

Issues of Modernity in Vedanayakam's *The Life and Times of Pratapa Mudaliar*

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Abstract

Portraying a rather faithful account of the national character, domestic life, habits and manners of the people in Southern India, Mayuram Vedanayakam Pillai, in The Life and Times of Pratapa Mudaliar enlightens the reader's perception of a nineteenth century society. The novel chronologically traverses the life of Pratapa Mudaliar. Mostly, through narrated tales within each chapter, the author upholds the age old oral tradition. At times without a proper connection between the tales, the author narrates didactic tales through the mouth piece of the characters. As the first Tamil novel, the text brings in to focus certain cultural and traditional markers juxtaposed with the ideals of modernism or an emerging "newness". The paper travels through the latent issues of modernity within the text as an understanding of the tenets of modernism in India.

Keywords: culture, ideals, modernity, nationalism, reform, tradition

In almost all the Indian languages, the modern age begins with the first struggle for Indian independence in 1857. The impact of western civilization, the rise of political consciousness, and a resultant change in society could be seen in the literature of the time. Contact with the western world resulted in India's acceptance of western thought on the one hand, and rejection of it on the other, and resulted in an effort made to revive her ancient glory and Indian consciousness. Most of the writers attempted to amalgamate Indian and Western ideals giving rise to a stable national identity. Similar to other novels of the time, like Nedungadi's *Kundalata* (1887) and Chatterjee's *Anandmatt* (1882), the integrity of the nation is emphasised in *Pratapa Mudaliar* as well. Vikramapuri, being a political nation of its own, struggles to come out of the chaos of mob rule. There was no king and only a judge. The judge himself was corrupt and it is said about him, "He comes to the court perhaps once or twice a month. And on that occasion perhaps about a thousand lives would be ruined. He never actually enquires into a case but follows a blind rule"(163). Akin to other modern

prose pieces of the time, there is a social critique articulated in such literature. With Gnanambal rising to be the king, an image of political unity comes into shape. Though fictional in most respects, the elephant garlanding Gnanambal as king leads to sequential political and social stability in the village. Through her unsurpassed wisdom and bravery, there emerges a nation inclined to acts of justice. This coincides with the then Indian dream of integrating the nation from the divided rule.

Vedanayakam Pillai, through the voice of a character (Gnanambal), presents his own opinions on certain political, social and institutional issues of the day. The king visualises an ideal governance of his (her) kingdom and details the nature and function of an ideal ruler. Though not very explicit, the author might in many ways challenge at invoking an awareness of the then British rule in India. Nationalistic and patriotic spirit of revolt prevails in these writings. Gnanambal gives her notion of an ideal ruler:

A king should not think of himself as one apart and distinct from the people. Or, should he do so, he should place the people above himself – like a loving father who is concerned about the wellbeing of his children...He should be easily approachable, his eyes filled with compassion, ears ever ready to heed complaints. (179)

Presumably, it might be satirical in implying to a Utopian state of affairs, something which India slightly envisaged then. At later instances, the British system of governance is directly condemned: “In the educational institutions set up by the British government, spiritual and moral values are not imparted and only some subjects relating to comfortable life are taught” (181). Apart from these concepts, other institutional issues such as the promotion of Tamil, the condition of advocates etc are also exemplified in the building of a nation under Gnanambal. Gnanambal, the king, advocates the use of Tamil and despises the use of English in courts. The author voices his outlook through the character: “We are not rejecting royal tongues like English and French as unworthy of study...But is it right to give up one’s own language completely and concentrate only on the royal tongues?” (207) There is a call to cling on to one’s own language, the vernacular. The introduction of English language in public sphere was a major aftermath of colonisation. There existed a society caught up between the ideals of acquiring English education and that of rediscovering the beauty of their own mother tongue. Presenting an alternative modernity, certain traditional characters in *Indirabai*, denounce the English language: “What hypocrites these people who learn English are!”

The birth of novel is predominantly associated with the social reform oriented movement in the nineteenth century. Education, especially of women was seen as a sign of social upliftment, a step closer to modernity. Likewise, the community concerned in *Pratapa Mudaliar* undergoes certain trouble of education. Right from the beginning, the novel commences with Pratapa's grandfather's zeal for education. "A young man of excellent education" (9), his grandfather went beyond the fear of ostracism and offers help to a poor, lifeless man on the street. Education doesn't build ignorance in characters like him. Moving on to the education of Pratapa, he was taught along with Kanakasabhi and Gnanambal. Their master, Devaraja Pillai was a man of wisdom and taught "uyir ezuthu, mei ezhuthu and uyir-mei ezhuthu" (14). Initially, while Pratapa's grandmother and father found education futile, it was his mother Sundarianni who insisted on his education. As evident from this, there is a certain level of wisdom, lacked by ignorance seen in the women characters like Sundarianni and Gnanambal.

Women have always been the focus of many literary works in the Indian Literature especially in an age of growing intellectual crisis and more so in a developing nation like India. There has been a constant conflict between tradition and modernity particularly in the portrayal of women. Early novelists have placed their women characters within a tradition. Sundarianni and Gnanambal, though display a great amount of practical intelligence, are tradition bound woman who are conditioned by conventions and she accepts the responsibility of being the custodian of family. At times in the text, Gnanambal is seen to admit the inferiority of women. She asserts,

However much women may study, they cannot excel men. Women are like fast-growing plants that flower quickly only to wither away. On the other hand, men are like trees, slow of growth but providing enduring benefits. Her kind words encouraged us to study even harder. (24)

This notion, rather turns out to be contrary to what she achieves in her later life as a ruler where she testifies to the meaning of her name Gnanambal- "the goddess of wisdom". As a fair administrator of Vikramapuri, she reveals her practical wit. She cuts down the expenditure, not increasing the tax burden. The armed forces were annihilated without recourse to a war or the use of a weapon. She exercised what she felt was right. A striking element here is the role of the complaisant husband who abides by his wife's decision. As opposed to the male-dominated society of the time, the novel portrays a female in power. There is a stride away from not giving a woman a choice. Gnanambal was completely devoted to her nation. There existed a self-will, authority and conviction within her in par with the concepts of a man, maybe even more. She emerges as a new-woman who strives to

reform the society. Her adventures and her administrative reforms pursue the author's social reformist agenda. However, her journey in supremacy doesn't break away from a traditional wife seeking her husband's happiness. She also abides to the kings in the puranas- Rama, Dharmaputra, Harishchandra, Nala. What is evident here is the power of a woman who brings change in the society but still with due reverence and adherence to her own principles of tradition. At many instances, she states her position as a woman and says, "As a woman, I should have remained in the background, hardly visible" (218). The author presents modern thought but with a fear of complete separation from custom and tradition. The strong individualism of the women characters, Sundarianni and Gnanambal assists them in emerging as the heroines within the novel, similar to Chembaka in *Marthanda Varma*. Their acumen and virtue make them better citizens, accepting the reality and moving along. To Pratapa, his mother was the mother of the universe and he worshipped her every day. Through her narratives and aphorisms, she taught Pratapa and Gnanambal. These two women characters are exalted throughout the novel and mainly at the end. Their name "spread far and wide and even reached Britain...and honoured them with the title of Royal Ladies." In one way, it's not just education that has liberated them but it's their good worth that has given them a place in the public. The ideal political state run by Gnanambal, though thoroughly seems to be fictional, reminds one of Sultana's dream in *Sultana's Dream*.

As the first Tamil text in the genre of novel, *Pratapa Mudaliar* does not completely, at any cost accept the European ideals blindly. Though there are references to literary texts of Bacon, Milton and Socrates showcasing their awareness of Western literature, there is no complete reliance on the Western ways of life. In Gnanambal's letter to her Athan, she says "Men and women there (Europe) enter into matrimony only when they are mature...they meet in private and move with each other before they marry without even meeting each other? ...Clearly, those who wish to usher that state of affairs into this country cannot be patriots." There is a direct disapproval of the European ways. Also, in Devaraja Pillai's narration of Ananthiah's tale, he says Ananthiah "berated this land and its culture and praised Europe." Through this story, the author gives light to what is acceptable and not acceptable within the European community. Blind acceptance of the Englishmen led to Ananthiah's lack of faith and consequently failure in life. Here, a question arises to what Vedanayakam, as the author tries to communicate to the readers. The deterioration of one's own language under British is also protested within the novel.

Being an instructing and morally edifying text, the author has posed many issues of modernity with the potential to reform and eventually reform the society. The chapters

devoted to married life, stories about ill-natured and good natured women, measures to reform wicked husbands and lame shrewish wives all to seem to be part of Vedanayakam's address to the society. There is a demonstration of the socio-cultural modernity in the colonised land. Distinctly modern values such as individuality and radical parity are articulated throughout the text. But unlike other texts, *Pratapa Mudaliar* does not celebrate modernity or the introduction of English language. The novel exhorts significance of one's own tradition and culture with slight modern outlooks.

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