

THE POISONED LEGACY: A POST-COLONIAL READING OF S.K. POTTEKATT'S *VISHAKANYAKA*

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Abstract

Ethnic communities are often compelled to integrate into the 'mainstream' culture in the postcolonial context. As Pramod K. Nayar (2008) points out, "Troubled by the trauma of a homogenizing national culture, local cultures begin to have the same fears as the colony did under the Westerner" (87). The emergence of hegemonic cultures significantly alters the structure of peripheral communities. S. K. Pottekatt's *Vishakanyaka* is frequently portrayed as the narrative of settlers in the Malabar region of Kerala, who transformed an uninhabited forest into a thriving agrarian paradise through back breaking toil. This paper tries to elucidate the 'calibanization' of the land's original inhabitants employing New Historicism, as advocated by Stephen Greenblatt. The paper also examines how the novel, despite its progressive inclinations, occasionally disseminates dominant ideologies by aestheticizing or sentimentalizing the suffering of women and indigenous communities. Drawing on insights from Spivak, Bhabha's concept of mimicry, and Greenblatt's New Historicism, the study locates *Vishakanyaka* within the socio-political transformations of postcolonial Kerala, which led to the migration of Syrian Christians to Malabar.

Keywords: ethnic communities; mainstream; hegemonic culture; calibanization; dominant ideologies

INTRODUCTION

Vishakanyaka (1980) by the renowned Malayalam writer S. K. Pottekatt explores the exodus of certain groups of St. Thomas Christians, also known as Syrian Christians, from Central Travancore to Malabar, the wild west of Kerala. This migration was motivated by the prospect of making a fortune by cultivating the virgin forest land, which was available at a low cost. In the preface to the first edition, the author states that his sympathy for the miseries endured by the migrant population in Malabar which he witnessed during a stay there prompted him to write the novel. He dedicated the novel to the memory of those pioneering individuals who sacrificed their lives in the virgin forest lands. Pottekatt portrays the political climate in Travancore during the early 1940s that significantly contributed to this migration:

From 1938 there was a concerted conspiracy, directed from responsible quarters, to crush the progress and financial stability of the Christian community in Travancore. ...Many fictitious tales were spread about them. In the storm their Banks fell like houses of cards. Their finances were

totally undermined. Their leaders were in jail, life had become hard. Agitation and protest were in vain for obvious reasons. (Pottekkatt 26-27)

During the Second World War, the princely state of Travancore experienced significant food scarcity and severe famine. Protests organised against the state's ineffective food distribution system were harshly suppressed by the powerful Dewan, C.P. Ramaswami Iyer. The Travancore National & Quilon Bank (TNQ) established by prominent members of the Syrian Christian Community was allegedly brought to a standstill by C.P. Ramaswami Iyer due to its support for the State Congress. K.M. Mathew, son of K. C. Mammen Mappillai (one of the proprietors of the bank), in his autobiography, *The Eighth Ring: An Autobiography* (2015), recounts how the Dewan orchestrated a run on TNQ Bank branches in Madras by disseminating false narratives about its proprietors.

In response to the untenable conditions prevailing in Travancore, several Christian families migrate to the forestlands of Malabar. They contend with the challenges posed by climate, malaria, wild boars and all devouring wild

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grass to transform the wooded hills of Malabar into agricultural orchards. The novel narrates the ongoing struggle between pioneering humans and the formidable forces of nature. The title designates the virgin forestlands of Malabar as an enchantress, 'visakanyaka', referring to the mythical maiden cultivated as a lethal weapon against potential adversaries, as described in the ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, *The Arthashastra*. It refers to a land where countless men and women sacrifice their entire savings and even their lives. The narrative portrays a group of individuals who left the 'civilized' world of Travancore to the 'wild and mysterious' forestlands of Malabar 'with a mission to make it civilized'.

CONFRONTATION OF THE BELIEF SYSTEMS

The life of an average Syrian Christian was predominantly centred on Church and the various rituals associated with it. Consequently, when new settlers arrived, they introduced their own religious beliefs, unsettling the existing belief systems of the land they had adopted. The novel documents the socio-cultural restructuring of previously existing communities:

In the wake of those Christian settlers came priests and curates as representatives of Jesus the Messiah, holding aloft the cross and the Bible. ... These soldiers of God cleared the forests of wild elephants and ferocious tigers and built churches and schools. Rough hewn temples to forest gods were broken up and in their places rose marble shrines of Virgin Mary. (Pottekkatt 69)

While discussing the challenges faced by the settlers from 'civilized' Travancore, the author doesn't give much attention to the indigenous tribal populations inhabiting the area. The native tribes are depicted as fringe elements, perceived as subhuman by the new entrants to their territory. The narrative primarily focuses on the losses experienced by the migrant population who are forced to accept defeat before the formidable power of nature. Although the Malabar Forest lands are owned by either the state or private individuals, indigenous tribes, who do not possess the idea of land ownership, also reside there. The Paniar and Karimpala groups, native tribes featured in *Vishakanyaka* are depicted as indolent, unintelligent and unenterprising. The near invisibility and the minimal significance

accorded to them contribute to the narrative of a virgin land waiting for human habitation. Varghese (2006) points out how within this overarching narrative, the environmental consequences of the migration are overlooked in the novel:

Vishakanyaka, ... foregrounds poignantly the miseries and sufferings involved in the developmental enterprise of migration. The identity of the migrant is thus defined against the losses and sacrifices incurred, in such a way as to naturalise the march of agriculture and development through the forest and wastelands of Malabar. The dissemination of such an image has been largely instrumental in the formation of a collective consciousness in modern Kerala, naturalising land colonisation and denudation. (Varghese 233)

Pottekkatt's epic saga, which holds an iconic status among Malayalam novels on migration, commences with the exodus of several Syrian Christian families, 'a party of nineteen', from Central Travancore, a Princely state in the Southern part of pre independent India, to the promised land of milk and honey, Malabar. The preparations for this journey echo the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan. They departed from their ancestral lands with heavy hearts, seeking to escape the oppressive regime of Swami Dewan Ramaswamy Aiyar. However, they were also filled with dreams for a better future in Malabar where "they could be one with nature, live in freedom and comfort, earn-perhaps gain the upper hand..." (Pottekkatt 13). They were attempting to establish a new Travancore in Malabar through arduous labour, where "they would not have to eke out their days as boot lickers of a wicked feudal aristocracy" (*ibid*).

The group comprised a few upright individuals like Anthony, a few never-do wells like Mathan, some unscrupulous characters like Cheriyan and Paul, but predominantly hard-working sincere and devout individuals like Mariam. Nevertheless, nearly all of them either perish or return empty handed after their encounter with the *Vishakanyaka*, the treacherous land of Malabar. A disillusioned Anthony, on his way back to Travancore, reflects on the receding hills of Malabar:

These are visions coming out of the fumes of Ganja, and just as deceptive! All this beauty is destructive. Oh, my brethren,

.....This venomous virgin, will hold you in an embrace of death; she will entice thousands more to kill them likewise. She will drain the lifeblood from them. And make them one with the earth..." (190)

Anthony believes that Annikutty, the girl he secretly admired, succumbed to malaria because he was captivated by the allure of Madhavi, a local Nair girl. The modest Annikutty symbolizes the Travancore Syrian Christian girl with Victorian morality whereas Madhavi, with her unbridled passion represents the wild lands of Malabar, enticing and draining the life force from those drawn to her beauty. The novelist portrays the Travancore migrants as crusaders who perished in their quest to conquer the land. In the 1967 preface to the seventh edition of the novel, the author announces his intention to write a second part titled *Veerakanyaka* (Heroic Virgin) depicting the success of the Travancore Christians in transforming the land of Malabar. He speaks about the establishment of new townships by migrants, with educational institutions and improved transportation infrastructure.

Anthropologist J. R. Freeman notes, "many of the older inhabitants of this mountainous zone recall a time when their subsistence derived exclusively from a combination of swidden agriculture and hunting". (Freeman 258). He further elaborates:

From the 1930s into the 1960s, over 70,000 petty capitalist planters from the Syrian Christian community of Travancore streamed into the highlands of Malabar, in an enormous, concerted purchase and clearance of the vast tracts of private forest lands there. The bulk of these migrations came in the decade from 1945 to 1955, and seems to have peaked in the years from 1955 to 1960. The transformation sparked by that single generation of settlers has destroyed nearly all the natural forest cover of the region and has converted the former jungle lands into commercial plots of rubber, pepper, areca nut, tapioca, coconut and cashew. (259)

Throughout the novel, the land is commodified as something to be conquered, tamed and 'civilized'. The migrants seek to exploit natural resources to secure maximum profit. Mathen's wife, Mariam, perceives the virgin land as "a golden platter of grain (and other produce) lay hidden beneath that

spreading greenery" (Pottekkatt 29). Upon witnessing the arrival of new migrants, she feels:

Let them come in their thousands. The boundless hills and forests would be there to welcome them. Let humans share out among themselves the forest lands that had remained unused for ages as part of nature's domain. Let vast store houses of food come out of the land which had been sleeping till now (57).

Even the virtuous Anthony, finds Biblical justification for human dominion over nature, "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (77).

However, the settlers' the actual encounter with the land soon transform their dreams into nightmares. Wild weeds, wild boar and malaria undermine their hard labour. Hapless individuals at the receiving end of harsh situations and inhospitable terrain gradually lose hope of survival. Unable to afford nutritious food, they subsist on rice gruel, tapioca curry, and black tea. Children suffer from dysentery, skin eruptions and scabies, while adults endure stomach ulcers or jaundice. The relentless struggle with nature leads the settlers descend into a hellish existence. Kunhikrishnan Nambiar describes their plight to his uncle Chappan Nambiar: "These people have no money to buy meat or vegetables. You must enter their hovels to realise what an evil poverty can be. Because firewood is available freely in the forests, these people cook what they eat. Otherwise, they would have eaten their dried beef raw" (88).

The settlers experience widespread death and disease due to their arrogant attitude towards nature and natural beings. As V. Rajakrishnan points out, "Nature and weather almost conspire to ruin their project and most of the characters in the novel, who had hoped to start a new life in pristine surroundings end up either defeated or dead" (22). The erosion of the sacred belief systems of the local people, which emphasized peaceful coexistence with nature and the sacred groves, toll the death knell for the settlers.

Postcolonial theorists Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) highlight how colonialism exploits both the environment and indigenous communities, in the name of development and

how the western development paradigms are emulated in the post-colonial world order. The narrative of *Vishakanyaka*, with its empathetic portrayal of settlers' struggles, underscores these themes.

EMPLOYING LANGUAGE TO DEPICT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The Jnanpith Award Winner S. K. Pottekatt deftly uses language to represent the struggle between man and nature. His language clearly demarcates the forest dwellers as inferior beings. The settlers' contempt towards the locals is visible in these lines.

These people are idiots. They sit and look up into the sky with such valuable forest lands around them. We'll show them how to make these 'impenetrable forests' mountains of gold. Our money will make them work like dumb cattle. This forest empire will become our own. We'll establish a new Christian empire.

These blighters have not seen the Travancoreans in their true colours. (Pottekatt 69-70).

The writer describes a tribesman as "a primitive hill tribesman with a black pock marked face which looked like a beehive. On his shoulders was a black girl who was screaming and beating her arms and legs about. The fearful creature disappeared into the forest holding the girl close to him" (136). The words 'black' and 'fearful creature' are indicative of the distaste the 'civilized' has for the tribals invoking the depiction of Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Continuing in the same vein, Pottekatt goes on to say, "In the dense forest nearby there lived a hill tribe, black of body and covered with hair all over. In the dense forest adjacent to the ruined fort, there lived in peace a hill tribe who went naked, hirsute and black of body. Their women dived into the lake to pluck out the lotus tubers" (139).

The narrator also talks about 'half naked' tribal men and women pounding twigs and leaves to catch fish from the lake (Pottekatt). He presents the indigenous tribal people as effeminate and childlike, and incapable of fending for themselves when he says that "When the Paniyas (indigenous tribe), who had lost their wives heard that they would get paddy and clothes and toddy for their re-marriage, they were content" (141).

The tribals are also presented as sorcerers and witches. The tribal woman Karimbathi Kurumba is presented as a witch doctor. She gives Madhavi a potion to entice Anthony which results in the death of Cherukattil Varkey. While sharing her misgivings against Christians to Madhavi, when she came to know that Madhavi is in love with a Christian young man, Kurumba says, "Ayyo, is it a Christian? ...One must fear him. These Chettan rascals are capable of any heinousness. They have razed to the ground even Siva idols and the shrines (sacred groves) of Snake Gods (167). She claims to have annihilated two Christians and "injected madness into another" by her sorcery (*ibid*). The clash between the two belief systems comes in the open here. Kurumba might have on purpose given poison to kill Madhavi's Christian lover to save her from potential danger.

Greenblatt (1980), postulates that "a text is embedded in the social energies of its time". *Vishakanyaka* portrays tribal people as mysterious wily creatures like Sycorax and Caliban in Shakerspeare's *Tempest*. The social situation prevailing in the state and country at large was favourable for appropriating forest land into agricultural land which prompted the vilification of indigenous communities and the glorification of settlers as crusaders for development. Such descriptions of tribal communities are challenged in later texts like *Kocharethi* by Narayan (2011).

The author arouses sympathy for the poor migrants when they are described as going back with shattered dreams. One of the retreating migrants, Ousep, accepting defeat after fighting with 'weeds, boars and fever' and losing his wife and three children goes back with a small packet of the soil of Malabar. He informs his landlord, Valiya Kurup, of his intention to go to the oppressive minister of Travancore and present him the packet, stating that "Swami, this humble servant of yours had believed that there was no deadlier poison than you for the Travancore Christian. But now something deadlier than you has been found. Please deign to accept it" (Pottekatt 159). Here, soil becomes the very antithesis of life.

SYMBOLISM AND CHARACTERISATION

Similar to the mythical 'Vishakanyaka' the land of Malabar drains the energy of countless men and women who succumb to illness and eventually perish while fighting the vagaries of nature.

Madhavi emerges as a symbol of the land, and Anthony, the peasant migrant. The novel unfolds through a series of events depicting the lives of various migrant families. Singh (1992), points out that “In spite of his deep enhancement for local detail, Pottekkatt does not let his characters as signs melt into the local, they stand in difference. The environment projects them, it elaborates their signifieds so that it affects them partly but never becomes their sole originator” (126). The multitude of characters embody the different groups striving to co-exist in a challenging environment.

Anthony, who appears to occupy a moral high ground compared to other migrants, always carries a Bible with him. An orphan aspiring to become a priest, he believes that God intends for humans to make the land productive. He exhibits little regard for the local tribal people or their sacred practices. Land, for him, is an adversary to be subdued. He embodies the “mimic man” of Homi Bhabha (1994), having appropriated the value systems of colonialists.

Indigenous characters are predominantly discussed rather than given a voice. Indigenous spirituality is represented through the character of the elderly tribal woman Karimbathi Kurumba with ‘dark cobwebbed face’ and ‘straw like hair’ (Pottekkatt 165). The novelist reluctantly acknowledges the traditional knowledge of the “ugly woman” who wanders “in the jungles all day long in search of herbs” (170) when he says that:

Kurumba knew many potions and specifics which were unknown to others. Kurumba’s father also had been witch doctor and medicine man! It was he who had passed on his learning to Kurumba. They were the traditional secrets of that Karimbala family (170).

The silence of the subaltern as spoken by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) is evident in the depiction of indigenous and female characters in the novel. They are spoken for rather than afforded narrative space to articulate their own subjectivity. The indigenous characters are exoticized through references to the magical potions they use and by describing the songs they chant while working. Among female characters, Mariam is the sole exception whose ambition to acquire more land is glorified, aligning with the colonial commodification of land as articulated by Huggan and Tiffin (2010). The patriarchal

values she internalizes lead her to dream of establishing ‘Mathen (her husband) Muthalali’s estate’ (Pottekkatt 30), despite her being the one toiling for it.

The subaltern woman, in Spivak’s (1988) framework, is doubly silenced, first by colonial or dominant nationalist structures, and second by patriarchal institutions that mediate her representation. Madhavi is never granted a sustained first-person narrative. Her identity is constructed through colonial travel writing tropes, village rumours, and eroticized exoticism. Her subalternity is intensified by her gender: even when she becomes a subject of intrigue, she is denied the space to define herself. This reflects Spivak’s core argument that representation (speaking for) supplants voice (speaking as), particularly for marginalized women. Her mythologization prevents her potential for self-articulation. Madhavi becomes a repository for male fantasies and her sexuality is both fetishized and regulated, a classic mode of subaltern containment. Annikutty “whose eyes reflected an appealing helplessness” (Pottekkatt 24) is idealized and admired by Anthony. Following the patriarchal norms of the society, she directs only shy, innocent glances at Anthony with her head bent, in stark contrast to the openly ‘flirtatious’ Madhavi. Anthony perceives Annikutty as embodying the image of a saint. She disappears both literally and narratively, not because she lacks depth, but rather because the dominant structure of the novel does not permit her voice.

NARRATING THE LANDSCAPE

Vishakanyaka narrates the lives of a diverse group of individuals emphasizing the collective struggle of people engaged in a perpetual battle against the land. Through the lives of these hapless individuals Pottekkatt, the travel writer, provides the reader with a virtual tour of Malabar. The land, which is the sacred life blood of the indigenous people, is depicted as a commodity to be bought and sold, rather than as a means of sustenance. In the capitalist context of migration, land becomes a medium of economic progress for the hard-working individual.

The land, regarded as sacred by the indigenous inhabitants, is rendered profane by depicting it as the mythical *Vishakanyaka*, the poisonous maiden, who claims many lives. The land is also metaphorically associated with the sensuous Madhavi, a local Nair girl, who seduces Antony.

Throughout the narrative, death and disease reveal their ominous presence as a consequence of the struggle between nature and humanity. Land, the source of life in indigenous tradition, is subverted in the narrative as profane destroyer of life.

CONCLUSION

In mainstream writing, indigenous characters are presented as impediments to progress, lacking intellectual ability and even basic personal hygiene:

She (Kurumba) massaged the cow on the back towards the tail with the palm smeared with the paste (of medicinal plants). As if by magic, the uterus of the cow had expanded and burst and the calf was ejected. Immediately she massaged the cow in the reverse direction with the same palm. The vaginal edifice contracted. She then gently stroked the vaginal regions of the cow and the pain stopped.

...After all this was over, she never washed her hands. She just wiped them on her dhoti. With the same hands she folded up some pan and put it into her mouth. (171)

The entire incident is narrated by Pottekkatt to present Kurumba as a 'dirty creature' rather than to talk about the effectiveness of her herbal medicine in alleviating the intense labour pain of a cow. He also illustrates the influence of the native soil on innocent migrants like Mathen, who

'denigrates themselves to the position of a tribal' by consuming half-cooked wild meat. The native devotion to nature and natural objects is decried while the settler's attempts to tame the nature are upheld in the novel. A postcolonial reading of the encounter between the settlers and the original inhabitants reveals the radical difference in their spiritual vision.

Vishakanyaka depicts the connection of indigenous people with the land as passive rather than ecopolitical and resistant. Green Postcolonialism highlights how such portrayals risk perpetuating colonial ecological narratives, where land is romanticized, and the people connected to it are marginalized. Huggan and Tiffin assert that land must be understood as lived, historical, and contested, not merely symbolic. In this context, Pottekkatt's text, while progressive in some respects, may overlook the eco-political voice of the subaltern. Pottekkatt's lyrical descriptions of the land risk becoming eco-aesthetic, celebrating nature for its beauty while ignoring the political realities of its inhabitants.

In *Vishakanyaka*, the indigenous people appear through metaphor, mystery, or menace, rather than as agents of ecological knowledge. The novel may thus reproduce a form of green imperialism, where nature is narrated but its custodians are not. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) caution against this: "Nature writing has too often been complicit in the ideological structures of empire, turning nature into scenery for the imperial eye" (11)

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