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**Aquapelagic Subalterns and the Hydrocolonial Imagination
in Select Malayalam Narratives**

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Abstract: There is something insidiously lethal about the way Malayalam literary and cinematic culture has looked at the sea. The littoral zone of Kerala, with its vast fisherfolk communities, its salt-stiffened bodies, its caste-inflected ocean labour, and its centuries of marginalization, has long appeared in the cultural imagination as backdrop rather than centre, as atmosphere rather than argument. Writers and filmmakers have given us the fisherman as silhouette, the grieving widow as metaphor, the drowned body as the punctuation mark in someone else's tragedy. What they have rarely given us is the coastal community as an epistemological world in its own right: as the bearer of knowledge, language, and ways of being that deserve to stand at the centre of critical attention. They constitute what this paper terms a condition of hydrocoloniality; the systematic erasure of water-based communities, their lifeworlds, and their epistemologies from the dominant symbolic economies of Malayalam cultural production. This paper calls for a fundamental reorientation of Malayalam literary and film studies toward the submerged histories, dialectal knowledges, and ecological intimacies of Kerala's long-marginalized coastal communities.

Keywords: *Hydrocoloniality, Malayalam Literature, Slow Violence, Blue Humanities, Coastal Epistemology, Fisherfolk Communities, Malayalam Cinema*

Introduction

Sometimes the aesthetic beauty covered under certain violence; the terrible beauty. It does not announce itself with force or spectacle. It settles instead into the grammar of representation; into the choices a culture makes about whose pain counts as tragedy and whose life counts as story. In Malayalam literary and cinematic culture, this violence has long organised itself around the sea, around the bodies of those who work it, and around the stubborn refusal to see those bodies as bearers of knowledge rather than instruments of atmosphere.

The coastline of Kerala spans over nearly six hundred kilometers, with a hugely inhabited area in all South Asia. It is home to fisherfolk communities whose histories of labour, caste subordination, ecological knowledge, and political marginalization predate the formation of the modern state. These communities have fished waters that colonial administrators mapped as resources, prayed in churches and temples that missionaries and reformers tried to remake in their own image, and buried their dead in sand that developers now price by the square foot. They have survived cyclones, debt, the mechanisation of fishing, and the intrusion of deep-sea trawlers that destroy the coastal ecosystem. They have endured what Rob Nixon calls "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight... delayed destruction dispersed across time and space" (2), a slow accumulation of structural neglect that rarely produces the concentrated spectacle required for public political recognition.

And yet when Malayalam literature and cinema turn to the sea, what we most often encounter is the fisherman as atmospheric detail: a silhouette against a sunset, a body hauling nets in the background of a story really about someone else, a face contorted in grief at the film's emotional climax before the narrative moves on to more pressing concerns. The grieving widow appears as metaphor for sacrifice. The coastal village serves as setting, as mood, as the picturesque condition against which the real drama of more legible, more literate, more caste mobile subjects unfolds. What Malayalam cultural production has rarely given us is the coastal community as an epistemological world in its own right, as the bearer of a specific knowledge, a specific language, a specific way of being that deserves not merely sympathetic representation but centred critical attention.

This study seeks to make one point clear: the formation of these symbols was neither a matter of pure coincidence nor merely an attempt to fill representational gaps. Rather, it is a systematic process produced and continually reproduced by the very structures of caste hierarchy, linguistic standardisation, state indifference, and aesthetic convention that have historically marginalized coastal communities in material, social, and cultural life. The term this article proposes for this condition is hydrocoloniality: the systematic erasure of water-based communities, their lifeworlds, and their epistemologies from the dominant symbolic economies of a culture's literary and cinematic production.

The argument of the study draws from several voices. One is from Hofmeyr, where he asks us to "go below the waterline," to go deeper than the surface of the sea. In the words of Mentz, what he wants us to remember is that the ocean is not just a poetic image but it is a real place of happening, bodily labour, also a place where they are in a politically vulnerable zone. Nixon gives us a way of understanding violence that is not sudden or spectacular, but slow, accumulating quietly over time, built into structures rather than events. This study reads two works of 2024, one by Arun Babu Anto's novel *Udapluthasathwangal* and the other Ajith Mampally's film *Kondal*. These texts are not exemplary texts, and this study does not treat them as such. They are lumpy, sometimes antithetical, and fetch within them the marks of the very cultural genesis they attempt to summon. But they represent a nascent and significant shift in Malayalam cultural production toward centering the coastal subject as a political and epistemological agent, and that shift deserves sustained critical attention.

Theoretical Framework: Hydrocoloniality, Blue Humanities, and Slow Violence

The theoretical architecture of this article rests on three bodies of scholarship that, taken individually, illuminate different facets of the problem and, taken together, constitute something approaching a method. Isabel Hofmeyr's conception of hydrocolonialism, developed in her influential 2010 *PMLA* essay, challenges scholars of postcolonial and world literatures to attend not only to the land-based logics of empire; its borders, its territories, its administrative geographies; but to the sea as a structuring element of colonial power and colonial knowledge. What Hofmeyr insisted was that critics must "go below the waterline" (23) and also initiate a grave perspective of those people for whom the sea is not just a landscape but a lived condition: not a boundary to be crossed or a sublime to be contemplated, but a material environment whose governance, exploitation, and symbolic appropriation are continuous with the history of colonial extraction on land. To go below the waterline is to ask who has historically controlled the meaning of water, who decides whether a particular stretch of sea is a fishing ground, a shipping lane, a tourist amenity, or a sacred space, and whose claims are routinely overwritten by more powerful symbolic regimes (Hofmeyr 659). The answer is constant in Kerala's case for centuries. Because the fisherfolk communities of the coast have sustained and cherished generational knowledge of the sea while being systematically excluded from institutions like the state, the university, the publishing house, the film industry, etc. Their knowledge has always been real. It just has not always been recognised.

Also from Steve Mentz's blue humanities project, this idea extends and inflects the argument by insisting on the ocean's materiality as it focuses on the bodies that labour within it. Mentz argues in *Ocean* that, against the long tradition of treating the sea as a space of metaphor, we have made it stand for freedom, for the sublime, for the unconscious, for everything that feels boundless and beyond us.

What Mentz asks for instead is to see the ocean as a real place in a simple and even harder way that is unceasingly tangled up with politics and ecology in all ways, like body and labour (11). More than the aesthetic part of the sea, all the so-called laymen cherish it, and it also provides a hidden terrible beauty scene to people who actually belong there. In the same way, we ignore the conditions of the fishermen who fish, dive, and die in it. Knowingly or unknowingly, we belong in the same line of the symbolic economy that renders coastal communities invisible. The blue humanities, at its most ambitious, challenges the assumption that ocean-adjacent communities are the passive subjects of larger historical forces rather than active producers of knowledge about those forces (Mentz 13–15). What is most useful in Mentz's framework for this study is precisely this insistence on the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology: the beautiful image of the sea is not politically neutral. It carries, embedded within its conventions, a set of decisions about whose relationship to the water counts as knowledge and whose counts as merely picturesque.

Nixon's proposition of slow violence supplies the temporal axis that Hofmeyr and Mentz gesture toward but do not completely develop. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon argues that the most significant forms of environmental violence are those that resist spectacular representation: cumulative, dispersed across years and decades, and therefore "least photogenic" and "least amenable to documentary filmmaking" (3). They operate "below the threshold of what dominant cultural regimes of attention will register as violence" (13). This is the condition that characterises the structural acquisition of Kerala's littoral fishermen: not the single disastrous storm or the singular act of state brutality, but the gradational collapse of fish stocks, the accumulation of debt, the slow destruction of littoral ecosystems by trawlers, the compounding of estate disadvantage across generations, and the regulatory silence that greets every formal complaint. None of these processes produces a spectacular event. None arrives at the threshold of legibility that dominant cultural forms tend to require. What Nixon's framework makes possible is the naming of this gap between the scale at which structural violence operates and the scale at which cultural representation tends to work.

Taken together, these three frameworks constitute a reading practice. Applied to Malayalam cultural production, they ask us to attend to what is present in a text and to what is systemically absent; to how the sea is figured and for whose benefit; to the temporal scale of the processes a text engages or evades; and to whether the language of the text, its register, its dialect, its generic assumptions, is itself part of the colonial archive or attempting to work against it. Existing scholarship on Malayalam literature and cinema has produced rich readings of caste, gender, modernity, and the subaltern, but has rarely brought these concerns into sustained conversation with the specific lifeworld of coastal communities. It literally opens a critical space that has been unmarked till now, but still does not try to displace any earlier scholarship, instead supplementing the framework.

The Aestheticization of the Coastal: A History of Beautiful Erasure

To map the representation of tradition the works were working against, we need to look into the formal choices at stake in Anto's novel and Mampally's film. Malayalam movies have a rich and complicated bond with change, from the devotional and barbaric tradition to the social reformative literary context of the nineteenth century. From there, the early twentieth century was marked by nationalist cultural movements, after which realist and modernist literary traditions followed independence. All these were followed by the remarkable golden age, also known as the New Wave era of the 1970s and 1980s. However, across all these shifts in perspective, there has been no systemic change in the patterns through which littoral lives are represented in texts.

The first and most persistent pattern is what we might call the aesthetic sublime: the coast as the site of spectacular natural beauty, divine munificence, or romantic freedom. In this register, the sea is primarily an image, deployed for its affective power: the rising sun over dark water, the rhythmic crash of waves against rock, the vast and indifferent horizon that makes human trouble seem small. This is not representation of the coastal community so much as representation of the sea as backdrop, and the effect is to make the fisherfolk who actually inhabit that backdrop function as scenic elements rather than subjects.

The second pattern is sentimentalism, the elevation of coastal suffering into a generalised aesthetic of loss and sacrifice. The tragic beauty lies in the figure of the fisherman's widow, fate's cruelty shown through a drowned son, and the noble simplicity of the folk's poverty untouched by modernity's corruptions. Sentimentalism converts structural dispossession into an occasion for feeling, allowing audiences to experience pathos without being required to think about the economic, political, and caste structures that produce the suffering. The body on the shore is moved into the register of the universal at exactly the moment when its particularity, its situatedness within a specific history of exploitation, would have been most legible.

The third pattern, closely related, is what the coastal communities themselves have named in the Malayalam term *erachippotta*, as mentioned in Anto's work, a complex word that the draft notes carries "connotations of both the smell of fish and the class associations attached to it." It tells us that the embodied knowledge of the coast, the knowledge that inheres in a body that smells of fish because it has spent its life extracting the sea's resources, is coded as something to be ashamed of, to be washed away, to be left behind when one achieves education and social mobility. The placenames used in the cultural geography of the coastline in these texts bear a certain epistemological burden. For example, the use of the fictional Vaavakaad in Anto's novel is associated with a place of liminal settlement that is always neglected and falls outside the administrative map of the coastline of Kerala because such

spaces never have a place within the subject of national cultural pride. The epistemological archive of coastal life survives intact without being regulated by anyone, and so these spaces become the accumulated sites of structural neglect and slow violence.

Udapluthasathwanga: The Archive of Brine

Arun Babu Anto's *Udapluthasathwanga*, a title whose literal force is something like "beings drowned in the body," though no translation quite catches it, announces its project from its first pages. The novelist created a fictional village out of a sandbar, a new word, *Glathi*, out of cuttlefish bone, and also a mythic sea monster named Karumpachan. The final pages are reminiscent of the classic sea novels of Hemingway and Melville. In the early pages of the novel, the characters, especially the protagonist Anikleth, are suffocated with the mythical creatures, their smell and sound associated with the sea. The sea is not a landscape of the typical beauty that normal eyes can perceive, but for the people it is nothing but a surface upon which every morning is a negotiation with survival, like the daily arithmetic of debt and the fungibility and risk of labour.

The treatment of dialect in the novel is its iconoclastic decision. The writer used the conversational language of the coastal folks, not the standardised literary Malayalam used in newspapers and academia. "Ee kadalilennayokke jaathi jeevikala, athungade okke porake poya nammade uyir pokum. Athreyoll" (Anto 51). "All the creatures living in this sea, our lives will end following behind them. That's all." What survives in translation is the content; what is lost is the epistemological signature. To leave the dialect untranslated, to demand that the reader come to the text rather than asking the text to come to the reader, is to refuse the usual hierarchy in which coastal knowledge is made legible on the terms of the educated centre. The dialect is not a regional colour. It is an epistemological form.

The linguistic argument of the novel is reinforced by its structural logic. *Udapluthasathwanga* is, on one level, a novel about the disappearance of two fishermen and the bureaucratic indifference that greets it. But the absence of official response is not presented as an exceptional scandal. Rather, the novel presents it as the normal condition of littoral life under the slow violence of state neglect. Through the grieving father Anikleth, who has lost his son, lamenting both the loss and the negligence of officials who fail even to follow up on a missing person who went to sea, the novel exposes the routine nature of institutional abandonment. Because the sea will give it back, and only the sea is accountable for the rest too (Anto 92). It is simply what happens when people at the margins of the administrative map disappear.

The character of Beseli, a person of the first generation referred to throughout the narrative, manifests the novel's central epistemological argument. Though he belongs to the first generation of fishermen in his family, his vast knowledge and his disbelief in the myths related to the sea have entered his body and environment into mutual constitution. That knowledge can only be understood on its own terms. Anto writes: "It is the sea that made him, not his mother, not the Church, not the debt. The sea had shaped every muscle and every fear into what he was" (89). The passage is notable for what it places in series: mother, Church, debt. These are the institutions and structures—family, religion, capital—through which coastal subjects are typically narrated in Malayalam cultural production. The sea, by contrast, is figured here not as an institution but as a formative environment, a material force that produces a form of subjectivity that those institutions cannot fully account for. This is, in miniature, the epistemological argument the novel is making at every level. With his second sense, he perceives the impending dangers associated with the sea and its ecology, a capacity developed through generations of practice and attunement. One night, when he went to bathe in the sea, the mythical Karuthachan appears amidst bioluminescence, and he senses the change of tides through every fibre of his being. This knowledge is an extension of his body, something made and used rather than simply felt.

The novel's other most important character is Aniklethu Sranku, who is present in the narration from the very first part of the novel until the last, and who sets out to avenge himself against the Sea Rani for the loss of his son, a scene reminiscent of the characters of the great Santiago and Captain Ahab. Such figures function less as individuals than as repositories of accumulated knowledge, bearers of a communal memory for which the dominant culture has no category. The scenes set in settlements described with reference to a place like Vaavakkaadu—administratively invisible, ecologically damaged, socially stigmatised—make this marginalisation spatial as well as temporal. The community exists not only in a neglected present but in a geography excluded from the images of Kerala that circulate as cultural identity: the backwaters, the temples, the Kathakali performance, the software corridor. The coast, in Anto's rendering, is the part of Kerala that has been cut from that image, and *Udapluthasathwangal* is the act of insisting that it belongs in the frame.

Kondal: The Ocean as Political Terrain

The film *Kondal*, meaning sea breeze, functions as the atmospheric metaphor of the movie. With considerable precision, like a storm at sea, it builds tension among the lives and struggles of its characters. Unlike Anto's work, which explores language and narrative detail at a slower pace, this film focuses more on the subdued and complex coastal grammar of dialogue against scenic beauty, presenting it as a testimony to lived experience rather than mere visual spectacle.

The central character of the movie is Manuel, or Immanuel, as his baptism certificate reads, the kind of man Anchuthengu knows by the sound of his footsteps. His family is his anchor, even when everything else about him is adrift. Anchuthengu breathes fish. The village wakes up to it, goes to sleep smelling of it, and measures its worth in the morning's catch. The conflict begins when some unscrupulous owners exploit the honesty of the fishermen. The consequences fall not only on individual workers but on every fisherman who hauls his net before sunrise and every woman who carries a basket to the market with her head held high. These people want nothing more than acknowledgement: a public statement that the rot came from one company, not from their hands or their waters. It is a matter of dignity as much as livelihood. Words turn to shouts, shouts turn to shoving, and by the time Manuel walks into the middle of it, the air is already thick with fury.

The opening sequence of the movie deserves a moment of pause. It presents the beauty of a coastal village at dawn: the light on the water, the masts of fishing boats, the curve of the shore. But that beauty is immediately contextualised by the sound of a radio weather report. This is Mampally's first, and perhaps most telling, artistic choice. The film is not interested in the romance of the sea that has been endlessly repeated in cultural representation. It is interested in what that romance hides: the daily arithmetic of survival, the weight of decisions made before sunrise. The choice is political—a quiet declaration that this film stands apart from the long tradition of cinema that has gazed at the coast and called it poetry while the people living on it kept working.

By directing the camera at Anchuthengu, a real and historically significant coastal settlement, and casting the sea as both victim and battleground, Mampally makes a film that, whether or not it uses the term, operates within a hydrocolonial critical consciousness. The space of the sea in the movie is a regulated and hierarchical environment, one where men like Stephen and Sons must negotiate meteorological data and economic risk daily simply to enter it. The company extracts from the sea and from the labour of coastal fishermen. Then, when that extraction turns corrupt, the community bears the reputational and economic fallout rather than the company. The fishermen's demand for a public clarification is, in this reading, a demand to dismantle that insulation and to make the hydrocolonial actor visible and accountable.

Mampally has spoken in interviews about his aspirations in terms that reinforce this reading: that he wanted to write from within what they know. The distinction between writing *about* and writing *from within* is, in the theoretical terms this article has been developing, the distinction between representation and epistemology. To write from within what coastal communities know is to accept the epistemological challenge that their knowledge poses and to allow it to reorganise the assumptions, the registers, and the formal choices of the work itself.

Hydrocolonialism also interrogates whose knowledge of water is considered legitimate. The film implicitly challenges the monopoly of institutional knowledge. The corporation knows the market, but the fishermen know the sea. *Kondal* grants epistemological weight to this community knowledge throughout its first half. This is consistent with what postcolonial coastal theory calls recovering "pre-colonial understandings of water," treating the sea as a sacred, living, and knowable space rather than an inert resource.

Manuel himself functions as what hydrocolonial theory might call a figure of tidalectics, a concept borrowed from Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite and extended into coastal postcolonial theory: the back-and-forth, non-linear movement between sea and land, between subjection and resistance. His recklessness, his drinking, and his seeming aimlessness are not simply personal failings but symptoms of a community structurally dispossessed by hydrocolonial forces. When he finally enters the brawl, and later the deep-sea confrontation, his violence is not random; it is the tide turning.

Reading Together: What the Texts Reveal and What They Submerge

Placed in conversation, *Udapluthasathwawal* and *Kondal* illuminate each other's formal and political strategies. Both texts engage with the question of how to represent coastal epistemology without converting it into an aesthetic object or sentimental spectacle. The film's rare cinematic feat of setting most of its second half on the sea, rather than beside it, is itself a blue humanities gesture—insisting that the ocean be seen as territory, not horizon. The novel's title, "beings that have floated up from the deep," likewise enacts the blue humanities principle of the sea as an archive. Its figurative vocabulary—flesh-scrap washing ashore, creatures consumed in the deep—treats the sea as a material force that metabolises violence and returns it, altered.

Udapluthasathwawal locates its hydrocolonial extraction at a deeper, more structural level. The novel's opening image of bodies consumed by bigger fish, of flesh-scrap that leave no trace, figures the coastal community as a group already subject to hydrocolonial erasure. Where *Kondal* names a specific corporate villain, *Udapluthasathwawal* implicates a nameless, systemic violence that has no face and leaves no evidence. The ship serves as a miniature colony. The ship's enclosure replicates colonial enclosure: once you are inside it, the rules of the outside world cease to apply. This is one of the most striking convergences between the two works. The novel's coastal geography traps its characters in the same way the sea traps the crew of *Kondal*—geographically proximate to freedom, structurally confined.

Kondal dramatises the collision between the blue economy's formal sector (Stephen and Sons, its market networks, its reputational power) and the blue economy's informal sector (the individual

fishermen of Anchuthengu, whose catch has no institutional protection). *Udapluthasathwangel* engages the blue economy more obliquely but more devastatingly. The blue economy has, in other words, colonised not only the waters but also the community's imagination of what the sea is for.

In *Kondal*, Manuel's narrative is tidal: he recedes (drinking, aimlessness, withdrawal) before surging (the village brawl, the confrontation at sea, the revelation of his brother's murder). His violence is not a climax in the linear sense but a tidal return—something that has been building beneath the surface and must eventually come back up. The sea in the film operates by the same tidal logic: it conceals, it holds, and then it returns what it has been given, transformed. *Udapluthasathwangel's* very title is a tidal image. The novel's narrative itself enacts tidalectics: truths that the community has suppressed rise to the surface in fragmented, disfigured form. Aniklett Srank's contradictions—his simultaneous cruelty and helplessness—are the tidal residue of a community's suppressed history, surfaced but not yet legible.

It should also be acknowledged that both texts carry the marks of their positions within the cultural institutions whose terms they are also contesting. Anto's novel was published by Mathrubhumi Books, a major Malayalam publishing house, and its Author's Note, however radical in its linguistic politics, is addressed to a readership assumed to need the note explained to it. These are not disqualifying conditions, but they are conditions—and a hydrocolonial reading practice must remain attentive to the institutional frameworks within which even the most politically committed cultural production necessarily operates.

Toward a Hydrocolonial Reading Practice for Malayalam Studies

What might it mean to institutionalise, within Malayalam literary and cultural studies, a reading practice that takes hydrocoloniality as one of its structuring concerns? This is not a rhetorical question. Malayalam studies is a rich and heterogeneous field, attentive to caste, to gender, to the subaltern, and to the global circuits through which Malayalam literature has always moved, but it has not, by and large, developed the sustained attention to coastal epistemology that the communities living on Kerala's six-hundred-kilometre coast might reasonably expect. This absence is not, in the terms this study has been developing, a simple gap. It is itself a symptom of the representational pattern that hydrocoloniality names: the sea is everywhere in Malayalam culture, but those who live from it are systematically at the margins of the critical conversation.

A hydrocolonial reading practice for Malayalam studies would attend, first, to dialect and language as epistemological form rather than regional colour. The work that Anto performs in *Udapluthasathwangel*—preserving the coastal dialect in its specificity and refusing the normalising

pressure of standard literary Malayalam—is itself a critical act, and critics need the conceptual vocabulary to recognise it as such. The Portuguese-inflected vocabulary of Kerala's coastal Catholic communities, the specific lexicon of fishing technology and marine ecology that has no equivalent in standardised Malayalam, and the forms of address and narrative that circulate within coastal communities rather than between them and the educated centre: all of this constitutes an epistemological archive that remains largely unexamined by Malayalam scholarship (Hofmeyr 659–660).

Second, a hydrocolonial reading practice would attend to the temporal dimensions of coastal dispossession, to the slow violence that Nixon identifies as the characteristic mode of structural neglect (Nixon 13–15). This means developing critical tools for reading not only what texts say about the coast but also how they figure time: whether they narrate coastal life in the compressed temporality of crisis and catastrophe, or in the longer, slower temporalities of ecological degradation and structural accumulation.

Third, a hydrocolonial reading practice would attend to the politics of aesthetics, to the question of what the beautiful image of the sea costs, epistemologically and politically, for those whose labour produces and whose lives are defined by the body of water being aestheticized.

Finally, such a practice would need to attend to the institutional conditions of cultural production: who publishes, who funds, who exhibits, who reviews, and who the implied reader or viewer of any given text is assumed to be. The hydrocolonial is not simply a theme or a content; it is a structural condition of cultural production, and no text can be understood apart from the institutional ecology within which it circulates. A reading practice that attends to this dimension will inevitably be attentive to the limits of even the most politically committed texts, including the two remarkable texts this article has tried to read with both generosity and rigour.

Conclusion

The argument this study has pursued is, at its core, a simple one, even if the evidence for it has been complex. Malayalam cultural production has, for most of its modern history, treated the coast as an aesthetic resource and the coastal community as the raw material of sentiment—not a failure of imagination so much as a reflection of the power structures of caste, standardised language, and institutional aesthetic preference that determine which lives are deemed worthy of serious cultural representation. Hydrocoloniality names this condition, and the convergent frameworks of Hofmeyr, Mentz, and Nixon provide the theoretical vocabulary to analyse both its mechanisms and the possibilities of resistance to it.

Udapluthasathwangal and *Kondal* are imperfect but significant attempts to represent the coastal community not as the object of a sympathetic gaze from outside but as an epistemological world with its own integrity, its own language, and its own forms of knowledge about time, ecology, labour, and survival. Both remain, in a sense, still surfacing—partly submerged in the formations they are working to challenge. That the work of surfacing is unfinished is not a reason for critical disappointment; it is a description of what the work of culture actually is: incremental, partial, and dependent on the accumulation of texts, readings, and critical practices that gradually shift the terms of what can be said and how.

What they offer is a set of questions—about language, about time, about the distribution of epistemological authority, and about the politics of the beautiful image—that Malayalam studies does not yet routinely ask. Beginning to ask them is the task that these two texts, in their different ways, demand of their readers.

There is more work to be done. The archive of coastal literature in Malayalam is larger and more varied than two texts from 2024 can represent; earlier works that engaged with coastal communities, some sentimentally and some with greater critical ambition, await rereading through a hydrocolonial lens. The relationship between the coastal communities' own cultural production—oral forms, devotional music, and the political songs of fisher unions—and the mainstream literary and cinematic tradition is a subject that would require its own sustained investigation. The question of how gender intersects with hydrocoloniality, and how the women of fishing communities bear specific forms of the dispossession this study describes, is one this study has touched only obliquely. These are not omissions to be apologised for. They are openings: the measure of how much a hydrocolonial reading practice still has left to do.

The sea from which no one returns, as Aniklethu Sranku says in his coastal dialect, does not wait even a moment. The same might be said of the structural forces that are reshaping Kerala's coast and the communities that live on it: ecological degradation, development pressures, and the slow disappearance of the knowledges that grew from a specific, centuries-long relationship between a people and a body of water. What literary and cinematic culture can do, at its most ambitious and politically awake, is refuse to let that disappearance go unremarked and insist, in language that breathes on its own terms, that those who are being submerged were always, despite everything, subjects. The irony is difficult to ignore: many of Kerala's most celebrated literary festivals take place on the shores of the very sea whose communities remain largely absent from the centre of the cultural conversations they host.

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