

song the chief held a public feast for the entire village where the young men danced about, waving their arms and thus it finally caught the entire community in a huge frenzy. The song and its impact was tremendous so much so that even the non Mizos were caught in the frenzy. There were some changes to the song gradually and the lines of the verse increased from two to three or more. This was in sharp contrast then to the belief of the missionaries. The mission and the Church saw the movement in both north and south of the state as a setback to Christianity. The aspect of 'puma zai' was gradually regarded to be a resurgence to heathenism. However researchers have deduced that there were no anti Christian elements in the song. It was within the domains of such colonization that the missionaries realized that the Mizos were actually a tribe that was inherently fond of song. In this regard translation became all the more important because song was actually not a inherited legacy from the white man, rather it has been clearly established that song had existed in its own parameters even much before the colonizer actually set foot upon Lushai soil.(Challiana,6) It however continues to establish the notion that there remains a distinct coalition in terms of the inter relationship between song and identity in the Mizo narrative. For instance, a woman by the name of Hmuaki was so prolific and spontaneous that very soon the inhabitants of her village became extremely concerned about the prospects for the later generation. They felt that there would remain little or no opportunity for the youth to compose any new songs. Thus, the village rallied around and decided to bury her alive. Even as she was being dealt with in such a barbaric manner, so ardent was her love for song that she continued to compose and sing till her dying breath: *My dear ones, my dear young boys, | Do shovel me gently.* The notion of hybridity and the power that it releases may well be seen as a characteristic feature of the post colonial Mizo .The tradition of song, that has been part of the pre colonial and inherently pre Christian tradition amongst the Mizos have in the process, allowed a “means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past” and have also succeeded in developing “new anti- monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth.” The concept of hybridity has been seen to occur in most post colonial societies as a result of “conscious moments of cultural suppression”. These aspects could perhaps be because, the colonial power has invaded to consolidate political as well as economic control or when settler – invaders dispossess indigenous peoples and in the process force them to assimilate to new social patterns. Ideologically, it has been asserted too that it could occur in later periods when patterns of immigration from the metropolitan societies and from other imperial areas of influence continue to produce complex cultural palimpsests with the post colonized world. In the case of the Mizo song tradition there has been an inherent association of the same with that of worship. As Christianity has significantly been the religion amongst the people of the state even after the colonial missionaries have departed, there has been an inherent assimilation of the Western as well as native song

traditions. Foucault's notion of 'how we have been trapped into our own history' becomes here a significant case in point. The element of translation and power has been intrinsically associated with the cultural relations between Britain and her colonies especially in the nineteenth century. The concept of colonization in terms of other countries was very different as compared to the Mizo scenario, for instance in terms of the European thought the aspect of culture in its colonial operation was regarded to be "hybridised, alienated and potentially threatening." Translation had created in the Lushai hills, a people who were as Bhabha had denoted as a set of 'white but not quite' people. Even though Mizoram was amongst the furthest in terms of the Indian geographical locale, it must also be concluded that, for the Mizos the aspect of identity has been very much essentialised and significantly fixed in many ways through the perspective of translation.

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**SARAH RUSSO AWARD
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This Award is instituted in memory of **Ms. Sarah Russo**, mother of our dear Albert Russo, Advisory Committee Member, Labyrinth to commemorate her support for young writers and her love of literature. **Sarah Russo Award for Literary Excellence** in a form of a certificate from Albert Russo and an humble sum of ₹ 2100/-, is a token of appreciation to thank and honor the authors and celebrate the power of the written word. This award recognizes **an outstanding piece** that shows the highest literary merit, in and of itself, as a creative or scholarly work. Writers do not apply for the prize themselves. Each Labyrinth contributor will be a participant in this contest. Albert Russo sponsors this award. Award of the previous year will be announced in **Labyrinth January Issue of the new year**.

Novel as Ethnography: Adivasi Identity in Malayalam Novel

- Vipin K Kadavath

Abstract: This paper analyses the representation of Adivasi identity in Malayalam novel as it is embedded in the modernization narrative and the space-time of 'community development'. The paper proposes that there are specific strategies in the ways space and time along with imagery and narrative schemes are employed to the effect of producing Adivasi identity as an essential and ahistorical entity amenable to continuous cultural reproduction.

Keywords: Ethnography, Adivasi identity, *Ponni* and *Maveli Manram*

... of all learned discourse, the ethnological seems to come closest to fiction. – Roland Barthes

India has been “a land of wonder” for many for its social and cultural plurality.¹ Much of the recent postcolonial endeavours within the academia had to do with the dissecting of this “wonder” and to interrogate our history and culture from different locations. We found our own history closely entwined with the legacies of colonialism, and one of the leftovers of that encounter being the specific forms of our modernity itself. Modernity, as a social formation is highly complex and has to do with forms of knowledge and social identities. In this paper, I will look at a discursive field that, in the process of constructing a category called “the tribal”, also defines the basic premises of modernity. Though the field that I refer to is an entanglement of different academic disciplines such as anthropology, popular beliefs, and literature, I would here focus on two novels to stretch my argument and drawing on other sources whenever it is necessary. Anthropology, both as a colonial discipline and in its post-independent avatar, has tried to collect data regarding the cultural practices, religious beliefs and oral traditions of different sects of people which resulted in accumulating a large body of “ethnological” knowledge. Anthropology, which during the colonial period operated as a tool for ruling over the subject population, was a result of the western positivist curiosity to know the “primitive” which also marked an attempt to know its own pasts by looking at the “primitive” that suffered a “temporal dislocation”. The texts I will discuss here, *Ponni* (1967) by Malayattoor Ramakrishnan and *Maveli Manram* (1992) by K J Baby, show some anthropological concerns and how the different articulations about tribal identity and existence have crystallized in literary practices. Usually, these novels were seen as the mainstream discussions of the hard life people had to undergo in remote forests, empathising with these “people of nature” who were still “pure” and unaffected by civilization. The fact unattended was that these texts were produced at a time when large scale “acculturation” was happening and “the tribal” was getting re-fashioned in political and economic

terms. Why then this continued obsession with “the tribal” and “the primitive”? The paper tries to understand how an identity is constructed and stabilized for a community usually “prefixed” with the adjective “tribal” through these literary fictions. It is my argument that the time-space of “the modern” is imagined through constructing such identities that fall outside that category and it depends on such identities. A thorough logic of temporality was operating in such exclusions and categorization. For example, the very binary, “the primitive” and “the modern”, could be understood as a dislocation within a larger frame of temporality, by which “the primitive” suffered a time-lag. My attempt in this paper is to show how this temporal division was also a particular spatial configuration, of identities and their limit-boundaries.

My use of the word ethnography is not accidental.ⁱⁱ The word, in significant ways, connects up these two novels with the discipline that contributed the most to this identity of the “primitive”—i.e. anthropology. Both these authors are not from the tribal communities, but they had a short or long stay in these communities and, triggered by 'a very different life of' of people suitable for becoming material for a novel, decided to write about them. This is – notwithstanding the differences between these texts – very similar to what an ethnographer does. Ethnographers go to a “tribal” area, communicate with the people, collect data, participate in rituals and write about them. But the simplistic view of ethnography as collecting and describing “other cultures” has come under severe questions and the concept has undergone a continuous theoretical reframing. An important moment in the history of ethnography is the shift it had from positivism to naturalism. Positivism refers to an approach embedded in the physical sciences trying to formulate universal laws regarding the nature of all physical phenomena. Based on this, the social sciences were conceived in terms of the logic of experimentation and testing which resulted in the revelation of the “fact”. But naturalism proposed that as far as possible, the social world should be studied in its natural form. It was optimistic of describing and discovering the culture truthfully as it believed that the ethnographer's involvement was very low as his job was to become part of the culture observed. Both these approaches were not devoid of the “Otherizing” in the form of objectifying the community studied into a set of data and entailed a romanticisation of it. Following through the implications of the post-structuralist intervention can raise new questions hawking the very existence of ethnography as a methodological practice. One such move has happened within the discipline of anthropology by theorists like Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Georges Marcuse, Stephen Taylor et. al. who started perceiving ethnography as a narrative [“... a story we tell about the people we study” (Bruner: 138)], rhetoric [...even the styles adopted in natural scientific and quantitative social research reports are rhetorical” (Hamersley: 329), and, in Clifford Geertz's terms, “construction of other people's construction.” (Geertz: 9) What has come under question is the very idea that literature and anthropology

occupy very different realms of human existence. In fact, after these theoretical postulations, it is not very difficult to say that literature, rather than existing in some trans-social aesthetic world, exists closely entwined with other texts and cultural practices.

Though the novels *Ponni* and *Maveli Manram* are written by famous writers in Malayalam, they have not been seriously engaged with. *Ponni*, published in 1967, narrates the conflict that happens between two communities – the Mudugas and the Irulas living in Attappadi, the south of Nilagiri hills. The story revolves around a Muduga girl, Ponni, who is disillusioned with the customs and beliefs of her clan. She received a little schooling which is reflected in her attitudes toward the people around her. Chellan was Ponni's friend from childhood and when she grew up into a beauty he became one of her suitors. But Ponni never looked at him with any consideration. She participates in a program organized at Kotamaithanam as a part of Republic Day and there she meets Maran, a young man from the Irula community. At first sight they are attracted towards each other. One day Maran, chasing a deer, reaches a place that belonged to Muduga people and he has a verbal fight with a Muduga man, Chinnan. Chellan, when he came to know about this arrives there and fights with Maran. This incident leads to a second meeting between Maran and Ponni, and they reciprocate their love but without any hope of getting married as they belonged to different communities. The problems in the novel finally get resolved with the arrival of Sinna Dorai, the sub-collector, who often shows “a sympathetic partiality towards the tribal people.” (Ramakrishnan: 147) He declares that the tribal people can burn forests (as there was a ban by the authorities on burning forests) for cultivation and also tries to unite Ponni and Maran which finds a stark objection from both the communities. Ponni plans to run away with Maran to some distant place where nobody or no rules will confine them. But the novel ends with the accidental death of Ponni in a landslide, leaving a romantic union unfulfilled. The novel unfolds the narrative through the intrigues among the clan members, the secret meetings of the lovers, descriptions of the festival and the witchcraft of Bomman, the sorcerer of the community.

K J Baby is better known as an activist. He has been running an alternative school called *Kanavu* (meaning dream) in Chengode, Wayanad. Earlier, he had been associated with Samskarika Vedi, the cultural organization of the radical Left in Kerala and produced street plays for it. “The novel *Maveli Manram*”, writes Satchidanandan in the introduction to the novel, “tries to explore a subaltern pasts which till then was marginalised to the periphery of literary circles, or that did not even turn up from the abyss of negligence and tries to bring it to the centre.” (Baby: 7) *Maveli Manram* is full of songs and myths and in a very significant way unearths an incident from past, the pawning of a slave that happened in 1834, and reconstructs it through the experience of its central characters – Kaippadan and Eera. The novelist has appended the official documents associated with this incident. Kaippadan is pawned

by Ambu Nair to Subbaraya Pattar for eight rupees. Kaippadan's life becomes a re-enactment of the mythical characters Melorachan and Keyorithi which is narrated to him by Jevaraperuman. Melorachan escapes from the servitude imposed on him and runs away along Keyorithi, but ends up with a sad plight when Keyorithi loses her life in a lake called Vellikulam. Similarly, Kaippadan also escapes with Eera, but after a long travel reaches back to Malimala, the place of subjection that they always wanted to escape. This circle of transformation be read as a change in the people of Malimala, who were also in search of the runaways. They had begun to create stories about the venture of Kaippadan and Eera to cross the borders of servitude. At the end of the novel, when all unite once again, they together create a world they longed for. The novel *Ponni* can be best understood by using the category of "liberal outsider". (Jobin) The story unfolds the logic of emancipation of a "non-yet-citizen" subject who needs care from a higher authority. After independence, the Indian state has invested much energy in this direction, economically and politically. One such liberal outsider figure within anthropology is Verrier Elwin. In fact, the central idea of the Nehru-Elwin policy was "to develop the tribes along the paths of their own traditions and genius without much interference and imposition from outside." (Subba: 213) One fear of such intervention might have been that due to the contact with the "civilized" world, all these "primitive" cultures may extinguish. But still, tribal development has been one of the most important things that the postcolonial state had to come to terms with. The state establishes a distinctive relationship with these marginal communities characterised by a deliberate distance but conscious deployment of its mechanisms among such communities. Liberal outsider, in this sense, would be one who represents the state to the marginalised and vice versa, a person with a double function. In *Ponni*, Sinna Dorai (sub collector) functions as a liberal outsider who can empathise with the tribal community. The novel *Maveli Manram*, on the other hand, does not have such a figure within the narrative. The Marxist reading of the text has hailed this novel as presenting the point of view of the neglected. But in the wake of Adivasi assertion in the subcontinent during and after the 1990s the text becomes a problematic one to deal with. Even though entangled with the disillusionment of the promises of the postcolonial state *Maveli Manram* too shares the basic representational premises of modernity that *Ponni* stands for.

"The modern" - that which is new - is primarily a temporal category and deriving from the Latin term "modernus" carries "a sense of the present as an irreversible break with the past." (Payne) The idea of "tribal development" within modernization narrative, that a section of population is under need of "progress", is an outward reflection of this temporal logic. But modernity is not merely a concept of temporality devoid of its spatial preconditions. Modernity operates through different spatial configurations. My attempt in the following pages is to analyse the novels to understand how they "imagine" and "deploy" a set of spaces

and their boundaries reinforcing the logic of temporality. The reason for such an effort would be to see an explicit and more visible way the “tribal” identity has been constructed and stabilized through an imagining of the spaces we occupy. In the discipline of anthropology place is an important factor. Anthropology understands a culture in its temporal and spatial dimensions – it will be fixed on these two axes. An ethnographer will have to delimit a culture spatially, giving the details of specific locales etc. as the particular culture that he/she studies exists within a pluralistic background of many cultures. The same pattern could be followed even by the state. For example, the Indian Constitution defines a tribal community as follows: Scheduled Tribes as per article 366(255) of the constitution are people traditionally occupying a geographical area and with a distinctive culture including language, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, art, craft etc. For our purpose here the very category of spatiality will have to be re-imagined. By spatiality I mean a way of imagining spaces, its boundaries and the inside/outside. From the analysis of these novels and other sources, we may discern at least three rationales operating in such spatial divisions. One is a habitual and commonsensical “fact” that the tribe is associated with forests. The most illuminating example could be given from the work of Edgar Thurston who, in the early decades of the twentieth century did extensive ethnographic work in south India. Thurston says:

... tribes which, only a few years ago, were living in a wild state, clad in cod and simple garb of forest leaves, buried away in the depths of the jungle, and living, like pigs and bears, on roots and honey, and other forest produce, have now come under the domesticating and sometimes detrimental influence of contact with Europeans, with a resulting of modification of their conditions of life, morality and language. (Thurston: xiv – xv)

Thurston's use of words is apparently striking. The tribal is very easily associated with wildness, simplicity, animalistic life and an essential opposition to the Europeans. The mention of nature is capable of drawing all sets of associations related to an irrevocable and even desirable “primitivism.” In the introduction to *Ponni*, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan says:

North to Mannarkkad, west to Coimbatore, south to Nilagiri, east to Ernad taluk, exists this beautiful valley. Here we see jungles full of green, and people, simple and true to nature. (Ramakrishnan: 1)

All these accounts are rich with animal imagery. Thurston abundantly uses animal images to talk about the tribal, whereas Maveli Manram tries to reverse this animalisation using words like *karadi* (bear), *puli* (tiger), *nari* (fox) to refer to upper caste landlords. But recent readings of the novel have found this as another essentialisation of the tribal identity. (Baburaj 2004) *Ponni* also gives us exotic descriptions of the tribal space like the social festivities where the male and female freely indulge in sexual plays. One such description is that of the *pongal* night when all from the community assemble at the river Bhavani. The women will take bath in river while men wait near for their “chances”. As Malayattoor