Memoirs of Love and Loss: Life Writing Through the Eyes of Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of Kerala

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the award of the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English Language and Literature

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

T. K. M COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

KOLLAM – 691005

2026

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I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **Memoirs of Love and Loss: Life Writing Through the Eyes of Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan** submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature is the original record of studies and research carried out by me during 2024-2026 under the guidance of Dr. Sulfia S Santhosh, Assistant Professor of English, T. K. M College of Arts and Science, Kollam and it has not formed the basis for the award of any degree, title or recognition.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my guide Dr Sulfia S Santhosh (Asst Professor in English) for giving me this invaluable opportunity to work under her expert guidance. I would like to primarily thank her for the useful comments, remarks and engagement throughout the learning process of the thesis. She consistently allowed this paper to be my own work, but steered in the right decision whenever I needed it. My heartfelt thanks to all other teachers in the department for being an unconditional source of courage and inspiration. I would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to my classmates, who have supported me throughout the process.



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Preface

Literature has always been a space where human lives, memories, feelings, and relationships are kept alive beyond time's reach. Among the many forms of writing that capture human experience, life writing holds a unique and personal place. Unlike fictional stories, life writing comes from real experiences, personal memories, and emotional truths. It lets both ordinary and extraordinary lives become part of literary history. This project aims to explore that rich literary tradition through two significant Malayalam memoirs: *Basheerintae Ediyae* by Fabi Basheer and *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* by Radhalekshmi Padmarajan.

Both texts are examples of life writing and are deeply rooted in memory, love, companionship, and loss. They are not just biographies of two celebrated men, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and P. Padmarajan. They are also powerful narratives that reveal the emotional lives of the women alongside them. Through these memoirs, the wives move beyond being silent companions. They emerge as narrators with their own voices, memories, and perspectives. Thus, the project examines not only the lives of Basheer and Padmarajan but also how Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi shape identity, agency, and meaning through their narratives.

The study seeks to explore these memoirs from literary, feminist, and sociocultural angles. It looks at how personal memory connects with public history, how women's identities are formed within marriage and home life, and how life writing allows women to reclaim their narrative space. The project also looks into the link between creativity and companionship, showing how the hidden emotional labor of women often goes unnoticed behind the success of celebrated male figures.

The first chapter focuses on *Basheerintae Ediyae*, analyzing its chronological narrative structure, how Fabi's identity relates to Basheer, the patriarchal symbolism in the title, and the social and political issues reflected in the memoir. It also examines how Fabi's life writing alters readers' perceptions of Basheer's literary works and female characters. The second chapter looks at *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* as both a biographical and emotional narrative that reconstructs Padmarajan's life through Radhalekshmi's memories. It further explores how devotion, love, memory, and identity are intertwined within the memoir.

This project aims to understand life writing not just as personal recollection but as an important literary and cultural practice. The memoirs chosen for this study show that behind every celebrated creative figure, there is often another silent but equally important presence whose experiences deserve to be recognized. By reading these texts critically and sensitively, this study hopes to add to broader discussions on Malayalam literature, women's writing, memory studies, and autobiographical narratives.

Chapter One

Introduction

There is something deeply human about the urge to document a life. This might not be one's own life but the life of someone so cherished that their absence creates an ache that words can only start to heal. When a person dies, they leave behind not just silence but also an unfinished story. Those who loved them often feel compelled to complete it or at least honor it. Some of the most intimate and lasting works of literature have come from this place of grief, memory, and devotion. This project focuses on these kinds of works: memoirs written by women about their husbands. These texts explore personal loss while also forming a literary identity of their own.

The two works central to this study, *Basheerintae Ediyae* by Fabi Basheer and *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* by Radhalekshmi Padmarajan, fall into the broad category of life writing. Both were written by women who stood beside prominent figures in Malayalam literature and cinema. They were also written in the shadow of loss. Yet, these are not just passive reflections. They are vivid narratives filled with the richness of everyday closeness, the weight of shared years, and the quiet strength of women who experienced greatness closely and chose to express it on their own terms. By doing this, Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan did more than document their husbands' lives; they discovered their own literary voices and enriched Malayalam literature in unexpected ways.

This introduction aims to place both works within the larger context of life writing as a genre. It seeks to shed light on the lives of the two remarkable men at the center of these stories and to highlight the importance of these memoirs both as biographical accounts and as expressions of women's perspectives and literary styles. Life writing is difficult to define. It

serves as an umbrella term that covers many forms, including autobiography, memoir, diary, letters, biography, personal essay, and travel writing. The common thread among these forms is a deep commitment to the real experiences of actual people: the truth of a life as it was felt, remembered, and expressed. Unlike fiction, life writing forms a silent pact with the reader. It promises that what is being shared, despite being influenced by memory and language, has its roots in reality. This pact gives the genre unusual strength and distinct fragility.

The history of life writing stretches back to the origins of writing itself. From Augustine's Confessions, where a man wrestles with the tale of his own soul, to Rousseau's Confessions, which subjects the self to harsh scrutiny, to Virginia Woolf's diaries, which document a woman's inner life with great precision, life writing has always made the private somehow universal. Personal details, small domestic moments, and half-remembered conversations are the basic elements of life writing. They often convey truths that grander narratives cannot touch.

In Indian literature, life writing has a rich and intricate history. The saint-poets of the Bhakti movement, like Mirabai, Kabir, and Tukaram, created a form of devotional life writing that offers the self to the divine. In the modern era, autobiographical writing in regional Indian languages has grown significantly, especially in the twentieth century. Malayalam, the language of the two texts being studied, has a strong autobiographical tradition. Writers such as G. Sankara Kurup, Lalithambika Antharjanam, and Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) have enriched personal writing, blending the literary with the confessional and the private with the political.

Memoir, the form most similar to the texts under examination, holds a unique place in life writing. It differs from autobiography in focus and scope. While autobiography typically covers an entire life, memoir zeroes in on a specific period, relationship, or experience.

Memoir often feels more emotional, more literary, and more selective than autobiography. The memoirist actively chooses what to remember and highlight, and those choices are significant. When Fabi Basheer writes about her husband, she does not aim to create a complete record; she aims to express what it felt like to live with him, to love him, and to lose him. That feeling—slippery, subjective, and deeply human—is the essence of memoir.

Life writing also carries important feminist implications that relate directly to the texts being discussed. For much of literary history, the lives deemed worthy of documentation were those of men—great men, public figures, and achievers. Women who documented their own lives often faced criticism for crossing the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior. When a woman places her own experience at the center of her narrative—asserting that her perspective, feelings, and story are important—it can be an act of quiet defiance. When women wrote about others, especially their husbands, they were frequently seen as secondary to male achievements. However, literary scholars have increasingly recognized that these women's memoirs are much more than supplements to male biographies. They are essential records of women's experiences, reflections of their complex inner lives, and contributions to the literary tradition.

To fully appreciate Fabi Basheer's memoir, one must first grasp who Vaikom Muhammad Basheer was—not just in the context of Malayalam literature, but as a person whose life was as strange, chaotic, and radiant as any of his stories. Born on January 21, 1908, in Thalayolaparambu, located in the Kottayam district of Kerala, Basheer was born into a modest Muslim family during a time when the world around him was buzzing with early signs of nationalism. From his beginnings, Basheer was a man who rejected conventional boundaries.

His pre-literary life resembles an adventure tale. As a young man inspired by the freedom movement, Basheer joined the Indian National Congress and actively fought against British rule. He was arrested, imprisoned, and faced the hardships of political dissent. Yet, his restlessness was not solely about politics; it was also existential. He traveled across India and beyond, working various jobs—magician's assistant, cook, trader, healer, and wandering beggar. He spent time at Himalayan ashrams seeking spiritual knowledge. He explored other countries, absorbed different cultures, and brought all of that experience back with him to fuel his writing.

When Basheer finally dedicated himself to writing, he changed Malayalam literature in profound ways. Before him, Malayalam prose fiction was mostly characterized by a formal literary style that distanced the text from the everyday lives of ordinary people—especially those who were poor, marginalized, or excluded. Basheer shifted this approach. He wrote in a language that was colloquial, vibrant, and rooted in the everyday experiences of life in Kerala. His sentences were short and impactful. His dialogue pulsed with authenticity. His characters—beggars, thieves, dreamers, lovers, lunatics, and saints—were fully realized, capable of great tenderness and absurdity alike.

His major works are monumental in Malayalam literature. *Balyakalasakhi,* published in 1944, tells a touching story of childhood friendship that evolves into love but ultimately falls victim to the cruelties of class and circumstance. *Pathummayude Aadu,* a short comic masterpiece about a family's relationship with a goat, showcases Basheer's remarkable skill in finding depth in the trivial. *Shabdangal* is a powerful prison memoir that reflects on his own experiences of incarceration, meditating on suffering, solidarity, and the strength of the human spirit. *Mathilukal*, later made into a celebrated film by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, is a love story of poignant delicacy, featuring two prisoners who fall in love across a wall they

never cross, never seeing each other's faces, yet building a relationship of extraordinary emotional depth.

Throughout his life, Basheer adopted many identities: revolutionary, wanderer, mystic, comic genius, and tender humanist. Yet, perhaps the identity that mattered most to him was that of a writer belonging to all humanity, not confined to any specific class or faith. He wrote about the poor with love and without condescension. He portrayed Muslims and Hindus with equal empathy and irreverence. He showed special tenderness for children and animals, while remaining wary of pretentiousness. Despite this, he maintained a distinct literary voice—playful, melancholic, rebellious, and deeply compassionate—that was unmistakably his own. Known affectionately as the "Beypore Sultan," a title that reflects both his significance in literature and his long association with Beypore, where he spent much of his later life, Basheer remains a legendary figure in Kerala's cultural landscape.He passed away on July 5, 1994, leaving behind a legacy of work that continues to be read, loved, and studied. He also left behind a widow, Fabi Basheer, who had been his partner, confidante, and grounding presence during the quieter years of his life. It is her voice, her memories, and her love that we encounter in *Basheerintae Ediyae*.

If Basheer reshaped Malayalam literature with his powerful language and radical humanism, Padmarajan transformed Malayalam cinema with a similarly profound commitment to the complexities of human emotions. Born on July 24, 1945, in Peringottukara in the Thrissur district of Kerala, Padmarajan grew up in a vastly different world from Basheer's dynamic youth. His sensibility was quieter, more introspective, and finely attuned to the nuances of rural and small-town Kerala life, as well as the inner landscapes of desire, longing, and loss.

Padmarajan began his creative path as a fiction writer, and his short stories are notable for their psychological insight and poetic depth. He had a talent for delving into the minds of his characters—especially women and young individuals—depicting their inner lives with exceptional care. His literary work alone would have earned him a significant place in Malayalam literature. However, cinema provided him with a larger platform and a more profound influence. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he began screenwriting and directing, becoming a key figure in a new wave of Malayalam cinema that was artistic, emotionally honest, and genuinely popular.

What set Padmarajan's films apart from earlier works was their rejection of melodrama and simple resolutions. His movies explored the messy and ambiguous aspects of real human relationships. They revealed unspoken emotions between fathers and daughters, the complicated desires of young men and women, the consequences of social transgressions, and the beauty and cruelty of love. Films like *Peruvazhiyambalam*, *Koodevide*, *Thoovanathumbikal*, *Namukku Parkkan Munthiri Thoppukal*, and *Innale* stand among the best in Malayalam cinema's history. Each film is marked by its character depth, sensitivity to scenery, and willingness to navigate emotional complexity without hesitation.

Padmarajan excelled in creating strong female characters. The women in his films are rarely passive; they have desires, make choices, deal with consequences, and receive the respect and dignity often lacking in commercial cinema of his time. He appeared genuinely interested in women's inner lives, resulting in some of the most unforgettable female protagonists in Malayalam cinema. His collaborations with actresses such as Seema, Shobhana, and Urvashi produced performances full of depth and authenticity.

Padmarajan passed away on January 24, 1991, at just 45 years old due to a heart attack. His death was mourned as a loss not just of a filmmaker but of a literary and cultural

vision that was irreplaceable. He left behind a legacy in both literature and cinema that continues to be cherished, studied, and celebrated. He also left a wife, Radhalekshmi Padmarajan, whose memoir, *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan*, would become a significant and moving personal narrative in Malayalam literature.

Basheerintae Ediyae, which translates roughly to "Beside Basheer" or "In Basheer's Presence," tells the story of a marriage. However, it is much more than that. It explores what it means to share a life with someone whose inner world is vast, restless, and filled with literature. Loving him requires a special blend of patience, attention, and imagination. Fabi Basheer embodies these qualities in her memoir, resulting in a book that offers a unique insight no biographer or critic could achieve.

The memoir begins with Basheer's childhood and early life, drawing on what Fabi learned directly from him, what she observed, and her understanding from years spent together. It covers his final years and his death in a generous and detailed narrative full of specific memories, intimate exchanges, and small, meaningful details only someone truly present could provide. Fabi writes about Basheer the man: his habits, fears, joys, complex relationship with the world, tenderness toward the humble and marginalized, playfulness, moments of sadness, spiritual searching, and the deep, quiet love that anchored their life together.

What makes the book especially significant is how it explores the relationship between the private and the literary. Basheer's fiction is deeply autobiographical—he constantly drew from his own life, relationships, and emotional experiences. Reading Fabi's memoir alongside his fiction creates a layered understanding: one sees how life informed his literature, and how his literature shaped his life. The writer portrayed in Fabi's pages is

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recognizably the same as in his fiction—rebellious, tender, complex, deeply human. This perspective, viewed from their daily reality as a married couple, enhances our understanding far beyond what academic criticism typically offers.

There is also something deeply poignant about Fabi Basheer's act of writing in this memoir. She is not a professional writer. She did not start her life with literary ambitions. She loved a writer and lived with his creativity for many years. Yet, when the time came to share her experience of that life and love, she discovered a narrative talent that was genuine and unique. The prose of *Basheerintae Ediyae* carries a quiet authority—it does not strive for effect, does not exaggerate or sentimentalize. It simply conveys what it knows, confidently drawing from lived experience. In doing so, it reveals Fabi Basheer not as an addition to Basheer's story, but as a voice in her own right.

The title of Radhalekshmi Padmarajan's memoir, *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan*, is rich with meaning. A Gandharvan in Indian mythology is a celestial being, a divine musician and artist, radiant and somewhat otherworldly, belonging to a realm that is near but not entirely of this earth. Naming her memoir with this term—my Gandharvan—is not just an expression of devotion. It captures her true experience of Padmarajan: that he was gifted in a way that seemed almost otherworldly, that his creative vision felt as if it came from elsewhere, and that loving him meant embracing someone who remained, in part, beyond ordinary reach.

Like Fabi Basheer's memoir, *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* traces its subject's life from childhood to death. Radhalekshmi writes about Padmarajan's early years, his journey as a writer, his entry into cinema, his imaginative quality, working process, and the inner life of their marriage. It was a union between two people deeply engrossed in art and literature, both sensitive and both facing the unique pressures and joys that this life brings. The memoir is

vivid, emotionally honest, and crafted with a literary sensibility reflecting Radhalekshmi's rich engagement with literature and culture.

One of the most striking aspects of Radhalekshmi's memoir is its willingness to confront the complexities of living with a creative genius. She does not portray Padmarajan as a perfect saint. She acknowledges his absences, both literal and metaphorical, the demands his work placed on his time, and how a life dedicated to art can require loved ones to bear specific burdens. However, this understanding is not a complaint or reproach; it reflects the reality that great creativity comes at a cost, always accompanied by its shadows. Loving someone means accepting them entirely, shadows included.

The memoir also sheds light, in ways that are genuinely insightful for students of Malayalam cinema, on the creative process behind some of Padmarajan's most famous works. Radhalekshmi was involved in the making of these films; sometimes as a direct witness, always as a close companion. She discusses the origin of ideas, the collaboration with actors and technicians, the anxieties of production, and the emotional investment that Padmarajan put into every project. This insider perspective feels more like personal testimony than technical documentation. It captures the essence of someone who watched a person she loved dedicate himself fully to creating art.

One key aspect of both *Basheerintae Ediyae* and *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* is how they engage in a broader discussion about women's literary expression and experiences. Both books were written after the deaths of their husbands; in the wake of loss, when the urgency of memory and the need to share became overwhelming. This timing is significant. The death of a husband somewhat lifts the immediate pressure of his public presence and his fame. It creates a space—melancholic yet oddly liberating—where the woman can express herself from her own perspective, in her own voice, on her own terms.

Both Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan spent years alongside men with huge fame. In such situations, it is easy for a woman's own identity to become overshadowed—for her to be seen mainly as a wife, companion, or supporter. This pattern has repeated itself throughout literary and artistic history, across cultures and languages. The women who stood by the great male writers and artists were often remarkable individuals—perceptive, intelligent, and creative—but their identities were usually eclipsed by the men they loved. The memoir, as a form, allows these women to reclaim visibility. By writing their stories, Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan assert that they are subjects too, not just objects; narrators rather than mere characters in someone else's story.

The literary and cultural significance of both memoirs goes beyond the personal. Their publication marked a significant moment in recognizing women's literary voices in Kerala. This recognition had been growing steadily through the latter part of the twentieth century, and these books helped solidify that progress. Both books received praise not only from general readers but also from literary critics and scholars. They recognized not just the biographical information about celebrated men but also the genuine quality of the writing itself. Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan were acknowledged not just as wives writing about their husbands but as writers creating substantial and beautiful work.

This recognition is important because it highlights a broader change in how Malayalam literary culture views women's writing and experiences. The success of these memoirs sparked discussions about many women writers and creative figures in Kerala whose contributions had been overlooked or undervalued. It led to a growing scholarly and critical interest in recovering and reassessing those contributions. In this regard, both books serve not only as personal documents but also as cultural interventions—acts of writing that altered, in small but meaningful ways, the literary landscape they entered.

Any exploration of memoir must seriously confront the issue of memory and its connection to truth. Memoir is not history in the strictest sense; it does not aim for objectivity or comprehensive documentation. It is a version of life shaped by emotion, colored by hindsight, and inevitably partial. The memoirist remembers certain things vividly while others fade, selectively narrating specific moments and leaving others out, all filtered through her own feelings and understanding. This is not a flaw in the genre; it is one of its key characteristics and perhaps its greatest strength.

The emotional truth that memoir conveys—the texture of lived experience, the quality of feeling, and the sense of what it was like to be in a certain time and place—cannot be captured by strictly factual documentation. When Fabi Basheer describes a specific afternoon, a certain conversation, a moment of laughter, tenderness, or grief, she offers something irreplaceable: a glimpse into the inner life of a close relationship, a testament to what it felt like to be Basheer's companion during his most private hours. No amount of detailed literary biography can provide what this kind of intimate witness offers.

The same applies to Radhalekshmi's memoir. Her memories of Padmarajan, including his moods, enthusiasms, creative rituals, and ways of interacting with the world, reflect the perspective of someone who was genuinely and consistently present. She writes from an intimate viewpoint rather than a distant one. While this closeness may bring its own distortions — like how love can color memory and grief can shape retrospect — it also brings clarity. An intimate witness often notices what an outside observer might miss: the small gestures, private fears, and unguarded moments that reveal character more accurately than any public performance can.

Both memoirs also raise intriguing questions about the lines between the personal and the literary. In each case, the subject is a significant creative figure, and their domestic life is

deeply connected with their creative life. Writing about Basheer as a husband inevitably means writing about him as a writer. Writing about Padmarajan in his home means writing about him as a filmmaker. The memoirs do not artificially separate these identities; they allow them to blend, just as they did in life. This is one of the most valuable aspects of these texts — they portray the creative figure as a complete person, not as a statue but as a living, breathing individual with ordinary needs and extraordinary talents.

This project unfolds in two main chapters, each focused on one of the memoirs being studied. The first chapter centers on *Basheerintae Ediyae*, providing a close reading of Fabi Basheer's text that addresses both its biographical content and literary form. It explores how Fabi positions herself as the narrator, how she navigates the challenge of writing about someone with a well-established public identity, and how her memoir adds to and complicates the image of Basheer that literary history has created. It also examines the importance of the domestic space in the memoir, viewing the home as a site of literary production, a refuge, and a stage where the daily drama of a creative life unfolded.

The second chapter focuses on *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* and offers a similar close reading of Radhalekshmi's memoir. It looks at its emotional tone, its portrayal of the cinematic life and its demands, and how Radhalekshmi expresses her own perspective while highlighting her husband's outstanding talents. The chapter also considers the specific cultural context of Malayalam cinema during Padmarajan's peak years of creativity — a time of remarkable artistic ambition — and analyzes how the memoir positions itself within that context.

This study does not aim to judge the accuracy of the memoirs' accounts in relation to historical facts, nor does it seek to evaluate the biographical truth of their claims. It primarily focuses on literary and cultural analysis, taking both the literary qualities of these texts and

their significance in the broader landscape of Malayalam life writing and women's literary voice seriously. It treats Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan as writers deserving of the same critical attention typically given to the works of men.

There is always a risk in studying texts born from grief and love, of losing critical distance — of being so swept up in the emotional flow of the work that analysis gives way to sentiment. This project seeks to avoid that risk while respecting the emotional truth within the texts themselves. The goal is to read both memoirs with the attention and thoughtfulness they merit, honoring their humanity while also applying rigorous literary inquiry to reveal their complexity. Why these two books, and why together? They form a natural and productive pairing. Both were written by women who were intimate witnesses to the lives of celebrated creative men. Both were created following death, in the reflective space of loss. Both navigate the challenge of capturing a life that is not their own while also expressing their own. Additionally, both emerge from a specific literary and cultural context — Kerala in the later decades of the twentieth century — which gives them a shared historical background, even though their subjects differ greatly in personality, medium, and artistic vision.

Chapter Two

Reconstructing the Self Through Life Writing: *Basheerinte Ediye*

The narrative begins by describing Fabi within her family, social background and upbringing. She grows up within a traditional social structure, where women's lives are largely shaped by marriage, obedience and domestic responsibility. From the beginning we can see how gender expectations frame a woman's life even before marriage. This early phase is important because it prepares the readers to understand Fabi's later acceptances of sacrifice and devotion as natural. Fabi does know Basheer as a writer and she had read some of his works. We can hear her inner voice about Basheer in the narrative as she asks herself about Basheer that he was born on 1840's or ..... yet he is still not married ..... and Fabi also asks a question to others present there that "Is he still alive?" Fabi's question was kept down with a laugh. Basheer appears more as a public figure than a personal presence in Fabi's life. The contrast between Basheer's literary image and the ordinary world Fabi inhibits is quickly introduced.

Fabi's marriage to Basheer marks a turning point in the narrative. On December 18,1958 the marriage took place at night. Marriage immediately redefines Fabi's identity as Basheer's wife (Basheerintae Ediyae). This transition is not just emotional but social and symbolic as her individuality begins to merge with her husband's life. After marriage, Fabi enters a life that is far from stable or predictable. Basheer's lifestyle, habits and worldview are unconventional, requiring patience and emotional flexibility. Fabi learns to adjust to irregular routines, financial insecurity, emotional unpredictability. This phase highlights the invisible emotional labour expected of women in marriage. We can see every day, every time

Basheer has visitors and Fabi is in charge of giving tea to the frequent visitors. When they face a financial crisis they will manage to sell their household animals like cows, hens etc.

One of the most crucial phases in the narrative is Basheer's recurring illness and mental struggles. Fabi becomes the primary caregiver, managing both physical and emotional crises. We can see the fear, anxiety and emotional exhaustion of Fabi. This exposes the human fragility behind the literary genius. This phase strongly makes the readers rethink their understanding of Basheer's works, especially their compassion and vulnerability.

Financial instability becomes a recurring reality in their life. Income from writing is uncertain. Fabi shoulders much of the responsibilities of maintaining domestic stability despite limited resources. Poverty is a persistent presence shaping everyday decisions. This period reflects the broader sociopolitical reality of marginalised writers and their families. The narrative offers a rare glimpse into Basheer's writing life as seen from within the home. We all know Basheer as a writer and a literary legend. But after reading Fabi's narrative we can see Basheer as a family man, who cares for his wife, his children. Basheer shares a special bond with his children especially with his daughter 'Shahina'. Fabi's role remains largely invisible in public literary history but the text reveals her presence as essential.

As Basheer gains recognition, a contrast emerges between his public image as a celebrated writer and his private dependence on Fabi. The narrative shows that being famous couldn't put poverty down. Fabi remains grounded in everyday responsibilities even as Basheer's reputation grows. This highlights how women often remain outside the spotlight, even when central to a writer's life. Despite hardships, the text emphasises moments of deep emotional closeness. Love is expressed through care, shared silence, mutual understanding. The relationship is portrayed as complex neither idealized nor oppressive, but deeply lived. As time progresses, Basheer's physical and mental fragility increases and Fabi's

responsibilities intensify with age. The narrative becomes more reflective focusing on memory, loss and endurance. This phase carries a tone of emotional maturity and acceptance.

Basheer's death marks a major loss and emotional rupture. Fabi's identity, long shaped around companionship, is now confronted in the absence of Basheer. The narrative treats death as a deep personal loss. This moment transforms Fabi from a living companion to a keeper of memory.

Writing as Remembrance

After Basheer's death, Fabi turns to writing as an act of memory. The life writing itself becomes a form of mourning, preservation and self-expression writing allows her to reclaim a voice that existed largely in the background. The act of narration becomes a presence in literary history. Though the title still defines her relationally, the narrative itself gives Fabi agency as a story teller. She selects, remembers and interprets events. Her life writing challenges, Male centered autobiography, official literary narratives. Fabi's life, once largely private, becomes part of literary discourse. *Basheerintae Ediyae* stands as a testimony to love, care and silent endurance. The narrative reminds readers that literary history is built not only by writers, but by lives lived alongside them and traces a movement from personal anonymity to narrative visibility. Fabi's journey unfolds through marriage, hardship, care, loss and remembrance. The text records not just events, but the emotional rhythm of a shared life, making it a powerful life narrative rooted in everyday reality

Basheerintae Ediyae can be read as a personal yet socially revealing narrative that explores how women's identity is formed within marriage, memory and emotional companionship. At surface level, the text appears to celebrate love, intimacy and shared life. However, a closer critical reading shows that the woman's sense of self emerges largely in relation to her husband, suggesting that her identity is relational rather than autonomous. The

narrative thus becomes a valuable site for examining how female subjectivity is shaped within patriarchal and cultural frameworks. One of the central ideas reflected in the work is that identity is not presented as an independent or self-contained entity. Instead, the woman's selfhood is shown as growing around her relationship with Basheer. Her memories, emotional experience, daily life and even narrative presence are anchored in him. She is not introduced to us primarily as an individual with a separate public, intellectual or social identity; rather she exists as "his wife", a role that becomes the organizing principle of her selfhood.

From a feminist perspective, Simon De Beauvoir's idea that women are often positioned as the 'Other' in relation to man is relevant here. The male figure appears as the central, creative and socially visible subject, while the women's identity is defined through association. In *Basheerintae Ediyae*, the husband is the cultural figure, the writer, the personality known to the world, while the women's narrative authority arises from her proximity to him. Her voice is valid because she belongs to his life story. This suggests a subtle but powerful dynamic in which the female self is legitimized through the male.

The work foregrounds marriage as the central space where identity is constructed. Her role as wife is not just a social position but the emotional and existential foundation of her life. Love, care, companionship and shared struggles define her sense of purpose. This may appear romantic, but it also reveals how women are culturally conditioned to see fulfilment through relational roles. The narrative does not strongly emphasise her ambitious, intellectual pursuits independent desires outside the marriage. Instead her experiences are framed in terms of nurturing, emotional labour and loyalty. This aligns with traditional gender expectations where women are seen as emotional anchors within the domestic sphere. Thus, the text reflects how patriarchal cultures shape a woman's identity by centering her life around family and husband.

However this does not mean she is portrayed as weak. Her strength lies in emotional resilience, patience and devotion. Yet even these strengths are recognized within the framework of marriage. Her individuality is visible, but it is filtered through her relational role. Another important aspect in how memory functions in the narrative. Her identity is intertwined with recollection to tell his story to tell her own. The act of remembering Basheer becomes an act of self-definition. This shows how women's life writing often merges personal identity with relational experience.

In many autobiographical or biographical narratives by wives, the self is expressed through shared life rather than individual achievements. The narrative voice in *Basheerintae Ediyae* carries warmth, intimacy and emotional depth, but it rarely separates the self from the beloved figure. This suggests that her subjectivity is dialogue formed through emotional exchange rather than isolated selfhood. Feminist critics often argue that such narratives reflect how women are trained to prioritize relationships over individuality. The self becomes porous, open and shaped by care and attachment. While this gives the narrative emotional richness, it also indicates how female identity is socially structured to revolve around others.

The text does not depict over domination or conflict. Instead, it shows what may be called "soft patriarchy". The woman's life appears loving and meaningful, yet her identity does not fully detach from the husband's presence. This reflects how patriarchy often works not through visible force but through cultural norms, affection and internalized expectations. She is willing to embrace her role, but the absence of an independent sphere of selfhood raises questions. Does the narrative allow her an identity beyond wifehood? Or in her individuality inseparable from that role? These questions open space for critical interpretation.

It is also important to note that while her social identity is relational, she does exercise emotional agency. She interprets events, remembers selectively and gives meaning to shared experiences. Through narration, she shapes the memory of Basheer and in doing so, claims narrative power. Thus the text can also be read as an assertion of voice : even if her identity is tied to him, she controls how the story is told. This duality is important. She may not possess a socially separate identity, but she possesses emotional and narrative authority. This complicates a purely negative feminist reading and suggests a more nuanced view of female subjectivity.

The woman's selfhood grows in connection with her husband rather than apart from him. This reflects broader gender patterns where female identity is structured around roles of care, companionship and emotional support. At the same time the narrative gives her voice, memory and interpretive power, allowing her to shape meaning within that relational framework. Thus, this text becomes a valuable exploration of how women's identities are formed at the intersection of affection, cultural expectation and narrative expression not entirely autonomous, yet not entirely silenced but existing in a complex space between devotion and selfhood.

The very title *Basheerintae Ediyae* operates as a powerful patriarchal symbol, announcing from the outset the framework within which the women's identity is constructed. Translated literally as Basheer's Fabi, the title foregrounds possession, relational identity and male centrality. Before the narrative begins, the woman is linguistically placed within the orbit of her husband. This naming practice is not rather, it reflects a deeply embedded patriarchal logic in which a woman's individuality is subsumed under male identity. Through the little and the narrative that follows, the text reveals how Fabi's agency and selfhood are shaped, limited and mediated through marriage, love, and cultural expectations.

Fabi is not named as an autonomous subject; she is introduced as someone who belongs to Basheer. The possessive suffix "-intae" (meaning "of") reinforces a sense of ownership. It echoes a broader cultural practice in which women are identified as daughters of fathers or wives of husbands. As feminist linguist Dale Spender notes in *Man Made Language*, patriarchal language structures normalise male dominance by making male identity the reference point for meaning (Spender, 1980). Thus, the title itself becomes a symbolic act of erasure, where Fabi's independent identity is overshadowed by her association with a celebrated male figure. Throughout the narrative, Fabi's identity unfolds primarily within the institution of marriage. Her life gains meaning through companionship, care, sacrifice and emotional labour. Marriage becomes not just a personal relationship but the central site for her self-formation. While the text portrays this bond with warmth and affection, it simultaneously reveals how women are culturally conditioned to derive their sense of purpose through relational roles.

From a feminist perspective this reflects what Betty Friedan calls the "feminine mystique" where fulfilment is located within domesticity and devotion rather than self-realization. Fabi's ambitions, desires and individuality outside marriage remain largely unexplored. Her world is organized around Basheer's presence, needs and creative life. This does not suggest emotional weakness but points to a structural limitation imposed on female subjectivity. Although Fabi's social identity is relational the text does allow her a form of emotional agency. She nurtures, remembers, interprets and sustains. Her strength lies in endurance, loyalty and emotional intelligence. Carol Gilligan's theory of the "ethic of care" helps illuminate this aspect (*In Different Voice*, 1982). Gilligan argues that women's moral agency often expresses itself through relationships rather than autonomy. However, emotional agency should not be confused with social power. While Fabi exercises influence

within the private sphere, her public identity remains derivative. Her agency operates within boundaries drawn by patriarchy -boundaries that define care as a feminine and creative or public recognition as masculine.

Basheerintae Ediyae can also be situated within the tradition of women's life writing, particularly narratives written by wives of famous men. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in Reading Autobiography, note that women's autobiographical voices often emerge through relational identity rather than individual achievement (Smith and Watson, 2001). Fabi's self-representation is inseparable from Basheer's story; to narrate his life is to narrate her own. This merging of identities complicates the question of agency. On one hand Fabi gains narrative authority by telling the story. On the other hand, her voice remains tethered to the male subject. The text thus illustrates how women's narratives are often authorized through proximity to male significance rather than independent cultural recognition.

Importantly the patriarchy represented in the work is not overtly violent or oppressive. It is subtle, affectionate and internalized. This aligns with what Pierre Bourdieu terms "symbolic violence" a form of domination that is accepted as natural and even loving (*Masculine Domination*, 1998). Fabi does not openly resist her identity as "Basheer's Fabi" instead she embraces it which makes the patriarchal structure harder to challenge. The title therefore reflects not coercion but consent shaped by culture. This raises critical questions: Is choice truly free when social norms offer no alternative models of selfhood for women? Does love neutralize inequality or does it mask it?

The work thus offers a right portrayal of womanhood under patriarchy - one marked not by overt oppression but by love, internalization and symbolic erasure. Reading Basheerintae Ediyae critically allows us to see how language naming and narrative framing

participate in the subtle reproduction of gender hierarchy, even within intimate and affectionate relationships.

Reading an author's literary works often creates a sense of intimacy with the writer's imagination, beliefs and world view. Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's writings are widely admired for their simplicity, humor, compassion and deep humanism. However, reading *Basheerintae Ediyae* by Fabi Basheer produces a significant shift in how one approaches and understands Basheer's works. The life narrative does not merely add biographical information, it fundamentally alters the interpretive lens through which Basheer's fiction and non fiction are read. After encountering Fabi's perspective, Basheer's writings appear more complex, more human and more ethically charged.

Before reading *Basheerintae Ediyae*, Basheer often appears to readers as a literary personality, a unique voice shaped by humor, irony, rebellion and empathy for the marginalized. His works project an image of a man who stands apart from conventional society, questioning authority and celebrating simplicity. However Fabi's narrative reveals the everyday human life behind this literary persona.Through her memories, Basheer is no longer just the writer who speaks for the poor, the mad, or the outcast, he becomes a husband struggling with illness, financial instability, emotional vulnerability and dependence. This shift humanises him deeply. As a result readers return to his works with a greater awareness of lived struggles that inform his writing. The humor now carries traces of pain and the simplicity appears hard- earned rather than merely stylistic.

Basheer's humor is one of the most celebrated aspects of his writing. After reading *Basheerintae Ediyae*, this humor feels less carefree and more layered. Fabi's account reveals the precariousness of their life together with illness, uncertainty and emotional strain. When readers revisit Basheer's works, laughter becomes inseparable from survival. The compassion

in his stories also gains depth. His empathy for marginalized characters like the poor, the mentally ill, the socially excluded etc now seems rooted in lived experience rather than abstract idealism. Fabi's narrative suggests that Basheer's sensitivity was shaped not only by ideology but also by personal vulnerability and dependence. This understanding enriches the ethical dimension of his writing. This awareness alters how readers perceive authorship itself. Basheer's works can no longer be seen as the product of an isolated genius. Instead, they appeared as outcomes of shared life in which Fabi's sacrifices and emotional labour played a crucial role. This realization encourages a more ethical and inclusive reading practice that acknowledges the unseen contributors to literary history. After encountering Fabi's voice, reading Basheer's works became an ethically charged act. The reader becomes more conscious of whose voices are heard and whose remains in the background. Fabi's narrative invites readers to read Basheer not only as a writer but as a figure embedded in relationships that shaped his life and work.

Chapter Three

The Gandharva of Malayalam Letters: A Biographical and Chronological Study of P. Padmarajan through Radhalakshmi's Memories

P. Padmarajan had a profound impact on the cinematic and literary scene in Kerala during the late twentieth century. His work navigated the delicate space between the harsh realities of human life and the enchanting world of myth. To grasp the timeline of his life is to engage in a story filled with foresight, passion, and an unyielding quest for the unconventional, as recounted in the memoir *Padmarajan: Ente Gandharvan* (Padmarajan: My Celestial Lover) by his wife, Radhalakshmi Padmarajan. This report gives a thorough analysis of his life events, viewed through the personal lens of his partner. It details his journey from the rural setting of Muthukulam to becoming a cultural icon, whose untimely passing continues to evoke deep sorrow in the Malayali community.

Padmarajan's creative vision began in the village of Muthukulam, near Haripad in the Alappuzha district, where he was born on May 23, 1945. He grew up in the princely state of Travancore as the sixth son of Thundathil Anantha Padmanabha Pillai and Njavarakkal Devaki Amma. His early years, as remembered by Radhalakshmi, involved a physical frailty that oddly fueled his mental growth. He suffered from chronic skin sores, which kept him almost constantly in his mother's arms. This closeness to his mother, Devaki Amma, immersed him in the oral storytelling traditions of the area.

Due to his health issues, Padmarajan could not attend formal school until the age of seven. Yet his intellectual growth flourished at home. He displayed remarkable intelligence, absorbing lessons from his elder brothers simply by listening to them read before he learned to write. When he finally entered school, he did so in the fifth grade, marking the beginning

of his "early bloomer" journey. This phase of his life infused his stories with the "smell of raw earth," deeply rooted in local traditions and psychological nuances first encountered through his mother's tales. As he transitioned into his teenage years, Padmarajan pursued higher education with a zeal that later appeared in his carefully crafted screenplays. He attended Mahatma Gandhi College and earned a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry from University College, Thiruvananthapuram, in 1963. Afterward, he studied Sanskrit for a year under the guidance of Cheppad Achyutha Warrier. This unique combination of chemistry and Sanskrit provided him with tools to explore both the scientific details of human behavior and the mythological aspects of Indian culture.

Padmarajan's professional life began in 1965 when he joined All India Radio (AIR) in Thrissur as a program announcer. Thrissur, known as Kerala's cultural capital, provided a dynamic environment for the young writer. It was here he began to build his reputation in literary circles, drawing inspiration from his experiences and the people he met at AIR for his early short stories and novels, such as Udakapolla. The most significant event during this time was his meeting with Radhalakshmi, a colleague from Chittoor, Palakkad. Their romance unfolded like a gripping story, full of deep devotion and fierce family opposition. When her family discovered the relationship after a year, they pressured her to resign from AIR and return to their ancestral home in Chittoor.

The strength of their connection showed in the drastic actions taken due to their separation. At just 21, Radhalakshmi attempted suicide by taking pills, an incident she recalls with painful honesty in the memoir. She was rescued when a cousin noticed her unsteady behavior while playing chess. Following this, she was sent to Calcutta and Madras to encourage a "change of heart." However, the separation didn't last; in Madras, she reunited with Padmarajan at his sister Padmavathi's house. Realizing they could not stay apart, their

families eventually accepted their love. After Padmarajan's transfer to Thiruvananthapuram in 1968, they married in 1970. This period of struggle and reconciliation laid the groundwork for the "beautiful romantic dramas" he would later create, often featuring couples challenging societal norms.

The 1970s marked Padmarajan's emergence as a key figure in the "second generation" of modern Malayalam literature. His first novel, *Nakshathrangale Kaaval* (The Stars Alone Guard Me), published in 1971, was a landmark achievement, winning him the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1972 at the young age of 27. His writing focused on individualism, human psychology, and the lives of those on society's fringes, tackling themes such as deceit, murder, mystery, and sexual jealousy. His venture into cinema was equally significant. In 1975, he wrote the screenplay for Prayanam, which marked Bharathan's directorial debut. Their collaboration introduced a "middle-path" cinema that merged commercial films with high art, bringing themes like human sexuality and unconventional relationships into the homes of middle-class Kerala and challenging conventional norms.

Throughout the late 70s, Padmarajan was prolific, writing screenplays for various directors, including I.V. Sasi, K.G. George, and Mohan. His scripts were known for their meticulous detail and captivating narratives. In 1979, he made his directorial debut with Peruvazhiyambalam (The Street as a Choultry), based on his novel of the same name. The film was a critical success, winning the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Malayalam and establishing him as a director who understood his characters intimately, having created them himself.

The 1980s marked the height of Padmarajan's artistic output. He directed 18 films, becoming one of the most important filmmakers in Indian cinema. In 1986, as his filmmaking career intensified, he retired from All India Radio to focus entirely on his art. This decade

featured themes of "transgressive love," memory, and the complicated dynamics of power and passion in relationships.

Radhalakshmi's book gives a rare window into the domestic life that supported his professional passion. The family resided in a "Baker model house" in Poojappura, Thiruvananthapuram, built on land bought from their neighbor, Shantha. Padmarajan played a vital role in designing their home, especially the long windows in his upstairs writing room that let him control the lighting. However, as his children—Ananthapadmanabhan and Madhavikkutty—grew older, he found he needed complete solitude to write. He often checked into hotels in Kovalam or Veli or spent weeks at a dedicated flat in Vazhuthacaud to escape the daily demands of family life.

His relationship with his children was filled with "overflowing love," as recalled by his son, Ananthapadmanabhan. His daughter, Madhavikkutty, affectionately called him "Achankutty" during moments of spoiling. This warmth at home contrasted sharply with the often dark themes in his work. Radhalakshmi notes that Padmarajan lived with a constant fear of an early death, stemming from the loss of many male relatives, including his brothers, at young ages. Radhalakshmi points out that Padmarajan was troubled by a fear of dying young, stemming from the early deaths of many male family members, including his brothers. This fear became an obsession, causing him to avoid sleeping alone, a detail that adds depth to the character of the "Gandharvan" and highlights the "looming sadness" in much of his work. Padmarajan's films during this time often focused on strong female leads who defied societal norms. He had a knack for discovering talent, introducing actors like Jayaram, Rahman, and Ashokan, and bringing out powerful performances from established stars like Mohanlal, Mammootty, and Thilakan.

The last year of Padmarajan's life was closely tied to his final film, *Njan Gandharvan* (1991). This project marked a shift from his usual grounded storytelling to a lyrical interpretation of the Gandharva myth. In Kerala's folklore, Gandharvas are celestial musicians whose appearances on Earth are associated with the enchantment and tragedy of young women. These tales were traditionally kept private, as it was believed that Gandharvas would curse those who revealed their existence. Radhalakshmi's memoir describes the "evil omens" during the film's production. After starting the script, Padmarajan suffered a cardiac arrest and mild stroke, halting work for six months. Upon resuming, he narrowly escaped death when part of his house's roof collapsed. Further delays ensued when a bird struck his flight to Mumbai, where he intended to select lead actor Nitish Bharadwaj. Many friends and family, including Radhalakshmi, urged him to quit, concerned about the mythological consequences.

Despite these challenges, Padmarajan felt compelled to complete what he viewed as an exploration of existence's paradox, depicting a celestial being willing to trade heaven for the complex, painful, and beautiful "Maya" (illusions) of human life. The film, featuring Nitish Bharadwaj and Suparna Anand, was a visual treat, using the scent of plumeria flowers and butterfly imagery to create a dreamlike atmosphere. However, upon its release, the film was misunderstood and did not achieve immediate commercial success, which troubled Padmarajan. Years later, it gained cult status as a unique and poetic piece of Malayalam cinema.

Radhalakshmi recounts the final events of Padmarajan's life with touching detail. In January 1991, following the release of *Njan Gandharvan*, he began a promotional tour of theaters in Kerala, joined by actor Nitish Bharadwaj, producer Goodknight Mohan, and distributor Gandhimati Balan.

The tour brought them to Kozhikode, where they stayed at Hotel Paramount Towers. Radhalakshmi recalls Padmarajan observing the audiences and being surprised to see a large number of college girls attending the matinee shows, a demographic shift he had not anticipated. On January 23, after a day of theater visits, the group retreated to the hotel. Padmarajan passed away in his sleep during the early hours of January 24, 1991, due to a massive cardiac arrest.

His death at 45 shocked the state. His body was taken to his ancestral home in Muthukulam and cremated with full state honors. The timing of his passing, as he promoted a film about a Gandharva returning to the heavens, created a lasting mythical aura around him. Radhalakshmi's memoir ends with the observation that he seemed aware his end was approaching, confirming the premonitions he had harbored since his youth.

In the years after his death, Radhalakshmi and their son, Ananthapadmanabhan, became the main guardians of Padmarajan's legacy. Radhalakshmi's book, Padmarajan: Ente Gandharvan, originally published in the early 90s (with editions in 2003 and 2007), has become an essential resource for understanding the man behind the films. Ananthapadmanabhan, who also pursued writing, published several of his father's unfinished works, like *Pirranaallkutty*, ensuring that even his early ideas reached audiences. The memoir shows that Padmarajan's influence went beyond his own films. His collaborations with Bharathan and scripts for directors like Joshi and I.V. Sasi formed a film-making style that still impacts contemporary Malayalam cinema. The themes he pioneered, such as portraying nature as a character, exploring the psychological depth of female desire, and treating death poetically, remain central to discussions in Kerala cinema.

The life of P. Padmarajan, as chronicled by Radhalakshmi, was filled with both bright moments and shadows. It began with stories shared on a mother's lap in Muthukulam and

ended in a hotel room in Kozhikode. The experiences between these two points transformed the Malayali cultural landscape. Through the memoir, we see not only a "master storyteller" but also a husband who feared the dark, a father who took his children on research trips into the world of magic, and a creator who felt the "bad omens" of his final film as a physical burden. Radhalakshmi's retelling emphasizes that Padmarajan was never a distant observer of life. Whether reflecting on the "transgressive love" of his youth or the "raw and explosive passion" of his characters, he experienced the emotions he depicted. He aimed to create a space where intellect and emotions could connect, devoid of "pretensions of high art" and the "crass vulgarity" of commercial films. As he slipped into eternal rest that January morning in 1991, he left behind a body of work that continues to reflect the "humanly crafted" Gandharva—a being who, like Padmarajan himself, was "attentive, kind, romantic, and gentle," always yearning for a life among the mortals he understood deeply.

The literary and cinematic history of Kerala closely connects to the multifaceted creativity of P. Padmarajan. His works delve into the depths of human desire, loneliness, and the supernatural. However, behind the public image of the "Gandharvan," the celestial lover, lies a story shaped not by Padmarajan himself but by the woman who was closest to him. Radhalekshmi Padmarajan's memoir, Padmarajan *Ente Gandharvan* (Padmarajan, My Gandharvan), is an important contribution to Malayalam domestic biography. In this work, the author's identity is not just influenced by her husband; it is intentionally shaped around him. She expresses her sense of self through closeness, service, and the eventual stewardship of a legacy that goes beyond her husband's life.

Examining Radhalekshmi's identity is part of a larger social and cultural trend in Kerala's history: the "wife memoir." This genre serves both as a private account and as public recognition of the domestic work that supports male creativity. Unlike the bold self-

awareness in Kamala Surayya's *Ente Katha* (*My Story*), which aimed to break down traditional boundaries of female identity, Radhalekshmi's narrative seeks to uphold them. Her identity reflects an act of devotion where the personal "I" blends into the collective "We" of marriage, and eventually into the singular "He" of her late husband. To understand identity formation in Radhalekshmi Padmarajan's memoir, we must consider the changing status of women in Kerala during the 20th century. The shift from the strict and often confining structures of the Namboodiri Illam to the modern middle-class nuclear family redefined what female agency could be.

In earlier decades, as documented by Devaki Nilayamgode in *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*, female identity was shaped by "Antharjanam," or "people who live inside." Women were often confined to their homes, prevented from being seen by even close male relatives after a certain age, and lived lives focused on rituals and traditions that allowed little personal expression. Their identities were entirely communal and patriarchal; they were defined as daughters, wives, or widows, with their survival linked to their compliance with these roles. While Radhalekshmi's generation moved away from such severe physical confinement, the psychological burden of living "under the shadow of others" remained. For the wives of well-known men, this shadow wasn't cast by the walls of an Illam but by the prominent intellectual and public lives of their husbands. In the Namboodiri community, change began when families started educating their daughters and encouraging wives to take charge of their lives. However, in the fields of arts and literature, a different deal emerged: the educated wife often found her main purpose in supporting her husband's career intellectually and emotionally.

The title of Radhalekshmi's memoir, Padmarajan Entae Gandharvan, sets up a mythological lens through which she sees her marriage and herself. In Malayali folklore, a

Gandharvan is a celestial being known for beauty and talent, who comes to the mortal world to enchant women. By presenting Padmarajan as a Gandharvan, Radhalekshmi elevates him to a divine status.

This mythological framing plays several roles in shaping her identity. First, it raises her from the status of a common housewife to that of a chosen partner of a divine being. If Padmarajan is a Gandharvan, then Radhalekshmi is the human anchor that allows him, even if briefly, to remain on earth. Her identity is thus made sacred by the extraordinary nature of her partner. Second, the myth gives a narrative structure to the tragedy of his early death. Just as the Gandharvan must eventually return to the heavens, Padmarajan's passing is seen as a divine departure rather than a simple biological event.

Using religious and mythological language to describe a spouse appears frequently in Malayalam memoirs by women. Rosy Thomas, in *Ivan Ente Priya CJ*, chose a title with clear biblical references ("He, My Beloved CJ") to express her devotion to playwright C.J. Thomas. For Radhalekshmi, the "Gandharvan" label is broader. It captures Padmarajan's quirks, his creative passion, and his occasional distance from everyday family life. By taking on the role of the wife of a "celestial being," Radhalekshmi gives up her own independent identity for a spiritual partnership. This approach is common in marriage biographies, where a woman's self-understanding is shaped by the unique nature of the union. The memoir focuses not on Radhalekshmi's growth as an individual but on her development as the companion to a genius.

Radhalekshmi describes her life as a series of negotiations with Padmarajan's creative process. Her identity is built through "functional invisibility." She ensures the silence needed for his writing, manages the finances, and mediates his relationship with the outside world. The Labor of the Muse This invisibility is not shown as a form of oppression, but as an

important contribution to the art that Padmarajan created. In this sense, Radhalekshmi sees herself as a co-creator. Her identity is formed in the heat of his creativity. This reflects the experiences of other women in the Kerala literary scene who moved to different parts of the state or to Madras to support their husbands' various projects in theater and cinema. The causal relationship here is clear: Padmarajan's success proves Radhalekshmi's effective domestic management. Her self-worth is confirmed by the awards he received. This is a subtle but widespread form of identity formation where the woman's "career" is linked to the husband's legacy. Unlike Kamala Das, whose self-discovery challenged societal norms and focused on deeply personal experiences, Radhalekshmi's awakening is entirely shaped by the domestic sphere. Radhalekshmi's identity undergoes a major change after the sudden death of Padmarajan in 1991. The latter half of the memoir and her life in the public eye center on her role as the "guardian of the memory". In this period, she is known as the "widow of the legend."

The grief described in *Padmarajan Entae Gandharvan* is all-consuming. It shows the strength of her bond with him. In traditional Kerala society, especially among the Namboodiris, widows faced extreme hardship and social exclusion; they had to suffer for the "crime" of outliving their husbands. Radhalekshmi flips this narrative. Instead of experiencing social death, her widowhood marks a public rebirth of a new identity: the official biographer. By writing the memoir, she claims the Padmarajan story. Her identity becomes deeply connected to how the public remembers him. She becomes the go-to person for the media looking for stories, the chair of the foundation named after him, and the one who decides which parts of his life get shared. This form of power stems completely from her status as a widow, yet it gives her a public voice that she uses effectively.

The shift from the private 'Radha' to the public "Radhalekshmi Padmarajan" involves careful attention to the past. The memoir emphasizes romance and beauty while often overlooking the everyday struggles that come with any long-term relationship. This focus on the ideal aspects of marriage is crucial for her identity. To be the widow of a Gandharvan, the marriage must have felt like a divine event. This pattern also appears in the life of Kamala Surayya. Her family ties, as the daughter of V.M. Nair and Nalapat Balamani Amma, significantly shaped her public persona. Still, she sought independence from those ties. In contrast, Radhalekshmi doesn't seek to break away. Her satisfaction comes from completing the circle: being his wife in life and his voice after death.

Radhalekshmi's identity is closely tied to the special cultural status Padmarajan has in Kerala. He was a filmmaker who connected commercial and parallel cinema. He was also a writer who won the Sahitya Akademi Award. His personal charm was as important as his creative work. Being married to a man known as a romantic icon can put pressure on a wife's identity. Radhalekshmi's memoir shows that she felt the need to be the "perfect" partner for such a celebrated figure. This includes a level of self-monitoring and taking in the traditional expectations of the "muse." The book emphasizes how her identity was formed by the expectations of Padmarajan's fans and colleagues. She describes her role in his life not as a burden but as a privilege. This perspective is important because it changes what could be seen as self-erasure into a way of finding herself. She is not "just a wife." She is the woman who could love and understand a man whom many could only admire from afar.

The language used in Radhalekshmi's memoir is very important. She uses a style that's both personal and elevated. She uses the Malayalam language to create a sense of nostalgia and respect. This choice of language helps her build her identity. By using language, she makes her domestic experiences sound like art. She rarely talks about her

struggles. Even when she describes the difficulties of Padmarajan's career, such as the risks of filmmaking and his long periods of absence, her tone remains supportive. This consistent language reinforces her identity as a loyal woman. It is like a humanized version of a saint's life, where the saint's the husband and the one telling the story is the wife.

Radhaleshmi's work is in conversation with female voices in Kerala. If Devaki Nilayamgode wrote about the denial of identity and Kamala Surayya wrote about the explosion of identity, Radhalekshmi Padmarajan writes about the integration of identity. She integrates her selfhood into the than-life persona of her husband.This integration is a strategy for women in patriarchal cultures to survive and thrive. By becoming part of something "great" they share in that greatness. The memoir is an account of this shared greatness. It provides the "side of the legend but it is a humanity that is always viewed through the lens of devotion. In conclusion Radhalekshmi's memoir is an example of how identity can be formed through the careful and intentional centering of another person. Radhalekshmi Padmarajan uses the figure of her husband, the "Gandharvan" as a mirror in which she sees her best self. Her identity is constructed through the roles of the chosen consort, the anchor, the intellectual supporter and the final custodian.

The memoir serves as a historical document that captures a specific mode of Malayali womanhood. One that finds empowerment not in separation from patriarchy but in the skillful negotiation and management of it. Her identity is not lost in the shadow of the Gandharvan; rather she finds her voice by becoming the person who tells his story to the world. In doing so she ensures that as long as the name Padmarajan is remembered, her own name. And her version of their shared life. Will be inextricably linked to it. The book remains a testament to the idea that for some identities not an individual pursuit but a collaborative masterpiece, where the boundaries between the self and the beloved are beautifully and permanently

blurred. Through references and a nuanced understanding of the socio- landscape we see that Radhalekshmi's narrative is a sophisticated performance of selfhood that uses the "Gandharvan" not as a mask but as a throne from which she speaks with authority, about love, art and the enduring power of the domestic sphere.

The merging of identity in Padmarajan Entae Gandharvan has important sociological implications for studying the Malayali middle class. It shows a time when "companionate marriage" became the ideal, yet the power dynamics still leaned heavily toward the male patriarch, especially when that patriarch was a cultural icon. The wife's identity was "upgraded" from past seclusion but still connected to the husband's career. This "upgraded" identity enabled women like Radhalekshmi to engage in public life—attending awards ceremonies and mingling with film industry elites—but only as an extension of their husbands. The memoir illustrates how Radhalekshmi managed this by becoming a "cultural diplomat" for Padmarajan. She represented the acceptable, domestic face of his often radical and boundary-pushing art.

In the end, it can be said that writing the memoir was Radhalekshmi's most radical act. By putting pen to paper, she changed from being the subject of Padmarajan's world to being its author. While she uses this authorship to honor him, the act of writing itself shows a self that survived him. Her identity, shaped around him during his life, became a tool for her own survival and success after his death. The "Gandharvan" may have been the center of the book, but the voice that speaks, the eyes that observe, and the heart that remembers belong entirely to Radhalekshmi. Ultimately, the memoir is just as much about the development of her resilience as it is about the man she loved. It is a detailed, personal account of a woman who lost herself in another, then found herself again by sharing the story of that loss.

The detailed accounts in the memoir, from descriptions of Padmarajan's writing habits to the small details of their family travels, create a world where the husband is the sun and the wife is the Earth. It is a world of gravity and orbits. For the reader, the message is clear: identity is not always a lonely journey. For Radhalekshmi Padmarajan, identity was a constellation, with her as the star that remained fixed in the sky long after the Gandharvan had disappeared into the clouds. This report has explored this constellation through mythology, sociology, and literary tradition, offering a clear understanding of a woman whose life became a tribute to a man's memory.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

The genre of life writing holds an important place in literature because it preserves lived experiences, personal memories, emotions, and historical truths through individual stories. Unlike fiction, life writing draws its strength from authenticity and emotional honesty. Memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, diaries, and personal narratives act as valuable cultural records that link private lives with public history. In today's literary world, life writing provides a vital space for marginalized voices, especially those of women, allowing them to gain recognition and establish their identities. This project studies *Basheerintae Ediyae* by Fabi Basheer and *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* by Radhalekshmi Padmarajan to explore how memoir writing serves not only as a reflection on a loved one's life but also as a declaration of the writer's own literary identity.

Both memoirs focus on the lives of two prominent figures in Malayalam literature and cinema, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer and Padmarajan. However, these works are more than just biographies from an outside perspective. They offer intimate narratives rooted in emotional closeness, memory, affection, pain, companionship, and loss. Since both books were written after the deaths of their husbands, the writing process itself becomes deeply emotional and reflective. The memoirs evoke a sense of remembrance and longing, while also celebrating the personalities, struggles, creativity, and humanity of Basheer and Padmarajan. Through these narratives, the wives turn personal grief into literary expression.

One key takeaway from this project is that both texts go beyond the traditional roles assigned to women in literary history. Initially, Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan were mainly seen as the wives of famous men. However, through their memoirs, they position themselves as writers with unique narrative voices and emotional depth. Their

writings show that women standing beside celebrated figures possess their own insights, memories, and creative talents. Thus, the memoirs become acts of self-expression and identity. These women are no longer silent observers in the lives of great men; they emerge as storytellers who preserve and interpret history through their own experiences.

Another important insight from these memoirs is the humanization of legendary figures. Publicly, Basheer and Padmarajan are remembered as exceptional creative geniuses. Yet, in these memoirs, they are portrayed not just as icons but as husbands, fathers, companions, and ordinary people with emotions, flaws, habits, fears, and vulnerabilities. The memoirs reveal their childhoods, personal struggles, relationships, moments of joy, and emotional conflicts in a deeply personal way. This human aspect fosters intimacy between the reader and the personalities depicted. Readers can see the lives behind the fame and understand that greatness is often shaped by ordinary experiences and relationships.

The memoirs also capture the cultural and social landscape of Kerala during various times. Through everyday events, family bonds, home environments, artistic journeys, and emotional exchanges, the texts document social realities and evolving cultural values. In this way, the memoirs serve not only as personal stories but also as social and cultural records. They preserve memories that might otherwise fade with time. Life writing thus becomes a repository of emotional history, where personal memory contributes to collective cultural memory.

Furthermore, this project highlights the emotional impact of memoir as a literary form. Both texts express sincerity, affection, nostalgia, and emotional truth. The writers do not create idealized images of their husbands; instead, they portray them with realism and warmth. This honesty lends credibility to the narratives and strengthens the emotional bond between the text and the reader. The memoirs illustrate how memory itself can be a creative

process. The writers choose, arrange, and recount events not just to inform but to relive moments and maintain emotional ties. Thus, remembering transforms into an act of literary creation.

The study of these works also underscores the significance of women's writing in Malayalam literature. Traditionally, women's contributions have often been overlooked or restricted to domestic roles. However, memoirs like *Basheerintae Ediyae* and *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* challenge this limitation by showcasing women as intellectual and emotional players in literary culture. Their writings demonstrate sensitivity, insight, narrative ability, and emotional intelligence. Through life writing, these women carve out a space in the literary field and contribute to the larger conversation about women's identity and authorship.

Another major conclusion from this project is that life writing blurs the line between the personal and the literary. The experiences shared in these memoirs come from real life, but the way they are conveyed transforms them into literature. Memory, emotion, language, and storytelling come together to create narratives that are both personal and artistic. The writers use straightforward yet impactful narration to engage readers emotionally. Their honesty and emotional depth make the memoirs relatable and timeless. Readers can connect with themes such as love, companionship, loss, struggle, memory, and resilience—universal aspects of human experience.

Additionally, these memoirs reveal the quiet yet vital roles women play in the creative journeys of famous men. Behind the public success of Basheer and Padmarajan were relationships built on care, emotional support, patience, and companionship. By documenting these realities, the memoirs acknowledge the emotional work of women that often goes

unnoticed in public narratives. Thus, the texts challenge male-centered literary histories and provide a more balanced understanding of creativity and success.

Ultimately, this project shows that life writing is not just about documenting facts or events. It focuses on preserving emotions, relationships, memories, and identities. Through the memoirs of Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan, life writing becomes an act of remembrance, healing, resistance, and self-discovery. The texts lovingly uphold the legacy of Basheer and Padmarajan while also establishing the literary presence of their wives. The memoirs function on multiple levels: as personal reflections, cultural records, emotional narratives, and feminist expressions.

The significance of these memoirs is in their ability to maintain emotional intimacy while still being literary works. Personal narratives often run the risk of being too sentimental or limited to private experiences. However, *Basheerintae Ediyae* and *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* rise above this limitation. The writers effectively turn their memories into meaningful reflections on life, love, art, and human relationships. The emotional honesty in these works allows readers to connect deeply with the narratives, even if they don't know much about Basheer or Padmarajan's personal lives. This universality is one of the greatest strengths of life writing. Readers do not just witness another person's memories; they are reminded of their own relationships, losses, and experiences.

Both memoirs show that memory works in a selective and emotional way, not just chronologically. The writers move through moments of emotional importance instead of listing historical facts in order. This narrative style gives the texts a natural, human quality. Memory in life writing is not just a mechanical record; it is deeply tied to feelings, attachments, and personal interpretations. Through selective remembering, the writers recreate the emotional atmosphere of the past. Readers are invited not just to learn about

events, but also to feel the emotional weight of those moments. This emotional connection sets memoirs apart from regular biographies.

Another important conclusion from this project is the link between creativity and personal life. Both Basheer and Padmarajan are remembered for their artistic talent, originality, and contributions to Malayalam culture. However, through the memoirs written by their wives, readers see how creative people are shaped by their surroundings, family lives, emotional experiences, and relationships. The memoirs reveal the struggles, anxieties, habits, and emotional complexities behind their creative successes. Such portrayals help readers grasp that art does not develop in a vacuum. It is influenced by everyday experiences, human relationships, and emotional truths. Therefore, the memoirs are valuable for understanding not just Basheer and Padmarajan's characters, but also the emotional backdrop that fueled their creativity.

The project also emphasizes that women's narratives often add a unique emotional sensitivity to life writing. A wife's perspective differs significantly from that of a historian or critic because it comes from intimacy and shared experiences. Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan write from places of emotional closeness, allowing them to capture details that public narratives may miss. Small domestic moments, conversations, habits, emotional challenges, and acts of love become significant parts of the memoirs. These details may seem ordinary, but together they form a vivid and realistic picture of the personalities being remembered. In this way, the memoirs challenge the view that only public achievements define a person's greatness. They highlight the importance of humanity, relationships, and emotional connections.

Basheerintae Ediyae and *Padmarajan Ente Gandharvan* are significant contributions to the genre of life writing in Malayalam literature. These memoirs exemplify how personal

experiences can transform into meaningful literary expressions that connect individual lives with broader social and cultural realities. They reveal the emotional richness of human relationships while also emphasizing the rise of women's voices in literary discourse. Through these works, Fabi Basheer and Radhalekshmi Padmarajan turn memory into literature and grief into creative expression. Their memoirs remind readers that behind every celebrated life lies another voice quietly carrying memories, emotions, and untold stories. By bringing these voices into literature, life writing enriches both literary tradition and human understanding.

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