

Regional Cartographies in CV's Marthandavarma

Dr. Reji A L

Assistant Professor & Research Guide, Department of English, MES Keveeyam College, Affiliated to
University of Calicut, Kerala

Abstract

C.V. Raman Pillai's Marthandavarma stands as a foundational work in Malayalam historical fiction, yet its significance extends beyond literary achievement into the realm of cultural geography. This paper examines the novel as an act of regional imagination, where narrative becomes a tool for constructing regional cartographies—not just geographical, but also historical, cultural, and ideological. By fictionalising the political transition in 18th-century Travancore, Pillai enacts a literary reclamation of space and identity, embedding a proto-nationalist sentiment within a distinctly local context. The novel resists colonial historiography by foregrounding native landscapes, vernacular ethos, and regional heroism. Through a close reading of spatial markers, political allegories, and characterisation, this study highlights how Marthandavarma configures a symbolic cartography that negotiates between history and myth, power and resistance.

Keywords: Region, Historical fiction, Spatial practice

If the land is made fit for human habitation by memory and 'old association', it is also true that by memory and association, human beings are made fit to inhabit the land. Regionalism is a necessity of civilization and of survival. The phenomenon of universalisation, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a subtle interference, not only of traditional cultures, but also of the creative and mythical nucleus of mankind. It is a paradox that every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. Only a living culture, at once faithful to its origins and ready for creativity on the levels of art, literature, philosophy and spirituality is capable of sustaining the encounter of other cultures. Climate, geography and the presence or absence of certain materials, are thought to be the factors that influence of regional architecture. Fundamentally, regionalism is a state of mind. It may be induced by poverty, isolation, lack of transportation, and iron-clad traditions, imposing living patterns rooted in a vanished past. In Architectural Regionalism, Vincent B. Canizaro called this type of regionalism the "Regionalism of Restriction" as opposed to it came the "Regionalism of Liberation" (58). This kind of regionalism developed in Florence during the Renaissance, flowered in Chicago between 1880 and 1914 and in California between 1895 and 1914 and again in the 1930s. Architectural regionalism remains a nebulous concept, and its historical development and current influence go on largely undocumented.

Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, points out that space is not empty, or a neutral container, but is made up of spatial practices. His theory of spatial production involves the understanding of perceived, conceived, and lived space (33). Spatial practices are the social actions and conventions that form a space in a specific culture. In C V's Marthanda Varma, the perceived space is represented through detailed

descriptions of the physical environment: architecture, landscapes, the depiction of the Travancore region, the palaces, and the natural surroundings. Here the conceived space involves the mental representations and conceptualizations of space: to convey social hierarchies, power dynamics between raja and praja, and cultural values prevalent in the region during the time period. The lived space is depicted through the characters' experiences and interactions within the spatial environment. The novel explores how the characters navigate and negotiate the spaces they inhabit, revealing social relationships, conflicts, and alliances.

Marthanda Varma is C.V. Raman Pillai's first historical novel that is based on the history of the state of Travancore. The novel deals with the political struggle between Marthanda Varma, the prince, and his rivals. The novel describes the setting as the kingdom of Venad under the rule of the king Rama Varma. The major events of the novel happen in and around Padmanabhapuram, the capital of the kingdom, and Thiruvananthapuram within Venad. Other kingdoms also have importance in the novel: traitorous criminals are exiled to Aralvaimozhi, to the south-east.

The Encyclopedia Britanica defines the historical fiction as "a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact" (www.britannica.com). But in George Lukac's *The Historical Novel* (1962), he understood the historical novel, and modern historical consciousness itself, as emerging in the context where the ascending bourgeois class questioned the existing values of society (17).

C V Raman Pillai was more influenced by oral tales that his relatives and acquaintances narrated around the history of Travancore than available historical documents. Bindu Menon in "Romancing History and Historicizing Romance" remarks that Raman Pillai had drawn from the veeragadha tradition which "comprises of songs about heroic deeds of warriors, descriptions of warfare etc. Rich in Tamil usages and indigenous tunes and rhythms, they form part of the large corpus of folklore in southern Thiruvithamkoor" (31).

Marthanda Varma was crowned as the King of Venad in 1729 following the death of his uncle and King Rajah Rama Varma, following the matrilineal law of inheritance. In spite of being under the threat from the refractory nobles and Brahmin chiefs of the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Marthanda Varma consolidated Venad into the most powerful kingdom on the southwestern coast known as Thiruvithamkoor. During the course of time, the internally discordant nobles and cousins were murdered, the Brahmin chiefs banished from the kingdom, the army was modernized and reforms were introduced in the revenue system, budgets, public works, among others.

P. Sankunni Menon, in his *The History of Travancore*, writes that the natives of Travancore are quite competent for the administration of the country, in its revenue, civil and military branches (viii). Nagam Aiya in *The Travancore State Manual* goes on to narrate the glorious episodes in the history of a state which seems to have founded itself on traditional forms and myths of feudal statecraft. His description of Marthanda Varma's self-ascription as Sri Padmanabha Dasa (2: 377) reminds one of the Divine Right Theory of Sovereignty. Around the middle of the eighteenth century the Maharaja of Travancore officially dedicated his kingdom to the god Padmanabhaswamy.

Guptan Nair described C. V. Ramanpillai as "a royalist among revolutionaries and a revolutionary among royalists" (67). The meaning of this ambiguity can be understood only by situating Raman Pillai's work on broader history. Marthanda Varma is a narrative with quick success of events. That is why he remarks: "It is so cluttered up with sensational events that the characters have no time to think, to talk or even to

make love. It is all action, one followed by another. We get only fleeting glimpses of their finer aspects” (31). Another criticism was raised by M P Paul who argued that in Raman Pillai’s novels “importance is given to only one community. It would appear that the history of Travancore was the history of a few Nair families” (Paul quoted in Guptan Nair 51). As a response to this, P. V. Velayudhan Pillai says, “the subject of these novels is not history; but political conflicts in a historical period – conflicts centred on power” (17). According to him, these conflicts were waged between a Malayali section who followed matrilineal system of descend and the Tamil-Vellala community who followed the patrilineal system. K Vinod Chandran characterises Raman Pillai’s historical novels as “alter-native narratives of re-form in Malayalam which engage themselves with a radical re-phrasing of selfhood, power and time” (68). He further argues that the historical novel is noteworthy for an “intensive reciprocation between the history and the desire of the people” (68).

In “Perumthacante Balishta Silpangal”, M. G. Sasibooshan describes that only the Darbhakulam Mansion and the Kalkulam Mansion of Padmanabhapuram Palace existed during the timeline of the novel. The novel describes the residence at the place of the present southern mansion on the northern side of the contemporary palace. Prince Marthada Varma halts there on his way to Boothapandi and later Padmanabhan Thambi camps there (history/ the story), after which approximately fifty members of Channar clan were executed at the Palace compound. Charode Palace is two miles north to Padmanabhapuram Palace. Charode palace is small, with only an enclosed quadrangular homestead (nalukettu) and a cookhouse (madappalli) (Ramachandran Nair, C. V. Padanangal 142).

In the introduction to the novel, Ayyappa Paniker observes that there is a fusion of history and romance in Marthanda Varma. There are many historical events and personalities that are not presented in the novel, and some of those are presented, modified, and even subverted. In the novel, C.V. Raman Pillai did not approach historical facts as a historian, but as a writer. Its subtext is a political one concerned with the writer’s ideal of what constitutes a good government. In the historic document, the Malayali Memorial of 1891, submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore in the same year as the publication of Marthanda Varma, the concept of good governance is elaborately discussed (11-12). The Malayali Memorial can be said to have originated as a response to and a reaction against the mounting influence of the non-malayali Hindus, otherwise called the Paradesa Brahmanas in government service. Paniker also regards C. V.’s novels as an attempt to resist the sense of cultural inferiority created by colonialism. (12)

The socio-political issues relevant to a proper understanding of Marthanda Varma have been highlighted by the editorial note on the novel which appeared in The Hind, Madras Edition, dated December 21, 1891: The incidents related therein refer to a remote but important epoch in the history of Travancore and are not without interest in relating to us the manners and characteristics of a state of society, which belongs to the past, a society in which . . . physical prowess rather than intellectual greatness reigned supreme. Travancore was then in the throes of a revolution. The reigning Maharaja was on his death-bed; and his nephew, the heir-apparent, was devising measures to save himself from the hands of the assassin. There were powerful chieftains throughout the country, each exercising supreme authority over his own local area. The reigning Maharaja had two sons, and the elder of the two was aspiring for the throne. All the powerful chieftains had taken sides; . . . the question which the Malabar Marriage Bill has brought into prominence. . . . Longstanding custom was a stumbling block even in those days: . . . intense thirst for power encouraged the Maharajas’ son to the foulest deed, . . . (Marthanda Varma 12).

C. V. is not only a participant of past history, but also plays the role of a critic of contemporary politics. He supports the part of the tradition which leads to good governance, while he continuously opposes that

part of the tradition which leads to stunted growth. He highlights the heroism and self-sacrifice of characters from the past that stood up for law and justice and condemned the self-aggrandizement of the treacherous and the disloyal. What we have to do now is a twenty first century critical evaluation of a nineteenth century fictional interpretation of what happened in an eighteenth-century historical setting (13-14).

M. G. Sasibhooshan writes in the article “Perumthacante Balishta Silpangal”: “The traditional Vastuvidya has a speciality that the surrounding area of the building could be widened according to the needs for they were built observing the fine yonis such as dwajam, simham, vrishabham and gajam” (Ramachandran Nair, C. V. Padanangal 142). This speciality is also visible in C. V.’s writing strategy. That is why after twenty-two years of the publication of Marthanda Varma, C. V. is able to build an ettukettu again from the eduppu of Ettuveedar of Marthanda Varma in Dharma Raja and an extension of Dharma Raja in Rama Raja Bahadoor (140 – 146). In the olden days Nairs’ and Kshatriyars’ Nalukettu faces the eastern direction, while in Namboodiri’s, it is in the western direction. C.V. explains this peculiar pattern that he has seen around him in the novel while describing Chempakasseri Bhavanam and Mankoyikkal.

At the time of the story, Padmanabhapuram is the capital of the State of Travancore. In chapter one, there is a small description of Charode Palace, two miles north to Padmanabhapuram palace. There is an underground passage that connects these two palaces through which the young Raja, disguises as a Brahmin and his loyal servant Parameswaran Pillai escape from the hands of enemies in the middle of their journey to Bhootapandi and reached Charode Palace. It remains in a dilapidated condition, leaving a small nalukettu and madappalli as remnants. There is a wall surrounding this palace with doors in the south and east. Now, only the entrance from the main palace to Charode Palace is left (Raman Pillai, Marthanda Varma 34).

In the article “Depths of Mystery” that appeared in The Hindu, Sarat Sunder Rajeev shares his interaction with Bhavanikutty Amma, who admits that she had the experience of travelling through this tunnel till the river Valliyar. She also reveals that the door to the subterranean passage is still visible in the Thaikkottaram and at the other end the tunnel was clearly visible amongst the ruins of Charode Palace (thehindu.com).



Fig. 1. Wood Work at Padmanabhapuram Palace

Padmanabhapuram palace consists of Poomukham, Plamoottil Kottaram, Veppinmoodu Kottaram, Thaikkottaram, Uttupura, Homappura, Uppirikka Malika, Ayudhappura, Chandravilasam, Indra Vilasam,

Navarathri Mandapam, Lekshmi Vilasam or Puthenkottaram and Thekkekkottaram. In the Poomukham, there are ninety flowers carved on the ceiling and each one is different from the other. The granite cot made up of seven pieces of granite, the Chinese model throne, the paintings on Ona Villu, and the Kuthirakkal Vilakku are the main attraction in the hall (Premkumar, Padmanabhapuram Palace 22).

In chapter two of the novel, C. V. gives the topography and social distribution of houses in the old town that is quite different from the present one. The western side of Sri Padmanabhaswami Temple is monopolised by the Namboodiri and the Tulu Brahmins and the higher sects of Hindu community. But for the main road that runs to the west with a number of narrow connected bylanes, convenience for free and easy travel is rather limited. Sreevaraham, Perumthanni and Palculangara are protected from unnecessary roads (Raman Pillai, Marthanda Varma 40-41). But the city is devoid of all external splendour and magnificence associated with royal cities, except the Padmanabhapuram palace.

C.V. gives a vivid photograph of the Chempakasseri house. Many members of the family enjoy the privilege of being the hereditary ministers of the Royal house of Travancore. The spacious well-ventilated drawing room in the south owes to its superior elegance:

On one side of it, parted by a single door, stood a beautiful wainscotted chamber which led to two further rooms, skirting all of which, ran a verandah with curved wooden banisters painted in pleasing colours of light red lac. Huge shooting bolts of brass secured with chains and filigree-petalled knobs completed the decoration of the doors (41).

To the eastern side, there stands the inner parlour, the guest rooms, all connect with the central building by projecting porticoes. The kitchen, storeroom and the dining hall are situated in the northern wing in the conventional style. The temple of the household gods known as the kalari is isolated in the south. A little to the west of the inner parlour, there stands the armoury. Besides the appointed keeper, only the head of the family has access to it. In those days weapons are considered to be emblems of God for the purpose of defending right against wrong. It is the seat of both might and right (41). Around the living quarters, runs a thick wall of baked mud, crowned on top by a further thatching, outside which is a gate house. Away from these, at the far end of the compound, there situates the tank and the bath-house attached to another suit of rooms intended to accommodate Brahmin guests. It is believed that there are innumerable secret cellars and tunnels in the underground of this house.

The custom of the times prescribes that ordinary strangers shall be given accommodation in the storied gate-house, and that the more dignified among them shall be allowed the use of the main drawing-room. The northern wing and the suite of rooms attached to the inner parlour set apart for the use of the female members of the house. Except the head of the family and the servants of the household, male presence is tabooed in that quarter. After the return of the widowed Karthyayani Amma, the only sister of the then Karanavan, with her daughter Parvathy, the northern wing has been set apart for their exclusive use (42). Sundarayyan, who has come there with the proposal of Thampi for Parukkutty, enters the inner parlour without permission, causes an aversion in the house keeper Sanku Asan. The presence of a stranger within the forbidden female quarters, especially at night, upsets the mother and daughter at the same time. This produces a sickening nausea in Parukkutty.

In the novel, while running away from Velu Kuruppu and his men, Marthanda Varma is helped by a mad Channan who hides him in a tree and misdirects his pursuers. Dr. P. Venugopalan in *Soochitha Sahitya Krithikal: Oru Padanam*. writes that this account of actions is a collaboration of two situations where Marthanda Varma escaped from the enemies. Once, when Marthanda Varma was returning after some confidential visits to Kanyakumari and Suchindram, he was tracked by the men of Ettuveetil Pillas and

Thambi brothers (402). While running away from the chasers, he was suggested by a Channan plougher of the nearby field to hide inside the hollow statue of the elephant at the adjacent temple of Shasthavu. In another occasion, when Marthanda Varma was chased by the enemies, he evaded them by hiding inside the big hole within a jack tree at the Neyyattinkara Sree Krishna Swami Temple. The tree is still preserved at the temple compound and known as Ammaciplāvū.

In chapter four, the Mankoyikkal house of famous Nair chief Eravi Peruman Kandan Kumaran Kurup is described. He has under him a small army of trained Nair warriors. He was as good as steel due to the vigorous training of Kalari. His house is situated two miles to the north of the Charode palace. While seeing two people hastening in panic towards the hills, Kurup orders the southern gate of the inner parlour to be thrown open. He welcomes them and treats them with great devotion and respect. They are Marthanda Varma, the Yuvaraja of Travancore, disguised as a Brahmin and his loyal servant Parameswaran Pillai. Later the whole house has been surrounded on all sides under the leadership of Velu Kurup by raging lancers. Mankoyikkal Kurup locks the Yuvaraja and his body guard inside the inner parlour and runs to the main gate of the house. This ancestral home is burned at least in a dozen different places. It assumes the shape of a flaming titanic tower of gold (82). The wood work of the house crackles like the laugh of some evil creature. The heat becomes intense in the room where the Yuvaraja is made to stay. At last, after having broken the roof, the mad Channan helps the Yuvaraja and his bodyguard escape in chapter six. Here, C. V. gives main focus to a detailed description of the loyalty, leadership and courage of the host and the Channan rather than the minute description of this house.

There is a reference to Kalipankulam incident in the fourth chapter by the Yuvaraja in his desperate, helpless state. It is said that, the five younger princes of Umayamma Rani are foully drowned by Ramanamadathil Pillai, to make the royal line extinct. Travancore historian P. Sankunni Menon (A History of Travancore 86) and Nagam Aiya who has written Travancore State Manual admit this incident (1: 310).

The fifth chapter of the novel describes the space of Padmanaphapuram palace. Padmanabhan Thampi, the elder son of the Maharaja is accommodated in one of the Malikas of the northern side of the Padmanaphapuram palace. More than three hundred people loiter in small groups up and down the street. Most of them belong to the royal retinue. Thampi is in the veranda of the second storey of the palace, impatient and frowned like a caged beast of prey. After knowing from Velu Kurup that a Channan has rescued Yuvaraja, he orders to catch all the Channars and bring them to the palace. He gives orders to kill the Channars who has been brought in, even though they are innocent and they have no connection with the above-mentioned incident. Soon the palace courtyard becomes filled with corpses. And then, Bhranthan Channan has been brought there, but Velu Kurup is not there to recognise him and Thampi orders to put him in the cellar after he has failed to get an intelligent answer from him (Raman Pillai, Marthanda Varma 85-98).

Beneath the floor of the palace, there is a dungeon which is used for locking up prisoners. The mad Channan is locked up there. He tries to investigate the possibility to escape. At last his foot strikes against a large metal ring. He tugs at it with all his might. And it gives way disclosing a narrow opening. He slips down and closes the trap-door. He makes his way through a long corridor, and passes door after door that followed a flight of granite steps. He traces the steps and knocking his head in all directions. After five hours, he reaches the Charode Palace. Later he realises that he has travelled through the secret tunnel which leads from Padmanabhapuram Palace to Charode (99-100).

Maharaja's state of health is steadily declining day after day. So that will result in a state mourning. But in Chempakasser house, there is great jubilation after Sundarayyan has come with the proposal of Thampi for Subhadra. The house renovation takes place under the leadership of Karthyayini Amma in chapter eight (129-130).

All the plants and dwarf trees in the garden are pruned into shape, and the courtyard is swept clean of every particle of dust. On one side of the house, tailors stitches curtains and fits them to doors and windows. Thick rugs and carpets of the finest kind deck the floor in every room. The old palanquin used by Karthyayini Ammas's deceased husband is painted anew and done up with crimson velvet. Pillows, mattresses and the like are aired and dried in the sun before being fitted with snow white sheets and covers (130).

In the tenth chapter, C. V. gives a vague picture of Kutaman Pillai's house, north of the main road running from the Sri Padmanabhaswami Temple to the east. It is a big residential house used by the accredited leader among the Eight Chiefs. Except a distant female relative who has looked after the house in the absence of the master, this place is usually uninhabited. A conference has been arranged to take place that night at the above-mentioned house. The old man, Kutaman Pillai, is waiting in the inner apartments of the house. The teak-panelled room in which he sits has been rendered bare of furniture, and excepting the mats on the floor and the huge pillows that propped up against the wall, the room contains only some pansupari plates, two brass table lamps, and a couple of spittoons of the same bright metal (157). The Lords of the Eight Houses—Chempazhanti, Pallichal, Thirumadhom, Venganoor, Kulathoor and Kazhakkootam are all there on time. And the last to arrive is Sundaram, the inseparable part of Padmanabhan Thampi. One by one, all members of the assembly takes the customary oath. Only Kazhakkuttathu Pillai shows the courage to express his individuality in the opinions made by him and walks out.

The bed chamber of Subhadra is referred to in the eleventh chapter. There is a covered bedstead piled up with soft cushions and mattresses. A girl of exquisite physical charms stands up from the cot. C. V. gives a detailed description of the female figure there called Chempakam (170). He also gives the background information related to her.

Patani Palayam is described in the fifteenth chapter. On the outskirts of Trivandrum, the place now known as Manakkad has been in those days in the nature of a miniature desert. Now in Manakkad, there exists a Patani Lane which can be traced back to the history of Travancore. At the time of the story, a small Patan caravan has come from the north and pitched their tents there. There have been about half a dozen neat tents, besides two long sheds rigged out in canvas. A score of pure Arab horses and a pair of camels comprise their means of transport and travel. The Patans are supposed to be very wealthy, appear in costly silks, wear gold brocade and Kashmiri shawls and deals with machine-wrought weapons of war, besides gunpowder. The party has set out under the leadership of the old man named Hakkim (219). Having mastered rare books dealing with Unani system of medicine, Hakkim uses that profound knowledge for the good of suffering humanity—saves Anantha Padmanabhan from the wounded state and cures Parukkutti and gives a herbal powder to the Maharaja to improve his health.

Anandapadmanabhan's valour and determination to risk his own life for the sake of the king has been described as purushathwam. Guptan Nair remarks that not only his heroes but also his great villains values manliness and gigantic endeavours Women too are endowed with this paurusham (as illustrated in Subhadra's heroic deeds to save Marthanda Varma from the plots of Ettuveetil Pillamar) though it is etymologically a masculine virtue (40).

Sri Padarath house is owned by Kazhakkootthu Pillai. In his absence, the mad Channan comes there to free Mankoyikkal Kurup who is confined there in an underground cellar. He shoots Kodanki and Velu Kurup to death. Both the Channan and Mankoyikkal Kurup are shifted to the underground cellar in the Chempakasser house (281-286). On the fifth day of their confinement, Parukkutty and Karthyayini Amma enter the cellar to see the Channan there and to clear their doubts.

While describing about the attitude of the Ettuveetil Pillamar towards Yuvaraja to Mankoyikkal Kurup in chapter four, Yuvaraja speaks about the existed socio-economic and political condition of the State. He wants military support from distant lands to defeat the inside enemies and mentions about the mercenary forces from Madura reached at Bhoothapandi. He exposes the economic crisis: “the arrears of wages due. . . The treasury is empty” (73). V. Nagam Aiya recorded about the lack of money and manpower in the state (330); Sankunni Menon cited reference to a treaty existed between king Rama Varma and Madura Nayaks in Kollavarsham 901 to supply additional forces to Travancore for a fixed annual payment (109). C. V. had a unique passion for history. While analysing his novels it is evident that he was diving deep into contemporary social and political problems. More than the written histories, it was the unwritten histories of the old manors and mansions that fascinated him. In Paniker’s own words, “Marthanda Varma invites us to a world of mysteries. And the lure of the mystery persists even after the novel ends. History never ends, never concedes everything to us. One story gives way to another, that’s all” (11).

Works Cited

1. ---. Marthanda Varma. Translated by B K Menon. Sahitya Akademi, 1998.
2. Chandran, Vinodh K. The Counter Narratives of Power and Identity in Colonial Keralam. JEC,
3. 2023.
4. Lefebvre, Henri. ---. The Production of Space. Trans. Donald Nicholson Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
5. Lukac, George. The Historical Novel. Merlin Press, 1962.
6. Menon, Bindu M. “Romanticising History and Historicizing Romance.” India Seminar. June 2009 pp. 28-35
7. Nagam Aiya, V. The Travancore State Manual. 3 vols. Travancore Government P, 1906. Print.
8. Nair, Panmana Ramachandran, ed. C V Padanangal. Thrissur: Current Books, 2013.
9. Nair, S Guptan. C V Raman Pillai. Sahitya Akademi, 1992.
10. Pillai, C.V. Raman. Marthanda Varma. Sahitya Akademi, 1998.
11. Premkumar, G., ed. Padmanabhapuram Palace. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Archeology, 2015. Print.
12. Rajeev, Sarat Sunder. “Depths of History.” The Hindu. 7 Aug. 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/interesting-facets-about-charode-palace/article8948389.ece>
13. Sankunni Menon, P. A History of Travancore: From the Earliest Times. Madras, 1878. Print.
14. “The Historical Novel” The Encyclopedia Britannica. Jan 19, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/art/historical-novel>
15. Venugopalan, Dr. P. Sūcitasāhityakṛtikāḥ Oru Padanam. 1992.