blamed for it? *What News, Pilate?* definitely does not lay any blame on them.

With regard to perspective, at times the novella seems to make fun of all the various re-interpretations of the biblical narrative. But at other times it seems

to be in earnest. However one thing that is definite is that his re-telling is diverse from how the traditional church looks at these narratives.

However, in his re-telling, he does not try to minimize the supernatural aspects of the biblical narrative, i.e. the aspects that cannot be explained by reason or science. So, his perspective is not to rationalize the narrative of the bible and make it plausible.

Also, he looks at the human aspect in Christ, i.e. Christ as a man for him takes precedence over Christ as the divine figure. This is a popular theme in the re-telling of biblical myths. Both Jose Saramago and Kahlil Gibran emphasized and highlighted the humanity in Jesus Christ as against his divinity. And Paul Zachariah continues in this vein. But what sets him apart from them is his humor. Most re-tellings of the Bible are solemn affairs.

They have a sense of seriousness that is a reflection of the solemnity in the original narrative. But when Paul Zacharia re-tells it, he adds humor to a story that has tragic proportions. So, in a sense, he adds an element of irreverence into his re-telling. His stories have an element of satire. But, who is being satirized will depend on the perspective of the reader.

In the novella, What News, Pilate?, the character of Pontius Pilate is satiric in nature. He is depicted as someone who would be, in our terms, going through a midlife crisis. He is trying to come to terms with his own old age and mortality and failing miserably. So, the prevailing emotion in him is nostalgia:

Edo Antonius, you mustn't be jealous of me for what I am about to tell you. Think of the many breeds of honeyed lips I have kissed! The array of fabulous wines that have tormented my nerves! The battlefields that I have

watched flowing with blood. The death sentences that my pen has scribbled! I have breathed strange winds, known bewitching flowers and wondrous trees, had as pets fabulous birds and great dogs. But ask me, Antonius, if I feel satisfied when I look back, and I have no answer. I did my duty to my Emperor and for the Empire. And I enjoyed all the pleasures that came along with that. That's all. This is the lot in life that Father Jupiter (I will not strike that out, old chap, it is clear I have begun to think about God) has assigned me. Who am I to decide whether it is right or wrong.

Pontius Pilate, in his letter to his friend, also reveals a lot about his character. He is materialistic and dedicated to the sensuous aspects of life. So, he is preoccupied basically with wine, beauty and women. And in this he is a total contrast to the figure of Jesus:

But when I turned over that Jew to those rascally priests, for them to thrash and kill, I felt a little distressed. But he had brought the situation on himself. Because he just wasn't there. He was in a dream. And he didn't even have the primary sense of survival in the midst of mortal danger.

While one is a materialist, working for the earthly empire, the other is totally for the spiritual kingdom. But, they have their similarities too. Pilate's acceptance of the kind of life he has had and the end that awaits him is similar to Jesus' acceptance of the fate and purpose that God intended for him.

The line in the novella where Pilate accepts with resignation his life as assigned by 'Father Jupiter' is strikingly similar in tone to Jesus' prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane: "Abba father, for you all things are possible; remove this

come from me; yet, not what I want but what you want.” So, this could either be seen as an emphasis on the human aspect in Christ or the divine spark in man.

Some of the Gnostic gospels have emphasized the presence of the divine within man. The line of reasoning is, since man was created in God’s image, it is not unusual or offensive that there should be some features that are godlike or divine within him as well. But, on the other hand, this final acceptance of fate or God’s will is human. It is the one quality that most religions advocate — placid or stoic acceptance of your destiny. Also, the relation between God and Jesus is reflected in the way Pilate regards the Emperor.

He writes to Antonius that he did his duty to the empire:

But ask me, Antonius, if I feel satisfied when I look back, and I have no answer. I did my duty to my Emperor and for the Empire. And I enjoyed all the pleasures that came along with that. That’s all.

And this is the same emotion echoed by the Jesus in the monologue at the end of the novel:

But, why does father elude me? He eluded my mother too. How angry I used to be with her for not having a father to love. Alas, I should not have done that.....My mother has always suffered all the agony I caused her. She suffered my death as well. What is the point of my resurrection now? Can my mother’s agony be undone?.....why not take Mariam and the others along and go see her? Mother will be so happy.

My resurrection will have achieved a little something then.

The same feeling of dissatisfaction and futility with what they have done with their lives is reflected in both the monologues. Jesus, here is as dissatisfied at his neglect of his mother in his search of his father and his father's kingdom. Likewise, Pontius Pilate is unhappy with his life for the Empire, which is the father figure here.

Thus, the figure of God and the Roman Empire become similar to each other. And the comparison works both ways, though not to the advantage of either. The cruelty and autocratic nature of the empire rubs off on to the perception of God the father.

And the power and formidable nature of God gets imposed on the perception of the Roman Empire. Also, the God that Jesus talks about in the Bible—the loving father image is replaced here with something more reminiscent of the Old Testament God, as a result of this association between the imperial power and Christian God.

However, there are two perspectives put before us, of Jesus — one by Pilate and the other by Ruth. But how reliable and discerning are they? Pilate has already revealed himself to be unreliable. His boasts to Antonius regarding his escapades with women are revealed to be nothing more than hot air. Ruth informs the reader that Pilate is not that great a lover as he thinks himself to be.

Ruth, in contrast seems more reliable, at least in her views that Jesus should have included women in his church. Later on in the 'monologue of a young man returned from death', Jesus echoes her views: "is it that the mother gives us birth. And the father brings us back from the dead?" Ruth's arguments and reasoning are an elaboration of what Jesus himself feels after resurrection:

Pilate, shall I tell you the biggest failure of Yeshu, whom you did not understand? It was that he did not open all the doors of his world to us women and invite us to enter. He wasted his time with those donkeys, whom he called disciples. Had he given us the time, the attention and the patience he gave them, perhaps he would not have had to do what he had to do., so soon and so frighteningly! He kept his mother at a distance. And his sisters too. Who can protect a man's soul the way a mother, a wife, a lover or a sister can? If only he had held on to his mother in the hurly-burly of seeking his father! Instead, he got lost in the dark alleys of paternity. What did it matter who his father was? Is not the womb the real father? What a pity! Who will change his mind? Will the resurrected man go back, fall at poor Mariam's feet and say, Mother, I recognize you? This time, I will ask him to do that.

This could also be a critique of the patriarchal attitude of the church. The Christian church has always been male dominated and male centered. For example, if you consider the Catholic Church, the only two requirements that the candidates for the post of the Pope, officially have to fulfill, are that they must be baptized Christians and male.

So, women are excluded. And the fact that Jesus had only male disciples is used to justify this exclusion of women. And this patriarchal attitude is enhanced by the common belief that God is male. Therefore women become the secondary citizens in the kingdom of God and they are perceived as Eve or Mary Magdalene, tempting man from the righteous path.

This misogyny in the church is evident in the attitude of Paul, one of the founding fathers of the Catholic Church, towards women. His attitudes with regard

to women are similar to the ones expressed in the Hindu document, the Manusmriti, in his misogyny:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing[....] Let women learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived, and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through child bearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.¹¹

But in Zacharia's re-telling, he puts forth a different attitude to women. He advocates the importance of the female aspect in religion. The father is important but not so much that the mother, i.e. the female aspect should be rejected. So, for him the divine is a mixture of both the male and the female components. And Jesus realizes this too late, after the resurrection.

But, Zacharia refrains from attaching too much importance to the female. He undercuts his own arguments by bringing into contrast, what is stated by Ruth and what really happens later on in the book. With regard to the apostles, Ruth states that:

Now that he is resurrected, they will cling to him all the more—and run away from him just as fast when it comes to the crunch. Pilate, my boss, it was that bunch of scoundrels that you should have had thrashed good and proper. Someone said that when the priest caught hold of Yeshu in the garden of Gethsemane, one of the disciples ran away dropping even his clothes! Oh my Yeshu, that you should have come to such a pass! If it is

this way today, that will be the state of your Kingdom of God in the future? Why did you not share with us your secrets? Why did you not ask us to the final supper? Wouldn't we have at least helped you serve the food? How did you have the heart to entrust the burden of your Kingdom of God to a group of men who have no spirit or character? Wouldn't we have gathered your Kingdom into our wombs? Wouldn't we have nurtured it and spread it over heaven and earth? I fear that something even more terrible is going to happen to you because you spurned our love, and your mother.....why did you alienate your Kingdom from our love, the support and shelter only we can give? That was your great loss.

This lament of the Ruth refers to the church's exclusion of women from the liturgical aspects of the church. Her objection to the importance given to the male disciple by J sus is an objection to the perception of the church as a male or patriarchal domain.

But her arguments that the women would have been more loyal than the men, had they been included is mocked in the next chapter, which is titled 'The Secretary Becomes Unconscious'. In this, Ruth, when she encounters Jesus after resurrection, is uneasy and afraid. And this is reflected in her obsession with her sandal and her fainting fit:

Ruth: My feet are aching, walking like this. And my sandals are pinching my feet too.....I can't walk another step. Both my feet are sore.....

Without anyone realizing it, the sun has faded. Suddenly, there is another thunderous sound from the horizon, like an army on the march.....the earth trembles as if giant footsteps were approaching. The ground beneath their feet heaves as if a giant animal....

Ruth: Ayyo! I have a cramp in my leg...

In the distance, through the screen of dust, the figure of a traveler approaching for the opposite direction can be seen indistinctly...

Ruth: Man or woman, all will perish if there is an earthquake...

The newcomer removes the cloth from his face, covered with gashes.

Ruth: Aah! (falls to one side unconscious)....

The other women stumble back, shutting with their palms mouths opened to scream...

So, they are not that different from the women in their reactions to the appearance of Jesus. And this is not an unexpected arrival that they should react so in fear. They were already aware of the fact that he had resurrected. In fact they were on the lonely path in search of him.

Also, the monologue by Ruth, where she contemplates the future of Jesus' Kingdom, is one of the examples of re-telling in the novella. The biblical narratives have a different thing to say about how the disciples behaved when Jesus was arrested. Though, it is recorded there that the disciples were afraid, but the three of the four gospels. So, except for Luke's gospel, the gospels record that the disciples stood by Jesus, ready to resist his arrest, till he told them not to:

Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword...."¹²

But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with clubs and swords to arrest me as though I were a bandit?"¹³

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Mal'chus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the father has given me..."¹⁴

This is one of the few instances where something is recorded with almost no or little difference in the gospels. Though this incident is not recorded in the gospel of Luke, the fact that it is present in the other three makes it plausible. And Paul Zacharia is deliberately re-writing this aspect to incorporate his view.

But, it is unwise to think that there is any serious questioning of the biblical authority in this revision of the facts. The presence of humor gives the impression that he is re-telling the gospel accounts because he wants to and not because he wishes to found a new theology. Also, Zacharia adds his own little touches to the story and characters, making them more interesting.

Ruth, in her attitude resembles a feminist, or at least someone far from a traditional Jewish girl. The most important fact is that she works, outside the home. She is the secretary of Pontius Pilate, the governor. She is different from the women of the time in her attitude of irreverence, confidence and moral scruples.

There is one instance particularly when this modernity or at least self-confidence comes out: "The leg which darted out earlier like a flash of lightning is now crossed over the other under the blue robe." Her way of sitting has none of the signs of docility expected from Jewish women or good Christian women in general.

Then there is the preface, which is a folktale that is identifiably Indian. It is the story of a woman cheated by her Brahmin lover and how she takes revenge.

This folktale, in the beginning of the novella, reveals the influence of more than one religious system, on the writer.

The Christians of Kerala do not live in isolation, away from the influences of other religious systems. A cursory glance at their customs and rituals and even superstitions will reveal the influence of the religious systems that they are living within. So, it is only natural that when the writers write, they incorporate themes and symbols from other religions as well.

The tale of the 'Panchavankadu Yakshi' is one of revenge and betrayal. And it serves to set the tone. The moral of the tale is: "It is thus that we pay for the price for our actions". It reflects the human desire for revenge. When the story seems to have a happy ending, with the Brahmin getting away with the crime, the listener in the narrative objects, but, when it reaches its gory end of revenge, the listener expresses unease.

So, the tone set by this folktale is contrasted by the main section of the novella, which is about how Jesus dies and defeats death through resurrection, but also about how some people like, Pilate and Herod will not pay for their actions.

The New Testament is the story of one man—Jesus. And this is the case of What News Pilate? as well. However, there are other central characters — the women and Pilate. But Jesus is the major presence. The story revolves around him. He is the main subject of the narratives of Pilate and Ruth. Also, there is the "monologue of a young man returned from death", which is an indirect reference to Jesus. He figures in the short letter of Herod as well.

Another common feature of most re-tellings or reinterpretations is the focus on the human side of Jesus. But, Zacharia's writings are different from other re-

telling like that of Jose Saramago's in the sense that he never questions the fact that Jesus is the son of God. He is more into critiquing the way the church has come to depict the other characters in the biblical narrative, especially the women, as well as focus on the human aspect.

Jesus is divinity as well as man. And the gospels witness both. While they depict him as the son of God, they also acknowledge the fact that he is man as well. The strongest argument for Jesus' human side is that he is born to a woman. It is the church who later wove myths around Mary, Jesus' mother, making her in the process almost as powerful as God. Another instance when Jesus' human side comes to the fore is in Garden of Gethsemane (the Mount of Olives in John's gospel). There he falters in the mission intended for him, though only for a moment. But, he does falter: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me;...."¹⁵

In his The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, Jose Saramago rejects all notions of divinity in Jesus' birth. He is, in the book, the son of Joseph and Mary. It is only much later that God claims him as his son. But, in What News, Pilate? Zacharia accepts that the father of Jesus was God. But, that does not deter him from emphasizing that Jesus was human too, and therefore prey to doubt, disillusionment. In the last monologue in the novel, Jesus expresses his doubts with regard to his actions and the emphasis that he gave to his father's Kingdom.

Also, in another short story titled, "Till You See the Looking-Glass", Jesus is depicted as a young man, preoccupied with the so-called material things like, how to earn some money to alleviate the poverty of his mother and sisters and with bodily discomforts like, dirt, dust and the need to take a bath.

He is also assailed by doubts regarding his purpose: “What’s the point of my sitting in this courtyard with the knowledge of the kingdom of God? I’m not even able to look after my mother and sisters in these hard times.” And by asserting the human side of Jesus, he is brought closer to people, so that they can identify with him and his fears. So, this preoccupation with the human side of Jesus is not just confined to What News, Pilate?.

However, while What News, Pilate? is based or at least alludes to instances recorded in the New Testament, “till You See the Looking-glass” (Kannadi Kanmuvolam) is not. The biblical narratives on Jesus’ life are silent about what happened to him between the ages of twelve and thirty two/thirty three. However, this story is set in his thirty second year and focuses on his more material and bodily preoccupations. This is a side that was often ignored, in favour of the divine part of Jesus. This story however, emphasizes and re-establishes the fact that Jesus was half human, as well as being half divine. Therefore, it is not unusual that the human frailties and feelings in him should come out. And these two re-tellings, celebrate that side of Jesus.

So, the key aspects in these re-tellings are human and humour. The focus is on Jesus as man and therefore vulnerable to all the feelings and weaknesses of man. And humour is inherent to the way the stories are told or re-told. Therefore, on one level, these stories raise mans from the depths of hopelessness and sin that religion had thrown him into. And on the other, it makes the reader laugh or at least smile while at the same time making him or her think about how the politics of interpretation and perspectives, which are usually ignored when it comes to religion.

¹ From The Bible and the Third World

² From Gendering the Spirit: Women, Religion and the Postcolonial Response:
Introduction by Durre S. Ahmed

³ ibid

⁴ From The Bible To-day

⁵ From The Philosophy of Spinoza: Selected from His Chief Works

⁶ From The Bible To-day

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

⁹ From The Holy Bible: Luke 23

¹⁰ ibid: Mathew 27

¹¹ ibid: 1 Timothy 2: 8-15

¹² ibid: Mathew 26: 51-52

¹³ ibid: Mark 14: 47-48

¹⁴ ibid: John 18: 10-11

¹⁵ ibid: Mathew 26

Conclusion

Malayalam language and literature has had three major influences. The first one was the Tamil influence. Then there was the Sanskrit influence and in then there was the western or Christian influence. Though there were Christians in Kerala before the advent of colonialism, there is hardly any evidence of them leaving their mark in the literary field.

This could be in part because of the bible being available in Malayalam only in the 19th century. Also, the Thomas Christians used Syriac for all liturgical and official purposes. However, they would have been familiar with the vernacular language, since they were mostly business men. So, it was just a matter of a catalyst. And the advent of colonialism became that catalyst.

Whatever the reasons, the early Christians in Kerala, did not seem creatively inclined. Even if they were, there is no proof of their creative efforts in Malayalam. Therefore, the first major Christian influence on Malayalam literature was the coming of the missionaries. And their important role in the eventual growth and modernization of Malayalam literature has been emphasized by historians:

The contact with English literature led to far reaching changes in Malayalam literary expression and these changes were fostered by socio-political factors like the British conquest of India, the introduction of English as the medium of instruction and the adoption of western technology in selective fields of endeavor. These changes constitute a veritable renaissance in Malayalam literature.¹

The western influence was primarily religious, or at least was so initially. So, western influence on Malayalam literature can be considered synonymous with Christian influence. And, therefore, the Christian influence on Malayalam literature becomes prominent with the advent of colonialism. This influence can be divided into two stages.²

The first stage can be called the foreign stage. In this period, which was till 1880, most of the writings in Malayalam with biblical or Christian influences were found in the writings of foreigners, who wrote in Malayalam. But even then the influence was slight, because the earlier Tamil and Sanskrit influences were still strong:

...when you come to the 17th century Malayalam gets the feel of the west; as Christian missionaries from Portugal, Italy, Germany, Hungary and Austria came to Kerala. The European contact on the literary front was slight till about 1840, when the dominant English influence commenced in the cultural and educational realm. The trickle thus became a continuous stream.³

It started because the missionaries did not know the local language. But, in order to preach to the natives who were unfamiliar with English, they had to learn Malayalam. And many missionaries, once they learnt the language, decided to not just stick to sermons. Instead, they decided to contribute to the Malayalam language.

One of the first contributors was Arnos Padiri, a Jesuit Missionary from Hungary who wrote Chaturantyam and Misihacharitam. Both these works have a biblical base but the narrative style of Chaturantyam resembled the Ramayana. In

fact, this poem in 4 cantos was modeled on the Ramayana. Another work of considerable historical significance is Father Clement's Samkshepa Vedartham. This is a Malayalam version of Compendium Doctrinae Christianae.

Also, there was the first translation of the bible into Malayalam. The first translation of 1811, by the Bombay Press, contained only the four gospels. Then in 1829, the New Testament was translated into English by Benjamin Bailey who was assisted in his endeavor by four Syrian priests. And finally in 1841, the Old Testament was also translated into Malayalam and the complete bible published.⁴ This can be seen as an important contribution to Malayalam literature in terms of themes and language.⁵

During this stage, the Indian Christians slowly started to make their presence felt in the arena of Malayalam literature. The first travelogue in the language was by Thomas Kathanar. The book, Vartamana Pustakam (1786) is a record of his travels to Rome in 1778. Around the same period, 'Chavittunadakam', a style of musical drama, which has its roots in Portuguese culture, came into existence.

Some consider this genre of drama to be the precursor of Malayalam theatre. Needless to say, most of the stories staged were biblical — Joseph Natakam and Yakob Natakam are two 'chavittunadakams' that are concerned with biblical subjects.

The distinguishing feature of the second stage was the increasing participation of native writers:

The first stage was predominantly foreign and the contributors are mostly foreign missionaries. The contribution of native writers showing western

influence is meagre. And the works to a considerable extent deal with Christian theology with the background of western philosophy....In the second stage, the missionaries themselves took a more liberal attitude...therefore apart from compiling dictionaries and grammars sufficient for Europeans to learn the language, missionaries like Gundert produced works of great scholarship...what is even more important is the flowering of native talent in an abundant measure on account of the Western impact.⁶

The second stage in biblical influence in Malayalam literature is marked by the revision of the Malayalam bible. In 1871, the various missions in India and the local Syrian Christian church collaborated to bring out a new translation of the bible. During this same period, an Italian, Dr. Marsialinos wrote the Satyavedacharitam.

And it is also marked by the publication of two Christian periodicals in Malayalam, Satyanandam and Nazrani-deepika. But, more than missionaries, native writers entered the foray of writings that have biblical themes or subjects. As a result there was a shift in the purpose of writing on biblical themes and subjects. In the earlier stage the focus was on conversion.

The missionaries wrote in the vernacular in the belief that the natives would believe and be converted. However, with time, writers started exercising subjective interpretation of the biblical themes and narratives. They also, used the bible to criticize the churches and its ideologies. So, the importance was given to creativity and not passing on the biblical message.

Also, it is to be noted that the native Christians were the first to respond to the western influence and write literature modeled on the western genres and

styles of writing.⁷ So, there were many translations of works from English into Malayalam, during this period.

The first translated work in Malayalam, from English was the Pilgrim's Progress by Archdeacon Koshy. The Malayalam translation was titled, Paradesi Mokshayatra (1847). And the first book on rhetoric in Malayalam was by Father Gerard (1881). Also, many other works from English literature, especially Shakespeare's plays, were translated into Malayalam.

But with 1880 onwards, religious ideas took a back seat and secular ideas and reform entered the limelight, though the biblical stories or themes were often used to convey these ideas. The earliest story on a local theme was Archdeacon's Pullelikuncu (1882).⁸ :

The introduction of a new system of education based on the western model, the establishment of printing presses, the work of Christian missionaries, the starting of newspapers and periodicals...were developments responsible for bringing about the real renaissance in Kerala culture, especially Malayalam literature.....As in the rest of India, the 19th century thus marks the penetration of Anglo-Saxon culture into the national tradition and the modifications brought about by the reception and resistance offered to it by the native tradition.⁹

But, the Christian influence was here to stay. This is evident from the list of some of the poets, dramatists and novelists of Kerala whose writings contain evidences of biblical and Christian influences. Changampuzha Krishna Pillai (1911-48) translated the Song of Songs from the Bible into Malayalam.

Then there was P. Kesava Dev, whose novel *Ayalkkar* (Neighbors) represents a cross section of the three dominant cast groups in Kerala: the Nairs, the Christians and the Ezhavas. An important poem in Malayalam was “Magdalana Mariam” (Mary Magdalene, 1921) by Vallathol Narayana Menon. This poem is a re-telling of a biblical episode and became an instant success.

It was one of the earliest works in the world to speculate on the relationship between Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. Another poem on a biblical subject was the epic poem, “Shri Yeshu Vijayam” (The Victory of Jesus, 1928). This poem by Kattakkayathil Cherian Mappila was on the subject of the life story of Jesus. Also around the same time, K.V. Simon published his collection of long poems, Veda Viharam (1931), which is based on the book of Genesis.

S. K. Pottakkatt whose main contribution to Malayalam literature were travelogues, wrote a novel on the migration of Christian workers from central Kerala to the estates in Malabar — Visha Kanyaka (1958). Ponkunnam Varkey, another writer of the period, wrote novels criticizing the catholic clergy of Kerala. Another writer who wrote about middle class Christians of Kerala was Parappurath (1924-81).

Malayalam drama was no different. It too felt the influence of Christianity. Kalvariye Kalapadapam (The Divine Tree of Calvary, 1935) by Kainikara Padmanabha Pillai made an attempt to fuse together a Christian theme and plot with modern prose theatre. Another major Malayalam playwright who wrote plays that had distinctly Christian themes was C.J.Thomas (1918-1960). His plays, Avan Veendum Varunnu (He Will Come Again) and A Manushyan Nee Tanne (Thou Art Man, 1955) are two plays that have biblical overtones.

These are only some of the major works in Malayalam, over the years, which have made thematic use of the bible and the Christian community. There are also works that re-tell or re-interpret the biblical stories. However, one thing that is definite is that the bible did play a role in enriching Malayalam literature, and continues to do so.

There was, at the same time, an awareness of religious pluralism, even among the missionaries, as is seen in the work of Arnos Padiri, a Jesuit missionary — his work, Chaturantyam is modeled on the Ramayana.

The increased awareness of religious pluralism has resulted in the awareness that “it is no longer possible for man to confine himself to the small island of his own culture and tradition and not recognize the significance of other cultures.”¹⁰ The best example for this growing awareness is the declaration of the Second Vatican Council of 1963-65:

Those who through no fault of theirs are still ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his church yet sincerely seek God and with the help of divine grace, strive to do his will as known to them through the voice of their conscience, those men can attain to eternal salvation.¹¹

This is in opposition to the earlier decree in 1854, by Pope Pius that there was no salvation for those who did not join the Catholic Church:

It is to be held by faith that outside the apostolic Roman Church no one can be saved; it is the only ark of salvation and anyone who does not enter it will perish in the flood.¹²

So, this earlier stance has been softened. The new position of the Catholic Church comes close to acknowledging the legitimacy of other religions. The basic fact then is that to believe in God (any of the gods) and try and help others is all that is necessary for salvation.

But among the Christians in Kerala, there was already an awareness of religious plurality, even before the arrival of the colonial powers. (In fact it was the advent of colonialism that destroyed this sense of religious plurality among the Christian community of Kerala.) And this can be seen in the religious ceremonies of the Christians of the state. The word used for this contact between religions is 'syncretism'.¹³

It may be argued that few religions are wholly immune from some degree of syncretism. Even Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other major religions, from their beginning, combined many different religious ideas and rituals. Syncretism...was originally used by Plutarch for 'fusion of religious cults' which occurred in the Greco-Roman world...Christianity, from its beginning, combined many different religious ideas and rituals...¹⁴

And, in India, Christianity was influenced by Judaism and Hinduism. This influence in culture and ideas is reflected in the literature as well. But it is most evident in the rituals and customs of the Christians of Kerala:

the advent of the caste Hindus and the close interaction between the Hindus and the Christians resulted in a long process of sharing and adoption of each other's cultural-religious beliefs, customs and traditions.....the belief in astrology and in calculation and determination of the auspicious day and time is widespread.....tying of the tali, a Hindu practice of Kerala, is the

essential symbol of marriage (Christian). The Southist or Thekkumbhagom subgroup of the Syrian Christians even today conducts performance of old marriage eve songs. A similar custom exists among the Cochin Jews also.¹⁵

So, it is only natural that this syncretism should be reflected in the literature of the state as well. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find both biblical and other religious influences in the writings of Christian writers of Kerala. Also, it is not unusual to find biblical influences in the writings of non-Christian writers as well. And this is a result of 'syncretism'.

And with the help of five contemporary prose texts in Malayalam by Christian writers, I have attempted to explain the important role that the Bible has with regard to Malayalam literature and language. So, the biblical influence on the literature of Kerala can be seen in terms of language, themes, and subject. Also, the close interaction between people of different religious beliefs in real life is reflected in the writings of Malayalam Christian writers, both in their ideas and depiction of the Christian community.

Also, this work in progress attempts to establish the close link between literature and religion and how it is necessary, to ensure that the religious system does not become closed and rigid. Literature brings to religion multiple interpretations. And constant re-tellings and re-interpretations preserve a kind of openness in religious belief and prevent or at least retard the growth of fanaticism. It also opens up new possibilities and perspectives. Therefore, literature that draws upon religious texts should be seen as an enriching experience, and not an example of blasphemy or heresy.

¹ Ayyappa Panicker stated this in Knit India Through Literature, Volume 1: The South

² From A Many Branched Tree: Perspectives of Indian Literary Tradition

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ K.M. George in his book, A Many Branched Tree: Perspectives of Indian Literary Tradition, states that the bible brought a number of new idioms into the Malayalam language. Out of a bout 150 idioms that have come into Malayalam as a result of western influence, some of them have come from the English bible. He gives the following examples to illustrate this point: 'forbidden fruit (from the Genesis, a book in the bible), white washed sepulchre (also from the bible).

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid: Many of the early Malayalam writers influenced by English literature were Christians (Aymanam P. John's (1825-1893) India Charitham, Oommen Philipose's (1838-80) translation of the Comedy of Errors, and Archdeacon Koshy's (1825-99) translation of Pilgrim's Progress are all cited as examples).

⁸ From Knit India Through Literature, Volume 1: The South

⁹ ibid: Ayyappa Panicker

¹⁰ From Studies in Religion: A Comparative Approach to Theological and Philosophical Themes

¹¹ ibid

¹² ibid

¹³ From the introduction in Culture, Religion and Philosophy: Critical Studies in Syncretism and Inter-faith Harmony: B. Francis Kulirani elaborates the syncretic elements in the customs and beliefs of the Syrian Christians of Kerala in the essay "Jewish Heritage, Hindu Tradition and Syncretistic amalgam Among the Syrian Christians of Kerala"

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ From Culture, Religion and Philosophy: Critical Studies in Syncretism and Inter-faith Harmony.

Appendix: Summaries of Three Novels

Except for the last novella, What News, Pilate?, and the short story “Till You See the Looking-glass”, written by Paul Zacharia, which is available in an English translations, the other three works of fiction are in Malayalam and have not been translated as yet. Therefore, given below are brief summaries of these three works.

Luciferinte Atmakatha

The title of this novel by K.P. James, when translated into English means ‘the autobiography of Lucifer’. It is set in the twentieth century in post independent rural Kerala, though the place is not named. It is in the first person narrative. The protagonist is Raman who conceives and starts an agrarian revolution for the upliftment of the workers. This revolution is similar to Marxism in its ideology. However, though the movement begins with the good of humanity in mind, he soon becomes disillusioned with the materialism of his friends who initially helped him, but later pushed him out as impractical and lazy.

Finally a young laborer, Yeshu, is killed by some people (it is not clearly specified by who, but Raman believes that the people in charge of the movement, his old friends, are responsible). Feeling guilty for the death of Yeshu, Raman decides to protect and take care of Yeshu’s wife and child. After a short period of happiness and contentment, the outside world intervenes with disastrous consequences. Sridevi (Yeshu’s wife) commits suicide after killing the child because she cannot take the taunts of the public anymore. And Raman is left disillusioned and ineffectual, to be supported by a lonely old woman who goes out begging so that he can eat.

Allahayude Penmakkal

This novel by Sarah Joseph is set in Thrissur and is the story of a family of women and one man, who is stricken with tuberculosis (the other men have either run away or died). It is the tale of their poverty and struggles to make a living in a world which is hostile to a group of women, that too poor, making a living alone, without really a man to protect them. Needless to say it is a tragedy. On one side is the grandmother of the main character, Annie, a young child, who knows the mysterious prayer, 'allahayude namaskaram'. On the other side is Annie's mother who believes in the traditional form of worship and the church's ideology and considers this mysterious prayer as hogwash and blasphemy. Caught in the middle is Annie, who wants to and tries to belong to both worlds.

Vishudha Likhithangal

This novella by Johnny Miranda has a narrative that moves backwards into the past and then into the present, with fluidity and almost no indicators of the shift in time. It is the story of the degradation and final fall of Sunny, who comes to the village of Kuzhikara to build a statue or idol for the local church. He has an unhappy past that haunts him — an alcoholic father who was unfaithful to his mother as well as regularly beat him and her to an inch of their lives. And, in the process of the narrative, he commits the same crimes that his father committed, namely, too much drink that culminates in the rape of the minor girl, Mercy (his neighbor).

After the rape, Sunny runs away from the village, in shame, only to return years later to find out what had happened to Mercy and her family and thus exorcise his ghosts. All he finds is Mercy's near blind grandfather; Mercy, pregnant after the rape had committed suicide and her mother had run away with some man. Thus, there is no salvation for Sunny.

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