

The Mirror of Colonial Psychology: A Critical Analysis of Indulekha

Manjusha S M*

¹Assistant Professor, Department of History, Government College Tripunithra, Ernakulam, Kerala, mail: smmanjusha78@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multifaceted interplay between indigenous identity and colonial psychology in O. Chandu Menon's 1889 landmark novel, *Indulekha*. As the first major work of fiction in Malayalam, the novel functions as a vital socio-historical record, reflecting the deep shifts in Malabar's social structure under British admin. By focusing on the protagonists, Madhavan and Indulekha, this study explores the transition from traditional feudalism to a Western-influenced modernity. Furthermore, it investigates the changing status of women within the Nair community and explores how the emerging local elite began to align themselves ideologically with the structures of colonial rule.

Keywords:Malayalam Literature, Colonial Modernity, Indulekha (O. Chandu Menon) Nair Community, Social Reform Feudalism vs. Westernization

1. Introduction:

Published in 1889, O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* is far more than a work of fiction; it is a seminal social critique. The novel captures a definitive 19th-century turning point where the influx of Western education began to fracture the long-standing cultural foundations of Malabar. While centered on the Nair community, the story serves as a broader autopsy of a fading feudal order and the eventual decline of the Sambandham marriage system. The core tension of the novel lies in the crumbling authority of the Karanavar. Under the traditional matrilineal framework, the Karanavar held unquestioned dominion over the family unit. However, Menon illustrates a burgeoning generational revolt, as a new class of Western-educated youth began to challenge this rigid hegemony. This ideological schism is perfectly encapsulated in the opening friction between Madhavan and his uncle, Panchu Menon. Their argument over the English education of young Chinnan is not merely a domestic spat; it is a symbolic collision between ancestral custom and the progressive demands of a modernizing society. [1][2]

2. Literature Review: Mapping the Scholarship on Indulekha

The scholarly discourse on *Indulekha* has evolved through several distinct phases, primarily focusing on its role in social reform and its relationship with colonial modernity.

2.1 The Reformist and Realist Paradigm

Early scholarship, most notably by Meenakshi Mukherjee (2005), situates *Indulekha* within the "third strand" of Indian colonial fiction—a genre defined by its pledge to capturing contemporary society through an idealist lens. In this milieu, journalism is not merely a narrative tool but a deliberate vehicle for social reform, where the novel serves as a laboratory for "fashioning the modern self. Building on this, Sruthi Vinayan (2021) observes that the novel provides an unflinching look at the internal ruptures within the Taravadu (the matrilineal joint family). These domestic fractures were driven by a new class of educated youth whose intellectual autonomy directly clashed with the rigid, authoritarian structures of the Karanavar. Consequently, the novel becomes a chronological record of the precise moment when traditional kinship began to buckle under the weight of individualistic modernity. [3][4]

2.2 Victorian Values and Gender Agency

Recent scholarship has increasingly pivoted toward the "Victorianization" of Kerala's social fabric, viewing *Indulekha* not just as a story of love, but as a project of moral realignment. Scholars such as J. Devika (2002) and G. Arunima (1997) have critically examined the spatiality and agency afford to women within the text. They

argue that while the titular protagonist possesses incontrovertible intellectual grit and a "modern" education, her agency is paradoxically restrictive. Indulekha may be a "new woman," but her aspirations remain tethered to the domestic sphere. Ultimately, her upheaval is not against patriarchy itself, but a quest for a sophisticated, monogamous version of it—one where her agency is limited to the choice of a partner within a newly modernized, patriarchal framework.[5]

2.3 Post-Colonial and Canon Critiques

Scholarship in the *Rupkatha Journal* (2021) has critiqued the "Indulekha Moment," symptomatic of that its canonical status has eclipsed other significant 19th-century works (like *Saraswativilayam* or *Sukumari*). This "linear history" often favors the "Kerala Renaissance" narrative, potentially ignoring the subaltern voices and colonial atrocities that the elite-focused *Indulekha* omits.

3. Indulekha: The New Woman and Educational Emancipation

The titular character, Indulekha, represents the "new woman" emerging from the intersection of tradition and modernity. At eighteen, she is portrayed as academically stable and exceptionally well-educated.

- **Educational Synthesis:** Unlike her predecessors, Indulekha's education extends beyond traditional domesticity to include English and fine arts, such as the piano.
- **Agency and Reform:** She stands as a assign of progressive women who support female education and actively oppose the restrictive *Sambandham* system.
- **Emotional Resilience:** Her character is defined by a "stable mental balance," demonstrated when she suppresses her feelings for Madhavan to ensure heleftovers focused on his academic pursuits.

4. Madhavan and the Colonial Psychology

While Indulekha embodies the social and domestic aspirations of a changing society, it is the protagonist, Madhavan, who serves as the primary vessel for a distinct "colonial psychology." As a Bachelor of Laws (BL) graduate from Madras University, Madhavan is more than just a character; he is a social archetype—the exponent of a burgeoning Western-inflected intellectualism. His character exemplifies the ideological bridge between the indigenous elite and the British Raj. Madhavan's education does not merely provide him with a degree; it reconfigures his entire worldview, making him a proponent of European rationalism and individualism. This psychological shift creates a tension between his cultural roots and his colonial training. In Madhavan, we see the "modern man" who views his own tradition through the lens of Western enlightenment, often pronouncement the feudal structures of Malabar—such as the arbitrary power of the *Karanavar*—to be intellectually and morally obsolete.[6]

4.1 Adoption of Western Lifestyle

Madhavan's lifestyle is a deliberate departure from indigenous norms. His habits reflect an aspiration toward the British way of living:

- **Physical Culture:** He maintains his physique through fitness exercises and participates in western sports like lawn tennis and cricket.
- **Leisure and Attire:** His interests include hunt with modern firearms (rifles and revolvers) and playing western instruments like the piano. When traveling or hunting, he adopts western attire, including pants, shirts, and boots.
- **Dietary Shifts:** The text notes his consumption of meat and wine, signaling a break from traditional dietary restrictions.

4.2 Religious and Philosophical Skepticism

Madhavan's immersion in Western education serves as the catalyst for a radical re-evaluation of traditional Hindu orthodoxy. His worldview is characterized by a shift from ritualistic observance to a more abstract, rationalistic monotheism [9]. He openly challenge the necessity of idol worship and the sanctity of temple visits, advocating instead for a philosophical devotion to an "all-pervading God"—a stance that reflects the influence of both European Enlightenment and contemporary Indian reform whereabouts like the Brahmo Samaj. This skepticism extends to the physical markers of piety; Madhavan dismisses the traditional practice of smearing *Bhasma* (holy ash) or *Chandana* (sandalwood) as superficial affectations rather than true indicators of spirituality [10]. Furthermore, he maintains a pragmatic distance from the metaphysical claims of Advaita philosophers. He is particularly critical of their assertions regarding the absolute mastery over sensual pleasures, viewing such abstinent ideals through a lens of modern psychological realism rather than unquestioning spiritual faith. In Madhavan, we see the materialization of the "secularized" Hindu, for whom religion must pass the test of logic and individual conscience.[7][8]

4.3 Political Ideology: The British Stakeholder

Madhavan acts as a spokesperson for British rule, viewing it as the essential catalyst for Indian progress. His political stance mirrors that of the "moderate" who dominated the early Indian National Congress (INC).

Aspect	Madhavan's Perspective
1857 Revolt	Viewed as a "blunder" and a conspiracy by "treacherous Indians"
British Rule	Seen as "trustworthy" and necessary for political reform
INC Strategy	Believed the Congress should cooperate with the British to gain the virtues of their administration
Lord Dufferin	Highly admired, despite contemporary criticisms from nationalists like Lala Lajpat Rai

This alignment is further lined by his geography; Madhavan's life revolves around the British strongholds of Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. His eventual settlement in Madras with Indulekha symbolizes a permanent departure from the "old order" to the "new order" established by the British [11]

5. Authorial Perspective and Class Bias

The colonial psychology found in the novel may be an extension of the author, O. Chandu Menon, himself. As a associate of the affluent Nair community and a servant of the British administration (honored with the title *Rao Bahadur*), Menon's upbringing was steeped in western culture. [12]

- **Elite Perspective:** The novel focuses almost exclusively on the elite class, failing to mention a single community lower than the Nair caste
- **Absence of Colonial Atrocity:** Because the typescript are stakeholders in the colonial system, the atrocities of British rule are absent from the narrative
- **Suppression of Nationalism:** The novel suggests a deliberate attempt—or a lack of exposure—regarding the budding nationalist movement in Malabar at the time.

6. Research Gap: The Unexplored Depths of "Colonial Psychology"

Despite the extensive literature on *Indulekha's* reformist agenda and Victorian influences, a significant Research Gapremainder in the systematic psychological mapping of the "Colonial Subject" as a specific psychological archetype.

- **Internalization of the Colonizer's Gaze:** While existing research identifies Madhavan's *imitation* of British habits, there is a lack of deep psychological analysis regarding his *internalization* of the colonizer's gaze. Most studies treat his westernization as a socio-political choice rather than a profound psychological swing that alters his perception of his own indigenous heritage as "primitive" or "beastly."
- **The "Psychology of Cooperation":** Existing literature often treats the political support for the British (mentioned in Chapter 18) as a mere historical manifestation. There is a gap in understanding this as a *psychological defense mechanism* used by the emerging elite to reconcile their indigenous identity with their colonial dependence.
- **Absence of Subalternity as a Psychological Void:** While critics mention the omission of lower castes, there has been little research on how this "erasure" functions psychologically within the text to create a sanitized, colonial-approved version of indigenous culture.

This study addresses these gaps by moving beyond the socio-historical narrative to analyze how *Indulekha* serves as a "psychological mirror" that reflects not just a changing society, but a colonized mind seeking validation through the adoption of the master's culture, language, and logic.

7. Conclusion

In the final analysis, *Indulekha* serves as a profound psychological map of the 19th-century indigenous elite. While the novel acts as a bold manifesto for social emancipation—specifically through its advocacy for the education of women—it simultaneously illuminates the complex "colonial dependency" that defined the era. For Menon and his contemporaries, progress was not an isolated cultural evolution but was viewed as synonymous with Westernization. The narrative suggests that political salvation and social refinement were only attainable through the lens of British cooperation, reflecting a worldview where the colonizer's logic provided the primary framework for local liberation. Central to this transformation is the character of Madhavan, who embodies the radical re-evaluation of Hindu orthodoxy. His shift from ritualistic observance to a rationalistic, abstract monotheism marks the birth of the "secularized" Hindu. By dismissing traditional

markers of piety, such as *Bhasma* and *Chandana*, as superficial affectations, Madhavan elevates individual conscience and logic over ancestral tradition.

Feature	Traditional Orthodoxy (Feudal Era)	Modern Rationalism (The "Madhavan" Model)
Spiritual Focus	Ritualistic observance and temple-centric worship.	Abstract, rationalistic monotheism.
Authority	Caste-based hierarchies and priestly dictates.	Individual logic and private conscience.
Physical Piety	External markers (<i>Bhasma</i> , <i>Chandana</i>).	Dismissed as "superficial affectations."
Metaphysics	Ascetic mastery and Advaita philosophy.	Modern psychological realism and pragmatism.
Education	Sanskrit scholarship and lineage traditions.	Western education as a catalyst for reform.
Social Structure	Matrilineal, feudal landownership.	Administrative class within the British Raj.
Political Goal	Preservation of regional feudal power.	Progress through British cooperation and law.

This skepticism, influenced by both the European Enlightenment and Indian reform movements like the Brahma Samaj, effectively moves the seat of spiritual authority from the temple and the priest to the educated mind of the modern citizen. Ultimately, O. Chandu Menon captures a pivotal historical metamorphosis: the transition of the Nair community from a class of feudal landowners to the sophisticated administrative backbone of the British Raj. This shift required a pragmatic distancing from metaphysical claims, replacing ascetic ideals with a modern psychological realism. As a Rao Bahadur himself, Menon's own professional trajectory informs this "colonial psychology," where the pursuit of English education and bureaucratic merit became the new currency of power. *Indulekha* stands as a testament to this transition, documenting the moment when the indigenous elite traded their traditional social capital for a seat within the intellectual machinery of a global empire.[13][14][15]

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