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**CULTURAL DIVERSITY DURING FRENCH COLONIALISM; EXPLORING
COSMOPOLITANISM IN M MUKUNDAN'S *MAYYAZHIPUZHAYUDE THEERANGALIL***

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Abstract:

The concept of cosmopolitanism emphasises cultural coexistence and advances the notion of cultural diversity. This paper attempts to analyse the representation of cosmopolitanism in the novel *Mayyazhipuzhayude Theerangalil* (On the Banks of Mayyazhi) and consider how it contradicts established colonial notions of hegemony and subjugation. The narrative starts with the importance of the geographical setting of the novel and the cosmopolitan spirit of its people. In the novel, people from many social, ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and political backgrounds communicate, share ideas, and coexist in a heterogeneous society. The paper is an exploration of the various cosmopolitan elements in the novel, such as multilingualism, inter-racial marriages, and convergence of cultures.

The term 'cosmopolitanism' was coined by the German sociologist and philosopher Hegel, during the nineteenth century to characterise a person's sense of belongingness to the world rather than just one nation or culture. He supported the concept of global citizenship. Cosmopolitanism is always juxtaposed with nationalism. Being cosmopolitan literally means, going beyond the draws and pressures of the area or country to which one belongs to. Some theorists are of the opinion that people must embrace cosmopolitanism, even though nationalism exists. Bruce Robbins, in contrast to other thinkers, contends that cosmopolitanism predates nationalism.

In *Mayyazhipuzhayude Theerangalil* (translated as on the banks of the Mayyazhi), M. Mukundan presents a nuanced portrayal of Mayyazhi or Mahe as a cosmopolitan space. The story departs from the usual colonial narratives, despite the fact that the work is set against the backdrop of French colonial Mahe of that time. Instead of focusing on the domination of the colonisers and the oppression of the colonised, the novel offers a multifaceted portrayal of a cosmopolitan space with fluid identities and complex power dynamics. This paper attempts to analyse the representation of cosmopolitanism in the narrative and examine how it challenges the traditional colonial narratives of domination and subjugation. Port cities represent the meeting point of the global with the local, as Pearson reveals, citing Rhoads Murphey:

Port functions, more than anything else, to make a city cosmopolitan... A port city is open to the world, or at least to a varied section of it. In it races, cultures, and ideas, as well as goods from a variety of places, jostle, mix, and enrich each other and the life of the city. The smell of the sea and the harbour, still to be found... in all of them, like the sound of boat whistles or the moving tides, is a symbol of their multiple links with a wider world, samples of which are present in microcosm within their own urban areas. (Moorthy 78)

Mahe was clearly a port-town in the eighteenth century, a zone of contact formed by the foreland and hinterland conditions of the time. The connection with the French started on December 3, 1724, when they arrived on the Malabar coast for trade activities and selected this river port as their main business centre. The town got its name from the naval captain Francois Mahe de Labourdonnais (Shanti travel). Mahe had a distinct political landscape shaped by its French colonial influence, and the dynamics of its freedom struggle differed from those of other parts of Kerala. Nationalism and the freedom struggle developed gradually in different parts of Kerala, especially in colonial British dominated areas. But the local population of Mahe/Mayyazhi never thought of liberating themselves from French rulers until 1936. As Sasikumar P elucidates its reason in his work, 'Nationalism in question: the other side of Mahe liberation Struggle':

Surrounded on all sides by their hardened enemy the British, the French were more cautious in dealing with their subjects in Mahe. Even though economic exploitation was the basic principle of colonialism, the French were softer when compared to their counterparts in Malabar. Unlike British colonial

masters, the French were eager to ensure the well-being of their subjects in Mahe, providing decent food and other facilities to its people. Here, the political hegemony led to cultural contact, which resulted in a sort of attachment with the French' and therefore they never thought of liberating themselves from the French yoke till 1936. To the people of Mahe, colonialism was not the enemy...(1082)

Mayyazhi people are compassionate towards each other. Cultural exchanges are integral to the everyday lives of their inhabitants. According to Anthony Appiah, "we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kin, or even the formal ties of a shared citizenship" (492) Leslie Sayiv and Kurambiamma's relationship in *On the banks of Mayyazhi* is marked by respect and adoration for one another. Kurambiamma still longs for Leslie Sayiv and breaks down in tears frequently after his passing. "Leslie Sayiv never kept the natives at a distance" (MT 10). He even shared an intimate relationship with her husband, a coconut merchant named Kelu. Their heirs were inseparable companions. These two families shared a cordial relationship; they sympathized with each other in affliction and supported each other in need.

Kurumbi Amma has a degree of agency within Leslie Sayiv's family. She expresses her wish for Leslie Sayiv to buy his own car. This indicates that Kurumbi Amma is at ease enough to tell him exactly what she wants. Leslie Sayiv values her opinion and promises to take it seriously. Leslie Sayiv had expressed his desire to send his son Gaston to France to study medicine. When asked if Gaston would take payment for treating her illness, Leslie said that he was his son as much as hers. From a cosmopolitan perspective, Leslie Sayiv's words emphasize the interconnection and shared responsibility within a society. Leslie highlighted on a sense of collective ownership and mutual support that transcends individual boundaries such as familial ties and national borders.

Kurumbi Amma suggests to Missie that they should marry off her son Gaston before he goes to France. Kurumbi Amma's advice might be based on her traditional family values. Later, Leslie Sayiv and Missie had a discussion with Gaston about his marriage which he refused initially. However, after discussing the issue with his close friend Damu, he eventually changed his mind. Damu told Leslie Sayiv that Gaston had agreed to the marriage. This incident illustrates how individual actions and decisions within a cosmopolitan community are influenced by the interaction of varied cultural backgrounds, values, and perspectives.

The novel depicts a heterogenous society in which individuals from different social, ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and political backgrounds interact, share ideas, and coexist. Sometimes they even assimilate elements of each other's beliefs into their own practices. Leslie Sayiv affirms that "the mother of Mayyazhi can make anything happen" (MT 13), while "Kurumbi turned towards the silvery cross on the steeple"(MT 11) with closed eyes as a devotee. On the first day of school, Damu and Dasan went into the church. "Dasan lit the candles, cupped his hands, and placed them before the idol of the Virgin (MT 26). The Mother of Mayyazhi, as the virgin has known, loved her devotees, just as the Thiyya Gods, Gulikan and Kuttichathan did. This reflects the fluid nature of religious identity and the ability of individuals to adapt and synthesize diverse influences. People from different religious or ethnic backgrounds such as Mayor Chekku Moopar, David Sayiv, Commissar Laporte Sayiv, Secretaire Karanan, Brigadier Venkayya, kunhichirutha, Kunhanandan, Vasutty and Pappan were present among the crowd who came to witness the Thira performance . The people of Mayyazhi together celebrated the festival in the church, just like the Thira festival. "The festival in the church of the Virgin was as important in Mayyazhi as the Thira festival in the Meethambalam Temple." (MT 130) It reflects the peaceful coexistence of multicultural and multiracial groups in a society.

The narrative is a portrayal of the cross cultural relationships and fluid-ethnic boundaries, reflecting the diverse and complex social fabric of French colonial society. Inter-race and inter-community marriages in the novel serve as a lens through which Mukundan examines themes of identity, belongingness, and social dynamics. These relationships often challenge the traditional norms and hierarchies, as individuals navigate the complexities of cultural differences and societal expectations. Robert Sayiv's son Peter had married a Hindu girl (MT 33) named Janu. Even though initially there was some conflict between Robert Sayiv and his son Peter regarding his marriage, later he accepted it. But Clement Sayiv wanted a pure French wife for his son, Leslie, even though there were many part-French girls. He wants to preserve race purity; otherwise, he would not die happy. David Sayiv admired Kunhichirutha, a well-known courtesan of Mayyazhi, and she bore him a son.

Later, David Sayiv built a house for her. Likewise, Brigadier Chettiappa cohabits with Nani and her daughter Devi.

Even food became a cross-cultural symbol, as evident in Mukundan's description of Missie's hospitality during the festive days. "Missie's cakes were famous throughout Mayyazhi. She baked them for Christmas, Quatorze Julliet, and other festivals. Those who were invited to partake of them considered themselves lucky". "People had come in carriages to her house and feasted and drank the whole night long." (MT 133). Many people were invited to Big Sayiv's bungalow, the Rue de la Residence. "Drinks and dinner were served there every day (MT 6)". Likewise, Leslie Sayiv entertained visitors constantly and loved giving presents. "On festive days like Christmas and Quatorze Julliet, he served food to the poor people in the dharmasala and showered them with gifts" (MT11).

Multilingualism is an essential cosmopolitan skill and tool, empowering those who are proficient in using one or more additional languages effectively. It also means valuing local languages. In this novel, a French white woman named Missie "spoke Malayalam as fluently as anyone in Mayyazhi" (MT 14). Kurumbi Amma, an illiterate native of Mayyazhi, understood a few words of French. Sometimes, she even communicated with Leslie Sayiv in French. For instance, "when Leslie Sayiv asked her if she was all right, 'Ça va?' She would shake the thakkas swinging in her earlobes and say, 'oui monsieur' (MT 54). Policemen communicated "with each other in a mixture of French, Tamil, and Malayalam" (MT 62). "Thousands of pilgrims moved with the procession, singing the praises of the mother of Mayyazhi in many languages" (MT 133). These are some of the instances that reflect the individuals' inclusiveness and openness towards others while living in a multicultural and multilinguistic society.

Oral stories act as a medium for cultural transmission. Stories about mythical heroes and historical events act as catalysts between different generations as well as different cultures. Kurumbi Amma narrates the story of Kunhimanikkam and Vaisravanan Chettiar. The story ends with the death of Kunhimanikkam, who was bitten by a serpent. Kurumbi Amma shares the local belief that the serpent was Vaisravanan Chettiar, who killed Kunhimanikkam for not keeping her promise. On another night, Kurumbi Amma told the story of Joann of Arc, a patron saint of France. Similarly, Clemen Sayiv told his son Leslie Sayiv, and it continued to the next generation as Leslie Sayiv told this story to his son Gaston. The French story became popular among the locals; it was passed from one generation to the next. "No grandmother in Mayyazhi could tell the tale of Joanne de Arc" (MT37). Another character named Ammaman told Dasan about Brahmarakshassus, the demon spirit in Hindu mythology. These stories reflect how different mythical elements of different religions or cultures are intricately woven into the multicultural fabric of Mayyazhi.

Even during the liberation movements of Mayyazhi, the majority of the population never thought of liberating themselves from French rule. Unlike British colonialists, the French gained popularity and affinity among locals. Unni Nair and Kurumbi Amma symbolise the locals who never wanted French rulers to leave. The revolutionary Dasan even states that he has no grudge against French people. He even affirms that they are against their rule over them, not against their culture. Even after liberation from French power, Kurumbi Amma and Unni Nair were waiting for the ship from France. They firmly believed that the French people would come, and they would rebuild their country. "For more than two centuries the people of Mahe did not raise their voice against the imperialists because their needs were satisfied" (Sasikumar 1085)

People are free to choose their citizenship after independence; many of them rejected French citizenship, while others embraced French citizenship and continued to live in harmony. M. Mukundan challenges the conventional narratives of colonialism and presents a more complex and nuanced portrayal of a heterogenous society during the French colonial period.

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