

MADHAVIKUTTY DESERVES IT AND MUCH MORE**P . GOVINDA PILLAI**

The selection of Madhavi Kutty *alias* Kamala Das *alias* Kamala Surayya for the prestigious Ezhuthachan Award of the Government of Kerala has led to an unseemly controversy. The controversy was initiated by Sri. P. Parameshwaran, the well-known Acharaya of Sangha Parivar and currently Director of Bharatheeya Vichara Kendram. His main complaint against her is that she is notorious for her obscene writings which are unfit to be read in a family group. Worse still, they are repellent even for a personal perusal.

I am surprised to read such an evaluation of Madhavi Kutty coming from a cultured person like Sri. Parameshwaran. It is hard to find anything in Madhavi Kutty's writings, which can be reasonably characterized as grossly obscene. All what one could charge against her is some references in her autobiographical fantasia, *My Story* (both in Malayalam and English) in which she makes a number of references to untoward passing fascinations she pretends to have experienced towards some men and vice versa. Though there are some very oblique remarks on the curves of female form they never reach the proportions of obscenity as we read in a *Lady Chatterly's Lover* or Frank Harris' autobiography.

They do not even reach the heights or depths of sensual ecstasy of Kalidasa's classic *Kumarasambhava*, Jayadeva's exquisite *Geetha Govindam* or our own Mahakavi Vallathol's *Vilasalathika*. For our Parameshwarji to rivet his eagle eyes on such casual references among the voluminous corpus of Madhavi Kutty's stories, novels, poems, and skits is an enviable exercise which exemplifies less than cultured taste.

Had it not been for my esteemed friend Parameshwarji known for his spiritual and literary accomplishments, I would have been tempted to remind him of the famous adage: Obscenity is often in the eyes of the beholder rather than in the work of art.

Madhavi Kutty's lyrical prose and delicate delineations of the human relations and endearing recitals of motherly affection and scintillating insights into the children's psyche spread out in her stories and novelettes have opened up a chapter of fragrance in Malayalam fiction. Madhavi Kutty's originality and talents as a storyteller par excellence have almost blurred the contours of poetic imagination and lived experience. She is among the two or three story tellers who successfully extricated Malayalam fiction from crude and lifeless realism. Realism certainly was a revolutionary innovation to begin with -- but as in the case with all such innovations, changes in social milieu and taste among the readers,

led to its deterioration as did Romanticism before it. Her “*When the Pomegranates were in Blossoms*”, “*The scent of Bird*”, “*When the Bats fly*”, “*The Black dog*”, “*A doll for Rugmini*” and dozens of her stories are replete with the milk of human kindness which flows not only to sooth the broken hearts of humans but also to birds and animals. Her culture combines both the worship of nature in Indian tradition and the love of the animal world passed on to us by Mahavira and Gauthama Buddha.

Her stories often depict sympathy for and compassion towards unfortunate women driven to degradation and prostitution by the patriarchal society. That does not mean that she approves of such decadent lives. Jesus Christ’s sympathy for Mary Magdalene does not prove his approval of life in sin. Of course she does not consider sensuality and sex as sin after the Victorian hypocrites and Mrs. Grundy’s. Her culture as is India’s is alien to the European Christianity of middle ages which considered sex a sin in their explicit expressions and indulged in all the vulgarities of flesh and luxury in the deep recesses of their consciousness and dark cloisters of their existence.

Parameshwaran reminds us of the spiritual qualities of Ezhutachan’s Classics. Yes, certainly I agree. But spiritual qualities in human creations spring from the essence of human being, human

relations, love, affection, ideals and nobility. It is precisely these that Madhavi Kutty express and extol in the tragedies and comedies of life, in ecstasy and agony, in pathos and thrills. Spirituality in Valmiki and Ezhuthachan are not expressed in ascetic denials of life or chanting of *mantras* but in commitment to life and its problems and vagaries.

From all these it is clear that Sri. Parameshwaran has some axe to grind than the proclaimed dislike of Madhavi Kutty's sensual proclivities. Most probably, he has been taken aback by her recently pretended conversion to Islam. I use the word pretended purposely. She made her surprising and controversial declaration of conversion to Islam for the first time in a library conference in Ernakulam which I was presiding over. After making the statement which she knew would catch the headlines in the next days press, approached me and affectionately took my hands to her forehead and asked me not to be upset by her unusual announcement. I said, "not at all". I am not an admirer or approver of her idiosyncratic behaviors or the habit of hankering after headlines and limelight. I don't hate Islam. As a matter of fact, I am a great admirer of outstanding renaissance leaders and prophets like Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed and others. But I don't think worshipful respect for Mohammed should be associated with the pretentious wearing of black hood over the head and associated condemnation of Indian traditions. I am unable to

respect such behaviour even if they are from a writer of eminence and talent like Madhavi Kutty.

In the history of literature, we come across great men and women of letters with such idiosyncratic habits and pretensions. One example is the great philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau who in his classic autobiography '*The Confessions*' confesses to many sexual aberrations and misconducts. The modern researchers and scholars have established that all such confessions were bogus and that he led as puritan a life as possible. I have the privilege of knowing Madhavi Kutty and her family members very closely. And I have no doubt that her confessions in her autobiography are like Rousseau's, totally imaginary. They show certain psychic aberrations she is prone to as was evident in her pretended conversion to Islam. But such aberrations do not make her in any way a lesser writer. She is by any sensible measure one of our most outstanding storyteller who richly deserves the Ezhuthachan Award or any higher award if there be any such. Her detractors are on slippery grounds as far as literary merit and talents are concerned.
