

S K Pottekkatt's *In the Land of the Kappiris*: A Journey into the Heart of Africa

Dr Cynthia Catherine Michael

Assoc. Prof & Head, Department of English

Fatima Mata National College (Autonomous)

Kollam, Kerala State, India

cynthiamichael2006@yahoo.com

Abstract

Exploration and mapping of Africa began around 1850 and continued into the nineteenth century. S. K Pottekkatt, the Indian travel writer from Kerala State in India, set out to Africa. This study focusses on S. K Pottekkatt as a travel writer who made Malayalis aware of the geography, life and culture of Africa. The Kappiri had no place in the land of his birth. Beira was a source of great relief for Indians travelling from other countries because Portuguese Africa was fairly free from racial discrimination. The Gujarati businessman was prominent. They had mastered the language of the natives and had in depth knowledge of their customs as well as their needs and so prospered well. Who had the greater right in Africa: the British or the Indians?

Keywords: Travels, Writing, Document, Africa, Right. Journey.

Extensive developments took place in travel writing during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This phase in exploration and mapping of Africa began around 1850 and continued into the nineteenth century. It also paved the way for the Europeans to race and capture as much as land as possible and as a result of this, the map of colonial Africa was redrawn many times. The writers of those times found material for books with the rapid

increase in the British colonial acquisition of African territories. Some of the books published during this era were Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897), Grogan's *From the Cape to Cairo* (1900), Mary Hall's *A Woman's Trek from the Cape to Cairo* (1907) and Constance Larymore's *A Resident's Wife in Nigeria* (1908). Most of these writers had travelled through the areas colonised by the Europeans. They often had to depend on the goodwill of the local authorities for their safe passage through these areas.

It was just after these times that a traveller from the land of the Malayalis in India decided to set out to Africa by ship. It was none other than S. K Pottekkatt, the Indian travel writer from the State of Kerala. He wrote many travelogues for the people who were never introduced to the outside world. It is mentioned in the Wikipedia "He was the author of nearly sixty books which include ten novels, twenty-four collections of short stories, three anthologies of poems, eighteen travelogues, four plays, a collection of essays and a couple of books based on personal reminiscences." These works have been translated into English, Italian, Russian, German and Czech, as well as most of the major Indian languages. He has visited many countries like the Soviet Union, many European countries, Indonesia, Nepal and Egypt. Pottekkatt loved to travel and his works like *Simhabhoomi* (1954), *Nile Diary* (1954), *Indonesian Diary* (1955), *Soviet*

Diary (1955), *Innathe Europe* (1955), *Baalidweep* (1958), *Nepal Yathra* (1969), *London Notebook* (1970), *Cleopatrayude Nattil* (1977) are great examples of travel writing.

Pottekkatt made Malayalis aware of the geography, life and culture of various countries and people abroad and his style has been followed by many authors. His popularity lies in the lyrical quality of his travelogues, sprinkled with humour, keen observation, in depth study and vivid images. As a pioneer in travel literature, his works led to the popularisation of this genre in Malayalam. Some of his travelogues enjoyed greater readership and popularity in Malayalam than the novels and plays of the same period. He was

a socially-committed writer with a political vision. He was involved in politics along with his illustrious literary career.

Peter Hulme, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* comments that “Travellers will usually follow their instincts and opportunities, rather than directions from home, and it is traveller’s eccentricities and extravagances-in the literal sense of wandering off-which have attracted many readers to the genre of travel writing (1)”. S.K Pottekkatt could be easily considered as one such travel writer who followed his impulse and travelled far and wide, one who also documented his journeys and later published them as books. He did not wait for any external impulses to travel to far off places. It was often an impulsive decision. He loved to walk rather than travel by any other mode of transport. In the book referred above Susan Bassnett comments on the adventurous nature of travellers, “The essence of adventure lies in taking risks and exploring the unknown, so it is hardly surprising to find that early travel accounts tended for the most part to be written by men, who moved more freely in the public sphere (3)”. S. K. Pottekkatt moved freely. Nothing stopped him from visiting new places and this actually helped him to maintain an objective stance in travel narration.

The account of his travels in *In the Land of the Kappiris* begins thus:

It was the morning of the tenth day of our voyage from Bombay. After covering 2500 miles, we had reached Mombasa port, said to be the eastern gateway to the African continent. As I looked out, what I saw first was the figure of a tall, half-naked Kappiri standing on the terrace of a warehouse of the wharf, looking at our ship in amazement. He was the first Negro I set eyes on in the land of the Kappiris.

To me, he seemed to represent the entire black race of Africa. (5)

The Negro might have stood ‘wide-eyed’ when the ship of Norwegian sailors docked at the Dark Continent in the eleventh century. He might also have stared at Vasco da Gama’s sail in 1497. “The passage of centuries has brought no change in the sense of wonderment.

That is precisely why he has not made progress even now” (5). The Kappiri had no place in the land of his birth and every adult had to pay the white man tax for living in his own native land.

After Pottekkatt’s visit to Lourenco Marques in Portugal-ruled East Africa, he goes onto Beira, a port city which occupies a strategic position. This port had earned enormous profits for the Portuguese through taxes. Beira was a source of great relief for Indians travelling from other African countries because Portuguese Africa was fairly free from racial discrimination. There was only one restriction, one should not speak in English. They were happy if one could memorise a few words of politeness in their language. Portugal was a dictatorship, and its signs were seen in Beira too. If a person criticized the government, he would find himself in the

Mozambique prison. Beira was attractive in appearance, but had a lot of drawbacks and scarcity of potable water was one among them. “It is said that in Beira beer is more affordable than water(10)”. There was a man from Madras who lived there and made it his mission to provide accommodation to all Indian tourists who visited Beira:

He reached Beira thirty years ago in search of a job and has not set foot on Indian soil since. Today he is a prominent citizen in Beira, respected even by the Portuguese authorities. Yet his love for India – especially Madras- remains undiminished. When a ship from India reaches the shores of Beira, he boards the vessel, enquires whether there are any Indians to disembark, takes them home and extends all possible help and hospitality. (11)

Regarding the Indians of East Africa, Pottekkatt describes Gujaratis as businessmen, Keralites as clerks and other south Indians as coolies. There were scores of Indians who were teachers. “Thanks to their strength in numbers, the Gujaratis have succeeded in making their mother tongue the language of Indians in Africa. In fact, one has to know Gujarati to become a teacher in a private school here (23)”. Gujarati businessmen and families constituted around

96 percent of the Indian population in East Africa. There was likelihood of finding a Gujarati shop in every village. They stocked many things that attracted the natives. Items like salt, sugar, tobacco, Indian stones, necklaces, brass bangles, black cloth made in India, cloth with polka design from London etc were stocked in these shops called 'duka'. The Gujarati businessman had mastered the language of the natives and had indepth knowledge of their customs as well as their needs. The natives would come from far and wide to these shops. "After selling their cattle or the tobacco and the grains they had cultivated, they would have money with them. But by the time they leave a Gujarati shop, their purses will be empty. The Gujarati businessman's skill in flattering and extracting money out of the Kappiris is extraordinary (23)".

Pottekkatt recalls that the British had abetted communal violence in order to continue their rule in India and they had followed the same policy in Africa, pitting the Africans against the Indians. The natives were made to believe that they (the British) were struggling to reform the African people and grant them freedom at some uncertain point of time in the future. They mislead the natives by telling them that the Indians were blocking the path to freedom. According to Pottekkatt:

It is not difficult to mislead a primitive group of people after all. The British grant the Africans new concessions from time to time. Recently they gave the natives freedom to drink beer. Until then it was illegal to sell beer to the Africans. I happened to see scenes of their celebration. Little do those dim-witted Kappiris realize that such a compromise is only a ruse for increasing the sale of British beverages!(29)

On closer scrutiny of this travelogue, one ponders on the question as to who had the greater right in Africa: the British or the Indians? It was up to the natives to decide whether it belonged to the Indians or the Europeans. The Indians have had trade relations with Africa from ancient times. They interacted with the natives in a friendlier manner and generously

contributed to the upliftment of the natives. In a message by Jawaharlal Nehru to the Indians in Kenya, “What the Indians living in Africa should remember always is that they are the guests of Africa and therefore should not indulge in anything that is likely to be an obstacle in the Africans’ progressive path towards freedom (29)”. Nehru exhorted the Indians to help the Africans in every movement towards Independence. On the other hand, the white men viewed a friendly relationship with fear and anxiety because it would be the end of their domination in Africa.

In the last part of the travelogue, *In the Land of the Kappiris*, S K Pottekkatt ponders on the future of the Indians who have been living in Africa for nearly three decades of their life. The questions they were asking themselves were numerous. What would he do? “Return to India? Or spend the rest of his life in Africa (60)”. They had adjusted themselves to the climate of the land which was so different from their homeland (India), and lead very comfortable lives in Africa. Would they be able to maintain rich meals and the many servants (they had in Africa) with the pension provided by the African Government when they returned to their homeland, India? It was said that many who returned to India did not live more than a few years. Another fear was “with no close relatives, acquaintances or friends in India, they will be like refugees in the land of their birth. It is an uncertain future that confronts them. Should one embrace that uncertainty or remain in Africa and live on as before? (60)”.

In the Land of the Kappiris is a piece of fine literature because it contains descriptions of Nature that are exquisitely poetic; anecdotes that are laced with mild humour; and social commentary that is tempered with geniality. It is difficult to escape being charmed by Pottekkatt’s soft brilliance and engaging style. Dr Radhika P Menon, who translated *Kappirikalude Naattilinto* English has thus to say regarding the use of terms and language “Translating this magnificent narrative into English was a challenging task because

it posed more than the usual cache of difficulties, the most obdurate one being the very first word of the title. Although ‘kappiri’ in Malayalam describes the Black race, it originates from the Arabic word kaffir, which means ‘infidel’ or ‘non-believer’. The religious bias and the surrounding derogatory aura made it virtually impossible for me to consider having the Arabic word in the English title and the text. Besides, it went against Pottekkatt’s own humanistic spirit that would brook no cruelty in gestures, words or even thoughts. But translating it into the polite, politically correct and contemporaneous term ‘Black’ would take away the historical perspective of prejudice that prevailed during Pottekkatt’s time” (Life Writing).

Following Pottekkatt’s trail fifty-two years later, the famous Malayalam writer Paul Zachariah saw and noted many major changes in the land and its people. In short, Pottekkatt’s Africa had changed beyond recognition. What is striking is that in less than a decade of publication of Zachariah’s travelogue, the contours and complexion of many African countries have changed even further. This narration by Pottekkatt is a literary time capsule which the young readers of today could use in order to journey back to an Africa that modernization has wiped out forever. The pristine qualities of the landscape and its residents can be retrieved and savoured only through the pen portraits very affectionately drawn in *In the Land of the Kappiris* because the paths Pottekkatt took cannot be mapped and archived even by Google Earth anymore; the sights he saw were never captured in real time and in all their animated richness using a hand-held digicam; and the destinations he reached had not been artificially dressed up to enliven flamboyant, multi-coloured tourist brochures or packaged tours.

References

- Bernadette, Clara. *Life Writing*. Eds. Clara Bernadette and Christy Clement. Kollam. FMNC Publications, 2020.
- F. Fiona Moolla (2013): “Border crossings in the African travel narratives of Ibn Battuta, Richard Burton and Paul Theroux”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.
doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2012.759128
- Hållén, Nicklas. *Travelling Objects: Modernity and Materiality in British Colonial Travel Literature about Africa*. Department of Language Studies, Umea University, Sweden. 2011.
- Hulme, Peter. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Ed. Peter Hulme. and Tim Youngs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Pottekkatt, S K. “In the Land of the Kappirris.” *Synergy: Readings in Fiction and Non Fiction*. Ed. Josh Sreedharan. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Susan Bassnett. “Travel Writing and Gender.” *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Ed. Peter Hulme. and Tim Youngs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.