

# Overlapping Boundaries and Fluid Cultural Spaces: A Cultural Geographical Reading of D. K. Chowta's *Mittabail Yamunakka: A Tale of a Landlord's Household*

Dr. Sini Jose

Associate Professor, Department of English, Government College, Kasaragod, Kasaragod District, Kerala, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 11 May 2025</p> <p>Revised on: 05 Jun 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 11 Jun 2025</p> <p>Published on: 15 Jun 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> Tulumad, cultural geography, cultural practices, dynamic place, overlapping boundaries, fluid nature, time.</p>	<p>Place, process of place formation, struggle over places, spatial production of identities, and practices of spatial representation predominate in the spatial aesthetics. The term and concepts provided by the discipline of geography and cultural geography can enhance the analysis of spatial texts. This paper is an attempt to read D. K. Chowta's <i>Mittabail Yamunakka: A Tale of a Landlord's Household</i> with a cultural geographic framework. The novel's spatial setting is the historically existed Tulumad region in Dakshina Kannada. <i>Mittabail Yamunakka</i> exposes the fluid and overlapping boundaries of place. Juxtaposition between a past and present Tulumad is the strategy adopted for its fictional mapping. Tulumad's spatial history in the colonial period is placed against the same in the postcolonial period. Cultural geographic reading will reveal the relative nature of the dominant values and preferences inscribed in the fictional geography. The spatial consciousness that the novel shares is that of a dynamic place ever-evolving. What the novel presents is not a static place, but a dynamic place ever evolving and emergent. The place and places in <i>Mittabail Yamunakka</i> are fluid entities, owing to their ever changing-nature and ever shifting boundaries. The lived space of <i>Mittabail Yamunakka</i> is at once decided by the myths, fossilised customs, domestic happenings, varied social-relations, events of nationalist nature, colonial encounters, and historical occurrences. This study also highlights economic exploitation enacted through the caste-driven and gender-driven social practices depicted in <i>Mittabail Yamunakka</i>. Incorporation of a political vision in the critical framework has unravelled the embedded web of hegemonic power relations evolving over time.</p>

## INTRODUCTION

Place and the spatial occupy a prime concern in the coding and decoding of present day literary and cultural texts. The spatial orientation in the literary has its roots in the theoretical development happened in the fields of history, geography, urban studies, phenomenology, body studies and cultural

studies in general. A considerable number of literary texts produced in the 21st century exhibit the literary turn towards a spatial aesthetics. Place, process of place formation, struggle over places, and spatial production of identities and practices of spatial representation predominate in the spatial aesthetics. The terms and concepts provided by the discipline of

geography and cultural geography can enhance the process of decoding any spatial text.

This paper is an attempt to read D. K. Chowta's *Mittabail Yamunakka: A Tale of a Landlord's Household* with a cultural geographic framework. The novel, originally written in the Tulu language, is translated in to English by B. Surendra Rao and K. Chinnappa Gowda in the year 2017. *Mittabail Yamunakka* is a fictional attempt to document a unique place in history. The novel is named after the central woman character Mittabail Jamunakka. The novel is a fictional cartography of the cultural landscape of Tulunad. In this process, the novel charts out Tulunad's natural territories, local culture, local food systems and environmental ethics manifested in its everyday practices. *Mittabail Jamunakka* retells the story of an ethnic space, by tracing it from the popular imagination of people. The novel's spatial setting is the historically existed Tulunad region in Dakshina Kannada. Juxtaposition between a past and present Tulunad is the strategy adopted for this fictional mapping. Tulunad's spatial history in the colonial period is placed against the same in the postcolonial period. This paper attempts to explore the cultural geography of Tulunad by focusing D. K. Chowta's strategic fictional mapping which tells the tale of a landlord's household and its spatial history over four generations.

### **Overlapping Boundaries and Fluid Cultural Spaces in *Mittabail Jamunakka***

Place can be understood as a social construct where the social itself being spatially organised. In humanist accounts, place is more than locales with territories around; place is identified as a distinctive and bounded location defined by the lived experiences of the people. From a culturally geographical point of view, spaces come by their meanings as a consequence of the complex intersections of culture and context occur within that specific location.

As such, a place can be understood as a bounded manifestation of the production of meaning in space (Barker 144). Modern cultural geography rejects the universal definitions of 'place' or 'space': "As such, the boundaries of place and space are deemed contingent, their seeming solidity, authenticity or permanence a (temporary)

achievement of cultural systems of signification that are open to multiple interpretations and readings" (Hubbard, "Space and Place" 46 ). Hubbard's argument stresses the 'poly-locative' nature of places. *Mittabail Yamunakka* highlights this 'poly-locative' nature of places in exposing the fluid and overlapping spatial boundaries. The overlapping territories of Tulunad as seen in the novel is decided at once by mythical Gods like Malaraya, local religious leaders like Tantri of Badaje, local political powers like Mittabail Guttu (joint-family), local regional authorities like Kumbala kingdom, State power in the form of legal procedures, Foreign invaders in the form of Company rule, etc. These overwritten territories set the cultural geography of Mittabail in flux.

Cultural construction processes that deny homogenous and fixed meaning to place is indicated by philosophers like Henri Lefebvre (Marxist theorist). Lefebvre, for example, introduced a trialectics of spatiality that explores the entwining of cultural practices, representations and imaginations. In his view, a space is seen as 'made up' through three-way dialectic between the perceived, the conceived and the lived space. He comments on the 'social' production of 'social space' (170) - a space that is fundamentally produced by and through human actions. Such a space "subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity". For him spatial and social meanings are inscribed on every space. According to him space is the product of social and cultural construction processes which attach meaning and values to seemingly 'natural' or 'absolute' places. Space in this sense develops from perceptions, practices, and representations.

The spatial scales in *Mittabail Yamunakka* are always in process - emergent or shifting rather than fixed and static. Poststructuralist geography, geography that is influenced by poststructuralist philosophical arguments, has introduced new strategies to read the places in process- the places that are shifting and emergent (Barnes and Duncan; Barthes). Poststructuralist geographers attempted to read culture and landscapes in a textual fashion. The basic premises of poststructuralist geography emphasise 'textuality' and 'intertextuality' of various landscapes. Each 'text' (for example, a domestic

space) was identified as existing in relation with other 'texts'. So geographers attempted to use textual analysis to 'read' geographical cultures/ cultural landscapes. In *Mittabail Yamunakka*, all the spatial scales are intimately connected through lived practices and cultural interactions. Various cultural practices establish linkages among places. Interconnections that link regions to regions and practices to practices are striking. The Mittabail Guttu's story is connected to other households in the region as is hinted in the statement, "Places may be different, times may be different, people and gods and the deivas they believed in may be different, but their stories and travails are all similar. Routine agricultural operations, clashes and fights, racing buffaloes, fighting cocks, -they are really no different from one another" (Chowta 39-40). The local events connect people and practices across distant spaces and times.

The uniqueness of Mittabail has its roots in the vast network of connections among different communities and clans existed at that time. Intertextual nature of place can be best explained in tracing the spatial foundation of the novel. The complexity of the spatial politics evolves from the numerous ties that form a web of relations among local places - Maippadi, Ullala, Kumbala, Kasargod, Tellichery, Payyannur, Vitla, Varkady, Manjeshwara, Goa, etc. and different communities- Jaina community (Chowta 26), Muger community of bondsmen (24-27), Brahmins, Christian community (17) Muslims (28), Konkans (92), forest-dwellers, etc. The inter-personal, inter-familial and inter-caste social relations that decide the cultural environment of Mittabail is made evident in a few occasions. Thus it is Saibu, a Muslim man, who remains the trusted friend and well-wisher of Mittabail family (28-29). Like that there exists a very good relationship between the Mittabail guttu, the Bhut family and the Bhandara Mutt, Konkans of Manjeshwara. They are like one family and they "share honour and prestige, triumphs, and travails in equal measure" (106). This indicates that the chronicle of Mittabail guttu is at once intertwined with the chronicle of many other places and communities that existed at that time in the cultural map of Tulunad.

The spatial consciousness that the novel shares is that of a dynamic place ever evolving. What

the novel presents is not a static place, but a dynamic place ever evolving and emergent. The place and places in *Mittabail Yamunakka* are fluid entities, owing to their ever changing-nature and ever shifting boundaries. The alternative session titles 'these days' / 'those days' is a mapping strategy adopted in the novel to contrast the past and the present landscape of Mittabail. The inscription of time-bound places results in the diachronic spatial study of Mittabail. At the same time, this diachronic spatial reality becomes at once the history of larger spatial scales like Tulunad region or the nation space itself owing to the interconnected nature of places. The interconnectedness of places turns them complex geographies.

Places are filled with a variety of social and cultural meanings, "we live in a world of cultural places" (Ryan 1). Space and place are imbued with meanings; they are not just the sites of events, "Place itself is a producer of meaning and changes in spatial practices always have cultural implications" (Johnson et al. 106). They are historical and cultural at the same time. They are historical in sense that historical meanings are recorded on landscapes, and cultural history can be read through landscapes. As cultural meanings are inscribed in every landscape, they are cultural also. It is significant to note that historical and cultural meanings are produced in a specific location. *Mittabail Yamunakka's* cultural universe, inhabited by mythical gods like Malaraya, folk practices like cock-fight and the buffalo fight, festivals such as Bisu- the new year day and shahshti festival, offer a wide scope for a critical and cultural geographic inquiry. The "ritual of setting up of the sprawling bakimar field for agricultural operations" is one such local event with layer of cultural meanings, since it includes the three-in-one celebrations of setting up of the paddy field, the feast of the newly harvested rice, and the ritual offerings to the family deity, Malaraya. This traditional annual celebration is a unique practice in that it connects at once human and non-human; the natural, cultural and the spiritual. The statement "That is the custom to which the landlord's household at Mittabail has always adhered to" indicates the power of these cultural events to connect people across distant spaces and times (6). Thus the festive occasion in the Mittabail family proves that Tulunad has a long

tradition of a unique cultural history stretching from a distant past to the recent present.

Cultural geography is concerned with the remaking of the physical world through the imposition of cultural values, ideas and meanings. The cultural changes bring about geographical changes and vice versa because the interplay between human culture and physical environment is always two-way, "What kind of community develops in response to an environment affect the kinds of cultural practices the community engages in, and those practices in turn shape and reshape the physical environment, turning it into a human-made landscape" (Ryan 13). There are detailed references to local festivals like annual event of the buffalo-race with the thirty pairs of buffaloes and the customary cock-fight that design the human-made landscape of Mittabail. There are remarks about unique cultural practices that existed in the cultural landscape. They include passing remarks about the events like hunting (Chowta 111), cock-fight (8), buffalo-race (5), black-magic and exorcism (142), folk medicine (142), rituals like Kutti Puja (137), Dharma Nema (34), festivals like Bisu (87) and Keddasa hunt (111) and journeys by buffalo-cart or palanquin (100), boat ride (131) and art forms like Yakshagana. There are also references to the financial transactions of various sorts. This includes the businesses like lending money on interest (99-100) or distributing land on rent basis (102). They act as unique cultural markers that unite people, places and times, since these immaterial cultural traces carve the cultural territory of the village around the Mittabail guttu and set its cultural geographic territory against all other places and times. In this way, Chowta's novel becomes a fictional segment of the 'live-space' of Tulunad region carved out from the cultural history of South Canara.

Cultural geographic reading will reveal the relative nature of the dominant values and preferences. The relative and culturally specific nature of value systems can be examined in relation with the treatment of the concept of physical power. There are many situations showing that physical power was shown as an essential component of political power in local and national circles in colonial period. Thus when speaking about the revenue collectors of the Mayippadi kings, it is

stated that while collecting land revenue and other tax levies, in many occasions the properties were "forcibly taken away from the defaulters" (Chowta 93). The passing reflection that, for the revenue collectors "right persons needed to deal with such situation" (93), signal the physical power that involved in sustaining regional level political rule. The awe that physical body power enjoyed is indicated in the reference to Birabail Thyampanna's "reputed muscle-power" (107). Similarly, the character Manjana's selection to the army of Kumbala kingdom is mainly because of his physical fitness (75-76). In a similar fashion, normative body discourses are prevailing in the cultural geography of the village around Mittabail family. Thus, somebody with the listed bodily defects cannot be the head of the Mittabail household (8). Those who are selected to the army are only the physically fit male members (75, 78). The slightly changing nature of the predominance of physical power and the addition of new cultural values is suggested in stating that both their reputation and physical stature has contributed to Yamunakka's superior power, that she looked "big both in fame and frame" (15). What is more significant is the fact that the seemingly minute changes in the dominant value system often function as the consequence of large scale changes in the political scenario. For instance, the widely accepted value of physical power in colonial times in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the importance given to the value of power and family lineage in the early periods of 20<sup>th</sup> century give way to value of peace and prosperity by the time of independence. It is indicated in the novel in mentioning the possibility of the open acceptance of a Gandhian as the new head of Mittabail guttu, "If a Gandhian like Subbayanna, who won fame all over the village, got anointed in the household for the service of Malaraya, everyone would believe that Mittabail would verily be an abode of peace and prosperity" (268). This incident points at the textual nature of spatial practices. Spatial practices act as texts and the reading of these texts reveal cultural history. Places and spatial practices carry evidences of the ever evolving nature of cultural laws and dominant value systems.

The institutional space of home in the novel is reflective of its ideological patterns and gender driven social practices. Thus the family model is



centered not on the father or mother figures but on some other kinship bonds- "the true elders of the boy or girl are the heads of the family or their aunts and uncles" (Chowta 91). The matrilineal community's cultural consciousness also operates in tracing a child's resemblance with the uncle figure, instead of the normally accepted father figure (108). Chowta seems to suggest the unique ways of making up institutional places in a joint-family set-up in a Southern Kannada region in the colonial era. The book in this way offers insight into the alternative institutional models of home and unique kinship relations that form Tulunad's cultural identity.

Cultural geography observes a very close relationship between bodies and places: "people and places are imagined, embodied and experienced in ways that are . . . radically and inextricably intertwined with each other" (Bondi and Davidson 337). This truth of place-body relationship can be critically examined both in relation with the material place and in relation with the cultural/institutional place. This place-body relationship is indicated in the novel in speaking about the caste-driven and the gender-driven spatial practices. Mittabail's cultural geography reflects its caste-driven spatial laws in dealing with the bondsmen from Mugeru community whereby the bondmen and the girls, who join the Mugeru community after marriage, are bound to work for their landlord's house (Chowta 27). In maintaining the practice of making a group of people as the bondsmen, the landlord of the Mittabail house seems to possess the ownership of their labour power. Critical examination of this social practice may unravel the economic exploitation that underlies this place-body relationship. While the bondmen are tied to the landlord's house in strategic movement to exploit their labour power, their social exclusion is ensured in maintaining ritualistic practice whereby "the bondsmen of the household would not step in "the front yard of the bhuta shrine at Mittabail" and they "would not come anywhere near the route in which the ritual paraphernalia of the deity is taken" (Chowta 24). In describing the strange cultural practices of sustaining a group as the bondsmen, the eternal workforce, and yet treating their bodies as pollutive, the novel highlights a double-edged pattern of exploitation. The reference to this social practice as a 'fossilized custom' points at the

historically rooted nature of this embedded hegemonic power relation. This pattern of exploitation that is supported by similar cultural practices can be traced in the privileged consideration granted to the people of Brahmin caste. Characters like Mittabail Yamunakka believe that paying respect to Brahmins may bring blessings to their household: "feeding a few Brahmins for a few days let their good wishes and blessings be the protective fence to the house of the Mittabail (32). Critical exploration of the belief systems, everyday practices and widely accepted social customs will shed light on the constitutional elements of the embedded hegemonic power relations.

Place is the site of hegemonic power dynamics. Space plays an important role in constituting and reproducing social relations/identities (Massey, "Spaces of Politics"). In turn, the agency of body actively engages in the production of space. Hence, bodies and spaces are mutually constituted. The examination of the gendered places in the novel reveals the way by which bodies and spaces construct each other. Thus the material place of kitchen is treated as a place of women (Chowta 62, 87, 92). More than emotional relations, institution of marriages were driven by practical affairs of the world. Thus in thinking about the marriage of his brother and himself, Manjana thinks the advantage of having two more girls in to his house "to help his sisters in kitchen and the fields" (92). The novel hints at the gendered nature of places and its unequal power relations in mentioning the custom of the matrilineal families, where a widow is supposed to leave her husband's house on the very night of her husband's funeral ceremonies and she is not permitted to take anything more than the clothes she wore (73). The shadows of the economic exploitation that characterises the caste-driven lord-bondmen relationship, seems to have parallels in gender exploitation too. Dominant power relations are revealed as embedded in accepted social behaviors and customs. At the same time, the economic exploitation enacted through the caste-driven and gender-driven social practices allude to the Marxian discussions on the relations of capitalist social production and exchange and the theory of alienated labor, where the force of production got alienated from the product of their labour power (Carver). Like

any capitalist commodity society, workers must sell their labor-power to capitalists. They do not possess the means to produce enough goods for them to stay alive without contracting themselves out to another person's control. As in any modern capitalist society, caste-bound or gendered individual-self turned as worthless in this process of estrangement.

Modern cultural geography also considers the politics of representing landscapes. Landscape is said to be an outcome of culture that comes to have meaning when it is invested with the desires, designs and imperatives of a culture. A landscape is often transformed by the ideas, imaginings and value systems of that particular culture. So the real worlds are in fact 'imagined realities'. Spatial representations like monuments and sites of commemoration are often termed as 'landscapes of power' by cultural geographers since they reflect the power of those who control culture (Zukin). A close reading of the sites of commemoration reveals a complex politics of memory and identity with hidden social, cultural and political meanings. The bioregion of Tulunad has its own systems of preserving power and recording dominant traces of its lineage. There are references to the material and immaterial kinds of spatial representation. While the monument constructed in the memory of the dead is an instance of the material spatial representation, the annual festival of the setting up of the paddy field and the celebratory feast of the newly harvested rice is a spatial representation of an immaterial sort, since the event proclaims the community's existence as a unique group and reminds the present generation about the great figures from the family history (Chowta 18, 16). Similarly, the ritual offerings to the family deity, Malaraya, and the supreme role assigned to this mythical god is an immaterial cultural trace that preserves cultural memories of a group, its struggles and survival. It is also hinted in the novel that the monument constructed in the memory of the dead is occasionally converted as a temporary shelter for the travelers to sit and rest and a place for the 'unemployed do-nothings and gossip-mongers of the village' to assemble (18). In mentioning the spatial appropriations that happened to these monuments in the present times, the novel points at the truth of everyday spatial conflicts over these 'landscapes of power'.

Marxist and materialist readings focus the importance of place as socially produced and consumed. They explore the relations of domination and resistance played out across different spaces of social existence: The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies defines place as, "a site or location in space constituted and made meaningful by social relations of power and marked by identifications or emotional investments" (Barker 144). The works of David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre illustrate the idea that cultural battles generate explicit inequalities in the way that space is occupied and used by members of different groups. Chowta also projects places as contest zones. Places at various spatial scales are contested and fought over: the internal family conflicts exemplified in the dispute between Maanku Rai and his niece Yamunakka (Chowta, 335); the physical struggle between opposing parties over land rights as it happens between Mittabail people and Baarabail people (381, 386-392); the fight between the Kumbala kingdom and Kalyanappa's regime on political grounds (178-179); the larger national conflicts between freedom fighters and the British people (272); the caste driven conflicts over land and natural resources (354-55); the religious riots during the days of independence (344); the clashes on historical grounds where people fought over interpretations of historical incidents (387, 390); fights/compromises over gendered cultural spaces (9); diplomatic spatial appropriations of monuments (18); and even the inter-species' conflict hinted in man's encroachment into animal world (50).

Along with place, time or the space-time in the novel is socially produced and consumed. Chowta follows a locally adopted temporal marker in delineating the space-time of Tulunad. The peculiarity of the timescale of the novel lies in its rejection of the authoritative historical templates. Time-sense evoked in the novel is in tune with the micro/macro level spatial transformations operating in diachronic/synchronic lines. It is made evident in stating, "before the coming of the Company Rule, any number of such guns were available in the region around Ullala," the time sense is evoked in connection with the establishment of the British East India Company in India (Chowta 49). Similarly, the way of evoking temporal sense by placing certain social/ regional events against some historically

important event is suggested in stating that the friendly relationship between Mittabail and Bhandara Mutt was begun at the time of Kalyanappa's Revolt (100). There are instances in the novel when certain local family events are connected to large-scale political happenings or global events. Thus, it is said that the ancestors of a character named Devaya Bhandari, a Konkani man living at Manjeshwara, have fled from Goa owing to the "persistent persecution of the Portuguese there," indicating that European rule had effected spatial and social changes in the micro geographies like a household (92).

There is a very special time marker is introduced in the novel that offers at once the strange mixture of the personal, domestic social and national events at once. This is in stating about the character of Subbayanna, who left the Mittabail home and joined Gandhiji's freedom struggle, after the mysterious death of Maanku Rai, the head of the Mittabail family: "After the death of Maanku Rai, Subbayanna, who had gone to join Gandhiji in his asrama has not returned yet," (Chowta 9). While Subbayanna's long-time absence from the Mittabail household is a personal choice and the uncertainties that accompany the house is a domestic one, the historical reasons that triggered it are at once local and national. Chowta contrasts an era of peace in the nationalist history to the violence-driven period in a domestic place. A critical reading of this incident would reveal the strange point that unite the seemingly distant national and the local/domestic. The character of Subbayanna here functions as the connecting point between two distant layers of history. What results is series of heterogeneous space-time blocks, with a nationally affected local time and locally incorporated national time.

## CONCLUSION

The critical exploration of the documentation of place and time in *Mittabail Jamunakka* reveals the nomadic nature of the same. Mittabail's spatial and temporal identity evolves from the network of unique cultural practices, distinct linguistic features and special geographical borders. This cultural geographic reading also underlines the fluid nature of spatialities by pointing out its shifting boundaries

in time and space. The lived space of Mittabail Jamunakka is at once decided by the myths, fossilised customs, domestic happenings, varied social-relations, events of nationalist nature, colonial encounters, and historical occurrences. Incorporation of a political vision in the critical framework has unravelled the embedded web of hegemonic power relations evolving over time. A critical exploration of this mythical cum historical novel and the identification of numerous cultural markers announces the existence of a place in history with its unique lived practices and nomadic boundaries.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Barker, Chris. *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage, 2004.
- [2] Barnes, Trevor J., and James S. Duncan, editors. "Writing Worlds." Introduction. *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*. Routledge, 2011, pp. 1-17.
- [3] Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, Jonathan Cape, 1972.
- [4] Bondi, Liz, and Joyce Davidson. "Troubling the Place of Gender." *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, edited by Anderson Kay et al., Sage Publications, 2003, pp. 325-343.
- [5] Chowta, D. K. *Mittabail Yamunakka: A Tale of a Landlord's Household*. 2005. Translated by B. Surendra Rao & K. Chinnappa Gowda. Aakrithi Aashaya Publications, 2017.
- [6] Hubbard, Phil. "Space and Place." *Cultural geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, edited by David Sibley et al. I.B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 41-48.
- [7] Johnson et al. *The Practice of Cultural Studies*. Sage Publications, 2004.
- [8] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell, 1991.
- [9] Carver, Terrell. *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*. Cambridge University Press, 1991. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy
- [10] Massey, Doreen. "Spaces of Politics." *Human Geography Today*, edited by Doreen Massey et al., Polity P, 1999, pp. 279-294.
- [11] Ryan, Michael. *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell, 2010.
- [12] Thayer Jr, Robert L. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. University of California Press, 2003.
- [13] Zukin, Sharon. *Landscapes of Power: from Detroit to Disney World*. U of California P, 1991.