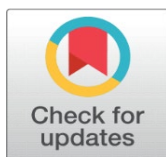


IDEOLOGICAL DECLINE AND HUMAN STRUGGLE IN KAKKANADAN'S USHNAMEGHALA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Kakkanadan's Ushnameghala as a literary portrayal of revolutionary consciousness and class struggle in post-independence Kerala. Through the life of the protagonist Shivan, the novel reveals the complex realities faced by revolutionaries, balancing intense political commitment with personal and familial conflicts. The narrative highlights the fervour of armed struggle as a catalyst for social change, while also chronicling the disillusionment that arises from the decline of the communist movement and its ideological betrayals. Through illustrating the conflicts between traditional and modern communist ideologies and the conversion of revolutionary fervour into political power struggles, Ushnameghala provides a critical analysis of the deterioration of revolutionary principles and the difficulties in maintaining group goals for social justice.

Keywords: Communist, Kakkanadan, Naxalite, Revolutionary, Youth

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Kerala reveals a landscape where the majority of the labouring population existed without organized class consciousness, often resembling an enslaved community. Despite this, struggles to uplift and integrate these marginalized groups into mainstream society have been led by the Communist Party. These movements, while sometimes perceived publicly as aggressive, were fuelled by a determined group of young revolutionaries committed to protecting workers' rights through covert resistance. Kakkanadan's Ushnameghala narrates the preparation and challenges faced by such revolutionaries, focusing on the life of Shivan and his involvement in a revolutionary organization. The novel provides a critical lens on the social structures established post-1947 independence, which failed to alter the circumstances of those who had lived in darkness for centuries. This failure ignited a response from individuals like Shivan, who sought to create a more equitable society, despite the many obstacles encountered along their path.

Ushnameghala goes beyond depicting revolutionaries as mere political actors by delving into their human emotions, thoughts, and disillusionments. The novel portrays revolutionaries as multifaceted individuals, often torn between their commitment to social justice and the ties of family and personal relationships. The family, depicted as a concrete fortress, frequently impedes the revolutionary's journey toward justice, underscoring the tension between private obligations and public duty. Through the character of Shivan, Kakkanadan illustrates the mental conflicts arising from these dual

responsibilities, highlighting the sacrifices and isolation endured by those who choose the path of revolution. This humanization invites readers to understand the profound personal costs of political commitment.

Moreover, Ushnameghala critically examines the ideological evolution of the communist movement in Kerala. Shivan's unwavering belief in armed struggle as the sole means to establish socialism reflects the intense revolutionary zeal of the era. Yet, as time progresses, the novel documents the movement's decline, marked by parliamentary illusions, distorted Marxist philosophies and a shift away from radical goals. The ideological rift between the old and new communists, embodied by the conflict between Shivan and his younger brother Keshavankutty, encapsulates the broader generational and strategic divides within the movement. Through this narrative, Kakkanadan offers a poignant reflection on the erosion of revolutionary values and the complexities faced by those striving to maintain ideological purity amidst changing political landscapes.

2. DEPICTING THE REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIENCE

At the heart of Ushnameghala lies the life of Shivan, a revolutionary whose journey encapsulates the covert struggle to protect workers' rights and challenge entrenched social inequalities. The story presents a vivid portrayal of the underground existence led by revolutionaries who operate without public recognition, often relying on the solidarity and support of the common labourers. The novel's depiction of Mary, Shivan's wife, lovingly providing food to him while he is in hiding, evokes a powerful image of care and mutual reliance within the revolutionary community. This scene not only humanizes the revolutionaries but also underscores the shared aspiration for securing rights from oppressive authorities. Mary's stirring question, "If you fall, who is left for us?" reveals the fragile hope that sustains these activists in their perilous struggle (Kakkanadan, 1969).

Kakkanadan challenges common perceptions of revolutionaries by exposing their inner thoughts, emotions and vulnerabilities. Far from being idealised or one-dimensional figures, the revolutionaries are shown grappling with the demands of family, personal attachments and the risks inherent in their political commitments. The narrative acknowledges that familial bonds often create tension and act as obstacles on the path to revolutionary justice. For Shivan and others, the revolutionary life is likened to the precarious act of a circus performer, with constant danger and uncertainty threatening their existence. This portrayal emphasizes the sacrifices demanded by the revolutionary cause and the intricate balance between personal and political responsibilities.

The novel also captures the psychological turmoil experienced by Shivan, especially as he confronts the possibility of surrendering family responsibilities after his father's death. This internal conflict is marked by a restless uncertainty that blurs the lines between joy, fear, and indecision. Shivan's eventual isolation in Delhi, stripped of his identity and confronted with an alienating urban life, contrasts sharply with his past revolutionary fervour. Despite the harshness of his new existence, Shivan finds solace in the memory of past sacrifices and the enduring ideal of living for a noble cause. His yearning to rejoin the movement and dissolve into collective struggle underscores the persistent allure and emotional grip of revolutionary ideology.

3. IDEOLOGY AND REVOLUTIONARY ZEAL

Shivan's unwavering political ideology centres on the belief that armed struggle is the sole effective path to establishing socialism. He views revolution as a potent force—a social transformation so swift and all-encompassing that it eradicates existing obstacles. This revolutionary fervour is likened to a drug, an intoxicating force that grips the nerves and mind of its adherents with an addictive intensity. Much like religion is described as the "opium of the people," revolutionary extremism captivates its followers with a mesmerising allure, sustaining their commitment to societal good despite the personal costs involved (Rockmore, 2002). Historical evidence suggests that those who fail to fulfil their revolutionary aspirations often descend into despair, underscoring the deep psychological impact of this ideology.

The novel situates this intense ideological conviction within the broader context of Kerala's socio-political transformations. With the decline of the feudal system and the implementation of land reforms, the Communist movement initially sought to uplift the marginalised sections of society (Berwal, 2018). However, over time, the movement experienced a retreat from its radical roots. Marxist and Engels' philosophies were reinterpreted or distorted to suit contemporary realities, and the labour movement increasingly succumbed to parliamentary illusions. Shivan's return to his hometown exposes him to a ruling class that no longer bears the marks of hardship he once recognized.

This transformation deepens his sorrow and sense of betrayal as the movement he dedicated his life to shifts away from its original ideals (The Hindu, 2011).

This disillusionment manifests in Shivan's severe criticism of the evolving communist landscape and his personal restrictions, such as forbidding his younger brother Keshavankutty from engaging in political activism. The ideological clash between Shivan and Keshavankutty epitomises the tension between experience and youthful zeal, old and new communist thought. While Keshavankutty embraces the necessity of bloodshed and rejects parliamentary democracy, Shivan views such extremism as futile and a departure from effective revolutionary practice. Through this conflict, Kakkanadan articulates the fragmentation and decline within Kerala's communist movement, reflecting the broader challenges faced by revolutionary ideologies adapting to shifting political realities (The Hindu, 2011; The New Indian Express, 2011).

4. DECLINE AND DISILLUSIONMENT OF THE MOVEMENT

At the heart of *Ushnameghala* lies a poignant portrayal of a revolutionary movement in decline. Kakkanadan illustrates the fragmentation of organizations that once championed radical change, highlighting their retreat into parliamentary politics and abandonment of revolutionary ideals. Shivan's sense of betrayal is palpable as he accuses these parties of degenerating into bourgeois democratic entities, forsaking their working-class base for self-preservation. This narrative mirrors historical developments, such as the trajectory of the Naxalite movement and its founder Charu Majumdar, who, despite initially rejecting parliamentary ambitions, ultimately engaged with electoral politics without success (Hindustan Times, 2005).

The novel critically examines the parliamentary delusions that plagued various factions within leftist movements. This is reflective of the broader challenges faced by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] in Kerala, where the party's engagement in parliamentary politics has been criticized for leading to stagnation and a dilution of its revolutionary ethos (Frontline, 2014).

The ideological conflict between Shivan and Keshavankutty encapsulates the broader tensions between old and new communist ideologies. Keshavankutty, representing the restless youth, advocates for revolutionary violence and dismisses electoral politics as insufficient for achieving socialism. In contrast, Shivan's scepticism towards bloodshed reflects a weariness born of years of struggle and disillusionment. This generational and ideological rift underscores the shifting dynamics within Kerala's political landscape, where the rise of identity politics and the challenges of sustaining revolutionary momentum have been noted as significant factors contributing to the decline of leftist movements (Mathrubhumi, 2025).

Ushnameghala addresses the human cost of these ideological battles, depicting brothers turned enemies and comrades estranged by political convictions. The novel's portrayal of these personal conflicts within revolutionary families illustrates the complex interplay between political ideology and intimate relationships. Through this lens, Kakkanadan offers a poignant critique of the erosion of revolutionary ideals, emphasizing the difficulty of preserving collective aspirations amidst internal divisions and external pressures.

Kakkanadan captures the intoxicating nature of revolution, particularly among the youth, for whom revolutionary fervour often takes on the character of a drug. However, as youthful zeal fades, this intoxication frequently transforms into a desire for power, signalling a shift from idealism to pragmatism or even opportunism. This transformation is starkly depicted in the conflict between Keshavankutty and Shivan, where the former labels the latter a renegade, symbolizing the decline of the movement Keshavankutty represents. The novel idealizes the Naxalite movement's early days in Kerala but does not shy away from illustrating the erosion of values and the loss of revolutionary spirit that followed.

The erosion of revolutionary ideals is further exemplified by the CPI(M)'s shift towards parliamentary politics, leading to a dilution of its foundational principles. The party's engagement in electoral politics has been criticised for resulting in stagnation and a departure from its revolutionary ethos (Frontline, 2014). This shift has led to internal conflicts and a loss of direction, mirroring the disillusionment experienced by characters in *Ushnameghala*.

The rise of identity politics in Kerala has posed significant challenges to the communist movement. The CPI(M) has acknowledged that identity-based politics, which contributed to its decline in West Bengal and Tripura, is now posing a similar challenge in Kerala (Mathrubhumi, 2025). This shift has led to internal conflicts and a loss of direction, mirroring the disillusionment experienced by characters in *Ushnameghala*.

Kerala's rapid urbanisation and the expansion of a professional, service-sector-oriented middle class have transformed the state's socio-political landscape. This segment prioritizes economic mobility and individual aspirations over traditional class-based solidarity, leading to a shift in ideological consciousness. The communist movement, bound by its historical ideological framework, has struggled to adapt to this evolving class structure, resulting in a loss of mass appeal in urban areas (Quantum Dialectics, 2025).

The historical context of revolutionary movements in Kerala, such as the Naxalite movement, provides a backdrop for the themes explored in Ushnameghala. The Naxalite movement, inspired by Charu Majumdar's "Historic Eight Documents," advocated for a Maoist protracted people's war to overthrow the Indian state, denouncing the Indian State as a bourgeois institution and rejecting parliamentary politics (Seth, 2006). This historical trajectory mirrors the disillusionment and ideological conflicts depicted in the novel.

5. CONCLUSION

Kakkanadan's Ushnameghala offers a profound and multifaceted exploration of revolutionary life and ideology in post-independence Kerala. Through the character of Shivan and his interactions with family, comrades, and adversaries, the novel humanizes the revolutionary experience, portraying its emotional depth, personal sacrifices, and ideological conflicts. It reveals how revolutionaries are not merely political actors but complex individuals grappling with the tensions between public duty and private ties, youthful idealism and pragmatic disillusionment.

The novel critically reflects on the trajectory of the communist movement in Kerala—from its radical, armed struggle origins to its gradual decline and ideological fragmentation. Kakkanadan captures the erosion of revolutionary values, the seductive pull of parliamentary politics, and the resultant sense of betrayal felt by committed activists. The generational and ideological conflicts between old and new communists, embodied in the relationship between Shivan and Keshavankutty, symbolize broader tensions within political movements navigating changing social realities.

Ultimately, Ushnameghala stands as both a tribute to the enduring spirit of revolutionary struggle and a cautionary tale about the complexities and pitfalls inherent in political movements. It challenges readers to recognize the human cost of ideological commitment and the difficulties in sustaining collective aspirations for social justice amidst evolving political landscapes. Through its nuanced portrayal, the novel invites ongoing reflection on the meaning, challenges, and future of revolutionary activism.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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