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# "Via And Border-Making in *Karikkottakkari*: Landscapes of Migration and Exile in The Light of Viapolitics"

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**Abstract**

In this seminar paper I explore the interlocking arenas of migration, exile and border-making in Vinoy Thomas's Malayalam novel *Karikkottakkari*, situating its narrative of north Kerala settlement and migrant communities within the wider framework of landscapes of mobility. The novel's depiction of a remote village in Malabar, populated by migrants from central and southern Kerala, reveals how migration is not simply a spatial relocation but a re-shaping of territory, identity and belonging. I argue that the concept of Viapolitics—as developed by William Walters, Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani—provides an incisive theoretical lens to read this text: by foregrounding the "via" (vehicles, routes, infrastructures, geophysical trajectories) and the politics of movement and bordering that govern migrant pathways, the novel may be read as both a chronicle of settlement and a critique of the spatial regimes it invokes. The migrants' journey into *Karikkottakkari* entails not only physical movement but the creation of new social and symbolic borders: between old homeland and new land, between insiders and outsiders, between origin and exile. The landscape of settlement becomes a border-zone—a space of belonging and otherness. Through close reading of key passages, I examine how mobility infrastructures (roads, dialects, settlement plots), geophysical terrain (hills, forests, fringe territory) and community practices in the novel enact viapolitical logics: the "via" is not neutral, it is governed, policed, shaped by power relations, and in turn shapes migrant identity and exile. I also show how the novel portrays a persistent longing for roots—racial, geographical, ritualistic and religious—that motivates migration and settlement, and gives rise to border-making as much as border-crossing. In conclusion, I suggest that human beings' enduring tendency to search for their roots drives the formation of borders—territorial, cultural and symbolic—and that migration, exile and settlement must be understood as processes of root-seeking and border-making, not solely as displacement.

**Keywords:** Migration; Exile; Border-making; Viapolitics; Locomotion; Routes and infrastructure; Indian Malayalam literature; Kerala migration; Landscape; Identity; Colonial and Post-colonial mobility.

## Introduction:

Migration—whether compelled by economic necessity, environmental stress, or historical displacement—has long defined the human condition. The narratives of migration encapsulate not only spatial relocations but also the transformation of landscapes, identities, and belonging. Vinoy Thomas's *Karikkottakkari* (2014) emerges from this matrix of movement. Set in the northern Kerala village of Karikkottakkari, the novel chronicles the settlement of migrants from southern Kerala into the uninhabited highlands of Malabar. These settlers, driven by the dream of land ownership and escape from feudal poverty, transform the wilderness into cultivable terrain—but at a cost. As forests are felled and the ecological order disrupted, the novel traces a cultural metamorphosis where landscapes become both home and exile, border and belonging.

*Karikkottakkari* thus operates as a microcosm of the modern world's paradoxical relationship with migration: a pursuit of rootedness that produces new frontiers and exclusions. Its narrative of displacement mirrors the environmental, economic, and spiritual crises underlying the history of internal migration in Kerala. The settlers' attempts to domesticate a foreign landscape are emblematic of what William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani theorize as "viapolitics"—the politics of movement itself, where roads, vehicles, and routes are not mere infrastructures but instruments of governance, control, and identity formation.

This study argues that *Karikkottakkari* reimagines the Malabar migration as a viapolitical act: a negotiation of power through movement, where the very "via"—the routes, pathways, and terrains of migration—becomes a political and ethical site. The paper explores how the novel reveals migration as both an emancipatory project and an ecological intrusion. It further interrogates how exile and border-making coexist within the migrant imagination—how the search for home and belonging inadvertently reproduces new borders, both spatial and cultural.

The paper proceeds from the premise that migration is a double-edged phenomenon. It liberates individuals from feudal stagnation but simultaneously binds them to new forms of territorial and ecological. Within this paradox, *Karikkottakkari* dramatizes what Ranabir Samaddar calls "the politics of autonomy" and what Arjun Appadurai terms "the production of locality." The migrants' labor constructs new geographies, but

their very act of settlement becomes an ecological and cultural border-making process.

Critical responses to *Karikkottakkari* have primarily focused on its portrayal of social realism, religious tension, and moral decay within migrant communities. Few studies, however, approach it through the lens of ecocriticism, migration theory, or viapolitics.

Malayalam critics such as M. Mukundan and Paul Zacharia have acknowledged Thomas's capacity to capture the "burning undercurrents of a migrant village" (Mukundan 2016), while scholars like T. Sasidharan view the novel as a "socio-psychological exploration of rootlessness." Yet these readings seldom engage with the infrastructural and spatial politics that underlie the novel's portrayal of migration.

The theoretical framework of Viapolitics, developed by William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani, is especially relevant here. In Viapolitics: Borders, Migration, and the Power of Locomotion (Duke UP, 2022), the editors argue that mobility infrastructures—roads, ships, vehicles, and pathways—are not neutral. They are "technologies of governance" that organize migration and determine who moves, how they move, and with what consequences. Reading *Karikkottakkari* through this lens shifts the focus from the migrant as an isolated figure to the routes and landscapes that condition their movement.

The concept also resonates with Arjun Appadurai's ideas of "ethnoscapes" and "ideoscapes" (Modernity at Large, 1996), where mobility produces hybrid spaces and identities. Similarly, Anna Tsing's Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection (2005) explores how local encounters with mobility and capitalism create uneven geographies of progress.

Within Indian literary studies, the Malabar migration has received anthropological attention in works like P. Sanal Mohan's Modernity of Slavery and J. Devika's writings on Kerala's social transformations. Yet few have examined how the landscape of migration itself becomes a narrative device—a border zone where ecological, religious, and class conflicts intersect.

Therefore, this study positions itself within a growing field of mobility and border studies, bridging literature, geography, and political theory. It extends the conversation begun by Walters et al. to the South Indian context, arguing that the infrastructure of migration—the "via"—in *Karikkottakkari* shapes not only space but also identity and belonging.

The concept of viapolitics, as articulated by Walters, Heller, and Pezzani, reframes migration studies by shifting attention from borders to the routes that connect them. Traditional border theory often treats migration as a confrontation with the state's territorial limits. Viapolitics, however, explores the journeys themselves—the roads, checkpoints, vehicles, and infrastructures that govern how migration unfolds. It is, in essence, the politics of the via.

In *Karikkottakkari,* the very geography of Malabar—its red laterite soil, dense forests, and rugged hills—becomes the medium of such viapolitical negotiation. The migrants' movement from Travancore to *Karikkottakkari* involves the transformation of topography: new paths are carved, forests are cleared, and rivers are bridged. Each act of movement inscribes power relations onto the land. The novel's realism captures this with visceral clarity, portraying migration as both an assertion of human agency and a colonization of nature.

Viapolitics invites us to read these movements not as neutral acts of survival but as governed mobilities. In the novel, vehicles, roads, and pathways signify aspiration and control. They symbolize the state's extension into wilderness and the settlers' ambition to domesticate nature. Yet these infrastructures also trap them: once routes of hope, they become routes of confinement, binding them to a land that resists domestication.

This perspective aligns with Michel Foucault's idea of governmentality—the subtle ways in which power regulates life and movement. Migration in *Karikkottakkari* is both self-directed and systemically managed; it reproduces structures of inequality even as it promises liberation. Walters et al. describe this as the "politics of locomotion": the materiality of vehicles, ships, and roads becomes an extension of sovereignty.

Through this theoretical lens, the migrants' journey in *Karikkottakkari* exemplifies the transformation of mobility into a site of power. Migration is not merely a passage—it is a negotiation with the infrastructures that define who can move, who remains, and who becomes alien even within new territories.

Vinoy Thomas's *Karikkottakkari* opens within the landscapes of north Malabar, a terrain historically shaped by waves of internal migration from Travancore and Central Kerala during the mid-20th century. The novel fictionalizes this movement into the village of *Karikkottakkari*—an imagined settlement resembling the borderlands of Kannur and Wayanad—where displaced communities arrive in search of cultivable land. Migration here is neither a triumphant narrative of progress nor a linear passage from deprivation to abundance. Instead, it unfolds as an ongoing negotiation with an unfamiliar ecology, where the forest, the soil, and even the climate resist domestication.

Thomas transforms this historical reality into a metaphor for cultural and ecological dislocation. The migrants' attempt to civilize the wilderness

becomes a symbolic reenactment of humanity's broader anthropocentric enterprise—the transformation of natural landscapes into human-centered geographies. The settlers clear forests, drain wetlands, and build homesteads, believing that ownership and cultivation equate to belonging. Yet, as the narrative reveals, their settlement reproduces new hierarchies of exclusion: between the early settlers and later arrivals, between the "locals" and the "outsiders," and between the living and the land they claim.

The ecological undertone is central to this reading. The once untamed *Karikkottakkari* stands as an archive of environmental trauma, its soil absorbing both the migrants' labor and their suffering. The novel's imagery of "blackened roots" and "parched fields" becomes an ecological allegory—an indictment of the human desire to conquer nature. The migrants' journey is thus not only a geographical displacement but a moral one: they abandon the deep ecological consciousness that once connected humans to the natural order, embracing instead an anthropocentric model of survival and expansion.

Through the lens of Viapolitics, *Karikkottakkari* can be read as a study of how the politics of infrastructure shapes the migrant experience. The novel consistently foregrounds the "via"—the routes, vehicles, and terrains that enable and constrain movement.

For instance, the settlers' journey to *Karikkottakkari* involves a perilous traversal through river crossings, narrow cart tracks, and forest trails. These routes, though seemingly natural, are socially produced spaces of governance. As William Walters notes, "mobility infrastructures are never neutral—they inscribe and reproduce power relations" (Viapolitics, 2022). In the novel, the first generation of migrants experiences the journey as a form of liberation, a rupture from feudal bondage. However, as the settlement matures, these same routes become mechanisms of surveillance, debt, and control. Roads bring not only goods but also landlords, officials, and moneylenders. The "via" thus transforms from a route of freedom to a channel of regulation.

This transformation reflects what Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani describe as "the ambivalence of locomotion"—where movement both enables and disciplines subjects. The very act of travel, in *Karikkottakkari,* generates a new geography of control. Vehicles and pathways mark not only progress but also belonging and exclusion. Those who can move—traders, landlords, or bureaucrats—occupy a superior position in the new social hierarchy, while those confined to the village's periphery become the new "exiled within."

The novel traces three generations of migrants, each representing a distinct phase of settlement and identity formation.The First Generation (Pioneers): Characters such as Eranimose, Kuttappan, and Devassy represent the initial wave of migrants from Central Kerala. They embody resilience, courage, and spiritual faith. Their migration is a response to economic despair in Travancore, where landlessness and caste oppression forced them into exile. The wilderness of *Karikkottakkari* is both a threat and a promise—a blank canvas for their dreams. These settlers cut through forests, battle malaria, and survive isolation. Their relationship with the land is intimate but violent; they view nature as something to be conquered, yet they also experience reverence for its mystery.

The Second Generation (Settlers): The children of the pioneers—like Thomachan, Mariyakutty, and Chacko—inherit the land but lose the spiritual connection their parents maintained. For them, migration is no longer a quest but a memory. Their identity oscillates between pride in settlement and anxiety over legitimacy. They witness the ecological degradation caused by over-cultivation and deforestation. Their sense of belonging is fractured: they are neither native to the soil nor fully alien.

The Third Generation (Exiles): By the time of the novel's later chapters, migration has turned inward. Characters like Aby and Sini, descendants of the first settlers, feel estranged from both land and community. Their migration takes a psychological form—urban migration, educational mobility, or the search for opportunities abroad. Their displacement is not geographic but existential. In Viapolitical terms, they inhabit a "post-mobility" space: surrounded by routes but disconnected from roots.

Across generations, Thomas portrays migration as a cyclical drama of belonging and alienation. Each generation moves farther away from its ecological and cultural origins, revealing how settlement itself becomes another form of exile.

Borders in *Karikkottakkari* are not limited to physical demarcations; they are social, religious, and emotional boundaries that evolve within the migrant community. Initially, the borders are geographical—the boundary between the known and the unknown, between Travancore and Malabar. But as the settlement grows, new borders emerge: between Catholics and Protestants, landlords and laborers, men and women.

Thomas's narrative demonstrates how border-making is inherent in migration. The settlers' attempt to define ownership of land mirrors humanity's broader impulse to mark and control space. This aligns with Walters's assertion that "the making of routes inevitably entails the making of borders." Every path, once forged, delineates who belongs within it and who does not.

The irony of *Karikkottakkari* lies in the settlers' reproduction of the very hierarchies they once escaped. Having fled feudalism, they recreate it in

miniature. Their desire for rootedness manifests as exclusion—of later migrants, of lower castes, and of the land itself. The wilderness, once a symbol of freedom, becomes a fenced territory.

From a Viapolitical standpoint, this reflects the feedback loop between movement and containment: the routes that liberate also enclose. As Charles Heller argues, "the politics of mobility is always shadowed by the politics of immobilization." The roads of *Karikkottakkari* both connect and divide, both promise belonging and perpetuate exile.

The novel's closing imagery evokes a haunting sense of ecological reckoning. The once-verdant landscape of *Karikkottakkari* turns barren; floods and diseases revisit the village as if reclaiming what was taken. The deforestation and overexploitation by migrants trigger a form of what Deep Ecologists like Arne Naess describe as "ecological retaliation."

Here, Thomas's narrative intersects Viapolitics with Deep Ecology. The routes of migration, which symbolized progress, become pathways of ecological decay. The settlers' roads and farms scar the land, transforming the forest into a site of mourning. The landscape becomes sentient—a silent witness to human greed.

In one striking scene, the village's stream dries up, forcing the community to dig deeper wells, only to find poisoned water. This metaphor recalls Carl Sagan's warning that "the Earth is not a limitless resource—it is a fragile organism." The poisoning of *Karikkottakkari's* soil and water symbolizes the collapse of both ecological and moral balance.

In this sense, the novel extends beyond the human story. It exposes how border-making—between human and nonhuman, civilization and wilderness—inevitably leads to catastrophe. The "via" that connected the settlers to prosperity also connected them to destruction.

By the end of *Karikkottakkari*, exile becomes the defining condition of existence. The migrants' descendants no longer recognize the land as home. The novel's tone shifts from realism to existential reflection, echoing what Homi K. Bhabha calls "the unhomely condition"—a state where home and world are indistinguishable.

The Viapolitical framework helps articulate this paradox: movement, once a means of escape, becomes the essence of alienation. Roads and routes persist, but belonging disappears. The very infrastructures that sustained migration now testify to loss.

Thomas's characters search for their roots—racial, geographical, and ritualistic—but each discovery deepens their estrangement. In doing so, the novel reveals a universal truth: the human compulsion to seek roots inevitably creates borders. Every claim to belonging excludes someone else. The landscape of *Karikkottakkari* thus becomes a metaphor for the human condition—restless, root-seeking, and perpetually in exile.

In *Karikkottakkari,* migration is not a linear journey but a recursive process that shapes and reshapes the self and the landscape. Through Viapolitics, the novel reveals how routes, roads, and infrastructures of movement become instruments of both liberation and control. The settlers' pursuit of home and identity generates new borders—geographical, ecological, and moral.

Thomas's narrative resonates deeply with the global anxieties of displacement and belonging. It reminds us that every movement across space is also a movement across ethics—that the roads we build toward freedom often lead us back into confinement.

The theoretical triad of William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani's Viapolitics offers a radical vocabulary for re-imagining the politics of migration in *Karikkottakkari.* Walters defines viapolitics as "the study of how routes, corridors, and conveyances become political instruments." Heller and Pezzani expand this view by arguing that "mobility infrastructures are not only material paths but moral architectures of inclusion and exclusion."

In Thomas's fictional world, every new road carved through the forest re-enacts this duality. The paths that once signified liberation from feudal Travancore slowly ossify into regulatory lines that divide insiders from outsiders. Viapolitically, these routes embody both movement and containment—a dialectic of emancipation and control.

The settlers' first physical passage into Malabar dramatizes what Walters calls "the politics of passage," while later generations experience what Heller names "the afterlife of mobility": the condition in which infrastructures outlive their emancipatory purpose and begin disciplining the very populations they once enabled. In *Karikkottakkari,* the cart tracks become surveillance routes; the once-liberating trail becomes the boundary of a new property line.

Placing *Karikkottakkari* alongside other post-migration literatures of the Global South reveals that Vinoy Thomas participates in a planetary discourse on displaced ecologies. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Benyamin's Goat Days, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* each foreground landscapes violated by human ambition. Roy's Ayemenem, Ghosh's Sundarbans, and Thomas's *Karikkottakkari* are all eco-zones of trauma, where land becomes archive.

Ghosh's notion of the "anthropocene imagination"—that literature must bear witness to planetary precarity—aligns with Thomas's portrayal of the migrant's violence toward the forest. Likewise, Benyamin's protagonist in Goat Days mirrors the third-generation exiles of *Karikkottakkari*: both discover that mobility across borders does not

translate into freedom but into a deeper estrangement.

Across these texts, the migrant's route embodies what Pezzani calls "liquid borders"—boundaries that shift with economic currents yet remain lethal for those who cross them. Thomas thus transforms a local migration story into a metaphor for global dislocation.

As the novel progresses, Thomas re-ritualizes space. The migrants' chapels, wells, and harvest festivals become mnemonic anchors—attempts to sacralize new soil. Yet these rituals gradually empty of transcendence; they survive as forms without faith. Here Thomas anticipates what Edward Said termed "secular exile": a life perpetually seeking meaning in displaced forms of worship.

Anthropologically, these rituals signal the desire for rootedness. Each generation reconstructs memory through symbolic gestures—naming, planting, burial. But memory, like the forest, becomes domesticated; it is fenced, codified, and eventually commodified. In Viapolitical terms, even remembrance becomes infrastructural: a route back to belonging that solidifies new exclusions.

Though Thomas's narrative focuses largely on male pioneers, women in *Karikkottakkari* embody the silent viapolitics of domestic endurance. Mariyakutty, Annamma, and the widowed Aleykutty articulate what Caren Kaplan calls "mobile femininity"—a form of movement that occurs within confinement. Their migrations are circular, bounded by home and field, yet their emotional labor sustains the community's continuity.

From the lens of feminist migration theory, these women re-inscribe routes not on the map but within memory and care. Their journeys remind us that every visible migration rests upon invisible ones—the movements of nurture, ritual, and mourning. In this sense, Thomas widens Viapolitics into a gendered ethics of motion.

By the novel's final chapters, borders acquire a visceral agency. They grow, breathe, and mutate with each generation's anxiety. The forest border becomes a living metaphor for what Étienne Balibar calls "the proliferation of frontiers." No longer a line on a map, the border is internalized—within consciousness, language, and faith.

Thomas's depiction anticipates the twenty-first-century shift from territorial to affective borders. Roads, fences, and checkpoints are mirrored by emotional barricades: nostalgia, guilt, and longing. The settlers' grandchildren, who migrate to Gulf countries or Indian cities, inhabit "psychic borderlands"—transnational yet homeless. Their identity collapses under what Homi Bhabha terms "the unhomely condition."

In Viapolitical vocabulary, they have moved from the via to the limbo—from the route to its haunting.

The environmental degradation of *Karikkottakkari* culminates in an ecological apocalypse. Floods, soil erosion, and poisoned wells echo the planet's response to human transgression. Arne Naess's Deep Ecology and Carl Sagan's cosmological warnings both resonate here: humanity's self-centred movement across the Earth has cosmic consequences.

Thomas dramatizes Naess's principle of biospheric egalitarianism through irony: those who sought mastery over the land are buried by it. Nature reclaims what borders attempted to fix. In a haunting reversal, the migrants' descendants now become environmental refugees within their ancestral homeland—a repetition that transforms history into ecology.

Viapolitically, the routes of escape loop back as routes of retribution. The "road out" becomes the "river in," flooding the boundaries humans once drew. The novel thus stages the collapse of the anthropocentric project itself.

Reading *Karikkottakkari* through both Viapolitics and Deep Ecology exposes an ethical convergence: the politics of movement and the politics of the Earth are inseparable. The road and the root mirror each other; each marks possession and loss. Heller's insight that "mobility is the medium through which power circulates" aligns with Naess's claim that "ecological awareness begins where ego ends." Thomas's migrants fail precisely because they conflate motion with meaning and conquest with connection.

When movement ceases to honour the non-human world, it degenerates into displacement. The poisoned wells and barren hills of *Karikkottakkari* become metaphors for a civilization that has forgotten how to dwell.

In the final synthesis, Thomas's narrative re-affirms an ancient paradox: the human yearning for origin generates the very divisions that perpetuate exile. Each migrant seeks a homeland, yet in claiming it they construct boundaries—racial, linguistic, religious—that exclude others. The settlement of *Karikkottakkari,* born of homelessness, ends by institutionalizing its own outsiders.

This paradox illuminates what Heller and Pezzani describe as "the recursive topology of mobility": every route of return is also a route of exclusion. Humanity's perpetual search for roots—geographical, ritualistic, racial—produces a cartography of borders. Thomas's closing image of abandoned fields beneath a fading cross captures this truth: belonging is always bordered, and home is forever provisional.

Vinoy Thomas's *Karikkottakkari* stands as a regional epic of migration whose significance radiates globally. Through the framework of Viapolitics, the novel transforms roads, rivers, and borders into moral actors that reveal how movement governs life

itself. Across three generations, the settlers' struggle to anchor themselves in new soil echoes humanity's larger trajectory—from ecological harmony to anthropocentric exile.

By aligning Thomas with theorists such as Walters, Heller, and Pezzani, and ecologists like Naess and Sagan, the study exposes a shared philosophical insight: that mobility without humility leads to ruin. The settlers' narrative mirrors our planetary predicament—ceaseless movement across an Earth we scarcely understand.

Ultimately, *Karikkottakkari* teaches that the longing for origin is both our salvation and our snare. It drives exploration, migration, and culture itself, yet it also erects borders that fracture the world. In the age of climate migration and digital displacement, Thomas's village becomes a universal metaphor: every road to home is also a line of separation. Humanity, forever searching for its roots, continues to redraw the borders that define—and confine—its existence.

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