

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Provincializing Island Poetics: The Personal as the Spatial in N S Madhavan's *Litanies of Dutch Battery*

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Affect towards islands is a unique approach to engage with in discussions of the phenomenology of fictional islands. This affect complements the already identified tropes within island poetics: those of sensorial exploration, spatial practices, and textural detailing of islands. This article turns to a work of fiction about a fictional island based on the island city of Kochi in south India to unpack an alternative aesthetic of spatiality, the kind that changes the personal/political relationship to personal/spatial one. We argue that the novel, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (the novel in question) by N.S. Madhavan, expands inquiries into phenomenology of fictional islands by making space for corporeal memory and collective memory in storytelling. These memory-oriented narrative devices, we suggest, “provincialize” island poetics to add a hermeneutic of postcolonial angst to the repertoire of formal features of literary islandness.

Introduction

The depiction of islands in creative texts, literary and cinematic, animates readings that engage with specificities of formal representation of islands. Island poetics, the theorization of representation of islands, goes beyond locating representations of islands as tropes, icons and symbols (see below for more). It inverts into explorations of characters and readers or audiences perceive or conceive of islands. This project of island poetics, when used in postcolonial context and outside the Anglophone, we suggest, proves to be a critical exercise in uncovering the connections between history and geography of island spaces. As we discuss below, one such connection is the one between the personal and spatial (evocative of the notions of the personal as the political of second wave feminism). We show that this personal/spatial connection is embodied by the individual as well as the collective ways of inhabiting the island in the fictional island Dutch Battery which is based on the island city of Kochi in south India. Before we turn to this text that exemplifies the personal/spatial contiguity, let us first explore the framework

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of island poetics and our agenda of building on it vis-a-vis the project of “provincializing” so as to enable postcolonial readings and renderings of island poetics.

Island Poetics and Provincializing

The call to study islands “on their own terms” (McCall, 1994, p. 2) has brought about an empathetic turn in locating islands as spaces with their own identity (Baldacchino, 2004, 2007; Conkling, 2007; Hay, 2013; McMahan, 2016). The phenomenological perspective on this call has added further nuance to the terms of islandness as being defined in generic sense. For instance, theorisation of phenomenology of islands (Hay, 2006) looks at islands as inviting place-based approaches to make sense of their diversity. According to Pete Hay, the phenomenology of islands transcends traditional definitions. Instead, he perceives islandness as a complex and multifaceted concept that emerges from a “deeply visceral lived experience” (2006, p. 34). Islands, as Hay suggests, are not isolated entities separated from the mainland solely by geographical boundaries. Instead, they possess a tapestry of cultural, social, and environmental elements that shape and define the existence of islanders.

Building on Hay’s phenomenology, Graziadei et al. (2017; 2017) foreground the concept of island poetics to discuss the narrative devices that bring out the islandness of texts. They point to narrative tropes such as sensory orientation of island texts, use of spatial practices such as swimming and circumnavigating, and textural richness of the narrative as markers of the praxis of island poetics. This investigation into literary islands has invited a lot of reflection on what makes these spaces remarkable in terms of storytelling (Dautel & Schödel, 2017; Dawson & Pugh, 2021; Hong, 2022; MacKinnon, 2020; Martins et al., 2021; McDonald, 2020; Riquet, 2019; Samson, 2020). This “phenomenology of fictional islands”, as Graziadei et al. (2017; 2017) put it, has been largely oriented towards Western texts such as *Shutter Island*, *The Blue Lagoon*, *Life of Pi*, or *The Invention of the Morel*. It revolves around western settings or unanchored/unnamed tropical islands. In the realm of popular fiction, the islands of Britain continue to be a popular setting for “whodunits and crime thrillers” (Crane & Fletcher, 2016, p. 637), “adventure” (Crane & Fletcher, 2017; Kinane, 2016), and “happy ever after” romances (Crane & Fletcher, 2017, p. 119). The theoretical engagements with phenomenology of islands as visible in these examples also reinforce the notion of this western orientation and the trope of rootlessness in extending island poetics to studies of specific island texts (Samson, 2020). In his study on Island Studies, James Randall (2020), an economic and social geographer, looks at the European explorations of islands in historical literary works, and comments that the islands are represented as spaces of “danger, mystery, fantasy escape and transformation” (p. 58) and argues that this idea gets perpetuated in the disciplines of tourism and marketing. Islands from non-Western locations are now gaining visibility within island studies. For

instance, Gang Hong (2022), through her study, expands the subject by incorporating the geographies of Chinese islands into the framework as a response to the predominance of western settings in the discourse.

It is against this background that nissologists, especially from the postcolonial contexts, need to engage with the specificity of the aesthetic of islandness as emerging from the Global South. Explorations of literary islandness from the postcolonial critique are located in the stance of contesting the representation of the islands of Global South in mainstream island narratives and are complemented by an effort to investigate how consequences of European political interventions play out in the aesthetics of islandness. For example, Graham Huggan in his “third world reappraisal of island poetics”, points out that when discerned from a postcolonial lens, islands are represented with a sense of exoticness in which an “I” establishes hegemony over the other (1987, p. 20). The difference, as lived by a third world island, lies in “the ethnocentric perspective of island experience” (Huggan, 1987, p. 26). While factoring postcolonial geopoetics within island as a form, Antonio Balasopoulos (2008) points to the need to address the insular imaginary of island form as being informed by imperialism. Turning to postcolonial islands’ ability to bring an element of “a critical postcolonial and spatial historical context”, Tariq Jazeel establishes the need to examine “the political possibilities of thinking and imagining island space differently” (2009, p. 399).

In history, this contestation of Eurocentrism has come to be hailed as a gesture in “provincializing”, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) first put it. It is an act of unlearning European habits of practising a discipline or even any mode of thinking that is rooted in a location that might be “provincial” in the sense of its relation to the mainstream or metropolitan Europe. In recent times, it has garnered some attention on the scene of cultural geography (Alias & Wadhwa, 2023; Gosetti et al., 2022) as a methodology to challenge hegemonic spatialities. The project of provincializing is relevant to the spatial reading of the novel as well as its configuration of islandness in terms of pre/colonial history given that it draws attention to an otherwise under-explored literary geography. Most engagements with spatiality in Indian novels deal with metropolitan cities such as Bombay (Ashcroft, 2011; Gopal, 2009; Mantri, 2019) and Delhi (Khanna, 2016; Tickell & Ranasinha, 2018), some even evoking Bombay as the metaphor for India (Patel & Thorner, 1995). Therefore, the extensive engagement with Kochi’s history in general and of its cosmopolitanism in particular in the novel *Litanies of Dutch Batteries* by N S Madhavan merits attention for providing an anchoring of an alternative cosmopolitanism model for India (to echo Ashis Nandy’s formulation in its ethnographic account of the city). In this article, we seek to extend the same to the praxis of island poetics so that the phenomenology of islands (in fiction) gets pluralised and the overall phenomenology of islands gets enriched in terms of what Hay (2006) points to as socio-cultural tapestries. Thus, it is

befitting to delve into other tapestries outside the Anglophone island poetics and to turn to concepts other than the tropes associated with fictionalising of islands in the Western imagination.

Kochi (known as Cochin during four centuries of European rule until recently when the vernacular Kochi was revived as the name for the city) constitutes an appropriate location to examine these tapestries. In contrast to the metropolitan cities of India such as Mumbai, Bangalore or Delhi, Kochi is a relatively less known space—geographically as well as historically. Located a few miles away from Calicut, where Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama arrived and “discovered” India in 1498, its geography changes according to the context it is perceived in: it is, simultaneously, perceived as a mediaeval era kingdom, a region, a group of islands or a city in the historical and cultural engagements. Similarly, historically speaking, its milieu is “a cultural milieu shaped by labyrinthine historical narratives” (S. P. Thomas, 2014). Ruled over by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British from the late mediaeval to mid twentieth century, Kochi has a distinct identity shaped by diverse historical influences and is now home to biennale in India, an unusual host for the mega art event given that generally it is the megacities that are chosen to represent art for the event. The island/city has seen traders, travellers and other “strangers” in the Simmelian sense (Simmel, 1908) from different parts of the world including China, Italy, Portugal and Holland arrive and live here. This legacy continues to live in the space of Kochi in different forms in art, culture, and built environment. This has led Ashis Nandy to comment on Cochin’s distinctive multiculturalism wherein a “culturally embedded identity” develops, encompassing diverse communities as an “inalienable part” of its very essence. (Nandy, 2000, p. 327). The Jewish synagogues, the Chinese fishing nets, the Dutch palace and the varied art forms and practices announce Cochin’s transnational and cosmopolitan legacy: “a place where one can find more than ten gods, goddesses, festivals, rituals and worship places in co-existence in an area of 7 kms for the last many centuries” (B. Thomas, 2012, p. 47).

The representation of this legacy is the substance of many Kochi novels. It was in Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) that Kochi appeared as a setting and a rich material for fiction in a significant way, in the way it located the richness of cosmopolitanism here. *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (2010), along with Johny Miranda’s *Requiem for the Living* (2013), deserve to be seen as part of this larger project of discovering interesting ways of framing locales away from Eurocentrism. Other engagements with history as seen by those outside European frameworks appear in the work emerging from Kerala are *Francis Itty Cora* (2009) by T. D. Ramakrishnan and *The Covenant of Water* (2023) by Abraham Verghese. N. S. Madhavan, a renowned author of Malayalam literature, has a repertoire of short stories that delve into varied thematic concerns to his credit. Being an advocate of the downtrodden, Madhavan explores India’s communal issues, caste divide and poverty as some of the subject matter of his stories. His literary distinctiveness emerges

from his engagement with the different historical episodes, such as, the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the subsequent Sikh massacre in the 1980s, as well as the various protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 that sought to limit the notion of citizenship to certain communities in India. *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, his debut novel, was one of the first novels to record Cochin's prolonged history of cohabitation in its individuality. Published as *Lanthan Batheriyile Luthiniyakal* (2003) and translated into English as *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (2010), it is a significant novel in the exploration of Kochi through Dutch Battery, a fictional island modelled after Kochi. The novel presents Dutch Battery as a land of migrants and refugees who have come from various parts of the world and settled in the island. Set in the middle of twentieth century, the story depicts the island's history, layered with regional legends, myths and images and is a reflection of the complex history of Kochi and its relationship with various colonial powers that have ruled the city over the centuries through the narrator as well as through the islanders in general. The narrator is Jessica who relates to the island in ways deeper than what patriotism can ever explain; indeed, she finds her life to be a reflection of the island's. The islanders as a community also relate to the island in special ways, committed to its history. Both the individual (Jessica) and the collective (the islanders) constitute mouthpieces and/or witnesses to the rich history of the island. The novel is appropriate to locate at the project of provincializing island poetics in that its textuality is located in an active engagement with the island's history, and its identity remains a concern throughout the story. Together, these elements add a nuance of agency to the idea of space, transforming the idea of "the personal is the political" from second wave feminism to "the personal is the spatial".

We first contextualise the novel and its plot and then explore the spatial in terms of two lenses: the individual (Jessica) and the collective (the islanders).

Towards a Critical Reading of *Litanies of Dutch Battery*

Litanies of Dutch Battery revolves around a young girl named Jessica and her experiences in the fictional island called Dutch Battery where she lives. The island itself is one of the primary characters of the novel as it defines each of the inhabitants of the space. It is depicted as a location that has seen invasions and trade relations with multiple European and Asian countries including China, Portugal, Holland and England. It gets its name after the mounting of five canons here by the Dutch; it is a "bridgeless delta", as Jessica puts it (p. 301). Connected to the mainland with the help of ferries, this land has people who came as refugees, including Jews, French descendants and Latin Catholics.

The story begins when Jessica's mother is pregnant with her. It starts in the year 1950 which marks a very important period in Kerala and Cochin's history amidst the larger narratives of the famine issues of the Second World War and the earliest days of the communist government in the state. Jessica recounts the stories of the different communities that live there and the

emotional state of the islanders when the ferries leave for the mainland. She narrates the experiences and practices of the islanders and their short trips to mainland for facilities that the island does not provide. Several real events from the regional history such as the election of a Communist government, the appointment of E.M.S. Namboodiripad as the first Non-Congress Chief Minister in independent India, the anti-communist agitations and the effects of Second World War become the vignettes of her narration. These are details that make better sense to those familiar with regional politics but readers in general are likely to understand the context as Jessica and the islanders keep referring to different historical episodes in their conversations.

To return to the plot, Jessica's life on the island becomes tough after she is molested by Pushpangadan Master, her tutor. Her attempts at asking for justice result in the accused committing suicide which, in turn, makes things worse for her as everybody blames Jessica for the suicide and disowns her. The novel ends with Jessica's descent into madness. Initially, she decides to fake madness to set herself free from all the troubles but very soon she comes to identify with the madness in her state of grief. What is even more remarkable is that in this state of grief, she continues to identify with the island and its history (see the section on the individual below for more).

The islanders too appear every now and then in the story as carrying the island's sense of agency. They are historians and guardians of its legacy, feeling nostalgic about its past and mournful at the loss of markers of that legacy (one example of which is the local opera inspired by the European genre—more on which below in the section on the collective). These quirky characters are fond participants in the island's story: their bond with the island makes it clear that it is not just Jessica who identifies with it and that the island occupies the islanders as much as they occupy it.

The novel is, thus, a documentation of the cultural history and practices of Cochin: its balance between an individual's life story and the larger history of the geographical location praised for its "kaleidoscopic" breadth "chronicling the ways in which the island and the history of the world around it reach out to each other, thus accomplishing the narrative of isolation by means of describing its very obliteration at the altar of politics" (S. P. Thomas, 2014). Through our analysis of its island poetics at work, we argue that the novel is symptomatic of "provincializing" regionality in postcolonial fiction and the theorization of space itself. The personal gets interwoven with the spatial in the novel in a synergy that adds a unique twist to the way city writing is formulated or theorised in India. The freshness of *Litanies of Dutch Battery* lies in the way it creates a spatial dimension for the articulation of the personal in two ways: one by enabling a body-space, and two, by enabling a collective personal, rather than a hegemonic space, that articulates the personal-spatial congruity. It is this conflation of body and space that we unpack in the first part in the analysis below. We then focus on the way

the people of the island remember the island's history and feel bound to it. Together, the two levels—the individual and the collective—relate the spatial to the personal.

As mentioned above, “the personal is the spatial” is a revisiting of the second wave feminist assertion “the personal is the political” (Hanisch, 1969). While the connection with the political is well-established, the spatial angle to being human and inhabiting a space with a sense of belongingness is an insight of some use to cultural geography, especially in the context of island poetics. As an aside, we must note that our reading here is based on the English translation of the novel and is therefore oriented towards concepts that make stronger sense in the poetics/aesthetics and critical concepts (such as provincializing) of the Western and Anglophone contexts. We hope that this reading encourages other ways of approaching the original novel.

We now turn to the two levels of the personal—the individual and the collective—as presented in the novel towards two ends: to demonstrate how fiction becomes a resource for provincializing island poetics, and to suggest that such intertwining of the personal with the spatial matters a lot in conceptualising provincial spaces such as Kochi.

The Individual in the Personal/Spatial Contiguity

In their study of island formation within texts, Graziadei et. al, (2017) suggest two approaches. They broaden the concept of the textual construction of an island by including visual and sensory experiences, and by also taking into account the spatial practices such as swimming, walking, circumnavigating, landing etc. To this approach, we add that certain literary texts, such as *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, also conceive an island space through the metaphor of body.

Three instances from the novel will help clarify the connection between the individual and the spatial. All of these instances refer to the way Jessica, the protagonist and narrator of the novel identifies with the island. In one, she speaks of the parallels between her and the island at the moment of her birth. In another, she defines islands, especially her island, differently. In yet another, she imagines becoming one with the island by seeing herself as a lighthouse. Let us turn to each instance.

Jessica begins her story in a way that establishes that it is going to be a story of the island as well as of her own life: “The day I was born, the water around Lanthan Bathery was placid with hardly a ripple” (p. 4). She says she was aware of the water around the island even in her mother's womb: the tides in the water used to be accompanied by the tidal surges in the amniotic fluid; every time the river turned red with the colour of brick, the fluid too would turn red. She “feel[s] the solitude of the delta” (p. 5) and also mimics the movement of its waters. Similarly, she equates her detachment from her mother's body after the umbilical cord gets severed, to the bridgelessness of the island. According to Jessica, her navel is a body part from where she got the “the messages about a broken bridge” (p. 45). The correspondence

between oneself and one's space is a very different textual strategy. This is an expression not just of sensory connection as identified in island poetics, but of embodiment.

The "litanies" in the title of the novel referring to the island manifest in litanies that are about her being, suggestive of the continuities between her and the island. The first litany is the list of things she likens to her vagina, the last words of which go: "my faith; my multiplication table; my mountain pass; my harbour mouth; my chronometer; my anchor; my tabernacle; my blessing; my vulva" (pp. 52-53). The other ways the idea that Jessica is an island is reinforced throughout the story include the likening of the moment of her birth to the docking of a ship.. The body/space relationship comes alive in the way Jessica looks at the island as an insider. It is as if the island were seeing itself and finds a personal attribute of loneliness in the being of the island: "I learned the definition of an island [. . .] a piece of land surrounded on all four sides by water. [It] was——nothing but an outsider's take. In the minds of islanders, an island was a state of bridgelessness" (p. 45). This definition of bridgelessness anticipates the way Jessica will find her helpless later in the novel. But for now, one must note that this definition of islandness as bridgelessness is a unique expression located in postcoloniality: the process of dwelling on an island makes the dweller intimate with the space that is not visible to an outsider's or coloniser's gaze. The definition of islandness as bridgelessness needs to be read in the light of the project of provincializing: islands are not what are accessible via sensory experiences and spatial navigation as illustrated through predominantly western examples of depictions of islands (Graziadei, Hartmann, et al., 2017; Graziadei, Kinane, et al., 2017). Islands are spaces vulnerable to lack of infrastructures (such as bridges), the access to which has been a matter of power relations. As a formulation, the personal is the spatial, brings politics into the category of space especially of island poetics. In the way it speaks of Jessica's relationship with the island and its history, it critically modifies the feminist motto of the personal is the political, thereby giving it a gravitas of space is inhabited. It also reveals that the political nature of the personal is a located one; that is by adding space to the personal/political contiguity, one can identify the different entry points from/into geography of a subject. It also extends geography to the collective rather than keeping it confined to personal in the sense of the individual. Feminist geographers might find it interesting for a relationship between body and geography, especially when it comes to observing how gender plays a role in making sense of and navigating space (Longhurst, 1995; M. E. Thomas, 2005).

More images connecting her body with that of the island are present throughout the text. Jessica connects to the island's helplessness when she hears about the time when Australian soldiers clamoured along the streets of the island during the Second World War. Her helplessness mirrors that of the island when Jessica too becomes somewhat like a "bridgeless delta" (p. 301), as she defines the island earlier in the novel, when she is ostracised by others

as punishment for speaking out against the molester. Towards the end, this resonance between her body and the island's being that she establishes at the beginning of the story gets further reinforced when she says: "In those days, the moles on my body tightened their grip over my life; I no longer went for walks. Did moving about mean anything in a bridgeless delta where all pathways led to the water?" (p. 301). Her observation connects geography and personality: like the island, she too is in a state of bridgelessness.

A few pages later, she imagines herself to be a lighthouse holding a candle to the ships in her reverie seeing the various communities arriving in ships to the island, thereby becoming a lot more intimately connected with the island. As she, the lighthouse, becomes one with the island, she becomes a witness to the different arrivals to the island: the Jews from Palestine, Thomas of Cana, the Knanaya Christians, the Arabs, Konkans, the Gujaratis, the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British are peppered here with characters from the novel's temporal setting. Mehboob (a musician and singer from Cochin), Lee Hung Jup (a settler from China who started the first Chinese restaurant in the town), Gilbertchettan (a retired navy officer from Bombay, meaning "Gilbert, the elder brother"), and Jab Dil Noronha (of Portuguese descent, with the words "Jab Dil" being a nickname given to him for exclusively singing a Hindi song called "*Jab dil hi toot gaya*" ("alas, my heart is broken" by the renowned Hindustani singer K L Sehgal). Towards the end, as Jessica undergoes a shock therapy, her connection with the island deepens. The contiguity between herself and the island's being manifests in the scene where she is given shock therapy to cure her "madness". The switching on of the machine brings to her the sensations of the water around her: "I could hear the sounds of bubbles nursing in the mountain brooks, water rushed through holes in the rocks, peeling like angels' trumpets. The water grew into a river" (pp. 309-310). She expresses the sensation that she is leaving her body behind floating by the dam and drifting away "past the sandbanks of Aluva, into Lanthan Bathery and, beyond to the estuary at the Azhi, and into the Arabian Sea" (p. 310). Recognising these rich connections between the body and the island, literary critic Udaya Kumar (2018) observes that the novel stands out as a personal narrative in suture with the geographical and the historical narrative of Kochi.

These contiguities between the individual (body) and the spatial (island) highlight an "imaginative geography" (Driver, 2005; Gregory, 1995; Said, 2008) in which fiction becomes a method to talk about landscape. The mirroring of the character and the island in the sense of the character turning to the history of the island to express a sense of violation and grief is a remarkable strategy of "doing" islands, as also evoked in the ethnographic work of Philip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart (2012). The way the two (Jessica and the island) share the way their physicality gets expressed in helplessness, and the way they become a part of each other bring to island poetics an expression of provincializing Western aesthetics by depicting the rootedness of the island in body and history. However, the personal-spatial

connection does not become limited to Jessica alone. It expands to incorporate the community living on the island. As detailed in the next section, the social too is intertwined with the spatial in the novel, a connection that deepens the idea that inhabiting a space is an intense way to internalise its history and identity.

Kochi and the Social-Spatial

Rajesh Rajamohan, the translator of the novel, observes that the islanders of the Dutch Battery have a secret-like humour that outsiders cannot access: it gets revealed in the way they speak of Kochi's history, "while sliding in layers of legends, fantasies, myths, facts and images" (p. ix). Taking a cue from his observation, we argue that in the way the island appears into everyday conversations among the characters, one finds a crucial lens to understand the island's history. This is an example of history from below, quite in the grain of provincializing Chakrabarty theorises, or as Udaya Kumar puts it: "In *Litanies*, the narrators and transmitters of history, the bearers of the archive, are the islanders. In toddy shops and libraries and boats, the islanders thematize history, they mobilize repositories of traces and enact scenes from the historical past" (p. 82). The islanders carry the history of the space they inhabit; they know its history as dwellers of a space knows its geography. Several instances of this social-spatial stand out: Appan's (Jessica's father) way of historicizing, a discussion of the revival of *chavittunatakam* (an opera-like genre native to Kochi about European historical figures), references to the Kappiri shrines dedicated to African slaves brought to Kochi by the Portuguese, and the invocation of the creation myth of Kochi. Each of these instances is discussed below.

To Appan, Jessica's father, history is something that the people of the island understand as chronicled in the body of the trees. As he narrates history to Jessica, the different rings on a tree mean different episodes in the history of the island: one ring stands for the abdication of the Maharaja of Cochin, one for the sighting of a German submarine near the Kochi coast (both in 1914), one that sings the national anthem of India stands for 1947 (India's independence), one for Gandhi's assassination (in 1948), and one for the year Jessica was born (in 1951). This depiction of the island's history in the image and metaphor of a tree trunk is an unusual narrative device to explore the idea of islandness.

Similarly, one must also consider the way Santiago, Francis and Michael, three workers who commute to mainland for their work in the nearest town of Ernakulam, talk about *chavittunatakam*, an opera-like performance based on European historical figures such as Charlmagne, and its origins in Kochi. The islanders' history/memory credits a certain Chinna Thampi Annavi as the pioneer of *chavittunatakam*: "Chinna Thampi Annavi was a great man like Akbar, Gandhi, or Pope Leo XIII. He was a Tamil, who fathered the *chavittunatakam*, the craze of Christians from Vatuthala to Vypin, and from Kannamalito Cherthala. He was a total madcap" (p. 22). According to a legend that the islanders discuss, a Carmelite priest from Italy must have

arrived in Kochi and brought along with him the story of *Orlando Furioso* (*Orlando Enraged*, 1516-1532). He must have narrated it to Chinna Thampi Annavi, the Tamilian (i.e., a resident of the neighbouring province called Tamil Nadu in India) who went on to create the genre of *chavittunatakam*. The list of “greats” the islanders cherish (such as Annavi mentioned in this quote) is quite long, extending to the times closer to the temporality in the novel. One such “great” is a tailor who is “the world’s best costumier” who used to be in-charge of the costumes for the actors in the *chavittunatakam* performances (p. 20). The characters mourn the day the art form was banned by the Church, during the 1930s, because of the discouragement from church. The church dissuaded the artists from staging the opera at night, citing the presence of seven deadly vices during the time. Despite the church’s objections, the opera was staged at night, leading to the prohibition of this artform in the region. They swear to revive the tradition and restore the greatness of the form that involves narrating the biography of Charlmagne or of the Sultan of Turkey (pp. 21-22). The conversation involves the formation of a new troupe for practising and teaching the opera, funded by the money provided by the church and other inhabitants of the village. Santiago says,

I, the first born son of Arampurakkal Augasteenju, who, until he was weighed down by age, was famous for playing the part of Karalman, the Emperor of France; this Michael, also called Minku, the youngest son of Arampurakkal Raphael, my father’s brother, who played Albiranth, the Sultan of Turkey, in the same Karalman opera, the mere mention of whose name shook the world; and this Pranchi, the Useless, also called Francis, son of Tailor Daveedinju, who was known all over the earth and Rome, for the glittering sequined costumes he made for the valorous Roldan, the paladin-in-chief of Karalman - are founding an opera troupe called Chinna Thampi Annavi Memorial Chavittunatakam Sangham. (pp. 21-22)

The scene is funny in the way it bestows greatness upon the actors who had performed the “great” characters in the opera. However, there is also a poignant note in the little speech about the way the characters remember their pasts: there is a sense of pride and an awareness of that pride as well and shows that the islanders are sensitive to the damage caused to their roots in the abduction of the king or in the banning of the *chavittunatakam*. The islanders remain conscious of their history through the history of their artform.

The islanders, like Jessica, also remain invested in practising history by not just attempting to revive the artform but also by keeping the practice of worshipping at the Kappiri shrine. This episode of the novel offers a glimpse into the history of the arrival of black slaves with the Portuguese traders. Jessica shares that there are “folks in Fort Kochi offering liquor and chicken to the Kappiri Muthappan near the Delta School, in the hope of getting a

part of the treasure he is guarding” (p. 195). Santiago, one of the inhabitants of the island also confirms this when he comments, “The spirits of these black slaves, Kappiri Muthappans, are simple souls. Just like us” (p. 195). The Kappiri shrines referred to here are shrines in Kochi dedicated to the African slaves who accompanied the Portuguese traders. Neelima Jeychandran (2019) engages in a fascinating study of the Kappiri shrines in Kochi and adjoining areas, bringing to the fore yet another subaltern group in the multicultural milieu of Kochi. “Kappiri” is said to be derived from “qafir”, referring to African-Arab peoples. These shrines, found in roadsides and the sacred groves (kaavu) maintained by some Malayali homes, are said to serve the restless spirits of African slaves who were unjustly killed by the Portuguese. In worshipping at these shrines, the islanders in the novel have kept the slaves alive in their memory.

In addition to the discussions of the tree as an embodiment of the island's history, the legacy of the opera, and the worshipping of the Kappiri shrines, the creation myth of Kerala becomes a reference point for the islanders to adapt to their own myth of the creation of modern Kochi (through the fictional Dutch Battery that they inhabit). The creation myth is that Sage Parshurama (from Hindu mythology) threw an axe into the ocean to create a space that today is understood to be Kerala. Santiago, the one writing the *chavittunatakam* opera on Christ, pens a tribute to the British engineer Sir Robert Bristow (1880-1996) for similarly fashioning modern Kochi out of nothing by creating a bridge:

Countries are many in the world like Holland, Portugal, and
England
But nowhere is there an engineer like Bristow, the great son of
Kochi
He hurled an axe made of gold from Venturuthi over the water
The waves parted and threw up an island for Our Lord Christ
Amen (p. 85).

Robert Bristow, the British engineer who led the development of Cochin into a major port, is also a character in the novel. His character also gets “delusional” (p. 44) towards the end of his life. He calls himself “Robert Parasuram Bristow” (p. 44), associating himself as the successor of Vishnu's avatar Parasuram who created Kerala with his divine axe. Bristow says, “After Vishnu's avatar Parasuram hurled his divine axe from Gokarna, making the sea toss up the land of Kerala, I was the one who reclaimed more land from the sea” (p. 44). Likening the British engineer to a Hindu mythological figure is a unique example of the way the islanders remember their history. In a similar spirit, they remember the benefits the Portuguese brought to Cochin. “What if Gama had never come? Imagine our plight. We would have been picking weeds out of farms belonging to upper-caste Hindus”(p. 62). One of the cooks in the novel thanks da Gama saying that, “He gave us dried chilli pepper too. Imagine our life without onion and chilli” (p. 62). Historical

figures become a part of the island's space as an invisible presence. One of the characters in the novel laments that "the fish would slither away. Like the way Karalman [Emperor Charlemagne] left our islands" (p. 153). With the coming of the Konkani community from the region of Goa nearby, the people of Kochi get exposed to the spicy delicacy of poppadums: the poppadum-making skills help the lower caste Konkani community survive in Dutch Battery. Thus, the act of remembering is a collective act of historical representation. They remember that they are indebted to the various arrivals of skills, objects, words taken from other languages, and trees brought from other lands. The islanders *live* and *live in* history. The songs and artforms bear the imprints of history for the people "to go back to the old times" (p. 153). While such invocation of European history and even glorification of European explorers in these conversations and memories might appear to be working against the project of provincializing island poetics as argued for in this study, one must note that not all gestures in provincializing need to be explicitly anticolonial. Here, such instances of connection with Europe need to be seen as islanders' ways of making meaning of their history in the notions of transculturation (Ortiz 1995), "right to opacity" (Glissant, 1997, p. 190), and "repetition [...] [with] a difference and a deferral" (Rojo & Maraniss, 1985, p. 432). Each of these ideas helps navigate the various, even contradictory possibilities of how postcolonial islands are in the process of making and unmaking, appropriating and resisting colonial realities.

According to the islanders, Malayalam, the language spoken in Kochi and the larger state of Kerala acquired a new note or sound with every encounter. "Da" came out of encounters with Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, and Hindustani while "Ha" came out of interactions with Arabic, Persian, and Portuguese. The master continues to talk about the way in which Malayalam has been impacted over the years: "So there are several foreign guests among our fifty-two alphabets. Our language Malayalam is like our shores; ships from distant ports come here. Yes, like ports of call, many of our alphabets are there only to receive foreign visitors" (p. 117). Jessica listens to this account and responds: "I shut my eyes again. My language had been perforated. A cold breeze whistled through and past these holes from Arabia, Persia, England, Lusitania, now called Portugal, and Holland. I shivered" (p. 117). Both voices – Jessica's narratorial voice and her third-person-like commentary on the islanders' discussions – are intertwined throughout the novel.

Together, these ways of provincialised history as remembered by the islanders are evocative of Emily Johansen's observation that what makes a locale cosmopolitan is not its narrative of mobility but the "cosmopolitan negotiations that happen in the transformation of place into a lived locale" (2014, p. 16). The chilli pepper, the broadening of occupations with the exposure to new skills (such as poppadum-making skills), the Kappiri shrines, the regional opera (*chavittunatakam*) and so on are examples of such cosmopolitan negotiations made visible in the novel revealing a unique form of personal-spatial cosmopolitanism outside the metropolitan notion and

location. Observing Cochin's sustained stance of plurality, Nandy (2000) in the ethnographic study, argues that Cochin establishes as a site for fostering discussions of an "alternative cosmopolitanism" that diverts from the metropolitan stance. He incorporates the arguments of a local inhabitant regarding its unique cosmopolitan legacy: "nowhere in the world will you find a community like this. Walk one kilometre and you will find more than one language and religion" (p. 322). This sustained practice of cohabitation elevates Cochin beyond its status as a mere hostland, transforming it into a cherished homeland for the fugitive groups. The shrines also amount to what anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2008) identifies as "subaltern strategies of localization" that depend on affect towards land. His argument is in the context of social movements in biodiversity but is equally relevant to diversity within cultural ecosystems. These instances also point towards what David Harvey identifies as "heritage as a process" replacing the static idea of heritage as past (Harvey, 2001). His idea of "heritageisation" as a verb, similar to Vannini & Taggart's (2012) idea of island as a verb, speaks of the role communities play in the making of a space that continues to engage with its history. Without the collective (of the personal), this heritage (of the spatial) would be impossible. Finally, it is these instances—seen through the postcolonial perspective of provincializing—that enrich the idea of island poetics through turning to features other than sensory exploration, spatial practices, and textural specificity which have been identified as attributes of island poetics (Graziadei, Hartmann, et al., 2017; Graziadei, Kinane, et al., 2017). What we see in *Litanies of Dutch Battery* is an engagement with the island in terms of body and collective identity as expressions of the agency of the island. The notion of island poetics has been proposed to look at the way characters, readers and audiences relate to islands. We flesh out further nuances to this relationship on the layers of the individual and the collective. The individual nuances of the personal/spatial intertwining are not merely manifestations of an exceptional or isolated relationship. The narratological requirements of the story might make it more imperative for one character to be the protagonists' equivalent. However, the internalization of the islands' history and heritage on part of other characters reveals that the islands' story is everybody else's story as well.

Conclusion

N.S. Madhavan's novel *Litanies of Dutch Battery* provincializes island poetics by presenting an alternative site for the depiction of the life of a small community in an island in a newly independent India. By interweaving the spatial into the personal as well as collective ways of being and connecting, the novel opens up new ways of practising literary islandness. The two - individual and the collective—constitute the idea of the personal as the spatial thus extending the well-known idea of the personal as the political to spatial ethos. The embeddedness of the fictional Dutch Battery in the

socio-historical being of the plot or storytelling suggests a richness of spatial aesthetics foregrounding new ways of theorising geographies of postcolonial locations outside European/Western locales.

In such a praxis of locating island poetics, a praxis that comes closer to provincializing, the geographical setting of a novel gets explored for the space between the island and the characters, and the space among the characters themselves. The reading of the individual/body and the collective/social as intertwined with the island is one way of exploring fiction which enables a way of understanding the textuality of an island and its history. Similar spatial analyses of narrative technologies used in fiction especially from the Global South can help the task of provincializing space by turning to non-metropolitan locations and analysing the role geographies play in storytelling contexts. These readings situate island poetics in memory and history, thereby adding to established tropes of islandness identified in texts by other scholars interested in island poetics.

A story is part of an experience. Kochi, fictionalised as the setting of Dutch Battery in the novel, figures as a canvas of experience and the major strokes on this canvas are memory (personal and collective), love for the land (that is expressed as being one with the island and in pride for its history), and the various social and cultural upheavals. That such identification between the personal and the spatial is located in Kochi is a case study in the act of provincializing that reveals the bonding with people and physical spaces outside the mainstream narratives of literary islandness.

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