

## **A Confab with Benjamin, the Son of the South**

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### **Introduction**

In India, literary writers are usually not as widely and popularly interviewed as sportspersons or film artists. One tends to wonder if from among all creative arts, there is a bias in the media, against literature, Book launches, few and far between, and the mushrooming lit fests are a source of hope at present. However, an interview with the writer, just before a book launch, seems to lend the work of art a shade of commerce appealing brighter than its intrinsic creativity.

A project in the Media Writing course was our best opportunity to consider interviewing a writer. Eleanor Wachtel was a model and an inspiration for our amateur attempt. Benjamin (originally Benny Daniel), a Malayalam novelist and short story writer, a resident of Kulanada, a small town in Pathanamthitta, Kerala, seemed the most viable choice, for he was both reachable and approachable. The challenges of social distancing imposed by the pandemic ravaging the country, and the possibility of bringing to focus a writer from the neighbourhood, strengthened the choice. The interviewer (Ms. Lekshmi Chandra) set about seeking the writer's kind indulgence for the exercise. Benjamin obliged, and the tete-a-tete happened on 16.01.2021, Saturday from 2.00 to 3.30 pm at the author's residence. The interview was in Malayalam, and the transcript below is a verbatim translation of the interview.

### **Who is Benjamin?**

Born in Kerala in 1971 as Benny Daniel, Benjamin is the recipient of the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 2009 for his first novel *Aadujeevitham* published in 2008 and shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary prize in 2012. An author of more than two dozen novels, he spent more than twenty years of his life in Bahrain as a Project Manager. His life in another country and the hard realities he faced there turned him into a novelist.

*Aadujeevitham* was a great success with more than hundreds of reprints. The novel, based on the real-life story of an Indian labourer trapped in the desert, has even found its way into the syllabi of many universities and the state school syllabus.

Benyamin introduced in fiction writing the experimental concept of a 'twin novel' unheard of until that time. The outcome was *Al-Arabian Novel Factory* and *Mullapoo Niramulla Pakalukal*, two novels whose plots are intrinsically connected; yet, one is not a sequel to the other. *Mullapoo Niramulla Pakalukal*, translated into English under the title *Jasmine Days*, won the JCB Prize for literature in 2018.

### **The Interview:**

#### **Q1 When did you realize that writing could be your profession? And why did you choose this pen name?**

I realized very late that writing could be my profession. I wrote my first story at the age of twenty-nine. I had never devoted any time to reading or writing till that time. I am an engineering graduate, and right after college, I went abroad for work. After I reached there, the initial eight years were filled with loneliness and identity crises. I started reading, as a solution to these problems. I was a voracious reader from the age of twenty-one to twenty-nine. I found immense pleasure in reading. During that period of my time, I realized that there were some hidden sparks within me.

Many of my friends at that time were good writers and literature lovers. I was embarrassed to tell them that I too write. I considered a pen name as a hide-out from them. And I often felt that people whose names ended with 'n' like Govardhan, Vasudevan, etc., were good writers. That's why I chose the pen name 'Benyamin'.

#### **Q2 How do you develop in your mind the theme for a novel?**

There are many things. First is, how did an event or person strike your mind? Thousands of subjects come to our minds every day – hundreds of people, their lives, social and political events, personal experiences in our daily lives etc. There are chances that none of these strikes me deeply. But sometimes, one incident or person touches me deeply and shakes me up. It stays in my mind for a long time and makes me feel that I should write about it. Along with this idea, certain other things also develop in the mind; that it should connect more with a particular group of people. Then I start researching subjects or people I can relate to in this novel. It could be documents, books, newspaper writings, interviews, personal experiences.

All the while, the story will be developing in the mind to its complete structure. Then I start writing it.

**Q3 Amongst all your characters, to which one is the common man ‘Benny Daniel’ close?**

There are elements of the self within every character that is created. Every character is created to narrate through them what I have in my mind – my dreams, desires, insights, perspectives, and so on. In this way, there are fragments of myself in every character. But, to be precise, 'Mohan' of *Manthalirile Irupathu Communist Varshangal* stays much closer to my real life than any other character. His character has been developed from my childhood memories. I see myself in that small boy, Mohan.

**Q4 What encouraged you to choose a Dan Brown style of writing, with which Malayalam literature has not been much familiar?**

One thing is, the nineties in which I started writing was one in which the habit of reading was dwindling. People became much engrossed in other sources of entertainment like T.V., the internet, and the social media. In such a period, the biggest challenge in front of me and my contemporary writers was bringing back people to reading. We are a generation of writers who believe that we faced it firmly and succeeded in our attempts. A group of writers, including myself, K.R.Meera, O.V Vijayan, T.D Ramakrishnan, and Subhash Chandran, had one more aim – to bring back readers to literature. And the most important thing was to increase the reading ability of people. When each reader is in front of a book, he or she will have a hundred other things to do. There are many other mediums like film, T.V., internet to take them to the world of entertainment. It's always been a writer's job to keep him reading without any of this (distraction). A reader has the thought of coming out of the book every moment of reading: ‘I will stop reading after one more page and do something else’. So, there is a duty before the writer to make the reader captivated. For example, in a book of 350 pages, all 350 pages should be captivating. To achieve such a task, particular styles of writing are adopted.

**Q5 When people who read a lot start writing, there is a tendency in them to get influenced by their favourite writer of a favourite book. Is there any such thing that you have experienced?**

There are chances for a writer to get influenced by his favourite writers or particular writing styles during the initial period of his writing. But if you are creative, you will get to know that you are imitating somebody or trying to copy some idea or style. And also realize that it is not imitation that is required for good writing. One more thing, our creativity is also related to the books we have read. When we think of a sentence and then realize we have already read it somewhere, we experience injustice to ourselves. Then remove the whole sentence itself. But, if you ask me why I am reading, my answer is, to know how great writers changed incidents into stories or how they fabricated the story using words, or what's the technicality of the novel. In my perspective, the purpose of reading is to get to know this and not imitate it.

**Q6 As the writer of *Manthalirile Irupathu Communist Varshangal*, what is Communism in your perspective?**

My Communism is nothing but the experiencing of justice and equality by all people. Gandhiji has explained well the principal of "Sarvamatasammata". The most important thing is to have a system in which justice reaches all human beings in the society. I believe this is real Communism. But the social issues and political problems in this century prove that the ideology fails to produce its true meaning. Even then, the idea of Communism in my mind stays like that forever.

**Q7 Are special efforts made to diversify the characters and the background of your stories? For example, the name of the characters, the description of the setting, etc. The readers feel them new yet familiar...**

I try not to repeat the same story once I have written it. I am not a person who thinks once I have written *Aadujeevitham*, again I will write something related to it. My second novel, *Manjaveyil Maranangal*, was a completely different one. I always try to do something new or think differently, so this newness comes to me very naturally, I guess. I don't like myself to repeat. Ultimately, the purpose of my writing is to seek self-satisfaction. So, if I repeat myself, I won't get that self-satisfaction.

**Q8 Do you write with readers in mind, or is it a strong flow of thoughts and ideas?**

Often it is so. As I said earlier, I am ultimately writing to satisfy myself. But it does not bother me how much it will satisfy the reader. But now that the book has been translated into many languages, I think of how a world reader would accept it. I had used many colloquial

words and the regional dialect when I was writing *Akkapporinte Irupathu Nasrani Varshangal*. That is very difficult to translate. So now when I write, I think of whether it is translatable or how would a global reader understand it. But ideas are ours and are not written just to satisfy the reader.

**Q9 In your novel, *Al-Arabian Novel Factory*, the character, John Hogan, opines that the "novel of the present century is a factory product." What's your opinion about that?**

Many novels are coming out. Many novels in world literature that come with the subtitle 'number one bestseller' are not the hard work of a single man. Even though only one person's creativity is involved in them, many persons' thought processes, discoveries, and research are present in such novels. The name *Al Arabian Novel Factory* symbolizes that. I think in Malayalam Literature, the time hasn't yet come for writers to create such novels.

**Q10 As for a poet, a quiet time to write and an orderly life matters a lot. How do you find time for public events and other things in your daily routine?**

I wrote novels such as *Aadujeevitham*, *Al-Arabian Novel Factory*, *Manjaveyil Maranangal* during very busy workdays. I was working as a project manager in the UAE at that time. Anyway, we do not write all 24 hours, so it is important to spare some time for writing in our routine. But on the other hand, we are writing the whole 24 hours while driving, eating, or cooking by constantly thinking about the story and its characters. So, all the while, the story is developing in our minds. So, if you find a specific time for writing, it will go very easily.

I have come back from the UAE and settled down in my native place. Now I use my time adequately for social events and many other things, but still, I keep a particular time for writing. The only thing is that you have to keep the balance between everything [you have to do].

**Q11 *Puzha Meenukale Kollunna Vidham* is a new joint initiative. What are your experiences and hopes after writing a novel in collaboration with young writers?**

It was a new experiment. *Puzha Meenukale Kollunna Vidham* was a new experiment on what you can do when you are home during Covid time. It was collaboration with young writers. I write one chapter, and another person will write the second chapter and so on. It was a new stimulus for literature and young people. So, in all of my works, I always try to find something new. *Al Arabian Novel Factory* was also a new experiment with the introduction

of a twin novel that had not been thought of until that time. Thus, *Puzha Meenukale Kollunna Vidham* is part of an experiment on a different type of writing.

**Q12 What advice would you give to young writers or literary students like me?**

You are the ones who see the world better than I do. I don't think there is any need for any special advice. I want to tell you from my life experience that if you want to get into literature, all the doors to it are open in this world. If a person like me, from a small village Kulanada, without a literary background or companionship with any literary figure, can succeed like this, anyone can succeed. There is a way open for each of you here, and you all have to go through it. And the most important thing is that there are no easy paths to literature. If in sports at the age of twenty or twenty-two you can be an athlete, for those in literature, even at the age of forty, you will be a young writer. Our maturity in literature increases with age. Sachin Tendulkar, 40, is a retired legend, while a 40-year-old writer is described as a young writer. It's a period of people who start writing in their forties. Each of these experiences is an asset to our writing. So, one thing is to wait. Patience is one of the most essential elements of this art. Orhan Pamuk has once said that writing a novel or writing a story is like digging a well with a needle. It is such a delicate work of art. Literature can only move forward if the work is done with such patience. Then have a good social outlook. Have a sense of history. Read. If you have all of this, I am sure that you will be able to become a good writer one day.

**Q13 Which book and writer influenced you the most?**

If I were asked the name of a storyteller, I would say the name of Nikos Kazantzakis. His secular spirituality has always influenced me greatly, but if you ask me to mention a favourite book, I may mention some other work, not by him. This book which I came across during the initial days of my reading, *Jean-Christophe* by Romain Rolland, a 1915 Nobel Winner, is my favourite book forever. The anxieties, fears, and methods of a young man of that time are all well illustrated in that novel. This novel is based upon the life of the great musician Beethoven.

**Q14 In today's scenario, it is very easy to publish a book through an online or offline medium. But long back during your time, it was not that easy. How did you achieve that task?**

To be honest, I knew nothing. My first publisher told me that he did like my stories very much and needed copyright. So I gave him that copyright. I still do not know what its technical aspects are. It is the publishers who tell me these things and send me the contract. I sign the contract and agree to the copyright. When we are part of something, we unknowingly realize what it is and act accordingly. I haven't received any special instruction or advice for this purpose. My opinion is that there is no need to bother about such things. The real question is, 'Is your writing worthy?' If it is worthy, publishers will come to you, give your copyrights to you. So, through the lesson of my life, what I have learnt is that your writing should be valuable.

**Q15 Nobody would have written about diasporic life as you have, in Malayalam literature. So what prompted you to adopt the theme in most of your novels?**

As I said, I have been an expatriate for more than half of my life. If I was in Kerala for the first twenty-one years of my life, I was in the UAE for the next twenty-two years. Then naturally, the experiences, thoughts and even the anxieties of the life in another country will affect us. Tony Morrison says, 'I wanted to read a story about a black girl. I searched the whole literature but found nothing. So, I decided to write a story myself.' Similarly, I felt that stories about such experiences in exile seemed rare. So, noting that so many Malayalees are leaving Kerala and living in different expatriate life situations, I started writing about life in exile.

**Q16 Now *Aadujeevitham* is turned into a movie. What were the changes as it went from story to screenplay?**

The screenplay is in a different format. People often ask me if I am a storyteller, and I can write a screenplay very quickly. But the answer is no. It's like asking someone who plays volleyball to play basketball. Although both are seen as ball games, both are two types of games. The screenplay is just another thing that creates energy from the story. One example I always cite is that the difference between a story and a screenplay is like the difference between water and water vapour. When it comes to the script, it also has a visual feel to it. It becomes a way for our story to reach many people who stand outside of the story. So, I wrote the script with great pleasure.

**Q17 How much contribution has been made to the writer named Benjamin, by the commoner named Daniel?**

Benny Daniel's contribution to Benjamin is a twenty-year life in Kulanada. Life in this place may seem simple at first glance, but it has played a major role in creating language and conditions in many novels. I think childhood is important for every writer. I lived a very ordinary life, not extraordinary in any way. Not a rank-holder in every class, an average cricketer who hits a mango on a tree, reaching last in a race – that would be Benny Daniel's contribution to Benjamin. I do not think there is any difference between the two. They do not exist as separate entities. At home, I live like a normal person. If I go a little farther, like Kozhikode, Thrissur, Palakkad, or to another country, I am seen as somebody different; something seems to be getting bigger, I feel. I always go for walks like a normal person, talk in the market, and drink tea in shanty tea shops.

**Q18 What changes can readers expect in your future literary years?**

I say, I never do any planning. What we plan within ourselves to do may not work. I thought I could write a novel on Travancore history, and I have read about one hundred and fifty books for this purpose. But I couldn't succeed in my attempt till now. What we plan may not happen, but some things penetrate our minds and will happen very soon. *Nishabdha Sancharagal* is one such thing. This topic came to my mind from an incident or discussion that happened very casually two or three years ago. In another two or three years, I had developed the story and published the book. So, I'm not going to have a planned lifestyle to go forward, like planning that I'm going to do this or that for the next five years. Let it come as it is. Now I am coming to my twenty-fifth book. So far, when I write, I've experimented with bringing about a change in language, presentation, and style. I would like to write novels that satisfy me and those who love literature deeply than novels that satisfy everyone. I will try more new experiments with novels, and I will continue the experimentation forever. Many times, I have dropped such experimental ideas thinking of how the readers will accept them. But at present, I have left that thought and am focusing on more experimentation. Let all the other things, come as they are.