



Bheemachan: The Aesthetics of Narration

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Abstract

Stories are a primal mode of expression of human experiences. The diverse transitions and emotional realms of human beings as social creatures are encapsulated in stories, opening up both personal and social realms of meaning simultaneously. This paper presents a study of Bheemachan, a short story by N. S. Madhavan, who introduced postmodern sensibilities into Malayalam literature. The study explores the depths of aesthetic experience in the narration of this story.

Keywords: postmodernism, regionalism

Introduction

Contemporary literature employs various narrative strategies in unique ways. Rather than just the novelty of themes, present-day writers focus on the stylistic innovations of narration. Thus, narration has evolved into a distinct mode of discourse within storytelling. Through language, symbolism, and references across multiple domains, storytelling today reflects a rich diversity. N. S. Madhavan's narrative world has introduced many innovations into Malayalam short fiction. His narratives carry a mission of politicizing the inner structures of narration. This paper analyzes the narrative method in N. S. Madhavan's Bheemachan, a story that carved out a new path in Malayalam short fiction. While standing as a guidepost to postmodern storytelling, the story simultaneously interweaves

elements of regional life and history in a compelling aesthetic form.

Postmodern Storytelling – Approaches and Conflicts

Literary movements arise either consciously or unconsciously out of the cultural situations prevailing in each era. Literature has marked the convergence of individuals, their environments, and their philosophical worldviews. Influences from world literature have also left their mark on Malayalam writing. Among these, the postmodern phase stands distinct. Postmodernism began influencing Malayalam literature more visibly from the 1980s onward. Known variously as postmodernity and post-postmodernism, theorists like Lyotard, Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and



David Harvey have interpreted postmodern literature as a cultural and social condition. Concepts like parody, pastiche, metafiction, and intertextuality are central to postmodern literary theory.

N. S. Madhavan is one of the prominent writers who has strongly presented this literary background in Malayalam short fiction. While the modernist works of O. V. Vijayan, M. Mukundan, and Kakkanadan in the late 1970s opened multiple pathways, Madhavan introduced a distinct postmodern approach. He made a significant impact with his first story *Sishu* in 1971. His debut collection *Dead Bodies at Choolaimedu*, stood out for its unique narrative style, often reminiscent of cinematic language.

After a long gap, the stories in his 1991 collection *Higuita* presented postmodern sensibilities with precision. Through stories like *Naalamlokam*, *Thiruth*, *Muyalvetta*, *Mumbai*, and *Amma*, Madhavan delved deeper into the political and social dimensions of storytelling. Postmodern literary works reflect characteristics shaped by technological growth, media expansion, and transformations in economic and social structures. These works align with post-structuralist thought and emphasize the interpretive freedom of readers. In the context of Kerala, postmodern literature also embodies resistance—against globalization and multinational capitalism—drawing strength from regional cultures and traditions. N.S.Madhavan's recent story *Bheemachan* (published in 2024 in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*) beautifully weaves the aesthetic textures of regional life in Kochi, particularly through imagery shaped by waterways and island geographies.

Bheemachan – The Undercurrents of Fear

Like Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Bheemachan* presents a symbolic narrative. The story follows the lives of Santiava and Anastasia and revolves around a giant crocodile—Bheemachan. It departs from conventional depictions of coastal life, such as in *Chemmeen* (Thakazhi), *Valakkar* (Sarah Thomas), *The Luthian Women of Lenten Batheri* (N. S. Madhavan), *The Book of Kings* (K. A. Sebastian), and *Chavunilam* (P. F. Mathews). These narratives

portray coastal communities through motifs of faith in the sea goddess, boat-making traditions, occupational rituals, and seaborne experiences.

In contrast, *Bheemachan* addresses the island-ringed life of Kochi, examining survival amidst geographical isolation. The story opens with a striking image of alienation: "When Santiava lowered the boat to go to the Ernakulam market to buy tanks, the backwaters felt unfamiliar. He didn't see the usual lines of canoes. Except for some reed mats lying like shrunken lungs of the dead, there was nothing in the backwaters." "What has seized the Kochi backwaters with such emptiness?" he wonders. The concept of a region (*pradesh*) is pivotal in both social science and geography. It encompasses aspects such as climate, language, landform, and occupation to define a collective identity. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, regionalism holds significance in historical, political, and sociological analysis.

Kochi's unique topography—shaped by its coastal and backwater networks—gives it a distinct character as a port city. Colonial structures such as St. Francis Church, the old Jewish Synagogue in Fort Kochi, and numerous islands and mainland areas together form a rich cultural geography. *Bheemachan* is set against this regional backdrop, portraying a community dependent on fishing, under threat from the monstrous crocodile. Santiava, a fisherman, undertakes the mission of eliminating Bheemachan, described as:

"Bheemachan is not just a crocodile. He's a demon sent by Satan to destroy Kochi's backwaters."

The story poetically describes the locales visible through the waterway journeys—churches lit by dying torches, smoky Madonna statues, post offices, police stations, colonial bungalows, colleges, government offices—all contribute to mapping the coastal terrain of the story. Quoting Lyotard, who stated that "each discourse domain has its own translational form and internal logic," this perspective can be applied to *Bheemachan* in how it aesthetically portrays the shifting positions of backwater life.



The collective effort to defeat Bheemachan reflects the communal sense of survival. The story intensely depicts Santiava's psychological battle against the crocodile—even the news of Anastasia's pregnancy doesn't sway him from this singular focus. This emphasizes how deeply the menace of Bheemachan has consumed him. Place names such as Thevara, Perumanur, Mulavukad, Palarivattom, Mattancherry, Fort Kochi, Vaduthala, Chalakudy, Chottanikkara, Vallarpadam, Edappally, and Pachalam serve to mark the regional landscape. The narrative becomes one of place-making, tracing the flows of people and water.

The fantasy elements heighten the aesthetic force of the story. For example, the crocodile's leap: "With scars, fangs, blank eyes, rows of sword-like teeth, and a tail broad enough to capsize the boat, Bheemachan leapt. For a moment, it felt like an eclipse fell upon the boat. Drops of water from the creature drenched Santiava; the stench of its regurgitated backwater breath spread over the vessel." Stanzel's narrative theory, which distinguishes between "story" and "discourse," helps analyze how Bheemachan handles regional experience through discourse. Through names, dialogue, and sociocultural categorization, the story marks Kochi's layered historical past.

Conclusion

At its core, Bheemachan is a narrative of a man-versus-beast confrontation centered on Santiava and Anastasia's life. But beyond that, it represents an allegory of communal survival and the transformation of fear into a mythical narrative. The concept of regionalism is complex, especially in a city like Kochi where island-geographies intersect with socio-historical-economic arrangements. Bheemachan presents this regional life with artistic brilliance. In short, Bheemachan stands as one of N. S. Madhavan's distinctive stories, continuing his contribution of landmark narratives to Malayalam short fiction. Drawing on humanism, regional culture, scientific curiosity, and a deep engagement with football, cricket, and cinema, Madhavan situates his literary space beyond postmodernism—hinting at a new aesthetic paradigm for the narrative art.

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