

Research Article

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Romancing the Past: Cultural Nostalgia in Primary School Textbooks

Abstract

This article examines the ideological dimensions of early literary instruction through a critical reading of select Malayalam-language primary school textbooks in Kerala. Focusing on textbooks published by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) as part of the 2013 curriculum revision, the study explores how cultural nostalgia and idealised representations of nature are constructed and circulated within these materials. It argues that such representations often produce a homogenised and depoliticised vision of social and ecological life, one that remains disconnected from the lived experiences of children. Drawing on insights from critical pedagogy, the article situates early textual encounters as formative sites where interpretive habits and ideological orientations are shaped. While not a comprehensive empirical study, the analysis highlights the pedagogical implications of uncritical literary engagement and underscores the need to incorporate critical textual analysis into language instruction. By doing so, it advocates for a more reflexive and context-sensitive approach to teaching literature at the primary level.

Keywords: Cultural nostalgia, critical pedagogy, critical textual analysis, primary school textbooks, Kerala

Introduction

Over the past couple of years, I had the opportunity to browse through the primary school textbooks used in Kerala's state curriculum while my child was in the early grades. I couldn't help but notice how little the children engaged with them, as there was very little they could relate to. The content often felt disconnected from the everyday realities of a child in contemporary times. Pages were filled with idyllic scenes of green pastures, beautiful riverbanks, and children at play in untouched natural settings, images that feel more like echoes from a distant past than reflections of the present. At some point, it struck me that these were actually the nostalgic musings of a generation already in retirement. Where the texts were not

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rooted in romanticised rural life, they turned to talking animals and cartoon-like tales, leaving little room for the complexity of a child's real world today.

For generations, textbooks have reflected what adults believe children should learn. Relying more on an activity-based curriculum to balance and take away the stress on textbooks is almost something most government-run schools in India cannot afford given the class sizes that often range from thirty to fifty students. As Disha Nawani observes, in India's public education system, textbooks occupy a central position in classroom practice, shaping how both teachers and students engage with the material. Questions of how textbooks are used, and for what purposes, are closely tied to perceptions of their overall "quality" or effectiveness (Nawani, 2010, p. 158). While textbooks are technically one among multiple educational resources, they remain the primary tool on which classrooms rely, and this heavy dependence influences the standards by which their value is evaluated. This brings us back to the textbooks as a central component of the primary education in government-run schools. Educational reforms have often spoken of centring the child's perspective, yet truly understanding what captures a child's interest remains elusive, particularly in contemporary times, as generational shifts widen the gap between adult assumptions and children's realities. As Henry A. Giroux writes:

Children have fewer rights than almost any other group and fewer institutions protecting these rights. Consequently, their voices and needs are almost completely absent from the debates, policies, and legislative practices that are constructed in terms of their needs. (Giroux, 2008, p. 127)

Today's young learners arrive at kindergarten and primary school with experiences already deeply shaped by digital media. For many children, their earliest forms of instruction, companionship, and emotional engagement are mediated through screens. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, making screens an almost inseparable part of early learning. Only families with certain socio-economic privilege can now actively limit their children's exposure to screens; for most working households, screens function as an accessible form of childcare and a convenient means of keeping children engaged. While I do not have empirical data to substantiate this, my observations during parent-teacher association meetings at a small state-run lower-primary school in Kerala (approximately 100 students across Grades 1-4) suggest that screen use cuts across income groups. Many parents, including those from lower-income backgrounds, reported that their children spend considerable time on mobile phones.

A notable number also perceived their children's digital ease as a sign of intelligence, often remarking that their children were more comfortable with screens than they themselves were. In this context, asking what makes a textbook interesting will take us nowhere. Rather, we should ask what meaningful learning looks like for young children growing up in a digitally saturated world.

My attempt here is to address the disconnect between textbooks and young children. In my observations, Malayalam textbooks for primary classes are filled with instances of cultural nostalgia and portrayals of idyllic natural settings that bear little connection to the lived experiences of the children. I have chosen to focus on Malayalam-language textbooks here because I am particularly interested in how literature is introduced and taught at the lower-primary level. I find that, more than English textbooks, Malayalam textbooks tend to incorporate cultural nostalgia, perhaps because Malayalam, being the mother tongue of the region, becomes a more complex site of memory and identity. Drawing on my experience as a teacher in a university literature department, I increasingly observe that even postgraduate students struggle to read literary texts beyond their literal or surface meanings. More importantly, they often remain unaware of how they are already interpellated¹ by the ideological structures embedded in these texts (Althusser, 1971/2002, p. 175). These early textual encounters establish frameworks that shape perceptions, values, and interpretive habits of students long before they encounter literature at the university level. In this sense, early literary instruction functions, as Freire cautions, either as a "practice of freedom" or as a mechanism of ideological domination (1970/2000, p. 81). My observations suggest that the latter tends to prevail, with students both shaped by and largely uncritical of the ideological forces that have influenced their literary and cultural imagination.

I intend to briefly examine how nostalgia and depictions of the natural world are constructed and circulated in Malayalam textbooks, often serving to romanticise the past and idealise nature. The textbooks under consideration are published by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Kerala, an autonomous body under the Department of General Education, Government of Kerala. I focus on primary school textbooks from the 2013

¹ The term interpellation, developed by Louis Althusser, refers to the process by which ideology positions them as subjects who recognise themselves within social roles and norms that appear natural or self-evident. See Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster.

curriculum revision, with a preliminary look at those from the 2023 revision. Although not a systematic or comprehensive study, my reflections are based on these selections of texts. Although my research background is in literary studies rather than education, this discussion aims to underscore the importance of subjecting textbook content to critical textual analysis and of introducing such analysis as a tool in language instruction as a means of cultivating critical thinking skills in students.

Revisions and Controversies in Kerala School Textbooks

Textbook revisions and educational reforms in Kerala have consistently faced challenges since the formation of the state and its first elected government. The process has often involved a struggle between the vision of secular, progressive education and the demand for culturally rooted, tradition-based learning. Beginning with the Kerala Education Act of 1958, public policy in education has largely been challenged by communal discomfort with secular education reforms (Textbooks, Religion and Politics, 2008, p. 5).² In debates over educational reform in Kerala, education itself often receives the least attention, with political parties and religious and/or caste-based groups deploying it as a tool for political gain. A controversy that ensued in 2008 over a Class VII social science textbook chapter titled *Mathamillatha Jeevan* (Jeevan with no Religion/Life without religion, SCERT, 2008, Std. VII, Part I, pp. 24–25) reflects the ongoing conflict between secular educational ideals and culturally rooted beliefs shaped by caste and religious groups in Kerala (Sreekumar, 2012). Introduced by the Left Democratic Front government, the chapter depicted a boy whose parents chose not to assign him a religion, thereby promoting secularism and individual choice. However, it faced strong opposition from the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and various religious groups, who interpreted it as an endorsement of atheism. The chapter was eventually withdrawn under pressure.

Critical textual analysis or textual analysis is a widely used method in literary research, yet it is often reduced in practice to mere summary or thematic description. It is also frequently

² The 1957 Education Bill, introduced by Prof. Joseph Mundasseri under Kerala's first Communist government, aimed to regulate private educational institutions by standardising teacher appointments, salaries, and curricula. A clause allowing potential state takeover of non-compliant schools drew strong opposition from religious and caste groups, notably the Syrian Christian Church and the Nair Service Society, as well as the Congress Party. Though the bill faced legal and political resistance, the Supreme Court upheld it, and many of its provisions were later implemented with amendments by subsequent governments.

associated with formalist or New Critical approaches in literature, which treat the text as an isolated object, detached from the social, historical, and cultural forces that shape it. In contrast, critical textual analysis understands the text as a locus of power relations, assumptions, and socialising processes, requiring close reading informed by relevant extra-textual materials and knowledge from their historical, social, and cultural contexts, which is key to critical textual analysis (Belsey, 2005/2013, p. 163). Reading against the grain is therefore central to both critical pedagogy as well as critical textual analysis. Drawing on the framework of critical pedagogy, particularly the Freirean emphasis on education as a site of ideological struggle and transformation, textual analysis becomes a tool that helps us to interrogate the pedagogical intentions and implications embedded in literary and story-like narratives, where ideological underpinnings often appear subtle and natural. This can also be viewed as a broader trend in which literature is increasingly treated as merely instrumental, used primarily for its role in facilitating language acquisition, while its ideological content is often taken for granted and left unexamined.³ Consequently, literary studies are frequently reduced to story summaries, fragmented metaphors, and disconnected images. In contrast, critical textual analysis encourages reading not only for content but also for silences, exclusions, and underlying ideological cues. These materials play a significant role in shaping subjectivities and reinforcing hegemonic narratives. When literary texts are treated merely as tools for language acquisition, the potential for cultivating critical thought among learners is significantly diminished. As a result, no matter how outwardly progressive or secular the efforts of curriculum committees may be, the content of the textbooks often ends up being an overdose of nostalgia and idealised nature to which today's children have little or no immediate connection. This trend is more pronounced in language textbooks especially in Malayalam where anything and everything becomes a subject of language teaching. The current generation of young children, shaped in significant ways by the rapid acceleration of technological change, often perceives any period prior to the 2000s as belonging to a distant, almost prehistoric past. I have been asked whether I had written on papyrus or seen dinosaurs, reflecting a broader tendency to imagine the past as a vague, undifferentiated, non-digital era. While subjects like mathematics or environmental studies are anchored in clearly defined disciplinary content, and English as a foreign language leaves little room for cultural nostalgia specific to the region, Malayalam textbooks at the primary level are notably filled with nostalgic representations.

³ See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), for a discussion of the ideological formation of literary studies in colonial India.

Nostalgia and Nature

Controversies surrounding school textbooks in Kerala reveal an ongoing tension between state-led secular pedagogical aims and the demands of powerful community and religious organisations. These conflicts underscore how curricular decisions frequently become sites of negotiation, where secular ideals are contested, resisted, or reshaped by groups seeking to protect their cultural or caste interests (Devika, 2008). Amidst ongoing tensions between secular ideals and religious or community sentiments in the region, themes like nostalgia and nature often appear to function as “safe” curricular choices capable of placating multiple interest groups. However, the perceived neutrality holds only when these themes are approached in uncritical, depoliticised, and purely aesthetic ways. Contemporary theoretical debates, in contrast, highlight the deeply political dimensions associated with both themes. The prevailing understanding of nostalgia most often reduces it to a sentimental longing for a period in the past, which is disconnected from the lived past without any historical or emotional complexity. Nadia Seremetakis argues that the Greek notion of *nostalghía* is far from trivial or romanticised. Its etymological roots *nóstos* (return or homecoming) and *álgos* (pain) reflect a deep, embodied longing marked by emotional and physical suffering (Seremetakis, 1994/2019, p. 4). It is a sensory and affective engagement with memory, especially shaped by experiences of exile, estrangement, and historical rupture. In Seremetakis’s reading, *nostalghía* retains the transformative weight of the past, which looms over the present as an unresolved presence, while also resisting the flattening of memory into mere sentiment or aesthetic consumption. The representation of nostalgia in primary school textbooks largely aligns with a popular understanding, presenting such narratives in purely aesthetic and uncritical ways. Similarly, nature, both in literary imagination and in popular discourse, is often heavily aestheticised. Landscapes, wilderness, and the countryside are commonly invoked representations, yet they are typically reduced to a scenic backdrop rather than being engaged within their ecological, social, or political complexity. In the textbooks, both themes are represented as mere spectacles, devoid of agency or critical engagement. These themes are further interconnected, as the portrayal of nature as pristine and untouched, often functioning as a vehicle for nostalgically recalling the past and idealising its perceived grandeur.

As Shalini Advani argues, contemporary constructions of childhood often project a nostalgic longing for a lost “golden age,” a sentimental ideal that overlooks the unsettling realities children face today, including rising rates of abuse, familial instability, and pervasive exposure to violence. In attempting to “protect” children through silence or sanitised representations,

such portrayals ultimately hinder their ability to engage meaningfully with the world they inhabit (Advani, 2009, p. 114). Echoing this concern, Krishna Kumar reminds us that children, like adults, possess a desire to make sense of the conflicts they witness: they seek to “identify the contradictions involved in the conflict by referring them to a framework of ideas and values,” even though adults frequently underestimate their capacity for such intellectual work (as cited in Advani, 2009, p. 114). Together, these insights highlight the need for educational materials that acknowledge, rather than obscure, the complexities of children’s social worlds.

Cultural Nostalgia in Malayalam Textbooks

Cultural nostalgia indicates a collective longing for an idealised past embedded in a society’s cultural memory. While nostalgia has positive dimensions, its dominant forms tend to foreground selective, sentimentalised aspects of history, traditions, landscapes, or social practices, thereby obscuring historical complexity, social inequalities, or political conflicts (Natali, 2004, pp. 13–14). In educational contexts, cultural nostalgia manifests when textbooks or curricula present history, nature, or cultural practices as aesthetically pleasing or morally unproblematic, thereby reinforcing dominant regional, national, or communal identities without critically engaging with the lived realities of the past. The subsequent discussion highlights selected instances from Malayalam textbooks prescribed in Kerala’s state syllabus for students in standards one to four. One of the lessons that is included in the Standard II Malayalam textbook is titled “Kuttipura” (Toy House), written by Sumangala (1934-2021), a well-known writer of children’s literature in Malayalam (SCERT, 2015/2022, Std. II, Part I, pp. 24–30). The story features a six-year-old girl named Savithrikutty, who asks her father to have a toy house built for her. Her father, reclining on a traditional *charukasera* (easy chair), is clearly not a labourer himself. He calls out to someone named Velu and instructs him to build the toy house for his daughter. Standing behind her father’s chair, Savithrikutty eagerly adds that the toy house should include a family of five with three daughters. Velu, a carpenter, considers the request. Since the rainy season is approaching and work may be scarce, he decides it’s worth taking up the task. He estimates it will take about a week to ten days to complete. Savithrikutty, excited, begins imagining the house in vivid detail: a veranda, two bedrooms, a dining room, kitchen, and a storehouse. She even drapes a towel like a saree and walks around, pretending she is already living in that house. However, Velu doesn’t return as promised. When Savithrikutty asks their servant (*velakkaran*) Nanu, he tells her it’s difficult to track down Velu and suggests that he doesn’t have a fixed residence and moves around like a vagabond. Eventually, Velu reappears ten days later, arriving with a pull-cart full of assorted materials.

He assembles a detailed toy house complete with a gate, compound wall, trees, and even a nameplate that reads *Prasadam*. Inside this miniature house, the family members are carefully represented: the father is reading, the mother, dressed in *mundum veshtiyum*⁴, is working in the kitchen, and the three daughters are engaged in various domestic activities. One is reading on a cot, another is stitching, and the third is playing the *veena*. Even their attire is carved in wood, down to the sarees and jackets. Savithrikutty is mesmerised by Velu's craft. The story ends with her gazing at the toy house, deeply absorbed, and even forgetting that she cannot actually enter it.

The story, which presents a time when the author was probably a child, exudes a feudal ethos, with implicit references to caste, labour, and social hierarchy, which are reflected in names, spaces, and roles. Yet, despite these clear markers, the exercises and discussions that follow offer no explicit engagement with labour or skill. Velu is not introduced as a carpenter, and his craftsmanship and the question of wages are left unspoken. The socio-economic context is backgrounded, while the focus remains on Savithrikutty's imagination and fantasy. Although the setting appears to be from several decades ago, the social codes it evokes remain strikingly relevant today. The story naturalises a world shaped by caste and class, where service and hierarchy are taken for granted. The exercises focus on rote factual details by heart, such as "Who are the characters?", "What did Savithrikutty want in her house?" There is no attention given to Velu's labour, his artisanal skill, gender roles, or the deeply layered social setting in which the story unfolds. All literary works are embedded within socio-cultural hierarchies, either conforming to or challenging them in various ways. The suggestion here is not to exclude such texts, but to let children learn about the tools to understand the different dimensions of the text. But treating a story merely as a vehicle for language learning renders it flat, destroying the opportunities for developing critical thinking skills. As Giroux suggests, the traditions of critical inquiry and ethical understanding have been overshadowed by an instrumental rationality that narrows education to the mastery of isolated competencies and basic, skills-oriented learning (Giroux, 1983/2025, pp. 37-38).

A similar lesson titled *Pathayam* (granary) reflects nostalgically on the large wooden structures once used to store grain for the entire year. The text describes how these granaries have fallen out of use with the decline in paddy cultivation, and how many are now being repurposed into

⁴ Traditional two-piece attire for women.

furniture, as they take up too much space in modern homes. It ends with a quiet lament for a fading agrarian way of life, noting our growing dependence on rice from other states. However, beneath this sentimental tone, *Pathayam* is not just presented as a cultural artefact; the text also subtly evokes the ethos of the old feudal order, without naming it outright. The text presents granaries as if they were a common feature in every household, when in reality, they existed only in large landowning homes—those with acres of farmland and a sizable workforce that laboured on the land (SCERT, 2015/2022, Std. IV, Part I, pp. 38–41).

The textbooks do include names that suggest minority representation such as Suhara, Usman, Riyas, Ouseph (a regional variation of the name Joseph), and Aby—and describe events like Eid and Christmas celebrations; however, these moments often feel tokenistic as the nostalgia is always associated with the feudal and dominant society’s past. For example, in Standard I, Part II, such inclusivity appears briefly (SCERT, 2015/2022, Std. I, Part II, pp. 72–83). This surface-level representationalism is also evident in the inclusion of short biographies or anecdotes about great personalities like Gandhi, Nehru, Mother Teresa, Pazhassiraja, Sree Narayana Guru, Khalifa Umar, and Dhyan Chand, among others. However, these inclusions often seem perfunctory and disconnected from critical engagement. The purpose behind featuring these figures appears less about the pedagogical intention of meaningful reflection or ethical inquiry, and more about a symbolic gesture of checking boxes of inclusion. Peter McLaren critiques the idea of diversity which is normally presented as a harmonious coexistence of peaceful cultural groups (quoted in hooks, 1994, p. 31). He argues that this conservative and liberal view of multiculturalism should be rejected because it treats culture as an undisturbed space of agreement, ignoring that all knowledge is shaped by histories marked by social conflicts and power struggles. Although these textbooks contain “stories,” they are rarely treated as opportunities for developing narrative comprehension, emotional insight, or critical thinking. Instead, the stories function primarily as tools for evaluating memory recall: children are asked to remember character names, the sequence of events, or simple facts, rather than engage with how a story is constructed, what themes it explores, or how it resonates with their own experiences. Consequently, storytelling is stripped of its imaginative and cognitive potential, and reduced to a mechanism of factual testing.

Cultural nostalgia takes on a different shape when it comes to representations of nature. More often than not, nature and its surroundings are described as picturesque and idealised. The textbooks feature numerous literary pieces by well-known authors that offer rich, detailed

portrayals of the natural world. Yet, both sets of texts (2013 revision and 2023 revision) and the follow-up discussions or exercises tend to present nature as a purely scenic backdrop – naturally harmonious, peaceful, and untroubled. This framing recurs throughout the content, where both children and nature are consistently romanticised. The following lines serve as a typical example of this kind of representation, repeated in various forms across the textbooks. “The scent of flowers spread everywhere, The butterflies flew around, The beetles hummed and sang” (SCERT, 2015/2022, Std. I, Part II, p. 71).

Most of these descriptions focus on nature for its aesthetic appeal, with images of fragrant flowers, fluttering butterflies, and singing beetles, creating an image of the natural world that is peaceful, vibrant, and harmonious.

Vimala walked and reached Kamala’s house. Kamala said, let’s go to the mountain. It is full of trees. No, let’s go to the riverbank, said Vimala. They walked to the riverbank. It rained. There was no umbrella. What should we do? Let’s cut the leaves off a banana tree and cover our heads. (SCERT, 2015/2022, Std. I, Part I, pp. 30–31[author’s translation])

Passages of this kind are plenty in these books which romanticises rural life by presenting a simple, spontaneous adventure in nature, where children walk freely between mountains, valleys, and riverbanks, unbothered by obstacles. Such scenes evoke a nostalgic, idealised past where nature is both accessible and nurturing, and childhood is innocent and self-sufficient. A very stereotypical binary is also drawn between the rural and the urban, as in the following passage where both urban and rural realities are flattened.

The car reached the countryside. Traffic on the road had thinned out. Trees lined both sides. Small houses dotted the landscape. Here and there, fields lush with greenery. In the distance, tall mountain ranges. A stream flowed gently through the middle of the paddy field. On the bund, white egrets stood in neat rows (SCERT, 2015/2022, Std. II, Part I, pp. 12–13[author’s translation]).

It constructs an idyllic, postcard-like image of the countryside, emphasising scenic beauty with lush green fields, gentle streams, and neatly lined egrets. Nature is portrayed as peaceful and orderly, reinforcing a romanticised and nostalgic view of rural life, while obscuring the socio-

economic and environmental realities that shape these landscapes today. This erasure also excludes industrial and diasporic realities, as well as the rural and the urban poor. The text obliterates the complexities, harshness, and the labour often tied to rural life. This kind of romanticisation turns nature into a mere spectacle, something to be admired for its aesthetic value without addressing the complexity and contradictions associated with it. Nature here becomes a passive backdrop, devoid of its ecological and socio-political realities, effectively decontextualising it. However, nature in its depoliticised avatar has a protean ability to represent multiple things. As Bhog et al. mention, in Bengali textbooks, nature is often romanticised and pastoralised, with landscapes like the Bengal village serving as nostalgic symbols of home, familial love, and communal harmony (Bhog et al., 2011, p. 55). While nature might appear apolitical and neutral, its representation works ideologically to evoke emotional connections to the past and construct a sense of belonging, demonstrating how nostalgic depictions of nature can serve broader cultural and political purposes.

Textbooks produced as part of the 2023 curriculum revisions contain fewer explicit instances of cultural nostalgia; however, such nostalgia persists subtly through representations of nature and discussions surrounding the natural environment. For example, the second-standard Malayalam textbook—which integrates environmental, social, and health sciences—opens with a chapter on rain. This unit includes short poems and descriptive passages while also explaining the phenomenon of rain in child-appropriate scientific language (SCERT, 2025, Std. II, Part I, pp. 8–17). Although rain affects different regions of Kerala in markedly different ways—with certain areas experiencing waterlogging and others, particularly hilly or mountainous regions, facing landslides and other natural hazards—the accompanying descriptions tend to emphasise the beauty and pleasantness of rain. By foregrounding Kerala’s scenic landscape and invoking its popular epithet “God’s Own Country,” the textbook reinforces dominant regional and national identities. The fourth-standard Malayalam textbook extends this further by briefly referencing the Kerala floods, depicting people of different religious backgrounds and genders boarding rescue boats as submerged houses and a hovering helicopter frame the scene (SCERT, 2025, Std. IV, Part I, p. 33). This chapter, titled “Let’s Move Forward” (*Iniyum Munnott*), attempts to promote resilience, though without deeper engagement with the socio-environmental implications of such disasters. Another section in the second-standard textbook encourages children to consider perspectives “from the side of animals,” a gesture towards sensitisation that reflects contemporary concerns about frequent wildlife incursions into agricultural areas. Yet, the narrative anthropomorphises animals,

depicting them as forming a collective to farm using human tools and methods, thereby presenting a highly anthropocentric worldview (SCERT, 2025, Std. IV, Part I, pp. 38–41). This raises critical questions reminiscent of C. K. Janu’s reflections in her autobiography, where she recounts the dissonance, she felt as an Adivasi child encountering textbooks in which animals walked upright and spoke like humans (Janu, 2004, p. 10). A further example appears in a unit describing a temple festival (*pooram*), where the live elephant traditionally central to the celebration is replaced by a mechanised, wheeled elephant adorned in customary regalia (SCERT, 2025, Std. II, Part I, pp. 38-41). These scenarios are introduced without student participation and without discussion of the ethical, cultural, or environmental debates surrounding such issues. The third-standard Malayalam textbook includes a brief section on different kinds of work and labour, notably featuring a domestic scene in which the father scrapes coconut while the mother cooks (SCERT, 2025, Std. III, Part I, p. 59). Such a representation, which was very unlikely in mainstream textbooks two decades ago, reflects shifting societal attitudes toward gender roles. The 2023 textbook revisions make a deliberate effort to incorporate images and themes that reflect new perspectives and progressive social orientations. However, these inclusions are neither elaborated upon nor opened for discussion, likely because doing so might disrupt the delicate balance between maintaining dominant conservative sensibilities and projecting a nominally forward-looking stance. These texts nonetheless perpetuate an idyllic, brochure-like portrayal of Kerala’s natural beauty in an uncritical manner, which is an aesthetic rooted in cultural nostalgia that ultimately becomes the overarching feature of the textbooks.

As mentioned earlier, Malayalam textbooks in primary classes become the focal point for nostalgia and memory, that too only the privileged version of it. Much of what is presented in the textbooks has little connection not only to the experiences of the children but also to those of their millennial parents. Instead, the content largely reflects the memories of a privileged community familiar with life from the 1950s to the 1970s. Since these are often framed as semi-fictional narratives, the underlying stereotypes and prejudices are perpetuated subtly and uncritically. Superficial interaction refers to content that engages with cultural, social, or historical themes in a cursory or descriptive manner, without encouraging critical thinking, analysis, or reflection on underlying social, political, or ideological issues. Studies on English textbooks from two state boards (Kerala and West Bengal) and the national board (NCERT) have shown that the depth of cultural interaction is often limited, with significantly more superficial interaction themes than critical reflection themes (Bose & Gao, 2022, pp. 3, 8).

While it is difficult to determine the exact reasons why Kerala and West Bengal show similar patterns, socio-political similarities between the two states may be a contributing factor. Although these findings relate to English textbooks, similar tendencies may also be observed in Malayalam textbooks, particularly in the way narratives of nostalgia and nature are presented, often aestheticised, depoliticised, and uncritical, offering learners a limited engagement with the deeper cultural, social, or ideological contexts. The preceding discussion represents a relatively unsystematic and ad hoc selection of materials from the textbooks. Conducting a more structured and systematic review of the content would enable a clearer identification of underlying patterns and trends.

Rethinking Early Literary Education

While critical pedagogy, critical thinking, and Freirean framework etc. are common vocabularies in draft documents and discussions of curriculum revisions, their practical implementations often fall short. One effective way to expose the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1980) embedded in these materials is through critical textual analysis. In regional language textbooks, such hidden curricula often manifest in nostalgic representations of culture and nature that serve to legitimise specific historical narratives while suppressing complexity and dissent. The production of a homogenised, harmonious image of the natural world and social relations becomes a regressive pedagogical strategy that depoliticises cultural memory. It also portrays tradition as naturally virtuous, views change and progress as dubious, and frames alternative identities as deviations from the norm. Similarly, the natural world is also presented solely in aesthetic terms, promoting a passive attitude towards nature where students fail to understand and engage with nature as a site of power, labour, and justice. Attending to these limitations requires a shift in how language and literary texts are approached in the classroom. The study is intended as a preliminary critical reading to explore the ideological dimensions embedded within early literary instruction through a reading of select Malayalam-language primary school textbooks prescribed by SCERT Kerala under the 2013 curriculum revision. The observations demonstrate that the recurring use of cultural nostalgia and idealised representations of nature often produces a simplified and depoliticised understanding of social and ecological life, one that remains distant from the lived realities of many children. Drawing on perspectives from critical pedagogy, it is emphasised that early encounters with literary texts are not ideologically neutral; rather, they shape interpretive habits, social understanding, and modes of relating to the world. The study therefore argues for the importance of fostering critical textual engagement at the primary level, enabling students to question, interpret, and

contextualise the representations embedded within educational materials. The discussion also notes how Malayalam textbooks, perhaps more than English-language textbooks in the context of Kerala, function as complex sites of cultural memory and identity formation. As children encounter these narratives at an early stage, they are not merely learning language or literature, but are also being shaped by the ideological assumptions embedded within the texts. My observations suggest that literary instruction at the primary level often tends toward the latter, encouraging passive acceptance rather than critical engagement.

Although recent curriculum revisions in theory emphasise critical thinking and analytical skills, the pedagogical approach within many textbooks continues to rely on pre-packaged moral and cultural narratives that children are expected to accept rather than interrogate. In this sense, even seemingly progressive or politically correct content can become limiting when learners are not encouraged to question how such narratives are constructed, whose perspectives they privilege, and what silences or exclusions they contain. It should also be noted that the ideological operations of contemporary textbooks often appear in subtle forms rather than through overt stereotypes, making them more difficult to identify and challenge. This is especially significant in Malayalam language textbooks, where literature frequently becomes a vehicle for cultural nostalgia and regional identity formation. For many children growing up in a rapidly technologised and digitised world, these representations may appear distant, abstract, or disconnected from their immediate social realities. The discussion also challenges the broader assumption that children must be shielded from social complexity through sanitised or nostalgic representations. As scholars such as Shalini Advani and Krishna Kumar suggest, children are already attempting to make sense of the conflicts and contradictions surrounding them, even when adults underestimate their interpretive capacities. Educational materials that avoid these realities may therefore limit rather than nurture critical consciousness.

Although contemporary curriculum discourse in Kerala increasingly foregrounds critical thinking and analytical skills, literary texts in primary classrooms continue to be approached largely through factual recall, moral simplification, and language acquisition. Stories are reduced to instruments for memorisation rather than opportunities for interpretive engagement, emotional complexity, or ideological reflection. As a result, children are seldom encouraged to examine the silences, exclusions, contradictions, and power relations embedded within the narratives they encounter. The problem, therefore, lies not merely in the inclusion of nostalgia or nature as themes, but in the uncritical and depoliticised ways in which these themes are

framed and taught. While the present study is selective and exploratory rather than systematic and exhaustive, it underscores the importance of subjecting textbook content to sustained critical textual analysis. A more structured and comprehensive examination of textbook narratives may reveal broader ideological patterns shaping regional language education. More importantly, integrating critical reading practices into primary language instruction can enable literature classrooms to cultivate not only linguistic competence, but also historical awareness, social sensitivity, ecological understanding, and critical consciousness.

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