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Literary Quality and Reader Reception in Chemmeen and Ram C/O Anandi

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Abstract:

This study provides a comparative analysis of enduring literary value versus contemporary popularity in Malayalam fiction, focusing on Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's classical novel *Chemmeen* (1956) and Akhil P. Dharmajan's contemporary bestseller *Ram C/O Anandi*. Utilizing Reader-Response Theory alongside the cultural frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, and Henry Jenkins, this paper examines how digital media transforms reading culture. The analysis reveals that while *Chemmeen* maintains academic canonization through thematic depth, social realism, and structural originality, *Ram C/O Anandi* achieves rapid commercial success via cinematic narration and aggressive social media marketing on Instagram and Facebook. The study argues that contemporary digital promotion fosters a participatory, often performative, reading culture that prioritizes public enthusiasm and visual presentation over sustained critical depth. Ultimately, this chapter highlights a paradigm shift in how literary quality, authenticity, and cultural capital are defined in the modern Malayalam literary marketplace.

Keywords: Malayalam Fiction, *Chemmeen*, *Ram C/O Anandi*, Reader-Response Theory, Social Media Marketing, Literary Value, Cultural Capital.

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Recent Malayalam fiction has gained significant popularity in the contemporary literary market. Many novels are widely promoted on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, and within a short period after publication they are often celebrated as “classics.” However, this rapid recognition sometimes raises questions about the literary quality of such works. A number of recent novels tend to adopt a cinematic style of narration, focusing heavily on dramatic events and visual storytelling. While these elements attract readers and create commercial success, some critics argue that these works lack deeper literary qualities such as authenticity, originality, and thematic depth.

In contrast, earlier Malayalam novels continue to maintain strong literary value and cultural significance. Works like *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and other classic Malayalam narratives are still studied in academic institutions and included in university curricula and research. These novels are appreciated for their strong narrative structure, social realism, and authentic portrayal of human experiences. Contemporary popular novels such as *Ram C/O Anandi* by Akhil P. Dharmajan, although widely read, are often viewed as examples of popular or pulp fiction that rely more on hype and market visibility than on lasting literary depth. By comparing the narrative elements and thematic concerns of past and present Malayalam fiction, this dissertation aims to analyze the differences in authenticity, originality, and literary value between classical and contemporary works.

This chapter provides a critical analysis of the literary qualities of the selected Malayalam novels, *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and *Ram C/O Anandi* by Akhil P. Dharmajan. While the previous chapter compared the narrative and thematic elements of these works, the present chapter evaluates their authenticity, originality, and literary value. The discussion also incorporates the perspective of Reader-Response Theory to understand how readers interpret and respond to these texts. The literary value of *Chemmeen* lies in its realistic portrayal of the coastal fishing community and its deep engagement with social beliefs and traditions. The narrative explores themes of love, faith, and moral responsibility through the tragic relationship between Karuthamma and Pareekutty. The novel reflects the cultural life of Kerala and presents characters with emotional depth and psychological complexity.

In contrast, *Ram C/O Anandi* represents a contemporary narrative style that focuses more on individual experiences and modern relationships. While the novel gained wide popularity among readers, its narrative structure and thematic depth differ significantly from classical works like *Chemmeen*. The storytelling often resembles a cinematic mode of narration that prioritizes dramatic moments and emotional appeal. Originality is an important factor in determining the lasting value of a literary work. *Chemmeen* demonstrates originality through its integration of folklore, social realism, and emotional storytelling. The novel combines personal tragedy with collective cultural beliefs, creating a narrative that remains significant even decades after its publication. Some contemporary works, however, tend to rely on familiar narrative patterns influenced by cinema and popular culture. Although these works may attract large numbers of readers, their literary originality may be limited when compared to classical Malayalam fiction.

In the context of contemporary Malayalam fiction, reader response is increasingly influenced by social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Many novels gain rapid popularity through online discussions and promotional campaigns. While such popularity indicates active reader engagement, it also raises questions about whether literary value is determined by critical depth or by public enthusiasm.

Social media has developed into an effective tool for book promotion, enabling writers to swiftly connect with a large audience. A portion of the reason for Akhil P Dharmarajan’s success is the widespread social media activity around his book, where users are making reels and shorts that increase the book’s exposure. In a similar vein, Nimna Vijay and Joseph Annamkutty Jose have used their social media followings to increase book sales by converting indifferent readers into ardent advocates.

Nowadays, young readers are a major force in the Malayalam literature industry. They favour modern books that speak to their experiences and the times they live in. Along with higher sales, this demographic shift has produced a readership that is both larger and more varied. Younger viewers have shown a great deal of interest in films like Joseph Annamkutty Jose’s ‘Daivathinte Charanmar’, Nimna Vijay’s ‘Ettavum Priyappetta Ennodu’, and Akhil P Dharmarajan’s ‘Ram c/o Anandhi’. These pieces establish a close bond with their readers by delving into topics that are important to today’s youth, such as emotional journeys, social challenges, and personal development.

The publishing sector has seen a radical transformation thanks to technological developments in printing, especially print-on-demand technologies. Publishers may now more effectively address the urgent demand from readers by lowering expenses and financial risks thanks to this innovation. This has been essential in allowing for the increase in book sales. Diverse genres are gaining popularity once more. A rising interest in crime thrillers and autobiographies has counterbalanced the fall in the market

for pornographic books. Reprints of classic works are being released, and new writers are finding willing readers for their stories. All these signs point to a bright future for Malayalam writing. The convergence of contemporary marketing tactics, technology developments, and the interest of a lively new readership suggests a robust and long-lasting literary renaissance. Using a qualitative methodology, this study looks at reader demographics, sales data, social media trends, and case studies of prominent Malayalam writers. Authors and publishers were interviewed by various media, as part of the data collection process these interviews were analysed, and sales records and social media analytics were also analysed.

Social media has become an important platform for promoting new Malayalam fiction. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube play a major role in popularizing newly published novels. Readers frequently share reels, short videos, and reviews about books. These promotional activities create curiosity among viewers and encourage many people to buy and read the novels.

However, this trend also raises certain concerns. In many cases, social media popularity does not necessarily reflect the literary quality of a work. Some readers purchase books mainly to display their reading habits on social media rather than to engage deeply with the text. As a result, the culture of reading sometimes becomes more performative than intellectual.

This situation has also influenced the nature of contemporary Malayalam fiction. Some recent novels gain popularity very quickly through online promotion, but they often lack deep thematic exploration. Instead of presenting complex social realities or psychological depth, many of these works rely mainly on a sequence of events or fast-moving narratives.

For instance, works like *Ram C/O Anandhi* by Akhil P. Dharmajan have attracted a large number of young readers and fans. Social media discussions and reviews have played a significant role in increasing the visibility of such novels. While these works successfully engage new readers, critics often point out that they sometimes lack the deeper analytical or thematic richness found in earlier Malayalam classics.

In contrast, classical works such as *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai explore social life and cultural realities in a more profound manner. *Chemmeen* presents the life, beliefs, and struggles of the fishing community in Kerala, offering a detailed portrayal of their traditions, emotions, and social structure. Such novels combine narrative strength with strong thematic depth.

In a moment aching with the despair of their lives, Thakazhy makes a powerful statement about the professions people pursue and the idealistic values they hold dear to them. Palani tells Karuthamma that a fisherman is doomed from the start anyway.

“He makes his money by cheating and catching innocent beings moving freely in the sea. To look upon those millions dying with their eyes open is nothing to those who see that sight every day. But you cannot save money made at the cost of innocent lives. It is not possible. Otherwise, why should fishermen starve?” (Pillai 127)

In contemporary literary culture, however, some newly published works quickly gain viral popularity through social media and are sometimes prematurely compared with established classics. In certain cases, they are even celebrated as “modern classics” immediately after publication. This reflects a changing reading culture shaped by digital media and online discussions. Therefore, while social media has helped bring new readers to Malayalam literature, it has also influenced how literary value is perceived and discussed in contemporary society.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) that cultural activities such as reading can function as a form of cultural capital. People sometimes display cultural practices like reading books in order to gain social recognition or prestige. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital explains how cultural practices such as reading can become symbols of social status. In the age of social media, displaying books or reading habits online can function as a way of constructing an intellectual identity rather than engaging deeply with literary texts. Jean Baudrillard argues in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) that modern media culture often replaces reality with representations or images. In digital culture, the appearance of something can become more important than the substance itself. Henry Jenkins discusses the concept of participatory culture in his book *Convergence Culture* (2006). He explains that audiences are no longer passive consumers; they actively participate in promoting, reviewing, and circulating cultural products through digital platforms. This idea helps explain why novels become popular through reader engagement on social media.

In brief, the growing influence of social media on reading culture can be understood through several theoretical perspectives. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital explains how reading can function as a marker of intellectual identity and social distinction. At the same time, Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation suggests that media representations can sometimes replace genuine literary engagement. Furthermore, Henry Jenkins’ idea of participatory culture highlights the active role of readers in

promoting books through digital platforms. Together, these perspectives help explain how contemporary Malayalam novels often gain rapid popularity through social media circulation.

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen* (1956) became a cult classic due to its intense portrayal of forbidden love, the poignant, mythological "Kadalamma" (Mother Sea) legend regarding fishermen's, and a vivid, realistic depiction of coastal Kerala life. It balanced themes of caste, patriarchy, and societal norms with a tragic, lyrical romance that captivated readers and viewers alike.

Chemmeen was published in the 50s, at a time when India was finding its footing upon gaining independence. I was reading the book over sixty years after its first publication. The novel's prescience astonished me. This novel was published long before any debate on climate change and nature conservation entered the international stage. The first World Climate Conference was held on February 1979 in Switzerland thousands of miles away from a tiny state in western India where *Chemmeen* was born. *Chemmeen*'s story is no doubt as timeless as all of the lessons it holds.

The comparison between *Chemmeen* and *Ram C/O Anandi* illustrates the contrast between enduring literary value and contemporary popularity. Classical novels continue to be studied in academic institutions because of their thematic depth, cultural representation, and narrative complexity. Contemporary works may achieve rapid success through media visibility and reader enthusiasm, yet their long-term literary significance remains a subject of critical debate. This chapter examined the literary qualities of the selected novels through textual analysis and Reader-Response Theory. The analysis demonstrates that while contemporary Malayalam fiction enjoys widespread popularity, classical works continue to hold strong literary value due to their authenticity, narrative depth, and cultural relevance. The comparison highlights the changing nature of Malayalam fiction and raises important questions about how literary quality is defined in the present literary landscape.

From the perspective of Reader-Response Theory, the literary value of a text is shaped not only by the author's intention but also by the way readers interpret and experience the work. The lasting popularity of *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai demonstrates how a literary text continues to generate meaningful responses from readers across generations. The novel's rich cultural background, emotional depth, and strong narrative structure allow readers to engage deeply with its themes of love, morality, and social belief. Because of this enduring engagement, *Chemmeen* has remained significant in academic discussions and continues to be included in literary studies and research.

In contrast, the reception of *Ram C/O Anandi* by Akhil P. Dharmajan reflects the changing nature of contemporary reading culture. The novel has attracted a large readership and gained popularity through social media discussions and modern promotional platforms. However, from a Reader-Response perspective, its reception appears more closely connected to immediate reader enthusiasm and popular appeal rather than sustained critical engagement. This comparison suggests that while both novels generate reader responses, the depth and longevity of those responses differ significantly, highlighting the distinction between enduring literary value and temporary popularity in contemporary Malayalam fiction.

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