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Migration, Cultural Remittance, and the Social Landscape of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The social landscape of Kerala—the southwest Indian state—has undergone significant changes in the last century. Migration has been a major factor impelling transformation in different sectors of Kerala society, thereby contributing to the overall development of the state. Among the major destinations of migration from Kerala, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries continued to be a unique space for more than one reason. Apart from historical and cultural links, the GCC countries have geopolitical as well as economic importance to India, and Kerala in particular. This has naturally attracted several migration-related scholarly investigations. There are several studies and reports pertaining to the impact of the Gulf migration on Kerala's economy and society. Yet, the cultural impact of the remittance boom on Kerala—which started in the 1970s—has not been subjected to rigorous studies and analysis. Hence, this paper tries to deploy cultural remittance as a category of analysis for understanding the changing social landscape of Kerala—with the emergence of new cultural spaces held out by the Gulf-related songs, home cinema, films, religion, cuisine, dress styles, media, and the diaspora literature. The study mainly delves into the text and context of such cultural artefacts with a view to exploring the contours of 'living Together' in the 'Gulf life-world' in Kerala.

KEYWORDS

Living Together; Malayali migration; cultural remittance; Gulf Boom; Kerala diaspora

1. Cultural Remittance

Cultural remittance has not been a recurring theme of investigation in migration studies in India. Remittances usually refer to a certain form of financial transaction—money transferred from migrants to their home country through banks and other financial agencies. However, the concept of social remittance has already emerged in several studies—to denote transactions beyond money in terms of the transmission of ideas, identities, skills, and social capital that occur between sending and receiving communities. Peggy Levitt used the term social remittance to refer to the ways in which individuals and communities in migratory spaces send and bring back social values and

experiences, besides looking at the implications of such flows for the home countries.¹ Her basic interest was in understanding how the social and cultural resources that migrants carry with them 'are transformed in the host country and transmitted back to sending communities such that new cultural products emerge and challenge the lives of those who stay behind.' Levitt thus uses ethnography and life-world experiences to understand the social remittance scenario in the Dominican Republic.² Juan Flores extended this idea to a more nuanced social realm—culture.

According to Flores, in most social science accounts of more-than-economic return flows, as exemplified by the work of Peggy Levitt and others, culture is reduced to behaviour, and thus not examined in relation to the national ideologies and cultures of either 'host' or 'sending' countries. Furthermore, no attention is paid to forms of cultural expression altered by the to-and-fro movements of contemporary migratory patterns. It is, after all, in language, music, literature, painting and other artistic and expressive genres that the values and life-styles remitted from diaspora to homeland become manifest in the most tangible and salient ways.³

Extending his studies to Latin America and the Caribbean, Flores says, 'Cultural remittances having to do with gender roles and sexual orientation have caused nothing short of a shock-wave in home societies ...' He further noted:

Cultural remittances—eminently transnational as a consequence of circular migration and the ubiquity of contemporary communications technology—implode in the national territory as something foreign, and yet in their local relevance not so foreign after all. When the focus is on popular culture (in the sense of community experience and working-class expression) and on youth culture, this multidirectional cultural movement and impact comes most clearly into view, as does the mutual articulation between cultural remittances from the outside and some of the oppositional cultural experiences occurring within the national territory.⁴

Following studies by Juan Flores et al. this paper places cultural remittance within the social landscape of Kerala—mainly associated with the transmission and exchange of values, ideas, cultural and religious practices, and lifestyles from the Gulf diaspora to the homeland. In most migration studies on Kerala, culture is explained more in terms of human behaviour than in relation to the transmission and exchange of values, ideas, and cultures of either host or sending country. Similarly, not much consideration is given to the myriad forms of cultural expression brought about by the to-and-fro movements of the Gulf migratory trajectory.

The study argues that the cultural remittance from host environs (in the Gulf) has reinforced new norms, values, and ideas of social capital that eventually helped sustain a cultural public sphere in the sending society (Kerala) that characterises trust, communication, and cultural exchanges in a wider social participation mode. The main sources of the enquiry are cultural artefacts—songs, films, food habits, dress styles, literature, and the media, besides interviews with different stakeholders.

¹P. Levitt, 'Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion', *The International Migration Review* 32(4), (1998), pp. 926–948; P. Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²*Ibid.*

³J. Flores, 'The diaspora strikes back: Reflections on cultural remittances', *NACLA*, (25 September 2007).

⁴*Ibid.*

2. Kerala and the Gulf Migration

Kerala is known for its vibrant global diaspora (known as Non-Resident Keralites-NoRKs) with people having flocked to different locations across the world in search of jobs, business, and livelihood. Estimated variously—from 3.5 million to 4 million—NoRKs are mostly found in the GCC countries, North America, Europe, Africa, Australia, Southeast Asia, etc. According to various surveys, nearly 90 per cent of NoRKs live in the West Asian region, and as many as 39 per cent of them are in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and 23 per cent in Saudi Arabia. Reports say that as many as 6 million households in Kerala depend on foreign remittances—mostly from the GCC countries.⁵

The multilevel engagements between the NoRKs in the GCC and the Kerala social landscape have brought forth several social and cultural pay-offs. And the remittance boom itself generated several cultural projects and practices, such as the production of films, the construction and renovation of religious places (mosques and churches), the proliferation of blogs and vlogs, diaspora novels, stories, and travel narratives. Inevitably, the cultural remittance that has bloomed over four decades since the 1970s has contributed to the development of a larger public sphere in Kerala, with the attendant results available for sharing and strengthening social capital in the society. The expansion of education at all levels is yet another significant pay-off of the Gulf migration.

Apart from questions of identity, authenticity, and collectivity, there are remittances having to do with issues of social mobility, gender and sexuality with a richer cultural and thoughtful content. There are songs, narratives and characters in films, novels and stories—that emerged with the different waves of migration to the Gulf—which portray the limits and possibility of mobility, exchange relations, and material comforts. Cultural remittances having to do with gender roles and sexual orientation have also elicited differential responses in the home society, as has been portrayed in a range of Malayalam songs, narratives, films, and writings. The workings of cultural remittances thus inform a significant milestone in the history of Kerala's cultural public sphere.

3. Living Together in Kathu Pattukal

One of the earliest forms of the cultural expression of the migrant life-world came from S.A. Jameel's *Kathu Pattukal* (letter songs), popularised in the late 1970s, with the first wave of migration to the Gulf countries. Identified as a new Islamic literary genre, *Kathu Pattukal* exemplified the emotional appeals of migrant families with the wife and husband (of such families) exchanging their feelings of love, affection, dreams, and aloofness amid two subtle forms of struggle in the 'host' and 'home' countries. More than a track-setting scenario of nostalgia and emotions, these songs captured the imagination of both migrant and non-migrant communities in Kerala and the Gulf with audio cassettes being sold by tens of thousands and heard by millions. That was the period when Kerala witnessed the flood of electronic goods and gadgets from the Gulf—such as tape recorders and audio cassettes—and *Kathu Pattukal* played a

⁵S.I. Rajan and K.C. Zachariah, 'New evidences from the Kerala migration survey, 2018', *Economic and Political Weekly* 55(4), (2020), pp. 41–49.

significant role in ushering in new modernity of cultural rejuvenation. By the 1980s, this genre found itself transformed—from audio to video mode of circulation. Curiously, even after four decades, these songs have got renewed appeals with the advent of internet platforms and social media interfaces. The rationale of the continued appeal lies in their ‘texts’ of representation and ‘contexts’ of presentation within a ‘host-home’ matrix.

Kathu Pattukal belonged to a certain genre of folksongs and they set a new track of communication among the Malayali migrant communities, particularly between migrating men and their left-behind homes. They were written and composed in a Mappila song tradition (earlier in Arabi Malayalam script, known as Ponnani script, where Malayalam was written with Arabic letters) and sung customarily by the Muslims of the Malabar coast for various occasions. S. A. Jameel’s Dubai *Kathu Pattu*⁶ was also written in Mappila song style. The attraction of these songs came with the Malayali diaspora in the Gulf and their families back home started popularising them. One major reason for its popularity was that they were able to arrogate the deep social cost of migration that all stakeholders had to recompense. As Dhar pointed out, ‘these songs do not limit themselves to the expression of pain and grief, but rather raise important questions around morality, religion, domestic violence, and the challenges of single parenting.’⁷ They really captured ‘the conjugal insecurity of women as the fear of losing their husbands to other women, literally and metaphorically, is very prominent in most of the verses.’ The fear was somewhat vindicated insofar as it could be placed within a patriarchal family system where ‘women’s mobility was restricted, and their participation in decision making was nominal in the patrilocal households.’⁸

The question of ‘living together’ emerged in many of these *Kathu Pattukal* which encompassed two types of songs—the musical elucidation of a letter written by the wife to her ‘Gulf husband,’ and the reply which was the husband’s letter to his wife, known as *Marupadi Kathu Pattu*. The ‘Gulf wives’ of those migrants—estimated then to be nearly one million women, left behind in Kerala—were grappling with loneliness and it was reported that as many as 80 per cent of them never visited their husbands abroad.⁹ Dhar also raised a religious dimension to these songs. He says that S. A. Jameel was a follower of Salafism (puritanical Islam) and therefore he had understood the importance of ‘saving parting families from un-Islamic practices.’ Dhar says that Jameel’s songs ‘emphasized the holiness of the exclusive loving relationship between man and woman, attaching to it a moral and religious connotation.’¹⁰

Jameel was a practicing counsellor in Nilambur and he wrote the first *Kathu Pattu* in 1977 after listening to the ‘Gulf wives’ as they shared their agonies with him. Since then, there were about 200 *Kathu Pattukal* recorded and distributed. Most of them were alike as they picked up more or less the same theme. Yet, Jameel’s Dubai *Kathu Pattu* remained very popular insofar as it was circulated by ‘Gulf wives’ and

⁶S.A. Jameel, *Therenjedutha Krithikal (Selected Works)* (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2010).

⁷D. Dhar, ‘The estranged song: How Kathu Pattu and Bidesiya Birha folk songs narrate the social cost of migration in India’, *Routed magazine*, (31 October 2021).

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹S. Castelier, ‘Kathu Pattu: The love letter songs of Kerala’, *The National*, (25 March 2019).

¹⁰D. Dhar, ‘The estranged song: How Kathu Pattu and Bidesiya Birha folk songs narrate the social cost of migration in India’.

'Gulf husbands' through audio cassettes, marketed by HMV company. Later, the same song was sung on radio and television channels as well as in concert halls in Kerala and across the GCC countries. That was the time when every *Gulf veedu* (migrant house in Kerala) had a Japanese-made Sony or National Panasonic radio-cum-tape recorder.¹¹ As Sebastian Castelier noted, *Kathu Pattukal* presented 'a subtle and less personal way for husbands and wives to share their feelings for each other amid Kerala's conservative society.' He said many 'Gulf husbands' learned about 'their wives' emotions through *Kathu Pattukal*.¹² According to K.E.N. Kunhahamed, a noted Malayali writer and cultural critic, 'what is pulsating in Jameel's *Kathu Pattukal* is the very blood of Kerala's Gulf history.' Jameel wrote these songs 'in the tears of migrants whose stories, dreams, adventures, hardships, and agonies got melted in the sand deserts of the Gulf,' KEN said. He further characterised these *Kathu Pattukal* as belonging to a genre of lyrics in the tradition of one-message poems as that of Kalidasa's *Meghasandesam* and others. Many of these songs were in circulation across a wider audience carrying different dimensions of trauma and despair, love and longing for a living together. KEN also noted that Jameel's poems are a repertoire of dreams and imaginations that the Gulf Malayalees sought to sustain.¹³ According to N.P. Mohammed, a well known Malayali writer, Jameel's songs echo not the agonies of just one person, but the moods and emotions of those who eke out their livelihood in the Gulf deserts. He said that these songs 'reverberate the sentiments of the Gulf diaspora longing for a living together.'¹⁴

4. 'Gulf Films' in The World of Living Together

One of the significant impacts of the Gulf migration on the Malayalam film world is the proliferation of Gulf-based themes in several movies. The Gulf remittance also became a major source of funding for the film industry. V. Muzafer Ahamed, a senior journalist who worked in Saudi Arabia for a decade and a half and a well-known writer of several travelogues and stories on the Gulf, told this researcher that the Gulf money played a significant role in the proliferation of Malayalam films since the 1980s. Many of these films also carried themes of the Gulf families, particularly their lives and livelihood, and expectations and realities. Muzafer also said that these Gulf investors were instrumental in the making of many successful as well as unsuccessful films. The film industry and its associated cultural realms in Kerala generally benefitted from this Gulf money.¹⁵ According to Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, the Gulf money bred 'a 'newly rich' consumerist sector, 'fostering a lumpenised urban mass culture.'¹⁶

¹¹P.K. Arafat, 'Casseted emotions: Intimate songs and marital conflicts in the age of Pravasi (1970–1990)', quoted in R. Banerjee, ed., *Cultural Histories of India: Subaltern Spaces, Peripheral Genres, and Alternate Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2020); S. Castelier, 'Kathu Pattu: The love letter songs of Kerala', *The National*, (25 March 2019).

¹²S. Castelier, 'Kathu Pattu: The love letter songs of Kerala'.

¹³K.E.N., 'A message that is distinct', quoted in S.A. Jameel, *Therenjedutha Krithikal (Selected Works)* (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2010).

¹⁴N.P. Mohammed, 'Kurusu Perunna Yuvakkal', quoted in S.A. Jameel, *Therenjedutha Krithikal (Selected Works)* (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2010).

¹⁵Interview with V. Muzafer Ahamed, (22 May 2022).

¹⁶A. Rajadhyaksha, and P. Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (New York: British Film Institute and Oxford University Press, 1994).

One of the earliest films shot in the Gulf was *Vilkanundu Swapnangal* (Dreams for Sale), directed by Azad, and written by M.T. Vasudevan Nair. The film shot into a lime-light with a poster, 'a golden opportunity to see the Gulf.' The film depicted the story of Rajagopal who went to Dubai to support his family. He reaches the coastline of the city as an illegal migrant without any documents, but sustained unusual energy with dreams of a wealthy 'Persia.' Rajagopal soon found that the Gulf was meant only for hardworking people. Though managed to get a job, he went through different experiences and challenges. The film narrates the feelings and agonies of the people who had gone to the Gulf countries with high expectations, and how their friends and relatives responded to the burden of 'prosperity' and 'crisis' such people should carry in their life-world.

Nilavu (Moonlight), produced by a group of non-Resident Indians in Bahrain unravels the story of Hari, a young migrant worker in the Gulf. An orthodox Brahmin that he was, the film portrayed how he reached the concrete jungles of Bahrain, and was lost in the world of perfunctory characters, living in synthetic dreams. Bewildered about his identity in a strange world, he searched for someone to break his loneliness. His search ended up in an encounter with Lakshmi, another lonely soul in love with nature. Wife of a rich businessman, and despite all the luxuries that money could buy for her, she felt incarcerated in the fortress of a dysfunctional relationship. Their solitude and search for emotional anchorage brought them together. The narrative of these two endearing souls constitutes the kernel of the film. It weaves the mosaic of how their relationship then evolves, exploring the different shades of love, perceptions, and expectations.

Gaddama (Housemaid) tells the challenging life-world experiences of Aswathy who reached Arabia with a lot of dreams. Following the premature death of her husband Radhakrishnan, she had to find a way to support her family. Driver Usman promises her a job at the same household where he works. At the airport, Aswathy is warned by another 'Gaddama' while waiting for the sponsor. For Aswathy, life changed for the worse since her arrival in the Gulf. Harassment and tortures wilt her physically and mentally. One day Aswathy vanished from the house and started wandering about in the desert, without even a drop of water to drink. The narrative is of great contemporary relevance as a lot of women from Kerala work as Gaddamas in the Arabian Gulf, suffering harassment and insults at the hands of their employers. Similarly, *Pathemari* (Dhow) is another narrative of the life of a Malayali who has been toiling in the desert city of Dubai for decades fending for his near and dear ones. Despite the exploration of the theme at hand not going to the depths, *Pathemari* became popular for its effort at making a depressing tale of the lives of the expatriate community in the Gulf.

In an interesting study, Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil noted—quoting Radhakrishnan¹⁷—that 'the Gulf made itself manifest in these films through semiotic associations through semiotic associations such as gold bars, transistors, and wrist watches' He said that the 'bigger budgets of Malayalam cinema of this period also gave rise to a new breed of cinema which could now shoot in foreign locations.' Shafeeq further said that it 'was only towards the closing years of the 1990s the Gulf

¹⁷R. Radhakrishnan, 'The Gulf in the imagination: Migration, Malayalam cinema, and regional identity', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23(2), (2009), pp. 217–245.

became accessible again as a diegetic space for Malayalam cinema. Most of them treated the Gulf as a space of thrills and adventure, in consonance with the spirit of Gulf migrant photographs of an earlier time, with some stereotyping of the Arabs and Sharia law occasionally thrown in.¹⁸ He gave the examples of *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu* (1998), *Sharja to Sharja* (2001), *Dubai* (2001), *Oru Marubhoomikkadha* (2011), *Diamond Necklace* (2012), and *Casanovva* (2012). Shafeeq also pointed out that these ‘films did refer to the exploitative labour conditions in the Gulf, but only in passing. The Gulf in these movies was mostly just another city, albeit one with a lot more racial diversity.’ Shafeeq concludes his paper:

‘Dubai’ becomes the referential space by virtue of which the migrant can lay a claim in the affective economy back home in Kerala. The cathecting of cinematic memory as collective memory to ‘Dubai’ thus also becomes the migrant’s act of affective citizenship, i.e. an act of claiming from below the right to have rights, which is in itself a public coding of a more personal demand to find recognition in the thoughts of the folks back home. It is a call to recognise the migrant not just a provider but also one who is in need—of being remembered in their rightful place, above all.¹⁹

Apart from these trends, the Malayalam films began to portray the diasporic life-world stories in myriad ways. Thus, ‘Gulf films’ have become a popular medium of insight-articulation. There have been several films taken on the themes of the Gulf diaspora. This has been paralleled by the huge capital investment in the Malayalam film industry by the NoRKs. Many of these films have been taken in different ‘host-home’ locales with the representations of the Gulf—including deserts, cities, Arabian shops, and malls—getting ensconced in the popular imagination of the people in Kerala.

5. Home Cinema

Parallel to the mainstream Malayalam film industry, there was another experiment called ‘Home cinema’ which became popular in the Malabar region towards the end of the second wave of Gulf migration. It all started with Salam Kodyathur’s self-supported movie, *Ningalenne Branthanaakki* (You made me a Lunatic) in 2000. This was followed by several such movies, produced locally with amateurish technology and distributed as CD/DVD through video shops, bookstores, etc. It was a time when cinema itself was seen as *Haram* (forbidden) among the conservative Muslims of Malabar. But ‘Home cinema’ began to gain legitimacy with the induction of ‘Islamic content’ and the experiences of the Gulf diaspora. Soon, such movies went beyond the locales of Malabar and got distributed in social gatherings, such as in labour camps, in the Gulf. The representation of gender norms and family relationships in such movies tended to change the mindset of people, especially of Muslim women, and their imagination of public life. The Malappuram district in Kerala (which produced the largest segment of the Gulf diaspora) witnessed a paradigm shift in the making of the social public—thanks to the pay-offs of the cultural remittance.

¹⁸M. Karinkurayil, ‘“Dubai” as a place of memory in Malayalam cinema’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, (2022). DOI: 10.1007/s10767-022-09422-1

¹⁹Ibid.

According to Bindu Menon and T.T. Sreekumar, these films 'concerned with social reform among the Muslim Community of Kerala, also refract the experience of migration to the GCC, particularly in narrating an emotional landscape characterised by precarious conditions of labour, racialised hierarchy and the kafala (the specific employment system in many GCCs, that is a combination of a contract and patronage) through specific tropes of precarity and philosophy of risk in these films.'²⁰ They noted: 'Self-described as Islamic home films, the home film industry emerged in the course of the late 1990s and flourished in the 2000s with about 200 productions in the last decade and it is both facilitated by and exists as an expression of Islamic political mobilisation. Eagerly echoing the views and concerns of Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the most powerful Islamist groups in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh, the home film movement has contributed significantly to the popularity of Muslim-oriented social themes, enabling the emergence of an alternative public culture in the Malabar region of Kerala.'²¹

Home films sought to offer 'an alternative set of correctives motivating Muslim households to discard customs and practices that are construed as 'un-Islamic.'²² 'The films infused with wit, irony, satire, and moral judgments mimicking mainstream Indian films in structure and form, have become increasingly acceptable among both Jamaat-e-Islami supporters and a wider Muslim audience.' Menon and Sreekumar write that 'Home films have gone to create a vast geography of circulation that extends from Muslim households in the four districts of Northern Kerala to public exhibitions in football grounds on giant screens to households and labour camps in the ... GCC. The popularity of these films could also owe to the central theme of the reconstitution of a moral and ethical Muslim household against the impeding forces of globalisation.' The home films emerged 'into a wide network of circulation in about four districts in Kerala, and six countries in the Middle East, with an average viewership of 500,000 people.'²³ According to them, 'Of the 200 odd films in the genre, most of the home films engage with the pressures that migration to the Modern Gulf states brings about. The car panoramas of Modern Gulf cities like Kuwait, Doha, Abu Dhabi and Dubai to the jagged alleys, gravelled roads and green fields of Southern Malabar. The emotional geography of this encompasses the fraught lives of the wives and women who are left behind to the loneliness and alienation of labour, hardships and insecurities of immigrant life. In ways that are not overtly critical, many of these films do touch upon the appalling labour conditions' in most of GCC countries. These films address the migrant life as not just dominated by the paradigm of utilitarian economism and rational choice but as complex social beings and portray the affective terrain of the migrant life.'²⁴ Shot in the cities like Doha, Muscat, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi, 'we can see that in the films that form part of the Home video movement, the extension of psycho-social impact of the migration to an alien Muslim locale and the cultural abjection of a community gets a rare archival treatment.'²⁵

²⁰B. Menon and T.T. Sreekumar, "'One more Dirham" migration, emotional politics, and religion in the home films of Kerala', *Migration, Mobility and Displacement* 2(2), (2016), 4–23.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

Living together experiences of migration are portrayed in all such films. *Pathiyatrakkoru Ticket* (Half Way Ticket), *Oru Dirham Koodi* (One More Dirham), *Parethan Thirichu Varunnu* (The Deceased Returns), *Kudumba Kalaham Nooram Divasam* (Family Feud 100th day) and *Aliyanoru Free Visa* (A Free Visa for the Brother-in-Law) were shot in Gulf cities. They unravel the life-work dynamics of the migrant identity in all narratives. According to Menon and Sreekumar, the home cinemas were 'shot in an all-male world of working class or middle class men who work in these cities and are segregated from other South Asian immigrants and live together in all Malayalee enclaves. They rent apartments together with six or more men sharing an apartment, often hosting immigrants/friends who arrive from other parts of Kerala. The emotional world that is unravelled is one of loneliness, longing, despair and alienation.'²⁶

The background setting of many of these films has something to do with reproducing the real life-world in the Gulf to permeate the homeworld back in Kerala with images of migrant life situations. For instance, *Aliyanoru Free Visa* was set in Kuwait, and it unfolds with a song in the background of the urban landscape of Kuwait, mansions and luxurious buildings, big highways, fast-moving scenarios of vehicles, and grand malls. It also depicts other sites of migrant labour life as well as paradoxical scenarios of the real life-world—wealth and poverty, pleasure and predicament, etc. The cities remain at the core of these representations 'as an affective trope of the migrant life.'²⁷ In a paper on the home cinema, Shafeeq also shows how Baputty, the protagonist in this movie deploys cassette letter. He says: 'The cassette letter continues to be narrated in the background, thus uniting in its subjective retelling of migrant woes both the racial-national and the class other. In a rare instance of a subjective appropriation of the universal, a community is imagined, with its differences intact, in spatial disjuncture, inaugurated by the truth of migrant experience rather than the tongue in which it is expressed.'²⁸

According to Menon and Sreekumar, in 'some of the cases where films bring in the question of family life and relations, it brings sexuality into relationships with political economies of migration and those relationships often tendered in terms of a newly sexualised subject's access to the pleasures of consumption or in terms of financial pressures brought to bear on these subjects.' They further noted that migration itself 'appears as emotional risk taking for both migrants and the spouses left behind, in these films wives of the migrant men.'²⁹

In such home films, migration continued to be a significant contour of the new identity of the Gulf houses in northern Kerala. They were also set around 'insider/outsider binary as an essential one.'³⁰ In the film *Parethan Thirichu Varunnu*, the protagonist, a long-time migrant now ailing, decided to get back home, hoping that his surgery could be done with the support of his family. Disheartened by the uncaring and demeaning comments of his parents and relatives, he made up his mind to go back to Kuwait.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸M. Karinkurayil, 'The Islamic subject of home cinema of Kerala', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10(1), (2019), pp. 30–51.

²⁹Menon and Sreekumar, "'One more Dirham" migration, emotional politics, and religion in the home films of Kerala'.

³⁰Ibid.

'This is better than Naadu (native place), where I have the support of kind and discerning friends,' says the protagonist. In such depictions, the Gulf remains a better place for 'living together.' Yet, a major component of the diasporic life-world is 'the family bond, where a young man migrates to the Gulf and creates opportunity for others to migrate.' Studying films like *Oru Dhirham Koodi*, Menon and Sreekumar noted that 'The sequence in its panoramic shots of desert landscapes, melancholic audio track in its musical notes and lyrics together create an affect of risk philosophy. This allusion towards risk can be seen repeated in dialogues and lyrics in most of the films in the genre/movement. The nature of social relationships and familial relationships are also shown as stressed and in a dialogic relationship with the conditions of migration as well as contributing to migration.'³¹ According to them, 'Home films have often functioned as maps for the cultural and social geopolitical imaginaries and realities of everyday life of the diasporic Malayalee Muslim in Middle Eastern cities.' They further noted that the 'concerns around the missing male figure in the public imagination give rise to the construction of the 'Gulf Wife' as a transgressive figure who is often in 'need' of sex and emotional companionship in the absence of her husband. The construction of the 'Gulf Wife' as a 'transgressive' woman has formed part of a diverse range of representations in literature, film, and television in Kerala for more than three decades.'³² In an interview with this researcher, Khadija Mumtaz, a noted woman writer, said that women in such Gulf families faced multiple challenges, and sexual poverty was an issue that naturally emerged in such home cinemas and *Kathu Pattukal*.³³ Thus, cultural representation of such challenges to living together—in the wake of Gulf migration—was a signal of Kerala's changing social landscape.

6. Kerala's Diaspora Literature

Culture is seen today as essentially 'social-textual' and all cultural artefacts—including literature—are equally the products of social discursive practices and experiences. If literary works are agents of discourses and knowledge production, they have a critical space in every society. The writings from migratory spaces (diaspora), by and large, problematise the received notions of identity and subjectivity which are often embedded in fixed, binary definitions/representations such as native/foreigner, master/slave, inside/outside, citizen/stranger etc. The proliferation of novels, stories, poems, memoirs etc emerging from the Malayali diaspora in the Gulf, over the last decade and a half, is an indication that a genre of *pravasa sahithyam* (diaspora literature) has come to stay in Kerala too with significant socio-cultural effects. Obviously, this is the end-result of the process of 'Second Wave' migration to the Gulf countries since the 1990s.³⁴

Migrants in these countries used to complain about their passports being confiscated and were forced to work under highly exploitative system of sponsorship-based employment. Yet, employers are rarely prosecuted for violations of labour law. As a

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Interview with Khadija Mumtaz, (21 May 2022).

³⁴K.M. Seethi, 'Beyond 'fiction' and beneath 'facts' of diasporic life-world: The Gulf migration and the cultural artefacts', *Journal of Polity and Society* 14(1), (2022), 10; K.M. Seethi, "'Meaning' and 'panic' in Malayali diaspora literature", *Kerala Calling*, (January 2018).

result, migrant workers experienced hazardous working conditions, besides cramped and unsanitary housing. The situation is particularly dire for the millions of migrant domestic workers, almost exclusively women, isolated in private homes.³⁵

As such the life-world experiences of sufferings, alienation and marginalisation which the Malayali diaspora have been facing for a long time in the Gulf found expressions through novels and stories that emerged in the literary realm of Kerala in the recent past. These texts of/on Malayali diaspora have become immense sources of insight and knowledge. The trend setter was Benjamin's *Aatujeevitham* (Goat Days),³⁶ came out in 2008. There were a few diaspora novels and stories before, but *Aatujeevitham* created a sensation in the Malayalam literature with more than 100 editions, besides translations in several Indian and foreign languages. Benjamin's novel eloquently depicts the experience of a self (Najeeb) that is treated as not quite human. Najeeb's 'forceful narrative' not only surprised Benjamin, the novelist (who himself was an expatriate in Bahrain since 1992) but the readers who were waiting for such a narrative from the Malayali diaspora. *Aatujeevitham* is essentially a social text of slave narrative with a substantial explosive material of the life-world situation which the migrants in the Gulf have been facing for long. The novel generated considerable interest due to the style of narrative and the strategies deployed to convey the message of the story. The character Najeeb would tell us at the beginning itself that a 'way to come out is to listen to the stories of those who endure situations worse than ours.'³⁷

Similarly, Keralite journalist-turned-writer Joy C. Raphael's *Slaves of Saudis: Terrorisation of foreign workers*, his *Mutawas: Saudi Arabia's Dreaded Religious*, and *Sour & Sweet: Expat Stories from Arabia* offer dramatised narrative of the traumatic, real-life experiences of the migrants in the Gulf. Raphael tells us that a good number of workers in the region suffer very harsh treatment at the hands of their employers, and 'some Indian bosses are no different,' as they also deny them basic rights, forcing them to live in filthy conditions. The narrative of realtime incidents in his works presents an unsettling scenario of the terrors of being a worker in the Gulf. The story of Suryan in his *Sour & Sweet* is typical of the agonies of the conditions of workers. With each episode offering an unbelievably darker side of the treatment meted out to the Indian labourers, the narratives are unnerving. The life-world experiences of Abbas, John Mathai, Hamsa et al. are examples of this excruciating agony setting in the Gulf. There are several such characters in Ravuthar's *Arabyayile Atima*, Jabbar's *Saya*, Vijayan's *Salala Salala*, Krishnadas's *Dubaipuzha*, Khadija Mumtaz's *Barsa*, Baji's *Maruppottal* etc. Many of these novels and stories look at the issues of the diaspora from different angles such as class, gender, occupation, region and country.

Deepak Unnikrishnan's English novel, *Temporary People* (2017) also stands apart in the Malayali diaspora literature, as he himself engaged in aesthetic experimentation with magical realism and transcribed interviews. As a critical-passionate insider of the Malayali diaspora in the Gulf, Deepak unravels the depredations, sorrows, and longings of the foreign workers (who are often depicted as 'disposable') in a multimedia mode.

³⁵K.M. Seethi, 'Beyond "fiction" and beneath "facts" of diasporic life-world: The Gulf migration and the cultural artefacts'.

³⁶Benjamin, *Goats Days* (Thrissur: Green Books, 2011).

³⁷Ibid.

The 'surreal and hallucinating' style of *Temporary People* depicts how migration and diasporic spaces offer a new window for reimagining 'citizenship.'

Keralites' journey to the Gulf, in search of jobs, is one of the exemplary Indian arcs of migration of the contemporary times. But a sense of its atypical risks and dislocations—of the tensions between a 'self' willing to remake itself in a new world not particularly interested in that 'self' except as a body that works appeared in Malayali diaspora writings in as compelling a form as in Benyamin's novels from *Goat Days* to *Al Arabian Novel Factory*, from Ravuthar's *Arabyayile Atima*, Jabbar's *Saya*, Vijayan's *Salala Salala*, Krishnadas's *Dubaipuzha*, Baji's *Maruppottal* to Raphael's writings. Their perceptive threading of external description and interior monologue powerfully brings home the life-world of a migrant's 'living together' experiences. Their works are cultural artefacts to be read and understood by applying methods of 'thick descriptions' as suggested throughout these works. Malayali diaspora writers have, in effect, 'textualized' the life-worlds and 'historicized' the texts' which produce both 'meaning' and 'panic' and are crucial qualifications for social writing through fiction. Benyamin and others have thus 'reproduced' a model of historical culture, in which social and cultural issues are raised in their historical context, thereby providing insights for a better and acceptable change in the condition of the migrant life-world.³⁸

Sabin Iqbal's *Shamal Days* also unfolds the manifold challenges of migrant life in the Gulf. The novel depicts Abbas's life as a journalist in the Gulf and the vicissitudes of his unhappiness. The arid shamal days embody the nuances of a human life where things are at no time stress-free and where people long for companionship to escape from lingering solitude. Muzafer Ahamed's desert travelogue, serialised in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* a decade and a half ago, had already captured the Malayali readers. His *Camels in the Sky* published by Oxford University Press is a compelling repertoire of 23 literary exposés written over a period of six years (2006–2012). They were originally part of two Malayalam books *Marubhoomiyude Athmakadha* (Autobiography of the Desert), and *Marumarangal* (Desert Trees). Muzafer undertook desert travel several times during the long years he lived in Saudi Arabia and captured the life-world of Bedouins who settled themselves in the desert. He learned that 'the desert is a complete biosphere in which life's minute sparks, nature's dark secrets, and artless openness cohabit.' And each journey filled his life 'that had been resigned to emptiness with various kinds of experiences. Landscapes and mindscapes streamed one after another.' *Camels in the Sky* is lyrical, rich in insights, and encapsulates all that enthrals in a desert foray.

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil writes: 'We often forget that cities are not built by stone and bricks and mortar alone. Cities are also built on dreams, passed on from one generation to another. For the migrant worker, the shore on the other end existed in his imagination long before he set foot there. It exists in folklore and anecdotes, in the tall tales told before the auctions for renovations of mosques, in fairy tales of Arab gold, and in the bulky photo albums that arrived from the Gulf.' Shafeeq goes on: 'To vernacularise the affect that is the Gulf, one has to understand the Gulf not just as an escape route for livelihood but also as a bhramam, that is, an obsession

³⁸K.M. Seethi, 'Beyond "fiction" and beneath "facts" of diasporic life-world: The Gulf migration and the cultural artefacts', *Journal of Polity and Society* 14(1), (2022).

which leads to losing one's self-consciousness and self-control.' According to him, 'In the self-narrations of Kerala's migrant labourers to the Gulf, it is another bhrmam, the indulgence in the baubles that the Gulf can bring, that subjects the migrant to a life of perpetual awayness.'³⁹ Migration and its associated risks have often found their representation in several other memoirs. Babu Bharadwaj's *Pravasiyude Kurippukal* (2000), *Pravasiyude Vazhiyambalangal* (2011), and *Pravasathinte Murivukal* (2012) and Krishnadas's *Dubai Puzha* (2005) are only a few examples of such memoirs. Initially, such works were brought out by relatively unknown publishing houses. V. Muzafer Ahamed told this researcher⁴⁰ that the Gulf money itself played a major role in bringing out several such works. Even Benyamin's *Aatujeevitham* was first published by Green Books, a venture initiated by a migrant, Krishnadas. With its fame, the novel got translations in several languages and it has crossed the 100th edition in Malayalam. Muzafer said that the Gulf money was instrumental in such cultural projects and many organisations working in the GCC countries started legitimising their status with literary awards being given to leading Malayalam writers. The institutionalisation of *Pravasi* (diaspora) awards was a milestone in Kerala's literary culture. Muzafer also noted that even celebrated writers (like Vaikom Muhammad Basheer) received several *Pravasi* awards, which eventually established wider connectivity between the writers and the diaspora in the Gulf.⁴¹

7. Religion and the Gulf Migration

The Gulf migration has inevitably helped reinforce religious practices as well as their associated institutional and organisational activities in Kerala. While this has been quite conspicuous among the Muslims and Christians of Kerala—the two dominant minority communities in the state—the Hindu majority community also benefitted from the Gulf money in terms of building and renovating temples and other religious concerns in the state, as well as in the Gulf. However, as Osella & Osella observed, migration has facilitated the Muslims of Kerala to get connected with a wider Islamic world and its associated practices.⁴² M.H. Ilias pointed out that this was quite perceptible in the growing *Gulf Salafism* in Kerala although the 'transformation of the Salafi movement caused by the Gulf connection had invoked not just the concern of reformists within the movement, but also of liberals and secularists outside.' He said that 'Muslims of Kerala in the Gulf previously had no considerable role to play in religious affairs and only a few voices were heard publicly.' But, he says, 'the newly-attained Salafi-Islamic identity helped compensate for this alienation.' In some places, where the reform movement could not make inroads before, 'the Gulf Salafis built a strong, penetrative social network. This trend also culminated in the creation of a huge army of Saudi sponsored scholars assigned officially by the Saudi state to popularise the Saudi brand of Salafism among Malayalees in the Gulf and Kerala.' Ilias further noted that the 'physical sign of Saudization was explicit in the construction of large Salafi

³⁹M.S. Karinkurayil, 'Losing oneself in Kerala's Gulf migrant literature', *Jadaliyya*, (24 March 2021).

⁴⁰Interview with V. Muzafer Ahamed, (22 May 2022).

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²F. Osella and C. Osella, 'Islamic reform in Kerala, South India', *Modern Asian Studies* 42(2/3), (2008), pp. 317–346.

mosques in remote corners, the rapid development of a market for Salafi tafsirs (interpretations of the Quran) published in Saudi Arabia, and the easy availability of popular materials like audio and video cassettes on Salafism.⁴³

In an interview with this researcher, M.N. Karassery, a noted writer and social critic, said that while there are many positive impacts of the Gulf migration, which could be seen in the wider realm of culture, education, media, etc., ‘there are also unhealthy trends prevailing among the Muslim religious groups in Kerala.’ There has been a proliferation of such religious groups and their activities, such as that of the two Sunni factions (popularly known as EK and AP Sunnis), Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen (KNM), Jamaat-e-Islami, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at, etc. While sections of Ulama among them still hold on to conservative practices and fundamentalist positions, new militant outfits such as Popular Front (PF), People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and other fringe groups foster violence and inter-communal discord. Karassery says that many such groups continued to receive funds from the Gulf countries. He also pointed out that in the period since the Gulf migration, rational thoughts did not find wider acceptance among the Muslims, alongside modernisation and progress in other sectors such as education and business. This seemed to be a paradoxical situation and a challenging one for the ‘living together culture,’ according to Karassery.⁴⁴

Mujeeb Rahman Kinalur, former president of ISM Kerala and the Editor of *Shabab weekly*, told this researcher that the Gulf migration has increasingly facilitated the social mobility of Muslims, particularly the Muslim women of Kerala. With the Gulf remittance boom, there was also a corresponding increase in the travel of Muslim families, for both religious and other purposes. Kinalur particularly noted the huge number of Muslim men and women going for Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages which were once considered as an opportunity only for the privileged sections. He said the Gulf migration had led to even lower middle class people finding it manageable to undertake Hajj or Umrah. Kinalur also noted that this pilgrimage boom also resulted in wider economic activities, both in Kerala and the Gulf.⁴⁵ According to Khadija Mumtaz, the emerging situation in the northern Malabar helped empower Muslim women, beyond the conventional religious restrictions and taboos. Living alone—with their husbands coming home only once in a year or two years—demanded a lot of involvement in women’s household activities, banking, education of children, shopping, etc. Consequently, there was a perceptible increase in Muslim women’s public participation and involvement in the decision making of local bodies, Ayalkoottam, Kudumbashree, etc in districts like Malappuram, which has the highest migrant households.⁴⁶ Khadija Mumtaz’s observations hold relevance today when Malappuram and other districts of Kerala witnessed a large number of Muslim girls going for higher education, including professional education, even in countries like China, Ukraine, Germany, etc.

Another major impact of the Gulf migration is the proliferation of mosques in Kerala. Mosque-building since the 1970s saw a sudden spurt in several places. It was

⁴³M.H. Ilias, ‘Gulf Salafism and the crisis of ‘Salafi-Islamic modernity’ in Kerala’, *Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations* 12(1), (2019), pp. 134–155.

⁴⁴Interview with M.N. Karassery, (21 May 2022).

⁴⁵Interview with Mujeeb Rahman Kinalur, (28 May 2022).

⁴⁶Interview with Khadija Mumtaz, (21 May 2022).

reported in the 1980s that more than a thousand mosques were built in less than a decade taking the total number of mosques in the state to as many as 6,367. Over the years, the number of mosques continued to proliferate with intense competition among the religious sects of Muslims in northern Kerala. According to Sreedhar Pillai, the 'new mosques stand out in Kerala's verdant countryside. Opulent and garish, they resemble the sprawling multi-coloured mansions of the nouveau riche Malayalees who found work in the Gulf.' Many old mosques with traditional architecture disappeared. Pillai reported that multi-storeyed mosques were 'not the only innovation.' Calicut, for instance, had the country's first air-conditioned mosque and a 'mosque in Chavakkad was built with a shopping complex alongside.'⁴⁷ Both M.N Karassery and Muzafer Ahmed said that the new trend was to build minarets, which the older mosques did not have. This amounted to the Arabisation of mosques in Kerala, Karassery noted. Muzafer said that it was a great mistake on our part to ignore the traditional architecture in the making of mosques.⁴⁸ An Imam of northern Kerala said that the migrants had imported a new Islamic lifestyle to the state after having seen splendid mosques in the GCC countries.⁴⁹

While these trends were quite visible among the Muslims, the experience of the Christian community must also be noted. Ginu Zacharia Oommen's study says that the 'arrival of new religious practises and remittances from the GCC countries are changing the Syrian Christian landscape in Kerala with long-history of Christian presence. Religious and spiritual reorientation among Syrian Christian communities in the host countries is abetting the assertion of communal identity, proliferation of radical religious groups, rise of godmen and cults, and the emergence of new forms of worship in the Kerala society. The Gulf migrants and their families are invariably using the trajectory of religion to achieve social mobility and prestige in the sending society.' He noted that the 'nearly ninety percent of all old churches have been either renovated, reconstructed or new churches have been built by demolishing the old ones. The Vicar General of Syrian Orthodox church highlighted that the uninterrupted flow of contributions has prompted the Church towards the mega construction spree.'⁵⁰

According to Oommen, 'pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine (holy land) is extremely popular and thousands of believers from Kerala are undertaking a pilgrimage to Israel every year to visit holy sites. Though pilgrimage to Holy Land never existed in Kerala due to the costs, the practice is now quite popular among the Gulf migrants. The pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine is another significant aspect which is widely prevalent among Syrian Christian immigrants. Each year almost all the churches in GCC states organise a Pilgrimage via Jordan to the Holy Land especially during the summer vacations. Perhaps due to the influence of Gulf immigrants the pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine has become very popular in Kerala too.'⁵¹

⁴⁷S. Pillai, *India Today*, (15 October 1987).

⁴⁸Interview with V. Muzafer Ahamed, (22 May 2022).

⁴⁹S. Castelner, 'The 'Dubai elsewhere phenomenon': 10 photos of the transformation of Kerala's mosques', *The National*, (14 April 2019).

⁵⁰G.Z. Oommen, 'Gulf migration, social remittances and religion: The changing dynamics of Kerala Christians, 2015', New Delhi, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, 2016.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

8. Engaging Consumerism and Communication

The Gulf boom generated myriad forms of consumerist culture in Kerala which could be seen in the proliferation of Malls, changing food habits and dress styles. There was a mushrooming of Gulf markets in Kerala since the 1980s with names such as Dubai Bazar, Gulf Souq, Gulf Bazar, etc in places like Beemappalli in Thriuvananthapuram and Chemmad in Tirur. There are several such places in Kochi, Kozhikode, Malappuram, and Kannur. Over the years, even migrants used to buy 'Gulf items' from these local Gulf bazars to satisfy their kith and kin. There was also a mushrooming of Arabian hotels and restaurants supplying Arabian foods such as *Shawarma*, *Yamani Biryanis* and *Kuzhimandis*. Similarly, the wearing of *Parda* became popular for over two decades in many places in Kerala. Khadija Mumtaz says that such dresses became a fashion with shops popularising them for obvious economic reasons. Many religious groups also promoted such Islamic dress with a view to gaining a foothold in the community.

Another major impact of the Gulf boom could be seen in the unprecedented growth of communication, media houses, and publication firms in Kerala and GCC countries. While each segment of the Muslim community began to flout their own newspapers and magazines, including women's magazines, others sought to launch television channels and blogs, and vlogs. Asif Ali, the editor of *Varthamanan*, told this researcher that the Gulf money played a vital role in the communication revolution in Kerala, and dozens of newspapers, magazines, and media houses could be a vindication of this sudden spurt in the media boom.⁵² Added to this trend was the launching of the Gulf edition of mainstream Malayalam newspapers and electronic channels. The digital revolution and new communication interfaces radicalised the notion of 'Living Together' with social media platforms (such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, BOTIM, etc.) playing a significant role in bridging the gulf between the home and diaspora.

9. Conclusion

The article basically looked into the transformation of the social landscape of the South Indian state of Kerala in the context of the migration of more than two million people from the state to the GCC countries. Kerala provides the largest Indian expatriate base in GCC. Evidently, the 'Gulf migration' and remittance boom in Kerala generated a cultural upsurge in the 1980s that helped strengthen the development of a larger public sphere in Kerala. In the article, cultural artefacts are employed to understand how migrants ensure connectivity with their home, through literature, films, songs, etc. in order to make a case for cultural remittance dynamics. Cultural remittance is employed as a category of analysis for understanding the social landscape of Kerala—exemplified through new cultural spaces offered by the Gulf migration. It is in these cultural artefacts that images and life forms remitted from the Kerala diaspora to their homeland become visible in striking ways. The agents of these cultural remittances are none other than the migrants from Kerala. The cultural artefacts selectively used in the article deal with questions of identity, marginalisation, social mobility, gender, and sexuality with richer cultural and thoughtful content. They richly portray the

⁵²Interview with Asif Ali, (30 May 2022).

limits and possibility of mobility, exchange relations, and material comforts among migrants and between migrants and non-migrants. Added to this stock of cultural artefacts is the role of religion in the remittance boom – the proliferation of mosques and churches, religious groups, and a surge in pilgrimages. While this has helped strengthen cultural bridging in one way, it has also led to cultural bonding with increasing religiosity, fundamentalism, and all their associated forms. The article tried to understand how the media and publication industry in Kerala witnessed a surge in the post-migration period, with considerable investment from the Kerala diaspora in GCC. The study also brings together the dimensions of a pattern change in food habits, dress styles, and other consumer traits. The workings of these cultural artefacts inform a major milestone in Kerala's public sphere. The upshot of the study is that notwithstanding the unfolding inter-communal tensions, the cultural remittance from the Gulf migrants has reinforced new norms, values, and ideas of social capital that eventually helped sustain a cultural public sphere in Kerala that characterises growing trust, communication, and cultural exchanges. It has also helped strengthen the 'living together' dynamics in diverse areas of social life.

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