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Place versus People: *The Hungry Tide* and *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi*

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature from India has been the staple diet of academics and scholars for over 40 years now. One thing that has not changed in all these years is the kind of texts that are included in the postcolonial literature courses. While varied texts from all over the world find place in the courses there is an unwillingness to look beyond literature that has not been written in English even when they are available in translation. For example, the translated Malayalam novel *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* is a powerful and poignant portrayal of colonialism and its aftermath in the erstwhile French colony of Mahe. But this text has never made it into any syllabi in India or abroad even while it is available in English translation, while Indian English writings have come to represent postcolonial writing in India. In my paper, I look at Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and M. Mukundan's *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi*, two novels set in special geographical areas, providing immense scope to showcase the peculiarities of the place and the people. Through a detailed analysis of the representation of the locals and the relationship between insiders and outsiders, I argue that while Ghosh's gaze resembles that of a tourist in the Sunderbans, Mukundan sketches the inner scape of the people of Mayyazhi. It has to be concluded that there is an intrinsic difference in the sensibility of writers who visit and write about their experiences and those who write about lived experiences.

Keywords: *The Hungry Tide*, Postcolonial literature, Subaltern

The term postcolonial has been in circulation for quite a long time now, and it has been interpreted in many different ways. Right from whether the word should be hyphenated or not to the very relevance of this area of study today has been debated upon. Still, over the years, the scope of postcolonial studies has only widened to include various disciplinary fields making it truly interdisciplinary. The multicultural moorings of the field have led scholars to examine the idea of postcolonial literature as world literature. Commenting on the various theories and approaches that have infused the field, many that are conflicting

and even contradictory, Ashcroft calls postcolonial studies a "convivial critical democracy" where even while one disagrees with one another, there is also an agreement to "live with each other" (Ashcroft xvii). The basic agreement is that a postcolonial study is an enquiry into the effects of colonialism and imperialism in all forms. Therefore, Dalit Studies become as much a part of it as History. Postcolonial literature has been recently hailed as the new world literature and the real comparative literature (Young 688). Nevertheless, it has also been accused of being stagnant with no fresh ideas, theories, techniques, and writers being brought in. Even while indigenous literatures and Dalit literature are argued to be under the ambit of postcolonial literature, it is true that postcolonial literature primarily considers only texts written in English worthy of any exploration. Even texts available in English translation are overlooked. This is very much true about postcolonial literature from India.

Postcolonial literature from India has been the staple diet of academics and scholars working in this field for over 40 years now. One thing that has not changed in all these years is the kind of texts that are included in the postcolonial literature courses. While varied texts from all over the world find a place in the courses, there is an unwillingness to look beyond literature not written in English even when they are available in translation. For example, the Malayalam novel *Mayyazhippuzhayude Theerangilil* (1974), translated as *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* (1999), is a powerful and poignant portrayal of colonialism and its aftermath in the erstwhile French colony of Mahe. But this text has never made it into any syllabi in India or abroad, even while it is available in English translation. While language is a powerful means to stage decolonization, the same language is not considered decolonizing enough due to a text's 'local' origin. The paper, through a comparative lens, would analyse the representation of a place and its people in an Indian English text, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and a Malayalam text, M Mukundan's

On the Banks of the Mayyazhi (1999) translated by Gita Krishnankutty.

While *Midnight's Children* established Indian English fiction as one of the main mediums of postcolonial thought, a series of novels that came later consolidated its position further. Amitav Ghosh's writings deserve prime mention among these works. The postcolonial themes of migration, dispossession, and alternate history form strong undercurrents in most of his writings. M. Mukundan, often referred to as the storyteller of Mayyazhi (a town named after a river in north Kerala), too had lived far from his home, in Delhi, for many years. *The Hungry Tide* and *Mayyazhipuzhayude Theerangalil* are works set at different places and different times. Nevertheless, both these novels tell the story of a place, a river, and its people and explore the idea of home. Both the stories talk about a habitat removed from mainstream society in many ways. *The Hungry Tide* takes the readers to the heart of the Sunderbans, very much a part of West Bengal in the political map but existing on its margins literally and metaphorically. In *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi*, Mukundan brings alive the yesteryear French-occupied 'Mahe', now, though geographically tucked within Kerala, ruled by a distant Puducherry union territory government. The context of the novels, set in special, singular geographical units, provides immense scope to the writers to showcase the unique aspects of life and culture in these places. I focus on the portrayal of people and place in these two novels as delineated through language, customs, and relationships to analyze how significantly similar or different the two writers treat the themes.

The story of *The Hungry Tide* focuses on two outsiders on different missions; both marked their physical appearances as separate from the locals, bound to meet as their lives take unexpected turns and twists like the fortunes of the Tide country itself. That Piya does not understand Bangla, "*ami Bangla jani na"* (4), serves as a perfect ploy to translate everything spoken in Bangla into English. Though Kanai knows Bangla and has visited the place once in his childhood, he does not know much

about the way of life there nor the recent developments. So everything about the place, its history, hazards, and folklores are elaborately explained for the outsiders, so much so that in some ways, the novel progresses in the form of questions and answers.

Mythology, etymology, and history come alive in Nirmal's notebook and culminate in the unrecorded history of the Morichjhapi incident. This retold part of history, like Shiva's matted hair, becomes the pivot that holds together many strands of the novel. The inhuman treatment meted out to the migrants in the settler colonies and the brutal force with which their protest was crushed prove the precariousness of some sections of people in the democratic set up of the nation, reminding us that colonialism can be "duplicated from within". (Loomba 16) While this reappraisal of history is an important trope of postcolonial writing, the narration of the text through exclusively elite voices ought to be problematized.

The first colonising settler Sir Hamilton and his kin having left, the new educated settlers have taken over the leadership of Sunderbans. The dichotomy between the locals and the outsiders and their attempts at finding a mutually agreeable plane of interaction runs throughout the novel. Nilima has spent almost her entire life building the Bodoban Trust, working for the welfare of the people, but she stands apart from the locals by her looks, her behavior, and the very awe she commands from others, in a way like Piya does, and Kanai does. A thorough pragmatic, she decides it is wiser to be on the government's side than the settlers at Morichjhapi and is not swayed by Kusum's entreaties. Nirmal, the venerable 'Saar', is a delicate idealist who dreams of the revolution heralding a brave new world. A romantic, lost in the dreams of an ideal world, he quotes Rilke profusely in his notebook, and every reference about him proves that he is a well-read intellectual. However, in the Tide Country, he seems to have failed to touch the life of locals the way Nilima has. He could narrate to little Fokir the stories associated with each repair of the embankment. Still, Nirmal had not heard the Bon Bibi myth being sung until after his retirement when he was on his boat ride to Garjontola with Horen and Kusum! He did

not know about the Oraecella dolphins known to be the messengers of Bon bibi either! The trip to Garjontola exposes Nirmal as a stranger to the place he had spent almost 25 years. In his own words, he fares worse than little Fokir, who has "the river in his veins!" (245) He ruefully comments: "What would I not have given at that moment to be able to say that this was true also of myself, that the river flowed in my veins too, laden with all its guilty burdens? But I had never felt so much an outsider as I did at that moment" (245).

Kanai, for all practical purposes, is an outsider too. His appearance and attire denote "middle aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence" (5). His sympathies are with Moyna, who struggles against the odds to move upward in the social ladder. There is nothing much Indian about Piya, except her parents and the Bengali name they gave her. Born and brought up in the United States, she exhibits the nerve of a devoted researcher and the caution of a trained traveller. Almost everything in the story is simplified and explained for her understanding. Sunderbans seen through Piya's eyes seems to be a mysterious place, very much living up to India's image in the West as a land of snakes, crocodiles, and tigers. The barely-dressed fisherman with a lithe body who can chant songs in an unknown language too is so outlandishly exotic for Piya to make her fall in love. She realizes that Fokir does not belong to her world when he joins the mob to kill the trapped tiger in one of their expeditions. Piya is transferred back to the time of savages when the 'civilized world' was horrified by the brutality of the natives.

However, Fokir, a local and a subaltern and at least in Kanai's eyes a competitor for Piya's love, remains largely silent throughout the novel. We know through Piya's eyes how Fokir looks (46). His instincts are remarkable, for he senses and sees danger even when others cannot. His expertise as a boatman and a thorough local is of immense use to the research of Piya. Fokir, Kanai observes, "is a peculiar sulky fellow. One does not know what to expect" (217) though Piya feels that "it's very different when he's out on the water" (218), and that there is a

lot common between them. Piya's initially has a romantic imagining of Fokir which is emphasized by the frequent vivid images that appeal to the physical senses of vision, smell, hearing, and touch. It is this sensual imagination that leads her to believe that his wife would have thanked her fate on finding out that her husband was after all a boy "with fine clean limbs and wide, deep eyes, someone who could almost have been the dark god of her prayers and dreams" (158). Piya reaslises that Fokir's realities are all very different from what she imagined when she observes him at his own home. He looks completely out of place at his home, squatting on the doorframe "like a bird perching on the bar of a cage" (208). Piya does ask Kanai: "But has it occurred to you that she might look a little different from Fokir's angle?" (220). However, this is the only time Piya attempts to think on behalf of Fokir. She is utterly shocked to see Fokir joining the tiger-burning mob and admits later to Kanai that she was wrong about Fokir.

Divya Anand believes that Ghosh's portrayal of Fokir resists any attempt at stereotyping the subaltern as the "outsiders are dependent on Fokir to navigate the waters." (24) Still the characteristic silence with which Ghosh wraps up Fokir is intriguing, especially when he makes Kusum, his mother, vocal and articulate. These different portrayals add interesting dimensions to the narrative of Ghosh, and bring in the question of representations of the subaltern in a literary text. In fact, these are the two representations Gayatri Spivak had talked about in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She argues that the intellectual by appropriating the voice of the subaltern through a transparent model of representation, in which "oppressed subjects speak, act and know' their own conditions end up silencing the subalterns" (276). She is doubtful of the "native informant's" position in relation to the subaltern, suggesting that they are "at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other" (284). Thus, both kinds of representations – speaking for or pretending that they can speak "on their own" – seem problematic since one cannot "intervene benevolently." In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum

too comes alive largely through others' narratives in the novel. While she was the only friend Kanai made when he was in Lusibari (69), to Nirmal, she was his muse who forced him to put pen to paper after many years, and for Horen, she was his lost love. To Nilima her memory seems to be a source of pain, for Moyna Kusum is a woman she admired and could have identified with, and for Fokir, she was a guiding spirit who communicated to him through dreams.

Fokir, too, takes shape through others' observations and inferences. Ghosh allows no glimpse into his mind, as he has himself pitched as an outsider blocking himself from having a peep into what happens inside Fokir's head. We do not know what Fokir thinks of Piya or Kanai, whether he too was attracted to Piya, whether he saw himself worthy of any competition to Kanai. We only know that he died with the names of his son and wife on his lips and even in his dying moments, did not feel the need to express his love for Piya in whichever form he could. Kanai's earlier attempt to talk to Fokir when he and Piya visited is also met with silence, which Ghosh suggests is his "defence". Fokir seems to get excited only when he talks about the Garjontola and the dolphins. The only time Fokir gives a peep into his mind is when he takes Kanai to Garjontola and leaves him there. But even this could be Kanai's perception. Rey Chow, in her essay, “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” opines:

> Contrary to the model of Western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as a primary, active 'gaze' subjugating the native as a passive 'object,' I want to argue that it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native's gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer 'conscious' of himself, leading to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth 'reflected' in the native-object. (139)

Kanai, however, feels Fokir’s gaze does hold a retaliation which very well could be the evidence of his “consciousness” of Fokir’s gaze. That Fokir had “wanted him to die” or that “he wanted him to be judged” (327) are only erroneous inferences of Kanai, for Fokir does return with Piya and Horen to help Kanai.

Throughout, the readers are given only the perspective of Kanai and Piya about Fokir. Thus, Fokir is parrot-like and child-like to Kanai. Piya, at one level, idolises him as a romantic hero, while at another, he becomes nothing more than a savage. His physique and his instincts are what the readers understand, not his intellectual abilities and emotional needs. Even Kusum needs an agency to talk to the world because it is Nirmal's pen that records her history without any complete knowledge of her inner story, including a relationship with Horen.

On the other hand, Moyna, Fokir's wife, is the one who understands the world of the elite outsiders, her own aspirations making her a stranger to Fokir's world. She does not share his excitement about Bon Bibi's messengers or is part of Fokir's pact with his mother's soul. Horen is the only insider who also talks to the reader. He explains the Morichjhapi incident and quells Kanai's curiosity about Nirmal's feelings for Kusum. He appears to be the only confident native and is convinced that Piya would choose Fokir over Kanai. He displays a more mature understanding of life when he tells a patronising Nirmal on their boat trip to Morichjhapi: "Let us leave each other to our beliefs and see what the future holds" (147). It seems as though Ghosh has been experimenting with different kinds of subalterns in his work: the subalterns who do not speak; those who try to speak through others; those who actually speak; and those who are eager to speak the language of the others. But however varied the portrayal, Amitav Ghosh chooses to narrate his story through the different perspectives of Kanai, Piya and Nirmal, thus denying the locals an opportunity to narrate incidents directly. Nishi Pulugurtha is of the opinion that by resurrecting the story of Morichjhapi, Ghosh gives a voice to the subaltern in the novel (Pulugurtha 84). Ghosh indeed delves into unrecorded history to bring out the plight of the migrants who suffered at the hands of an apathetic Government. Horen is the only surviving native that the readers meet who was associated with the Morichjhapi incident directly, but he too only reports the events: "I know no more than anyone else knows. It was all just rumours" (278). However, Annu Jalais' 2005 article on

Morichjhapi reveals that the incident is still very fresh in the locals' minds, "…Why have our dead remained unaccounted for and un-mourned by the babus of Kolkata, forced to hover as spirits in the forest, while a tiger who enters our village and then gets killed puts us all behind bars?" asked Jayanta voicing a general bitterness. ("Dwelling on Morichjhanpi" 1760-61). The voice of locals like Jayanta is missing entirely in Ghosh's work. In the novel, the Morichjhapi incident comes across as a long-lost story revived only by Nirmal, while Jalais' article suggests that it is still very fresh in the people's memories. For Ghosh, it is the event itself that has caught his imagination, not its lingering effect on the people. This kind of distance and objectivity is evident in Ghosh's portrayal of the Sunderbans too:

> The freshly laid silt that bordered the water glistened in the sun like dunes of melted chocolate. From time to time, bubbles of air rose from the depths and burst through to the top, leaving rings upon the burnished surface. The sounds seemed almost to form articulate patterns as if to suggest they were giving voice to the depths of the earth itself. (*The Hungry Tide* 24)

The melted chocolate and the voice calling out to the depths of earth betray attempts to paint an enchanting picture of an exotic and mystic locale that cannot be easily tamed, with the crocodiles and tigers adding to the challenge. There is much emphasis on the visual whenever Ghosh describes the Sunderbans. He helps the reader negotiate through the treacherous islands as if he were a tourist guide. *The Hungry Tide* does meet many of his goals — the Sunderbans, with its exotic geographical features, comes alive in Ghosh's rich imagery, the forgotten history finds a voice and gets recorded, and the ecological concerns which bring into conflict the local and the global are reflected on. What curiously goes missing in this sweeping perspective is the close view of the individual and his many worlds. Ghosh's gaze is of a detached tourist even when he describes the Bon Bibi myth. He talks about the different rituals associated with the myth through Kanai and

Piya. These are characters who do not partake in the belief but are rather onlookers of the locals practising the rituals. For example, Kanai, even as a child, "had expected to be bored by this rustic entertainment" (105), and even when is moved to tears at the end of the performance like the rest of the audience, he does not fail to notice that the "animal was only a man, dressed in a painted sheet and a mask… that the actress' arrival was anything but instantaneous" (105). Ghosh cannot escape the viewer/viewed binary as it is the only position from which he can speak.

On his first visit to the Sunderbans Nirmal tells Kanai: "A place is what you make of it" (234), echoing the concept that a place is defined by the perspective and the sense of belonging a person has for it. When he also says that "there is no prettiness to invite the stranger in" (8) even when the name suggests that it is a beautiful forest, one wonders how anyone could possibly call such a place 'home'. This, of course, is the opinion of Kanai, who vehemently refutes any connection to the Sunderbans and re-iterates that he belongs to a different world in Delhi. However, Fokir categorically denies any wish even to visit the city. For him, the river is his home, where he can be what he really is. It is home to Kusum too, who wants to feel the familiar touch of the soil and silt under her feet. Piya sees the terror and the beauty of the place though it is the opportunity to do further research that brings her back to the Sunderbans after Fokir's death, which was an idea she was previously pondering on. Thus, ironically it is home to Piya where she can follow the *Oraecella* dolphins, and it is home to Nilima, where she can brew a pot of tea! There is obviously a qualitative difference in the sense of belonging different people express here. For Piya and Nilima, their sense of home is determined by a condition, while for Fokir and Kusum, it is just the sense of 'being there' that binds them to the place. According to Fanon, "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land that will bring them bread, and above all, dignity" (34). Ghosh fails to get under the skin of the real people of Sunderbans, to explore what

their idea of home is. Ghosh is an amazingly descriptive writer; thus, one has an almost real picture of the tides and the silt, the expansive mangroves, and the dangerous wild, but nothing at all about how the people survive by way of a society in this tricky terrain. Despite the centrality of the Morichjhapi event in the novel, *The Hungry Tide* ends up as a novel about outsiders who visit and make sense of perceived realities.

Mukundan's Malayalam masterpiece *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* too deals with the relationship of outsiders and insiders. The story set against the political movement of the 1940s that ultimately led to the freedom of Mahe from the French colonial rule has an insider's voice telling the story of a socially motivated young man who sacrifices a possibly brilliant career and the dreams of his family to die an unmourned death. The protest leaves many inhabitants confused and agitated as they do not even see the French descendants as foreigners, which makes the struggle all the more difficult. Undeniably, Mukundan's Mayyazhi is vibrant and steeped in local hues; still, the place does not overwhelm the reader like the Sunderbans.

A series of local myths, folklore, and composite culture abound in the lives of the Mayyazhi people. *Theyyam*, *brahmarakshassu*, *gulikan*, *kuttichathan*, *veluthachan*, *vasooriyamma* all exist together in a curious world where the local deities and customs are in perfect harmony with that of the colonialists. It is natural for Dasan to light a candle in the church of Our Lady of Mayyazhi on the first day of his school as to offer rice for *Biran*, *Pena*, and *Bhandaram* in the Malayalam month of *karkatakam*. The story of Jeanne d'Arc is familiar, we are told, to all the children of Mayyazhi – Malayalis and French descendants.

Dasan is the face of modern Mayyazhi, a young man with a great future ahead of him. Dasan's colonial education does not come in the way of his bond with his culture. Fed on endless stories and myths by his grandmother and guided by his communist idealist master, he remains a romantic at heart. Dasan forgoes higher studies in France, a government job, and a comfortable life to fight for Mayyazhi's freedom. He in many

ways resembles Frantz Fanon, who gave up his job as the Head of the Psychiatry Department at the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria to join the Algerian independence movement. For intellectuals like Dasan tutored in colonial discourse, it would have been easier to look away from uncomfortable truths. He is against bloodshed and believes that "Communism is humanism" (138). He is patient enough to wait: "The white men must go. History will see to it. As for us, we must act. We'll have to suffer, watch our parents shed tears. We might even die. No matter what the consequence is, we must act" (138). However, after over 20 years of the freedom movement, comrades like Pappan "talked incessantly of bloodshed" (138). After Pappan stabbed the Commissar, Dasan realizes "that there were occasions when it was necessary to inflict pain and bloodshed" (143). Earlier, it was Pappan who had said: "Vasutty, we're only against the white man's rule. Why should we be against his culture?" (100). Thus, we see a more complex picture of resistance towards colonialism in the novel through the varied approaches of the characters who fill the pages.

Uthaman is another representative of the young generation. Born into a family of Malayans, who are supposed to incarnate the fierce and passionate tribal gods during the ritual Thira dance, he is expected to take on his father's mantle after his death. A rebel and a rationalist, he still dons the garb of a sorcerer to make both ends meet. But, he decides to prove his point on the *thira* festival and does not observe the fasts and the vow of celibacy during the festival time. He trips and falls during the dance, breaks his neck and dies. His personal revolution ended in doom because of his naivety: 'After all, he was a novice. He should have been more careful (94). Kunhanandan master, fraught with ill-health, considers each day as a bonus, and lives his life to inspire the youth of Mayyazhi to take up his ideals of Global Communism. He is no arm-chair theoretician cut off from the vagaries of life. In fact, it is Kunhanandan master who advises Uthaman to take up his father's job: "…all of us have many roles to act in life. Surely, playing God can't be worse than any one of them" (90). He

commands immense respect even from those who are against his ideology. The sensuous, passionate women of Mayyazhi are in stark contrast with the nameless faceless women of the Sunderbans. Kunhichirutha, the famed prostitute of Mayyazhi, is welcome in every home. Dasan is made to accept the coin that she gives him on his first day at school. She is openly proud to be the regular sleeping partner of David Sayiv, and the other older, important men of Mayyazhi. Even the master teases her in David Sayiv's name. She also has a son from the Sayiv. There is no moralizing here; rather what is more important is life itself. The chettiar seduces Kanari's wife Nani and later daughter, but they go together to the cinema with him, much to the admiration of Kurambi Amma. Vasutty's sister takes to prostitution to escape starvation while he is away but is forgiven once he comes back to take charge of his home. Kallu is another woman who is delighted to sleep with Uthaman during the *thira* festival, reveling in the idea that she was sleeping with a God. Chandrika and Dasan get into an intimate physical relationship, and Chandrika declares to her father that she had invited Dasan to her bedroom. Girija falls in love with her rapist husband and leads a happy life with him. The story about Kunhimanikkam, the prostitute who kept Vaisravanan Chettiar waiting forever, suggests that she belonged to mainstream society. Amitav Ghosh decides to keep silent on these aspects of life. Instead, he presents a 'chaste' picture of the women of Sunderbans who wear white and avoid all auspicious ornaments of married women when their men go out into the river in an attempt to escape widowhood. Even the worldly-wise, Moyna is taken aback by the idea of leaving him: "He is my son's father, Kanai-Babu" (258). Nilima hints at her disillusionment with Nirmal but still, like a devoted wife, is pained by every mention of him even years after his death. Kusum is the only one who steps out of the invisible restrictive precincts to reach out to Horen, but their relationship is too short-lived. Even Piya decides to come back to honour the memory of Fokir!

Both the novels portray relationships the colonial/ neocolonial masters shared with their subjects. While Sir

Hamilton's legacy lies in ruins and Piyali's dalliance with Fokir is cut short before it develops any further, Kurambi Amma's admiration for Leslie Sayiv continues unabated even after his death. The part-French Leslie Sayiv had merged with the lives of the Mayyazhi people and could interact with the locals without the help of an interpreter or a translator. Kurambi Amma is the representative of the women of Mayyazhi who find their colonial masters the embodiment of manliness. Kurambi Amma's dead husband is remembered only on the special day of spirits on *karkatakam*, while the dead Leslie Sayiv makes an appearance in her dreams almost every day. Significantly, it is snuff that Leslie Sayiv asks for, a reminder that the rulers had come for spices and riches to the land of the plenty, and Kurambi Amma is always only too happy to oblige. The relationship of subtle exploitation is what we see in Kunhichirutha and David Sayiv. David Sayiv has built a house for Kunhichirutha, but he does not visit her there. Instead, it is Kunhichirutha who would bathe and change into a new mundu and, with flowers in her hair and kohl in her eyes, go to David Sayiv's bungalow at night. She waits eagerly with her child for David Sayiv to return and finally works in a cloth mill to earn a living.

Kurambi Amma couldnot imagine a Mayyazhi without the white men. "Everything would be all right if they came back. She would wait, counting the days, until they returned and restored Mayyazhi's lost glory" (229). The women and the characters like Unni Nair and Karunan represent the servility of the conditioned colonised minds, who "were as meek as lambs. They worked, ate and slept like tame animals" (7). Interestingly, the novel also depicts people like Vasutty who move into a new relationship with the erstwhile colonial masters. He explains his decision to take French citizenship:

> I never hated the white men. I asked them to leave Mayyazhi because history demanded it. They did not recognize that demand, so I had to demonstrate it to them with my actions. They've gone now. And they're not our enemies anymore. They're nothing to us. Taking French

citizenship now is like taking British or American citizenship. (244)

Mukundan's Mayyazhi is a land of syncretic culture and camaraderie. Missie is a white woman only in name and spoke Malayalam as fluently as any other woman of Mayyazhi. Missie serves as Kurambi Amma's alter-ego (Pavithran 5). Leslie Sayiv tells Kurambi that Gaston would not take money from Kurambi when he becomes a doctor because "Gaston is your boy as much as mine …" (*On the Banks* 13). Damu Writer is Gaston's confidante, to whom he confesses his fear of impotence. Another part French, Peter Sayiv, marries a *thiyya* girl, and ends up burning alive his own father, who gets lecherous after his wife. The Virgin Mary being termed as *Mayyazhiamma* and St George as *Veluthachan* shows how a new, richer composite culture is brought about by the fusion with the French. No wonder, Dasan's act of patriotism is seen as treason by his own father.

bell hooks talks about a marginality that acts as "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse, a marginality that is not just found in words, but in habits of being and the way, one lives" (341). This is not the marginality that one wishes to give up as part of being assimilated into the centre, but rather a marginality that one would cling to because it "nourishes one's capacity to resist" (hooks 341). While Moyna is one who would want to move into the Centre, Dasan is one who embraces his marginality and turns it into a site of resistance. He proactively rejects all moves to get absorbed by the Centre. He rejects the job offer and the scholarship from the Big Sayiv. Thus, Dasan proves to be a native who goes against the concept of Homi Bhabha's hybridity unlike Kanai who mimics the colonialists and Vasutty who moves to France after independence. Fokir's position, however, is ambiguous. He does reject the Centre, but it can become a political move only when he does it with full awareness of what he is doing.

Mukundan's novel demonstrates that writers in Indian languages other than English are empowered to give an insider's perspective. Even when Mukundan's is the voice of the

omnipresent, omniscient narrator, there is no doubt as to what his sensibility is. As Dasan's obsession with the *velliyan kallu*– a group of silvery rocks in the middle of the Mayyazhi river where according to folklore, souls in the guise of dragonflies make their homes – demonstrates, the novel deals with the place at two different levels: The physical place of Mayyazhi which Dasan is fighting for, and the spiritual plane of Mayyazhi which he has internalized by way of its syncretic culture, the varied relationships, the local folklore, and the myths.

Both the stories analyzed above narrate the postcolonial realities of the nation. Still, when Indian English fiction is celebrated as that which "writes back to the Empire", the writings that are not in the colonial voice, even when they are translated, are ignored. Nirmala Menon argues for a remapping of the postcolonial canon to include writers and works from languages other than English. It is in these writings that a different postcolonial sensibility emerges, which also has to be taken into account to arrive at the real picture of the postcolonial nation. Lisa Lau and OP Dwivedi use the term re-orientalism to problematize the politics of representation the East does of itself, many times falling back to the same track of Orientalism. They argue that "despite having far more access to self-representation than previously, deep-rooted postcolonial legacies continue re-enforcing the significant power imbalance, particularly in the way knowledge is selected, constructed, authorised, then recognised, legitimised, and disseminated." (3) Both the novels analysed in this paper talk about specialized localities – about locals, settlers, and struggle against the establishment. But when Amitav Ghosh looks at the Sunderbans through an outsider's lens, Mukundan travels into the inner scape of the Mayyazhi people. Any English reader would be able to relate to Kanai and Piya because they are pitched at the same position vis-à-vis Fokir. Mukundan's Mayyazhi, on the other hand, scans the landscape taking in its people, their beliefs, rituals, and relationships. *The Hungry Tide* is more about the physical place, while *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* is all about the emotional space of belonging. Mukundan's tale is deeply

rooted in the culture of the Mayyazhi people, which predictably loses some of its sheen in translation. Amitav Ghosh's toned-down account has more appeal to an average English reader than an intense narrative of Mukundan with an assortment of local characters. After all, Sunderbans is not home to Amitav Ghosh, unlike Mayyazhi is to Mukundan, nor is it home to his readers in India and the West.

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