

IN THE LAND OF THE KAPPIRIS: POTTEKKAT'S UNIVERSAL VISION

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Abstract:

This is a study of S K Pottekkatt's 'In the Land of the Kappiris'. His Universal Vision in depicting the tales of Indians, the Natives and the Europeans is analysed. Descriptions of Nature is visualised. He used different modes of travel avoiding air travel. He describes the culture and customs of the lands he visited. He was concerned about human compassion and comradeship and his narrative has a global significance in maintaining unity between the different peoples of the world. The author's concern towards the people of Africa was perhaps due to his own personal experiences as a victim of colonization in India. He emphasised on the need of making the people aware of the need of love for fellow human beings. This study focuses on Pottekkatt's universal vision as his narrative has a global significance in maintaining unity between the different peoples of the world.

Keywords: *Travel-writing, Narratives, Universal, Culture, Kappiris, Vision.*

S K Pottekkatt's *In the Land of the Kappiris* tells the strange story of the native African race termed *Kappiri* (in Malayalam) who went numb with fear because of tortures inflicted on him, first by man and later by nature. His 'yesterday' lies aeons back. In a sense, his 'tomorrow' is also centuries away (S. K. Pottekkatt, 6).

In the Land of the Kappiris (Originally published as *Kappirikalude Naattilin* Malayalam) by S. K. Pottekkatt is generally classified as a piece of travel writing and undoubtedly that was how it was read and appreciated during the time of its first publication. Its greatness lay in the fact that all of a sudden certain lands and cultures that Malayalis had perhaps only read about in history and geography textbooks came alive before their eyes. But if it were a mere travelogue, one would ignore it completely today and opt for more attractive alternatives - safe and quick air travel to those very places, highly informative television programmes or colourful travel guides. The continued popularity of the work among Malayali readers is the surest indicator of its higher status. S K Pottekkatt was the first Indian traveler to document travel experiences as he travelled around the globe in search of real humanity. He familiarized all the readers with the new places but he compares everything with his home state- Kerala, which is a small state in India and he wrote in his mother-tongue, Malayalam. In contrast to other writers who always used English to communicate with the locals of other countries, he always learnt their local language in order to talk to them. Pottekkatt was certainly a versatile personality. He used to talk to traders from Gujarat (A state in India) in their language Gujarathi when he visited Africa. He goes on to say "Only an Indian shop gives them (natives) all they want, under one roof... There are many Gujaratis in Africa who have made their fortune, running shops in this manner." (25)

Being a product of the renaissance period of Malayalam literature that gathered momentum in the mid-20th century, he combined the two spheres of fiction and travelogues and created a unique identity of his own. While other writers of his times like Takazhi, Keshav Dev and Basheer based their stories on Kerala's society, its caste and class divisions and injustices, Pottekkat's themes were more universal. He explored the complexities of human relationships, romantic interludes and the agonies and ecstasies they

caused. *In the Land of the Kappiris* displays how travel-writing can both be a delight and enlighten the readers if the author is able to use his talent with skill in the right measure. He gave special attention when he described the culture of the people through his narratives so that the readers could get a vivid idea of the places that they had not visited.

The author's concern towards the people of Africa could be due to his own personal experiences as a victim of colonization. Even though other ex-colonies had regained their past glory, the people of Africa did not seem to show any sign of progress. This might have raised his concerns. Pottekkatt states thus, "He is only slowly waking up from his millenia-long hibernation. It might take him decades, if not centuries, to shake off the lethargy (6)". He wanted to make the people of Africa aware about the need to rise from the impacts of the subjugation that they suffered from. Racism prevailed during Pottekkatt's visit to Africa. He was against the exploitation and oppression that people in different parts of the world, and he was able to raise his voice against the racial discrimination shown towards the people in those countries.

At a time when the world had not appeared on maps, one could hardly imagine the world outside, before the television and internet entering our homes. A man from the land of Kerala, embarked on a journey. Pottekkatt travelled across the world on a low budget, by ships, by third class on trains and sometimes by trucks and lorries. Avoiding air travel completely, he was aware of the ground realities in the countries he visited and saw people as much as places.

S. K. Pottekkatt had an intense desire to learn more about humanity in general. Readers could get an idea about the different cultures even though they had not seen these places or people. His encounter with the culture of Africa was a deliberate attempt to know more about the people and places in Africa. He believed that in order to learn about real human beings, one had to go to Africa. He did this to have a glimpse of the diverse humanity. In his own words:

The usual way to travel from Blantyre to Dar-es-Salaam (Tanganyka) is to go to Beira by train and then proceed by ship. I was determined not to follow the same route to get back to Portuguese Africa. I had my return ticket for the train journey to Beira already.... I bade goodbye to my Malayali friends and set out on the adventurous trip. There are very few Malayali families in Blantyre but each of them overwhelmed me with their hospitality and feasts. (31)

The author had travelled through most places in Asia, Africa and Europe and has vivid insight in representing the culture of the people. "The Kappiris of Nyasaland, draped in black robes, wearing chains around their necks and holding spears in their hands, reminded me of Sabarimala pilgrims." (35) In order to learn and understand about the people of various places he often had his meals with the local people which actually strengthened his interactions with them. His descriptions in the narratives covered most of the customs and beliefs that the people in the foreign place held. The reader becomes aware of it through his representation of the drum beats in *In the Land of the Kappiris*:

That night, for the first time, I noticed how they had an indigenous telegraph system of their own for transmitting messages. Despite being primitive, its effectiveness will leave even the modern white men amazed and envious. Fitted to the branches of tall trees in the remote villages of Africa, are huge drums-hollow pieces of tree trunks covered on both sides with wooden planks or thick leather. Messages travel via these drums at night... What is this message? Neither the villagers themselves nor can we decode it. It is a secret understood only by a few village elders and experts in the department. (35)

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. Dry data, though rarely inserted, are marshalled only for strengthening an argument. It is difficult to escape being charmed by Pottekkatt's soft brilliance and engaging style. In this description of the Victoria Falls, Pottekkatt vividly presents:

I saw a part of the Victoria Falls for the first time when my train started crossing the Zambesi bridge beyond the Livingstone railway station. It was a moonlit night. I had begun to hear sounds of its incessant flow much earlier. The image appeared half a furlong to the west when the train reached the bridge. It looked like a pot of milk that had been overturned! After some time the sight vanished from my sight. (18)

In the words of Dr Radhika P Menon (Translator's Note, *Life Writing*), who translated this text from Malayalam to English, "After a long internal debate and careful consideration of the repercussions of my choice, I decided to retain 'kappiri' because the word is value-neutral and fits in perfectly with Pottekkatt's world vision. The consolation was that any misgivings the word was likely to arouse in the readers' minds about Pottekkatt's moral compass would vanish quickly because the very first chapter contains ample evidence of the author's gentleness and genuine compassion for the deprived and the downtrodden". He described the places he visited and the unity he found among the people. He goes on to narrate his experience on a train journey. He woke up past midnight hearing sounds of drum beats and celebration. The train had stopped at an unknown station. "The noises that broke my sleep came from the Kappiris living in the village that lay beyond the station. They were dancing in the moonlight and their raucous shouts-'O-o-oha'- seemed to shake the darkness" (12). On seeing the silhouettes of them dancing to the beat of the drums on that moonlit night, he got the impression of a shadow play in progress.

Pottekkatt was a writer of strong social commitment and ideals, possessing an individualistic vision. He was concerned about human compassion and comradeship between the people all over the world. He wanted to highlight that human affection is required. Throughout his narrative, he emphasised on the need of making the people aware of the need for love for fellow human beings. *In the land of the Kappiris* does certainly have a global significance in maintaining unity between the different peoples of the world. He had immense curiosity in understanding all aspects of human life. Unusually for a Malayalam writer of his times, he believed that it was the pain and not the pleasure of travel that produced great travel literature. Many years later, his travelogues still make refreshing reading. A generation of Malayalis saw the world through the eyes of SK Pottekkatt who travelled across exotic regions. Pottekkatt wanted to convey the power of unity and human love through his travel narratives.

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