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Nostalgia for the Colonial World: A Reconsideration of Mayyazhi's Colonial Past

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Mayyazhi is a union territory sandwiched between the Kannur and Calicut districts of Kerala, India. When the rest of Kerala was ruled by the British, Mayyazhi was a French colony until 1954 when a non-violent anti-colonial movement ousted the French from power. Although the French left Mayyazhi around 60 years ago, French influence can still be felt in the ways and manners of the natives of Mayyazhi. Even though this hybrid culture is unique to all places that were once a colony, the nostalgia of the native of Mayyazhi for their colonial past makes Mayyazhi distinct from other erstwhile colonies. For the natives of Mayyazhi who have experienced the French colonization, the era of French rule is a golden age which they wish to go back to, if possible. This situation immediately necessitates a scrutiny of the native's nostalgia for colonialism as well as the nature of the imperialist project and decolonization in Mayyazhi. This paper explores the politics of the natives' love for their colonial masters and examines the nature of imperialist project and decolonization in Mayyazhi.

Mayyazhi, popularly known as Mahé, is a union territory sandwiched between the Kannur and Calicut districts of Kerala, India. When the rest of Kerala was ruled by the British, Mayyazhi was a French colony for nearly two and a half centuries. Even after India got independence in 1947, Mayyazhi remained a French Colony until 1954 when a non-violent anti-colonial movement ousted the French from power. Although the French left Mayyazhi around 60 years ago, French influence can still be felt in the ways and manners of the natives of Mayyazhi. Among 3000 people living in Mayyazhi, most can speak and understand the French language; some of them retain their French citizenship. There are people who cast their vote for elections in France and get pension from the French government. In addition to the Indian Independence Day on August 15, they also observe the Bastille Day on July 14 which is the French Day of Independence. Even though this hybrid culture is very much a product of colonialism, what makes Mayyazhi a distinct experience in postcolonialism is the natives' attitude towards colonialism. For the natives of Mayyazhi who have experienced the French colonization, the era of French rule is a golden age which they wish to go back to, if possible. This situation which is at loggerheads with the common nightmarish attitude of the natives towards colonialism as an event of terror and trauma immediately necessitates a scrutiny of the native's nostalgia for colonialism as well as the nature of the imperialist project and decolonization in Mayyazhi². But none of the dominant discourses narrating history of Mayyazhi's freedom movement does not give expression to the native's nostalgia for the colonialist past. They valorise the freedom movement as a mass agitation against the occupying force. Set against the backdrop of the freedom movement in Mayyazhi, M. Mukundan's novel *On the Banks of River Mayyazhi* (1974) attempts to fill in this gap in Mayyazhi's history by portraying the natives' reaction against the anti-colonial program¹. So throughout this paper I will be relying on Mukundan's account of Mayyazhi's anti-colonial program to problematize this special event. In other words, I will see the novel as site where the unheard voices in Mayyazhi's history are heard.

Any discussion on the concept of decolonization cannot afford to ignore Frantz Fanon. For Fanon, decolonization does not merely mean the ousting of the colonizer from the colony and the restoration of the land to the natives. It is, in fact, a much more complex process involving the liberation of the colonized from the cultural and the psychological alienation caused by the colonizer³. Fanon opines that physical violence is the principal disciplinary device that the colonizer employs in the colony to control the natives. In the mother country, says Fanon, ideological apparatuses such as “educational system, the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son” (38), good service entries and award for loyal service inculcate among the subjects a respect for the established order. Here violence is not direct and physical rather ideological and indirect. “In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge. It is obvious that here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force. “The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination” (38). The colonizer perpetuates violence upon the native till the latter accepts the colonizer’s claims of superiority. For the colonized, the foreigner who imposes his rule “by means of guns and machines” (Fanon 40) is an “Other”. According to Fanon, the natives’ recognition of their oppression stems primarily from the colonizer’s employment of physical violence to discipline them. In other words, the settler’s act of violence educates the native about their suppression. Though oppressed for the time being, the native is not meek and submissive for ever. He is always waiting for a chance to retaliate against the colonizer in the same violent way the former has treated him.

But Fanon’s ideas concerning the native’s experience of violence and its consequences in the colony are at loggerheads with the situations in Mayyazhi where power is exercised primarily through the policy of cultural assimilation. However a juxtaposition of these two theoretical positions is necessary to our study. Kenneth J Orosz notes, “As the French colonial empire expanded in the 19th century, it operated under the principle of assimilation, an idea dating back to the French revolution which posited that anyone who adopted the French language, culture and outlook could, in fact, become French” (189). The idea of assimilation gave France the authority to ‘civilize’ its colonies by appropriating them administratively and culturally. It taught the natives that the latter can eventually become a full-fledged Frenchman and a civilized human being by learning French language and adopting the colonizer’s culture. To get the subjects assimilated to the French ways and manners, they implemented in the colonies all the policies that they executed in France. The project of cultural assimilation, in short, presented the act of exploitation as a civilizing mission. Instead of disciplining the colonized through physical violence, cultural assimilation persuades the natives to imbibe western cultural values, and eventually manages to have them acknowledge the colonizer’s claims of superiority. Thus the assimilation plays a pivotal role in presenting the imperial project as a civilizing mission and transforming the natives into a self-consolidated other of Europe. In both the employment of physical violence and cultural assimilation, the aim of the colonizer is to discipline the native.

But the effect these two disciplinary paradigms have on the native is entirely different. The colonizer’s act of physical violence informs the natives that the imperial force is “Other” and corporeal punishments are visible manifestations of exploitations. Corporeally controlled and disciplined, the native awakes to the necessity of freedom. In cultural assimilation where the natives are disciplined through non-coercive means, there is hardly any means to immediately understand the fact that what is happening is exploitation and the colonizer’s civilizing mission is an act of discipline. Even though the British had also introduced a whole lot of programs of westernization in India, their aim was not to get the natives assimilated to the subject position of an English man, rather their agenda was to create a group of people

who are “Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay 42) in order to run the imperial machinery in the colony. Macaulay says, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern” (42). For them, the western-educated new class in the colony always remained a “reformed recognizable Other . . . a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 122). The French, on the other hand, considered the natives who imbibed the western culture as French citizens, and implemented in their colonies a mass cultural assimilation. It should be noted that all the three schools in Mayyazhi—L’Ecole des Filles, L’Ecole des Garçons and the Cours Complémentaire—were run by the French. Cutting across the class and caste barriers, these schools were made accessible to everyone in the colony. People from the lower-class lower-caste family like Dasan, Dasan’s father Damu and his friend Pappu; those from the lower-caste upper-class family like Kunhanandan Master and his niece Chandrika, and the upper class-French citizens like Guston are all equal the beneficiaries of the French educational system which interpellates the individuals to take up a subject-position that is pro-colonizer. Mayyazhi being a small town, the French settlers could effectively implement the policy of assimilation and get almost the entire population assimilated to the French cultural values. Varun Ramesh says about the French colonial policy of assimilation in Mayyazhi,

. . . the French implemented in Mayyazhi almost all the civil laws that they executed in France. “When the British created a separate mode of education for the natives, the French implemented here [in Mayyazhi] the same educational system that they practised in France. . . Because of this reason, there was not much resistance among people against the French unlike the widespread agitation against the British”⁴(8).

Central to the implementation of the policy of assimilation is the colonizer’s contact with the natives. Fanon says that zones of the colonizer and the colonized follow “the principle of reciprocal exclusivity” (39) where the colonizer has no direct contact with the colonized. “In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the colonizer and his rule of oppression” (Fanon 38). This reciprocal exclusivity creates a divide between the settler and the native. However the scenario is quite different in Mayyazhi where the imperial masters break this barrier between the colonizer and the colonized with a view to propagating their claims of civilizing mission among the natives, to demonstrating the western ways and manners and to eventually assimilating them to the western culture. In the novel, Kurambi Amma repeatedly recalls her strong bond with Leslie Sayv who was a regular visitor in her house. Kurambi Amma internalizes the western cultural values mainly through her contact with Leslie. Even though she cannot follow the French customs and manners in her life, she imbibes the idea that they are superior to the natives, and persuades her grandson Dasan to become a Frenchman in his demeanor. She says, “You must become a great man, like Leslie Sayiv. . . I want to see my little boy in coat and hat” (28). By marrying the native women of Mayyazhi and begetting children by them, the Frenchmen automatically inject into the next generation the values of the occident. In the project of assimilation, the colonizer tries to keep the difference between the world of the colonizer and the colonized to the minimum not by picking up the ways and manners of the natives but by training the natives in the western socio-cultural systems. By their active contact with the natives and by getting the natives assimilated to the western humanist notions, the colonizer made the natives believe that former not is an Other in the colony. Characters like Kurumbi Amma and Unni Nair repeatedly say that Frenchmen are not outsiders, rather they are also the natives of Mayyazhi.

The professions of the two consecutive generations in Mayyazhi delineate how assimilation makes the natives dependent upon the colonial system, and alienates them from

their former ways of living. Kurambi Amma's husband Keluachan was a coconut merchant, whereas his son Damu is a deed writer in the Palais de Justice and his grandson Dasan is an aspirant teacher in the school of the colonizer. The same is the case with Pokkachan and his son Vasutty. While Pokkachan was a coconut climber, his son Vasutty is a clerk in the Treasury. While Malayan Kurumbn earned his livelihood by healing people of snake-bite and performing sorcery, his son Uthaman is reluctant to take up his father's profession. Nor does he have expertise in any of the indigenous professions. Uthaman asks Kunhanandan master,

'What sort of a work I can find master?'

'You can roll beedies or plough the rice fields.'

I am not used to that kind of a work' (90).

This shows that assimilation makes the natives dependent upon the colonial world and results in the disintegration of the native economy. By making the natives heavily reliant on the colonial world, the project of assimilation makes colonialism a necessary factor in the lives of the colonized. Without the employment of physical force, the process of assimilation manages to discipline the natives.

Education, especially the teaching of western literature, is yet another important tool of assimilation and the resultant epistemic violence. As mentioned earlier, all the four schools in Mayyazhi are run by the French, and their primary agenda is to propagate the ideas supporting the civilizing mission of France. Irrespective of class and caste, these schoolstand for universal education in the colony so that the pro-settler ideas can be percolated to all strata of the society. The natives of Mayyazhi grow up reading mainly French literature. It prepares ground for the substitution of the native's symbolic and cultural world with a foreign episteme that aims to proffer the natives a new subjectivity prestructured by the settler. The educated natives of Mayyazhi like Dasan and Kunhanandan Master read Hugo's *Hernani*, Beaumarchais' *Le Mariage de Figaro* and Rousseau's *Le Contract Social*. Even the correspondence between Dasan and Kunhanandan master is not in their mother tongue Malayalam, but in French.

Family also plays a vital role in inculcating in the natives an admiration for the value system of the natives. Even before the kids start going to school, they are introduced to the colonizer's overarching claims of humanity and civility through such informal educational praxis as story-telling at home. Kurambi Amma, for example, tells her grandchild Dasan, the story of Jeanne d'Arc thereby conditioning him to sympathize with the French. Mukundan writes "Every child in Mayazhi had grown up with the story and wept over the tragic fate of the shepherd girl who was burned to death" (41). Dasan's conversation with Ammaman about the myth of the origin of Kerala shows that the new generation is almost completely alienated from their cultural heritage. Dasan's Ammaman asks him whether he knows the story of Parasurama who, the legend has it that, created Kerala. Having been educated in a western academic discipline, Dasan is clueless about these legends that had once been popular in his native culture. The substitution of the stories from the native's cultural repertoire with those of the foreign culture erases all traces of historical and social consciousness of the native, and paves way for the cultural hegemony of the imperial force.

In *Masks of Conquest*, Gauri Vishwanathan speaks about the cultural hegemony that the British achieved in India through English literature. She says that literature functioned as a tool for promoting western values in India. The canonical English writers were presented as the fountainheads of universal truths. These cultural products disseminated among the natives the western humanist values thereby aesthetically masking the British imperialist project

beneath the veneer of civilizing mission. Commenting on the colonial education in India, Judie Newman states,

Production of thought came to define the true essence of the Englishman. His material reality as subjugator and alien ruler was dissolved in his mental output. Viswanathan thus fully substantiates the idea that cultural hegemony can be best established and maintained through the consent of the dominated (21).

Though Vishwanathan's study pertains to British imperialism in India, this framework is tenable in the case of French colonialism also. In both the cases, the colonial subjects are required to study the colonizer's literature which is an effective vehicle for presenting the west as an ideal world and assimilating the colonized to the western humanist values. Through subtle textual practices which promote western cultural hegemony, the literature of the occupying force exercises control over the colonized people. Thus literature of the imperial force functions as a crucial agency in the perpetration of epistemic violence in the colony. The colonizer constructs a new subjectivity for the native, a new sense of what is truth, real and normal, so that the latter can be controlled by the colonial forces. This body of knowledge that the occident produces to subjugate the inscrutable orient is called orientalism by Edward Said. The whole project of orientalism, Edward Said says, aims to control the orient by "worlding" the subject peoples, that is by substituting their version of reality with its own mode of understanding and structuring the world. Orientalism exercises control over the colony by "making statements about it" (Said 1991:3). Employing Foucaultian paradigm, both Spivak and Said show how discourse controls and fashions the natives in the way the colonizer wants them to be.

Unlike the physical violence, epistemic violence keeps the natives unaware of the oppression they face, thereby eliminating the possibility of any resistance from them. In Mayyazhi where cultural domination and imperialist project work more by persuasion and consent rather than by force, the natives are brainwashed into believing the colonizer's claims of civilizing mission and are ignorant of the imperialist intentions of the French rule. Mukundan says, "Not many people in Mayyazhi could accept the fact that the white men had to leave. Only a few seemed to be aware of the need for freedom and you could count them on the fingers of your hand" (68). This is the reason why the natives call freedom movement "riot", and see the French army that come to suppress the freedom-fighters as saviours. Mukundan describes the way in which the natives treated the army: "They [the natives] gave the soldiers tender coconuts to drink and made payasam for them with milk and sugar" (160). In Fanon's conception of the situations in colony, the colonized is already aware of the exploitative system functioning in the colony. The function of the native intellectual and the nationalist party is only to organize people's anger and violence against the colonizer in a systematic way. We have already seen that the natives of Mayyazhi are ignorant of the colonizer's exploitation and their own subjugated position. So the native intellectuals in Mayyazhi have the double burden of educating the people about their oppressed status as well as mobilizing them against the settler.

But, in Mayyazhi, there is a chasm between the native intellectuals and the common mass. As opposed to a mass agitation, the freedom movement in Mayyazhi is carried out by a group of native intellectuals (such as teachers Cours Complémentaire and Labourdonnais college, college students, government officials, and so on) who depend upon the material base of the colonial government for their sustenance. Nowhere in the novel does Mukundan point out the participation of the common populace in the freedom movement. To say the least, the anticolonial program in Myaazhi was pretty much class specific. Fanon notes that the native intellectuals who are also the partisans of colonialism fear that a violent mass movement will eliminate the material base of colonialism upon which they depend for

their livelihood. Hence they opt for a non-violent anti-colonial programme that functions mainly through activities like election, peaceful demonstrations, boycott and so on. According to Fanon, this non-violence is insincere because it only preserves the economic and class interest of the colonialist bourgeoisie and the native intellectuals. In Mayyazhi, the native intellectuals protest against the colonizers through non-violent means so that material base of colonialism does not get jeopardised. Mukundan describes how the wheels of the colonial government had stopped functioning in Mayyazhi through non-violence.

Many government officers in Mayyazhi had resigned from their posts and joined the movement by this time. Abdulla who was in Public Works, Kesavan a teacher at the Cours Complémentaire, and Lakshmi Teacher of Labourdonnais College were among them (203).

Along with mass boycott of the government officials, they isolated Mayyazhi from the rest of the world by stopping food supplies and blocking transportation. Fanon always prefers a violent mass movement against the colonizer because it not only ousts the settler from power, but also frees the natives from the psychological alienation and the inferiority complex that colonialism had caused. Fanon says, "The mobilization of the masses introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history" (93).

Since it spells the doom of the material base of the colonizer, whatever the newly-born country needs for its existence has to be generated by the natives through unity and hard labor. They see themselves as responsible individuals who exercised their agency in the decolonization process. Violence, Fanon says, frees the native from his despair, inaction and inferiority complex. The people realize that each and every one contributed to the liberation movement and the leader has no special merit to claim. Through their active contact with people during the organization of the freedom movement, the native intellectuals also unlearn their class privilege and develop a nationalist ideology grounded in collectively. So violence is a powerful cleansing for both the natives and the native intellectuals. Fanon warns that the employment of compromise-politics in the decolonization process results in a neo-colonial situation. To corroborate his argument, Fanon cites the example of the Republic of Gabon where President Leon M'ba, upon his arrival in Paris declares that Gabon is an independent country. Even though Gabon has become an independent country, nothing has fundamentally changed between Gabon and its colonizer. The status quo continues. Fanon says, "In fact, the only change is that Monsieur M'ba is the president of the Republic and he is the guest of the president of the French Republic: (Fanon 67)

Like Gabon, Mayyazhi also does not undergo a fundamental change after decolonization. The changes that happened in Mayyazhi after decolonization are quite superficial. Instead of Big Sayiv, Kanaran becomes the head of the council. He lives in the house that Big Sayiv had once used. The pictures of Napoleon and Jeanne d'Arc are replaced by those of Gandhi and Nehru. The government officials who resigned to declare solidarity with the freedom movement are reinstated in their respective positions. The natives who bought the overarching claims of humanity and civility floated by French continue to look upon the latter as their patron, and remain ignorant of the exploitation they have been undergoing so far. They mistake the government of the occupying force that exercises its exploitative agenda for a welfare body, and nostalgically long to live under it. The kind of farewell that they bid to the French bears testimony to it. Mukundan says, "All Mayyazhi wept as the ship moved away. Their tears moistened the burning sand" (216) Many of them believed that the French government will send another ship to take them to France. Hoping to live with their French masters, natives like Unni Nair, Carpenter Raman, Vasutty and Balan take up French citizenship. Unni Nair enumerates the benefits that the French citizenship would confer: "Those who take the option will not have to starve, ever. The white man will

send them money from France” (225). Even Vasutty, an erstwhile revolutionary, takes French citizenship under the illusion that the French citizenship would “put an end to. . . his family’s poverty” (228).

The native intellectuals who deposed the colonizer are also ensnared in the oriental discourse. Like the natives, they also believe that the colonizer’s culture is superior to the native’s. For them, western culture is what the natives need to follow. Pappan a native intellectual in the party voices this agenda very clearly: “. . . we are only against the white man’s rule. Why should we be against his culture?” (Mukundan98). The native intellectual Uthaman’s denial to take up the professions of a sorcerer and temple-dancer underlines the fact that even the native intellectuals, who are apparently voicing resistance against colonisation, have nevertheless become victims of the settler’s epistemic violence. Uthaman thinks that the native episteme that legitimizes the religious rites of temple-dancing and sorcery is irrational and hence needs to be replaced with the colonizer’s idea of rationality. Uthaman’s mentor, Kunhanandan master also falls in the same trap. He advises Uthaman to see sorcery and temple-dancing as mere professions independent of the belief systems that underpin these performances. He says, “You can be a pujari without believing in God. . . it can simply be a profession” (89). Both Uthaman and Kunhanandan hold the view that the rituals followed by the natives are exotic and irrational. They conform to the colonizer’s orientalist idea that the east with its inscrutable and exotic rituals is irrational, and needs to be rationalized and modernized in the western way. The stance taken by Uthaman and Kunhanandan is what ParthaChatterjee calls the reverse of orientalism. That is to say, “. . . the ‘object’ in nationalist thought is still the Oriental” (38) because it sees the colony as an exotic land, and believes that a deliverance is possible only by catching up with the western standards. The reversal of orientalist thought happens in the idea that as opposed to the orientalist discourse that the natives are incapable of achieving western standards of civilization and modernity on their own, the natives now think that they can achieve what the occident considers to be modern. The resistance of the native intellectuals to the imperialist project remains only at an individual level in the sense that they want to remove only the colonizer, not his system by which he rules.

Apart from ousting the colonizer from power, the native intellectuals did not pay attention to understand, and educate people about the imperialist agenda behind policies of the French government. The natives who have been brainwashed into believing the colonizer’s claims of “civilizing mission” think that the French rule stands for the welfare of the natives. They continue to look upon the era of French colonialism with nostalgia. Even though the colonial master is not physically present in the colony, the colonized is still controlled by and submissive to him. The only change that comes over Mayyazhi through the freedom movement is that the colonizer is replaced by the natives. The psychological and cultural alienation that the settler had caused to the natives continues to exist. Since decolonization is also a psychological act of freeing the mind of the colonized from the alienation caused by colonialism, what happened in Mayyazhi is not a decolonization in its fullest sense, rather a transfer of power from “certain species of men by another species of men” (35).

¹ In his interview with Varun Ramesh in Mathrubhumi (book 93, issue 4, 2015) Mukundan says that he had to bank upon the memory of the people who had actually experienced the French colonialism, since no historical documents dealing with anticolonial movement in Mayyazhi present a view from the natives.

² Fanon in his *Wretched of the Earth* says that the native’s experience of colonialism is traumatic thanks to the colonizers employment of physical violence to discipline the latter.

³Fanon says that colonialism causes psychological and cultural alienation to the natives. It forces the natives to believe that their culture is inferior to the colonizer's. Fanon says that the colonizer proselytizes the native that they are insensible and devoid of culture and value. For the settler, the native is "insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is. . . the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil" (41). According to Fanon, decolonization, apart from ousting of the colonizer from power, should aim at restoring confidence and self-respect to the natives.

⁴Translation mine

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