

When Plot Recedes to the Primacy of Presence: Narrative and Narrativity of Babu Abraham's *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal*

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Abstract: *A narrative, as is widely known, can be defined as the representation of a string of events or "the recounting of a fictional event" (Gerald Prince) while Narrativity refers to a variable quality by which a narrative is defined (Porter Abbot). This paper explores the qualitative aspects of the memoir Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal (2025) which offers new literary grounds by emphasizing the persistence of a consciousness across time over the conventional developments of plot. The memoir encourages readers to accompany this persistent consciousness, and its engagement with existential crises provides a distinctive reading experience. The present study examines the narrative features of the memoir with particular emphasis on the narrativeness and narrative gravity. It further investigates the factors of narrativity that elicit a narrative response from readers.*

Keyterms: *narrative, narrativity, presence, sequentiality, tellability, persistence of consciousness, narrative tension, narrative gravity and narrative response.*

Narrative is generally defined as the representation of a string of events or a "recounting a fictional event" (Gerald Prince 186). While narrative refers to the structure of events, narrativity refers to the qualitative aspects which makes a narrative readable, tellable, thoughtful and responsive. Narrativity plays a pivotal role as it imparts unity and wholeness to the narrative structure by integrating the narrative and non -narrative elements under control. As Porter Abbott puts it, narrativity is the defining feature of a narrative like "the lyricism of a lyric" or "the descriptiveness of a description ("Narrativity"). The theorists like Sternberg, Sturgess, Fludernik, Audet and Simon-Shoshan regard narrativity as a distinctive quality of a narrative which has evolved as a focal term of narrative analytics. In this context, Babu Abraham's *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* (2025) reserves special attention as it offers a distinct reading experience by shifting away from the plot driven narrative structure to the primacy of the presence, consciousness and reader engagement.

Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal is an influential and inspiring Malayalam memoir that records the lived experiences of an ordinary family in a marginalised community and "the history of a generation's hunger and pain" (Foreword-*Kalbharanikal*). Though the memoir apparently centres on the struggles of the narrator against the social, cultural, political as well as the religious hierarchical society of the time, there is an immanent focus on the resistance and resilience of his mother against the social taboos, religious dominance and patriarchal codes around her. She challenges

the norms and conventions that forbid a woman from making a living and rearing up her progeny alone in a society. Her resilience enables her to prevail over all the obstacles that confront her determination. Though deep-rooted in personal memory, and spans beyond individual life history, the memoir reconstructs everyday life, marginal voices, and formative historical moments through a series of interwoven recollections. Rather than following a strictly linear autobiographical trajectory, the text unfolds itself episodically, inferring meaning from the cumulative resonance of remembered events. The saga of its persistent readership and the recent release of its forty eighth edition endorse its enduring relevance and narrative appeal. As a work of life writing, *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* occupies a distinctive position within the memoir genre by blending personal testimony with collective memory, thereby inviting readers to engage not merely with a life lived but with a story shaped and made tellable.

Drawing on H. Porter Abbott's theory of narrativity, this paper argues that *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* formulates narrativity not merely through the recounting of personal experience but through narrative coherence, temporal organization, and experiential resonance, thereby achieving a unified memoir form that invites strong narrative response and secures its unique position within the genre. The memoir emphasises the persistence of an enduring consciousness across time. The speaker is not retrospective with regard to his experience, but lives within the experiences which captures the attention of the readers who accompany the presence throughout.

The chief objective of the study is to explore the narrativity of *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* using H. Porter Abbott's theoretical framework. It also tries to identify the narrative strategies through which the memoir achieves coherence and unity despite its autobiographical and episodic nature. The study also attempts to examine how the text's narrativity generates sustained narrative response and reader engagement. This study is done by considering the denominators of narrativity such as Sequentiality, Eventfulness, Tellability, Narrative Competence and Experientiality, and Fictionality put forth by Abbott in his essay "Narrativity" – which he regards as the tools to evaluate narrativity.

Babu Abraham puts an indelible image in the Malayalam literary scenario with his autobiographical and memoir style writing of his debut *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal*. He could successfully engage the readers with his narrative features that

unravels the lived experience, struggle and success. What makes him more popular is his focus on memory, endurance and the persistence of consciousness and unyielding spirit shaped by his struggles against poverty, marginalisation and existential crisis. He could brilliantly transform his personal live history to a reflective narrative experience that resonates with dignity, meaning and selfhood. The memoir challenges the conventional plot -centric pattern of story -telling and keeps his narrative away from the dramatic actions to the everyday life and experiences of the marginalized community. The narrative is not developed on a conflict- crisis- resolution pattern whereas it foregrounds social hierarchy, and struggles of the marginalised for existence. Moreover, this is not just the struggle of Babu Abraham against poverty and adversity but this marks the unyielding and uncompromising fight of a woman belongs to a marginalised community against patriarchy, social taboos, religion and all other adversities. “[...] the life stories of those whose doors of possibilities were slammed shut. The life of a mother who wiped, cleaned, and filled the stone jars that would have been abandoned with broken edges in kambilikandam” (Foreword).

‘Narrative’ is a term defined frequently and diversely, such that it engages the attention of literary pursuers and critics with multifarious perceptions and concepts. More often the word is applied as a synonym to story and plot. While Merriam Webster defines narrative simply as ‘something that is narrated: story, account’, the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “a story or a description of a series of events”. In Oxford Dictionary it is “a spoken or written account of connected events; a story”. Generally, narrative is viewed as ‘the representation of an event or an action’. Michael Toolan, Professor of Applied English Linguistics defines narrative as an ‘adjective’ which means ‘characterized by or relating to storytelling’ (Narrative: a Critical Linguistic Introduction 41). To Hayden White, it is ‘a pan-global fact of culture’ (“The Value of Narrativity” 5) and to Roland Barthes, “like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural” (Introduction to the Structural analysis of narrative 237). For the scholars who study or analyse narrative as an artifact, it functions as an umbrella term which encompasses the elements of narrator, narration, narrative technologies, narratology, narrativity etc. Of these, the narrator plays a pivotal role as one is assigned the duty of narration through which the ideas and perceptions of the creator are expressed. It becomes feasible with the help of narrative techniques and strategies

through which one can develop the narrative, make it simple, complicated and interesting, and thereby attracts the readers into it.

Porter Abbott in his essay “Narrativity” expounds how the term is used both as a characteristic and as a scalar concept. As a scalar term, it is a referent to certain features like narrativeness, tellability, sequentiality, fictionality, emplotment, eventfulness, narrative competence or a quality which instigates a narrative impact on the reader or audience and “experientiality” (a term coined by Monika Fludernik in “Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology”). Abbott also explains narrativity as a characteristic feature of a narrative which narrativizes the corpus of a text and at the same time gives a space for the readers who interpret the text as narrative (“Narrativity”). Scholars like Robert Scholes relate the term to the ability and experience of the reader and employs the word “to refer to the process by which a perceiver actively constructs a story from the fictional data provided through any narrative medium. A fiction is presented to us in the form of a narration (a narrative text) that guides as our own narrativity seeks to complete the process that will achieve a story” (Semiotics and Interpretation 60).

Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal challenges the classical plot structure that follows the pattern such as exposition, conflict, rising action, climax and resolution. The memoir is not limited to a single conflict moving to a climax but brings into fore a series of continuous events into progression. It suggests that life remains static for the marginalised communities since it is continued as a persistent condition of struggle. Here the plot driven pattern is replaced by a process driven narrative, complementing the quality and experiential force of the narrative. In short, the memoir’s refusal of narrative closure does not affect its narrativehood but significantly enhances its narrativeness by foregrounding continuity, irreversibility, and experiential endurance.

At the very outset, the memoir prepares the readers for a narrative rooted in lived reality rather than on the dramatic action. The evocative description of the native place, Kambilikandam, and its slow paced and gradual progression underscores the setting of the memoir. Concurrently, the life of the narrator is shaped by time, poverty and social stagnation. He draws the readers into the social taboos, and customs prevalent in the society, dominated by patriarchal values, where only the birth of the baby boy is celebrated, where poverty hinders them from having medical care at childbirth and hardships prevent access to education, the clergy appear both as a boon and bane. “Our grass house which was made of mud bricks, had two small rooms with

half walls. Perhaps anticipating the hunger that would arise after the pain of childbirth subsided, my mother made porridge and gave it to both of her children to drink and kept the rest for herself" (*Kalbharanikal* 21). Thus, the memoir pervades in a personal consciousness of poverty and social justice.

Eventfulness is another tool for scaling narrativity which is measured according to the narrative event's non-trivial change of state takes completion in the actual world of the fictional narrative. For Schmid narrativity hence depends on the non-triviality of events. Five key variables are put forward by him to get the non-triviality of an event like its relevance, unpredictability, persistence, irreversibility, and non-iterativity ("Narrativity and Eventfulness" 17-34). The narrativity of the memoir is strengthened through the eventfulness without the conventional development of the plot. Father's abandonment of the household disregarding his responsibilities, the ensuing decision to commit suicide, the dominance of the church over moral, social and economic decisions, marks the non-triviality of the events. The memoir also exemplifies unpredictability, persistence and irreversibility of the events marks another feature of narrativity. The father's abrupt abandonment of the family, leaving them to darkness, debt and poverty is deeply unpredictable. In a social structure where father is expected to be the guardian and provider, his disappearance violates both cultural and native expectations. Mother's decision to commit suicide along with her children shocks the readers and her later decision to refrain from her intent, as prompted by the elder child's suggestion to beg for alms adds another layer of unpredictability. Father's desertion of the household absolving himself from all the parental obligations is not just a trivial but an enduring condition. Consequently, poverty, trauma, humiliations, and social vulnerability persist throughout the narrative. Poverty also serves as background that fuels all the actions in the memoir. For Paul Ricoeur, narrativity functions through emplotment which is the organised selection of plots imparting coherence and meaning. He relates narrativity with the "pre-understanding" of our historical mindedness or historical intelligibility (*Time and Narrative* 4). Hayden White also shares the same idea while relating narrativity with the perception of meaning which is produced by the emplotment and coherence of a story ("The Value of Narrativity" 26).

The memoir unfolds into a clear chronological structure as the narratorial voices spans from 1950 to 1998. Through this temporal sequencing, the narrator unravels his life story from boyhood to youth, mapping a continuous trajectory of lived experience.

This chronological progression strengthens the memoir's sequential narrativity, as events are sequentially presented, allowing readers to trace the accumulation of suffering, endurance, and growth over time. Along these decades, the narrative reiterates a life born and shaped by misery, marked by the persistent bitterness of existence. Poverty, illness, social discrimination, and abandonment form a recurring pattern rather than isolated crisis. The chronology does not merely record time; rather it intensifies narrativity by showing how hardship persists and transcends across different stages of life.

The emotional and the ethical layers of the sequential narrative centres around the mother, whom the narrator remembers with profound gratitude. Significantly, her contemplated suicide becomes a turning point: after renouncing death, she emerges as a figure of extraordinary strength. From this moment onwards, the reader encounters her not as a victim but as a mighty woman who actively resists oppressive forces—social conventions, patriarchy, religious authority, poverty, and disease. This transformation deepens narrativity by introducing moral and psychological development within the chronological flow. Porter Abbot identifies narrativity with sequentiality as not simply putting one event after the other but insisting on a causal connection in between the events. Both White and Ricoeur relate narrativity to historicity. While Ricoeur shows narrativity as human understanding of time and history (*Time and Narrative* 4) White shows narrativity as how culture produces meaning and truth (*The Value* 26).

In most recently, narrativity is used to refer to the play of suspense, curiosity and surprise, between represented and communicated time. The memoir envisages strong narrativity through the regulation of lived experience over time. The memoir exemplifies Sternberg's idea of narrativity as the interplay of curiosity, suspense, and surprise between narrated events and their disclosure, even though its surface structure appears episodic and reflective.

When my father abandoned us and left, my mother became the head of the family. Poverty and hunger became our daily companions. Even when we were suffering from severe difficulties, my mother did not allow herself to break down. "Don't ask anyone for anything. We should live with dignity," she said firmly. (Kalbharanikal 36)

After that, she began to shoulder everything herself. She took up all kinds of work—carrying cement sacks, unloading goods, and doing whatever labour was available—without any hesitation. When the union leaders objected and questioned her, she chased them away without fear. She believed that there was no shame in any kind of work, as long as one did not steal from anyone. Her resistance is repeatedly enacted through decisive actions. She single-handedly raises her children after being abandoned by her husband, refusing external interference in their lives. When asked to move to the ancestral home, she boldly asserts her autonomy, declaring that no one has the right to dictate the affairs of her and her children. She confronts religious authority by questioning the priest and challenging the norms imposed by the Church.

When relatives suggested that she should take the children and move to the ancestral house, she replied boldly that no one had the right to decide the fate of her children. She made it clear that she alone would take responsibility for them. “Are you trying to frighten us by saying God will punish us?” she asked the priest. When the priest tried to impose church rules and discipline, she questioned him openly. She did not submit blindly to religious authority. Her courage shook even those who were used to unquestioned obedience. (36)

She drives away union leaders who attempt to prevent her from carrying cement sacks, asserting her right to labour with dignity. Her ethical stance is clearly articulated when she advises her children that there is no shame in any form of honest work, as long as it involves no theft or exploitation. “Whatever work you do, do it with self-respect. There is no dishonour in labour” (36). Even in her response to the return of her husband, the mother’s moral strength is evident. She accepts him without bitterness and tells her children that they are free to leave if they cannot accept their father. This moment reveals her commitment not to resentment but to ethical autonomy and emotional maturity, reinforcing her role as the guiding force of the family.

From a narratological perspective, the memoir demonstrates strong narrativity through chronological sequencing regulated by ethical meaning. While the story unfolds year by year, narrativity is not driven by dramatic plot twists but by the sustained interplay of suffering, resistance, and moral formation. In Sternberg’s terms, narrativity here acts as a regulating principle, organizing memory, experience, and emotional response across time. The chronological structure thus supports a deeper

narrativity rooted in endurance and survival rather than conventional storytelling climax.

Narrativity becomes clearer when it is related to tellability. It is tellability or narratability that makes a story worth telling. Tellability is the variable potential of an unnarrativized story and narrativity is the variable success of its narrativizing. Events or actions are more or less tellable but the way it is told reflects its narrativity and hence a story may have different narrativity according to the way it is told or narrated. In Herman's precise wording: "Situations and events can be more or less tellable; the ways in which they are told can . . . display different degrees of narrativity" (Story 100).

Bruner asserts that without tellability there can be no narrativity ("The Narrative Construction of Reality" 18). Tellability is essential to Fludernik's experience based concept of narrativity because tellability is the outcome of three narratorial operations—reviewing past events, reproducing and evaluating them. Narrativity is constituted when these three aspects join together ("Natural Narratology and Cognitive Parameters" 245). In narratological theory, tellability refers to what makes a story worth telling—what gives it a point or communicative urgency (Labov; Herman; Hühn). While tellability is closely related to narrativity, it is not identical to it: tellability attaches to the significance of events themselves, whereas narrativity concerns how those events are represented. In *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal*, the memoir's high degree of tellability arises directly from the eventfulness of its experiences, particularly through their unpredictability, persistence, and irreversibility. The unyielding quest for life and survival forms the crust of the memoir. "I ran screaming halfway down the dirt road from the orphanage to Kalathodu. I kept scratching my lice-infested head, eyebrows, between my eyelashes and under my arms I ran. I didn't even bother to kill the lice that had gotten my nails" (63).

The narrativity of the memoir lies in the sustained interconnectedness of curiosity, suspense, and surprise across lived experience, regulated by memory and consciousness. The memoir thus challenges traditional storytelling while fully embodying Sternberg's deeper, process-oriented understanding of narrativity. In conclusion, this study has examined the narrativeness and narrativity of the memoir and has established that the text strongly embodies the essential features of narrativity. Through its coherent narrative structure, reflective voice, and interwoven recollections, the memoir transforms personal experience into a compelling narrative form. The genre

is employed not merely as a record of lived events but as a deliberate narrative construction that engages readers and sustains narrative interest. The memoir's uniqueness lies in its ability to balance introspection with storytelling, thereby enriching its narratological depth. Consequently, the text stands out as a significant contribution to the genre and affirms its place as a compelling and worthwhile read.

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