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## De-Scribing an Ex-Centric Community: Anglo-Indian Voices in Johny Miranda's *Jeevichirikkunnavarkku Vendiyulla Oppees: Requiem for the Living*

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### Abstract

The knowledge of a community's presence is an inevitable step towards ensuring its visibility and accepting its authenticity. The Anglo-Indians of Kerala are distinctive on account of the intricate cultural nuances that have gone into their making which involves essences of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the native Malayalees, the Batavians, the Javanese, the Malaccans and maybe even the Africans who were probably brought in here in the course of the slave trade that was rampant then. Being such an essentially miscegenated population, the Anglo-Indian ethnicity has been defined and re-defined over the years, so much so that the community has been facing the challenge of extinction and decline. At this juncture, the novella, *Jeevichirikkunnavarkku Vendiyulla Oppees: Requiem for the Living* becomes a relevant record of the history of a community, beset with contradictions, benumbed with frustration and struggling to persevere even at breaking point. Facing a crisis in gender positions and community orientations, the characters struggle to negotiate their identities and to come to terms with the reality of their being. Their obsessive quests and transgressive actions intensify the conflict raging within, eventually rendering vulnerable the status of their selfhood and the community they represent. The novella therefore is an *oppees* - a requiem -for a living community that is faced with the ominous prospect of extinction.

**Keywords** - *Identity Conflict, Hybridity, Subalternity, Masculinity, Gender, Fragmentation*

In an act of making and unmaking, doing and undoing, Johny Miranda repositions history by evoking voices hitherto unheard in mainstream versions which display with flourish, 'pure', 'unadulterated' caste bound structures where miscegenated identities can hardly be accommodated. Johny Miranda goes against the grain in this regard by bringing to the forefront a dwindling

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community seething with the frustrations accumulated over years of subalternity and marginalisation. Thus he scribes, de-scribes and re-inscribes the history of a hybrid culture formed out of the synthesis of myriad cultures. “Indeed, the Parankis bear traces of more than two cultures: among them there are traces of not only Portuguese culture and the non-Sanskritized and lower-caste cultures prevalent in Kerala, but also elements from South-east Asia, especially Java and Malacca, which were prominent centres of Dutch and Portuguese trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” (Devika xxiv) Set against the backdrop of Ponjikkara in Kerala, an area diverse in its range of cosmopolitanisms, the novella captures the essence of a community worn out by the dilemma of fragmented identities and exhausted by futile attempts at resuscitation. The author himself states how the Anglo-Indian Latin Catholics of Central Kerala:

lack a firm grasp of their own history and ancestry, but [they] continue to live with the sense of isolation and conflicted identity that comes along with being a hybrid race; a condition which affects the very rhythm of their lives. They may call themselves Anglo-Indian and carry outlandish surnames that stick out like tails, but the fact is that the majority of them remain backward and poor. (*Requiem* xi, xii)

Originally penned in Malayalam under the title *Jeevichirikkunavarku Vendiyulla Oppees*, *Requiem for the Living* is a translation of the same by Sajai Jose. The term *oppees* refers to “a funeral or commemorative rite, usually performed at the grave; from the Latin *obsequiae*.” (*Requiem* 80) Thus, as the author himself elaborates, “this novella tells the story of a people who are eligible for an *oppees* in every way, while yet alive.” (*Requiem* xi)

Narrated through the persona of Josy Pereira, who is called Osha, the novella reinstates its status as a plea for the surplus and dispossessed by giving voice to a character who bears the inscrutable fate of living out an obsession which tatters his very being. Osha, symbolic of ‘masculinity in angst’, is prepossessed by a fascination he feels towards a gold key which he discovers in the grave that was being dug for a pregnant woman. D. Peberdy attempts to distinguish between the terms ‘crisis’ and ‘angst’ used in connection with masculinity. “The term ‘crisis,’ then, is often used to speak about moments of male insecurity, instability and uncertainty in a broad sense, while ‘angst’ more usefully refers to the specific manifestations, performances and presentations of masculinity.” (8) Peberdy elucidates how masculinity is defined as either something to have or to lack. Replete with meaningful images, the key represents Osha’s anxieties regarding his masculinist being, perhaps his concern over a ‘lack’ and his yearning to find a lock that fits the key can be read as the desire to put

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together his fragmented self, and in conjunction the dilapidated community as well. Osha becomes the epitome of the incapacitated male self in the community, dormant, impassive and utterly detached, totally unable to evince a revival in the community. “He is precisely the reverse of the male reformer, marked by isolation, lack of voice, and powerlessness. Through him unfolds an extraordinary, intriguing tale of the community’s slow merging into the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church, a dirge at its impending disappearance.” (Devika xxx) Therefore, and in contradistinction, Osha also becomes the voice that could represent the community since he alone possesses an eye that perceives in an objective fashion, the absurd happenings in the community. Sajai Jose, the translator of the novella mentions how “the writer C. Radhakrishnan likens the author of this short novella to a fish that lies still at the bottom of a muddy pond, observing the goings on carefully while remaining unnoticed itself. The analogy is apt for its protagonist Osha; it is through his all-seeing, unblinking – at times morbid – fish-eyes that the story is told.” (xvii)

The most significant narrative strand is the part where Osha picks up the gold key because it is that definitive moment that shapes the destiny of the character and the community he stands for. “A glint of gold between the clods. I bent down and picked it up. It was a gold chaavi, the size of a little finger. I didn’t know it was gold. I did not bother to find out. I knew no one else had seen it...I told no one about that key, carrying it with me like a treasure.” (*Requiem* 20) Osha seems to be haunted by the necessity to find a lock that suits the key, thus marking out a disoriented sense of masculinity, the key emerging and re-emerging as a phallic symbol. When his sister, Ida, returns, shattered mentally and physically, after an elopement, Osha appears unconcerned and indifferent since, as he claims, he too is in a condition similar to hers. “I had come to know that Chitta was roaming the city streets day and night. What could I have done...At that time, I too had been wandering aimlessly with my chaavi.” (*Requiem* 29) Thus, Osha and Ida are two varied depictions of the relentless quest for piecing together the last remnants of a lost community. Osha’s obsession is not limited to the gold key; his is an obsession to search the un-findable. This is evident from Osha’s frantic search for a scrap of paper which contained a prayer that was part of the family treasure. While Osha’s father, in his typical vein of neglect, loses it, Osha is driven to constantly search for every little scrap that defines his identity and sense of community. “I had searched for that scrap of paper many times over, but never found it. To this day, I search for it everywhere; ... But I never found it.” (*Requiem* 25)

Osha’s inability to consummate his love with his wife, Jacintha, is a pertinent example that defines his state of numbness. Thomas A. Foster points out that male impotence, atleast according to

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the seventeenth century Victorian perspective, meant more than just sexual incapability. “All the various definitions of impotence point to notions of weakness, deficiency, or powerlessness.... “want of strength or power to perform anything; utter inability or weakness; helplessness,” or “wholly lacking sexual power.”” (733) Osha’s perspective on his marriage with Jacintha tells volumes of his indifference and lack of involvement in an event that, in the normal course of things, should have transformed his life. “I let myself be married without even being aware of it, the way a cow allows itself to be milked.” (*Requiem* 31) Though a frustrated Jacintha eventually forces herself upon him and thus gives birth to his progeny, Osha is unable to get over the sense of vacuum that pervades his entire self. Neither does he accept Jacintha as his spouse nor does he make an attempt to acknowledge his child. When he loses the key to Jacintha, he loses hold over his self as well. The existential longing to gather the shreds of a totally shattered identity never leaves him, and ultimately paralyzes him both physically and mentally. The fits that overpower him at the graveyard is evocative of a last bid to recover the ‘key’ to stabilise his identity. Unable to recover it, he relapses into a waking sleep and simultaneously, leads his community to the slipping edge of decay. “I heard everything. Knew everything. And as I’d kept my eyes open throughout, saw everything as well. I had only lost my ability to move, and to respond.” (*Requiem* 72)

Persistent images that recur in the novella are symbolic of the angst and fear that Osha carries, as part of his and his community’s crumbling identities. He mentions an incident involving an owl that sat on him when he was a baby, attempting to cuddle him, thus giving him bird-fever and leading to the shrivelling of his limbs. The insecurities of the protagonist are reflected in this and in the numerous incidents that surround his presence in the course of his growing up. Osha’s dreams and real life experiences are replete with images associated with sterility and fertility. In visions associated with the death of a pregnant woman, the missing of a child, the finding of a gold key, the killing of a pig, the crawling of a maggot through his brain, the clamour of dogs, the congregation of frogs, death, funeral rites and so on, Osha is reminded time and again of his sexualities and identities in a state of perpetual crisis. This is well depicted in his dream involving the killing of a pig:

A large pit is dug in the middle of a vast, uninhabited compound. The pig to be killed is buried upside down in the pit, in such a way that only its anus is visible above the ground.

By then, a curious crowd would have gathered, as if to watch fireworks.

In a short while, the pig’s anus would dilate rapidly like the mouth of a volcano and explode with a loud blast, spraying the animal’s intestines and filth all over...

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The difference between reality and my dream was that the pig in the dream had the face of a man. It was when the explosion happened that I would come awake with a start.  
(*Requiem* 52)

Osha's predicament finds an echo in the crisis faced by Jacintha's father, Thummi Chettan, who is under the obsessive impulse of discovering a clay pot that kept receding into the earth by itself. His eccentric quest leads him to Velankanni where he spends his days in the church grounds, in constant search of someone. Jacintha's mother "still keeps going to Velankanni, like someone visiting a grave for the annual memorial prayers." (*Requiem* 40) The evasive masculine figures in the novel ring the death knell of communities which had been bonded by mutual solidarities, now left to rot on account of a lack of orientation and cohesiveness. Thummi chettan, who represents the Latin Catholic community, and Osha who stands for the Anglo-Indians, are the epitomes of male sensibilities in their respective communities. Both are overcome by obsessive quests that have damaged irreparably the dynamics of their being, thus putting to question the centres of authority that they seem to symbolise. Osha says, "We were wandering in our own worlds, like two sleepwalkers." (*Requiem* 61) These aimless wanderings place them in a position of vulnerability thus leading them to shirk off all questions related to their respective responsibilities.

While Osha's lack of response is what undermines the fate of his community, his father, Franso's blasphemous rebellion reeks of the accumulated grievances, humiliations and frustrations that the community has had to endure over the years. Intensely critical of the absurdities of his race, he throws a tirade against anyone, anything and everything he chances upon. He hurls abuses at the crucifix and denigrates his European ancestors with the term "Paranki scum." (*Requiem* 13) "No one could match Pappa in the sheer variety of cuss words he knew. Pappa would go anywhere without even wearing a shirt. Or go to sleep that way. When Mamma was not around, he would eat up the rice in the pot to the last bit, and then piss in it. Sometimes, he'd shit in the stove." (*Requiem* 23) In the course of undertaking what seems to be a sacred job, the duty of a sacristan, Osha's father, Franso, does not hesitate to indulge in the most unholy undertakings which includes theft of the holy wine, the devout offerings and the church belongings. He accepts bribe to dig graves, steals holy resources and hurls insults at the cross. Osha says,

Pappa would receive the Holy Communion after having sex; without fasting, without bathing, without observing esthi...I have seen Pappa stealing and drinking communion wine, and adding water to the rest. Pappa would blow out candles lit by

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the faithful in the church and the cemetery as soon as they had left. He would later melt them and sell them at the price of wax and get drunk on that money. (*Requiem* 13)

Pappa is sacked from the post of sacristan when, in a drunk revelry, he set fire to a string of crackers, resulting in an explosion and the loss of an eye and four fingers, in addition to a scarred body. Eventually he commits the crime of hacking his own daughter to death right in front of the altar. “Leaping up to Ida Chitta like a maniac, Pappa hacked furiously at her neck and stomach and chest. Chitta lay writhing in blood, crying, screaming, and then, grew still forever.” (*Requiem* 41) Franso’s denial of his heredity, ancestry, religion, and even his offspring is his way of questioning the very paradigms that had shaped the contours of his contradictory self, fuming under the impact of forced subalternity and suffering. All these severe transgressions on the part of Franso are therefore, the fruits of heaped up humiliations that have been endured in time and prove to be detrimental to the future of the community as a whole.

While the male figures in the novella sway in the precarious balance between the two edges of decay, it is the female figures who bear an emancipatory potential. “The father-figures in the novella are ineffectual, violent, or absent – it is the mothers who are the keepers of the community, carrying and handing down its hybrid customs, practices, and knowledges, and thus.” (Devika xxx) The singular female character who holds the extraordinary power of redemption in the novel is Juana Mammanji, the repository of the community’s age old rites and rituals. The dominant matriarchal figure in the novella, Mammanji is indomitable in her will and unshakeable in her beliefs. She is the manager and architect of the *tharavad*, is adept at everything she set her hands upon, and is revered and respected by the villagers who address her by the nickname, Judge Nona. “Not just in the family, but in the whole parish, everything concerning what was to be done when a child was born or when someone died, or simply about things to be followed in everyday life ... in all such matters, it was to Mammanji that they turned for advice.” (*Requiem* 5) The prescriber of rules and conventions, Mammanji has enough sway over the parish to publish booklets with instructions for the faithful and to break conventions herself when necessary. Even when she wields the power to break the Pesaha bread thus denying Pappanji’s right, she is unmoved and unchallenged. Her famed home remedies for illnesses, precise predictions and learned injunctions gave her a cult status in the community. “Then she would make detailed predictions about everyone’s future. Make proclamations in answer to the queries of the anxious. Prescribe offerings. She would scold those who were lazy about attending prayer and church, those who slept at those times without observing esthi.” (*Requiem* 10) The

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precision with which she carries out the ancient community rituals symbolises her ability to perpetuate the solidity of a crumbling community. Mammanji's intense awareness of the paradigms of ancient knowledge holds the reins of salvation for the community. Thus, Mammanji becomes inevitable to preserve the integrity and worth of the Ponjikkara Anglo-Indian community by making an imprint on the minds of the local populace and ultimately by being elevated to the status of sainthood. Thus, from the annals of crime to the annals of sainthood, the otherwise invisible history of the Anglo-Indian community gains a pervasive presence in a caste-prejudiced society.

The gap occasioned by Mammanji's demise remains unplugged till the return of Osha's mother, Petrina whom he addresses as Mamma. Previously overshadowed by the domineering figure of Mammanji, Mamma opts to rebel against her mother-in-law and foils all attempts by the former at imposing herself on her. In an act of defiance against the family custom, Mamma refuses to name her children after the grandparents and vents her fury when, after her delivery, Mammanji urges her to undertake the stringent after-birth rituals. In course of time, Mamma manages to convince Papa to stay separately, thus severing all ties with Mammanji. "Mamma defied Mammanji, whom no one had dared to oppose. She broke the rules. That was how Mammanji came to disapprove of Pappa and Mamma." (*Requiem* 15) Mamma, however, gains notoriety when she takes upon herself the task of fixing a match for her daughter, Ida, and ends up eloping with the proposed groom, younger to her by twenty years. Mamma's changing of attire from 'thuni' and 'kavaya' to saree and blouse symbolises her rejection of a community oriented selfhood and a preference for the general ways of the world. Mamma's act of burning the 'thunis' and 'kavayas' in the courtyard illustrates the burial of an already dying community ethos and spirit. Xavy, a young stone mason, whom Mamma chooses as her son-in-law, ends up being her lover and a vicious lover at that, for he turns out to be nothing less than a trader in flesh and draws out the doom of both Mamma and Ida. However, Mamma and Ida would return, the former, to rejuvenate herself and the latter, to seal her impending doom. Mamma's return, years later, is propelled by Papa's death, simultaneously marking the beginning of a sense of revitalisation in the community.

Stained by the stigma of multiple levels of transgressions, the re-birth of the Ponjikkara Anglo-Indian community is ironically made possible by the timely intervention of Mamma, who upon her return takes upon herself the task of being the custodian of the community. "Mamma then and Mamma now were as different as a field where the grain was ripe, and one in which it had been reaped." (*Requiem* 48) This is done by meticulously going through the elaborate rituals and practices

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that Mammanji had secretly and scrupulously recorded and safeguarded in her precious trunk, which incidentally is inherited by Mamma. The access that Mamma gains to this legacy transforms not only her sense of being but also her community's historical significance. Mamma's overnight metamorphosis into the oracle-like mould of Juana Mammanji becomes a crucial point in the novella, wherein the destiny of the community takes a different turn. While Pappa's death coincides with the declaration of Mammanji's sainthood, it also marks Osha's relapse into physical numbness and subsequently divests Mamma of the power of soothsaying. This marks the community's dirge and merge at the same time, thus reflecting a necessary but slow inclusion of the marginalised populace into what is predominantly mainstream culture... "a restful, waking sleep, that was all..." (*Requiem* 73)

Through Osha's sister, Ida, the novelist presents the picture of doomed femininity in contrast to Osha's insecure and Franso's self destructive masculinity. After running away with Xavy, "Ida Chitta came back. Alone. She wasn't the same Chitta who had left home. Chitta now looked like a shattered tomb." (*Requiem* 22) Deceived by her mother and rejected by her lover, Ida haunts the city in relentless pursuit of an anchor but is unable to come to terms with her being. Fated to insanity and promiscuity, Ida returns, pathetically out of her senses and heavy with child, only to accept neglect at the hands of her father and brother. Ida's condition is unconsciously anticipated in Osha's association of dead pregnant women with *yakshis*. Even when alive, Ida leads a life akin to death, and wanders around the village in a ghostly vein, like a *yakshi* deprived of her soul's desires. "There is a belief that when pregnant women die, they turn into *yakshis*. After all, death has come to them before their earthly wishes have been fulfilled." (*Requiem* 18) While Osha maintains a stoic silence, refusing either to acknowledge or to accept his sister's presence, Franso, in a fit of mad impulse, chases his daughter to the Holy Altar and slaughters her in the presence of the congregation at church. Thus Ida's death and burial serves to symbolically re-evoked the significant graveyard scene in the beginning of the novella, thus obstinately reminding Osha of a pregnant lady's burial and his discovery of the gold key in the grave – the two events which had altered his life and purpose. "Here, in one pregnant woman's grave, was being buried another, her Achilles' tendon severed..." (*Requiem* 43)

Osha's wife, Jacintha, stands out from the rest of the characters in the novella by her comparative saneness and ordinariness. Being part of the Mappila Latin Catholic community, she, in a sense, exemplifies the inevitable merging of the two communities. Jacintha's practicality and conformity to norms is in odds with the general tendencies of the family which she enters. Beset with contradictions, the community struggles in vain attempts to balance the binaries that it contains – the

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extreme transgressions of Franso and Ida, the frustrating obsessions and depressive detachment of Osha, the complex admixture of sexuality and saintliness in Mamma, and the divine, oracle-like stature of Juana Mammanji. Therefore, Jacintha plays a regulatory role in the novella, ever-vigilant and in control of her husband's obsessive tendencies, even succeeding in capturing the gold key which she understands to be the obsessive fancy of her husband. "After a while, very gently, even fearfully, she asked me: Shall we throw that chaavi away? It's for nothing that you're searching for its lock." (*Requiem* 50) Osha hands over the key to Jacintha thus symbolically transferring the key of his individual and community identity to the latter. Out of dire necessity, Jacintha takes the initiative in consummating her marriage and gives birth to Osha's child, only to be disappointed by her husband's persistent indifference. Osha's unwillingness to accept the child as his own denotes his lack of control over the future of his community, which awaits its doom. In spite of Jacintha's inability to rein in Osha's obsessions, she perseveres till the end, and patiently tends to Osha when he succumbs to paralysis. Thus, Jacintha is necessary in that she represents the possible future of Osha's community by pointing to a possible merging of the Latin Catholics and the Anglo-Indians, thus bringing in new cosmopolitanisms. In terms of her rationality and her practical outlook, she serves as a foil to all the other characters in the novella and is therefore an aid to characterisation.

Thus, *A Requiem for the Living* is a swan song for a community on the verge of decline and is therefore an attempt at recording the complexities wrought into its structure that has resulted in heavy fragmentation and disorientation within the community. The endless quests for a consolidation of identities – both of the individual and the community – lands the characters in a mire from where an escape seems unthinkable. The ex-centrism of the community itself makes any attempts at narrating its history an arduous task since the absurdities and complexities that characterise its being have to be necessarily addressed. Johny Miranda's novella does justice to this role and poignantly points out the diversities and contradictions of the Latin Catholic Anglo Indian community at Ponjikkara, thus, gaining them a place and a voice, bringing their concerns to the forefront before the community's possible collapse and thereby inscribing them in history.

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