

Book Review: *The Silent Witness* (2019) by Anuradha

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Narratives on territorial conquest, occupation and settlement have dominated postcolonial studies for decades. There has been a considerable dearth of fictional accounts surrounding the European invasion of port cities via the sea routes and subsequent trade monopoly over the spices. The Indian Ocean has been the vortex of political activities and cross-cultural links. The ports along the Malabar coastline was of great interest to not just for one; but three competing super-powers namely the Portuguese, the Dutch and British. The trade links commenced with the onslaught of Greek traders who came to ports like Muzhiri or Mucheripatanam (Malabar) and Pum Puhar (Madurai) during 2nd century AD. Experts on Mediterranean maritime history like Vincent A. Smith points out as to how ports like Pum Puhar had the good fortune to attract traders across the globe as they were rich in three precious commodities “Pepper, pearls and beryl” (Smith 400) In fact, historical accounts of Warmington point out as to how there was a drain of Roman wealth as “Romans showed a taste for excessive decoration of fingers and by the use of gems to cover conches, garlands, armour etc. The practice of collecting gems became common during the 1st century AD and Saurus, Julius Caesar, and Marcellus were all collectors of precious stones. (131) However, the last of the European traders who came since 1498, the Portuguese, Dutch and British had imperialistic designs apart from sheer mercenary motives.

The Silent Witness (2019) by Anuradha, (translated from Malayalam by Nirmala Aravind) is a historic novel which explores the descent of Portuguese and Dutch suzerainty in the princely states of Kochi (central part of Kerala). She traverses backwards in time; to explain how these princely states became a pawn to the imperial project, due to their internal dissensions thereby paving way to an easy colonization by Portuguese and Dutch from the 15th to 18th C. In addition, the novel also highlights the ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘shared culture’ which emerged as a result of these trade and colonial interventions. All the historic events of the novel are juxtaposed around the plot to; both ‘hold and foil’ the forthcoming coronation of Kerala Varma as the ruler of Kochi. Running parallel to the plot is; the love interest of Veera Kerala Varma (Kerala Varma’s younger brother) and the niece of rival kingdom’s (Chempakassery) chieftain, Unnimaya.

The novel subtly hints to its audience as to how the Dutch were much better and more popular than the Portuguese. Novelist Anuradha charts out reasons for the latter’s unpopularity; like introduction of opium to masses whose “inordinate consumption” (13) destroyed public health and drained resources. She also directs the reader’s attention to the terror Portuguese ships triggered in the Indian Ocean by their canon-loaded caramel ships, and the restrictions imposed

on ships which did not have a Portuguese trade permit or *cartazas* to ply the Indian Ocean. The novel is equally blatant about the Portuguese forcible conversions and exclusion of the Syrian Christians and their entry to places like Fort Emanuel or Fort Kochi. Nevertheless, many of the historic incidents especially that which deals with the Portuguese has been ardently dealt in Malayalam films like *Urumi*, *Pazhazhi Raja* and in briefer versions in few novels like N.S Madhavan's book *Litanies of Dutch Battery* and Johny Miranda's *Requiem for the Living*.

However, the most refreshing aspect of Anuradha's novel remains her representation of Dutch in Kerala. Very few novelists have covered the socio-political implications of the Dutch regime and the coalition of three rulers of Kerala namely the Zamorins (Samoothiris) of Calicut, the Cochin kings and the Queen of Kollam to oust the Portuguese from power. Towards the concluding part, the novel also highlights the peaceful reign of Veera Kerala Varma under the Dutch overlordship. The novel insinuates the readers to analyse the reason why Kerala became a hotspot for violence and terror and susceptible to the hegemony of foreign invaders.

The novelist has engaged in a meticulous research of the 15 to 17th century and notably included most of the major events that occurred during the period. Anuradha has recreated or fictionalized real historic characters like Itty Achutan Vaidyan of the Kollad family who influenced the Dutch Governor, Van Rheede, with his knowledge of medicinal plants. As the plot progresses the audience is introduced to Itty Achutan's treatment of Van Rheede's painful boil on his foot with courtyard herbs like neem leaves, raw turmeric *horanthus* (186). The successful treatment led to the compilation of *Horticus Malabaricus* or "The Garden of Malabar" which was considered one of the most important treatise on the medicinal plants of Malabar. In addition, the religious tolerance of the Dutch is highlighted repeatedly in the book by contrasting it with the 'forcible conversion of natives' policy adopted by the Portuguese making most of the indigenous natives turn indignantly against the Portuguese rule. Although the book casts the Dutch regime as more benevolent as compared to the Portuguese, a closer look of the sub-text reveal at times; the tyranny and bloodshed Dutch inflicted on the Portuguese women and children while conquering Fort Emanuel popularly known as the jewel of Dutch throne.

Temples and temple festivals are sites of faith and power dynamics and cultural transactions in Kerala society. The novelist has truthfully invoked famous and leading temples of Kerala like the Guruvayoor temple, Vaddakanathan temple, the Poornathrayesha temple, Ambalapuzha temple, adding to the authenticity of the cultural setting of the novel and drawing attention to pivotal role temples played in the lives of royal families. However, the novelist has left out inclusion of a few important temple events like the attack on the famous Guruvayoor temple by the Dutch and razing of the flagstaff which could have further enhanced the authenticity of the novel. In addition, the novel also has a few historic flaws like attributing Zamorin Manavedan's uncle as the composer of *Krishnagiti* (the text of dance form Krishnattam). *Krishnagiti* was actually composed by Prince Manaveda who became the Zamorin in 1665. (Bush 21). Another flaw that can be discerned is the representation of the Vadekkara Palace, the palace of Cochin kings for ages; as the palace of Zamorin Manavedan where he has a clandestine meeting with Kerala Varma.

Running parallel to the political anxieties of the protagonist Kerala Varma and his brother Veera Kerala Varma is the story concerning the closest ally of the Kochi princes, known as the Ali Marrakar. Ali Marrakar and his pirate troops on sea called Marrakar pada supported and defended Kochi at the time of crisis. The other close allies of Samoothiri and Cochin kings like Mangath Achan, Paliyath Achan find a place in the narrative. The book also draws the attention of the readers to the fact that in many princely states it was the Queen who took care of the administrative affairs of the kingdom. For example, the Queen of Kollam not only entertained her

guests at the Puthukulangara Palace but also initiated political discussions. This delineates the power and agency woman had to take decisions and also efficiently execute the same.

The overall novelty of theme in English fiction makes it an excellent read for both book lovers and students of literature and history. In fact, the dual focus on colonial interventions in port cities and the resistance put up by the local rulers against the Portuguese makes it an important text for postcolonial analysis as well.

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So, some of the credibility of Silent Witness finds itself being flushed away before the detectives really have a chance to investigate their suspects. Even as they stand around the public loos, as the coppers sometimes say, theyâ€™re left with nothing to go on. More about: [Silent Witness | Emilia Fox |](#) [Show{{#moreThan3_total}} {{value_total}} {{/moreThan3_total}}](#) comments. Independent culture newsletter. The best in film, music, TV & radio straight to your inbox.