



Viapolitics in S. K. Pottekkatt's *Oru Desathinte Katha*

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Citation: Binoy Varakil, et.al (2024). Viapolitics in S. K. Pottekkatt's *Oru Desathinte Katha*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(2) 2116-2118

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i2.11021

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an extensive study of the concept of 'viapolitics' in relation to S. K. Pottekkatt's celebrated Malayalam novel, *Oru Desathinte Katha* (The Story of a Locale). Drawing on the theoretical framework of *Viapolitics: Borders, Migration, and the Power of Locomotion* (2022), edited by William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani, the study examines how movement—both physical and emotional—becomes a political, cultural, and existential act. 'Viapolitics' theorizes the politics of mobility through vehicles, infrastructures, and routes that structure the migrant experience. By applying this concept to Pottekkatt's semi-autobiographical narrative, this paper argues that *Oru Desathinte Katha* operates as both a travel narrative and a political cartography, mapping Kerala's transition through colonial, postcolonial, and global modernities. Sreedharan's journeys, from his native Athiranippadam to far-flung parts of the world, become symbolic of the human struggle for belonging, identity, and meaning in a world governed by mobility and displacement. The novel's depictions of migration—from personal voyages to collective displacements—are examined through the lens of infrastructural and emotional routes that echo the political landscapes explored in *Viapolitics*.

Keywords: Viapolitics, Mobility, Migration, S. K. Pottekkatt, *Oru Desathinte Katha*, Borders, Infrastructure, Kerala Literature, Modernity, Identity, Postcolonial Studies

Introduction

Migration, as a central trope of modernity, connects the movement of bodies with the circulation of ideas, cultures, and power. Literature, especially postcolonial fiction, has long functioned as an archive of such movement. S. K. Pottekkatt's *Oru Desathinte Katha* captures a unique intersection of the local and the global, tracing the evolution of Athiranippadam—a microcosmic village in Kerala—through decades of social and political transformation. The novel chronicles the protagonist Sreedharan's departure from, and return to, this landscape, reflecting not only his physical travels but also the emotional and epistemological journeys that define his identity. This paper applies the framework of viapolitics, as proposed by Walters, Heller, and Pezzani, to analyze Sreedharan's narrative of travel as a form of border politics. *Viapolitics* (2022) introduces the notion that 'vehicles, infrastructures, and routes' are not merely passive instruments of travel but dynamic sites of power, surveillance, and knowledge. By interpreting Pottekkatt's novel through this framework, we uncover how mobility—whether through ships, roads, or memories—structures both personal transformation and collective history.

Literature Review

The theoretical origins of viapolitics stem from Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, which emphasizes how life itself becomes subject to political control. Building on Foucault's ideas, scholars like Walters, Heller, and Pezzani have articulated viapolitics as a framework for understanding how mobility is governed and contested. In *Viapolitics: Borders, Migration, and the Power of Locomotion* (Duke University Press, 2022), the editors and contributors examine how vehicles—ships, trains, trucks—become spaces where migration, surveillance, and power intersect. Walters and Pezzani's analysis of ships like the *Ocean Lady* and the *Komagata Maru* illustrates how routes of migration are shaped by geopolitics, turning mobility itself into a contested terrain. Pottekkatt's *Oru Desathinte Katha*, though written in a different temporal and cultural

context, parallels these concerns. The protagonist Sreedharan's migrations—from Kerala to Africa, Europe, and back—can be read as 'routes of transformation' that reveal the politics of belonging and displacement in a colonially mediated world. Previous studies of Pottekkatt's work, such as those by M. Leelavathi and K. M. George, have primarily focused on his literary style and cultural significance. However, few have examined his fiction through the lens of mobility and geopolitical discourse. By connecting *Oru Desathinte Katha* to contemporary migration studies, this paper contributes a new perspective to both literary and postcolonial scholarship.

Objectives

1. To explore how the concept of viapolitics can be applied to the analysis of *Oru Desathinte Katha*.
2. To interpret the protagonist Sreedharan's journeys as political and existential acts of migration.
3. To identify how Athiranippadam operates as a geographic and emotional space structured by mobility.
4. To analyze how Pottekkatt's narrative reflects Kerala's transformation through colonial and postcolonial modernities.
5. To situate *Oru Desathinte Katha* within global frameworks of movement, displacement, and the politics of routes.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative analytical method, combining textual interpretation with theoretical insights from mobility studies and postcolonial theory. Primary analysis is based on close reading of *Oru Desathinte Katha*, with particular focus on passages depicting migration, travel, and return. These are juxtaposed with conceptual elements from *Viapolitics*, especially the ideas of routes, vehicles, and infrastructures as spaces of political significance. Supplementary references include Foucault's biopolitical framework, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization, and Edward Said's writings on exile and displacement.

Analysis and Discussion

In *Viapolitics*, Walters et al. introduce the concept of vehicles as 'moving locations of governance,' where human mobility is constantly regulated. Sreedharan's life embodies this viapolitical tension—his movement between continents reflects both the privilege and alienation of the modern subject. His journeys across Africa and Europe are marked by encounters with borders—legal, cultural, and emotional—that mirror the geopolitical realities of colonialism and postcolonial identity. Like the 'Ocean Lady' in Walters's study, Sreedharan's voyages reveal how the means of movement themselves—ships, trains, and roads—mediate human experience and power relations.

The village of Athiranippadam functions as a 'route of return,' symbolizing the longing for rootedness amidst perpetual mobility. When Sreedharan revisits his homeland after decades, he confronts the dissonance between memory and modernization. The physical geography of Athiranippadam, altered by time and development, parallels the internal landscapes of its people—displaced by social change and migration. Pottekkatt's narration transforms this space into a living archive of Kerala's modern history, where migration is not only physical movement but also cultural translation.

The disappearance of the Muslim family from Athiranippadam is a subtle but powerful viapolitical moment. It gestures toward forced migration and communal displacement in the wake of the Malabar Rebellion. Here, Pottekkatt anticipates what Walters et al. call the 'politics of routes,' wherein infrastructures of travel intersect with state power and social conflict. Just as the *Komagata Maru* exemplified the colonial control of maritime routes, the migrations within Pottekkatt's novel expose local forms of border-making, class segregation, and social exclusion.

Sreedharan's global travels also serve as acts of epistemic exploration. His encounters with diverse cultures echo the 'mobile forces of knowledge' discussed in *Viapolitics*. Travel becomes a way of knowing—an act of self-construction through movement. Yet, as he returns to Athiranippadam, he realizes that the journey has transformed not only his perception but also the meaning of home itself. In this sense, the novel engages with the philosophical core of viapolitics—the idea that motion itself generates meaning, shaping both subjectivity and social geography.

Conclusion

Through the framework of viapolitics, *Oru Desathinte Katha* emerges as a deeply political narrative about routes, displacements, and the infrastructures of belonging. Sreedharan's journey from and back to Athiranippadam captures the paradox of modern migration: the desire for rootedness amid continuous movement. By foregrounding the politics of travel, Pottekkatt transforms the traditional travelogue into a meditation on existence, memory, and identity. The novel, like the ship *Ocean Lady* in Walters's study, becomes a symbolic vessel—carrying not only its protagonist but also the histories, cultures, and struggles of an entire community navigating modernity's tides.

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