




---

## TRACING ECO-COLONIALISM IN POTTEKKATT'S *VISHAKANYAKA* (1948)

Sarah Babu Paul,  
Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Anne's Degree College, Bangalore  
sarahbabupaul411@gmail.com

---

**Abstract:** Migration during the 1940s from Travancore to Malabar was a consequence of the indirect repercussion of colonial rule in India. Second-World War and the agricultural exploitations of Britain on India compelled the Christians of Travancore to migrate within Kerala in pursuit of a new land. S. K. Pottakkatt's novel *Vishakanyaka (Poison Maiden)* (1948) speaks about the migration that occurred in the 1940s from Travancore to Wayanad (part of Malabar). The paper aims at looking at the eco-colonial aspects of the novel and takes a closer look at the struggles between man and nature. Migration during the 1940s was a great turf between the migrants and the native tribesmen in Wayanad. With the arrival of the migrants the natives had to go deep into the forests and watch helplessly at how they encroached the forests changing it into agricultural plantations. However, in the novel, the author fails miserably at narrating the story from the marginalised point of view, further degrading it and making it voiceless.

**Keywords:** Eco-colonialism, Eco-criticism, Migration, Malabar, S. K. Pottekkatt, marginalization

---

### Introduction

S. K. Pottekkatt's *Vishakanyaka (Poison Maiden)* (1948) is a novel that speaks about the migration of farmers from Travancore to Malabar. Pottekkatt wrote the novel from his first hand experiences from interacting with some of the families who migrated from Travancore to Malabar while he

was in Wayanad during the year 1944. Pottekkatt in his preface to the novel writes about how he wrote the novel as a form of respect for the people from Travancore who had the audacity to migrate to another land without any external help. Pottekkatt declines to look at how nature was adversely affected with the arrival of too many people and how colonialism was a major influence for their migration. He looks at nature as an entity that resists taming and is as wild as a 'poison maiden'. He also writes about how he felt sympathy toward them for the encounters they have been through.

With the advent of colonization, food crops like wheat and rice were forced to be substituted with cash crops like rubber, coffee and pepper. Indian economy was falling and the self-sufficient nature of the agrarian society changed which led to famines all across the country. The Christians of Travancore were also affected and thus had to migrate to Malabar in search of new lands. Even before this, Wayanad was under the colonial rule and they planted tea, coffee and pepper in their estates. The colonizers saw the hilly areas of Wayanad an impeccable land for the cultivation of these cash crops. The colonial crops like Rubber, Coffee, Pepper and Tea were imported by the British in Wayanad. However there are no references about Britishers or about the colonial rule in the novel. Later the Christians of Travancore were forced to migrate to Wayanad and farm these cash crops. Pottekkatt in the novel does not acknowledge this indirect influence of the British in the novel as a part of eco colonialism. The paper aims at looking at how the colonial rule affected a community to migrate to a place resulting in the exploitation of the land resources thereby mimicking the British. The migrant groups tried to establish power over the new land and the indigenous people. The migrants began with exploring, bought lands for farming, changed the ecological conditions, brought in a new religion and exploited the forest land.

**Eco- colonialism in *Vishakanyaka (Poison Maiden) (1948)***

The novel is about the story of a generation of people who migrated in hope to start a new life in the hills of Wayanad. *Vishakanyaka (Poison Maiden)* (1948) is a novel that talks about the struggle between nature and man, a rivalry against earth. The title '*Vishakanyaka (Poison Maiden)*' is a metaphor to the land and nature that is pictured as seductive. The migration during the 1940s from Travancore to Malabar adversely affected nature and the people living there. The Second World War affected every community in India adversely. Christians in Kerala who were marginal farmers and who were less educated, had to migrate within Kerala in search of a new beginning. "Many of them could have been quasi-economic refugees who had little stake in the feudal system or the ruling elite of a princely kingdom largely controlled by the Brahmin- Nair axis" (Samuel, 2011). The 1940 migration was a ray of hope for the group and a means of nature degradation towards another group at the same time. The root cause of this migration was the spread of malaria and economic crisis due to the Second World War which took away several lives and livelihoods. During the 1940s, groups containing 20-25 members left their homes, belongings and land that once belonged to them, travelling up the hills of Malabar in search of a better living. These groups contained men, women and children from different age groups. They saw Malabar as a ray of hope and distress at the same time while finding it hard to leave their homes. Life in Malabar was a test on their own destiny. People who shifted from Travancore to Malabar were mostly Christians. The unexplored hills of Wayanad was a place for them to fulfill their dreams, a maiden that has never been touched before, a place to coexist with nature and to live peacefully. The untouched forest lands of Wayanad was seen as barren by the newly arrived farmers. The Christian farmers bought these lands from the Nair- Janmis and lands that were forests were converted to agricultural lands.

Initially the forest land in Wayanad belonged to the Tribes of Wayanad such as the Adiya, Kurichia, Kuruma, Paniya ,Katunayaka and Kurumbas.

The Jains who migrated to Wayanad during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries took hold of the lands and later sold them to the Kottayam Rajas. With the arrival of Kottayam Rajas Nairs and Nambiar came along and took the land away from the inhabitants who were by then treated as slaves. Wayanadan forests were under the control of the rich landlords during the 1940s, these lands were not officially documented under the Nair-Nambiar ownership. These lands that were not surveyed by the government, were sold to the new people from Travancore.

The migrants were not mesmerized by the beauty of the green forest but by the vast stretching land where they could build their future. The landlords divided it among themselves on their own. The Nairs and Nambiar saw the arrival of the migrants as a means to earn more, they thought of the land that were under their control as useless and believed that the migrants could convert it into proper land for agriculture. They failed to look at the rich resources of the forest and the vast number of indigenous tribes that were dependent on the forests for their daily livelihood. With the advent of these new people unexplored land continued to be looked at as a young maiden waiting to be explored.

Clearing of forests was a slow and gradual process for the farmers. Ouseph in the novel clears out the endless forest land into estates and builds a bungalow in the middle. Very few people like Ouseph had stories of success to tell and these stories spread down the hill which also provoked other farmers to start a new life in Malabar. People who bought lots of land found it impossible to

practise agriculture in these areas due to frequent animal attacks and sold these areas dividing them into small plots to the new people who came. Nature stood untamed for them and fought against the new migrants who had come to disturb its ecosystem. The new people saw the forests as land hidden with treasures and gold that would make them wealthy. They shook the ecosystem in search of a land suitable for farming. The only dream they had in mind was to convert the useless forest lands into agricultural lands and to reap the most from it. They could not dream of owning acres of land when they were back in Travancore. The greed they had in mind drove them to get hold of as much hectares as possible.

Mathan and Mariam belonged to one of the groups who shifted to Malabar, they were unhappy with the shifting but with the fast spreading of the diseases and lack of financial resources, they were forced internally to migrate along with the others. The idea of relocating themselves and starting a new life brought happiness and sorrow at the same time. Mariam dreamt of converting the land into agricultural land, to farm vegetables, bananas, cashew nut, paddy and a lot of other plantations. She dreamt of the estate that would soon rise up amidst the forest which disturbed the natural habitat of all wild animals and wild plants. With the arrival of more people bamboo forests were transformed into bamboo houses, the places where snakes used to crawl freely became places to store weapons to harm them (Pottekkatt,29). Pottekkatt himself was aware of the damages and transformation the newly arrived people were making, but it is only narrated in a few places. Pottekkatt is duly sympathizing with them for having gone through a lot to start a new life in a place where the 'wild beasts' lay.

Mariam is presented as a strong woman who fights against nature and its natural ways. Mariam is in fact more enthusiastic than Mathan, her husband, in farming. Mariam knows exactly how hard it is to make the forest land into an agricultural land for the first time. Mariam and nature are fighting against each other for their own natural sustenance. As this process was taking place, forests were being cleared and a lot of people died from animal attacks and hunger. Deforestation was initiated by the British in Wayanad and was later continued by the arrival of the Christians from Travancore.

The migrants saw the forest as an untouched virgin. The metaphor of land as a virgin and the farmer as a man who has come to take control of the earth is present throughout the novel. "He stood mesmerized by the land before him that looked like a holy virgin, untouched by the seeds" (Pottekkatt,37). Earth is represented as a healthy fertile lady ready to be cultivated and as an entity that is to be used, commercialized and sold. Pottekkatt in the novel keeps a clear distinction between soil and human beings. He is not making an attempt to merge the qualities of soil and human beings, but is clearly defining the boundaries between them. Mariam and earth are connected with each other in so many ways. Both Mariam and earth are fighting for their own existence in their own ways. Pottekkatt is not denying the fact that earth and land are important for the sustenance of the ecosystem but fails by misrepresenting the nature of earth in its own wild ways, changing by the exploitation of migrants affecting the wildlife. When the weeds regrow on Mariam's plantation, she refers to it as 'devil's teeth'.

Human nature to provide an order and structure to the wild things are seen in the novel, though not explicitly. Mariam finds joy in clearing out the forest to a well structured plantation, but only for

the chaos that disturbs the wildlife and ecosystem. With the coming of monsoon, the fields change its shape with each rain, the water keeps changing its flow, but Mariam keeps fighting against it. After every rain Mariam starts ploughing the fields again with the same energy from the beginning. Pottakkatt cleverly takes the side of the migrants by defining agriculture as 'krishi devatha' (goddess of agriculture). This was an explicit method used by Pottakkatt to support the eco-colonialism. The spiritualizing of a human action with women have only gained sympathy and this is exactly what Pottakkatt feels for the migrants.

The Christian idea of earth and its resources for the well being of man is present throughout the novel. Humans consider themselves superior to nature, to trees and to every other living being. With this idea in mind the newly arrived migrants kept colonizing and exploiting the forest land converting them into agricultural plantations. Man's greed to create and define boundaries is seen in the novel. Creation of boundaries was a foreign aspect for the forest land and the wild animals in Wayanad. Mariam is seen building walls around her plantation and nature kept fighting back against their foreign habits in the form of animal attacks. Wild pig attacks were frequent in her plantation. Mariam continues to fight back against nature by deciding to poison the wild pigs, but fails at killing them. The constant fight between nature and Mariam is an important feature to eco-colonialism. Mariam and nature keeps fighting against each other. Even when Mariam is down with malaria she works hard on her land endlessly. On one hand there is Mariam who is trying to make a living out of farming by changing the whole ecosystem forcing eco colonialism on nature and on the other hand there is nature fighting back against the newly arrived colonists who are trying to implement new habits they are not familiar with. Mathan from the beginning did not favour the idea of migrating to Malabar, he was against the idea. It was only due to the pressurizing

by Mariam, he agreed to come along. Mathan who is lazy, ends up in the deep forest while escaping from the police. Contrary to Mariam, Mathan is protected by the forest. Mathan who had not done anything against nature, seems to be protected by nature. Even when Mariam and the others are caught with heavy fever Mathan is not. Mathan finds solace in the roots of a big tree and sleeps there. There is a connection between Mathan and mother nature in the novel. Mathan surprisingly keeps escaping from wild animals and snakes. Mathan is scared of nature but never expresses hatred towards it.

The tribes co- existed with nature and earth, worshipping them, collecting supplements for their livelihood from the forest produce without disturbing it. While the immigrants disturbed and exploited nature and forests, native tribesmen lived a peaceful life in the forests, understanding the rhythm and nature of their lands. The natives unlike the immigrants never tried to tame the forests. When the number of Christian migrants became large, missionaries also started migrating from Travancore to build churches and schools. The kaavu (sacred groves) of tribes were destroyed and they built statues of Mother Mary in the forests and hills. They saw the worshipping of stones and trees as primitive, foolish and as wild.

Pottekatt blindly discriminates against members of the indigenous tribes in the novel. However, it is they who led an eco-friendly lifestyle mingling with the forest, not harming nature. Pottekatt fails understand this aspect of the tribes and only takes a Brahmanical view of the tribes and calls them lazy and drunkards. Rich in cultural terms, they were not able to cope with the changing power relations and culture and thus were kept and seen as backward exotic people.

Madhavi in the novel is presented as a seductive woman who wants to seduce Anthony. Madhavi is a young Nambiar woman who tries to be in company with Anthony, but Anthony is scared of her and sends her away all the time. In the novel Madhavi is presented as, as wild as Wayanad, in terms of her behavior, unpredictable and seductive. When she comes to Anthony, he thinks of himself as Adam in Eden and Madhavi as the serpent who has come to charm him of the evil fruit. Madhavi's attempts at seducing Anthony can be looked at as how the ecological prospects charmed the migrants to come to Wayanad. Each time when Madhavi comes to Anthony, he escapes but she returns with her charm again and he fails. The nature and its beauty are presented here as something that charms the human mind as well as something that hides its true color. The nature that fights back against the migrants is presented as something evil and seductive, that destroys the human kind to make their living worst.

Madhavi in her attempt of seducing Anthony finds an elder tribal woman who performs black magic and asks for her help to seduce him. The lady gives black oil to Madhavi and asks her to line her eyes with it. Here, the beauty of the hill and her image is used as instruments that makes the men fall for them. The novel uses inexplicit metaphors aiming at man's concept of beauty and also stereotypes misogynist views. Earth is pictured as a woman who seduces more men with her beauty. Nature's final fight against the migrants was in the form of diseases that spread like wildfire during the monsoon. Almost sixty of the families were harshly affected by malaria and other infectious diseases, they had no hospitals, no money, their plantations were all flooded, all of the farming went to waste and they became unhealthy. Thomman whose wife and elder son died from fever goes to the priest to complain about his condition and to ask for some favours describes Malabar as poison, all his family was dead and he blames nature for it. He curses the land as

poison, the soil as poison, the climate as poison and everything in Malabar as poison. Nature answers Thomman back in the form of a wild fox who takes away his younger child and with unfavourable conditions his land went back to being a forest like it was before.

Half of the migrants who came to Wayanad returns to where they came from. Accepting their failure against nature they sell their land to the rich landlords from whom they bought it. The new migrants who came later demanded unused forest lands for their plantation. This lowered the chances of getting to sell the used land and even when they did the landlords bought it for cheap prices.

Ouseph finally while leaving Malabar takes a hand full of fertile red soil with him back to Travancore. The fertile soil for him was the only savings he was left with. The soil for him is a symbol of poison that killed his family. Ouseph who could not sell his land before going back grows 'cherkkuru' (a poison creeper) in his land, he once again calls the land as poison land. He hopes that one day the land would grow to become a dense poison forest. Man's greed and hatred towards land is visible in the novel. When they are not blessed with the outcomes that they thought would come, they become selfish and hatred towards nature grows. Man fails to look at environment and its sustainability but instead becomes controlling over everything around him. For Varkey, after all that he had been through, the loss of his family members and loss of his savings felt that he should end his life at the same place and commits suicide.

### **Conclusion**

S. K. Pottekkat's *Vishakanyaka* would seem like a good novel that sympathises with the migrants but on the other hand marginalises the voiceless, taking away their voices and keeps them to the

margins. The paper was an attempt at looking from the perspective of the voiceless moving away from the stereotypes of how nature was represented all along. The paper justifies how eco colonialism in Malabar was a method of mimicking the britishers and their system. While we continue to speak about how the British colonised India, we fail to look at whether we have colonised an area resulting in a bad change in the whole ecosystem. The paper was also an attempt to look at how we fail to look at the damage that we cause to the people and the environment around us. While speaking about the migration from Travancore to Malabar and about the exploitations, I talk from the realisation and accept that I have also been part of the exploitation of the forests and the tribes living there as I am one among the migrants.

**References:**

Gopalakrishnan, Malayinkeezhu. *Wayanad British Baranathil* . DTPC.1995. Print.

Gopi, Mundakkayam. *Kurumpurai*. Kalpetta. Sahya Publications. 2014. Print.

Johny, O. K. *Wayanad Rehakal*. Kozhikode. Mathrubhumi, 2016. Print.

Pottekkatt, S. K. *Vishakanyaka*. D C Books. Kottayam. 2017. Print.

Mitra, Bibhuti Bhushan. “*Eco-colonialism*”. The Daily Star. 2008. [www.thedailystar.net/news](http://www.thedailystar.net/news). Web. 8 March. 2019.

New International Version. *Bible Gateway*, [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com). 8 March.2019.

Samuel, John. *Migration from Kerala: The End of an Era?*. Infochange. 2011. Web. 8 March.2019.