

**Mapping the Motif of the Wandering Jew in Salim Kumar's  
*Karutha Joothan***

Jeslin Mery John  
St Thomas College, India

Asha Susan Jacob  
St Thomas College, India

### Abstract

The motif of the Wandering Jew is an archaic motif whose conventional elements can function within widespread narrative contexts. Formally the motif might operate in the same manner as do other motifs: as just another component of the narrative structure. But because of the comprehensive nature of its features, this motif is able to deliver its essential message of human suffering even as it migrates through diverse cultural environments, as the interaction of its axiological elements with their newly acquired social and cultural contexts has the capacity to appear seamless and unlaboured. Salim Kumar's Malayalam film *Karutha Joothan* (2017) is a case in point. The work employs this motif remarkably well in what is an uncharted cultural context: the dwindling community of Black Jews in Kerala. Along with articulating the distress of a marginalised community, the film memorialises a significant historical era. This paper examines the ways in which the film's protagonist comes to represent the prototypical lonely wanderer of the generic myth.

*Keywords:* diaspora, history, Jewish, minority, wandering

## The Myth of the Wandering Jew

Historically, the communities of the Jewish diaspora have been racialised, ghettoised, and continually persecuted. As a cultural reflexion of this social phenomenon, the stereotyped and prejudiced representation of Jewish characters has been prevalent in the European literary repertoire, quintessential examples being the antisemitic tropes manifested in Elizabethan plays like *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*. In many literary works, set against the backdrop of widely differing cultures, “the wandering Jew is typically represented as a male figure wandering through exile, doing penance for some act of wrongdoing, attempting to find his way back to the Jewish homeland” (Potok, 1998, p. 135). Many such representations presumably arise from the age-old story of the condemned Jewish shoemaker Cartaphilus, a mythical tale of crime, punishment, curse and guilt. Legend holds that Cartaphilus taunted Christ on his way to crucifixion and Christ damned him to a “miserable life wandering the earth until the Second Coming” (Morrison, 2012, p. 399).

Morrison (2012) summarises the generic myth thus:

On the day of his Crucifixion, as Jesus carries the Cross along the road to Golgotha, he comes to the workplace of a Jewish shoemaker called Cartaphilus. Tired, badly beaten, and thirsty, Christ halts and asks the shoemaker for a little water or perhaps the chance to rest for a moment in the shade of his doorway. Considering Jesus a worthless heretic, Cartaphilus abruptly denies the request, and, after some interchange, Christ, having perhaps repeated his plea for a little relief, brings the encounter to a menacing close, saying something like: ‘I am soon going to die, but you will not die until I return.’ Cartaphilus immediately realizes his catastrophic mistake. Cursed to live until the Second Coming, he leaves his wife and children, takes up a staff to support him as he trudges along, a sack to carry a few possessions, and, with no hope of companionship, home or destination, sets off to wander the earth for ever. (p. 400)

The initial circulation of this myth perhaps served as a warning against blasphemy. However, it is likely that it paved the way for energising a substratal rancour towards the Jews, leading to their invigorated persecution and victimization in several parts of the globe.

In *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*, George K. Anderson (1965) does a comprehensive analysis of the genesis and development of the legendary tale in a diachronic manner. Commonly considered a Christian legend, he points out that it is one of the “extrascriptural legends” (1965, p. 11) that was spread far and wide through different periods starting in the first millennium. There have been conspicuous changes in the story’s external appearance as it travelled across diverse spatial borders; the numerous regional versions of the same storyline testify to this fact. There are several versions of the account in folktales and different character names – Ahasuerus, Malchus, Cartophilus and others – are ascribed to this mythical character. Anderson (1965) holds that the pamphlet *Kurtze Beschreibung*, published in 1602 in Germany, is perhaps “the most important single milestone in the progress of the Legend of the Wandering Jew” (p. 42). He also brings to light several instances in the western cultural landscape where the legendary character reappears in slightly different forms, as in the Ancient Mariner (that of Coleridge) and the Flying Dutchman (p. 8). Many such characters with uncanny or rather demonic characteristics have sprung up in the British Gothic literature as well.

Due to their diasporic existence, and at least until the formation of the modern state of Israel, Jews were collectively awarded the sobriquet of wanderers. In fact, many theoreticians

considered them the paradigmatic diasporic population. Efraim Sicher (2014) observes that, until quite recently, postcolonial criticism considered the Jew the “archetypal cosmopolitan transnational migrant at home everywhere, with roots nowhere,” an epitome of the exploited “disadvantaged minority populations” (p. 2). However, considering today’s baneful Middle Eastern politics, he opines that now “the Jews have an ambiguous place as paradigmatic migrants” (Sicher, 2014, p. 10).

The critical volume *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (1986) offers an in-depth analysis of the legendary wanderer from multiple perspectives. The origin of the legend, moreover, is traced throughout several of the essays in this collection. These bring to light that, in many literary works, the futility associated with the Wandering Jew’s seemingly endless journey, his miserable and hopeless existence, is metaphorically extended to describe the condition of all Jews. The numerous exiles and subsequent scattering of the community are construed by some as a punishment for some act of wrongdoing in the past. The interpretation of Jewish identity based on certain dubious canards, such as their purported self-hatred and their acutely self-conscious reclusion, have a strong sway in the popular imagination. It cannot be gainsaid that such stereotypical, stigmatised discourses about the Jews have inadvertently crept into literary, filmic and theoretical arenas. However, it is interesting to note that, in many South Asian creative writers, a tendency to reject those commonplace characterisations of Jewishness is observable.

### **The Jews of India**

The Jews constitute a miniscule religious community in India. Untouched by antisemitism, their existence is characterised by a close rapport with the people of other cultures and religions. As evinced from the eloquent testimony by a member of the community, India has shown that there is “at least one country in the world [where], Jews can exist with pride and honour and without any need for self-consciousness or protective withdrawal into a self-created ghetto” (Israel, 1989, p. 52). The Jewish community of the southwestern strip of India, i.e., the Jews of Kerala, have also lived in harmony with the rest of the society. The minor divisions within the community, the separation of Paradesi Jews (White Jews) and Malabari Jews (Black Jews), is a minor blemish on their otherwise cordial, centuries-long inhabitancy in India.

Edna Fernandes (2008) explains the history of these two factions in her salient work *The Last Jews of Kerala*. The settlement of the Paradesi Jews takes place centuries after the arrival of the Malabari Jews along the coast of Malabar. This unusual division within the Jews is viewed by the Jewish scholar Nathan Katz (2000) as an emulation of the Hindu way of stratifying of society, that is, casteism (p. 12). Compared to the somewhat full-fledged assimilation of the Malabari Jews in the Indian polity, the integration of the White Jews is less coherent. Perhaps because of this less effectual assimilation, scholarly studies on the subject focus almost exclusively on the experience of the White Jews, obviating any analytical inquiry into Black Jewish life.

Following the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948, the Jewish population of India substantially declined, as many members of the community emigrated to the newly established nation. The Jews who remain in India resuscitate their memories of growing up in the Indian multicultural milieu through artistic pieces like memoirs, novels, poetry and others. Though sporadically, people from outside the Jewish community have also written about them, mainly as reminiscence of a lost past. Anna Guttman (2010) studies the Jewish characters created by renowned stalwarts of Indian English literature such as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Vikram

Seth, Amitav Ghosh and others in the article “The Jew in the Archive”. Apart from that, several documentaries and feature films have also touched upon the Jews in an attempt to showcase the remnants of a fascinating bygone era. In the Malayalam film industry, the film *Gramophone* (2003) is one of the first attempts in this regard. Most of these creative endeavours invariably present the Jewish existence with a rosy hue. As Guttman (2013) puts it, “colonial and postcolonial Jewish history in India is more complex and less utopian than is often presumed” (p.129). In spite of India’s much-acclaimed tolerance, she opines that “Indian Jews remained and remain marginal subjects” (Guttman, 2013, p. 133). The Malayalam film *Karutha Joothan* (2017) follows this trajectory, offering an alternative picture to the widely held cheerful glimpse; here, the bleak reality is brought to the forefront without the predictable euphemistic patina.

In this film the Black Jews may be understood as wretched individuals who were glossed over by the powerful and erased from history. Given the habitual, idealised renderings of this community’s experiences, it is difficult to anticipate that soon after these Jews emigrated in connection with the *aliyah* (immigration to Israel), all remembrance of them and of the objects they held close to their heart were wiped from the nation’s collective memory. The traces of their existence were expunged and whatever they left behind was physically erased. Encroachments on their assets and material property, including graveyards, became commonplace. In the interest of removing the euphemistic aura that surrounds the story of the Black Jews, the main episode shown in this film is based on a real-life incident.

### ***Karutha Joothan* and the Mythological Figure**

The story, screenplay and direction of *Karutha Joothan* (meaning Black Jew) are the work of Salim Kumar, who also plays the role of the protagonist. Also starring Shivaji Guruvayoor, Ramesh Pisharody and Usha, the film features the tragic story of a Black Jew in the village Mala, located in the Thrissur district of Kerala. The film won the Kerala State Award for the best story in 2017. The lead character Aaron Eliyahu (fondly called by his peers as Auroni Joothan), who is on a pilgrimage to explore the Jewish culture of India, meets with an accident. After being in a coma for years, he regains consciousness and returns to his hometown only to find that his family has migrated to Israel and his property has been reclaimed by the village council (panchayat). Nobody seems to recognise him except for his childhood friend Beeran, and he wanders destitute and homeless. The social backdrop allows the film to offer glimpses of how people, institutions and the state turn a blind eye to historical injustices and suppress facts in the interest of petty personal gain.

The film’s title song is an old Jewish folk ballad; it describes the journey of ancestors who in antiquity landed on the shores of Kerala after crossing the sea. The film unfolds through Beeran’s memories, as he recalls the past while perusing a book written by his friend Aaron. The plot moves back and forth in time, shifting between the halcyon days of Aaron’s childhood, when there were many Jews in Mala, and the present, one where people have relegated the Jewish presence in the region to a vague, distant past. The genuine acts of kindness and generosity with which Aaron’s family treated Beeran, make him emotional as he recalls the past. Different colour palettes are employed in the scenes to highlight the temporal deviations, and the flashbacks offer a glimpse into the extinct Jewish cultural life.

Aaron’s book, published after many adversities, is an unmatched storehouse of historical records, those of his personal life as a Jew and of the life of his community. The contents of Aaron’s book as well as the dramatic sequences become a platform upon which to discuss the

historical aspects of Kerala's Jewish community. The constant back-and-forth from past to present does not interrupt the even flow of the film, but rather regulates the pulse of its emotional content.

The film itself describes Jews as wanderers. Jewish ancestors came to India when they faced persecution elsewhere and settled in Kerala, acclimatising well with the local environment but always yearning to return to their homeland. They are compared to migratory birds that perch in new places and go back to their home after some time. They are also likened to turtles that go back to the ocean after their brief stay at the seashore. The film has accomplished the task of salvaging a rich episode in Kerala's cultural matrix, one that had been relegated to an indistinct past. It is an indictment of a specific historical neglect.

In some respects, *Karutha Joothan* reclaims the theme of the Wandering Jew, with Aaron becoming the embodiment of the legendary character although, unlike the mythical wanderer, he has not committed any crime. This wandering is not a punishment sin, but is an inevitable mission that, as a Jew, he is destined to fulfil. He takes on a journey that becomes a turning point in his life after vowing to his mother and sister that he would return in a year. He wanders through the tombstones of his ancestors across the length and breadth of India with the aim of finding the roots of his community and recording his findings for posterity. His he needs to shed light upon a period mired in darkness but can only do so by peregrinating through the world of the dead and the spirits.

The futility of his enterprise is brought to the fore, as he meets with an accident and lies in a coma for years. At the moment when the tragedy happens, he is about to finish his investigation. The film thus underscores human helplessness in the face of the absurdities of fate. As the news of his death reaches the village, it shatters Aaron's family. As years roll on and every Jew in the village migrates, they are also compelled to follow them to the Promised Land of Israel. Before leaving, Aaron's mother Veronica, who believes that her son may come back, entrusts the house and all their property to the panchayat on the condition that they return them all when Aaron returns. After about thirty or forty years, Aaron revives from coma only to play the role of the accursed wanderer once again. As he gradually learns of the changes around him, he is shocked at every turn. Harrowed and afflicted by the enormity of the time that has passed, he finds comfort in the prospect of reaching home and reuniting with his family.

However, what awaits him in his village is critically different from what he anticipated. There is no one, except for his bosom friend Beeran, who is happy at his homecoming. The haunted figure of the Wandering Jew resurfaces here without significant transmogrifications. Aaron sees that his house has been turned into a post office. He cannot rationalise this unexpected turn of events. Self-serving authorities and villagers refuse to acknowledge his identity because they have taken possession of the house and the hundreds of acres of groves and farmland surrounding it. Prior to leaving the land decades ago, he enjoyed a respectable position in the village as a teacher; now, his predicament is not much different from that of a beggar.

The panchayat authorities and the politicians join hands to evict the property's legitimate heir from his own land. The state apparatuses lack all integrity, denying him justice by obfuscating facts. Moreover, the police arrest him on account of his so-called illegal entry into the post office. In court he is unable to prove his identity. As a result, the court denies his appeals. It is ironic that there is an abundance of evidence to prove that Aaron is dead, but nothing is there to prove that he is alive. People indeed know the truth, but they refuse to accept it.

The Wandering Jew “is of indeterminate age [...], longhaired, heavily bearded, world-weary and dressed in long, simple, well-worn garments” (Morrison, 2012, p. 400). The physical appearance of Aaron roughly resembles the countenance of this mythical, perpetual wayfarer of lore. Estranged from his familiar environment, Aaron is cast away from the house in which he was born, tossed out to the mean streets as a destitute. He is relegated to the status of a vagrant or tramp, somewhat like the German Jew in Anita Desai’s novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988). His everyday existence is dreadful, now that he is a laughingstock, the villagers’ butt of ridicule. Being dispossessed and repudiated by everyone, he is treated like an eyesore; he becomes the subaltern “other” unable to occupy his legitimate place in society. Dismissed to the level of a ghostly, unwelcome presence who reminds his neighbours of a disavowed past, he struggles to cope with the changing currents. Like a vagabond, he trudges through the streets bereft of sanctuary and rejected at every turn.

The only remains of his past life are the sheets of paper that he scribbled down during his scholarly trips to the Jewish sites of North India. His greatest wish after returning to Mala is to publish them, as it would be an unparalleled historical record for posterity. For him, this manuscript is not simply an expendable collection of papers; it is the fruit of his long visionary wanderings for the completion of which he had to sacrifice a great deal. After going through a myriad of hardships, he gives the documents to a publisher who rejects them on the grounds that no one would be interested in reading about such exotic, minuscule communities.

Weighed down by frustration, he finally bids adieu to his dear friend Beeran. As he is an unwanted presence in the village, he decides to leave in the hopes of discovering the whereabouts of his mother, who might be dead by now, and of his sister. Before leaving he hands over his sole valuable assets to Beeran, i.e., a mezuzah (parchment sacred to the Jews) which his mother had gifted him, and the manuscript containing the findings of his studies. This is an unusual act whereby a Jew gives his most sacred religious object (mezuzah) to a Muslim as a way of expressing his love and his gratitude for standing by him unwaveringly through thick and thin. This solemn, heart-touching farewell scene picturises how the boundaries between religions get effaced in the warmth of genuine human relationships. The very ending of the movie, the final blow to his tragic fate, comes immediately after this scene. The film comes to a close showing the mutilated corpse of Aaron, who became a victim of the unending Israel-Palestine conflicts. He does not get a dignified funeral after his death, as his mortal remains are cobbled together in a wheelbarrow and buried at the cemetery without even a stone to mark the tomb of the last Jew of Mala.

From the outset, the ill-starred ramblings of Aaron provide an image of the doomed fate of the Wandering Jew. The decisive journey he takes throughout India to dig out the roots of his community seals his fate. As James E. Young (1988) points out, the “figure” of the Jew ... is always chased, always killed” (p. 116). Aaron is here presented as a Jew on the walkabout, a forlorn figure, one subjected to victimisation and othering who remains composed even after confronting terrible psychological turmoil. In the character’s identification with the Wandering Jew figure, fate is an essential compositional element. The inevitable, traumatic torments that he endures, blindly ordained by fate, sketch the lines that give us the image of the mythical character.

### Conclusion

Certain archetypes cut across space and time as recurrent efforts to tell the unending story of human tragedy. In the case of *Karutha Joothan*, a western motif is effectively reworked into a

non-western context. The critical analysis of the film shows how universal motifs, archetypes and iconographies cross cultural borders. Like new wine in an old bottle, this film employs the age-old parable to tell the story in a different historical and socio-cultural milieu, all the while performing only the slightest adaptations on the original narrative. Interestingly, this relocation has not removed the original tale's quintessential features. Clear allusions to the myth can be discerned from the plot. Like the legendary wanderer, Aaron has no home and is nowhere welcome; accordingly, he is always on the move, weighed down with the heavy baggage of memories.

Although the wandering and the constant rejection Aaron encounters are similar to the original story, there are differences. First, the social repudiation that he suffers is not the result of any wrongdoing. Secondly, although he constantly faces intractable danger, he is not someone who looks forward to embracing death. Thirdly, while he feels guilty for leaving his family alone and giving them a lifetime of grief, he does it unwillingly as the result of an accident. Furthermore, Aaron's journey is not an endless, eternal one as in the aforementioned tale, as his journey comes to an end with his death. Here, in death he finds solace: death provides an end to his miserable plight.

Despite its undoubted artistic merits, at some points the film's narrative structure needs to resort to melodramatic, perfunctorily sentimental and pessimistic scenes. The intense, emotional treatment given the protagonist throughout the film and the unmediated theatricality occasionally antagonise the realistic atmosphere that the screenwriter is evidently trying to create. Nevertheless, the film completes an important, historic task. Through the protagonist's plight, the film poses pertinent questions that serve to unsettle the average viewer's complacency. It furthermore seeks to debunk the biased traditional historiography, which ignores the history of the Black Jews and aims to place a delusory façade over acts of injustice. It is also a powerful reminder of the need to protect and reconceptualise cultural artefacts and memories associated with the nation's social and cultural past.

*Karutha Joothan* provides an evocative, sensitive portrayal of a thus far untold facet of Jewish life, and it does so by employing the motif of the Wandering Jew. The film is suffused with allusions to the allegorical, mythological figure without making any obvious, direct references to this character. The Wandering Jew is the template upon which the plot is built, though the backdrop is a very different, non-western sociocultural milieu. By exposing the raw realities of the life of one individual, the film becomes grounded in its scopic search for a collective identity that has, unfortunately, become a part of an abandoned, forgotten vignette of contemporary history.



## References

- Anderson, George K. (1965). *The legend of the Wandering Jew*. Brown UP.
- Fernandes, Edna. (2008). *The last Jews of Kerala*. Skyhorse Publishing.
- Guttman, Anna. (2010). The Jew in the Archive: Textualizations of (Jewish?) History in Contemporary South Asian Literature. *Contemporary Literature*, 51(3), 503–531. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2010.0018>.
- Guttman, Anna. (2013). *Writing Indians and Jews: Metaphorics of Jewishness in South Asian Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137339690>
- Hasan-Rokem, Galit, and Alan Dundes. (1986). *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the interpretation of a Christian legend*. Indiana UP.
- Israel, Benjamin J. (1989). *The Bene Israel of India: Some studies*. Orient Longman.
- Katz, Nathan. (2000). *Who are the Jews of India?* University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520213234.001.0001>
- Kumar, S., & Chettikkal, M. (Producers), & Kumar, S. (Director). (2017). *Karutha Joothan* [Motion Picture]. India: Laughing Buddha.
- Morrison, Christopher. (2012). The Wandering Jew in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 11(3), 399–417. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2012.737993>.
- Potok, Rena. (1998). The Wandering Jew and the Irishman: Paradigm shifts and the influence of James Joyce in Modern Israeli Fiction. *Religion & Literature*, 30(3), 135–149.
- Sicher, Efraim. (2014). The postcolonial Jew: Racialization, delegitimization, ambiguity. Paper presented at Anti-Semitism and Delegitimation of Israel, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Retrieved from: [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/270658854\\_The\\_Postcolonial\\_Jew\\_Racialization\\_Delegitimization\\_Ambiguity](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/270658854_The_Postcolonial_Jew_Racialization_Delegitimization_Ambiguity).
- Young, James E. (1988). *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Indiana UP.

**Corresponding author:** Jeslin Mery John

**Email:** [jeslinmery@gmail.com](mailto:jeslinmery@gmail.com)