

Life Writing as Plant-Writing: Arboreal Encounters in Kallen Pokkudan's *Kandalkaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham*

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Abstract Kallen Pokkudan, known as the 'mangrove man' of Kerala, devoted his life to the restoration of mangrove forests across the state. Pokkudan's autobiography, *Kandalkaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002), is as much a life narrative of the mangrove habitats in the Kannur district of Kerala as it is of the Dalit Pulaya community to which he belongs. Reading Pokkudan's arboreal activism in the light of recent critical approaches to vegetality, we argue that his autobiography can be read as an instance of 'Phytography' (Ryan 2020) or plant-writing, where the very act of writing the self evolves into writing with and listening to vegetal subjects.

Keywords Life writing. Plant writing. Mangroves. Phytography. Kallen Pokkudan.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Liminal Centrality of Mangrove Forests. – 3 Thinking-with-the 'Mad Mangrove'. – 4 Life Writing as Plant-Writing. – 5 Plant-Writing as Advocacy.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-06-07
Accepted 2022-10-21
Published

Open access

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Citation Venugopal, V.; Rangarajan, S. (2022). "Life Writing as Plant-Writing: Arboreal Encounters in Kallen Pokkudan's *Kandalkaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002)". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(2), 239-252.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2022/04/004

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1 Introduction

“All I have planted and tended to are the mad mangroves” (Pokkudan 2002, 62). This confession epitomises the life work of Kallen Pokkudan, a Dalit humanist and environmentalist whose autobiography *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002) or ‘My Life Among the Mangrove Forests’ is as much a life narrative of the mangrove habitats in the Kannur district of Kerala as it is of the subaltern community. Born into a family of agricultural labourers belonging to the Dalit *Pulaya*¹ caste in Kerala, Kallen Pokkudan devoted his life to the restoration of mangrove forests, planting thousands of saplings along the banks of the Pazhayangadi River in the Kannur district. This twinning of human life histories with vegetal histories in Pokkudan’s autobiography contributes to a unique repository of ecological wisdom and nature care. Mangroves are halophytes or salt-tolerant evergreen forests that thrive in extremely inhospitable conditions due to their high adaptability and complex salt filtration and root system. Mangroves are extraordinary ecosystems, providing many goods and services to humans, particularly fisheries, forest products, pollution abatement, and coastal protection against natural calamities (Sandilyan, Kathiresan 2012, 3524). The Indian mangroves alone support more than four thousand species, some of which face the threat of extinction. Mangrove forests in Kerala, the southernmost state of India, face an alarming erasure due to a number of factors ranging from undue extraction of raw materials, mining, land reclamation for agriculture, aquaculture, and housing. The state’s 700 km² mangrove cover has shrunk to a mere 17 km², thereby earning itself a ‘threatened’ status in Kerala (Basha quoted in Muraleedharan et al. 2009, 8). The decline also points to a gradual erasure of the traditional way of life of the Mangrove dwellers who harvested the land, sea, and inter-tidal zones to carry on with subsistence farming and fishing. The rampant commercialism which replaced this way of life was responsible for the loss of biodiversity in the State, known by the sobriquet, ‘God’s Own Country’. However, the Kannur district of Kerala was left with 45% of wetland cover due to the efforts of a lone eco-warrior, Kallen Pokkudan, who tirelessly collected and planted mangrove seeds and saplings. Propelled by the realisation that the socio-economic health of the local communities depended on the estuarine ecology and its mangrove habitats, Pokkudan created mangrove walls along the beaches of the Kannur district of Kerala to prevent sea erosion-related issues. However, the large-scale environmental value of Pokkudan’s efforts received attention only when

¹ *Pulaya* is a caste group found in South India. They have been designated as Scheduled Caste in Kerala, owing to their disadvantaged socio-economic status.

a tsunami hit South Asian countries in 2004. The severity of destruction was most evident in coastal ecosystems where mangrove forests had been destroyed due to anthropogenic activities. Pokkudan's autobiography talks about relationships that transcend the human focus by highlighting the imbrication of human survival and sustenance with the health and protection of mangrove ecosystems and the human need to be 'enchanted' by nature. As Pokkudan describes this poetics of symbiosis, "I began by planting 300 mangrove plants [...] to prevent the sea from eroding the coast and to shield the children walking to the school from the gusts of wind. And to soak in their beauty when they grew up" (Lal 2014).

The publication of *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* signalled a paradigmatic shift within the genre of Dalit life writing in Malayalam, indicating a nuanced articulation of what Mukul Sharma describes as "Dalit eco-narrations of the self"; the autobiographical expression of "an environmental space that is interwoven with a politics of survival and struggle" (Sharma 2019, 1013, 1018). It is also possible to read Pokkudan's autobiography as an experimental mode of life-writing that replaces the subaltern subject in relation to the surrounding *oikos* constituted by the mangrove forest and its unique ecology. Reading Pokkudan's arboreal encounters in the light of recent critical approaches to vegetality, we argue that *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* situates Dalit eco-experience alongside a parallel phytophilic narrative, thus constituting a new genre of plant-writing. Pokkudan's autobiography can be read as an instance of "Phytography" (Ryan 2020) or plant-writing, where the very act of writing the self evolves into writing *with* and listening to vegetal subjects. Here, the autobiographical narrative reveals its subtext as "more-than-human life writing composed in dialogue with living plants" (99). Additionally, phytography also takes on the crucial task of environmental advocacy by narrativising human vegetal intersectionality and cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility towards vegetal life.

The emergence of the autobiographical self in the European worldview was shaped by the Cartesian notion of an autonomous individual who "conquers the chaos of the external environment, including the community and nature" and is distinguished by his independence from the larger natural world (Ross-Bryant 1997, 85). This conception of a 'metaphysical self' remained alien to those at the margins of humanity - the oppressed, women, people of colour, and minorities. Subaltern life narratives depicting collective experiences of marginalised communities exhibit the development of a relational self that welcomes multiplicity and interdependency. However, the influence of the non-human environment on the autobiographer in reimagining selfhood has often been overlooked, accentuating the divide between the authorial self and the natural world. Pokkudan's life nar-

rative bridges this gap by centring the act of self-writing around environmental stewardship and ecopedagogical activism. The text illustrates that the 'self/setting' binary in life narratives can be eliminated by situating the self within the *oikos*, which signifies the idea of a larger home that consists of human and other-than-human actors. This emplacement establishes a continuum between the *oikeion* (traditionally associated with women, nature, and subalterns) and the *politikon* or the public sphere (Varma, Rangarajan 2018, xxii). In other words, Pokkudan's 'subaltern oiko-autobiography' reimagines the 'I' in life writing as an "emplaced subjectivity" as opposed to an "enclosed self" (xxx).

Dalit life writing has emerged as a distinctive genre in regional Indian languages as well as in English since the '90s. The Marathi term *Dalit*, which can be translated with 'crushed' or 'broken into pieces', was considered subversive in acknowledging the historical oppression of the erstwhile untouchable communities in a caste-ridden Indian society. Dalit life writing developed as a narrative practice that privileges the self and bestows agency to the hitherto 'invisibilised' Dalit subject. The resistance to caste hegemony through self-mediated articulations of trauma, atrocity, and exclusion can be seen as "an integral part of continuing contest within Indian democracy over the role of caste and its visibility/invisibility in the public sphere" (Ganguly 2009, 431). Despite the existence of a collective Dalit oral tradition in the form of folk songs and stories that depicted experiences of an agrarian society, the invisibilisation of Dalit presences was prevalent in early Malayalam literature (Dasan et al. 2012, xxvi, xxviii). The Dalit-Adivasi turn in Malayalam life writing tradition came much later, with the publication of works like *Janu: C.K. Januvinte Jeevithakatha* (2002), which was translated into English as *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* (2004) and *Mayilamma: Oru Jeevitham* (2006), which was later translated into English as *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (2018) to name a few. Janu's and Mayilamma's autobiographies were crucial in reinscribing the eco-political resistance of the subaltern woman in Kerala's social sphere; the former illuminated the Adivasi leader's struggle demanding land distribution to tribals in Kerala, while the latter documented the story of a tribal woman's fight against the groundwater depletion caused by the multi-national giant Coca-Cola in Plachimada. The publication of Kallen Pokkudan's life narrative, along with these texts, was central to the formation of a new counter-canon at the beginning of the twenty-first century, wherein activist autobiographies of subaltern lives uncovered the inextricable link between the struggle for autonomy over land and natural resources and the question of environmental justice. The lack of a single authorial self and the emphasis on *Pulaya* lived experiences in Pokkudan's life narrative have urged critics to read his autobiography as an auto-eth-

nography from the margins (Kuriakose, Mishra 2021). In the opening chapter of the book, Pokkudan contemplates: “[d]oes a *pulaya* have biography? (Pokkudan 2002, 25), echoing the continuing contestations over authorship and agency and prompting the attendant question – does a mangrove swamp have a biography? While *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002) places his political struggles on par with his eco-activism, his other life narratives like *Ente Jeevitam* (My Life) (2010) and *Pokkudan Ezhuthatha Aathmakatha* (The Unwritten Autobiography of Pokkudan) (2003) demonstrate how the plurality of experiences can be negotiated in fashioning multiple autobiographical selves. An anthology of essays titled *Kallen Pokkudan: Karuppu, Chuvappu, Pacha* (Kallen Pokkudan: Black, Red, and Green) (2013) edited by K.P Ravi and P. Anandan takes on the task of critically engaging with his life writing (the black, red and green colours signifying Dalit, leftist and green perspectives respectively) and points to the continuing relevance of his life and activism to contemporary times.

Pokkudan’s green activism as well as the text’s environmentality have been critiqued for the lack of focus on its emancipatory politics. For instance, Ranjith Thankkapan argues that the Malayalam word *pacha* (green) and the phrase *pacha manushyan* (raw human being) that is used by the publishers to describe Pokkudan, along with “[a] green cover page, with the photograph of the bespectacled Pokkudan, his half naked-body submerged in the mangroves” reinforces the notion that subaltern communities like the Dalits and the Adivasis are inherently closer to nature (208). He adds: “Pokkudan’s caste and caste occupation is objectified, and fixed symbolically on the *Kandal* (mangrove)” (Thankappan 2015, 209). However, such reading tends to overlook the manner in which the text construes historical linkages between caste, landscape, and natural resources. The metaphor of the mangrove functions a green strand in the narrative, weaving together the material embeddedness of Pokkudan’s experiences with a biophilic affinity for the natural realm; a signifier of the imbrication of social history with the deep, natural history of the region and an allusion to trans-species empathy. In other words, the mangrove metaphor does not undermine Pokkudan’s continuing resistance to being considered subhuman or ‘less-than-human’. Pointing to the history of dehumanisation of Dalits within the hierarchical caste order in Indian society, Pokkudan recounts how the *pulayas* in Kerala were denied ‘humanness’; they were forbidden from using the ‘proper’, dignified names reserved for the upper castes, and instead were named after animals, birds, and worms, relegating them to the status of critters occupying the lower rungs of life (Pokkudan 2002, 36). Upending this logic of dehumanisation where the subaltern is inadvertently likened to *animalia* or the non-human, Pokkudan reflects on the paradigm shifting perspectives that are likely to emerge in the caste-ridden mainstream Indian society, when the Dalit vernacular

in life narratives reclaim its embeddedness in the *oikos*; when language acquires the scent of *pacha mannu* (the bare soil), *pacha meen* (raw fish) and *puthu nellu* (the yield of rice after a harvest) (27). Pokkudan's oiko-autobiography subverts discursive dehumanisation by upholding the practice of writing *with* mangroves – situating self-narration as constituted by writing about the intricate web of life that comprises the swampy mangrove forests.

2 The Liminal Centrality of Mangrove Forests

Dubbed as carbon sinks or 'blue carbon', mangroves play an important role in contemporary Anthropocene climate change mitigation discourses. However, mangroves have been accorded negative valence despite the vital role they play in providing ecosystem services like flood and erosion control, carbon storage, shoreline protection, groundwater recharging, nutrient recycling, and microclimate regulation. Mangrove swamps have been historically perceived within our dominant cultural imaginary as unproductive spaces, habitats of dangerous animals, and vectors of disease. The ecological sublime is not associated with these liminal scapes because the mangroves call for a deeper understanding of our affective engagement with the greater-than-human. The constitutive entanglements of the mangrove swamps "don't inspire awe and wonder [...] In many parts of the world, they've long been frowned upon as dirty, mosquito-infested tangles of roots that stand in the way of an ocean view" (Kolb 2016). According to William Howarth, ecotones like swamps are characterised by the continuum between land and water and therefore inspire divided values like uncertainty and change. Human antagonism towards these 'hybrid' and 'multivalent' aqua-terra scapes is also fuelled by the prejudice that they "provide little basis for a life beyond subsistence" (Howarth 1999, 520-1). This perceived lack of usefulness has been a significant reason for the violence perpetuated on them by humans.

Anna Tsing draws attention to how the 'anthropo' as a qualifying prefix often falls short in imagining the Anthropocene, as it fails to trace the roots of our current ecological crises to exploitative socio-economic systems, rather than to 'humanity' as an unspecified whole, thereby "block[ing] attention to patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and non-humans: the very stuff of collaborative survival" (Tsing 2015, 20). In a similar vein, Escobar emphasises the "relational ontology" of the mangrove world, a world of quantum connections in a state of perpetual "becoming" and critiques

the conversion of everything that exists in the mangrove-world into 'nature' and 'nature' into 'resources'; the effacing of the life-en-

abling materiality of the entire domains of the inorganic and the non-human, and its treatment as 'objects' to be had, destroyed, or extracted; and linking the forest worlds so transformed to 'world markets' for profit. (Escobar 2018, 18-19)

Doing so, he emphasises the need for multiple transition narratives and forms of activism in the Global South as well as the Global North and alternative paradigms emerging from "intellectuals with significant connections to environmental and cultural struggles" (24). A striking example of this transitional discourse is the emergence of a vibrant socio-cultural movement called *movement mangue* (the mangrove movement) that emerged in the mid-'90s in the Brazilian city of Recife. The movement, named after the mangrove swamps on which the city was built, was a politico-cultural renaissance of sorts that had ramifications in the fields of art, literature, culture, and music. The movement also focused on an inclusive vision of ecological and social justice emphasising the point that mangroves are "life-places" – "a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries" with an "ecological character capable of supporting unique human and non-human living communities" (Thayer 2003, 3).

3 Thinking-with-the 'Mad Mangrove'

Mangroves are complex borderline beings. As rhizophores with a unique rooting system that is above the ground level, they mediate the land and the sea (from the Greek *rhizaporos*, meaning 'carry roots' or 'stilt roots'). Kallen Pokkudan's life narrative is the story of an engagement with the idea of flourishing – of both human as well as greater-than-human life – what Arne Naess refers to as the "relational total field" (Naess 1973, 95). The tidal world of the mangroves has many actors deeply entangled in food chains and symbiotic life processes connecting humans with worms, crustaceans, algae, molluscs, snails, fishes, and crabs. For Pokkudan's marginalised *Pulaya* community, survival was predicated on its emplacement in the mangrove's ecosystem since it provided them with food, fuel, and medicine. Pokkudan recalls that when rice, the staple food of the community, was not available, they would sustain themselves from the different kinds of food that the wetlands provided in abundance, like fish, berries, and tubers. The migratory birds that frequented the mangroves were also the beneficiaries of the wetlands' generosity. This relational *oikos* in which the "fish, the birds and the human beings depended on the mangroves" is at the heart of Pokkudan's ecocentric vision (Surendranath 2002). Pokkudan's life narrative is thus more about the *oikos* than the *autos*. He weaves in detailed descriptions of twenty kinds of mangroves and the birds, insects, and fish varieties that depend on

them for homing spaces. Pokkudan's autos is what deep ecologist Arne Naess would call a "large comprehensive Self (with a capital 'S') that embraces all the life forms on the planet" (Naess 1986, 80). This concept of selfhood is an inclusive one that recognises the planetary citizenship of all life forms. As Pokkudan explains, "[t]he birds that roam the skies and nest in mangrove branches, tree heads, paddy fields and river banks also have a life similar to ours" (2002).²

Caribbean scholar and poet Édouard Glissant, in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1990), elaborates on the idea of 'thinking-with-the rhizome' model of Deleuze and Guattari to capture the complex linkages and interconnections that traverse social and ecological worlds. Thinking-with-the-mangrove points to the complex space of inter-being shared by humans and the non-human world and paves the way for ethical alliances and ways of being in the world. Glissant makes a conceptual move from the land-bound fixity of the rhizome to the boundary-defying mangrove, thereby linking it to Caribbean history, trauma, and memory. Thinking-with-the mangrove also links to the slow violence of colonialism and its far-reaching after effects. In Pokkudan's narrative, the mangrove serves as a material and metaphorical image of the 'environmentalism of the poor' doubly disadvantaged by caste, inequality, and poverty. Pokkudan embraces the 'dark ecology' of his hometown, Pazhayangadi, an area ravaged by deep mining activities in the vicinity that caused nutrient runoff, shoreline erosion and water pollution, resulting in the disruption of the ecological functions of the wetlands and destruction of the microhabitats that support various life forms.

Chapter fourteen of the narrative describes a typical day in Pokkudan's mangrove life, a routine fraught with seemingly quotidian activities that are performed conscientiously with a keen sense of environmental responsibility. He would set out in the morning searching for mangrove seeds in a small boat armed with a bottle of drinking water and gruel – a search that would continue till the evening. He says:

One has to enter the jungle of adventitious aerial roots that extend into the waterways in order to hunt for the seeds. While undertaking this journey, one encounters the refuse dumped by the city- syringes, needles, and other plastic waste, the rotting refuse tossed in by the meat shops, and other impurities. The river has become a dumping ground for all kinds of waste. Many of the fish in the river are affected and die every day. As a result of all this, good seeds are also becoming hard to find. (2002, 62)³

² http://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-acteurs-337_fr.html.

³ All quotations from *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2002) have been translated from Malayalam by the Authors unless otherwise noted.

Thus, Pokkudan's quest for mangrove seeds also interweaves a stark portrayal of the environmental degradation in the habitat. In the early days, thinking-with-the mangrove brought him a lot of negative criticism as well as threats from local real estate gangs who were trying to commercialise the mangrove habitats. However, this did not deter Pokkudan from planting more than 50,000 saplings in Kannur and other districts and caring for them till they grew into dense mangrove forests.

Pokkudan's life narrative describes a selfhood that has been deepened and enlarged by acting on behalf of the mangrove swamps. Reflecting on the ridicule and criticism he had to face regarding his mangrove activism, Pokkudan writes,

I heard a few educated people mock me saying, 'Poor fellow! He has lost his balance'. They are right. This is a state of imbalance. But I like it. It is a pleasurable state of madness. Sometimes it occurs to me that I am a mad mangrove myself. (64)

When the circles of self-identification are widened, the ethic of care for nature becomes a spontaneous act of joy. As the Australian rainforest activist John Seed describes, this process marks an evolution from performing environmental activism as an act of self-preservation ("I am protecting the rainforest") to an activism that recognises the self as relational ("I am part of the rainforest protecting myself") (3). Pokkudan's identification with the 'mad mangrove' is about this process of relational thinking, where the protection of the mangroves becomes the protection of the self.

4 Life Writing as Plant-Writing

In recent times, explorations of environmentality in life narratives have revealed how they can operate as effective media for conveying ecological concerns and environmental activism (Hornung 2019, 236). Ecological life writing examines the capacity of eco-biography, eco-memoir, and eco-autobiography to bear witness in an era of mass species extinction of anthropogenic climate change (Hughes-d'Aeth 2020, 183). Thus, as opposed to the conventional depiction of an individual person of significance in humanist life narratives, ecological life writing extends the ethics of recognition of the material presence of other-than-human life (White, Whitlock 2020, 3). Reconceptualising the autobiographical pact as a 'zoetrophic pact', Cynthia Huff argues that expanding the scope of the *bio* to include *zoe* - life that has generally been deemed insignificant and killable - transforms our understanding of what constitutes life, the way in which it is narrated and what life matters (Huff 2019, 445-6). The very notion of 'pact'

suggests the multiplicity of its constituent members, a form of multispecies flourishing that is narrated not just through writing, but through all of our senses. Huff argues that, by replacing the narrative emphasis on the human, zoetropic pack creates a scenario that

troubles the autobiographical pact's alliance between the reader, author and editor; eschews the human as principal actant in favour of distributive agency between the animal, the machine, inanimate matter, and the human while also promoting multispecies flourishing; advances a material becoming-with; advocates representationality that nudges us into the open as a zone of play; and suggests a strategy of multispecies reading and response-ability that pushes the audience to become-with other species not just by, or primarily by, relying on sight, but across sensoria. (454)

Decentering the humanist portraits in autobiography that exclude our vegetal kin, John Ryan coins the term "phytography", referring to life writing about more-than-humans that "pivots on the potential of collaborating and co-authoring narratives with plants" (2020, 98). This form of plant-writing foregrounds vegetal life and our relationship to them, as opposed to the sole focus on the autonomous, individual human self in conventional life narratives. Ryan also lists some of the major characteristics of a phytographic work which include particularisation, percipience, corporeality, temporality and seasonality, emplacement, language and signification, historicity, and mortality (99).

Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham exists at the intersections of portraiture of marginalised lives, eco-biography and phytography. This evinces a sense of liminality, where writing *about* the mangrove forests evolves into a process of writing *with* them, where the 'human' can no longer stand apart and becomes enmeshed with the vegetal. Pokkudan's arboreal encounters in the wetlands can be considered as an instance where enmeshment in an intricate web of life composed by the human, the other-than-human, and the more-than-human becomes apparent. Pokkudan's phytophilia does not emanate from perceiving nature as a pristine wilderness 'out there', but from embodied experiences that are in turn shaped by his community's history. The text particularises vegetality, engaging in attentive observation and description of individual plant characters. This is especially visible when Pokkudan describes the *pranthan kandal*, or the 'mad mangrove', scientifically known as the *Rhizophora mucronata*. Enamoured by the plant, Pokkudan declares his wish to be known as its namesake. "I am a mad mangrove", he says (2002, 64). Here, the 'mad' mangrove becomes operative as the literal translation of the Malayalam *pranthan kandal* (the word *pranthan* in Malayalam means 'mad man') and a metaphorical allusion to the years of

public ridicule Pokkudan experienced as the ‘mad man’ who wanted to save swamplands. Later, he also states that he wholeheartedly welcomes the epithet *kandal* (mangrove) that remains attached to his name, expressing his desire to be known as “*Kandal Pokkudan*” (65). He perceives the mangrove trees as agentic and responsive, acknowledging their role in shaping the ecological and social history of the region. Describing the life cycle of the *murru*, a type of oyster that grows attached to the rocky reefs in the lagoon, Pokkudan says that even the shellfish is a creature, just like the mangrove (62). This analogy between plant and animal life subverts our dominant zoocentric paradigm that holds human/animal life as the standard against which vegetal life is measured. Pokkudan holds the mangrove tree to be a percipient, animate creature, and his linguistic register does not resort to the prevalent practice of zoologising plants to legitimize their vivacity. The fifteenth chapter of his autobiography is titled *Kandal Jeevitham*, which translates literally into ‘mangrove-life’, or ‘life amidst the mangroves’. Situating himself at the centre of its rhizomorphic arboreality, Pokkudan says that, for him, life is nothing but whatever green remains of the mangrove forests, the stench of its swamplands and the salty breeze that blows from the estuary (66). In this way, the corporeal presence of the mangrove forests co-constitutes Pokkudan’s selfhood and its articulation through an idiosyncratic phytological register.

Paying close attention to the temporality and seasonality of this treescape, Pokkudan catalogues various ways to care for the young saplings; as they grow and bloom in the month of May, the hanging seeds look like they have been adorned with small brownish hats (62). The phytographic poetics of the text is also shaped by its emphasis on emplacement, or the influence of *topos* and its particularities on plant being. Pokkudan uses the term *theerakkadukal*, which can be translated as ‘littoral forestscapes’ to describe the mangrove forests, thus revealing their interstitial existence; an ambiguous arboreality that roots itself between the *terra* and the *aqua*. Another important feature of phytography is the concern with the mortality of vegetal life, the “decline and demise of plants operating as meaningful events prompting human grief, memorialization and elegy” (Ryan 2020, 99). Pokkudan, who spent his life planting and tending to thousands of mangrove saplings, mourns the loss of around 5,000 saplings destroyed by those who deemed his activism to be antithetical to the ideas of development (2002, 64). Driven by an ethics of care that transgresses species boundaries, Pokkudan grieves the loss of species as it unfolds before him, a solastalgic mourning that reminds the readers that, if the current unfettered mode of development continues, clean drinking water, along with crabs, shrimps and other aquatic species will become a memory (68). Thus, Pokkudan’s life narrative can be read as a phytographic account composed in di-

alogue with the mangrove forests, signalling “a shift from a homogeneous view based on taxonomic order to heterogeneous view based on empathic regard for individual plants as subjects” (Ryan 2020, 101).

5 Plant-Writing as Advocacy

In the year 2014, a massive oil spill in the Sela River in Bangladesh, brought about by a collision between an oil tanker and a cargo ship, covered the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans mangrove forest in black tar, causing massive fish kills. In the context of this disaster, a few portions from *The Honey Hunter* (2014), an illustrated children's narrative set in the Sundarbans, was reworked by the author Kartika Nair and artist Joëlle Jolivet with the aim of portraying the devastating effect of the oil spill on the landscape and the people. They covered the original sketches of the mangrove forest in black to represent how the tar was suffocating the ecosystem and the original story was rewritten to show how the oil spill had affected the ecologically sensitive region. This campaign demonstrated one of the ways in which narrative advocacy could contribute to inculcating awareness about the crucial role this fragile ecosystem plays in protecting biodiversity.

One of the central tenets of phytography is its emphasis on environmental advocacy. By critiquing reductive accounts of plants, narrativising human vegetal intersectionality, and cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility towards vegetal life, *Kandalkadukalkidayil Ente Jeevitham* takes on the urgent task of environmental advocacy. The autobiography, along with the debates its publication elicited, contributed immensely to the growing public awareness about the ecological significance of mangroves and their rampant destruction. Today, Kallen Pokkudan's name is synonymous with mangrove conservation, and he is often described as the ‘Mangrove Man’ of Kerala. Much like his name, *Kandal* Pokkudan (Mangrove Pokkudan), his public persona has come to be inseparably connected with mangroves. He received several accolades for his conservation efforts, including a special mention from UNESCO and the Kerala state department's Vanamithra award. He also started a mangrove school to enlighten the young generation about the importance of mangrove forests and conducted more than five hundred lectures on the importance of conserving wetlands in educational institutions all over India. His autobiography has also been included as a part of the curriculum in several universities. Recently, a new species of Cyperaceae found in Kannur district of Kerala was named *Fimbristylis pokkudaniana*, honouring his legacy (Sunil et al. 2017, 21). Thus, Pokkudan's phytographic life writing operates as an ecopedagogical advocacy narrative in Kerala's public sphere, owing to its emphasis on environ-

mental praxis and the acknowledgement of the confluence of social, ecological and interspecies justice (Gaard 2008, 326).

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