

Trajectories of Transcending Borders: Human Displacement and Transnationalism in Benyamin's Novels

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Abstract

Migration is always an antidote to many difficulties that people face. Though exodus, exile, and expulsion are not new phenomena in the history of human evolution, 21st century has witnessed a renewed impetus in migration to different places, including outer space. Covid-19 has further complicated the situation by restricting people's movement, which was gaining momentum due to globalisation and technological progress, as it has never seen in modern history. Many writers have attempted to address these transformations that affected the identity of people, the cultural fabric of familial relationships and the political stability of a nation-state when human dislocations redefine people's daily lives. Benyamin is one of the writers who try to understand such situations and represents them in his works. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to analyse how Benyamin deals with the different realms of human displacements and their possibilities in his works. Also, this study aims to enquire whether transnationalism is an immanent element of his works that calls for universal citizenship.

Keywords: *Transnationalism, migration, identity, deterritorialization, diaspora, globalisation.*



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Introduction

Human displacement, the principal agency that proliferated the necessity of rethinking and reformulating the traditional notions of nation-states and borders, is the decisive factor behind the progress of human civilisation. Transnationalism, a concept that enunciates blurring the quintessential gap between nation-states, is the result of such political and economic exigencies. As a medium that records and reflects the changes taking place around the world, literature gives new subjectivities to individuals in the transnational world. Many writers have portrayed such issues of borders and citizenships that determine the theme of their works.

Benyamin, one of the leading writers of 21st century Malayalam literature, is the one who engenders many moments in his novels where the characters transcend their variegated identities beyond national borders by overcoming the barricades of political constraints. In his celebrated novel *Aatujeevitham*, he illustrates the predicaments of a Gulf migrant, Najeeb, who leads a slave living in a sheep rearing centre in an Arab desert. Not only *Aatujeevitham* but Benyamin's other novels also portray the causes and consequences of human displacements. Migration is a common motive that influences his characters' development and the flow of his storyline. The primary texts chosen for this study are the following; *Aatujeevitham*, *Al Arabian Novel Factory* (hereafter *ANFY*), *Mullappooniramulla Pakalukal* (hereafter *MNPL*), *Manjaveyil Maranangal* (hereafter *MVML*), *Akkapporinte Irupathu Nasrani Varshangal* (hereafter *AINVL*), *Manthilirile Irupathu Communist Varshangal* (hereafter *MICVL*), *Sareerasasthram* (hereafter *SSM*), *Nisabda Sancharangal* (hereafter *NSL*). Hence, this study intends to elucidate the multiple contingencies of migrations, cultures, and spaces that intersect and reconstruct individuals' identities, thereby moulding and transforming them as transnational citizens.

Transnationalism and Benyamin's Literary World

Transnationalism blurs the national borders for the free flow of people, goods and technology. If nationalism demanded national security by safeguarding the territories, transnationalism, which is the outcome of technological revolutions, globalisation, and international migration, dreams for the universal citizenship of people all over the world. Though many national and international movements called for nation-building from the 18th century itself, it could not stop people from migrating to other places. But the struggles for freedom and anti-colonial movements of various countries limited the intensity of migration for some time.

Because of the two World Wars, the Great Economic Depression, Gulf oil discovery, natural disasters, and political conflicts, the movement of people from one country to another increased rapidly in the second half of the 20th century. Along with the hike in the international market due to globalisation, overseas travels have become economical and more accessible, making migration an essential part of many developing and developed countries, giving new international identities to migrants. These transnational migrants become active participants in the economic, cultural, and social progress and daily life patterns of the country they reside in to survive by forming a bilateral relationship with them. Steven Vertovec mentions this transnational condition, “despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent) certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common- however virtual- arena of activity” (3). Since transnational corporations establish new developmental policies and scope for better transnational citizenship, Vertovec predicts, people who realise such globally intensified relationships will be the guiding force of future generations, and they will accentuate the inevitableness of re-evaluating the traditional definitions of territories, where the new world order created by the international flow of human labour changed the understanding of nation, citizenship, and identity. Henceforth, transnationalism “encompasses not only the movement of people, but also of notions of citizenship, technology, forms of multinational governance, and the mechanisms of global markets” (Daswani and Quayson 4).

Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of rhizome and deterritorialisation also become relevant in analysing transnational identities and relationships. A rhizome, which does not have a specific traceable origin or end, resembles transnational migrants whose identities turn out to be heterogeneous, interconnected, and multiple. Their relationships with other nations and citizens also become a spontaneous assemblage because “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze and Guattari 7). This rhizomed-identity transcends the inexorable ties of territories and the traditional place-bounded national identities in the ramification of international migrations.

Benyamin’s literary works also present this concept of blurring national borders, which gives rise to new global subjectivities even within multicultural conjunctures created by

immeasurable human mobility in the postmodern world. For example, in *MNPL*, Sameera, a radio jockey who migrated from Pakistan to the City of Joy, where the story takes place, introduces her colleagues at Orange Radio when they travel in their company's official vehicle ('Cattle-class Mercedes' in Sameera's terms). That Cattle-class Mercedes, in which citizens of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines travel, is the symbol of South-Asian migrants from where most of the immigrations occur in Gulf countries. In another instance, knowing Sameera's interest in music, Ali brings her to their music club, String-Walkers. And she becomes delighted and proud by seeing many talented musicians and music lovers from different countries. She writes about that club, 'we can call it a miniature of the world. That small group was a lucky place possible only in rare migration cities' (Benyamin, *MNPL* 62). This "awareness of multilocality stimulates the desire to connect oneself with others, both 'here' and 'there'" (Vertovec 6). Even when Benyamin suggests identity formation is connected to the place where one is grown up, he hopes for a new transnational world where no one is segregated based on national identities because he knows that "there are good people and bad people all over the world. The illusionary national borders are not an issue for that" (Benyamin, *MNPL* 27).

The life of Pratap, Edwin, Vinod Chopra, and Riyas Malik in *ANFY* is an example of the transnational relationships that are burgeoning, albeit temporary. Transnationalism provides the opportunity for a person to work, earn money and live permanently or temporarily in another country at their discretion, respecting other cultures beyond national borders and citizenship. Benyamin's characters Christy, Jaseentha, Pratap, Edwin, Sameera, Ritu, Sandhya, Kiran, Manu and Mariya are all translational individuals who think their lives are more important than where they live. These people, who come from different ethnic backgrounds and work together in common migrant societies of a very distinctive geographical location, evolve to be the basis for redefining homogenous identities of earlier cultural milieus. As a result of such dispersal and permeation of migrant subjectivities, "the very concept of homogenous national culture, the consensual or continuous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic ethnic communities'- as the grounds of cultural comparitivism- are in a profound process of redefinition" (Bhabha 7). Even if their country of birth and culture are desirable and valuable, such interests will not hinder transnational individuals from accepting or assimilating into another place. That is the essence of transnationalism, which "involves trans-border engagements and simultaneity between two or

more nation-states, a social field that connects one or more migrant communities through the doors of communication technology, goods, finance, and people” (Daswani 64). Benyamin, thus, puts forward a condition where nationalism and history are not the basis of a nation’s existence but the mutual love and trust of the people.

Benyamin also sought to create a literary space that spanned the globe without being confined to a particular geography. While Manthilir stories represent a small area of Kerala, the Andrappier mysteries are spread across Diego and Kerala. Other stories depict an extensive canvass of India, the Middle-East and Africa. Benyamin, though focusing on the influence of lineage and local histories over an individual, never upholds any nationalistic agendas. He successfully puts forward the heterogeneity of individual desires, lifestyles and cultures, and hints at transforming one’s identity into that of a global citizen.

The major reason behind the growth of transnationalism as a worldwide phenomenon that affects the relationship between nation-states is migration. Postmodern economists and sociologists believe that migration and development are correlated areas that provide avenues for economic development rather than creating troubles. Hence, migrants are considered the “active agents of contemporary transformations on local, national, and global scales” (Schiller 27). This condition, where migrants get international recognition than never before, has resulted in renegotiating the definitions of migration, citizenship, home and identity to assimilate them into broader dimensions of global market expansion. Moreover, human mobility destabilises the meaning of home “to the point where it no longer denotes a sense of place but rather a space determined by the relationships of the people who form it” (Tsolidis 4). When the new world shrinks and expands simultaneously, where the local becomes global and global becomes local, Soren Frank notes, “it is a time of redrawing maps, of intense deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation: people are passing, borders, but borders are also passing people” (2). Such deterritorialisations are most likely to affect developing nations with large populations, such as India. According to the *World Migration Report*, India had the largest number of migrants living abroad (17.5 million) in 2019 (3). This figure illustrates India’s role in the global market and employment.

E. S. Lee asserts that “no matter how short or how long, how easy or how difficult, every act of migration involves an origin, a destination, and an intervening obstacle” (50). Hence, each

migration creates repercussions on at least two nation-states and a group of people. Didar Singh and Irudaya Rajan divide the history of migration in India into three periods ancient, colonial and modern migrations. The ancient migration period is before the arrival of European colonial powers to India. It is a period discussed in *AINV* when the Manthalir people talk about their religious history. The colonial migration period was a time of indentured labour “for plantations and mines in Atlantic, Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions” (17). The family history of Christy Andrapp (MVML) and Mariyamma’s journeys (NSL) with the British Army to different military camps have to be read in parallel with this kind of migration to understand how displacement changed the life of people. Modern migration after Indian independence falls under two categories- “the emigration of educated and professionals to developed countries, such as the US and UK, and the emigration of skilled and unskilled labourers to West Asia” (Rajan and Sing 21). The migration of the characters like Najeeb, Pratap, Vinod, Persian Pappichan, Gracy, Lali, Sherin, Varghese, Rajesh, Reji, and Maria are examples of this modern migration.

Migration is one of the vital events that revived Kerala’s economy because “it is a process that engenders insights to rebuild one’s nation and its culture” (Sivadas 86). The most important one was the gulf migration that began in the 1960s. The oil revolution in the Gulf countries was a boon to many unemployed people of Kerala who were able to thrive financially in a short period when they got many opportunities in several skilled and unskilled occupations. A survey conducted in 2018 “found an estimate of about 2.12 million Keralites living out of the state, up from the 1.4 million first seen in 1998” (Rajan 11). The Gulf paved the way not only for men but also for women. High employment opportunities in domestic work and healthcare services opened new doors for women, mainly from India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and the Philippines, which caused more women migration than ever before. Khalid Koser comments, “women have traditionally migrated to join their partners abroad, an increasing proportion who migrate today do so independently; they are often the primary breadwinners for the families they leave behind” (7). Nursing has played a significant role in accelerating such migrations and breaking the conventional gender roles that prevailed in many Indian societies. Marie Percot (2006: 59) considers the nurses’ migration not as a “temporary migration’ but as a ‘lifetime process with significant implications.” The characters Mariyamma, Gracie, Lali, Sherin, and

Maria in *NSL* got such opportunities to cross national borders not only for their own economic needs but for their companions also.

Aatujeevitham is “a novel that changed Malayalees’ perception about exile life in Gulf countries” (Sachidanandan 14). It also played “an investigative role in identifying a significant lacuna in current institutional discourses regarding Malayali Gulf emigrants” (Menon 323). Najeeb’s goat-days in the Riyadh desert was the result of *Kafala* system that started in Gulf countries during the 1950s for regulating the large-scale importation of migrations and for monitoring their status and activities. In the *Kafala* system, the *Kafeel* (the sponsor, a citizen of one of the Gulf States) having all the social and psychological power over the *Makfool* (the migrant who is sponsored) even has the right to withhold the *Makfool*’s passport. Also, this allows the *Kafeel* to exert power over the foreigner and strip the migrants of all formal identities to convert them into aliens in Gulf societies (Alsayer 288). Hence, migrants in Gulf countries cannot socially and politically assimilate into their culture as they do in other countries. On that account, no matter how many generations pass, the Gulf Malayalees’ identity will remain a pure diaspora that bears only the true essence of the Malayali (Benyamin, *Kudiyettam* 81).

In *Aatujeevitham*, Najeeb leaves for Riyadh when the problems of the unrest caused by the First Iraq War are almost over. In between that, he dreamt “like the 14 million Malayali migrants in the Gulf. Golden watch, fridge, television, car, AC, tape recorder, VCP, and a thick gold chain” (Benyamin, *Aatujeevitham* 33). At a time when unemployment and economic instability were high in Kerala, “migrating to the gulf does not only spell an escape from unemployment but is also a move away from *payyanhood* (young, immature status) towards full adult status as a householder” (Osella and Osella 121). Najeeb is a representative of a coarse generation that was compelled to leave their home town to seek wealth and prosperity by traversing the predicaments of distance, language and weather. Significant factors that forced people to move from Kerala to other places were increased demographic expansion, unemployment, low wages, stagnation in the agricultural sector, failure of the economic organisation, and developments in education. Consequently, “more educated youth in the midland and the coastal regions opted for migration instead of staking their future in the withering agricultural sector back home” (Zacharia et al. 79). The narrator says about his father Dani, “he went to learn driving at a good time. It was a time when many young people from Kulanada and surrounding areas began to board the

aeroplane with boxes full of dreams to Gulf countries and returned with boxes full of gifts” (Benyamin, *MICVL* 261). Such migrations became a boon for many impoverished communities and middle-class families of Kerala,

MICVL giving prominence to political disputes as well as church disputes begins with the end of the 20 years of exile of Manthaliir Kunjoonj II. When Kunjoonj II, who was more interested in politics than his studies and participated in Kashmir and African guerrilla wars, returned after 20 years, he had his Punjabi wife and children with him. His wife Mandakini, coming from a radical communist family from a different cultural context, ‘brought a complete revolution in Manthaliir’ (Benyamin, *MICVL* 42). Mandakini brought the food, clothing, language, and lifestyle with her were all new to the Manthaliir people. Not only Mandakini but Nicker Chacko, who wore Bermuda shorts, Persian Pappachan, who became rich after reaching Persia, Borneo Ammachi, who went to Borneo during the Second World War, Rayikkuttan, who believed Bombay underworld was in his control were also the people who opened new windows of the changing world to Manthaliir people.

ANFY and *MNPL* have been able to change the image of the Gulf, which is often portrayed in Malayalam literature as a land of wealth and opportunities, into a land of political and religious discontent. Though the City of Joy is under the control of Majesty, a totalitarian leader who attempts to deracinate Shia people by means of enforcing uncanny laws and military moves, he does not restrict the immigration of the people from other countries to that city to work, live and enjoy, until they question the authority of ‘his-Majesty-government’. The Shia people argue that this unconditional influx of immigration from other countries is the reason why they are not getting the benefits they deserve from the government. *ANFY* and *MNPL* depict such political resonances that arise between Shia and Sunni as well as Shia and immigrants in the City of Joy, where the Shia people feel neglected and devastated. Even though the migration population helps the receiver country’s development and economic growth, it can remould the relationship between that country’s people and its government in multiple ways. Realising that migrants’ life is not safe in the host nation, Sameera’s uncle tells her about their government, “always remember that we are immigrants, we have no rights here, and what we have here is their generosity. Act on their will, regardless of justice or injustice, so as not to fall prey to their wrath” (Benyamin, *MNPL* 288). If the migrants receive better employment, economic stability,

and social benefits than the native citizen, it may lead to political turmoil in host countries. In immigration-high-countries, natives are now protesting to regain their rights by proposing new laws against migrants who get such economic support from the government; *Nitaqat* is an example.

Nitaqat is a programme implemented by the Saudi Arabian government as part of their Saudisation to increase Saudi nationals' employment in the private sector to reduce the unemployment rate caused by the unrestricted flow of migrants. Like Saudi Arabia, many other countries are also enforcing such laws to regulate the flow of migrants because "the authority of the nation-state is perceived as threatened as domestic populations and regimes are being undermined by diasporic invaders" (Cohen and Fisher 3). It is the anticipatory moves of the governments, realising the future increase in immigrant population than their own citizens, that drives them to enforce laws like *Nitaqat*.

Migration to European and African countries was another, but a series of subsequent emigrations after the gulf migration that happened in the late 20th century became a decisive factor for Kerala's industrial, educational and medical transformations. These changes in Kerala gave impetus to the subsequent influx of educated and skilled people into European countries. Benjamin's inspiration for many of the characters and their stories in *NSL* was such journeys that revolutionised the history of Kerala, predominantly of the Southern districts. Gracy, Radhakrishna Pillai, Susan, Anna Varghese, Raju, Rakesh and Varghese's lives are examples of such journeys.

Migration and identity

"To know a person is not only to know his mind but also to know his place" (Benjamin, *MVML* 199). Though different external and internal agencies influence an individual's identity formation, some agencies like space (the nation-state where one is born and brought up) play an influential role in determining a person's identity. According to Hall, identities are the "names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225). The identity that exists in the narrative of the past is not a transparent thing that is not already made, already available, and already accomplished fact. What makes an individual a citizen, migrant or refugee is the authority that controls them. Furthermore, citizens' identities in the country are shaped by successive governments' ideology and political agenda,

capable of turning a patriot into a traitor and a traitor into a patriot. However, the relationship between identity and place is deteriorating because of the cyclic movement of people from one place to another, which has been catalysed by globalisation and technological advancements in the 21st century. Thus, an individual's identity cannot be circumscribed only to national identity; in this transnational world, everyone becomes a diaspora whose identities are constantly being reproduced themselves perpetually. However, crossing the border will never be a pleasant experience for all immigrants, as not all of them are tourists who come to see the sights; on the contrary, every border will be a symbol of grief, loss and anger for the refugees who have left home and family and sought refuge in another country only to save their own lives.

In this technological world where every individual is connected globally through the internet and international migrations, the formation of one's identity also receives international attention because of their role in global markets. In a world where capitalist tactics bring forth innumerable global consumers, identities are constructed through different negotiations and repositionings. The transformation of local towns into a global market creates unparalleled mobility for people, making the transnational world even faster. Stem Pultz Moslund is of the view that "we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, fusions and intermixing it entails, reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world's countries and cities" (1). However, the goal of internationalism is not to dissolve or abandon the border that leads to political and cultural anarchy but to transcend it. Therefore, in this transition period of transnational affairs, the nation-states should recognise the limits of their borders to "reconsider and transcend old concepts of boundaries and frontiers so that they can become just one site in a new transnational culture" (Raghuram et al. 2).

The new types of international affairs, arising from the need to maintain amicable and collaborative relationships between nation-states, give new meanings to many diasporas, including diaspora writers, guest workers, asylum seekers, and refugees. Diaspora writers who had always projected nostalgia of home and longing for returning to the homeland as an unfulfilled dream engender a split identity and a fractured reality when they come back to their land. Avtar Brah observes that their "identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing 'imagined' and 'encountered' communities" (192).

This feeling of duality is due to the cultural shifts that happen in transnational relationships. When the diaspora writers, who are longing for a place called home, “experience a simultaneous sense of rupture and elevation” and “often find themselves caught betwixt-and-between two or multiple worlds and socio-economic realities” (Daswani 38). Benyamin, in an interview, while explaining his transition as a writer, gives credit to his life in exile, which inspired and provided him with the theme and characters of his novels. His sojourn life has all the adverse factors and circumstances like loneliness, isolation, existential issues, and many metropolitan experiences, which can convert a man into a writer (Thampuran 115). His experiences of living abroad for a long time as a migrant is an example of the suffering and isolation that many people face in another country, which, in turn, calls for the need to create an environment in which all people in all places receive equal treatment as it is emphasised in transnationalism.

Though Benyamin sets forth the notion that no land belongs to anyone, he never denies the quintessential ties between space and identity. Except for *Aatujeevitham*, one of the significant themes presented by all other novels is how an individual’s ancestry and heritage are used to gain power and dominance over the people of a particular place religiously, economically and politically. Manthalir Mathayi and Kunjoonj use their family history and tradition as a weapon against Antiochan Patriarchs in the religious battle to get back Manthalir Church’s power. Similarly, the Andrappier family who are trying to regain control in Diego, and the rebellious Ali and his cohorts in the City of Joy, who are trying to reclaim political power from the Sunni minority to the Shia majority, also use their legacy and history they have gained to support their claims. Ali, a Shiite who has to live as *number two* in his own country with a majority, has a life goal of regaining control of that country where the minority group Sunnis possess all the political and religious power over them. As for the Sunnis, who themselves consider *number one*, the Shias are immigrants and have no valid citizenship in that country because they came from Iran and had been living in that country illegally for ages (Benyamin, *MNPL* 76). Benyamin argues that it is a matter of debate why a large section of a nation’s population has to live as secondary citizens without even receiving the same status an immigrant community receives in that nation, even if all citizens belong to the same religion. In *SSM*, the identities of Ritu, Sandhya and Rakesh, who migrate to the metropolitan region, Delhi, are constantly in a struggle with the uncanny circumstances and construct their own identities based on the socio-political milieu

ascribed to them. That is why when they lose their jobs and their lives are threatened while exploring the mysteries of organ trafficking, they leave the city to forget everything and return to their homeland to start a new life.

Benyamin's novels also discuss the mental and physical predicaments that individuals encounter when they arrive in a new place as a migrant, especially when they reach an entirely strange culture and challenging climate. Even Christy, who knows the complete history of his ancestors- who came to Kerala from Portugal and reached Diego via Pondicherry- has to experience spatial and social alienation while living in Thiruvananthapuram for three years. He says, "until I go back, I was an alien there for three years"; then he realises that "all lives outside of us are our enemies" (Benyamin, *MVML* 161). In the case of Radhakrishna Pillai, the husband of Gracy in *NSL* who lived in Delhi, Zambia, and Germany for a long time, migration life was arduous because it was challenging for him to live in a country where language, food and clothing are different without giving up one's culture and personality. Radhakrishnan Pillai opines that if natives deliberately harass, humiliate and isolate migrants on the basis of nationality or colour, such situations will create more problems between the natives and the migrants, which can even become the root cause of having enmity between two nation-states. When Pilla arrived in Germany, the most difficult thing he faced was learning the German language, "they [Germans] have taken advantage of that as well. They used it as a weapon to remind us again and again that we are strangers" (Benyamin, *NSL* 93). Such neglect of migrants leads them to hate the destination nation and think that their own country is the best.

Najeeb, who had to live with his *arbab's* (employer) sheep in the desert for four years without seeing the outside world, could be suggested as an apt victim in this regard. Najeeb, who realises that nothing in the desert appeals to his personality, finds his greatest joy, peace, and freedom when he meets people in the prison who speak his mother tongue. Such situations, in which one finds peace, happiness and freedom inside a jail, elucidate the relative referential connotations of freedom. Sameera's inability to fit in as a radio jockey while working for Orange Radio was the consequence of both relativity in the concept of happiness and cultural differences that arise in migration. If that lacuna has to be filled, she writes, "sometimes we have to approach something. Sometimes we have to procure something. In the end, that space will become our own, and that gap stays in place until we adapt to it" (Benyamin, *MNPL* 26). Despite

being a migrant, Sameera does not experience high levels of cultural conflicts since she lives in Lahore Gully, where her family members, relatives, and other people of the same migrated communities live. Through such cultural groups, they are able to maintain the feeling of their hometown in Pakistan. The Malayali societies in Germany (*NSL*) and the Cherar Perumtheruvu in Diego (*MVML*) are all such 'imagined-cultural-groups' with common characteristics. These sorts of social practices validate the role of space and culture in constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing an individual's identity. Diego's Chief Investigator Vijay Mallika Ratnam's conversation with Christy strengthens that idea. He asks Christy when he goes to complain about Senthil's disappearance without Senthil's address, "if someone is missing, it means he's not available at his address. If you do not know his address, how can you say that he is missing?" (Benyamin, *MVML* 44). This incident further illustrates how Benyamin portrays the inextricable link between identity and space.

In this era of globalisation, identities evolve to be more fluid, relational and constantly reproducing through electronic networks and continuous spatial displacements. Hence, the inexorable ties between space and identity are now entangled in more complicated and precarious dimensions of understanding. In his paper 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Stuart Hall explains two types of cultural identities: an identity that is given culturally and the identity that one produces culturally (225). The first one is a shared cultural identity common to all who belong to a culture and possess a collective history and ancestry. These superficial or imposed selves are the recognisable symbols of a particular culture. The second is the identity individuals construct themselves by becoming and being. Even if a person's personality is a private matter, it is formed through various social processes that are public. Similarly, Chris Barker also proposes two types of identities, self-identity and social-identity, formed when an individual becomes a part of society. According to him, self-identity is "the verbal conceptions we hold about ourselves and our emotional identification with those self-descriptions", and social identity is "the expectation and opinion that others have of us" (215).

Therefore, interpreting an individual's identity separately from the spatial context in which the person grew up or existed is tantamount to separating space from society. Hence, any person, who moves permanently or temporarily from one place to another, faces cultural differences and identity challenges. Through his novels, Benyamin demonstrates that such changes will no

longer be unconventional and unacceptable in contemporary migrations and will be normalised as part of man's social evolution and psychological progress.

Space, Displacement and Ownership

There is an overreaching existential question posed by Benyamin in the select texts chosen for discussion: whether any place on this earth belongs to anyone? The author has such suspicion because he is convinced that travels are a fundamental phenomenon of human existence. In *AINVL* and *MICVL*, disputes arise between the Catholics and the Patriarchs over the ownership of the Manthali Church. Manthali Kunjoonj, who is trying to address this issue religiously and politically, describes the history of the Catholic community to the Manthali people to get hold of its ownership. Kunjoonj, who believes in St. Thomas, often repeats the argument that we are neither settlers nor foreigners; we belong to the upper caste people who existed in Kerala before. Such arguments are intended to question the origins of Antiochian Patriarchs who believed in St. Peter. Along with this, the two novels propose the social space of Manthali as a heterogeneous entity that emerged in due course due to the conglomeration of disparate intranational and national migrations and displacements.

Vettikoottilachan, a new priest who came to Manthali church, supports the Catholics by explaining their ancestral heritage by giving evidence from *Periplus of Erithraean Sea*, Ptolemy's map, and Thomas's descriptions. Benyamin's central characters often use their heritage and history to showcase their power and supremacy over other marginalised characters whose past lives are not appropriately documented. They are essential tools used in creating a national identity and showcasing power. Because history is always connected to power, the one who controls a particular group of people in a specific region will be the one who constructs their history. As George Orwell indicates in *1984*, "who controls the past controls the future", powerful rulers often write or deconstruct written history according to their ideologies (162). David Harvey argues heritage "is about the process by which people use the past, a "discursive construction" with material consequences" (19). In *AINVL*, Vettikoottilachan "shouted at those who say that Christianity originated in Kerala with the arrival of the Portuguese and therefore the Malankara Church did not exist before the Antiochus and Romans" (Benyamin, *AINVL* 76). Vettikoottilachan's religious authority and knowledge alone were enough to change the historical consciousness of the believers in Manthali.

The Manthalir family of Mathayi was the migrants who came to Manthalir centuries ago. With the help of the Pandalam royal family, they built the church and made history. The new generation of migrants, his own children and nieces and nephews, also had the potential to create new family histories. Jijan, who thought he would become a world-renowned communist leader, went to Maharashtra as a protest against his father's bourgeois attitude, returned after earning money. This is an example of new generation migration that originates from the Manthalir family.

Wilber Zelinsky defines migration as “any permanent or semi-permanent change of residence, more meaningfully, perhaps it is a spatial transfer from one social unit or neighbourhood to another, which strains or ruptures previous social bonds” (225). Humans who face different adversities always try to move away from such problems by migrating to more favourable places. The Manthalir family history, which began with Koothattukulam Ittiyavara's migration, had witnessed numerous spatial dislocations when that family lineage reached the Jijan generation. When it comes to *MVML* from Manthalir stories, each incident proves that those movements were a part of human existence as well as social progress. Christy's lack of influence and acceptance as a writer affects him, though his parents vouch they have prestigious ancestral existential anxieties about himself, his roots, and his identity disturb his mental equilibrium. Later, he realises that no place belongs to a person; humans will continue shifting their places until they find a place where they can meet man's basic physical, mental, and social needs. In the end, he asks himself,

Actually, which land should I remember when I ought to think of my ancestors? What journey will make me free from my emigrant life? Is it my grandparent's Diego? Or is it ancestors' Pondicherry? Can it be that 'Karappuram', the land they owned till 200 years before? Is it Kochi where they landed even before? Or is it Lisbon five hundred years ago? Who knows where their forefathers came from?
(Benyamin, *MVML* 235)

He understands these things only when he meets many ethnic and cultural groups and explores their lives in Diego Garcia. Therefore, Christy is unable to confirm who the real heirs of the island are and who the island's aborigines are in the Diego Garcian population of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and many other ethnic groups like Chagossians. Christy writes, “according to written histories, everyone in Diego today is either an immigrant or a descendant of an immigrant” (Benyamin, *MVML* 32).

Benyamin, who realises the fact that every human being is a hybrid in this new globalised world where no one can go back to history to produce original and pure identities, proposes the idea of a borderless world, a thought similar to Bhabha's views, who believes international relations are in a state of radical revisions. In Bhabha's words, "the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweaving of history, and the culturally contingent border-lines of modern nationhood" (5). Through the two interconnected novels, *ANFY* and *MNPL*, Pratap and Sameera tell the story of the grief and anger of the people who were denigrated as secondary citizens in their country because of the migrants who came to the prosperous City of Joy to earn money. According to Ali and his followers, they are the real heirs of that country, but they say, "we who have been here since ancient times are the second number in this city, and those who came later are the first number. How can we accept it?" (Benyamin, *MNPL* 110). However, the minority Sunnis who now rule this country also believe that they are the real heirs of that country. Sameera Parveen knows the history of that city and says that it was an area that has often been inhabited, ruled and displaced by a diverse population. She writes to her friend Javed,

This is a city of Sumerians who worshipped the mother goddess Enki three thousand years before Christ, and since then, the city has been ruled by Achaemenids, Parthians and Sassanids. Then came Islam. Persian kings, Caliphs and Ottomans ruled alternately. The Portuguese later conquered the city. Then came the British. When they left, the al Caliphs returned. (Benyamin, *MVML* 49)

Sameera, who knows about the migrant histories of that city, is not able to agree with the arguments of neither Ali, who support Shiites nor the members of the Thaya Ghar family, who support Sunnies. Moreover, she understands that no one can rule and own any country for a long time. The question that Sameera's cousin Farhana asks her parents, after the death of Sameera's father, while her family members were discussing whether they had to return to their mother country because of the political and religious turmoil in the city, is important in today's transnational world. She asks, 'why should I go back to Pakistan? ... this is the city where I was born and raised. I have the right to live here. This soil belongs not only to the strikers but also to me' (Benyamin, *MVML* 175). Farhana is a third-generation migrant who is assimilated into the host culture rather than deviating from it. Hence, she cannot accept the opinions of her parents and relatives.

Through such questions, Benyamin again asks the reader how a person can say a place is their own, and he gives the answer to that in *SSM* also. That answer is the comment made by Ritu, as they were preparing to leave Delhi, knowing that the lives of Ritu, Sandhya and Rakesh were in danger, who went in search of the mysteries of Midhun's death. Ritu consoles them, saying, 'we are the people who came to this city from different places. We have to leave somewhere at some time' (Benyamin, *SSM* 210). One of the important characteristics of this new generational experience of the young migrants is their "ability to move continually from one context to another, a condition of continuous (micro) diaspora, which implies the ability to translate and adapt what they have acquired in one context to the exigencies of other new context" (Colombo 20). These kinds of transnational contexts enable "new moral relationships in and across space as transnational migrants root themselves ontologically and experientially in the places of settlement- but without abandoning home" (Werbner 120). This, in turn, provides a way for normalising heterogeneous cultures in every transnational community.

Analysing all these novels selected for this study, it is clear that Benyamin is a writer who respects and encourages the indispensable need for heterogeneous cultures and hopes for a transcultural future where individuals' ethnic qualities become a part of their own kaleidoscopic identities. Here, by the term kaleidoscopic identity, I mean a condition in which individuals' heterogeneous identities and multicultural lifestyle connections obtain variegated meanings in transnational relationships. In that condition, every individual's cultural quality will be respected and receive different dimensions when it collaborates with similar multicultural scenarios.

Conclusion

To conclude, the central point that Benyamin tries to convey through his novels is his vision for a borderless world where people realise that every individual is a migrant on this earth. He could express it from *Akkapporinte 20 Nasrani Varshangal* to *Nisabda Sancharangal* vividly by showcasing the experiences of several displaced people. Another fact he finds out is that there are no voluntary migrations; all are forced in some way or another. Though it is believed that self-decided journeys are not involuntary migrations, there will be some political, economic, religious or cultural factors that cause such movements. Moreover, his novels reveal that migration is fundamental to human cultural evolution and social headways. This mobility will continue as an essential element in the life of individuals as long as they encounter insecurities in

their life. Hence, he realises that there is no meaning in becoming the land's rulers and proclaiming we are the heirs of this land. He envisions a transnational world where an individual acquires a kaleidoscopic identity, a cultural existence where one's identity receives variegated reflections when surrounded by multicultural individuals without being tied up in the constraints of national territories. Thus, his works will forever remain in Malayalam literature's history as an artefact that opened new trajectories to a new borderless world.

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