

Between History and Imagination: Reading the Representation of Ayyappankovil Eviction in Selected Life Narratives

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Abstract

The last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century have significantly used genres of 'memory' like autobiographies, memoirs, documentaries, and diaries/chronicles and letters to describe and investigate the past, especially by the minorities. It has also taken its new versions like 'autobiographical fiction', 'autobiographical song' and so on. Now more accurately, what is called 'life narrative' is considered as autobiographies. This paper presents a fertile ground for examining the autobiographical representations related to Ayyappankovil eviction and Amaravathy settlement—two significant events in the history of internal migrations in Kerala. Though these narratives seem like historical narratives in a fictional form, its position is different; it is more a personal expression and criticism using the tools of history and memory. The paper examines the application of imagination in reviving and representing the past by analyzing the selected life narratives on Ayyappankovil eviction—*Ente Jeevitha Kadha* and *Ente Kuthippum Kithappum* popularized view of local histories of the political leader AK Gopalan and social activist Fr. Vadakkan respectively.

The faculty of memory is the essential tool to portray the past and lost life in 'life narratives'. It has become a powerful medium to express the past in a personal tone. "For all of us there is a twilight zone between history and memory." There is history, historical sensibility, fiction, criticism, political views, memory and a language in an autobiography, therefore its position is in between history and imagination or history and experience or history and memory. It is called "simple literature of fact" (Popkin 12). Its language has a major function, a function of Lacan's mirror reflection or recreation of the reality. The two autobiographies discussed in this paper are not just narratives on the past life of the authors, but they place themselves between history and imagination, and their experiences.

The word autobiography is the combination of three Greek words, the *autos* denote self, *bios* denote life and *graphe* denotes writing. Sidonie Smith defines autobiography as "self-life writing" (1). In autobiographies, self is the prominent subject matter, wherein a memoir; it is more an objective presentation of the past and in history, it deals with collective time and collective experiences. When the realities are narrated as autobiographies, memoirs, articles, documentaries, and fictions, it becomes a historical document; as its subject matter is taken out of true events and experiences. Thus, these narratives "themselves find their place and legitimacy by invoking the question of realism that history can be narrated truly by those who part took in it than by those who were mere observers". (Varghese 327)

There are also many other new forms of “mediated memories” of visual and virtual modes like blogs and social networks to project the past life. Now, these memory narratives have become the major texts in Literature and History departments and many other Ethnic and Cultural Studies departments across the world. It is now “commonly known as life writing” (Smith 2). These are the personalisation and aestheticization of personal memory. “Memory is the central part of the brain’s attempt to make sense of experience and to tell coherent stories about it. These tales are all we have of our pasts, and so they are potent determinants of how we ourselves and what we do” (Popkin 12). It generates narratives of the past in the point of view of the author, with the ideology or philosophy to which the author is committed.

Ayyappankovil eviction is one of the important and huge government supported eviction happened in the history of Kerala for the developmental project. Ayyappankovil is a village in Idukki district of Kerala, which had a huge population of farmers who had migrated to that region almost ten to 30 years back of the eviction period. These migrants occupied these land either through Grow More Food Scheme or through the land discourse that spread during that time in the central Travancore. Leaving their homeland, they migrated hoping a better future. In 1961 the government of Kerala, led by Pattam Thanupillai decided to evict the migrants from their lands, on which they had already constructed a new life through agriculture and farming.

Leading a life beyond the political and religious system, cultural migrants who came from different remote places of Central Travancore led a united life. They had to cooperate with everyone irrespective of caste, class, religious or political disparity for survival and most of them cultivated in their lands with the help of neighbours. They were the workers, they were the landlords and they were the rulers. They were self-dependent for all the activities, but their happiness didn’t continue for a longer time. From 1957 onwards, the government identified migration as an issue as its forest was continuously destroyed for cultivation. The state Government began procedures for preventing migration and beginning eviction. This led to agitations, tensions and mental agony of the poor migrants, the people of the High Ranges became afraid of eviction.

In 1961, the coalition government led by Pattam Thanupillai, initiated Kerala’s first government supported eviction from Ayyappankovil, by giving notice to more than 36000 families living in this area in the name of Idukki Hydro Project. However, because of the continuous agitations, the government could only evict around 2000 families. Though these people were offered place, they were not settled properly and went through serious mental and physical agony. They were scattered to different unknown and unfamiliar destinations. The distribution of the land was also unjust. The main agitations against the injustice to the poor farmers of Ayyappankovil were the Amaravathy hunger strike led by AK Gopalan and the intervention of socio-political leaders like Fr. Joseph Vadakkan. The resettled migrants still remember the atrocities meted to them to this day. They are not still liberated from the traumatic experiences they had gone through.

This paper presents a fertile ground for examining the autobiographical elements related to Ayyappankovil eviction and Amaravathy settlement—two significant events in the history of internal migration of Malayalis. Though these narratives seem like historical narratives in a fictional form, its position is different; it is more a personal expression and criticism using the tools of history and memory. The characters are the authors themselves as in every

autobiography. They were the popular leaders of the time. A K Gopalan a political leader. Vadakkan, a catholic priest and a social worker. Both were concerned about the agrarian communities of the state and worked for them. In a way, these narratives also become a criticism on the fascist mentality of the ruling government of the period of the eviction. Here, one can trace a distinction between historian and a fiction writer, here the author of life narrative write out of his own experience. But in history use collective knowledge. Individual life is dominated by autobiography and a single self is continuously present all through the narrative.

There is a crucial question, where to place the author of an autobiography? Is he a historian or a fiction writer? As literature always keep a close relationship with history, memory, and autobiography, all narratives represent a certain amount of realities with creative means. Its contents are often drawn out of history, memory and the principles of the time. Here the authors have a dual role, one the role of the narrator of the events and then the role of the hero of the text; 'I' becomes a dominant subject matter. This personalization of the subject "dissolving the boundaries between the real and the fictitious subject it focuses the reader's attention on the performative social function of the subject's discourse and on the disjunction that exists between the personal and the historical." (Courteau 48)

The chapter titled, "Against Eviction" by AK Gopalan incorporated in his autobiography is a thirteen-page description on his ten days activism in Amaravathy against the state government's inefficiency to protect the evicted people. The chapter is a critical description of the incidents in Marxist point of view. It has been republished by the author in an article form with an extension of ten more pages in a book titled, *Manninuvendi¹ (For the Land)*. The author's point of view on this issue is to criticise the ruling government and its alliance, the whole story narrated in this chapter as well in the extended article of the same moves in this line. The author also claims that the Satyagraha he leads was a successful one in many ways, but the people of Amaravathy with respect of his support, says that it couldn't make any advantage, as the government did not do anything better for the people.

Vadakkan's chapter on Amaravathy incident titled, "Amaravathy and AKG" is a small narrative on his few days of activism in Amaravathy, supporting A K Gopalan. Vadakkan was an experienced social leader, who was working among the farmers of Kerala. These experiences had educated him the reasons and politics of Ayyappankovil eviction; therefore the whole of his narrative moves in a historical perspective; it has lots of data on migration and eviction. He uses many facts and figures to prove that there is a hidden agenda behind the eviction. His main aim in this chapter is to project his role in the event as well as to criticise the beneficiaries of the eviction and to justify his actions.

Like history, autobiography also claims to tell true stories about past events. History deals with collective time, collective knowledge and collective experiences, whereas autobiography deals with individual experiences in a subjective time frame. The purpose of the historian is to fill the gap in the knowledge system, but autobiography doesn't have this function, still, it uses history in its narrative for different purposes. Its use of history has a connection with the author; more, it is a personal history, and the public historical conscious of the author may be reflected in the narrative while asserting many of the things. Vadakkan

¹ A book by A K Gopalan, it is a history of different struggles lead by AK Gopalan in Kerala.

has a strong historical consciousness of the politics behind the eviction, he traces many of the incidents of migration and eviction in his chapter on eviction.

Both of these narratives are the self-description of the past, a self-descriptive history of the eviction drawn out of the historical consciousness of the past. Thus, these life narratives become “a text, which describes self, with a historical sense, this presupposes the unraveling of the configured self with its diverse attributes” (Varghese 328). Each of these chapters discusses Ayyappankovil eviction and Amaravathy Satyagraha in detail; both of these writers critically approach Amaravathy incident. Gopalan is more critical about the ruling government that pushed the people to trouble, whereas Vadakkan is more critical about the silence of the religious communities like Catholic Church and Nair Service Society. These two narratives are the two modes of mirroring the same incident; therefore, two kinds of criticism are found in these narratives, still both intents to blow against the ineffectiveness of the right-wing alliance in addressing the migrant issues. “Through writing the autobiography the author is in a process of inventing and projecting and constructing his own self. At the same time, it ‘can survey, a peer into, the operations of the rest of the human kind’ (Ward 1). Vadakkan raises many fundamental questions regarding the eviction, whereas Gopalan is more concerned with the atrocities the subjects of eviction faced. These two narratives have become the primary document on this issue as there is no other document which narrates the incident. Most of the present narratives on the issues of Ayyappankovil eviction are drawn from these narratives.

The individual efforts taken by the authors in the society have well emphasised by both the authors. Vadakkan personalise his arrival to Amaravathy in a condition in which he was suffering, he says; “I made cancel my reception programme in Bombay...when I reached at Trissur, my temperature was 103 degree. Many asked me to take rest for at least four days. But, my soul was in Amaravathy. So without considering my fever and tiredness, I went to Amaravathy with Wellington” (142-143). Vadakkan also asserts that he is an anti-communist, and his affiliation with a communist leader was only for the justice; he wanted to strongly assert the public that he was an anti-communist; therefore he says “As I am a strong anti-communist, my alliance with a communist leader, A K Gopalan, made debates among the other anti-communist groups in Kerala” (141). He also clears that, why he supports the Communist, though he was an anti-communist. He says that, “the 90% of the anti-communists were people of Congress. I knew that they won’t support me. So I strongly hold the communist. I, an anti-communist found a thesis that, there is no mistake in searching the support of the communist to do some good deeds” (147). Another significant moment Vadakkan personalizes the sentimentality that he had;

When we reached there, a protest march of thousands was going on...one young man from the march came out and told, ‘Vadakanacha’ if you were here, this wouldn’t have happened’ ...by the time people of the march had surrounded us. Majority of them were women in *chatta* and *mundu*². They cried aloud, saying ‘father you should save us.’...My heart was broken and I cried, I cried like a child, wiping the tears, I told them; I also will die for you (147).

² *Chatta* and *Mundu* is the traditional dress of Christian women of Kerala. Full blouse, Kavani and Mundu with special pleats at the back constitutes a typical *Chatta* and *Mundu* set.

The other major events Vadakkan personalizes are his attempt to write a feature on Amaravathy in *Malayala Manorama*³, the purchase of 2000 blankets from Trissur market and Madurai, the distribution of the wheat powder and milk powder to the poor evicted people. By referring to these personal efforts, he continuously asserts that he had a strong concern for the evicted subjects. He says that “I was like a madman on those days” (147-48). It shows that personalization of the events experiences has a major significance in autobiography. These kinds of personal experiences are never addressed in the public history, at the same time the narrative of this experience becomes different from a historical narrative. This personalization of the events and experiences are one of the prominent features of autobiography which distinguishes autobiography from a history a fiction.

Gopalan personalizes and narrates many of his roles as a politician and social activist. He points out, his role in *Kisan Sabah*, his journey to Himachal Pradesh, Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu and Mysore supporting the farmers. Through this he asserts that he is a supporter of the farmers. The significant personalization he makes in this chapter is on his hunger strike, according to him this was the most difficult strike that he had ever led.

Before this, I have lead hunger strike for 5,8,18,48 days, but until this I haven't lead a hunger strike in the worst condition like this, heavy nonstop rain, strong freezing wind, the unclean satyagraha room with clay and water, bad smell, and the lack of drinking water- in many ways it was difficult to continue the hunger strike. (311)

The speeches he had made, the visits of Ayyappankovil and Amaravathy, the hunger strike, arrest are some of the other significant incidents he personalizes in the narrative. Compared to Vadakkan's narrative, the personalization is less, and he mainly narrates the difficulties faced by the subjects in a Marxist point of view.

These autobiographies also become the reconciliation of the multiple aspects of the eviction in a critic's point of view. In order to authenticate the argument and criticism, both these authors refer many facts and figures associated with the eviction and settlement. Here history is used to makes a story. They give emphasis to their criticism, using history as a tool rather than narrating the history. Both these personal narratives place the personal life and history as tools to criticise the events, thus there is a political intention inherent in these narratives. Vadakkan's stand in this issue is against the Catholic Church, he is very critical about the silence of the Catholic Church, while the majority of the migrants are the Syrian Catholics. Though two of them are not from the migrant community, they were the leading socio-political leaders of the period; therefore, they had a good understanding of the whole issues. This narrative has a historical value as they were also drawn from the true incident. It's more a criticism, rather than presenting a narrative of the past, its focus is on the social ills and the atrocities people faced in Amaravathy. The facts and figures used are indented to show the depth of the severity the people faced. Gopalan also argues that the Migration to the eastern hills of Travancore started during the tenure of the Congress government of 1948, he also describes the different schemes that proposed by the government to support the migration. The difference in the narrative of Gopalan and Vadakkan is the point of view, while both the authors criticising the Congress, Gopalan is validating the deeds of communist party whereas

³ A leading newspaper in Malayalam

Vadakkan even criticises the community he belongs and points out their stand to the people who were favoring the poor migrants.

No ministers were gone to those locations of worries. I couldn't see any priest or nuns there. One or two young priests had come out against the eviction, when the DYSP threatened them with a threat of an arrest, they withdrew. "Priests should not go to Amaravathy, should not counter the government, politics is not fit for the priests. Let the Communist handle the problems" this was the attitude of the bishops. (143-44)

Vadakkan also criticises NSS, Catholics and its leaders along with the government which evicted the migrants, he even uses the name of the religious leaders whom he believes to have certain hidden agenda behind the eviction. He says, "later I understood that, there was a conspiracy and hidden agenda behind the eviction" (141). Here critic's personality or experiences are used not to write about him, but to write about the awful things around him. He criticises the religious leaders saying,

Mannam⁴ and his vested interested supporters had an interest in the eastern hills; their plan was to make new estates. Mannam took the authority of the 30000 acre forest land of the Kottiyoor Dewasm. The Christian leaders also planned for the expansion of the estates. Their agenda was to regain the huge amount they spent for the 'liberation struggle'. Not only the Christian rich, but the religious congregations and the bishops who had gained lakhs of dollars from America for the liberation struggle also had interest to make estates. (145)

He reinstates that he can prove that, the eviction was to initiate some hidden plans lead by some vested interested people and institutions. "Even today, I am ready to prove that the eviction that started in Udumbumchola in 1961 was the inauguration of a secretive plan to make estates for the institutions and the vested interested groups" (146). At the same time, Vadakkan tells the religious and social leaders who had showed a compassion and support to his efforts in Amaravathy, but he concludes his chapter with a strong criticism on the rest of the bishops who kept silence on the issue. "Bishops of Trissur, Tiruvalla, Kothamnagalam, and Thiruvananthapuram had an inner concern for my deeds, but only the bishop of Thalassery supported me without fearing anything. Other bishops showed themselves as good people in front of the government and supported Mannam and enjoyed disturbing me" (149). He also criticises each of the collation party that constituted the then government which evicted people and refers to each of their stand in it.

"Countering our own cabinet?" this was the question of the master brains of the liberation struggle. "Aren't the police under the Congress minister Chacko? In that case, the acquisition that the police showed cruelty, is the rumor spread by the communist", this was the words of Congress members. As Chief Minister was Pattam, the PSP⁵ people didn't make any move. For Muslim league, it was not at all an issue now and then. (145)

⁴ Mannathu Padbhanabhan was a social reformer and a freedom fighter from the State of Kerala. He is recognised as the founder of the Nair Service Society,

⁵ The Praja Socialist Party was a political party in existence from 1952 to 1972.

Another criticism is on the planning commission, “The planning commission and the administrators advocate that one third of the forest of the country should be kept without human touch. These commissioners and administrators are the people who have made big estates of lakhs of acres in the Himalayas, mountains of Aravalli and Mysore and enjoy the life” (145). Gopalan traces the history of High Range Migration with a Marxist critic’s point of view.

According to him the Migration was promoted by the Congress government of 1948. As these migrations were not monitored, many people illegally migrated. This couldn’t be controlled by them (304). He says that the landlords of the Travancore had sent the lower class people to High Ranges, so that they could avoid them from demanding land in which they were resided. He also argues that the rich and landlords were the major illegal migrants. These are some of his observations on the migration, through which he constructs two classes of people, the poor and the rich. Now he speaks for the poor and criticises the rich who are the beneficiaries and the supporters of the ruling government. He also asserts that these rich people are the main group who lead the ‘liberation struggle’⁶ against the communist government. Major part of his narrative is about a working class (the evicted subjects) who are defined as hard-working farmers; their suffering is his major portion of the narrative. He says,

These forest lands, which were the wandering places of the elephants and other wild animals until recently, was made to a populated area of largely growing tapioca, paddy, pepper, plantain and other agricultural products. Apart from that the farmers cultivated durable crops like coconut and areca catechu, with the dedication and the hard work of the farmers the land became prosperous. There are thrilling stories of the farmer’s fighting with the nature behind the construction of these fertile lands. It is difficult to measure the amount of effort they have put to make it. (305)

He also makes many critical comments on eviction and expresses his own mental agonies and strains to through the narrative. He also put certain examples of discrimination and favouritism in distributing the land.

The evicted people were taken in front of the RDO, who selected the people who are to be settled in new place. He did select people who wore shirt or watch, the one who didn’t have wife or children and ex-military men. Sometimes two or three families were allotted one place. RDO was inhuman. Even his name was frightening for the people, he was the in charge of the Ayyappankovil eviction also, if a little more educated man in this field was sent, there wouldn’t have occurred this much problem. (306)

In all these ways, the narrative becomes a mixture of history, criticism, opinions, experiences, favoritism and imagination. Thus, these narratives cannot be seen either as a history nor a fiction; it’s between two main genres, the history, and fiction. Sometimes he takes the point view of the evicted subjects.

Though both these authors spent only less than a dozen days in Amaravathy, they narrate the history, the cause, and context of High Range Migration in detail. Thus, these narratives also become a relevant historical document. As both the authors were the socio-

⁶ The Liberation Struggle (1958–59) is an anti-Communist socio-political agitation, started in 1958, against the first elected state-government in Kerala.

political leaders of the period, they had a strong historical sensibility of the contemporary incidents. Thus, the narrative automatically discusses many of the points that are historically valid. Gopalan starts with the description of the politics behind the High Range Migration, the role of the first Congress government of 1948, the communist government of 1957, the role of the land mafia, the efforts of the migrants to make the agricultural land, Ayyappankovil eviction, the shifting of the people, Amaravathy incident, struggles in Amaravathy, and his own arrest are narrated in details with the support of specific facts and figures. Vadakkan also describe the context in which people are evicted, he point out the schemes which pushed people to the High Ranges, the history of high range estates, the agriculture of the farmers, the politics of eviction, the discourse of Idukki dam, the intervention of the other leaders are the other important historical information Vadakkan discusses in detail. As they have a strong historical sense, the narrative becomes strong with a number of valid information that supports the existence of a group of people in Kerala.

The language of the autobiography also has significance, both the authors use simple language without losing the seriousness of the subject matter they discuss and without following a chronological order of the things. Vadakkan's narrative is small compared to Gopalan's; there are no much creative efforts in his narration of the incident. Gopalan has put lots of effort to narrate the story. His language is more flowing, not of history and not of fictional. Gopalan go on narrating the ways in which the people are evicted, this narrative the incident imaginatively, it's a history in a poetic language. The scenes of eviction are portrayed in a different style, not merely in a historical perspective, and not a fictional way or in a chronological order, a blend of history, criticism, opinions, and imagination in simple language as follows:

Everywhere policemen with weapons, the whole ambience was of a war zone. Nothing could be seen other than fire and smoke in the day. Children cried aloud, women were weeping. Many fainted and men were frightened. Long fields of paddy, the tapioca gardens, and each plant had around 20 kg of the crop. Thousands of plantains fruitful plantains, together with the houses, the police destroyed them also. (306)

Another considerable feature we can find in these narratives are the political views of the authors, both the authors had their own clear ideological back up in their narratives. As Gopalan is an active political leader of the communist party, he narrates the whole story in Marxist point of view. His narration moves in the line of the social realist novels. He is more concerned about the difficulties and the atrocities faced by the subjects. He says, "The landlords and the rich of Kottayam sent the lower class people to High Ranges, who were living in their land for a long time" so that they could avoid them from demanding land in which they resided. The whole narrative moves focusing on the pain of the farmers. He uses many words like, poor, hard work, sweat, blood, fight, land, class consciousness, struggle, bourgeoisie, tenants, agents, landlords, human beings, hell, power, bureaucrats, inhuman, armed force, repressive mechanism and so on which are commonly found in the social realist works. Blood, sweat and landlords are frequently used in the narrative.

Vadakkan's narrative moves from a humanistic point of view, with his critical spirit and the emphasis on the secular concerns. He is very much concerned about the poor; this was the major reason for his support to the communist party in this issue as he claims. In order to clear his view, several times he asserts that he is an anti-communist and justifies his alliance

with the communist in this issue. The words like human, human being, humanity, the poor are some of the predominant words Vadakkan constantly uses in his narrative. He is not talking particularly against a political group or section of a society, but against anyone who is not concerned about the poor. For him, the politicians, the bureaucrats and the religious heads who do not speak or act for the poor are culprits in this regard. Instead of attacking the whole session, he points out the leaders who are and who are not supporting the poor peasants. For instance, he criticises the silence of the Catholic bishops and at the same time honor the efforts that have taken by the bishop of Thalasseri. His humanistic approach is evident from his efforts to bring 2000 blankets from Trissur and Madurai, and the distribution of milk powder and wheat to the evicted subjects. He recalls,

More than ten thousand people were dispersed in the plain land in heavy rain, it was like a *chakra*⁷, and the government had made only two temporary sheds, only forty people could be accommodated there. Others were surviving under the trees, without any shelter. The day we reached, more than 300 children were fighting with death affected by fever and dysentery. (147)

Mind is a *tabularasa*⁸; experiences fill it and come out as narratives in different perspectives with creativity and personalization. The physical and mental experiences through which a person travels becomes the subject matter of such narratives; an element of reality is enclosed in every narrative and more specifically in memory narratives/life narratives, which directly recall the past. As autobiographies are written from the personal experiences and memories, it is more or less a personal narrative. It is the description of the self on the self and by the self. It is the revelation of the psyche of the author. Its theme is drawn out of the consciousness of the author, which is built by the social systems, political views, religion, and morality and many other ideological ambience surrounded him. "Autobiographies have such purposes as self-revelation, self-justification, propaganda, apologia, self-knowledge and historical record" (146 Tierney).

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⁷ *Chakara* is a Malayalam word used to describe a peculiar marine phenomenon in which a large number of fish and prawns throng together during a particular season as a result of mud bank formations.

⁸ An epistemological theory argues that the individuals are born without built in mental content and the knowledge comes from experiences and perceptions. The word means "blank slate".

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