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# NOVEMBER 2017

Perspective of Feminism in Abubakar Gimba's <i>Sacred Apples</i> Shuaibu Ramat Sule	6
Need of Language and Writing Skill in Communication-A Study Honnegowda C.S.	21
Pre-supposition Types, Taxonomy of Presupposition Samadhan Subhash Mane	25
A Zoocritical Study of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" Bipasha Majumder (De)	41
Critical Study on Islamophobia, Politics of Misunderstanding and Fundamentalism Hilal Wani & Sakina Khazir	49
Diaspora's Orphans: Reflections on Forced Marriages and the British Asian Diaspora Soumi Sinha Ray	70
The 'New Woman' in Jacobean Drama Sujata Chatterjee	79
A Feminist Model for India Shubha Tiwari	88
T S Eliot's Ideology of Objective Co-relative Anupama Verma	96
"Racial Tendencies and Dangerous Consequences" in Kiran Desai's <i>The Inheritance of Loss</i> M.Nirmala & Parvati. V.	103

A Quest for Identity: Diasporic Consciousness in Indu Sundaresan's *The Mountain of Light*  
N. Subhadra Chari

112

Reclaiming Body Reclaiming Self: An Approach to Body Politics  
Smriti Jha

121

The Material and Spiritual Dimensions of Landscape: A Cultural  
Landscape Reading of Malayalam Film *Thinkalazhcha Nalla Divasam*  
Lakshmi C. M.

143

When she was muted and they voiced her desire: An Analysis of  
MamoniRoisom Goswami's *The Man From Chinnamastia*  
Gutimati Goswami

151

Navigating Through Complexities In Search of Self-Identity: A Study  
of Jhumpa Lahari's *Nobody's Business*  
Moham Dharavath

162

Documented Identity for Undocumented Immigrants: Exposing Reality  
through *Dirty Pretty Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss*  
Showkat Ahmad Naik

171

Cinema as a Matrix of Intermediality: A Comparative Literary  
Methodology  
Ankita Gupta

182



## **THE MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF LANDSCAPE: A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE READING OF MALAYALAM FILM THINKALAZHA NALLA DIVASAM**

Lakshmi C. M.\*

Even though we gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not – we cannot – see the same landscape (Meinig 33).

*Cultural landscape is a term that appeared in the academic circle very dynamically in the 1990s. From focusing on heritage centers, great monumental and archeological sites to including common landscapes that exhibit 'everyday ways of life', the concept of cultural landscape is ever evolving, generating possibilities to swell its scope for multidimensional and interdisciplinary discourse.*

*The paper embarks on analyzing the landscape from a very subjective point of view and by restricting the approach of cultural landscape to a very limited realm of individual or personal landscape owned by a family. A family can be taken as a cross section of a society. Each member of the family has different views about the landscape given their perspective, generation, environment and background they belong to. By analyzing an individual landscape, the paper tries to universalize the dimensions of interpretation of landscape through the characters in the film Thinkalazha Nalla Divasam. Directed by the famous Malayalam director P. Padmarajan in 1985, the film won the National Film Award for the Best Feature Film in Malayalam.*

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This paper embarks on analyzing the different 'ways of seeing' the landscape by the characters in the select movie through the lens of the concept – cultural landscape. Each individual has differing views about the landscape given their perspective, generation, environment and background they belong to. Directed by the famous Malayalam director P. Padmarajan in 1985, the film, *Thinkalazha Nalla Divasam* (Monday is a Good Day) won the National Film Award for the Best Feature Film in Malayalam. A major part of the film is set on the personal landscape, a *nalukettu tharavadi* (the ancestral home) and the story revolves around the conflict happening in the family with regard to the landscape. The fate of the landscape rests on its dwellers, but more importantly the fate of the dwellers is decided by the landscape. The paper attempts to showcase the power that the landscape possesses by analyzing the differing attitude of the characters shaped by the landscape.

Just like culture, landscape too is a very dynamic and complicated term, and even more complicated is the term cultural landscape. A multidisciplinary term, cultural landscape is a subfield of cultural geography and started appearing in the academic circle in the 1990s. When the geographer Otto Schlüter used cultural landscape for the first time in the academic scenario during the early 20 century, he referred to the landscape that has been interfered by human agency. He differentiated cultural landscape from original or natural landscape as the latter meant the landscape untouched by human interference. Carl O. Sauer, an American human geographer was credited to have been influential in promoting and developing the concept of cultural landscape and is generally regarded as the father of cultural geography. The 1960s<sup>1</sup> and 1970s<sup>2</sup> concept of cultural landscape focused on the heritage centers and great monumental and archeological sites. The World Heritage Committee further promoted the understanding of cultural landscape in 1992 by listing *cultural landscapes* of outstanding universal value. With the essayist and critic, J. B. Jackson, his comrades and his successors, the conception of the term further expanded profoundly to include common landscapes that exhibit everyday ways of life and the role of every individual in creating and making alive places and spaces. From focusing on heritage centers, great monumental and archeological sites to including common landscapes

that exhibit everyday ways of life, the concept of cultural landscape is ever evolving, generating possibilities to swell its scope for multidimensional and interdisciplinary discourse.

Landscape are narratives of human activities on land. It is an open book according to Jackson. It is embedded with memories, values and sense of place, which human beings carry in intangible forms. Landscape is an external expression of culture – a cultural conditioning framed by ideologies, knowledge and experiences. It lies before our eyes to be interpreted in our own ways. The paper attempts to localize the application of cultural landscape to a personal landscape belonging to a family. Throughout the whole film, landscape plays a pivotal role in the minds of the characters. Though the film is not a landscape oriented film, it portrays the impact the landscape can create in human minds.

The story develops through the get together of the mother's sons Narayanankutty and Gopan and their families to celebrate the mother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Occupational mobility has ended up her elder and younger sons in Bombay and in the Middle East respectively. Initially the characters are thrilled by the rendezvous, but slowly reveal their deeper emotions lurking behind them. The eldest daughter of Narayanankutty, Sheenu who is a teenager quickly loses interest in spending time in her father's home because the metropolitan city in which she lives is more interesting than the dull village. Her way of seeing the village is different from that of the city. She prefers the city's fast life and sound, which is more appealing and comfortable to the village. The village in her view is less bright, less fast and of less sounds and she could not find any interest in the cows, goats and hens or the village girls. She lacks the sense of rootedness and belongingness unlike her father as soon as she spends some time at the ancestral home.

Soon after Narayanankutty settles in, he feels like going back to Bombay. But unlike his daughter Sheenu, he used to have the same feeling when he is in Bombay. After four days of stay in Bombay, he would love to come back to his village. Migration seems to have influenced a persistent uneasiness for people wherever they stay as it switches the



mind to a migratory mode. Probably Narayanankutty sees his village as a space that gives him tranquility and peace of mind, which he could not actually enjoy due to the persistent haunting of job tension that overwhelms him when he stays in his own land. His home to him is a site of memories and rootedness.

Gopan likes to make strides in the village and in order to escape those enthusiastic youngsters who nurse the dream to go to Middle East, he often takes short cuts. He dislikes to see the once vast lush green fields now covered with houses. Even though Gopan loves to change according to the new circumstances because of his Gulf money, he cannot appreciate the village welcoming changes morphologically.

Gopan's wife Bindhu sees the landscape in which the *tharavadu* is placed as a graveyard and she dislikes the vast area with lack of houses in the proximity. For her, flats and thickly populated areas are more comforting than the isolated *tharavadu*. Bindhu slowly unveils to mother about Sharanalayam (old age home), which would relieve the mother from 'difficult jobs' of the house and which would render her the 'real happiness.' She further defines this 'happy home' as a place where one can sit idle and watch TV. She further defines the 'happy home' as a peaceful and joyful place where one would have their daily prayers, exercises, dailies and periodicals to read, doctors who come for daily check up, correspondence to relatives and even a stay with them. All these contribute according to Bindhu to the concept of a 'heaven-like place'. Bindhu seldom understands that the definition of a happy home varies from person to person. Hence watching TV and sitting idle may render happiness to her but not for the mother. The so called 'difficult jobs' that she finds the mother doing in the ancestral home are actually a means to engage herself so as to drive off the utter loneliness and emptiness of life.

Gopan slowly unveils his decision of selling the *tharavadu* before it collapses. More over Gopan's brother-in-law, Vasudeva Panicker further encourages him to sell the *tharavadu* or else according to him it would remain a dead investment. Panicker says there is a glaring difference between an asset worth three to four lakhs being in our own

village and that in Bangalore which actually doubles its worth. Gulf migration and the pouring of gulf money has not only promoted the buying and selling of land, but also the very way of seeing the land. Panicker is a representative of the new wave Malayalees who sees land in terms of money.

Kunju, the ex-servant who once belonged to the untouchable community is rich enough to buy the *tharavadu* for three and a half lakhs. He is the prospective buyer of the *tharavadu*. He sees the ownership of *tharavadu* and its landscape as a means to empower him and to 'locate' himself with his ex masters. But he cannot break the strong fence of caste hierarchy, which is fundamentally the basis of Kerala's social stratification. This caste hierarchy makes him subdued before his yesteryear masters and also influences him in taking the decision to quit the idea of buying the *tharavadu* at last.

The mother who is inexplicably shocked at Gopan's decision strongly believes that he cannot sell the house at his will. She can only see her land as a precious entity that holds the remains of numerous generations. It is a place that holds the memories of not only their great ancestors but also of her husband and daughter. She has named the trees after them and regularly have a chit chat with them. She sternly believes that even if she compiles to sell the *tharavadu*, the ancestors would never consent. The organic link, the unbreakable bond between the land and its dwellers is something that cannot be understood through the statistical dimensions. The mother gives offerings to their household Gods regularly, which again is a gentle display of a living culture by the landscape. The landscape is thus attributed a living culture by the mother. Narayanankutty's comment that if mother leaves the *tharavadu*, she would be like a fish out of the pond becomes true as she dies two days after she left the *tharavadu*. The bond between the mother and the land cannot be explained in tangible terms but is truly intangible, incomprehensible and intelligible for Gopan and others who can only perceive land as a mere article for sale.

The mother's death eventually opens up a parade of incidents. The



relationship between Narayankutty and Gopan becomes highly tensed one since Narayankutty could not bear the fact that the mother died as she had to leave the *tharavadu*. Kunju quit the idea of buying the *tharavadu* since he could not bear the thought of the mother's ghost appearing here and there in the *tharavadu* rendering him a peaceless life thereafter. Even though Gopan loses his temper when Kunju announces his hesitance to buy the *tharavadu*, Gopan finally drops his idea of buying the flat in Bangalore and decides to settle down in the *tharavadu*. The sudden change of events echoed in him the words of his mother, "even if you wish, you will never be able to sell the house". The mother's words have now proved that land acquires a power more than its material dimension. Her strong wish that this land is not for sale sends Coelho in *The Alchemist* that if someone wants something, all the universe will conspire in helping one achieve it.

These differing attitudes of the characters towards the landscape unveil the enigmatic power the land possesses in triggering different viewpoints. These points of views are multidimensional. Their attitude towards the landscape is either materialistic or spiritual. Gopan who plans to sell the *tharavadu* to buy a flat in Bangalore, Bindhu who perceives the landscape as a graveyard, Vasudeva Panicker who sees the land as a dead investment, Kunju who believes that his newly attained status can locate himself with his masters, Sheenu who believes that the village is less fashionable than the city – all see the land in the materialistic dimension. The mother who believes the land is everything for her, Narayankutty and his wife Ambika who feels peaceful and at home, Gopan's children who are ecstatic at everything in the landscape points to the spiritual dimension. Even though the landscape is all the same, it is different for different people and it is not necessary that one person understands the way of seeing of the other. These differing views in fact make the landscape enigmatic in itself.

Though silent, each landscape can be called a historical text, a biography or even an autobiography – an imprint of memories of several generations and impression capturing the changing social, political, historical, cultural and economic realm of the region. Human beings'

everyday activities on the land develop in them an enigmatic, unfathomable, and undecipherable attachment with the land. There would develop an entangled and inseparable bond between land and humans since there is transference of memories, values, compassion, nurture and love from human to land. Only those who are closely attached to the land can understand the nerve of the land. This becomes incomprehensible to those who refuse to see land beyond its materialistic dimension.

The worth of the land, the mother's bond towards it and the power of the land becomes evident to Gopan only after the mother's death. He immediately understands the mysterious nature of land and consoles himself on a positive note that it will only bring good if the children grew up in the ambience of the *tharavadu* amid the cows, goats and hens living in communion with the landscape and with nature. The greatness of the land lies in the fact that it beholds so many generations and great people whose compassion towards the land is believed to be transferred to the present dwellers. Gopan understands that this compassion would be transferred to his daughters if they stayed in the *tharavadu* – an earnest endeavour to preserve the organic link with the land. So we may conclude with Meining's words that "landscape lies utterly beyond science, holding meanings which link us as individual souls and psyches to an ineffable and infinite world (47)."

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