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Recreation and Representation of History in Subhash Chandran's *A Preface to Man*

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Abstract:

The paper titled "Recreation and Representation of History in Subhash Chandran's *A Preface to Man*" seeks to analyse how well history has been represented in Subhash Chandran's phenomenal novel *A Preface to Man* (2015). This is a generational story as it explores the lives of three generations of Ayyatumpilli family: Narapilla, his children, and grandchildren. The novel progresses through the letters written by Jithendran alias Jithen to his wife Ann Mary during their six-year courtship. Thachanakkara is a microcosm of Kerala or rather the entire world. Subhash Chandran places the characters in the past thereby making them a part of the history. The novel informs the readers of the major events, twists, and turns that occurred in the history of Kerala. It also presents a vivid picture of the caste system which prevails in Kerala, and India as a whole. The author effectively captures the socio-political conditions of Kerala from the pre-independent era to the present.

A Preface to Man was originally published in Malayalam as *Manushyanu Oru Aamukham* in the year 2010. It has been translated into English by E.V Fathima and was published in 2015. The novel won most of the prestigious awards like Kerala Sahithya Akademi Award, Kendra Sahithya Akademi Award, Odakkuzhal Award, Vayalar Award, and so on.

Keywords: History, Communism, Caste, Memory, Past.

"Man is a history-making creature who can neither repeat his past nor leave it behind; at every moment he adds to and thereby modifies everything that had previously happened to him" W. H. Auden (quoted in Sharpe 188). Subhash Chandran's *A Preface to Man* faithfully exemplifies this statement of Auden. His characters are trapped in the mysterious workings of history and culture. The novel was originally published in Malayalam as *Manushyanu Oru Aamukham* in the year 2010. Undoubtedly, history plays

a significant role here as it does in many other recent Malayalam novels (*Francis Itticora* and *Sugandhi Enna Aandaal Devanayaki* are some examples). Such novels necessitate the use of extensive research work along with imagination. Subhash Chandran's *A Preface to Man* is no exception in this matter. There is a consistent interplay between history and individual. It deals with the life of the protagonist Jithen, who tries to come to terms with his personal history as well as the history of his nation. A complex interweaving of history and fiction makes *A Preface to Man* a remarkable piece of work. According to M. S. Paul, indigenous history and historical family narrative, which usually do not feature in mainstream literature, are taken up and discussed by the contemporary writers. He further mentions that 'historiographic metafiction' has become a new trend in Malayalam literature (18). Imagination and real historical facts are blended together in this genre.

The novel progresses through the letters written by Jithendran alias Jithen to his wife Ann Mary during their six-year courtship. On the first day of her widowhood, Ann Mary, who is in her fiftieth year, goes through these letters written about a quarter of a century back. Jithen had always yearned to write a novel about his village and his family, and these letters provide an outline to this novel. Ann Mary could only retrieve forty letters written during the last ten months between March 1999 and January 2000, from the gutter water. These letters carry great historical significance in that they document the history of the village of Thachanakkara, of Ayyatumpilli family, of Kerala, of India, and above all the history of humanity. These letters are presented as an epigraph to each chapter. The novel begins in the future with Jithen's death at the age of 54, in 2026, in a modern apartment in Thachanakkara.

Thachanakkara is a microcosm of Kerala or rather the entire world. It is another 'kitchen' like the one presented by Arnold Wesker. It is an admixture of people of different castes, different class, different values, and different beliefs. Jithen's letters are designed in such a manner that even the youth of present day Kerala could get a glimpse into the history of Kerala. This might be one of the reasons why Subhash Chandran dedicated his novel to, "those who were born in the last century and are living in this century" (*A Preface to Man*).

Uneducated and unsophisticated villagers people the fictional world of Thachanakkara. Beginning with Narapilla's youth, the novel progresses through his marriage to Kunjuamma to the birth of their children, and their grandchildren. Each person of Thachanakkara has a different take on life, and each has a different story to tell. Three different phases of Kerala are presented in the novel: (1) Kerala before the independence of the nation. (2) Kerala during the period between independence, and the

formation of the state. (3) Kerala after the formation of the state. The lives of the three generations of Ayyatumpilli family lay scattered throughout these three periods.

Jithen's birth is also historically significant as he is born in the month of Chingam, a month that all the Keralites cherish adorably for various reasons. In Jithen's own words, his birth date is "wedged exactly between the remembrance days of the two Malayalis who considered all human beings equal. On the hapless star of avittam, wedged and squeezed between thiruvonam and chathayam" (Chandran 180). He also remembers that Idukki district came into existence in the year of his birth. Apart from this, Jithen was also the first from Ayyatumpilli to be born in a hospital.

Every society is constantly in a state of flux, and the small village of Thachanakkara is no exception. The course of the materialistic progress of Thachanakkara, is described vividly in the novel. In the beginning itself, it is mentioned that Jithen dies on the eighth storey of an apartment - a thing which was completely unheard of in the times of Narapilla - and that this apartment stood on the ground where Jithen played cricket as a child. Thus, the author draws the attention of the readers to the drastic changes Jithen's birthplace has gone through. The formation of the youth club 'Arunodaya', their coming under the Soviet influence; the advent of technological devices like telephone, television, electricity, and mobile phones; the increasing popularity of newspapers are all well sketched in the novel.

Like every historical text, here also memory becomes a significant link. Ila in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* says "...there's a joy merely in knowing that you are a part of history" (104). Strangely enough, nobody ever realizes it when one is actually a part of history. This is what happens to the people of Thachanakkara also. Only Jithen comes to this realization. That is why he feels that he missed being part of the Indian independence struggle. He thinks that if he had been born two decades earlier he could have become a Naxalite, which implies that his present life is going through so much boredom.

E.H.Carr remarks in his work *What is History?* thus: "The function of history is to promote more profound understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them" (68). Memories and stories aid in this better understanding, and they comprise the major portion of *A Preface to Man*. When Aunt Kunthi gives descriptors to all the grandchildren of Narapilla, she calls Jithen 'treasure chest': "The collections in the chest were the memories from the beginning of childhood. Memories had roots. They had branches and twigs. Memories would flower and bud. Sometimes they would get mixed up and create new flowers and fruits, never seen by anyone before" (Chandran 220).

This description suits Jithen best because being the youngest he has been accorded the privilege to carry forth the legacy of Ayyatumpilli. Jithen becomes the personified image of the tradition and culture of Ayyatumpilli family. He is a mirror, which stands for everything good and bad about Ayyatumpilli.

According to Gyanendra Pandey, “memory has become the discourse that replaces history” (11). In a historical narrative, memory plays an important role because it is through effective memory that history is preserved. Memory takes a person back to those traveled distances and cherished experiences one has traversed in the past. According to Bhatt and Nityanandam, the individual who indulges in the act of remembering becomes a historian in turn. If this can be taken into account, there are several historians in *A Preface to Man*.

“Everyone lives in a story ... because stories are all there to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose...” (Ghosh 182). The novel is replete with poignant stories remembered and narrated by various characters. Jithen also has been taught different stories at different points of time. The story of Raman Pillai better known as Rambilla is one such story. Jithen used to call him Granpa Rambilla because he received a grandfather's love not from Narapilla but from Rambilla. Jithen was ignorant of the fact that Rambilla was responsible for the madness of Vasudevan Namboodiri. Though Rambilla dies, Alamboori reminds everyone of the grave mistake committed by the former. Viswanathan, a member of Eagles Club, is intervened in the midst of a sexual intercourse with Lalitha inside a temple, by Rambilla. Before Rambilla could assume what actually happened there, both the lovers flee. Rambilla could only notice the misplaced idol, and he assumes that two thieves were in an attempt to steal the idol. He informs the police that these men ran into Arunodaya Club which results in the arrest and subsequent madness of Vasudevan. He still roams around in Thachanakkara as a lunatic. He reminds everyone of that glorious past when the youth effected great changes in the land of Thachanakkara, and also of the tragic end of that glorious past. He also serves as a reminder of the cruelty of the police, and the torturous treatment they meted out to the Naxalites of that time. The infamous Naxal hunt was a dark episode in the history of Kerala.

In *A Preface to Man* small stories (*petit recits* as French historian Lyotard refers to in his phenomenal work *A Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*) of different people make up the plausible plot of the narrative. One remarkable story is the one propagated by Paanambarambath Nanu regarding the lame leg of Kumaran's daughter Radha. According to Nanu, the incident happened in 1960 or 1961 when Kumaran took part in a Communist procession and he walked from Thachanakkara to Thiruvananthapuram on foot for thirty days. His legs were paralyzed as a result. Since

Radha was conceived during this period, she also developed the lame in a leg. This is how Nanu twists the story. Nanu just cooks up this story using the details of a Communist procession, which he has in his mind. This is how several stories are created out of one's memory and the past. This can be related to another incident where Jithen remembers the sinking of the ship Kairali that his father told him. Jithen could imagine the scene of the ship sinking by recreating it from the words of his father. Like Nanu, Jithen recreates something of the past in his mind. The only difference is that Nanu goes a step further by adding his imagination his story.

The past can be presented in different ways as it recurs in the memory of individuals differently. Kunjuamma's children have fond memories of their mother whereas their father Narapilla presents her as a "miserable scarecrow with hardly any redeeming features!" (Chandran 307) He distorts everything according to his temper. "History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge" (Rushdie 25). These lines of Rushdie are exemplified by the various stories and memories that are shared by the various characters in the novel.

The lives of the women of Thachanakkara may seem pointless to the readers like the other women characters in numerous novels. Recalling the words of Ila in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, who says that there was a heroism in the pointless deaths of the people who lost their lives in border fights, one must be able to say that there was enough adventure in the passive lives of these women as well. It should be noted that in the histories of nations, sacrifices made by ordinary people are usually not recorded. Women do not even deserve any mention in any case. Though Kunjuamma leads an uneventful life, her death leaves a permanent mark on the minds of the members of her family. The memories of Kunjuamma take forward the plot of the novel. While alive, Kunjuamma abided by the code prescribed by the society as to how a wife should behave. Though she dies halfway through the novel, she appears in the memories of her children every now and then. Jithen also wants to tell Ann Mary that though his grandmother was capable of loving unconditionally she had to suffer greatly.

The title *A Preface to Man* is suggestive of the patriarchal world in which women have nothing concrete to do. 'She' is erased from the title just as 'she' has been erased from 'history.' Yet one should not forget that the original title in Malayalam is *Manushanyu Oru Aamukham*, where 'Manushyan' refers to human beings in general, which includes women also. Though there are plenty of women characters in the novel, other than Kunjuamma nobody stands out. Yet the author has done some justice to the female characters. At least some of them are portrayed as adventurous like Muringattil

Leela who delves deep into the recesses of the Punneli river. During a period when the word 'Caesarean' was unheard of, Chinnamma undergoes it, an act which displays her courage to experiment with her health. Kunjuamma's story has been etched on the wall of her room by herself in a state of madness. The author describes it as 'charcoal mural.' She has left something for the coming generations to understand her torturous state of mind. Kunjuamma lives on even after her death through the seemingly meaningless words she has written on the wall with charcoal.

Thaamara, the washerwoman, her daughter Ammu, and Kunthi who has been affected with elephantiasis are some women who have been sidelined due to their different forms of backwardness. Compared to Kunthi and Thaamara, the women of Ayyatumpilli lead much better lives. They have the privilege to enjoy the pleasures of all modern amenities. It is Kalyanikuttyamma who enlightens Thankamma and Chinnamma about the advantages of electricity. They get to know the details of the happenings going around in the world. It is Pankajaakshan's wife Kalyanikuttyamma who starts buying a newspaper for the first time in Ayyatumpilli. With the introduction of newspaper "...the roar of the waves of history from afar began to be heard in Ayyattumpilli too" (Chandran 144). Thankamma also gets Mathrubhumi and manages to have a glimpse into the world news. One interesting fact is that many incidents of universal significance are revealed through the eyes of the female characters.

Great leaders, writers, and cult figures like Gandhi always find a place in narratives and history very easily. But the fragmented lives of the marginalized are not to be found in any records. The conflicted and disrupted lives of these people are not considered even worth mentioning. In *A Preface to Man*, the readers can locate a large number of unknown, unheard voices whose tales have never been narrated. Subhash Chandran effectively takes up their cause and imparts meaning to their lives. History is multilayered and multidimensional. The novel explores both India's nationalist history and the indigenous history of Kerala. The readers can experience the intermingling of political, personal, familial, and historical factors.

The caste system in Kerala has always been complex because of the large number of castes and sub-castes we have. Jithen's diary is an expression of his hatred towards the duality and hypocrisy of the upper caste people around him. *A Preface to Man* unfolds the mysterious ways in which the caste system functioned in Kerala. Nairs have emerged as a superpower throughout all these years. A study of Kerala history would be insufficient without any reference to the Nair community. In *A Preface to Man*, the author delineates the position of the Nair community and the other so-called lower communities. Ayyapilla, Narapilla's ancestor who was the first-born in the family of Ayyatumpilli, was hung on the orders of the King of Thiruvithamkoor. He does not die

for 27 days. People from all walks of life come to see the dying Ayyapilla. They also strictly follow the rules of hierarchy. The minister and others from the Ananthapuram palace stood in the innermost layer; the local barons and the landlord-chieftains in the second layer; then the four castes stood to maintain a safe distance as prescribed by the then society. This incident throws light on the well-defined caste hierarchy which was prevalent in those days.

The novel elucidates in detail the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Aluva Advaitasram, which happened in 1925. It is interesting to note that Thachanakkara had different reactions to this visit. Lots of eminent personalities and events are mentioned throughout the novel making it a text of great historical importance. The demise of V. T. Bhattathirippad, Akkaamma Cherian, and S. K. Pottekkat are mentioned. ‘Vypin liquor tragedy’ is also alluded to as it happens soon after the death of Narapilla. *Vimochanasamaram*, Ezhuthachan, and Naranath Branthan also find a place in *A Preface to Man*. Balaanandan, a comrade who had been dismissed from service for forming a union is also referred to when Shankaran expresses his desire to name his son after him. Chinnamma gets the news of A. K. Gopalan’s death, of the resignation of the Achutha Menon ministry, of Karunakaran becoming chief minister and so on from Mathrubhumi newspaper. There is an instance when Kalyanikuttyamma reads about Lord Mountbatten in the newspaper. Only then does she realize that Mountbatten had been alive until then. “‘I had thought all those people we studied about in history, must be dead!’” (Chandran 290) Here the author takes a dig at the attitude of the people who usually think that anything that is old or that is in the past does not exist.

The novel progresses along two lines. On the one side it explores the nuances of public history (that of the independence struggle and others) and on the other that of private history (the personal lives of the characters and their respective past).

Subhash Chandran engages with the history and politics of Kerala with much ease. He has revolutionized the contemporary Malayalam literary scene with his very first novel. The history of Thachanakkara is in short the history of Kerala. The period of the rising discontent against the British government has been captured realistically by the novelist. The oppressive caste system which existed then produced lunatic men like Vasudevan Namboodiri. The novel is given more moral and intellectual depth because of the presence of conflicting characters and contrasting attitudes.

The author delineates how communism started to take off in Kerala slowly. An irony is employed when Narapilla who opposes communism strongly, ends up having two communist sons-in-law. They are there even in the front of the victory parade celebrating the ascension of E.M.S ministry. Jithen recounts in his letter to Ann Mary

that the poor men of Thachanakkara have not read any books on communism, still, they imbibed the feeling that any person who makes a living on his/her own has the right to live his/her life with full integrity.

Most of the changes mentioned in the novel take place within the first ten years of the marriage of Chinnamma. Sankaran Nair marries Chinnamma in the year in which the first E.M.S government comes to power in Kerala. *Mathrubhumi* newspaper becomes a part of the daily life of Kalyanikuttyamma. The major events of that period are described in detail by the author through the eyes of Kalyanikuttyamma. Not only the historical events of Kerala but the happenings all over the world are chronicled in the novel. Thus along with the likes of Mannath Padmanabhan and Sree Narayana Guru, world leaders like Fidel Castro, Kwame Nkrumah, Yuri Gagarin and others also find a place in the novel. The advent of industrialization and the disappearance of the joint family are also described. Narapilla's children divide the house plot among them and build fences. Four children build four houses in the same compound separated by bamboo fences.

Though history has been used extensively in the novel, the author claims that the Ayyatumpilli family had only a remote connection with the history of Kerala: that E.M.S's second ascension to power coincided with the birth of Chinnamma's first child. Some like Pooshappi are unlucky because he passes away without having the opportunity to listen to the first radio in Thachanakkara. The author says that Pooshappi's "testicles used to ache while listening to historical tales" (Chandran 148).

Rewriting history refers to repeated recording of events that have already been recorded in the past. In this sense, the author has attempted a rewriting of history in *A Preface to Man* by making Thachanakkara the centre of action:

Thachanakkara was not just a place, it was an era too. When one looks back into the past, the magic of place and time fusing together happens. When they both get blended and solidify, pictures that become like conservative memories, get painted. They can be renovated repeatedly by adding colour; but they cannot be repainted. (Chandran 421)

Jithen appears as a chronicler not only of the history of his family but also of the history of his nation. History lay fragmented all through the novel. The tumultuous past of the state of Kerala becomes the centre point of the novel. The narrative traverses through the pre-independence and post-independence eras.

"All the short stories that I wrote were preparations to arrive at this novel," says Subhash Chandran (459 *A Preface to Man*). Undoubtedly, this novel is worth all his preparations. He adds that through this novel he has tried to put down the 'emotional

history of a century.’ (461 *A Preface to Man*) He has done a remarkable job as he has used history to provide authenticity to the novel. When Sofia agrees with Jithen saying that “if one has to write, one has to write about one’s life, one’s times, and one’s locale,” both of them underline the importance of writing about one’s history (382). In short, each character of *A Preface to Man* lives up to the famous remark made by Rushdie: “‘We are. We are here.’ And we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage” (15).

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