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From Tropicality and Tourist Gaze to Affective Geography: Reclaiming Kochi in *Cobalt Blue*

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Abstract

Sachin Kundalkar's 2022 Indian Hindi-language feature film *Cobalt Blue*, which streamed on Netflix, is an adaptation of his 2006 Marathi novel of the same name, which Jerry Pinto translated into English. While the novel is set in Pune in the Indian state of Maharashtra, Kundalkar deliberately set the film in Kochi in India's southern state of Kerala. This article problematizes this mislocation of the film's setting, arguing that it creates a dialectical tension. On the one hand, the narration embodies a continuum between colonial discourse on tropicality (which codified tropical spaces as exotic, erotic, and perilous) and the capitalist spectacle of the tourist gaze (and Netflix gaze); on the other hand, it reduces the city of Kochi to a consumable place devoid of the logic of affective geography. This article traces the genealogy of colonial tropicality in relation to Kochi and examines how it is reproduced in the film as a continuum, with the city being showcased as a consumable place within the circuits of film tourism. It also demonstrates how the film's narrative subverts this very continuum by engendering an affective geography. A comparative reading of the novel and the film is furthermore conducted to establish how the paying guest (whose grammar in the narrative enables him to navigate the tropes of being a tourist, alongside subcategories such as 'drifter' and 'post-tourist') acts as a catalyst affecting the protagonists—the brother Tanay and sister Anuja—when the guest becomes their romantic and sexual interest and thus engenders the affective geography. The article draws on the theories of Dean MacCannell, John Urry, Sara Ahmed, and select philosophical frameworks of Alain Badiou.

Keywords: tropicality, tourist gaze, affective geography, Kochi Kerala, *Cobalt Blue*, consumerist tourism, film studies, queer cinema, film tourism

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Introduction: A Mislocated Setting to Tropicality and Tourist Gaze

Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* was initially published in 2006 in Marathi, and Jerry Pinto translated it into English in 2013. The novel is premised on the internal phenomenological reflections of two siblings—Tanay and Anuja—after they are emotionally affected by a paying guest in their house, who later abandons them. The unnamed guest becomes the romantic and sexual interest of the brother and sister, and Kundalkar employs a dual-perspective narrative to foreground different focalizations that involve the same interest—the brother Tanay's narrative is presented as an address to the paying guest, while his sister Anuja's narrative is presented as a diary entry. The novel was adapted as a feature film for Netflix, premiering in 2022. It was directed by Sachin Kundalkar, the author of the novel.

Historically, literary works have themselves fostered a type of tourism: the places of the births and deaths of literary figures, as well as locations associated with their works, have become distinctive sites that people tour (Herbert, 2001; Watkins & Herbert, 2003). O'Connor and Kim (2013) found that the change in medium, from literary to electronic through television and film adaptations, also induced tourism:

> Film and television adaptations of well-known novels mean a marriage or a conjunction of the two different media, which may result in magnifying the power to induce tourism. By means of film and television adaptations, a large number of people all over the world can easily experience great works of fiction. (p. 5)

For Long and Robinson (2009), film-induced locations generate a niche form of tourism that demonstrates how media, such as films, have become inseparable in global tourist discourse. However, contemporary scholarship stresses that this global tourist discourse is not politically neutral, but rather deeply embedded in problematic power structures. Global tourist discourse, often articulated through films and visual media, is powerful yet insufficiently examined as a lasting, tangible artifact of colonial hegemony and a primary source of the postcolonial gaze, which helps preserve the global postcolonial order (Harrill et al., 2024). According to Gibson (2019), tourism is entangled in capitalist structures, and tourist developments are linked to state territorialization, colonialism, and militarism. For Devine (2016), neoliberal tourism has resulted in violent practices of spatial colonization and land dispossession. Devine and Ojeda (2017) deepen this, arguing that violence is intrinsic to the process, linking tourism to (neo)colonialism. They introduce the notion of spatial fetishism—a mechanism that conceals violence by erasing local histories and enclosing resources to produce "paradise". This ongoing dispossession, both material and symbolic, ultimately makes tourism a key site of struggle over land and identity. Wearing et al.

(2019) note that global tourism is driven by neoliberal capitalist structures. Notwithstanding the fact that contemporary tourism is entwined in neoliberal and capitalist networks, Hazel Tucker (2019) highlights how historical colonialism continues to profoundly influence global tourism, which is reinforced through globalized capital structures. Tucker and Akama (2009) acknowledge the colonial legacies associated with tourism but also suggest that tourism can be employed as a tool to engender resistant counter-narratives that challenge the dominant discourse of exploitation. These theoretical premises form a crucial foundation for analyzing *Cobalt Blue.*

The cinematic adaptation departs from the novel in two aspects. Firstly, the novel is set in Pune in India's state of Maharashtra, whereas the film is set in Kochi in India's southern state of Kerala. This change in the setting is a deliberate artistic and aesthetic choice by the author/director based on how the setting is utilized. While the family of the protagonists remains conservative Maharashtrian Marathi Brahmin in the film, as in the novel, tension persists over preserving traditional values in an environment that is seemingly hostile towards their culture. It is also pertinent to note that Pune is not explicitly mentioned in the accounts of Anuja and Tanay in the novel, but Tanay's account refers to a paying guest asking him the reason for his city being called the cultural capital of the state (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, p. 31). Tzanelli (2007) foregrounds a powerful and deliberate link between a film's setting and the subsequent tourist discourse associated with it. Since the film's director is the author of the novel from which it is adapted, the change in the film's setting, along with its streaming on Netflix, makes it plausible to link it to the global tourist spectacle. For Tzanelli (2007), the relationship between the film's setting and tourist discourse is not a passive one, but an active one, driven by "global sign industries" (pp. 1-26). These industries generate and market cultural signs and narratives that shape how people generally perceive a geography. Secondly, contrary to the novel's introspective narrative style, the film employed a linear narrative that utilized the picturesque tropical landscape of Kochi, in particular, and Kerala, in general. This narrative style enabled Kundalkar to employ the techniques of restricted narration and temporal manipulation, withholding Anuja's romantic involvement with the paying guest while only foregrounding Tanay's desire for the guest until the moment of anagnorisis, which revealed the concealed queer relationship. The film's deliberate use of Kerala's picturesque geography makes it non-spurious to engage in conversation with the long history of representations of the tropics in art, literature, and media. These divergences provide an organic basis for engaging with Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). The adaptation mandates a shift from "telling" to "showing", where the former is employed in the novel's narrative to foreground the phenomenological experiences of the two protagonists and their introspective articulation, while the latter is used for translating the interiority present in the novel to that of the visual language of cinematic narrative.

Further, the fact that the film is originally produced, distributed, and streamed on Netflix, a global streaming service, complicates the cinematic narrative's relationship with the geographic landscape, as it reiterates what can be called a "Netflix gaze"—a capitalist logic that prioritizes marketability and aesthetic standardization, generating a spectacle for the viewers and appealing to the grammar of global tourism. This engenders a stereotypical visualization of Kochi and Kerala that aligns with the colonial logic of tropicality. However, this article argues that beneath the stereotypical and picturesque visual surface, a more radical and personal cartography is constructed. Contrary to the surface-level presentation of a spectacle of tropicality, the geographical landscapes are grounded in the intimate phenomenological experiences of the protagonists, Tanay and Anuja. Thereby, the place of consumption is transmuted into a geography with personalized meanings. The central argument of this article is that while the film *Cobalt Blue* appears to embrace the aesthetic of tropicality for a global audience—a tourist spectacle in the capitalist domain—it ultimately subverts this "Netflix gaze."

Thus, this article emplaces the film *Cobalt Blue* within the discourse of tropicality. As David Arnold (1996, 1998, 2000, 2006) reminds us, tropicality is not a neutral geography, but a historically imposed category that marks tropical spaces as exotic, sensual, and consumable. This is akin to how "the Orient" is constructed (Said, 1978). Such a construction underscores the history of objectification and aestheticization. Within this framework, the city of Kochi is reduced to an exotic backdrop bereft of lived complexity and is relegated to a space available for exploitation. A continuum persists between tropicality and global tourism in terms of the grammar of how tropical spaces are constructed—premised on natural geography and discounting cultural geography that prioritizes phenomenological experience with a landscape. Graham Huggan (2001) accentuates this continuum by asserting that the colonial tendency to exoticize non-European landscapes is repackaged for modern consumption.[1] This continuum is described by Stuart Hall (1996) as an after-effect of the colonial gaze.

The first section of this article explores the logic of tropicality, examining how the city of Kochi has been historically constructed and how it is depicted in the film *Cobalt Blue* (2022) under the global tourist gaze. The second section situates the paying guest within cinematic and literary narratives primarily as a tourist, while also alluding to the subcategories of drifter and post-tourist, connecting his role to that of a Badiouian event. It draws on theorists such as Dean MacCannell, John Urry, and Erik Cohen. The third section, drawing on Sara Ahmed, analyzes the newly engendered subjectivities of the two protagonists and how they generate affective geographies (spaces defined by emotion rather than just appearance), that are directly reciprocal

[1] Huggan's non-European landscapes are not limited to the tropics.

to the city's pre-imposed geography. The comparative reading of the novel and the film is used to supplement the arguments made throughout the sections.

Kochi: From Colonial Tropicality to Global Consumerist Tourism

The tropics have been historically constructed as a conceptual space (Arnold, 1996, pp. 142-143). This implies that, upon the actual geography of the tropics, a new signification is constructed, and this is called "tropicality." It is a Western colonial discourse that constructed "the tropical world as the West's environmental other and has been deeply implicated in colonialism and Western dominance" (Clayton, 2012, p. 1). These colonial iterations of tropicality functioned as epistemic tools; however, it is also pertinent to note that recent decolonial scholarship by Benitez and Lundberg (2022), Lundberg et al. (2023), Benitez, Chwala, Lundberg, and Nyeck (2024), and Benitez, Chwala, and Lundberg (2024) subvert these colonial iterations and queer tropicality. Notwithstanding these decolonial subversions, the colonial grammar of tropicality remains intact in cultural productions such as writing and film. In the film *Cobalt Blue*, the narrative at the outset embodies the grammar of tropicality through cinematographic objectification, appealing to Netflix's customer gaze for whom Kerala serves as the tropical other. However, beneath this, the narrative tactically subverts the colonial-capitalist continuum of tropicality. The objectified depiction of Kochi as a lush, green, wet landscape is complemented by the objectification of Kochi's men and by the political othering of the land through tacit symbolism. Presented through the male protagonist Tanay's gaze, Kundalkar depicts Kochi's men in *mundu*, bare-bodied, and playing football (Kundalkar, 2022, 0:03:42- 0:04:12). Given that this element is absent in the novel, it is a cinematic addition that performs an exoticization and othering of native masculinity as spectacle, which caters to Netflix's consumerist gaze. This method of othering is also reflected in the political realm, where a consistent visual motif of communist flags constructs Kochi as a "communist outback." There is a scene in the film where Tanay is stopped by a group of Communist Party activists, followed by the scene which shows their sloganeering disturbing the lecture Tanay is listening to (Kundalkar, 2022, 0:17:02-0:18:50). Furthermore, in the film, while discussing the paying guest, Tanay's father makes a statement that he is open to having anyone as a paying guest, as long as the person in question is not a communist. However, Anuja disagrees and expresses her love for Communists as they engage in strikes, resulting in the closure of schools and colleges, and they play football wearing *mundu*. She further says, "No Industry. No Development. Green Kerala" (Kundalkar, 2022, 0:24:30-0:24:42). Such dialogues in the film explicitly construct Kerala as an exotic geography. This aligns with how tropicality is historically constructed in colonial conditions, where geography is utilized as an immediate factor upon which other significations, in the realms of politics, sexuality, and more, are generated. Therefore, the continuum that exists between colonial tropicality and the

capitalist consumerist spectacle remains intact, whereby the people and politics of Kerala are assessed and cataloged as components of its exotic landscape or inseparable from the signification that constitutes Kerala. To understand the deep historical roots of this modern gaze, it is essential to trace the colonial construction of the region itself.

The modern state of Kerala, located on India's southwestern coast, is a product of the State Reorganization Act of 1956, following India's independence, when it merged three distinct political entities—the erstwhile princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the Malayalam-speaking areas of the Madras state which include the district of Malabar, and the *taluk* (subdistrict) of Kasargod in South Canara district. The linguistic reorganization and the emergence of Kerala as a state that unifies Malayalam-speaking areas is an effect of the Aikya Kerala Movement, which aimed at recreating a united Malayali homeland (which Zamorin of Calicut and Martanda Varma of Travancore failed to do due to the colonial intrusions of the Portuguese and the Dutch, respectively) (Menon, 2010, ch. 5). Despite being politically fractured for several centuries, Meena Khan (2024) notes that Kerala's unique geography acted as a catalyst in preserving its unity and identity: "Kerala has an historic unity and identity as the coastal lands rising up to the protective heights of the Western Ghats" (p. 178). The primary setting of *Cobalt Blue* is Kochi, historically known as Cochin, and it has a peculiar colonial history; the city and the areas surrounding it are one of the very few political units in the world—alongside Sri Lanka and Malacca, Malaysia—that were controlled first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch, and finally by the British colonial empires.[2] While, in the case of Sri Lanka, it has been argued that later colonial powers inheriting political power from a former colonial power, as in the British inheriting power from the Dutch, was instrumental in causing societal rupture in this multiethnic society, resulting in discontent due to biased colonial practices (Priyadharshan P., 2025), such societal discontent has been historically absent in Kochi. Despite the change in colonial powers, a continuum persisted in how colonial officers viewed the geography of Kochi and Malabar, which inherently exhibited tropicality. Colonial documentation by Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial officers exhibits similar tropes. Although the modern-day state of Kerala had little historical political unity in medieval times, the Portuguese officer Duarte Barbosa (1921), in his written accounts about India completed in 1518 A.D., referred to the territories that make up the state of Kerala of today as "Malabar."[3] He noted that the people of Malabar spoke Maliama and

[2] While European powers governed the Kingdom of Cochin indirectly as a protectorate, preserving its local monarchy, they pursued a strategy of direct rule in Sri Lanka, which culminated in the British consolidation of the entire island as a Crown Colony. For more about the Portuguese and Dutch colonial interactions with Cochin, see Panikkar (1929, 1931).

[3] It is important to note that while the state of Kerala is a modern political creation post-independence, the idea of the Malayali homeland has been in existence for a long time. Historically it existed in the form of three political

presented a detailed description of Malabar's early history, including its caste system, religion, division of kingdoms, and royal families (Barbosa, 1921, pp. 1-78).[4] When referring to the Kingdom of Cochin, he first noted the spices grown there.[5] He then stated that the King of Cochin achieved sovereignty with Portuguese aid and proceeded to describe the fort they had constructed at the mouth of the river (Barbosa, 1921, pp. 92-5).[6] Similarly, in his sixteenth-century account of India, Gaspar Correa (1869) referred to Cochin mostly in relation to the spice trade and viewed all of Malabar as a prized possession. Meanwhile, the Dutch Minister Philippus Baldaeus (1672/2000) described both the political and natural geography of Malabar, as his primary concern was with the spice trade through the ports present there. He was also interested in the caste system and society. The Portuguese and the Dutch accounts mentioned here show equal disdain for the native population by calling them "heathens" and their practices "idolatrous"; they were deeply interested in the caste system, and they viewed these geographies as abundant in resources that supported the spice trade and were ready to be exploited. While this notion of tropical abundance is also prominent in the works of the British collector William Logan (1887/2010a; 1887/2010b) and the East India Company's Francis Buchanan (1807/1988), it would be dismissed as an illusion by Pierre Gourou (1953/1966). One striking difference between the earlier Dutch and Portuguese accounts is their views from Protestant and Catholic perspectives, respectively—while the indigenous caste hierarchy was exoticized and religious practices were constructed as uncivilized in both accounts, native Catholic Christian practices were described benevolently in Portuguese accounts. However, the Dutch viewed them through the same lens of disdain. All these European accounts constructed Malabar as "an other" in contrast to Europe, not only in terms of cultural difference but also in terms of natural geography—they preferred commodities over people, and contrasted European natural geography with that of Malabar by utilizing the latter's natural landscape and the commodities grown there. This is strikingly exhibited in the British colonial artist and writer, James Forbes's *Oriental Memoirs* (1834), in which he compared the Mountains of Cochin with the European Alps:

> From Calicut, we proceeded to Cochin, and arrived there on the 14th, after sailing along a bold coast of cocoa-nut trees and rice-fields, extending over a sandy plain to the Gaut mountains, whose majestic summits in the morning are generally enveloped clouds; but towards

entities—the Kingdoms of Cochin and Travancore, and the British Malabar which made up the rest, and was a part of Madras Presidency—from the later part of the eighteenth century. The translator referenced these political entities in the footnote to contextualize Barbosa's work. However, in Barbosa's time there persisted only three recognized sovereign kingdoms—Cannanore, Cochin, and Venad (See Panikkar, 1960, p.18).

[4] Barbosa refers to the Malayalam language as Maliama. Malayalam, which is the official language of the state of Kerala, is one of the twenty-two languages recognized by India.

[5] The Kingdom of Cochin is not only limited to the port city of Cochin but also several adjacent parts.

[6] Barbosa used the term Cochim, a variant of Cochin.

> sun-set, their western acclivities display an assemblage of rocks and woods, in broad masses of light and shadow, which rival the Alps and Appenines of Europe; although deficient in those pinnacles and glaciers; whose sublimity and beauty, seen through the clear atmosphere of an Italian winter, baffle the artist's skill, and defy the power of language. (p. 216)

Completing the classic portrait of tropicality, Forbes also noted the diseases endemic to Cochin, juxtaposing the landscape's exotic splendor with the ever-present threat of illness. This aligns with David Arnold's (2000) reading of duality in the European engagement, which forms a trope of tropicality: "Europe's engagement with the tropics contained, almost from the outset, a duality that made the tropics appear as much pestilential as paradisiacal" (p. 8). The bodies of Malabar's men and women were historically scrutinized in colonial accounts, especially when referring to Malabar's societal practices and customs. These colonial accounts, ranging from those of the Portuguese to those of the British, offer a similar description of men and women regarding their attire—they were bare above the waist—which confirms the reliability of the descriptions. However, in the Portuguese accounts, such as those of Barbosa, the same is viewed through the lens of European Christian modernity, which led to the construction of a lack of upper garments as antithetical to European values; while, in the British accounts, the documentation was generally ethnographic, including William Logan's (1887/2010a; 1887/2010b) documentation of the Channar Revolt—known as the Upper Cloth Agitation—in Travancore.[7] Newer and biased significations of hypersexuality of locals were generated in colonial accounts. The construction of the native body as hypersexual and signifying it as both sexually deviant and primitive is a core component of discourses of tropicality and is an act of projection, as Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) and Edward Said (1978) have pointed out. Such historical accounts highlight the intricate link that exists between historical colonial tropicality and modern capitalist spectacle. The film *Cobalt Blue* tactically uses cinematic objectifications of Kerala's Kochi through picturesque portrayals of the city's landscapes, bare-chested men, and communist flags to cater to a global consumerist gaze, which aligns with and reiterates the grammar of colonial tropicality. Furthermore, the reduction of geographies into mere stereotypes reinforces Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1955/1961) notion that authentic tropical spaces are lost, and one wishes that "the spectacle on offer had not yet been blemished, contaminated, and confounded" (p.44). The non-existence of unblemished tropical spaces pre-empts the practice to "recreate

[7] On the contrary, Doss (2022), while acknowledging that the colonial discourse is an expression of European secular modernity, notes that it is articulated through missionary activity and education, producing a long-lasting sociocultural transformation in Travancore, as conversions occurred among marginalized communities and simultaneously reshaped indigenous moral frameworks. This demonstrates that British colonial engagement in the sociocultural sphere functioned as an active, normative force rather than a neutral ethnographic documentation.

a lost local colour with the help of fragments and debris" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955/1961, p.44), which explains how the film reinforces a simplistic, pre-packaged stereotype to appeal to Netflix's customer base, who, *à la* modern travelers, desire a spectacle; this is nothing but "contaminated memory" for Lévi-Strauss—a staged authenticity. With the global disposition of Netflix's customer base being largely Western, the cinematography reflects Urry's (1995) following point:

> Everyone in the 'West' is now entitled to engage in visual consumption, to appropriate landscapes and townscapes more or less anywhere in the world, and to record them to memory photographically. (p. 176)

The film, *Cobalt Blue*, aligns with Urry's assertion. While it is a capitalist cultural production, it catalogs Kochi's people and politics as inseparable components of its exotic landscape, thereby reiterating colonial discourses about Kochi steeped in tropicality.

Paying Guest as an Agent of Subjectivation

Akin to the film using a stereotypical depiction of Kochi to cater to the capitalist spectacle, a style rooted in colonial "tropicality," while simultaneously challenging this convention by creating affective geographies (emotional spaces), the novel and the film show the paying guest as exhibiting the grammar relatable to the tourist subcategories of drifter and post-tourist. This complexity is central to arguments pertaining to the paying guest and is a powerful statement about the character's transformative impact on the narrative. This section primarily utilizes the novel's account to examine how the paying guest transforms the protagonists.

The traits embodied by the paying guest in the cinematic and literary narratives are those of a "drifter," as Erik Cohen (1972 & 1979) would put it. For Cohen (1972), a drifter is a type of tourist who is a product of non-institutionalized tourism. He defined a drifter as follows:

> This type of tourist ventures furthest away from the beaten track and from the accustomed ways of life of his home country. He shuns any kind of connection with the tourist establishment, and considers the ordinary tourist experience phony. He tends to make it wholly on his own, living with the people and often taking odd-jobs to keep himself going. He tries to live the way the people he visits live, and to share their shelter, foods, and habits, keeping only the most basic and essential of his old customs. The drifter has no fixed itinerary or

> timetable and no well-defined goals of travel. He is almost wholly immersed in his host culture. Novelty is here at its highest, familiarity disappears almost completely. (Cohen, 1972, p. 168)

Richard Sharpley (1995/1999) notes that the conception of the drifter is no longer compatible with the globalized world, and there is a blurring of institutionalized and non-institutionalized modes of tourism. Furthermore, he also emphasizes the concept of the "post-tourist," as tourists who are aware of the tourist games and are no longer confined to traditional tourist roles. McCabe (2005) notes that a negative connotation persists associated with the word "tourist," and other nomenclatures are preferred. This provides a reason for the paying guest to be called such, despite embodying the grammar of a tourist, particularly that of a drifter, as well as the role of a post-tourist in the globalized world. The cinematic and literary instances firmly situate the paying guest within the twin grammars of the drifter and the post-tourist through his portrayal as rootless, *surnameless*, unattached, slipping in and out of domestic spaces with ease, and refusing all forms of institutional belonging. However, these also constitute the premise for regarding him as a tourist in general, since both the drifter and the post-tourist are established subcategories within tourism.

The role of the paying guest in both the film and the novel is central to the subjectivation of the two protagonists. This is explicitly stated through the characters' narrative in the novel. The paying guest embodies the transient nature of tourists—he is not grounded in the space where he resides. The brother Tanay's account in the novel explicitly discloses this when he mentions, "You came as a paying guest. You gave my parents the rent. You gave me so much more. Then you slipped away" (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, p.4). The novel's portrayal of the paying guest adds another layer to the reading of him as a transient tourist. In Tanay's account, his mother describes the guest as an orphan who is a final-year arts student and a translator of works from French. However, in the film, the paying guest is portrayed as an artist who paints public walls of Kochi, providing a visual and symbolic parallel to the film. In addition to these, he is described in the novel as a person without a surname, which leads to the undiscoverability of his caste. In Tanay's account in the novel, it is mentioned that his family takes no consideration of matters pertaining to caste, yet his parents attempt to interrogate the paying guest about his caste. This interrogation is premised on the paying guest's reference to chapatti as *"poli,"* which triggered a whole conversation about caste, since Brahmins employ the term *"poli,"* and Tanay's parents want to confirm whether the paying guest is a Brahmin or not through an inquiry about the family deity. For these interrogations, the paying guest replies as follows: "I begin from myself. I have no home, no caste, no clan. I have kept my relatives at arm's length. I do not know who I believe in. I am a seeker" (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, pp. 38-9). When Tanay's mother intentionally changes the topic of discussion by asking

where he is from, he replies, "Where I am, that's where I come from" (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, pp. 38-9). Further, in Tanay's account, it is noted that "every surname brought with it a hundred questions for people like my parents. If I brought a friend home and introduced him a name was never enough" (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, pp. 38-9). The paying guest's identity, as described in both the novel and the film, aligns perfectly with the characteristics of a tourist. His lack of family and surname makes him a figure that is transient and unrooted, and, *à la* a tourist, he also leaves a mark without owning that space through his acts, such as painting the public walls in the film. The narrative difference between the novel and its film adaptation reiterates Linda Hutcheon's (2006) concept of repetition with variation: the story is repeated with variations in medium, perspective, or setting, generating pleasure for the audience. The film primarily presents Tanay's account, whereas the novel encompasses both Tanay's and Anuja's versions, highlighting the variation not only across media but also in perspective. This is significant at this juncture, as Anuja's interpretation of the paying guest, or how he presented himself to her, can be read only through her diary entries in the novel.

The traits of the paying guest further establish him as a tourist: his stay is temporary, he is portrayed as a generic figure, and he is unnamed in the literary and cinematic narratives. While the generic image aligns with Georg Simmel's (2008) concept of the "stranger," through a reading of John Urry, this stranger aligns with a tourist—a spectator who has their own gaze, known as the "tourist gaze." He notes that the "tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience" (Urry, 1999/2002, p.3). Further, he adds that the "gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs" (Urry, 1999/2002, p.3). However, the paying guest's "gaze" is not a passive one, but is active—he interferes and attempts to change the scene. This is evident in his participation in painting the city's public walls in the film. In the novel, he interferes with the actions of the neighboring girls' hostel. The active participation of the paying guest makes him move beyond Urry's conventional tourist. Additionally, participation through acts such as painting public walls reinforces the *modus operandi* of colonial explorers and officers, whose accounts (which constitute tropicality), while seemingly passive, were actually active in shaping the ideological apparatus that justified colonial exploitation. Moreover, for Urry, the tourist gaze is antithetical to "non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness," implying that it is in opposition to routine, domestic life (Urry, 1999/2002, p. 1). However, in *Cobalt Blue*, the family unintentionally became a commodity to be gazed upon by the paying guest. The family unit of the protagonists in both the film and the novel, although portrayed as traditional, functions as a commodified locality. Its commodification mainly rests on its traditional setup, which is further exploited in the film's narrative as an exotic spectacle. Furthermore, for Urry (1995), the tourist gaze rests upon the conspicuous

consumption of time and is linked to economic activity, which supports Kundalkar's decision to change the film's setting to Kochi.

The character of the paying guest in both the cinematic and the literary narrative articulates a search for authenticity in the cityscapes of Kochi and Pune, respectively. MacCannell (1999) notes that a modern tourist seeks authenticity in the places they travel to, which, however, is not a possibility; only a staged authenticity is possible. Notwithstanding whether the narratives imply staged authenticity, there is a search for authenticity in the characterization of the paying guest—he chose to stay in a house and decided to live amidst a family, which shows his quest to reach the "backstage" of the culture, as MacCannell (1999) would put it.

Interestingly, the protagonists in both the novel and the film exhibit a greater degree of change in their characterization after being affected by the presence of the paying guest. This change in characterization, which is at odds with the grammar of the conservative family, is a crucial narrative element that warrants examination. At this juncture, given the nature of this narrative element, a Badiouian intervention to examine the subjectivity of the protagonists is *ad rem.* French philosopher Alain Badiou's philosophical *oeuvre,* which deals with the central question of political emancipation, incorporates the notion of subjectivation as a key component. For Badiou, the subject is not an *a priori* entity, but is created through the process of fidelity to the event. This implies that most of existence is "pre-subjective" and exists only as bodies within the given "world" (Badiou, 1998/2005). However, this bodily state of *being qua being* is shattered through an event in which the body transmutes into a subject, while also recognizing the truth in one of the four domains—love, art, science, or politics (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 42). The ethical commitment to the truth of the event is revealed through the fidelity of the bodies to the event, which transmutes the bodies into subjects (Badiou, 1998/2001). The character of the paying guest triggers an event as it brings about subjectivation in the two protagonists in the realm of love. For Badiou and Truong (2009/2012), love is synonymous with a truth procedure. A Badiouian event alters the existing grammar of a situation, generating new orderings and meanings that radically depart from earlier ones and offer an ontological break from the pre-subjective form. In the cinematic narrative, the father of Tanay and Anuja is anxious about preserving their familial values and culture, as their existence as a conservative Maharashtrian Marathi family in Kochi faces challenges from the city's contradictory exotic culture. This grammar is completely altered, when Anuja elopes with the paying guest and Tanay embraces his homosexuality; both of these are not possible in the existing setup that is established as an ordered structure (in Badiou's

term, a "count-as-one").[8] In a true Badiouian sense, the paying guest is an excess and exists outside the family, as he is not counted as one. This makes him what Badiou would call "inexistent"—he exists but is not counted.[9]

Tanay's accounts in the novel highlight how the paying guest engendered a rupture that broke his habits by making him question many of them and generating new habits. He recalls, for instance, how the guest disrupted his practice of going straight to breakfast after bathing and persuaded him to abandon his meticulous accounting of daily expenses by asking what such tracking ultimately yielded (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, pp. 5–6, 71). One of the significant narratives that cements the Badiouian intervention is the following line from Tanay's account in the novel:

> Perhaps that's what happens during the forging of a relationship: if nothing else, you adopt some of the other person's habits. It makes you feel those small adaptations, those adoptions, make him one of you. (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, p. 64)

This attests to the case of evental rupture in the domain of love, which is a sudden and unpredictable encounter that shatters the established world and its grammar and engenders a new grammar that acts as an empirical sign offering a break from the old orders. The ethical commitment to the event, or fidelity, is revealed through Tanay's "small adaptations." Additionally, by adopting the habits of the paying guest and letting go of his own, he is effectively performing a "new truth" that is located outside his pre-subjective body and is a part of his subjectivation. Badiou's notion of love is a universal construction of the world from the perspective of two, and is also premised on indifference to differences. In the context of the film and novel, the fact that the paying guest has no surname, an indicator of caste, is overcome through Tanay and Anuja's "indifference to differences," which made their emotional and physical connection with the paying guest initially possible. Tanay's iteration—"make him one of you"—aligns with this.[10] Also, in the novel, Tanay's accounts reveal that he stopped engaging in

[8] For Alain Badiou, the count-as-one principle is a structuring principle that binds scattered entities into a single, ordered entity. In the film *Cobalt Blue,* the conservative Maharashtrian Marathi Barahmin family is a count-as-one whose ordering is greatly disturbed by Tanay's sexual orientation and when Anuja elopes with the paying guest.
[9] However, the grammar of oppression unleashed on the inexistent is absent in this context.
[10] The notion of "indifference to difference" is pertinent to Badiou's emancipatory framework. As Tanay and Anuja are unaffected by the fact that the paying guest is surname-free, implying his caste is unknown, and engage in acts of love with him, they exhibit their "indifference to differences." Saswat S. Das and Guhan Priyadharshan P. (2022) argue, in the context of Badiou and caste, that indifference to difference is untenable in emancipatory politics related to caste, nonetheless. This also suggests that a certain degree of indifference exhibited by Tanay and Anuja is part of their subjectivation process, which is instrumental in subverting the "state of situation" within their home, while not necessarily subverting the larger societal structure of caste, *en masse.*

casual sex with strangers after being "affected" by the paying guest (Kundalkar, 2006/2013, p.41).[11]

In the case of Anuja, her diary entries in the novel provide a significant example of Badiouian subjectivation. She mentions that she always wanted to leave her family but messed up the first attempt. This implies that her desire to leave the family is intensified by the arrival of the paying guest, who serves as the catalyst for the event. Her "tomboy" character did not sit well with her parents.

The Affective Geography of Kochi

The affective geography generated in the film subverts the continuum of colonial tropicality and the capitalist tourist spectacle. The preceding analysis, drawing upon Alain Badiou, outlined the significant moment of rupture that acts as an ontological break from the established "state of situation" of Tanay and Anuja's household. This traditional and conservative disposition functions as a rigidly ordered multiplicity where the sexuality and free spirit of both Tanay and Anuja are uncounted due to the inherent patriarchal and heteronormative familial values. The arrival of the paying guest functions as an event that shatters the appearance of the family order, linking this rupture to subjectivation. The Badiouian framework, however, is limited to the subject's fidelity, abstracting over the material affects and the corporeal reality of what the event feels like, as well as how the "state of situation", or the dominant structuring order, maintains its power against rupture. This universalism is supplemented here through Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of emotions, signaling a move away from universal abstraction and towards the particular and the embodied. For Ahmed, the evental rupture is an affective disorientation that is both emotional and bodily, which severs the subject from the normative world or the logic of the "state of the situation." The paying guest's enigmatic, mobile presence produces precisely this disorientation from the "sedimented histories" of the family.

Ahmed's use of sedimented histories is also vital to understanding the cinematic disorientation that severs the city of Kochi from being viewed as a purely consumable, exotic place, akin to its representation in colonial discourses that reek of tropicality. As Ahmed (2006) notes, "(w)hat bodies 'tend to do' are effects of histories rather than being originary" (p. 56). This applies to the construction of cities and their perceived character. Furthermore, Ahmed's (2006) notion of discomfort is not negative but a productive one through the act of reorientation. In the narrative, reorientation takes

[11] Similarly, this same Badiouian framework—where a homosexual relationship forms a subversive and transformative event—is utilized by Priyadharshan P. (2025), in his reading of the Sri Lankan novel *Funny Boy,* to demonstrate how physical and emotional intimacy is articulated as "indifference to differences" and constitutes subjectivation.

shape the moment the protagonists sense their distance from the heteronormative and patriarchal "state of situation." This opens up the interpretation of evental fidelity, (drawing on Ahmed) as an act of willful reorientation, where the subject refuses the comfort of belonging and embraces the unsettling work of turning away from the emotional economies that sustain patriarchal happiness. In this sense, the event is not only a rupture but an affective one—registered in the body, felt as discomfort, and lived as refusal.

For Ahmed (2004a), spaces and objects acquire an affective value through their circulation in an affective economy—a framework in which emotions are distributed and circulated across social and psychic fields, much like capital. As Fontefrancesco (2023) notes, "Ahmed explores the role of emotions as a type of social infrastructure of political and economic actions" (p.1022). Applying this concept to the portrayal of Kochi in the film *Cobalt Blue* reveals how the city is framed through the phenomenological experiences of the protagonists after subjectivation and disorientation, thereby subverting geographies constructed as capitalist-tourist spectacles. The pre-subjectivation phase of the protagonists perceives Kochi as a spectacle, a beautiful backdrop, and an exotic Oriental paradise that can be consumed—a "happy object" as Sara Ahmed (2010) terms it (notwithstanding the historic construction of exotic tropical spaces as both paradisiacal and perilous). For example, a scene depicting the lovemaking of Tanay and the paying guest in a lush green field, with them waking up to the sight of an elephant, and then taking a swim in the nearby river or backwaters, initially risks regenerating this exoticized image (Kundalkar, 2022, 0:42:40-0:46:09 & 0:47:44-0:47:51). However, the post-subjectivation gaze disorients this construct, as the same geography is recounted through the character with melancholic nostalgia. The scene in which Tanay takes a swim, post-subjectivation and after the paying guest abandons him, no longer generates the image of tropical exotica (Kundalkar, 2022, 1:21:49- 1:21:55). This transformation destabilizes the notion that the city is merely a consumable place. The visual beauty of Cochin is thus reframed as a melancholic landscape of interiority, one that is felt by the viewer through the protagonists' grief. This is antithetical to the sedimented history of Kochi, which shaped its viewing as a spectacle. Similarly, the visual of a busy Arabian Sea with ships and ferries moving across its waters is shown in gaps to indicate the passage of days (Kundalkar, 2022, 0:43:14). When a similar visual is used post-subjectivation, it connotes melancholia and no longer invokes the former emotions (Kundalkar, 2022, 1:41:39-1:41:49). Moreover, another scene possessing contrasting affects involves Tanay and a member of his teaching faculty at the latter's residence which symbolizes Kochi's love for arts and literature. The first instance of their meeting at the faculty's residence occurs before subjectivation, and the faculty invites Tanay to visit his place often, with a nuanced physical touch suggesting his interest in Tanay (Kundalkar, 2022, 0:19:09-0:21:30). This accentuates

the tourist potential of Kochi not just as a natural tropical paradise but also as a significant cultural site in the world of tourism. However, on Tanay's revisits, post-subjectivation, the scenes articulate completely different affects. In the first instance, post-subjectivation, Tanay and his faculty engage in physical intimacy (Kundalkar, 2022, 1:15:35-1:18:01). In the second instance, they end up confessing their fears and anxieties, and these, similar to previous instances, are located outside global tourist anxieties and within the personalized affective domain.

The affective geography is directly linked to the paying guest: his presence engendered subjectivation, and his subsequent absence generated the transformed geography. The subjectivation of the protagonists is embodied through the event, not only rupturing the existing grammar of the family but also changing their relationship with the physical space. The sedimented histories of Kochi as a spectacular and exotic destination are disrupted by their own unsettling desires post-subjectivation and the subsequent grief caused by the paying guest's disappearance.

Ahmed's conception of discomfort becomes a significant analytical tool in understanding this spatial and emotional shift. Discomfort, in this context, is an affective signal that indicates a body is not fitting the alleged normative grammar of the "state of situation." Ahmed (2004b) notes, "(c)omfort is about an encounter between more than one body.... It is, after all, pain or discomfort that return one's attention to the surfaces of the body as body" (p. 62). In the state of comfort, the pre-subjective protagonists perceived Kochi as a consumable spectacle. Once subjectivation occurs and their experience—the nascent queer desire, the familial shame, and the onset of grief—misaligns with the "state of situation," and the affective value of the city is altered. The backwaters, as mentioned earlier, are no longer rendered idyllic and tranquil, but are instead imprinted with intense, private acts and pangs of loss. This layering, which subverts the public and consumable logic of tourism, is a political act.

These changes are embodied and align with Ahmed's (2004b) move towards the corporeal reality of affect—the notion that emotions are visceral, physical phenomena that actively shape and are shaped by the body and its social environment. As Ahmed notes, the "corporeal schema is of a 'body at home'.... If the world is made white, then the body at home is one that can inhabit whiteness" (2004b, p. 111). This explains the changed significance of the city of Kochi post-event; the protagonists, now evental subjects, no longer exist in the familiar geographies they once had. Kochi is thereby no longer a site of pleasure and a consumable geography, but a very personalized cityscape. The post-subjectivation gaze is a reoriented gaze, and the affective geographies it generates lie outside the pre-existing continuum of colonial tropicality and capitalism's tourist spectacle, thereby subverting it.

Conclusion: Tourism, Tropicality, and the Politics of Affective Geography

In *Cobalt Blue*, the mismatch between the setting of the feature film and the novel, despite the film's director also being the novel's author, is not spurious and invites an examination of the deliberate discrepancy, which this article traced. By problematizing this mismatch in relation to the way the screenplay was structured and how it was picturized, this article demonstrates that there persists an attempt to reiterate the stereotyped representation of the city of Kochi. A historical inquiry highlights how the city was constructed along similar lines across the colonial trajectories of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, and, consequently, the article asserts that the director/author retained this historically charged and stereotypical setting by leveraging this preexisting exoticism in cinematic tropes. While this reinforces the logic of colonial tropicality, whose grammar is also shared by capitalist tourist structures, the cinematic narrative undermines these superficial constructs by articulating a deep counter-narrative through affective geography. Affective geography is premised on the process of becoming subjects. Here, the article draws on Alain Badiou to study the subjectivation of the protagonists in the novel and the film, which happens through the intervention of a paying guest whose grammar aligns with that of a tourist (as well as subcategories of drifter and post-tourist). This furthermore demonstrates that tourists can no longer be viewed as passive observers decoupled from the tourist spaces in which they are present. Finally, this article signals Tucker and Akama's (2009) vision of engendering resistance within the global tourist discourse.

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