

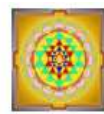
Spatial Narratives and Memory in Kochi: Constructions of Communities and Borders of Imagination.

Ms.Midhila Jos. Research Scholar in English, University of Calicut.

This study explores the increasing significance of memory in the context of auto-modernity, mobility and sociopolitical shifts. It examines the spatial politics related to shifting memory horizons, emphasizing the flux of borders of nations and the fluidity of political boundaries. Citing Henri Lefebvre, the study underscores that literary texts ubiquitously incorporate spatial elements, which are shaped by and shape everyday life and experiences. It challenges the concept of "absolute space" from the 1950s and 1960s, proposing instead that space is historically and socially produced. The sense of place is thus seen as a complex interplay of socio-cultural structures, behaviors, practices, language, and political discourse, influenced by natural forces and imagination. The study highlights how modernist fiction disrupted linear temporal chronology, integrating space as a vital narrative element.

Key words: Memory, space, narrative, transnationalism and diaspora.

Studies on memory have gained prominence in the contemporary age of Auto-modernity, perhaps due to the inordinate importance given to technology that is capable of storing even the minutest of details. Studying spatial politics in relation to shifting horizons of memory becomes crucial in an age that has started to foreground

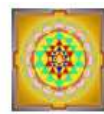


the idea nations are the product of imagination and the political maps are lines that can be easily redrawn. Henri Lefebvre said “any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about” (Lefebvre 15).

Place is productive of and produced by everyday life and experiences, many geographers propound the notion of “absolute space”, where phenomena pre-exist their location in space. During the 1950s and 1960s, space was understood by human and physical geographers alike as outside of human existence. Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* rejects the notion of absolute space, and argues that space is produced by social activity and is thus inherently historical.

The sense of place emerges through a massive complexity of socio-cultural structures and relations, behaviour and practices, language and political discourses. It is a product of natural forces and the power of imagination. Literary texts are quite often a mixture of narration, description and place or space is what occupies the descriptive passages. The debate between the relative importance accorded to temporality and spatiality in fiction has existed for a long time. Earlier it was felt that a linear chronology of time was mandatory in narratives. One of the major characteristics of fiction in the modernist phase was a deliberate disruption of such temporality.

Space as manifesting itself as an integral part of the narrative can be seen in many texts that are located in Fort Cochin. Fort Cochin lies towards the Southern end of Kerala, encased in the sparkling beauty of the Arabian sea and the lakes that meander through this land made it an ideal destination for settlement. This terrain

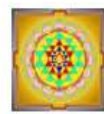


was ruled by three European powers in succession, from 1500 to 1663 by the Portuguese, the Dutch from 1663 to 1795 and the British from 1795 to 1947. Old Cochin was also settled by the Jews, the Arabs and the Chinese who left a lasting influence.

Literature like mapping helps readers get a sense of the worlds in which others live. Literature provides a way of mapping the spaces encountered or imagined in the author's experience. The terrain of Fort Cochin and the icons associated with its multiculturalism foreground the notion that places must be understood both as flexibly constructed by people through their own attachments and narrative productions of self. Here, place is understood as having a continued relevance for, and a dynamic relationship with, individual and collective identity.

Fort Cochin is the western half of Cochin, the ancient South – West Indian town teeming with memories of historical events. Being popular for its natural harbor it always attracted travellers and expeditions from around the world as well as from other parts of ancient India. Over the years it attained the position of one of the most sought after destinations in India. Cochin lies towards the Southern end of Kerala, encased in the sparkling beauty of the Arabian Sea and the lakes that meander through this land made it an ideal destination for settlement. This terrain was ruled by three European powers in succession, from 1500 to 1663 by the Portuguese, the Dutch from 1663 to 1795 and the British from 1795 to 1947. The Jews, the Arabs and the Chinese also settled down here and left a lasting influence. The changes brought by the colonisers in Fort Cochin are visible even in the present day.

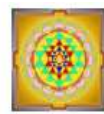
With the emergence of Cochin, especially Fort Cochin, as a prime destination



in the international tourist map, a glut of travel guides and coffee table books have started coming out. In keeping with its projected image of a tourist site that provides a sumptuous feast of colonial vestiges, these are usually bland reproductions of popular historical narratives that faithfully glorify the city's imperial legacy. There must be surely something singular about Fort Cochin that drives writers to come up frequently with a book inspired by the place. While some writers revel in its past, others are fascinated by its remnants; while some celebrate the mixed demography and the consequent lingua franca - a typical Fort Cochin lingo - others are captivated by its visual appeal.

N.S.Madhavan, one of the most powerful voices in contemporary Malayalam fiction, is a multifaceted personality, who is famous as a short fiction writer, novelist, football columnist and a travel writer. Madhavan enjoys a wide readership in Malayalam. After thirty-three years as a writer, Madhavan published his debut novel in 2003 as *Lanthan Batheriyile Luthiniyakal*, translated as *Litanies of the Dutch Battery* in 2010. It was well received by Malayalam readers and has been reprinted many times. The novel is about life on an imaginary island in the Cochin backwater, named after a 17th-century battery (bathery in Malayalam) of five cannons installed on its promontory by the Dutch (Lanthans in Malayalam).

Fiction makes use of geographical terrains in different ways. Sometimes fictional landscapes are created and sometimes the narrative is set in an existing landscape. Authors use the geographic perspective when crafting narratives. The relationship between people and their natural and constructed environments is often a key part of a story's plot or setting. The setting is not merely a background in such



cases rather space is foregrounded in such narratives and the ethos of the locale permeates the text. There are multiple elements, which make up a place in a narrative and every writer's approach will be different depending on their style and what they are trying to achieve.

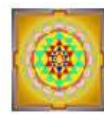
In contemporary literature the real-world space that serves as context and referent to narrative texts has gained importance. The area of Fort Cochin is unique as it contains the cultural icons and practices of various countries and the locale itself can be read as a text where time and space meet.

Jessica, the young narrator of Madhavan's story, is the scion of a family of carpenters with a long tradition of boat building. Her reminiscences start from the days when she was inside her pregnant mother's womb. The novel presents an intimate picture of life of the Latin Christians of the Kerala coast, descendants of poor, low-caste Hindus who were converted to Christianity by Portuguese colonists in the 16th century. The novel is set between 1951 and 1967, the first sixteen years of Jessica's life, but draws upon history going back to the time of Vasco Da Gama. Set against the background of the city of Madhavan's birth, Cochin, *Lanthan Batheriyile Luthiniyakal* is a roller coaster ride through micro histories, the nascent days of a newly independent country, the growth and decline of ideas, and the randomness of events affecting human lives.

The history of Fort Cochin and Mattanchery is portrayed well in the novel.

The ruling of three great European powers are seen as such

Imagine the history of western conquerors of Cochin as a pie. Divide it into three roughly equal wedges, each comprising one hundred and fifty



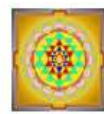
years. If the first piece had the hot peppery bite of the Portuguese, the second had the tangy sourness of the Dutch and the last piece, that of the English, could conjure up nothing but the bland taste of drinking water (15).

The novel also gives an explanation of the formation of Cochin. One of the characters Edwin Chettan recites from memory the speech Bristow had delivered at Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, in January 1937. It was about that eventful day in June 1341 when the Cochin port was born. Edwin Chettan would close his eyes.

And in a pitch that kept climbing, he would declaim

A gigantic struggle was being fought out by natural forces. From the East, that was the mainland, came the slit-bearing stream; down from the North came the flood arm or over-flow of the Periyar; up from the South came the discharge from the vast reservoir of the Vembanad region. From the sea came the long ground swell of the monsoon, and the wind waves from the South-West and North-West, all struggling, pushing, jostling each other. Slowly masses of land was deposited, stayed awhile and were pushed aside, streams widened and deepened. A possible opening in Alleppy closed itself. A possible opening at Andikadavu opened and closed again. Forces began to unite and concentrate at Cochin, unite probably with a combination of tides and heavy rains, with a long push and a strong push and out to sea went the famous Cochin Bar.(43)

In a conversation between Edwin Chettan and Valia Asari there is mention about the Portuguese influence in food, like how they have introduced wild meat



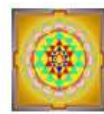
vindaloo and the word *sabola* is Portuguese word for onion that is commonly used.

Raghavan came back to his room and lay on his bed, remembering the stories that Shenoy had recounted of his Konkani community and how it had played a major role in making Cochin what it is.

In the novel there is also mention about Italians in Cochin. About the Chinese, the Arabs, the Dutch, the Portuguese and the English who came to Cochin. But we didn't know much about the solitary Italians who came to Cochin. Even before Ludovico's *Orlanda Furiso* set Roldanand Karalman free into the fantasies of Catholic children of the deltas, in 1441, another Italian, a voyager, Nicholas Conti while travelling in the night on a boat in the Eastern River, drew his boat to a site shimmering with lights, in the southern side of a dark Ponjikkara. There he saw, in the light of many flames, an image of St. Sebastian, whose body was pierced with countless arrows.

Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* critically analyzes the representation of India from the looking glass of marginalized Indian with Portuguese and Jewish origins having very strong diasporic cultural backgrounds. Rushdie's choice of an Indian protagonist with both a Jewish and Catholic background is significant, then, because that protagonist symbolises the experience of the minority in a postcolonial nation state that claims to tolerate cultural difference.

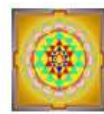
Down the ages the profitable spice trade with India had lured foreign traders of diverse origin to the harbors of Cochin (Kerala) and the south western part of India. Various European powers tried to discover the sea route to India in order to



carry out this profitable spice trade with India and to put an end of the monopoly of Arab traders. Efforts in this direction were made under the enthusiastic royal patron like Prince Henry the navigator and by many courageous navigators like Christopher Columbus. But it was left to the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama to finally discover it with the help of an Arab pilot. He landed in Cochin in the year 1498 with his ships and thus came the Portuguese in India for trade.

The novel begins with a family tree of Da Gammas and Zogoiby families as the ancestors of Moraes Zogoiby or Moor, the main character of the novel. Da Gammas are Portuguese Catholic, whereas Zogoiby family belongs to the Jewish communities. Both these communities rather sects (here Catholics and White Jews) are bearing antagonistic history against each other in their European mainland came to India for different reasons and settled in Cochin. Da Gammas claims themselves to be the descendant of the historical figure Vasco Da Gama, the great Portuguese navigator. Moor's great grandfather Francisco Da Gamma flourished in spice trade.

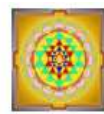
Despite its much celebrated historical grandeur; despite being the only metropolitan city in Kerala; and despite the popularity of a very thriving literary tradition of writing the land/*desham*'(nation), Cochin has not been featured that often in Malayalam literature. The near absence of literature that depicts the coastal life in the region has been ascribed to several reasons—the dominance of *Savarna* voices in both mainstream Malayalam literature and the left liberal ideology that provides its theoretical structure; the distinctness of its cultural life that is at odds with the upper caste Hindu elitism which defines Kerala's mainstream cultural life; the economic backwardness of the region; the lack of sufficient historical documentation of its



culture. It is quite surprising, given the predisposition Kerala has towards celebrating both its ancient cosmopolitanism and a self constructed, almost delusional, image of a sociologically conscious contemporary society, that neither the colonial past of Cochin — a city that was colonized by three different forces in a span of three decades and from where India's colonial past had begun — nor its present status as a thriving metro especially notorious for its high crime rate has been explored much in fiction.

Parishkara Vijayam (Victory of Reform), written by Variyath Chori Peter, and published in 1906 by Cochin Union Press, is the first Malayalam novel to portray the life of Latin Catholics in Cochin. As the title would suggest, it was written with the specific intention of achieving community reforms. Written in the tongue of the region, the novel provides a vivid portrait of the life at the time. However, it did not inspire a successor for a long period until Ponjikkara Rafi, towards the middle of the last century, came up with *Swargadoothan (Heaven's Messenger)*. Rafi's other novels—*Paapikal (The Sinners)*, *Oro Pro Nobis (Pray for Us)*, *Kanayile Kalyanam (Marriage at Cana)*—also are based on the region, though his later novels focus more on cultural documentation.

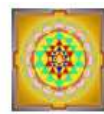
Both the Progressive Writers Movement post independence and the high modernity movement inspired by European existentialism in the seventies did not feature significant works that had foregrounded Cochin as the locale. In a career spanning twenty years from 1972 to 1992, Victor wrote only twelve short stories, almost all of them based on the city of Ernakulam, while most of his contemporaries had preferred Delhi as the city for their rootless heroes lost to the debauchery of



existential pathos. Victor was least interested in exploring the historical dimensions of Cochin, focusing instead on weaving into the beguilingly laced fabric of his stories, with a distinctly minimalist sophistication, the urban ethos of modern Ernakulam, which at the time was still evolving into the globalised metro it was to later become.

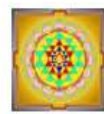
Portuguese, Dutch and English – of Fort Cochin in Kerala and juxtaposes them to a postcolonial present, conjured up through a plethora of things from the times. The appearance of these objects is often accompanied by a historical gloss – almost in the future anterior – which anticipates the time of the novel’s composition when the fictional world has slid into a recent, affectively charged past. Interestingly, the relationship foregrounded between the legibility of objects and public histories has the effect of anchoring the novel in a sense of the local and at the same time eroding the specificities of the place by assimilating them into larger narratives of circulation: of things, ideas and people.

Santa and the Scribes: The Making of Fort Cochin by E. P. Unny that was recently released takes readers through the crossover histories of half a millennium with 135 caricatures and related commentary. Unny writes it as “pack all of this and a million mosquitoes into one square mile and you have Fort Cochin.” The place has a visual coherence. It has many histories and surprisingly no feudal baggage. History is extended politics and being a political cartoonist it has excited him the most. Unny hails from Palakkad. His only association with the place were his visits as a young man to his uncle’s home, who resided in the splendid A spin wall bungalow. The book is a visual journey through centuries of Portuguese, Dutch and British heritage



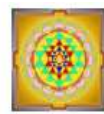
to the distilled present day life. LittleLisbon, Homely Holland, Mini England, Karl Marx... such chapters, describe the past and the present through chronicles of legendary characters. TheraintreesofFortCochinthatseemtocharmeverysitorhavecaught Unny's fancy too. In elegant understated prose he calls the signature tree, a graphic editor, "modulating the hype around monuments" Unny took five weeks to illustrate the one square mile, being directed by friends to illustrate characters that are an integral part of the composition.

Unlike Unny, George Thundiparambil is fromFort Cochin. Hisbook *Maya* published in 2008 has Kapri, the cigar-chewing, hat donning spirit of Fort Cochin as its hero. "Fort Cochin is a cultural meeting point and that's why people are attracted to it. It was the first European settlement in Asia. Not only from an Indian point of view but from a global point too Fort Cochin was very significant" says George. He stresses further that it is the layered history of the place that gives it its singularity. "The story of Kapri is Fort Cochin lore. I have seen cigars at his shrine, where people lightcandles".Georgewhowasinspiredtofictionalizethisstorybasedonlocalbelief and sourced it from a booklet *Kaprikathagal* written by a person named Aziz from Mattancherry. In *Maya*, the climax is reached on the fictitious 500th anniversary celebrations of Vasco Da Gama's arrival on the shores of Fort Cochin. While Unny combines drawing with chronicles, Madhavan weaves Church Fort Cochin into his story about an imaginary place with five Dutch canons on its promontory and George spins a riveting fast-paced story out of prevalent popular lore.



Tanya Abraham, a freelance writer from Fort Cochin, says that she was so often queried about the history and stories of the place that she decided to compile them into a book. Her slim volume *Fort Cochin-History and Untold Stories* are handed-down tales and vignettes that are a part of traveller's guide tales to authentic researched matter. Between a guide book and a pocket book that caters to travellers and carries with it the romance of the place is Meena Divakar's *Post Code 1*. It is a quick compilation of photos and related story of places and people of Fort Cochin. Most writers doing research on the place invariably reach out for K.L. Bernard's *History of Fort Cochin*. Though some of it is contested history but it is a book most referred to, says K.J.Sohan, a history buff and former mayor from Fort Cochin. With each writer deriving something unique for themselves from Fort Cochin the place continues to be their muse.

Interestingly, while its literature has not had much to do with Cochin, Malayalam's cinema has since the advent of millennium turned the city into both its cultural and industrial headquarters. Fort Cochin also became the favored location for many filmmakers. In fact, a whole new genre of Cochin films emerged which located the city as Malayalam's own underworld; a *Chotta Mumbai*, as the title of a blockbuster movie says. The movie *Big B* also portrayed Cochin as a place that is unsafe to live and which comprises only of the underworld criminals. But despite the fact that according to official figures, Cochin has for the best part of last ten years, found a permanent spot right at the top of the list of cities with the highest crime rate, this cinematic underworld is a blatant misrepresentation, a slipshod caricature



inspired more by the commercially appealing visual possibilities of its setting than by any meaningful interpretations of an existing social condition. With its crisscrossing networks of narrow alleys; its massive godowns; its graffiti laden walls; its harbor; and its colonial architecture; Fort Cochin and the adjacent Mattancheri are tailor made locations for run of the mill action thrillers.

If literature had sought to eroticize the history of Cochin, cinema's endeavor has been to eroticize its present, populating it with *Godfatheresque* dons and dope crazed 'freaks', which is very prominent in movies like *Honey Bee*. Needless to say, the actual dynamics of crime and its tangled operational networks are paid scant regard. Had that not been the case, more crime/action/under world thrillers would most certainly have had the globalised and haphazardly crowded urban milieu of Ernakulam as its background rather than the dazzling locales of Fort Cochin.

Ironically, cinema itself has now birthed a local underworld of a different kind, one that controls such production processes like renting buildings, providing local 'extra' artists, etc.

Place, as has been suggested, is a central feature of literature in so far as it places a writer's work within a specific location. William Zinsser takes a similar position when he states that "every human event happens somewhere, and the reader wants to know what that 'somewhere' is" (88). The novels *The Moor's LastSigh* and *Litanies of Dutch Battery* portray Fort Cochin with the mix of historical view. Both the narratives are intricately linked to the place and the narrative would not be the same if the locale were different. This article has made effort to read certain texts



that focus on the geographical terrain of Fort Cochin and to juxtapose the literary representations with the images from the locale that tell tales of a bustling mercantile area that was overrun by imperialism. The terrain of Fort Cochin and the icons associated with its multiculturalism foreground the notion that places must be understood both as flexibly constructed by people through their own attachments and narrative productions of self by imperialism.

Works Cited

Abraham, Tanya. *Fort Cochin: History and Untold Stories*. Ink on paper, 2009.

Keogan, Kevin. *Immigrants and the Cultural Politics of Place*. El Paso, Scholarly Publishing, 2010, 47.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell, 1991, 15.

Madhavan, N.S. *Litanies of Dutch Battery*. Translated by Rajesh Rajamohan, Penguin books, 2010.

Thommen, Antony. *FortCochin :The Heritage City of God's Own Country*.

Mastermind solutions, 2014.

Piatti, Barbara. & quot; Mapping Literature: Toward a Geography of Fiction. & quot; [ftp://cartography.ch/pub/pub_pdf/2009_Piatti_Geography_of_Fi
ction.pdf](ftp://cartography.ch/pub/pub_pdf/2009_Piatti_Geography_of_Fiction.pdf). 2009.

Rushdie, Salman. *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Vintage, 1996.



Unny, E.P. *Santa and Scribes: The Making of Fort Kochi*. Niyogi books, 2014.

Zoran, Gabriel. "Towards a Theory of Space in Fiction". *Poetics today*, 1984, 309-35.