

## Experience, Memory, and History: Unending Stories in

### *Yellow Lights of Death*

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#### **Abstract**

Identity is a determining factor of one's existence in society. Different physical and psychological elements influence the formation of a person's identity. The encounter with natural and human geography in a society plays a role in molding the experience and memory of an individual and thereby the psyche of the person. As an agency, history, and space become the overriding factors that regulate the needle of identity creation in such cases. Benyamin's novel *Yellow Lights of Death* reveals how telling stories decide the future of a person. Christy, the protagonist, is a budding writer who tries to get a position in the writer's circle by writing his new novel based on the island Diego Garcia. Though his family has a strong historical and cultural identity, his personal and political identities are in crisis. Since they are not satisfied with their present condition, many of the characters in the novel feel unsafe and unstable in their life. Family history, collective memory, personal experience, geography, and political history haunt every cultural group on that island. Therefore, this article tries to explore the relationship between memory, story, and history in the creation of multiple identities in this novel.

**Keywords: Memory, Story, History, and Identity**

#### **Introduction**

*Yellow Lights of Death* (2015) is an English translation of the Malayalam novel *Manjaveyil Maranangal* written by Benyamin in 2011. His most popular novel is *Goat Days*, which portrays the life of an abused migrant worker in a gulf country. Benyamin's simple narration of real-life stories has attracted wide attention. He is the winner of several awards and honours including the JCB Prize for Literature, Kerala Sahithya Academy Award, and Muttath Varkey Award. His other important works include *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* (2014), *Al Arabian Novel Factory* (2014), *Manthalirile Irupathu Communist Varshangal* (2017), *Sareera Sasthram* (2018), *Akkapporinte Irupathu Nasrani Varshangal* (2008), and *Nishabda Sancharangal* (2020).

*Yellow Lights of Death* is a novel that revolves around two writers. It takes place at Diego Garcia and in India. Diego Garcia is one of the islands in the Indian Ocean. The novel begins when the author cum narrator Benyamin receives mail from a stranger; later identifies as Christy Andrapp. He requests Benyamin to go through his new life story that is sent to Benyamin by e-mail. He adds that he sent only one part of the story, the remaining eleven parts

are given to different people, who are mentioned in the same story. Benyamin, though disinterested first, later accepts the challenge with his friends to find out the remaining parts and to get the complete details of the strange story of Christy Andrapp. Together they explore every possibility of finding out the other parts of that incomplete story. When they receive each part, Christy's and other characters' identities get revealed. Then they realize that Christy wishes to be a writer, but now he is in some trouble. Christy reveals that his schoolmate Senthil was murdered in front of him, but the state officials are not revealing anything about this case. When he starts to investigate this, he forgets his dream of becoming a writer. He falls in love with a girl named Melvin, but this too ends up in tragedy. He gets the news that she died in an accident while boarding a boat. Heartbroken Christy goes with the body of Melvin to her home, Valyedathu Veedu in Kerala. Later, Christy knows that his father has some illegal contact with many other people on that island and Senthil's and Melvin's killers have some connections with his father. After 41 days, he again goes to the Valyedathu Veedu. There he is welcomed by the mystery of the Valyedathu Veedu and 'Mariam Seva' (a secret function). When he comes back to Diego, he finds everything lost; his dad was arrested, his home was sealed and all their properties were seized by the police. After getting all twelve parts and completing Christy's narration, Benyamin and his friends feel disappointed and confused. Thus, they begin to investigate the mysteries behind Christy's identity. This is the storyline of *Yellow Lights of Death*.

### **Story and History**

In Dostoyevsky's short story 'White Night', the character Nastenka asks another character (the narrator) to talk about his life and to share his history. He says that he has no stories to tell. By hearing this Nastenka astonishingly asks "then how have you lived, if you have no history?" In her view, to live is to have some story to tell. Like this, through *Yellow Lights of Death*, Benyamin also tries to emphasize the value of stories and histories in one's life. Though Benyamin focuses on three major characters and their interconnected stories in this novel, every character has their own stories to tell. He uses the technique of 'frame narrative' to tell the stories of Andrapp, Senthil, and Melvin. It is a kind of narration through which two or three stories are narrated as a story within a story. Here, Benyamin and his friends enter into Christy Andrapp's life story and meet the fictional characters created inside that story. Hence, Benyamin and his

friends' story becomes the frame story in which Christy's life story and his novel 'Book of Forefathers' appear. As a first-person narrator and as a character, Benjamin investigates the mysteries behind these three stories. But he does not reveal everything to the reader. Therefore, questions like who killed Senthil, what happened to Christy, who killed Melvin, etc. are still unanswered in the novel.

"Stories are not simple reflections of a set of 'facts': rather, they are organizing devices through which we interpret and constitute the world" (Lawler 32). *Yellow Lights of Death* is such a literary world that is constituted by different real and fictional stories. "We didn't have to ask for directions at Udayamperoor. The descriptions in Andrappier's books were detailed and accurate" (Benjamin 3). This is the opening sentence in Benjamin's novel *Yellow Lights of Death*. The first chapter, titled 'Udayamperoor' describes the original narrator's (Benjamin) and his friends' visit to the Valyedathu Veedu in Udayamperoor. They were very familiar with that place since it has been vividly narrated in Andrappier's life story. That shows this novel is a repository of so many stories. Most of the events that take place, most of the places mentioned, and most of the people that the original narrator meets are already the characters in Andrappier's unfinished novel. Hence, the original narrator lives in the real-life experienced by the second narrator Andrappier in his novel. Here, stories are the basic needles that direct the flow of this novel *Yellow Lights of Deaths*.

Being a character and the first-person narrator, Benjamin blurs the gap between reality and fiction in this novel. Hence, he could prove the fact that there is no difference between reality and fiction; both are made up of multiple interconnected stories. That is why the writer himself becomes a character in his own imaginative stories. As a writer, he talks about his relationship with a fictional character and his life story. For example, when Benjamin and friends go to meet Mel Joe at the Valyedathu Veedu, he asks,

"How do you know him?" Mel Joe asked as he sat down. 'What is between him and you two?' 'The novel that he was writing -The Book of Forefathers- is with Benjamin. It has all the details of his life. He has elaborately described the roads he had taken and the places he had visited'" (Benjamin 9).

It is his stories that made Andrappier a hard-core fan of the writer Benjamin. Andrappier was a budding novelist who was attracted to Benjamin's novels after reading his popular novel that discusses the atrocities of a man who suffered alone in a desert in an Arab country. That inspired

Andrappier and persuaded him to send his life stories to Benyamin. Andrappier, in his first email to Binyamin, writes,

...I would like to meet you someday. I have a story to tell. I strongly believe that if you listen to the story, you won't be able to resist the temptation to write about it. It is a story that I wanted to write but due to unforeseen circumstances, I don't think I'll be able to write it. ...stories are not penned by those who experience them, but by those who listen to them. Only they can write stories. (Benyamin 10-11)

Andrappier was not an inborn novelist. Neither his parents nor his friends were writers. His family had a long history and tradition in plantation, administration, and voyages. They were the descendants of Andrew Pereira, a Portuguese sailor who traveled with Vasco de Gama and translated the Malayalam language to him. "It is said that Andrew Pereira found Kerala to be a dreamland and it took him only a few days to learn and to speak Malayalam" (Benyamin 160). Later, Pereira and his family became the favourite and one among the seventy-two chieftains of Kochi king. After many years, when the Portuguese lost their supremacy in Kochi after the arrival of the Dutch, the Pereira family shifted to Pondicherry and started farming and trade. Christy Andrappier claims that "the founder of modern Pondicherry was this great grandfather of mine: Homis Avira Andrappier" (Benyamin161). But after some years they had to transfer the power of Pondicherry to the French East India Company in an exchange with the island Diego Garcia. "That's how Homis Andrappier, with his family, thousands of slaves, boats, and vessels lauded in Diego" (Benyamin 162). They were the rulers of Diego Garcia until the British took over power from the French in 1973.

The Andrappier family has kept all the documents related to this history. The most valuable thing that they consider is their forefathers' room and the historical documents preserved there. This documented history was the reason behind their loss of political power in Diego. Their office staff Philip Gunavardhane betrayed them by disclosing their secret historical documents to the French government to prove they were the predecessors of a Portuguese sailor. Gunavardhane "quoted the whole history of the Andrappier family and wrote a letter to the French government harping on our Portuguese origins" and "he presented 'evidence' for the claim" (Benyamin 186). As a result, When the French government lost its power in Diego in 1973, they handed over the chancellorship to Philip Gunavardhane. The decline of power and prosperity of the Andrappier family begins from that moment. This collective historicity is the

main ingredient of Christy's creativity as well as the theme of his proposed novel 'The Forefathers' Book'. Thus, his incomplete novel becomes a collection of 'his-stories.' For a family like the Andrapp family, history and memories are the catalysts that accelerate them to move forward. But for Babu, a poor classmate of Christy, history and memories are commodities. He does not have any written family history or any political background. He earns his livings by selling fake historical objects and vintage goods. These two views about history show the two different uses of archiving history; one as a commodity and another as a document. Babu makes use of history by converting historical objects into heritage goods. He once explains his business secret to Christy showing him a wooden sculpture of the Buddha, and tells, "...that is just three days old. After it is made, it is dipped in mud, scratched with sandpaper, etc. Anyone will easily think it is a hundred years old. More than enough to dupe fools like you. They will grab it and proudly exhibit it in their living room" (Benyamin 155). The heritage industry utilizes history for contemporary purposes. It can be seen "as an aggregation of myths, values, and inheritance determined and defined by the needs of societies in the present" (McDowell 37). It is a cultural product that can be used to preserve cultural identities. Babu makes use of this aspect of antique goods. Christy did not know that history can be used like this, as a commodity for earning money. For him, history is a well-documented life story.

There are many migrant groups in Diego. "According to the recorded history, all people in Diego Garcia are migrants or their descendants. Most of the important migrations to Diego take place from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh from the mainland, and Sri Lanka, Mali, Mozambique, and Zanzibar" (Benyamin 32). All these migrant groups have their versions of history, culture, language, and hopes, and they believe that they are the 'original' Diego Garcians. Hence, they are in guerilla warfare for grabbing political power from the ruling party. They say,

We have been here for ages, we are the sons of the soil, the land belongs to us; it was our ancestors who battled da Gama with stones and slings to stop him from setting his foot here, and it is because of that shame and anger he wrote that there were no inhabitants. These are the claims of Dhivehi-speaking Chagossian tribes that echo from the mikes during the election campaign... Chagossians, the African natives are relatively poor and a minority in Diego. It was poverty, I thought, that was the reason behind their increasing number of children. That there could be politics attached to it, I came to know later. (Benyamin 33)

This reveals how some stories (of the minority) get erased from the official history books of the world by the intervention of some other stories (of the majority). Chagossians believe that history was written by the powerful people, from the perspective of Gama, hence their story is not included anywhere in world history. They were neglected simply because of being less in number and power. A similar story can be seen in Cherar Perumtheruv, a colony where Tamils live. According to their historical stories, “Cherar King Velkezhukuttavan was the first to set foot in Diego and establish a kingdom” (Benyamin 64). They believe that they are the natives of that land, and uses the placename ‘Ilam Cheranad’ instead of the French name Diego Garcia. Buddhists in Diego have another history to tell. A history book *A French Ships Journey to India* that Christy gets from his forefathers’ room, tells the story of Buddhists in Diego. Buddhists consider that they are the first inhabitants of Diego, and prove their claims by showing shreds of evidence from this book written by Theojin Page, the vice-admiral of a French warship. Buddhists argue that Theojin Page had visited Sanchy, a place in Diego, where he had seen King Veeravarda and many Buddhists. But Andrappert’s family history does not tell such a story. Hence, one of the histories is a lie.

The Valyedathu Veedu also has a mysterious history older than many centuries. Christy gets new images and hidden meanings about Melvin and her family when he listens to Jijo’s stories about Udayamperoor church and ‘Mariam Seva.’ Jijo says that the Valyedathu family is one of the four families that do ‘Mariam Seva’ in Kerala. ‘Mariam Seva’ is a secret ritual that takes place at the Valyedathu Veedu to ward off enemies and evil forces. It needs a lot of patience and prolonged efforts to please Mariam. The prayers and chants are written in the ancient Pali script. The locals in that region believe that Mariam is the daughter of King Thoma. Though Paliath Achan betrayed her and her husband, she stuck to her beliefs till her death. She had magical powers, and became a saint. It is believed that Mariam is the deity at Thaikkattu Palli, a chapel at Udayamperoor. It is very difficult to please Thaikkattamma. For that, a girl from the Valyedathu family has to be offered. Christy knows from Joji that Melvin is the girl who was offered to Thaikkattamma. This persuades him to enquire more about them. He feels Melvin’s brother Meljo, sister, their parents and priest conceal many things from him. Christy could not find it out completely, but Benyamin and friends in their second attempt unravel those mysteries. These events transform this novel into a multilayered literary work. Mariam Church

also has multiple stories to tell. Mariam Church is a church in Diego, it is famous among the married women of Diego. They believe that their husbands' achievements are the result of their prayers. According to their myth, Mariam was the daughter of King Thoma in Kerala. She loved and married a Hindu prince. But their minister named Paliath Achan cheated them and abandoned them from their land. Mariam was sent to Bodom and her husband to Ceylon. But surprisingly they united again in the sea. It is believed that Mariam Church was built during her time in Bodom. A pastor, whom Christy meets at Udayamperoor, argues that Mariam Church in Diego was originally a church of African slaves, but some people wisely blended Mariam's history with that African church. This reveals how history is being reconstructed for certain interests. Those who have the power to rule and influence the people not only have the power to create history, but to rewrite it as well. But wherever there is such distribution of power there will be battles to overthrow such tyranny. That is why Foucault says "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 95). Senthil who lives in Cherar Peruntheruvu secretly works for 'Uthiyar Cheral Thamizhar Kazhakam'; Meljo and other members of the Valyedathu Veedu who preserve the unknown history of Christianity; and Andrapper family who live in memories are all in such resistance and are waiting for their dynasty to return to power.

'Vyazhakkootam' ('Thursday group') is a friendship group of Benyamin and his friends. They meet every Thursday to discuss formal and informal topics. Benyamin, Anil, E A Salim, Nibu, Sudhi, Biju and Saju are the members of that group. This friendship 'Thursday group' shares their experience, stories, and opinions with each other every Thursday. These discussions help Benyamin to improve his creative skills. These friends also read, interpret and share opinions about Christy's life story that is sent to Benyamin and finally they all decide to investigate Christy's story. They play a crucial role in collecting vital information from different people and places. They propose multiple solutions and stories for each fictional crisis that Benyamin faces. Therefore, this group becomes a story factory that produces multiple narratives.

### **Story and Identity**

One day, when Christy meets his classmate Jesinta after many years in a coffee shop. She tells him that she is a customs officer in Cornish. Christy is astonished by Jesinta's development in her career and her present life. He knows that Cornish is a man-made island where rich people like ministers, businessmen, actors, and industrialists live and it is a symbol of prosperity,

freedom, and pleasure. Christy misses his life, even though he has a good family history. Even without having such a family history and tradition, Jesinta has achieved a position and identity, unlike Christy. That makes him even more unstable. Then he thinks about his school days and friends and creates an online community in Orkut, 'St. Joseph Seleucia'. He feels inferior and alienated when he knows that most of his friends have achieved financial security and social status. He could not achieve what he wished; he is still struggling to become a good writer. He could neither be a good person in his own real-life nor he could create a good character in his novel. This condition discomforts him and shakes his identity as a descendant of Andrew Pereira. In Freud's view, in the psychological development of every individual, there is a stage in which a person wishes to set up an ideal personality, he calls it ego-ideal. He says "...one man has set up an ideal in himself by which he measures his actual ego" (Sandler et al. 93). It includes a good job, salary, family, respect, and social status even though it changes according to personal and social needs. When one attains this, he feels fulfilled and goes for to set up new goals to achieve. When one cannot achieve the proposed goals, his ego-ideal becomes tormented.

Identity is a vital ingredient in the formation of every culture. In *Introduction to Psychology: Gate Ways to Mind and Behaviour* Dennis Coon and John O. Mitterer say about the role of "unique long-term pattern of thinking, special blend of patterns, values, hopes, and habits in making an individual's identity" (404). According to Chris Barker, subjectivity and identity are closely connected and are inseparable from everyday language. Subjectivity is the process of being a person biologically and culturally. He divides identity into two; self-identity and social identity. Self-identity "is the verbal conceptions we hold about ourselves and our emotional identification with those self-descriptions" (Barker 215). Social identity "is the expectation and opinion that others have of us" (Barker 215). It is clear from his words that both social and self-identity are crucial in determining the complete identity of an individual. People share some common identity features if they share the same social and cultural background. An individual's identity starts to develop from the birth itself and it is shaped by the social norms, values, rituals, and language prevalent in that culture. Barker is of the view that subjectivity and identity are contingent, culturally specific productions and this cannot exist outside of cultural representations. As a result, identity becomes the main component of every cultural representation as well as in the construction of cultural histories. Identity crisis emerges when

one's ego fails to achieve what it once wished as an individual in a society. An individual tries to match with "the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for significant others in the immediate community" (Erikson 50). If he fails to achieve that sameness and continuity, the ego feels disorientated. If one fails to fulfill the wish of the ego, he will feel lost for not finding out his self-image. Christy was in search of his ideal image or ego-ideal, for that he has set up a goal, to become a well-known writer. When he feels, he is going to fail in that, he becomes psychologically alienated. His parents blame him for wasting his valuable time; friends neglect him as a loser, and public security insult and humiliate him for moving against them. When his intimate friend Melvin dies in an accident, he collapses completely.

History as a scientific study of the past, analyses such cultural representations fixed in time and space. Many incidents in this novel narrate how individuals, by using their powerful identities, create stories and convert those stories into 'authentic' history. Christy Andrapp does not have a political identity and literary identity in Diego. What he possesses is the cultural identity of his family titles. But he does not want his identity to be limited to his familial identity. He thought his novel would help him to solve all his dilemmas. By following other people's lives and their problems he creates more complications in his life and that leads him to identity crisis. He did not know how to handle his present and future. He introspects, "I was thinking about that, lying in bed. A road following Senthil. Another to marry Melvin. The road to politics, as pictured by Daniel D'silva. The road to my soul called writing. The road to success in writing, as dreamt by Papa. Which one was mine?" (Benyamin 194). This uncertainty of Christy's life follows the reader even after reading this novel completely. But the experience that he gets from all these incidents indirectly helps him to become stronger. As Michael Pickering says, "...experience constitutes the meeting-place of individual perception and cultural meaning, self and symbolic forms, life-story and social conditions of existence. Experience occupies the contested territory between ways of being and ways of knowing." (Pickering 27) Therefore, Christy's letters to Benyamin and his life stories are the outcomes of such an experience.

Coming back to Diego from Kerala, after Melvin's cremation, Christy gets to know from Jesinta that people are gossiping about Christy and Melvin's relationship. He wonders how these people create such fake stories about a dead person without shame, why do not they make such gossips about Senthil? Jesinta says "...Diego will talk. It is not people's fault. If they don't have a

story, what will they do? They will make up new stories and keep repeating them. Anyway, you be careful, in one of those stories you are the hero” (Benyamin 269). That is the nature of Diego’s people, they make stories when they want; destroy the same if they do not want it, even if it is a real one. Public security also does the same, they erase stories and memories from their citizens’ minds. Christy’s friend Vinod’s life is an example of such ill-treatment by public security. They erased Vinod’s memory for involving in Senthil’s murder investigation with Christy. In that Orwellian surveillance society, powerful people create memory, story, and eventually history. There every individual is a piece of a story that can be erased at any time.

### **Conclusion**

*Yellow Lights of Death* tells the story of those who lost history. Even though history is constituted by factual stories, it does not include everyone’s stories. In the construction of the ‘authentic’ history of people, place, and cultures, many factors come to play their role. Money, politics, tradition, number, and power decide how history should be written, erased, and re-written. It also determines who should be included and who should be excluded. In this novel, Benyamin has tried to portray such excluded experiences, stories, and histories of many individuals and many social groups. Benyamin combined the real stories of the Andrapper family, the Valyedathu family, the Chagossian tribes, and the Tamil people to reveal the unwritten histories and forgotten memories by mixing them with fantasy and imagination.

It is clear from the psychological and sociological theories of Freud, Erikson, Barker, etc., that in the formation of an individual’s identity both the internal world (mind) and the external world (society) play a crucial role. External factors like geography, culture, history, politics, and religion influence the construction of the internal world which includes psychological elements like thoughts, hopes, memories, dreams, and experience. Most of the characters in this novel are engaged in a constant struggle for their literal, historical, cultural, religious, or political acknowledgement in their land. Christy Andrapper who wishes to be a well-known writer; Jesinta who wants to be a rich woman; the Andrapper family who secretly tries to overthrow Diego’s government; members of the Valyedathu Veedu and the ‘Uthiyar Cheral Thamizhar Kazhakam’ who wait for their dynasty to come back to power; the Chagossians and the Buddhists who fight for their rights in Diego are all examples of such people. Whether authentically written or not, what encourages them to participate in their

struggle for existence are the stories that they uphold. In Diego, everyone has their own story to tell. But, as the Chagossians believe, history is written by those who have power. The Andrappier's family stories and the Valyedathu Veedu's family stories are written in history because they had political and religious power in the past. Though Senthil, Babu, Vinod, Melvin, the Chagossians, the Tamils, and the Buddhists' have their cultural identities no one recognizes them and records them in history because of their powerlessness. Benyamin as a writer as well as a character addresses such political issues and gives voice to neglected people's life through this novel. Therefore, *Yellow Lights of Death* becomes a novel that discusses the politics of identity construction, the value of stories in life, and the role of power in transforming one's story into one's history.

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