The Image of the Other in Malayalam Travelogues: Readings of *Kappirikalude Nattil* and *Sanchariyude Vazhiyambalangal*

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Abstract

This paper primarily constitutes readings of two travelogues written in the Malayalam language in order to see how the image of the other evolves across narratives over time. My reading focuses on the dynamic and formative nature of the image of the other as it transcends the fixed theoretical positions and postulations. The image of the other presented in the event of reading could be better understood as a relational construction; which contradicts the essentialist claims made by theories about the identity of the other. The first travelogue *Kappirikalude Nattil* (1951) was one of the pioneering works of travel writing in Malayalam. Whereas the second book *Sanchariyude Vazhiyambalangal* (2018) presents a more nuanced and contemporary idea of travelling and exploration. To explore how the performance of travelogues in the event of reading contradicts the theoretical notions of the other, this paper contextualises the travelogues in the context of two theories related to othering. Those theories are Homi K Bhabha's 'mimicry', and Pierre Bourdieu's 'habitus'. Importantly, this paper exclusively focuses on the 'use' of these theories in literary readings, and therefore the sociological or psychological validity of these theories will not come under the scope of this paper. To expand the idea of 'self and other' dynamics as a 'relational construction', the paper incorporates Martin Buber's concept of 'I and Thou' and 'Levinas' ideas about the ethical approach towards the other. However, the paper does not intend to be an exploration of the intricacies in the philosophical and theoretical understandings of the other. Instead, it attempts a demonstration of how the theories of 'othering' work in the context of travel writings and how the philosophical understanding of otherness sheds light on the reading of travelogues.

Keywords: Relational Construction, Habitus, Mimicry, Otherness.

1. Introduction: Travel Writing as a Genre

What is travel writing? And are 'travel literature' and 'travelogue' synonymous with travel writing? In general, travel writing describes a loose set of writings that primarily thematise travel. It's a loose set in the sense the works that are labelled as 'travel writings' are not bound by any other rules apart from the thematic commonality. Jam Borm in his article "Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology" from *Perspectives on Travel Writing* defines travel writing: "The point to determine, therefore, is whether travel writing is really a genre at all. I shall argue here that it is not a genre, but a collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel" (Hooper, 2004, p. 13). In this sense, travel writing questions and destabilises the idea of genres. However, there are contrasting views and understandings about the fictional status and literary nature of

travel writings and I prefer to maintain the perception of 'travel writing' as synonymous with 'travel literature' throughout the article. In other words, 'travel writings' belong to the mode of literature: "I would like to stress that the literary is at work in travel writing, and that it therefore seems appropriate to consider the terms the literature of travel, or simply travel literature, as synonyms of travel writing" (Hooper, 2004, p. 13). Similarly, in the literal sense, the term 'travelogue' refers to the account of an individual's experience of travelling. The term emphasises the nature of travel writings as the representations of individual experiences. However, in the general sense, the paper regards 'travelogue' as a category of writing that thematise travel writings. Therefore, the terms 'travel literature', 'travel writing', and 'travelogue' are used interchangeably within the purview of the paper.

The culture of travel and navigation through new and 'other' lands dates back to the earliest of historically recorded time in the geographic space of contemporary Kerala. R Narayanan (2018) argues that early versions of travel writings were in verse. For example, Adhyatma Ramayanam embodies the spirit of travel writing: "The initial literary expressions of this culture were mainly in verse, as Sandeshakavyas (message poems), a by-product of Manipravaḷa mode of literature, would testify. We can trace the sparks of travelogue even in Ramayana, the great epic....It describes the journey of Rama from Ayodhya to Lanka" (2018, p. 1). Though the contemporary forms of travel writing might have evolved considerably, travelogues across time are connected by the theme of travel. And notably, travel writings have a key role in the South Indian literary tradition. Moreover, the invasion of Aryans who were predominantly nomads resulted in new modes of travel writings in the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, the influence of Christian missionaries and Arab traders triggered new modes of travel writings in the Malayalam literature. For example, The first travelogue in Malayalam *Vartamanapusthakam* was authored by Paremakkal Thoma Kathanar who was a Christian priest. And the travelogue is a depiction of a journey he took to Rome to meet the Pope. Relatedly, Ibn Battuta's representation of Malabar in Kerala triggered discussions around the norms and validity of travel narratives in the Malayalam literary tradition. Generally, in the context of Malayalam travel writings, the intervention by a foreign perspective transformed the existing norms and introduced inventiveness. British colonialism could be considered, for example, as an agent who transformed the existing modes of travel writings. And S. K. Pottekkatt, the author of *Kappirikalude Naattil* was considerably influenced by the colonial context. However, Alankode Leelakrishnan challenges these traditional modes of travel writings in his travelogue *Sanchariyute Vazhiyambalangal*. In this work, he recollects his memories of roaming around places which are, in most cases, nearby his home. Instead of looking for a 'foreig' or 'unfamiliar' experience, Leelakrishnan presents the nuances of the writer's self-navigating the world outside of itself. Apart from the differences in theme, both authors have distinct narrative styles as well.

2. S. K. Pottekkatt and Alankode Leelakrishnan

S. K. Pottekkatt is one of the pioneering travel writers in Malayalam literature who authored eighteen travelogues including *Nile Dairies*, *Kashmir, Soviet Dairies*, *and London Note Book*. He was a part of the Indian national congress and the freedom struggle. After the independence, he went on his first overseas travel to Africa in 1949. Experiences of this journey are recollected in his travelogue *Kappirikalude Naattil* (1951). Cynthia Catherine Michael (2020) substantiates the pivotal role of S. K Pottekkatt in the history of Malayalam travel writings: "Pottekkatt made Malayalis aware of the geography, life and culture of various countries and people abroad and his style has been followed by many authors" (p. 58). At a time when the world outside of the homelands remained unknown for many, his works offered a new horizon of experiences for his readers. Also, his works enjoyed wide popularity and readership among the majority of Malayalam literature lovers: "As a pioneer in travel literature, his works led to the popularisation of this genre in Malayalam. Some of his travelogues enjoyed greater

readership and popularity in Malayalam than the novels and plays of the same period." (Michael 2020, p. 58) The wide readership of Pottekkatt helped the popularisation of travel writing in Kerala. Alankode Leelakrishnan is a poet who also contributed to the world of Malayalam prose with his poetic articles and travelogues. His travel writings are rich with recollections of memories and cultural ruminations. Anyhow, this paper does not argue that his style is that of a 'modern travelogue' because it necessitates an assumption of a homogenous travel writing style at least in Malayalam; which is not true. His work *Sanchariyute Vazhiyambalangal* (2018) could be considered as a collection of different articles that recount his travel experiences. A comparative understanding of *Sanchariyute Vazhiyambalangal* (2018) and *Kappirikalude Naattil* (1998) will shed light on the evolution of travel writings in Malayalam.

Kappirikalude Naattil or *In the Land of the Kappiris* presents the image of Africa which was 'othered' either by the lack of representations or negative representations in the records. In the short introduction of the travelogue which is titled as 'statement' or the 'introductory statement', Pottekkatt elaborates on the political context of Africa during and after his travel. And this statement focuses on unveiling the complexities and differences within the continent of Africa which immediately shatters the notions about the monolithic 'otherness' of the continent. For example, he talks about how Southern Rhodesia implemented Apartheid and at the same time challenges British domination and UN laws. In that case, the fight for the liberation of Rhodesia does not necessarily liberate all Rhodesians. As the travelogue presents the experiences from Africa in Malayalam for the first time, it attains a critical position in the history of travel writings. Also, the image of Africa has never been portrayed by an Indian traveller before. While we have plenty of accounts about the colonial subjects written by the coloniser, the travelogues written by colonial subjects in the context of other colonised nations were very rare. All these factors make *In the Land of the Kappiris* a favourite work for post-colonial 'analysis' and theoretical exercises. At the same time, the travelogue presents nuances of colonialism and questions the very validity of a single categorical term 'colonial subject'. The writing transcends reductive theoretical analyses and labels.

In *Sanchariyute Vazhiyambalangal,* Leelakrishnan's approach to travel writing is totally different. The beginning of his introduction to the book could be loosely translated as 'journeys and the lessons learned from those journeys are the are backgrounds to all my books, but this one is my first book that is exclusive in the travel writing genre'. Leelakrishnan's idea of travel is fundamentally rooted in the encounter with the 'other' in the world. So he does not set out on a voyage to Africa to see the 'other', but he finds it beyond the very boundary of his embodied consciousness. And hence all his works, as he claims, are the explorations of what is beyond himself. However, because of the restrictions of the genre, he does not call all the other works to travel writings except *Sanchariyute Vazhiyambalangal.* This approach constitutes the philosophical foundations of *Sanchariyute Vazhiyambalangal*.

3. Other in the Eyes of a Traveller

The representations and images of the 'other' in travelogues have attracted the attention of different literary theories since the evolution of travelogues as a literary form. And different modes of self and other relations are possible within the framework of travel writing. The writer who is often represented as the first person narrator could be understood as the 'self' and in a broader sense, everything that exists out of the boundary of the narrator's embodied consciousness could be the other. But does this division exhaust all possible 'self and other' dichotomies within a travelogue? Sometimes, the narrator might make references to certain modes of othering. For example, Pottekkatt describes the attitude of colonisers towards the

Africans through which the coloniser constitutes themselves as the 'cultured self' who are on the mission to civilize the 'barbaric other'. Though this kind of reading resonates with contemporary post-colonial discourses, it is problematic to limit the dynamics of self and other relations to such fixed readings. For example, the instance of a coloniser 'othering' the Africans are presented through the first-person perspective of an Indian who is also 'othered' by the coloniser. So can the narrator remain as 'the self' of the narrative while talking about how he got 'othered' by the coloniser? Can the narrator become the self and the other simultaneously? To answer these questions, we need to understand what makes one a 'self'. Is the narrator of a story by definition 'the self' represented in that narrative? Or are the subject roles of 'self' and 'other' determined by power hierarchies?

First, let's consider the view that the 'self and other' roles are determined by the power hierarchies. Since the context of the paper are travelogues which represent the writer as the first person narrator, it is important to narrow down the representation of power hierarchies to this context. When a narrative is presented through the perspective of a narrator, by definition the narrator is the primary 'self'. The narrator could be a 'powerless self' or a 'marginalised self', but the first person perspective always gets embodied in a 'self'. While it is important to admit that the case of third-person narratives is different but it does not belong to the scope of this paper. Now from the understanding of the first person narrator as the 'self', we move on to the sub-questions: 'Aren't other forms of 'selves' possible within the narrative?' Yes, depending on each reading the reader could identify 'selves' and 'others' within the text. In each reading, each reader relates to the text differently, and the 'self and other' roles could change according to the nature of each relation. This means that the 'self and other' roles are dynamic and any theoretical fixity imposed upon this dynamic nature is reductive. However, is literary reading always relational? This paper adopts a particular position that 'literary reading' is an 'event' performed in the reader's relation with the text. Derek Attridge (2015) argues that literature 'comes into being' an event: "we can't identify the work with any particular embodiment in a physical object…. The literary work comes into being only in the event of reading" (p. 2). Attridge further elaborates on this concept by making the distinction between a text and a work. A 'text' is a linguistic entity whereas a 'work' of literature comes into being only in the relation between a reader and a text. In other words, a text is performed as a work in the event of literature. The event nature of literature is crucial in understanding the dynamics of self and other relations in the framework of travel writings. In short, every self and other relation in travelogues is dynamic. However, from the perspective of the narrative, the first-person narrator could be understood as embodying the subject role of the self consistently.

4. I and Thou

Once we reach the understanding of self and other relations as dynamic, the next question could be about how the self enters into a relation with the other. For example, at the beginning of *Kappirikalude Naattil,* SK Pottekkatt (1998) recounts his first encounter with an African man and he says that the "half-naked" primitive African seemed like "representing the whole black race in the African continent" (p. 7). Here, the narrator self of SK Pottekkatt enters into a specific relation with the 'other' he encounters. He identifies the other as primitive and then generalises the otherness of a particular individual to the otherness of a whole race. Is it ethical to reduce the other to the self's scale of primitiveness? And further, is generalising that particular description to a continent ethical? Fundamentally these questions seek an ethical grounding that ensures a harmonious relation between the self and the other.

A solution to ensure the harmonious interaction between the self and other was proposed by Martin Buber in his book *I and Thou.* The key idea is that the self should consider the other as 'Thou' not as an 'It'. When I perceive the other as an 'It', I consider the other as an object that could be conveniently categorised, labelled, and utilised by me. But when I
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perceive the other as 'Thou', I am considering the other as a subject with consciousness. In this case, I cannot categorise or label the other. Also the other cannot be constituted as a utility object because it is a conscious subject. For instance, in *Sanchariyute Vazhiyambalangal,* Leelakrishnan recounts the myth of 'Pazhambanan' who protested against the social inequalities of the society and got beheaded by the king. According to the myth the head, even after getting separated from Pazhambanan's body, sang songs against the tyranny of the king. Leelakrishnan (2018) allows the reader to have a view of the subjectivity of Pazhambadan through his poetic narrative: "while revisiting the truths of Kadathanadan resistance, the folk poet's speaking head was the last isle of hope" (p. 36). Interestingly, Leelakrishnan uses the term 'truth' (സത്യം) to refer to the myth. It could be read as an attempt to admit the complexities of the story of Pazhambadan who was an 'other' who stood against the ruling powers.

Another philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1979), in his book *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* asserts the role of conversations in the ethical approach towards the other: "very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing in the Other a right over this egoism." (p. 40) The very willingness to enter into a conversation with the other is the accommodation of the other over the egoism of the self. As an example, we can take SK Pottekkatt's narration about his meetup with 'Mr V', who is a British officer at Tanganyika. Pottekkatt (1998) says that "we talked for two hours like old friends" (p. 85). Despite his general disgust towards the British officers he calls Mr V a "Pure Soul" (p. 85). The narration of the meeting with Mr V is a demonstration of how conversation helps to understand the other better. Before the conversation, Mr V was just an 'It' who was labelled and categorised as a coloniser. After the conversation, he becomes 'Thou'.

However, theoretical analyses reduce the 'other' into a fixed category. And it's important to note that most of the 'literary theories' have their roots or extensions to other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology. This paper is not questioning the validity of those theories in respective disciplines. Instead, the paper is problematising the tendency to 'apply' those theories in the domain of literature and literary readings. For instance, Pierre Burdieu (2013) introduced the idea of 'Habitus' which is "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (p. 94). By Habitus, he meant that cultural and social norms are principles that are durably installed. Though these principles could last for a long duration of time, they are subject to regulated improvisations by the people. Bringing the possibility of regulated improvisations to the context of self and other relations opens a set of questions: do societies always work based on regulated improvisation? If so, who 'regulates' the improvisations? Does the self have any role in 'improvising' the world of the other? If the self imposes improvisations upon the world of the other, does the other have the capacity to regulate the improvisations? As part of the contemporary tendency to cross disciplinary boundaries and apply social science theories in the literature, Habitus has been a part of 'textual analysis' in literary studies. Leelakrishnan talks about the Kalari tradition of Edathanadu which is a form of martial arts. It is problematic to see the Kalari tradition as a habitus that exists as a regulating principle which is subject to improvisations. The Kadathanadu school of Kalari, according to Leelakrishnan, sustains all the traditional norms and principles with almost no improvisation. If a reader, takes the 'habitus' nature of Kalari for granted and reads the text, the reading gets reduced to a certain set of principles which are imposed on the otherness of the tradition.

Similarly, Homi K Bhaba's (1994) concept of 'mimicry' proposes that the colonial subject tries to mimic the coloniser and "the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing" (p. 123). This attempt to mimic the coloniser in turn

threatens the coloniser because now the colonial subject grows out of the image of the 'colonised other'. However, *Kappirikalude Nattil* presents a scenario in which 'mimicry' fails to offer any threat on the colonial power. S.K Pottekkatt talks about the 'Native Town' in Mbeya. Britishers expelled the natives from the town and created a special zone named 'Native Town' for them outside the city. And the colonisers civilise these natives by imposing the English culture over them. Once Pottekkatt was invited to see 'Goma' a traditional dance form, but he was disappointed to see "a bunch of Africans dancing around a gramophone that emits English songs." (1998, p. 80) However, this acquisition of the cultural codes of the British does not make any difference in the 'othering' of the natives.

5. Conclusion

Conclusively, travel writings embody a dynamic image of the 'other' which exists in relation to the self. Every 'literary theory' tends to fix and define the other reductively. Only a philosophical understanding of the self and other dynamics could bring clarity to the ethics of representing and understanding 'otherness' in the context of travelogues. A philosophical understanding of the representation of otherness can considerably change our reception and creation of literary works. Consequently, critical theory and literary studies departments will benefit from the changed reception of 'otherness' in literary works.

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Bio-note

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