

Yoonus Kozhisseri

IIT Bombay

Mumbai, India

The Vernacular Dissemination of the Fantastic in the Persianate Cosmopolis: The Case of *Badr al-Munir*

The advent of printing technology in Arabi-Malayalam and the subsequent changes opened the literary production to a new phase of genres of imaginations. As Dilip M. Menon says in his discussion of lower caste lives in Malayalam novels “(t)he late nineteenth century in India saw the happy coincidence of the first stirrings of nationalist sentiment as well as the emergence of a new artefact of the imagination—the novel.”(41)¹⁰ But in the context of Arabi-Malayalam, a parallel literary engagement within the space and time of Malayalam,¹¹ the artefact of the imagination was materialised and inaugurated through a fantasy work, that too in the poetry. Moyinkutty Vaidyar’s (1852-1892) famous piece of poetry popularly known as *Badr al-Munir Husn al-Jamal* marked the beginning of this moment of imagination in Arabi-Malayalam, a language that has been formerly housing exclusively genres of devotional substance. It is with *Badr al-Munir* that Arabi-Malayalam opened itself to the non-religious imaginary.

The genres of imagination in Malayalam have been analysed only with its similitudes with the development of novel genre in Europe, and never been comprehended as part of a world that constitutes the larger territory of ‘Persinate cosmopolis’¹² as I call it. In this paper I intend to examine the genre of fantasy and its trajectories across a wide region of Persianate Cosmopolis with active orbits through Indian Ocean littoral.

The paper selects the text of Vaidyar’s *Badr al-Munir* (1872) and takes a historical detour into its rhizomatic trajectories across borders of regions, languages, cultures, times and genres. Vaidyar’s adaptation traces back to its Urdu original *Sihir al-Bayan* (1785) by Mir Ghulam Hasan Dehlavi in Delhi. I particularly examine these two texts taking into account its history of publication and its popularity through years till date which would give a diachronic view of the fantastic genre in the region. With that backdrop, I look at a Malayalam novel titled *Bhadramuni: Oru Puthiya Kadha* published in Kerala in 1905.¹³ This novel takes the liberty of an independent retelling of the story, but placing it in a different context of region and religion in order to appropriate the fantastic for the targeted audience. Outside the textual form, the story takes another generic form in a play. I could find out an undated advertisement¹⁴ of a play/drama named *Benajir Badr-e-Munira* performed in Calicut by a troupe lead by a certain Sayyid Qadir Ussan. The ad summaries the plot in which it is clear that it is inspired from the Urdu original rather than Vaidyar’s text in Arabi-Malayalam. Along with these mentioned texts, I take into account different adaptations and translations of the work in genres such as gramophone records, play

¹⁰ Menon, Dilip M. “No, Not the Nation: Lower Caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century.” *Early Novels in India*, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, pp. 41–72.

¹¹ Arabi-Malayalam is a linguistic form with phonemes of Malayalam but with script of Arabic which is popular among the Mappila community in Malabar region of Kerala, India.

¹² The term ‘Persinate’ is a neologism ascribed to Marshall Hodgson. In his work *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Volume 2) he introduces it thus: The rise of Persian had more than purely literary consequences: it served to carry a new overall cultural orientation within Islamdom.[...] Most of the more local languages of high culture that later emerged among Muslims [...] depended upon Persian wholly or in part for their prime literary inspiration. We may call all these cultural traditions, carried in Persian or reflecting Persian inspiration, ‘Persinate’ by extension. (293)

¹³ It is a rare copy of the novel which I could archive after a long search.

¹⁴ It could be surmised that its time could be between 1920-1940.

performances, films, etc. that delineate the circuitousness of the fantastic across genres, regions and times. The selected texts would enable a deep examination of the vernacular dissemination of the fantastic with its multi-noded circuitous pattern.