

The British “Brother” and the Travancore Sister: Reading Colonial Diplomacy in Archived Letters

GAYATHRI S.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sacred Heart College, Thevara,
Kochi

The aim of this study is to engage in a critical discourse analysis of an archival letter written by the Travancore regent, Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi, to the British Resident, Colonel McDowell, conveying her condolences on the death of King George III. An examination of the macrostructure of the letter reveals that it is primarily political rather than personal, despite the emotive language used. The linguistic strategies employed by the regent demonstrate how the discourse of domesticity is used to facilitate diplomatic relations with the British. Secondary sources also suggest that the relationship between the resident and the regent is characterised by mutual respect and benefit. The paper argues that the familial tone used by the regent served a broader political purpose of maintaining both the stability of the kingdom and her own political autonomy. The letter serves as a case study in the domain of colonial diplomacy and gendered language.

Keywords: Letter, British, Travancore, Domesticity, Discourse, Colonial diplomacy

Reading a Colonial Letter

The scholarly corpus on regent queens in colonial India highlights the exercise of soft power by the regents within the political discourse. These female monarchs secured their political positions by engaging in diplomatic relations with the British at a time when colonial expansion was at its peak. Archival records such as royal proclamations and the series of letters exchanged between the regents and the British residents at different instances provide evidence supporting this claim. One such archival record, dated 1820, is a letter written by Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi offering condolences on the death of King George III, addressed to the British Resident, Colonel McDowell, and accessed from the showcase library of the Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The present study tries to analyse the nature of the relationship between the British Resident and the regent. This study

attempts to engage in a critical discourse analysis of the letter to elucidate how the diplomatic language of the regent was instrumental in the political stability of the kingdom.

The letter dated 10th Mithunam 995 Malayalam Era (Figure 1) is addressed to the then British Resident, Colonel McDowell. The Malayalam Era 995 is converted to the English calendar by adding 825, which corresponds to the year 1820. The events mentioned in the record give an account of the historical events of that year. The letter consists of three main events and the Rani's responses corresponding to each: the demise of George III, the death of his fourth son, and the accession of the new King. It is understood from the very first line that this was a reply to one of the letters sent by the Resident, which conveyed the news of the demise of the British King George III. The following section presents my translation of the original Malayalam letter written by Gowri Parvati Bayi to Col. McDowell. My translation follows:

A letter of Rani Parvati Bayi to the Resident dated 10th Mithunam 995 M. E., offering condolences on the death of George III¹

To Colonel McDowell Sahib Sir, who is more like a brother to me,

I received the letter that carried the unfortunate news. I am deeply saddened by the news that was conveyed to me by the Colonel regarding the demise of George III, the king of the most revered British Empire. The King, who had served the nation for 60 years, passed away in the month of January, on the 29th at the age of 82. The news of the death of the King's fourth son on January 23, at the age of 53, has also deeply saddened me. However, I was extremely happy to read further that the son of the deceased King was declared the new King of the British Empire. People are bound to bear both the happiness and sadness that are vested upon us by the Almighty, and this thought reduced my worry about the sad news. I constantly pray to God Almighty that the mercy shown by the British government towards our State, and the mutual fondness that the two states share, may remain the same and that there be everlasting harmony. My children and I are

¹ Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi, letter to Colonel McDowell, 1820, Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, author's translation.

keeping very well. I hope the Colonel shall write to me about his well-being.

In the month when the snow falls.



Figure 1: The original Malayalam palm leaf showcased in the Central Archives.

Source: Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram

At a micro-level, the content of the letter historicises an event. The letter, sent to express condolences, in this sense is personal. However, since both the sender and the recipient of the letter are people in powerful positions, this makes the letter assume a political character at a macro-level. A critical discourse analysis bridges the gap between micro and macro approaches to a text, which is denoted by the interactional and institutional approaches respectively.² This study focuses on analysing the letter at a macro-level to unravel the politics of diplomacy employed in language.

The British “Brother”

The first section of the study critically examines the salutation of the letter with a view to locating it within the discourse of colonial domesticity. The queen’s address to the Resident as a “brother,” though seemingly innocent and personal on the surface, acquires importance when read against the larger colonial context (Figure 2). Colonial historiographer Partha Chatterjee

² Teun A. van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 468.

distinguishes between the material and spiritual realms in colonial discourse using a gender binary. He states that the external or material realm, which is masculine, is also where the West gained prominence, as opposed to the spiritual or inner realm that is defined as domesticated and feminine. He says,

The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. That is where the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate.³

Therefore, Chatterjee advocated for the existence of a private realm, away from the politics of the British Raj, where the colonised subjects were able to assert a sense of autonomy. Colonial critic Judith Walsh also points out that “long before the nationalists began their political struggle with British imperialism, Partha Chatterjee has argued, they had produced a domain of sovereignty within colonial society itself, a domain which included the domestic world of women and the family.”⁴ Thus, Partha Chatterjee’s “inner domain” of the house became a space where the familiar and the domestic, represented through the female figures, engaged in a discourse of power.⁵

Within colonial discourse, the domestic sphere was often constructed as a space of autonomy in contrast to the masculine domain of formal power politics, and this distinction is reflected in language, as is evident in the letter. Thus, the queen’s address to the Resident as her “brother” immediately establishes a familial relationship, situating the exchange within the discourse of domesticity. The imbrication of politics and the familial can be traced back to the patrimonial state of the Mughal Empire. In this form of state organisation, the monarch assumes the role of a father who looks after the family or kingdom. According to Blake, patrimonial domination entails

³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 121.

⁴ Judith E. Walsh, “What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (August 1997): 641–77.

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 238.

“obedience to a person, not an office; it depends on the reciprocal loyalty between subject and master...”⁶ The Travancore regent’s letter can therefore be read as a continuum of this familial system of loyalty, with domestic language as the centre. It is significant that this mode of address was already seen in the reign of Queen Gowri Lakshmi Bayi, suggesting a continued use of kinship terminology as a strategic linguistic practice in communication with the British.

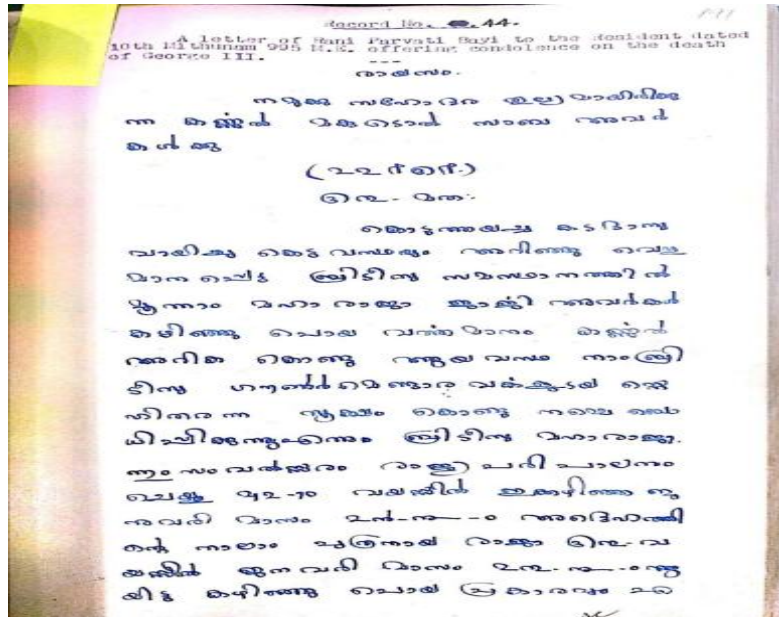


Figure 2: The transcription of the archived letter, Central Archives catalogue.
Source: Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram

On the occasion of her accession to the musnud, Gowri Lakshmi Bayi delivered a formal address in which she referred to the Resident, Col. Munro as “*Ethreijum Bahumanapetta Sahabay* (i.e., very esteemed Sahib).⁷ During the speech, she reverently submits herself to the care of the Resident:

Being a young female quite unprepared and unqualified for such a high and responsible position, I cannot do better than to place myself under

⁶ Stephen P. Blake, “The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Nov., 1979): 79.

⁷ V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), 467.

the guidance and support of the Honourable East India Company, whose bosom had been an asylum for the protection of an infant like Travancore, since the time Sri Padmanabhaswamy had effected an alliance with such a respectable Company of the European nation. To you, Colonel, I entrust everything connected with my country, and from this day I look upon you as my own elder brother and so I need say no more.⁸

In this address, the queen projects herself as a vulnerable woman through words like “unprepared” and “unqualified” and as being in desperate need of protection from someone more powerful than herself. She also adheres to the narrative that her kingdom required protection from the Company, thereby reinforcing the English justification of colonialism. Her admiration for the Company is strongly articulated and her explicit declaration of a brotherly relationship with the Resident was received favourably by the audience. It is noted in the contemporary accounts that the “speech made a deep impression on the minds of the European and native audience present.”⁹ The queen’s attempt to cultivate intimacy and goodwill with the Resident is evident in these records. Historical records also testify that her intention to gain favours from the Resident was successful and their relationship continued to flourish throughout her reign.

It is significant to note that Gowri Lakshmi Bayi was still in charge of the matters related to the state. She maintained her political autonomy even after submitting herself to the care of the Company. The Rani had appointed the British Resident to be her Dewan, but she retained the management of the state “virtually in her own hands.”¹⁰ Thus, colonial regents were able to use a diplomatic strategy to legitimise their own autonomy in the governance of their kingdom. The language of affection and submission, instead of taking away the political autonomy of the Queen, legitimised it. For instance, Col. Munro in one of his letters mentions that “the executive administration in Travancore should not only be conducted with integrity and zeal but that the people in general, and more especially Her Highness the Rani and the party attached to her interests, should have the means of knowing that it is

⁸ Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, 467.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 457.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 460.

conducted in that manner.”¹¹ This is indicative of the fact that the Resident was also pleased with Rani’s conduct and included her in matters of state. From the Resident’s letter, it is evident that the change in the Resident did not alter the relationship between the Resident and the regent. Gowri Lakshmi Bayi’s successor continued the tradition of evoking familial sentiments with the Resident by addressing him as brother.

Through clear lexical choices, the text overtly states that there exists a cordial and healthy relationship between the British and the princely state. This is the macrostructure that Van Dijk theorises in the discourse analysis strategies, where all structures in a discourse lead to a central argument.¹² The queen expresses her desire to maintain “everlasting harmony” with the British by upholding the principle of “mutual fondness.”¹³ The constant reiteration of cordial relations is significant when we trace back the historical relationship between the Travancore Royal Family and the British East India Company. The eighteenth-century Venad (later Travancore) was a period of many adversities for the royal family. The *Pillamar* and *Matampimar*, who were feudal lords, enjoyed positions more powerful than the King, causing many malpractices in society. In 1729, Marthanda Varma entered the scene as the saviour of the state. The constant threats from the neighbouring states led Marthanda Varma to join hands with the East India Company. It was at the request of the King that the East India Company established a military base in Travancore, thereby marking a friendly allegiance.

Amity between the Company and Travancore

During the reign of King Balarama Varma, the Resident in Travancore was replaced by Col. Macaulay, who had a visible hatred for the subjects of the kingdom. Raja wrote a letter to the Governor-General, Marquis of Wellesley, regarding the behaviour of the Resident in 1801. He compares Macaulay to the previous Resident Major Brannerman, and says that:

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Teun A. van Dijk, “Macrostructures in Discourse,” *Macrostructures: An Interdisciplinary Study of Global Structures in Discourse, Interaction and Cognition*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1980), 2.

¹³ Gowri Parvati Bayi, letter to Colonel McDowell, 1820.

His character and disposition have proved so directly opposite to those of Major Brannerman (who was ever mindful of the preservation of the rights of me and of my family, and possessed a thorough knowledge of the manners and customs of this country, an observation of which invariably commanded his regard) that the details of particulars would give me the greatest pain and uneasiness... From the day of his arrival here, he has never said anything excepting with asperity and ill humour, and, without touching on matters of business, though the object of his coming here was expressly to advice for the mutual interests of the two States.¹⁴

This disappointing exchange suggests that the idea of cordiality between the British and Travancore was not always fixed. The relationship between the monarch and the Resident was thus constantly evolving in the context of Travancore.

Colonel Munro Sahib assumed office as Resident in Trivandrum in 1809, marking yet another turn in the history of colonial India. The lost amity between the two states was reestablished during his service. Under Munro, Travancore witnessed two regencies where “the Regent could preside over the temporary arrangements, but could certainly not become a dictator.”¹⁵ The accession to power by Gowri Lakshmi Bayi marks the start of a long period of colonial diplomacy between the Resident and the regent. Munro understood that annexation of Travancore was not an option for retaining control over the land. Usually, in other Indian states, Residents were considered as a hindrance to the well-being of the state. However, Colonel Munro was different in his approach, and as a result of his efforts, conditions in Travancore improved considerably, resulting in this being acknowledged in the House of Commons in London.¹⁶ The Rani was responsible for this state of affairs, as she consistently cajoled the Resident and maintained good relations with the Company. She, for her part, went out of her way to win him over, famously

¹⁴ Balarama Varma, “Travancore Raja’s Protest Against the Conduct of Resident Major Macaulay,” in *Archives Treasury*, ed. J. Rejikumar, (Kerala: Kerala State Archives Department, 2005): 19.

¹⁵ Manu S. Pillai, *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2015), 136.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

declaring, “to you Colonel, I entrust everything connected with my country.”¹⁷ This persuaded Munro to go to the extent of protecting Travancore from the British Raj itself. As the popular story goes, when Gowri Lakshmi Bayi became pregnant in 1813, Munro informed the Company that she had already given birth to a boy and later offered prayers at the Padmanabha Swami temple to make this true. He took this step to protect the state of Travancore from falling into the trap of the Doctrine of Lapse, according to which a ruler who did not have a male heir apparent had to submit the kingdom to the Company. It is also believed that it was Munro who interfered and ensured that Gowri Lakshmi Bayi became Queen when one of her uncles raised objections.¹⁸ Thus, it is evident that the apparent submission of the queen to the Resident or the Company improved the harmony between the two states while also consolidating her personal power.

Another instance that illustrates the reverence of the queen towards the Company appears in a speech delivered by Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi in 1814 while introducing the son of her sister, Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bayi, as the heir apparent:

As the respected East India Company are conducting the affairs of the State in a just manner; Sree Padmanabha Swamy is pleased and things are done as the Company desired. As directed by my family deity Sree Padmanabha Swamy, I entrust my dear son to the Company. I consider it the responsibility of the Company to ensure support and respectful conduct towards this Prince in future. What more can I say?¹⁹

A micro-level reading of this text foregrounds the role of the regent as a maternal figure. In this record, she entrusts her sister’s son to the Company in the hope that the Company will help the heir apparent evolve into a good ruler. Using the discourse of the family, the regent attempts to establish a political link between the heir apparent and the Resident, thereby securing the autonomy of the state. The text also reveals an underlying political intention, which is to ensure that the cooperation extended during her reign would

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ V.S. Sharma, *Travancore Dynasty: A Short History* (Thiruvananthapuram: Mathrubhumi, 2013), 56.

¹⁹ Ibid., 58.

continue in the future as well.

In conclusion, archival documents such as letters and speeches from nineteenth-century colonial India reveal that language functioned as a political strategy. The letter examined in this paper shows that the regent's language was never ceremonial. The regent's language operated as a political tool to maintain the stability of her kingdom. By drawing on the discourse of domesticity and diplomacy, the regent was able to exercise a form of political autonomy. In this sense, the queen's apparent submission to the Resident can be understood as a conscious diplomatic act. Her discourse allowed her to negotiate power without openly challenging colonial authority, while ensuring the protection of the kingdom and its future heir. She positions herself as a maternal figure in need of guidance from a male authority by employing idioms of kinship. A macro-level reading of the gendered language in this archival letter thus serves as a case study for understanding the political strategies of a regent queen. The regent's rhetoric illustrates how women in colonial India navigated power by using domesticity as a diplomatic tool, challenging the political authority from within the very constraints imposed upon them.

References

- Aiya, V. Nagam. *The Travancore State Manual*. Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906.
- Balarama Varma. "Travancore Raja's Protest Against the Conduct of Resident Major Macaulay." *Archives Treasury*, ed. J. Rejikumar. Kerala, 2019.
- Bayi, Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi. Letter to Colonel McDowell. 1820. Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Author's translation.
- Blake, Stephen P. "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Nov., 1979): 79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2053505>.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

- Pillai, Manu S. *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2015.
- Sharma, V. S. *Travancore Dynasty: A Short History*. Thiruvananthapuram: Mathrubhumi, 2013.
- van Dijk, Teun A. "Critical Discourse Analysis." In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015, 466-85.
- van Dijk, Teun A. "Macrostructures in Discourse." In *Macrostructures: An Interdisciplinary Study of Global Structures in Discourse, Interaction and Cognition*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980.
- Walsh, Judith E. "What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (August 1997): 641-77.