



# Alternative Geographies and Bioregional Aesthetics: A Critical Reading of D. K. Chowta's *Mittabail Yamunakka: A Tale of a Landlord's Household*

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**Abstract**— Study of places form a significant part of contemporary cultural analysis. There are different approaches in spatial literary criticism based on the differences in geographical, political or cultural geographical perspectives. Bioregionalism is one such prominent field of spatial literary analysis. Bioregional orientation in literary criticism recognizes the role of literature in helping people to maintain sustainable relations to the places where they live. *Mittabail Yamunakka* is one of those literary endeavours, 'distinctly regional art,' that attempts to capture the bioregional nature of Tulunadu. The novel, originally written in Tulu language (one of the oldest Dravidian languages), attempts to retrace the historical existence of a human culture that once inhabited a region- scale ecosystem in the South Kannada, in India. The novel that embodies the highly complex socio-cultural history of Tulunadu is an attempt to document the "Tulu-ness" or the "Tuluva" world for non-Tulu speakers. This study seeks to read D. K. Chowta's *Mittabail Yemunakka*, from a bioregional perspective. The novel seems to embody the basic premise of bioregionalism where the natural factors function as a way to envision place. The community life in the region is organized around myths and rituals that carry environmental ethics. This study underlines the ethic of sustainability as the driving force of the community's co-existence. The novel exhibits its bioregional literary consciousness in fictionally documenting Tulunadu's natural territories, local culture, local food systems and environmental ethics. It inspires the modern readers to rethink- to reassess where we are.

**Keywords**— *Tulunadu, Bioregionalism, environmental ethics, bioregional community, reciprocal relationship, memory-space, temporal markers.*



## I. INTRODUCTION

Study of places form a significant part of contemporary cultural analysis. Recent literary studies share this spatial orientation. Spatial literary criticism involves the study of places, experiences of living in places, place-bound identities, experiences of journeys and displacements, spatial connections and memories, spatial consciousness, etc. There are different approaches in spatial literary criticism based on the differences on geographical, political, cultural, geographical, environmental or regional perspectives. Bioregionalism is one such prominent field of spatial literary analysis.

Bioregional orientation in literary criticism recognizes the role of literature in helping people to maintain sustainable relations to the places where they live.

Literature, as a form of cultural expression, has a key role in evoking a bioregional consciousness in the communities and cultures. In *LifePlace*, Robert L. Thayer Jr. proposes that "a distinctly regional art, aesthetics, literature, poetics, and music can evolve from and support bioregional culture" (94). There are various narratives in contemporary culture that reflects this bioregional sentiment. *Mittabail Yamunakka* is one of those literary endeavours, 'distinctly regional art,' that attempts to

capture bioregional nature of the historical landscape of Tulunadu, that once existed in Southern Kannada region in India. This study seeks to read D. K. Chowta's *Mittabail Yemunakka*, from a bioregional perspective. This study is founded on the basic theoretical arguments borrowed from the book *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, edited by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glatfelter, and Karla Armbruster and *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* by Robert L. Thayer Jr.

## II. ALTERNATIVE GEOGRAPHIES AND BIOREGIONAL AESTHETICS IN *MITTABAL YAMUNAKKA*

*Mittabail Yamunakka* seeks to represent the bioregional character of a specific historical place and community named Tulunadu in South Kannada. The novel, originally written in Tulu language (one of the oldest Dravidian languages), attempts to retrace the historical existence of a human culture that once inhabited a region- scale ecosystem. The novel that embodies the highly complex socio-cultural history of Tulunadu is an attempt to document the "Tulu-ness" or the "Tuluva" world for non-Tulu speakers (Bhasthi). Many linguists believe that Tulu is among the oldest languages within the Dravidian language family, with a history of over 2000 years. Tulu Nadu, the region where Tulu is spoken, has its own unique cultural practices and societal structures, including ancestral worship and spiritual traditions. The Tulu people or Tuluvas, the native speakers of the Tulu language, are an ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural group from Southern India. Fostering a sense of belonging and identity, Tulu serves as a linguistic and cultural link among Tulu-speaking communities scattered in various political landscapes. West Asian countries have a sizeable number of Tulu diaspora, apart from diasporic presence elsewhere in the world, but it is in the Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka and Kasaragod district in Kerala that the concentration of Tulu speakers is most seen. Especially in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi, Tulu is the lingua franca and is used extensively by people of all communities and classes even, though Kannada is the language of education and state administration (Bhasthi). Tulu language holds significant importance as it connects people in Coastal Karnataka and Kerala.

In their Introduction to *The Bioregional Imagination*, Lynch, et. al. identifies bioregionalism as environmental ethic unravels in the day- to- day activities of ordinary residents (3). *Mittabail Yamunakka* experiments with the strategy of literary mapping for reimagining the bioregional Tulunadu. The novel offers insight in to the particularities of a unique life-place, its

community, their ecological awareness, its environmentally connected ritual practices, its local culture and local food systems. The organisational force of this community's co-existence is neither national nor political, but a geographically driven one. This community's dwelling in the place is noted by their ethic of sustainability. The cultural identity of inhabitants of Tulunadu is formed in relation with a larger community of natural beings, which goes parallel with the basic premise of bioregionalism where the natural factors function as a way to envision place, "bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings—our local bioregion—rather than, or at least supplementary to, national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of identity" (4). The natural geographical territories and its unique cultural practices set up Tulunadu as a distinct bioregional place. The linguistic cum geographical borders of local bioregions are indicated in the statement "Since they hail from areas south of the Chandragiri River, they speak Malayalam" (Chowta 142); in line, the geographical cum religious borders are expressed in the utterance, "Between Payswini and Nethravathi rivers there were altogether twenty such Bhagavathi temples of Belchappadas [local religious priests]. . ." (144). The uniqueness of Tulunadu is decided both by the natural boundaries with a specific geographic and ecological character and by the unique human culture that exists in this region (1-8). In describing the peculiarities of Tulunadu's human culture, Chowta presents the local myths and rituals, and the celebrations that commemorate them. For instance, the annual event of the buffalo-race with the thirty pairs of buffaloes and the customary cock-fight that form part of this mythical commemoration serve as unique cultural markers of the bioregion. These immaterial cultural traces carve the cultural territory of the village around the *Mittabail guttu* [household] and set its cultural geographic territory against all other places and times.

The Tulunadu community's dwelling in their place is evolving over years. Their inhabitation has been a cultural cum imaginative process. This process of imaginative reinhabiting is significant since, "This idea that indigenous people who have lived mindfully and sustainably in particular places for long periods of time have something to teach us through their stories and related practices is widespread among bioregionalists" (Lynch et al. 12). The continuity of their sustainable way of reinhabiting the land is signaled through various customs and rituals. The existence of a historically connected larger community of human and nonhuman beings is exemplified in the reference to the memory of

departed ancestors" (34). It is again hinted in the reference to the monument constructed in the memory of the dead (18). The same concept is also hinted in the detailed description of the feast of the Myth of *Malaraya* [local deity]. The feast helps people to re-imagine the places where they live. The material traces laid on the landscape in the form of the monument simultaneously embody the mythical power of the god on the one hand and the human bond with nature, on the other hand. The statement, "That is the custom to which the landlord's household at Mittabail has always adhered to," etch out the temporal and spatial boundary of the bioregional landscape of Tulunadu. The reference to the 'custom' as an 'always adhered to' practice evoke a historical consciousness. The festive occasion of the ritual of setting up of the sprawling *bakimar* field [paddy field] in the Mittabail *guttu* and the reference that it is an annual practice, places the territories of this bioregion in time and place. It uncovers a bioregion with specific historical, geographic and cultural boundary. The ritual suggests that Tulunadu has a long ecological tradition and a unique cultural history stretching from a distant past to the recent present. The customary practices even establish a kind of temporal boundary by connecting people of these days with people of those days. When the author says that "This custom is not found in other households," it is clear that, the unique cultural practices and exclusive historical tradition, place this bioregion as different from any other local/ national/ regional geography (6).

The community life in the region is organized around myths and rituals that embody environmental ethics. In "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," the philosopher Jim Cheney points to the myths and rituals of indigenous people as models of bioregional narratives that reflect and maintain sustainable relationships between humans and their natural environments; As he argues, these myths and rituals locate the people associated with them "in the moral space of defining relations" and incorporate natural entities into their sense of moral community (126). Bioregional consciousness of *Mittabail Yamunakka* is most evident in its reference to the Myth of *Malaraya* and the ritual that commemorate this myth. This "ritual of setting up of the sprawling *bakimar* field for agricultural operations" incorporates the three-in-one celebrations of the setting up of the paddy field, the feast of the newly harvested rice, and the ritual offerings to the family deity, *Malaraya* (6). This annual celebration is a unique practice in that it connects at once the human and the non-human agents, the living and the non-living. In integrating human beings, nature and divine entities in a single string, the ritual seem to encompass ecological, sociological and moral values.

The significance of the customary practices held in the region presented in *Mittabail* can be read in connection with Robert L. Thayer Jr. observations made in *Life-Place*:

The incongruity between our culturally constructed districts, zones, and networks and the natural abiotic and biotic tendencies of the lands upon which we live can be traced to the ways in which we understand where we are. To a great extent, we have forgotten where we live because we have ignored the natural dimension of the land. This incongruity is one of perception, scale, and time. (8)

The feast of the newly harvested rice can be decoded as a celebration of community's reclaiming of the 'natural dimension of the land'. It gives a glimpse of the unique assemblages of lives that inhabit a bioregion formed around the Mittabail household in Tulunadu. The entities that inhabit this unique bioregion include the members of the Mittabail house [house name], members of the Majalody household [house name], the tenants and the farmhands, bondsmen of Mugera community [caste based community in South India] and their families, family deities including mythical characters like the deity of *Malaraya* and the spirit medium (god-man). It also encompasses commemoration of the dead, the process of paying respect to the land of the fresh paddy field, chosen agricultural crops like *atikara* [special rice], incorporation of animals like buffaloes and oxen, fighting cocks, etc. The incorporation of animals, birds, land, landscape and nature in to the human festivals held to commemorate the divine entities reflects this bioregion's deeper understanding of the places and networks where they really are. Instead of treating themselves to be the 'residents of human compartments,' the inhabitants of this bioregion share an ecological consciousness about the natural abiotic and biotic tendencies that are part and parcel of their dwelling (Thayer Jr. 8). This reveals this people's perception of where they live and the natural dimension of the land that encompasses layers natural and cultural. It enables the region-scale-community to stay related to the "essential structure and function of the natural living systems upon which" they ultimately depend (Thayer Jr. 8).

The building blocks of the spatio-cultural/natural network that unite the bioregional community include factors like natural geographic territories, local political organization, religious activities, shared beliefs in myths and rituals, collective memories, orally communicated historical knowledge, multiply situated temporal

consciousness, linguistic peculiarities and native systems of communication. These factors are intertwined systems that exist on mutual agreement and reciprocal relationship. Chowta provides the testimony for religious intervention both in the regional level politics and the domestic power relation. For instance, the inevitable presence of the religious priest *Tantri* of Badaje [religious priest of a particular place] is sought in the coronation of the Mayippadi king [king of the region named Mayippadi]. The intervention of the deity of *Malaraya* and his human mediator is inevitable in the event of appointing the head of the Mittabail household (11); This reciprocal relationship is also seen in the event of the festival of the fresh rice, where the functioning authority of Mittabail household seeks the blessings of the religious priest *Tantri* of Badaje (32-33). The land-human-divine triad that come together to bless the human interventions on the land is suggested in the rituals, prayers and religious ceremonies in the event of the brothers Manjanana and Kinhana's formal settling down at the village of Mittabail too.

The characters and communities in the novel form stronger bonds of identity with their natural regions. As we see in this pace-based community, the 'human districts' are not "unrelated to local natural conditions" (Thayer Jr 8). Various rituals, celebrations, customs, localized arts, stories, myths, and music connect them to local natural traditions. The unique configuration that bring together the divine, the natural and the human/ dead , can be seen in the reference to the 'flower-decorated post' arranged near the monument constructed in the memory of the dead: "It was part of the memorial built at the site where the founder of the Mittabail *guttu* was buried" (18). This is also significant that supreme power *Malarayabhuta*'s shrine [shrine of the deity named *Malaraya*] is constructed near the racing field. Both the monument that commemorate the dead members of the family and the shrine that honour the divine entity are respectfully placed in the bounty of nature. The novel offers lessons of reinhabitation and 'learning to live- in-place,' unravel in everyday cultural practices and unique annual ceremonies. Tulunadu's everyday life reflects the words of Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann about the members of bioregional community, "following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long- term occupancy of that site" (qtd. in Andruss, et al. 35). The ritualistic food served in honor of the departed ancestors of a family in the Mittabail *guttu* in connection with the feast of the newly harvested rice indicates this long- term occupancy of the site: "Inside the house they had arranged rows of sixteen plantain leaves in which rice,

chicken, fish and other dishes were served in memory of departed ancestors" (34). While Food here serves as a temporary monument that commemorate the ancestors, the use of plantain leaves to serve the locally made and regionally preferred dishes of rice, chicken, fish and other dishes indicate the unique blend of ecological closeness, ritualistic purity, exclusively chosen social connections and bioregionally connected local culture.

Bioregional community in the novel displays an "evolutionary tendency of humans to attach themselves to place and to one another" (Thayer Jr. 3). The sense of connectedness exhibited by the community reterritorialise them as an 'alternative geography' itelf (Thayer Jr. 59). The bond between Mugera community and Mittabail family reminds a "Bioregenerative planning evolves from the bottom up from groups of individuals who meet to resolve sticky problems, identify with specific resource conservation issues, protect certain natural or human communities, or seek a deeper moral basis for life itself" (Thayer Jr. 170). Mugera community, the older generation of bondsmen of Mittabail, are like members of the Mittabail family. This relationship is slightly hierarchical in nature as is revealed in their social / spatial organization. The colony of the Mugera bondsmen is located on the bowl-like field, down the hillock, on the edges of the paddy fields of the Mittabail family. They are dependent on the lord's family for their daily needs and are bound to work for the landlord (Chowta 26-27). However, the bond between the communities is very strong. The landlord may keep friendly relationship with this community, entrust them with the responsibilities of agricultural activities and defend their wrong doings. Their reciprocal relationship "embodies a return to participatory democracy and face-to-face communication requiring time and patience" (Thayer Jr. 170). Similar pattern of connection can be seen in the alliance between the members of Mittabail *guttu* and the members of the Bhandara *Mutt* [House name], the linguistic community of Konkanis [caste name] residing at Manjeshwara. They are like one family and they "share honour and prestige, triumphs, and travails in equal measure" (Chowta 106). The references in the novel about the inter-connected communities who inhabited this region scale ecosystem include the Jaina community (26), Mugera community of bondsmen (24-27), Brahmins, Christian community (17) Muslims (28), Konkanis (92), etc.

Bioregional community of Tulunadu share a culture of association, "deeper notions of the human culture of place: associating, celebrating, and interpreting what it means to share a life-place" (Thayer 9). The community is bound by agricultural practices and local celebrations. Festivals gather people and assert their sense

of a community. The local feast and the accompanying the celebratory fanfare with cock-fight (Chowta 6), celebratory buffalo-race (5), dances in the night (6), family meetings (21), etc. announce the collective spirit of the people and their silent agreement to be part of the same life-place. The network of customs and practices that link people of this bioregional community is suggested in speaking about Mittabail Guttu's connection with other households in the region, "Routine agricultural operations, clashes and fights, racing buffaloes, fighting cocks, -they are really no different from one another"(39-40). Being the members of the same community, the inhabitants go through similar day- to- day activities of agricultural jobs, local entertainments in the form of buffalo race or cock-fighting, enmities, coalition and alliance, etc. The bioregional life seems to share "a mutual community of reciprocity between human and nonhuman life" (Thayer Jr. 61). These daily practices enstrengthen both their community bond and their sustainable relations to those places.

The bioregional community also shares a 'memory-space' (Thayer Jr. 61). Cultural, collective, communal and mythical memories serve the purpose of assembling the members of the bioregion and invoke in them a sense of rootedness and a sense of connectedness. The cultural memories about locally important events are formed, added with colour and communicated orally as reflected in the reference to Manjanaalva as the "famed founder of Mittabail house" (Chowta 15). These kind of memories serve to authenticate the family history by recording and reflecting its ancient origin. Collective memories, which are shared by the bioregional community, are communicated from generation to generation. In speaking about the clash between the Mugera community and the Jaina people, the authorial voice state that "the memory of the Macabre events surrounding it has not been erased from the minds of the people till today" (26). The local histories remain alive in the cultural memory of the people, even when they are not officially recorded or communicated. Equally important, the mythical memory of the community around the deity *Malaraya*, alternatively creates a place to celebrate sustainable agricultural ethic. A landscape of memory can also be traced in the novel in its numerous descriptions of the bonds of love or hatred that unites or separates individuals or groups (Chowta 26-27; 106).

The bioregion in this fictional geography has its own time-scale too. The time-scale in the novel is multidimensional. The happenings in the village are spoken with reference to various temporal markers ranging from local events to the global happenings. Sense of time is evoked against the local temporal markers of religious

festivals, ritual ceremonies, agricultural festivals or the birth or death of family members and the spatial displacement of people from one region to the other. In addition, temporal markers of this cultural geography are different from the authoritative historical templates. There are such unique time frames like *Sankranti* day [transition period from one month to the other] when women used to offer tender coconuts to *Malaraya daiva* (the god *Malaraya*), the day of the feast of the newly harvested rice and the celebration of *Bisu*, that is the regional verion of new year and the ritually important day of *Malaraya nema* [day for worshipping the deity named *Malaraya*] (87). Festivals function as occasions for this bioregional group's cultural identity performances. Metaphysical importances of the festival in this life place are that they are reminder of the cyclical, seasonal world. Cultural significance lies in the fact that they reflect the rhythm of a bioregional community life. This is how a community re-imagines itself around their natural place-lore.

Geographical variations also affect the signifying systems and means of communication (Ryan 14). The bioregional community in the novel has its own systems of communication. The way of communicating information and messages in an era that lacked modern technological devices is striking. The casual talks, rumors, scandals, personal communication, messages send via official and unofficial messengers, etc. function as localized systems of communication. Thus in describing the news about the impending political attack on regions near Kasaragod and Mangalore, the author hints at a locally existing communication strategy, "Manjana used to get such news from the network of espionage he had among Bearys and Dombas [local groups]" (139). In a similar fashion Tantri of Badaje happens to know about Baarabail Biranna's plan to attack temples at Varkady and Badaje from his network of people from various sects of society (142-143). While it is an official messenger from the King who informs Manjana about his selection in to King's army (75), it is a personal messenger send by the Badaje Tantri who instructs him to meet the Tantri (the priest) urgently (139). The networks of human relationships that operated at multiple levels circulate information and communicate messages among the members of a community, and enable them to reterritorialize their places of existence.

The systems of power distribution among the various members of the family is strikingly unique in this cultural geography. Thus the people who exist in the different layers along caste, class, gender and age group, join to run the power systems, without any rigid written rules. This community manages things via customary practices and mutual agreement. Thus both the male and the female member involve in the governance of the

Mittabilg *guttu* (9); two different caste-based communities, Bunt community and Mugera Community of bondsmen, run together the agricultural management; matrilineal tradition prevailing in the region encourage a democratic division of domestic power, whereby “the outer face of management is male, but inside the strings of power are held by the woman” (9); religious festival exemplify this participatory politic whereby equal respect and honor is extended to nonhuman agents of land, deity and the animal world in the ritualistic celebrations (9,12). A critical reading of these instances in the novel offers a glimpse of the participatory political set-up and power distribution that bring about different sorts of human and non-human agents in a bioregional community. These instances can also be considered as ‘heterotopic’ moments of social equality and ecological democracy (Foucault).

### III. CONCLUSION

This critical study in this manner redefines *Mittabail Jamunakka* as a fictional mapping of a local place with bioregional character and environmental ethics. The novel exhibits its bioregional literary consciousness in fictionally documenting Tulunadu’s natural territories, local culture, local food systems and environmental ethics. The community in the novel seems to inhabit the landscape along with a community of natural beings. This study underlines the bioregional social group’s ethic of sustainability as the driving force of the community’s co-existence. In the course of critically examining the novel, this study points to the way by which natural factors function as a way to envision place.

*Mittabail Jamunakka* captures environmental ethic unraveled in the day- to- day activities of its ordinary residents. The book discusses the ethic of sustainable development operates at local places and scales where human life actually takes place, since “It makes little sense to discuss ‘sustainable development’ at the global level if no thought is given to the local places and scales where human life actually takes place” (Thayer Jr. 8). It inspires the modern readers to rethink and to reassess where we are. The novel’s significance is that it inspires the modern readers who are increasingly deterritorialized and detached from their places in their own regions, to reterritorialize, to reimagine and to reinhabit their life-places.

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