Ghosts of Empire, Spirits of Subversion: The Kappiri Legend and Kochi's Mythical Topographies

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This research study examines the intersections of myth, memory, and space through an in-depth exploration of the literary representation of the Kappiri myth prevalent in the city of Kochi. The Kappiri myth, originating from the city's Portuguese colonial era, tells of African slaves (Kappiris) who were buried alive to guard their masters' treasures. Over time, this myth has become a vital part of Kochi's cultural landscape, serving as a lens through which the community negotiates its historical memory and post-colonial identity. The novel *Adiyalapretham* by P.F. Mathews deals with the Kappiri myth. This research aims to understand how the Kappiri myth not only creates collective memories but also actively constructs subversive identities among Kochiites within the urban fabric of Kochi. Employing a qualitative methodology that includes textual analysis and spatial examination, this study draws on theoretical frameworks from Homi Bhabha's work on third space, Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, Arnold Van Gennep's theory of Liminality and Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopias. The research investigates how specific locations, such as Kappiri Muthappan shrines and Anjili trees, are imbued with mythic significance, transforming them into sites that embody collective memory and cultural resilience. Findings indicate

that the Kappiri myth plays a crucial role in the spatial identity of Kochi, creating spaces that function as both memorials to the city's colonial past and sites of cultural resilience. By examining the myth's influence on the construction of spaces, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how folklore shapes not only social memory but also the physical and symbolic landscapes of post-colonial cities, thereby enriching discussions on the role of myth in spatial and cultural studies.

Keywords: Kappiri myth, liminality, cultural memory, heterotopia.

Introduction

Kochi is a city engraved with vestiges of the trans-Atlantic slave trade conducted by European colonisers. Cultural links between Kerala and Europe are well-documented in literature, museums, and historical places; nevertheless, links to Africa and the forcible migration of Africans to the Malabar Coast are less known. Such histories are wilfully forgotten and are remembered mostly via rituals and folklore. The tale of the Kappiri Muthappan, a cigar-smoking African slave, is one example of this kind of folklore, and the practice of offering toddy and cigar to Muthappan is one such ritual. The novel *Adiyalapretham,* penned by P.F. Mathews and published in 2019 by Green Books, prominently employs the Kappiri myth popular in Kochi. Kappiri becomes the linchpin that binds together the narrative of the Kerala Sahithya Academy Award-winning novel. Presently, Kappiri Muthappan is worshipped as a protective deity by the natives of Kochi. According to historian M.G.S. Narayanan, Arab travellers referred to non-Muslim African slaves by the term 'Kafir'(qtd. in Surendranath 2013). Kappiri, therefore, would be a possible corruption of the term 'kafir'. For African slaves brought to Kerala by the Portuguese in the 1600s, the term "kappiri" is used in local parlance. The history of Kappiris can be traced back to the colonial expansion of the Portuguese, their invasion of the city of Kochi and their defeat by the Dutch forces in 1663. The event created havoc in the lives of Portuguese noblemen residing in Kochi who had to flee at short notice. These people who had fortunes are presumed to have buried it in the cellars of their residence or in between the thick walls of their homes,

and murdered their slaves in order to turn them into spirits to protect their wealth. Kappiri Muthappan is believed to be the spirit of these murdered slaves. It is a common belief in Kochi that Kappiri Muthappan resides in the Anjili trees found in and around the locality. The Kappiri in *Adiyalapretham* resides in one such Anjili tree at the premises of the protagonist Achambi Mappila. Devotees offer the deity his favourite delicacies in the hope of finding the treasures protected by him. Shrines of kappiri worship can be found in various parts of Kochi, reminiscent of the local myth. The novel leverages such practices commonly followed by Kochiites to drive forward the narrative of the master slave duo.

Theoretical Framework

The research paper utilises three main theoretical frameworks under geocriticism, namely- *liminality, heterotopia* and *lieux de memoire*.

The idea of spatiality gradually gained traction in literary criticism and cultural studies during the final decades of the 20th century. Postmodern and postcolonial paradigms helped to make this concept more relevant by exposing old philosophical and geographic boundaries and defining new ones. This revived focus on spatiality is termed the 'spatial turn.' (Tally 113) As a discipline that constantly evolves in response to new perceptions of the world, geocriticism, or 'spatial critical theory,' can be considered as a collection of interrelated methodologies, intersecting with cultural studies and reflecting the dynamic perception of current reality. It seeks to enhance and broaden the comprehension of the spatial dynamics that characterise the postmodern world, bringing into light the previously overlooked power relations (Tally 113–14).

The French philosopher Michel Foucault's 1967 lecture, *Des Espaces Autres,* is acknowledged as the first impetus for the 'spatial turn' in critical theory, wherein Foucault asserts 20th century as the "epoch of space" (Foucault [1984] 1998, p. 175), which led critical thinkers to conceptualise the notion of space as a significant esse in aesthetic, cultural and philosophical discourse. However, the architect of this theoretical framework is entitled to the French philosopher

Gaston Bachelard, who takes an epistemological stance on the poet's subjective experiences of household settings in *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1958). This view holds that actual objects and locations are only significant in relation to an individual's affective response to them, i.e., how the subject interacts and inhabits spaces and the imaginative effects generated in the psyche. His understanding of spatiality primarily refers to an inner space associated with poetic imagination. In a similar vein, Michel Foucault addresses power dynamics in social settings by recognising the performative and creative quality of space. Particularly intriguing to Foucault are settings that sustain unsettling and opposing interactions with other spaces: "That have the curious property of being connected to all the other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralise, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented by them." (Foucault 178) He categorises these spaces as utopia and heterotopia. The protagonist of the novel, Achambi mappila, performs kappiri worship on the altar under the Anjili tree, along with his servant Kunjummakotha. This altar seemingly meant for religious worship, '*suspend, ... the set of relations that are ... represented by them*'(ibid); it becomes a performative space where t*he power dynamics*(ibid) of the master slave dichotomy are imploded at two levels - one between Achambi and Kotha, and second between Kappiri and Achambi. This becomes a heterotopic space, which, according to Foucault, is—

"Real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable." (Foucault 179)

Thus, heterotopias are places that serve a certain social purpose but are ostracised from popular consciousness due to unfounded concerns.

Contemporary notions of space are intricately linked to the concepts of identity. Spatial restriction influences the formation and

dissolution of one's individuality. Liminal spaces are delineated as transitional zones between two physical places or two temporal segments. Anthropologists use the word "liminality" to describe those times when people are between two or more distinct realities, as well as rites of passage. The concepts of liminality and heterotopia are mutually exclusive, since liminality encompasses ambiguity and otherness, while heterotopia is, by definition, a realm of otherness. Moreover, liminality discloses a spatial idea, since its etymology originates from the Latin term 'limen' ('threshold'). Liminality, as a transitory condition and place, is metaphorically represented in thresholds, edges, mirrors, windows, walls, doors, and liquids. To echo Lefebvre's critical view of space as a social, dynamic, and interconnected product, literary scholars have shown a growing interest in investigating settings that contest and subvert the dominant/coloniser and submissive/colonised equation. The space of Kappiri worship is being analysed as a liminal space that subverts the coloniser's narrative of history, supported and predominantly reiterated by authorities. Spaces, when seen through the lens of liminality, play an important role in the formation of alternative, even subversive, forms of identity. The subverted identity created through Kappiri myth in the novel is that of a subaltern deity who was once a slave to Portuguese masters. Myths can be considered "a cultural space of liminality" (Reus and Gifford 6) since it occupies a transitional and permeable space between historical reality and fictional adumbration. Myths help reconfigure the identity of its perpetrators and followers through a movement across a threshold which may be physical, historical or metaphorical; emulating the deep liaison of otherness and liminality. Kappiri myth in the novel serves the purpose of reconfiguration of the identity of the colonial populace who were left out of the power structure because of their social, political and geographical status.

Another concept used in this research is "lieux de memoire" (sites of memory), a term put forth by the French historian Pierre Nora. *Lieux de memoire* are places, objects or cultural practices like monuments, battlefields, museums, national holidays and rituals that function as an archive for the collective memory of a community. The concept was developed by Nora during the era of modernisation when

societies began to experience a loss of direct connection to historical events. According to Nora, people started to depend on *lieux* to preserve their collective memory, serving as perceptible ties to historical events and collective experiences. Such sites integrate memory into geography, turning the physical world into a canvas for cultural memory, to commemorate history, identity, and culture. This is particularly helpful in scenarios where there is an absence of 'real' memories, directly experienced by a generation. In such cases, they tend to preserve the generational memory by creating *lieux de memoire.* The sites of Kappiri worship as represented in the novel are avenues to remember the long-forgotten history of the slave trade during colonial times in the Indian subcontinent. This myth is particularly significant because the existing generation lacks actual memories that were directly experienced by them, Kappiri's myth becomes a *lieux de mémoire* that eternalises generational memory.

Kappiri Myth in Adiyalapretham

The novel Adiyalapretham is penned by the renowned Malayalam language novelist and script writer, P. F Mathews in 2019. The plot of the work is set in one of the isolated islets in Kochi. The story is enshrouded in the Kappiri myth popular among Kochiites. The protagonist of the novel is a rich landlord named Pandyalakkal Achambi Mappila, who has a servant named Kunjummakotha. Achambi is a descendant of the family who inherited the land previously owned by a Portuguese nobleman by the name Almeida. The novel fictionalises the historical figure Francisco de Almeida, the first governor and viceroy of the Portuguese State of India. Through the story of four generations of Achambi Mappila's family, the novel traces the Kappiri legend popular in the islands of Kochi. The legend takes a familial dimension through Achambi and Kunjummakotha's tale. The character Achambi Mappila, who belongs to the second generation of the owners of Almeida Sayip's land, tries to retrieve the treasure through Kappiri worship. The year 1663 is etched in the history of Kochi for the Dutch gaining control over the city, which was under the Portuguese king, after a siege of four years. Almeida Sayip, according to the legend, fled Kochi on 7th January 1663 during the onslaught, along with his family, but left behind huge wealth in the

basement of his house to be clawed back later. He is believed to have murdered his loyal African slave to imprison his spirit to protect Almeida's treasure. Achambi is seen offering toddy, cigar, and beef curry to the Kappiri, whom he believes reside beneath the Anjili tree in his homestead. The ritual takes a nihilistic turn when Achambi sacrifices his servant Kunjummakotha to Kappiri in order to retrieve the fortune. The demesne then comes to be known as a cursed land following the unusual death of the remaining members of his family.

The site of worship of Kappiri Muthappan at Achambi's homestead can be considered as a third space, which poses concerns regarding the fundamentally rooted concepts of his identity as a true Christian and the notional concepts that encompass his original culture. Achambi, through the ritualistic practice, occupies a 'third space' that appears to be the intersection of translations and dialogues. His ritualistic practice is a passage from ideal Christian values to cult practices commonly followed by the Keralites following Hinduism during the 17th century. Liminality in anthropology pertains to rituals of passage and transitory phases between distinct states. As a transition zone between two distinct locations or times, liminal spaces are a kind of spatial or temporal boundary. The practice of Kappiri worship represents an emerging phase that holds promise in terms of meaningful identification and even productivity with a new identity conveyed by the Kappiri myth. His Kappiri worship not only challenges long-held beliefs about his cultural and religious identity and culture as a whole, but also offers alternative interpretations of cultural artefacts, thus blurring the lines between preconceived beliefs.

The 'third space' that bolsters Achambi and his descendants, therefore, is a space/ 'lieux' that provides an opportunity for the development of a counter-discourse which generates an inclusive sensibility and denies any fixed notions. The inclusivity here is the synthesis of indigenous rituals and Western customs. Consequently, it creates a new horizon for innovative ideas, enabling him to transcend the rigidity and restricted focus imparted by colonial binary thinking. Consequently, the new space has the capacity and inclination to include and embrace, rather than exclude and reject. Moreover, Achambi is seen to carry an inclusive sensibility by accommodating his servant

Kunjummakotha in his pursuit, despite Kotha being an untouchable according to conventional caste hierarchy. Kunjummakotha, who belongs to the Pulaya community, is given equal positioning as that of Achambi Mappila throughout their endeavours. He is described by Kunjummakotha as "a master who drinks from the same chalice as his servant, who eats from the same platter as Kotha … and the only person who doesn't address Kunjummakotha using the casteist surname." (Mathews 32)

Furthermore, the social categories that the colonised are subjected to, such as the notions of superior and inferior human ethnicities and cultures, have an impact on their imaginations. This imagery is inextricably linked with their memory, resulting in its dissociation or disconnect. Ultimately, this encounter generates distinctive hybrid cultural manifestations that challenge the colonisers' beliefs and experiences. Bhabha contends that these colonial and postcolonial cultural systems and statements are formulated in a "liminal space" known as the "Third Space of Enunciation." (Bhabha 7) As far as Kunjummakotha is concerned, Achambi's homestead, which is home to Kappiri's Anjili tree, is a Third Space of Enunciation. Achambi and Kunjummakotha's unconventional act of cultural production involves negotiating their differences in terms of caste to create a new cultural identity that merges and transcends both the present and the past.

"Such act does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The past-present becomes part of necessity, not the nostalgia, of living." (Bhabha 7)

Nonetheless, Kappiri legend ensnared in the domestic and symbolic space of the household of Achambi is reminiscent of Foucault's heterotopia, which are social locations that link to other locations but function as counter-sites, mirroring and inverting other real-life locations at the same time. The legend resonates heterotopic logic as it has evolved out of the collective memories of trauma, marginalisation and resilience of the people who perpetrate it.

Heterotopia often emerges during times of crisis as Foucault asserts, "There are privileged or sacred or forbidden places reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis with respect to society and the human milieu in which they live" (Foucault 179). This heterotopic context encompasses locations of deviation that accommodate people whose conduct diverges from established societal standards. Kappiri worship sites may be characterised as profoundly ambiguous, since they may be seen either as heterotopic spaces or as liminal phases in the rites of passage for marginalised individuals like Kunjummakotha, who are othered and seeking acknowledgement. The confines of the imprisoning walls of Achambi's household, the area surrounding the Anjili tree, and the space beneath the tree can be distinctly characterised as heterotopic; harbouring alternative histories and identities forbidden by dominant discourses. The ambiguous nature of these spaces allows their understanding as both heterotopic spaces and as liminal phases in the rites of passage for the people sidelined by society. Individuals like Kunjummakotha, who is a representative of a deliberately marginalised community, conceive these spaces as a site of symbolic transformation, to silently confront the exclusion and to renegotiate their identity. Within this ritualistic and spatial entanglement, the myth of Kappiri not only represents a forgotten past but also embodies a collective memory that is continuously passed on across generations. Enclosed within a chest, the subject, Kappiri, exists in a state of crisis and deviation from life, thereby being extricated from conventional spaces and relegated to an alternate space. This othered place, however, retains a connection to the external world and the present generation through the folklore of the cigar-smoking Kappiri, who safeguards his master's treasures and the ruthless quest to retrieve the imaginary treasure. It is within this space that the cultural psyche of Kochi reclaims its fractured past with the help of Kappiri myth functioning as a resilient tool to retrieve subversive historical consciousness. Thus, it can also be termed a *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 2) where memory crystallises and secretes itself as the Kappiri myth.

Conclusion

The study placed the sites of Kappiri worship as liminal places that exist as in-between spaces in the threshold zones of the real and symbolic, the past and the present, which could trigger critical encounters with the notion of the post-colonial history of Kochi. In the context of the novel *Adiyalapretham,* the Anjili tree and the altar beneath it, where Achambi Mappila and Kunjummakotha practice Kappiri worship, become a liminal space. Kappiri exemplifies the master-slave dichotomy that existed in the colonial era in India, while Kunjummakotha embodies the post-colonial scenario of the master-slave dynamics. Further, their story serves as a cultural node geared to resist the dominant narratives of colonial historiography. The tale of Kappiri myth passed down to Achambi Mappila and Kunjummakotha through three centuries is a petit narrative (in the sense proposed by Jean-François Lyotard) generated out of the marginalised history of the colonised subjects that yearns for recognition through expression in the forms of stories, legends, myths and folklore. These expressions tend to challenge the grand narratives put forth via commonly accepted dominant history. The study proposes that the shrines of Kappiri Muthappan are akin to heterotopias (a term proposed by Michel Foucault to refer to real places that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert other spaces) in which Kochi's history could no longer be reproduced in conventional configurations and chronological temporalities. Rather, these places of Kappiri worship nurture a palimpsestic, symbolic and affective historical consciousness that defies standard historiography. It consequently moulds itself to be a *lieux de mémoire* as conceptualised by Pierre Nora, allowing us to connect to the history of Kochi in culturally resilient terms. A cultural reimagination occurs through the rituals, offering a subversive lens through which an engagement with one's identity is possible in a post-colonial scenario.

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