

**NARRATIVES IN STONE: UNRAVELING THE LAYERS OF
OUR LADY OF HOPE CHURCH**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled “Narratives in Stone: Unraveling the Layers of Our Lady of Hope Church” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Tessa Fani Jose, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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This project explores the process of decolonisation through the analysis of Our Lady of Hope Church, Vypin. The project examines the extent to which the people of Vypin have been successful in changing the identity of this church, built by the Portuguese in the 17th century, into their own. The project uses the theoretical frameworks of Sarah Dillon's The Palimpsest Theory and Pierre Nora's Sites of Memory Theory to uncover the different layers that exist within the church. These layers stand as evidence to the past and present narratives around the church. Ultimately, the project argues that true decolonization involves the acceptance of cultural hybridity and recognizing the complexities of history, rather than an attempt to erase all traces of colonial influence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I take this opportunity to thank God Almighty for showering his abundant blessings and grace upon me during the course of my project. I would like to place on record my sincere gratitude to Rev Dr. Sr. Vinitha (CSST), Provincial Superior and Manager, St Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam and Dr. Alphonsa Vijaya Joseph, Principal, St Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam for their continued support throughout the course of my study in this institution. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor Ms. Tessa Fani Jose for guiding my thoughts in the right direction and for helping me to express them in the best possible manner. I extend my sincere gratitude to the Head of the Department, Dr. Preethi Kumar and all the other teachers of the department without whose guidance this project could never have been completed. I am grateful for Dr. Jeena Ann Joseph, who has given us a strong base on Research Methodology and all other faculty members of the department for their help and encouragement. I am additionally thankful for Ms. Lakshmipriya P Santhosh who aided in the initial creation of this project.

Deleena P D

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Introduction

Since the departure of the colonial powers from our countries, we have been in a never-ending attempt to regain our former glory. Following the fall of imperial powers, many nations have set out on a difficult path to rebuild, recover, and claim their cultural heritage. We have been trying to fix the impacts of colonization by reviving our traditions, improving education and politics. One such effort can be seen in the present state of architectures whose foundations were laid out by the colonizers.

In the intricate tapestry of postcolonial narratives, Our Lady of Hope Church in Vypin stands as a testimony to the West's attempts at colonization and the counter-attempt of the natives at decolonization. This church, established by the Portuguese on the small island of Vypin, acts as a microcosm to the complexities of decolonization and the solid integration of identity and memory spun around it. This project analyzes the extent to which a post colonial architecture has succeeded in shedding off its colonized past.

As mentioned in *Britannica*, Decolonization is a process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country. It involves critical assessment and reevaluation of historical objects and cultural items in the light of colonial history. This approach aims to challenge, undermine and dismantle the colonial narratives, giving control back to the communities whose cultural heritage has been appropriated and promoting a more inclusive representation of history.

Decolonization involves a shift in the power dynamics, giving voice and agency to the communities to narrate their own histories and meanings associated with the object - in this case, the building: The church of Our Lady of Hope. This project tries to understand how the colonial powers imposed their infrastructure on the colonized region, and how the local communities appropriated it in a way that tends to their needs, values and cultural practices.

This project delves into the narratives and layers embedded in this architecture through the lens of 'The Palimpsest' theory by Sarah Dillon and 'Sites of Memory' theory by Pierre Nora. The first chapter explores the theoretical framework used for analyzing the object, laying the groundwork for understanding the intersection for intersections of postcolonial architecture and memory studies.

Prof. Sarah Dillon is a Cambridge graduate and a scholar of the late twentieth and twenty-first century with a research focus on the epistemic function and role of stories, on interdisciplinarity, and on the public humanities. *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* is her first book released in 2007 which introduces us to literal and figurative interdisciplinary objects - Palimpsests. She addresses the relationship between literature, criticism, theory and philosophy in *The Palimpsest*. The book researches the structure and logic of the palimpsest to construct a theory of palimpsestuous relationality. This offers a conceptual framework for reevaluating history, subjectivity, temporality, textuality and sexuality. Chapter 2 delves into the application of the palimpsest theory in the specific

context of Our Lady of Hope Church, unveiling the layers of visible past within the postcolonial structure.

French historian Pierre Nora is renowned for his research on French identity and memory. He is associated with the study of new history, an area concerned with cultural history and history of representations. As an historian, he has carved out a thought-provoking niche that is highly influential and stimulating for the forthcoming academics worldwide. He is known for the publication of the three volume project - *Les Lieux de Mémoire (Realms of Memory)*, for which he gathered a galaxy of French social and cultural historians who contributed dozens of insightful and unique pieces to the essay. This collection explores the concept of “Sites of Memory” which investigates how certain sites contribute to the construction of cultural and national identity. Chapter 3 of this project expands on Nora’s concept in relation to Our Lady of Hope church. The negotiation of colonial legacies, the intentional adaptation of liturgical practices to the local context, and the role of the Anglo-Indian community as carriers of memory within the church are explored. It showcases the church as a dynamic site where the narratives are reshaped and adapted in the process to create an identity.

Chapter 1

Unveiling Layers: Postcolonial Architecture through Palimpsest and Memory Sites

When it comes to post-colonial architecture, memory studies is a multidisciplinary field of study that plays a crucial role in revealing the complex histories, identities, and cultural narratives buried within the structure. It borrows elements from different subjects, including cultural studies, psychology, neuroscience, sociology and anthropology to understand the complex nature of memory. Memory studies first appeared in the second half of the 20th century and it challenges the conventional historical narratives. It provides a way to understand the nuances of layers in society and thus provides a platform for the marginalized voices to be heard.

Memory studies analyze how individual memory and collective memory contribute to the formation of an identity. It tries to understand the ideas of "cultural" or "collective" memory by identifying the use of a metaphor. The concept of "remembering," especially in individual minds, is figuratively extended to a cultural level. Scholars use terms like "nation's memory," "religious community's memory," and even "literature's memory" (referred to as intertextuality by Renate Lachmann) to refer to this concept. Anstrid Erll in her handbook has explained the distinction between individual and collective memory as:

This crucial distinction between two aspects of cultural memory studies is what Jeffrey K. Olick draws our attention to when he maintains that “two radically

different concepts of culture are involved here, one that sees culture as a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds versus one that sees culture as patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society". (Erll 5).

The field of memory studies is home to numerous theories. The Palimpsest Theory and the Sites of Memory Theory are two prominent theories within Memory Studies that provide valuable frameworks for unraveling the intricate layers of memory in post-colonial architecture. These theories intersect in an examination of the complex and varied character of memory, especially in relation to post-colonial architecture.

The concept of palimpsest, as explained in literary and cultural studies, serves as a fitting metaphor to explore the layers of meaning and influence embedded in texts and cultural expressions over time. The word palimpsest according to oxford languages, means "a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing" or "something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form". (*Oxford languages*). It aligns with the idea that objects bear visible remnants of past forms, interpretations, and historical contexts, much like palimpsests do. This idea extends literary works and encompasses cultural artifacts as well, such as the actual spaces that are shaped by postcolonial architecture.

The meaning of an object, especially in postcolonial architecture, is not fixed during its creation, just as a palimpsest changes over time as new writings are superimposed over previously written ones that have been erased. It acquires value with

time, gaining multiple interpretations and layers of history. Hilda Doolittle's definition of palimpsest as "a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another" (Doolittle 1) connects to the shifting narratives that are incorporated into architectural spaces that have seen multiple historical eras.

Thomas Penson De Quincey introduced the idea of the palimpsest, which was symbolically introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century and continues to have relevance today in the study of postcolonial architecture. He talks about the concept of palimpsest in his essay 'The Palimpsest' in *Blackwood's Magazine*. He says that it is a strange, new figurative entity, invested with the stature of the substantive.

Sarah Dillon's exploration of the central story in 'Palimpsest' by Hilda Doolittle illustrates how stories bring to life the textual, arbitrary, and palimpsestuous aspects of history. She claims that the interesting thing about the concept of palimpsest has not been included in H.D.'S definition. It is that even though the first writing on the object has been erased, it is often imperfectly erased. It is, therefore, a surface phenomenon that produces an illusion of layered depth where texts that are unrelated to one another are deeply entwined, interrupted, and inhabit one another. (12)

As Sarah Dillon comments in her book, *The Palimpsest*:

Palimpsests are created by a process of layering – of erasure and superimposition – but the most peculiar and interesting fact about palimpsests is omitted from The

Oxford English Dictionary's definition. Palimpsests are of such interest to subsequent generations because although the first writing on the vellum seemed to have been eradicated after treatment, it was often imperfectly erased. (Dillon 12)

Dillon introduces terms like 'palimpsestic' which refers to the layering technique that produces a palimpsest and 'palimpsestuous' which specifies the structure that emerges from that process and the way the underlying script subsequently reappears. She claims that this term rewrites and refigures the idea of palimpsest in context of literary and cultural thought from the late 20th and earliest 21st centuries. (Dillon 4)

The first identified use of palimpsests in figurative language is found in Plutarch's *Moralia*. Dillon undertakes a close reading of 'Murex: War and Postwar London (*circa* A.D. 1916 - 1926)' to demonstrate how the narrative evokes the textual, subjective and palimpsestuous nature of history, both personal and national. In addition to these, she argues that this coiled structure can be found in the writings of D. H. Lawrence, Ian McEwan, Umberto Eco, and Arthur Conan Doyle, demonstrating the palimpsest's enduring and innovative characteristics in contemporary thought.

The term "sites of memory," as conceptualized by Pierre Nora, aligns seamlessly with the palimpsest theory. He introduced this concept of "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) in his work "Les Lieux de Mémoire" ("Realms of Memory") published in the 20th century. Similar to the layers of meaning in a palimpsest, Nora's concept of a "*lieux de mémoire*" refers to the symbolic or actual places where collective memory crystallizes.

Nora came up with this concept to study French memory. He says that “This history of memory is realized through the imaginary representations and historical realities that occupy the symbolic sites that form French social and cultural identity.” (Nora ix)

In Nora’s words, "A *lieux de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community." (xvii). These locations, which can include anything from monuments to intangibles like language, are significant cultural assets that contribute to our knowledge of a community's past.

The deliberate creation and alteration of physical spaces as "sites of memory" is essential in postcolonial architecture for challenging historical accounts, claiming cultural identity, and addressing colonialism's legacies. Governmental recognition and increased public awareness of memory sites have the potential to standardize the diverse range of local memories they represent. As Nora says: “In the past, then, there was one national history and there were many particular memories. Today, there is one national memory, but its unity stems from a divided patrimonial demand that is constantly expanding and in search of coherence.” (Nora 635)

Nora distinguishes between “dominant” *lieux de memoire* and "dominated" ones. He says that the dominant sites are spectacles or celebration of triumph and they are imposing and imposed by some official organization. “One doesn't visit such places; one

is summoned to them". The dominated sites are places of refuge and sanctuaries of devotion and hushed pilgrimages where the living heart of memory still beats. (Nora 19)

Three realms of memory are highlighted by Nora: memory as object, memory as practice, and memory as discourse. Concrete objects, places, or artifacts that serve as archives of memory are included in memory working as objects. Rituals, ceremonies, and activities through which a society interacts and preserves its memory are referred to in memory as practice, and memory as discourse refers to the ways in which a society debates, analyzes, and creates stories about its history. This framework provides a way to analyze the various ways in which memories function in a society. An advanced explanation of the formation, maintenance, and transmission of collective memory as an object, practice, and discourse across generations is provided by Nora in his theory.

The objective of this project is to examine how postcolonial architectures reflect the erased layers of memory and history embedded in them in the past. It acknowledges the existence of multiple meanings that have evolved over time and analyzes how they form intricate relationships between historical narratives in a society. The palimpsest theory, based on literary and cultural studies, offers a framework for examining how texts and cultural expressions change over time and how they tend to reveal hidden histories and meanings. This examination goes hand in hand with Pierre Nora's "sites of memory" concept, which provides an organized framework for examining deliberate acts of alteration of narratives in postcolonial contexts. The process of how architectural spaces become symbolic entities which crystallize collective memories is studied through the

framework provided by Nora. It helps in a comprehensive analysis that challenges historical narratives and asserts cultural identities. The palimpsest theory and Nora's sites of memory concept work together to offer an extensive and intricate analytical method that explores the hidden layers of postcolonial architecture.

Chapter 2

The Layers: A Thorough Analysis

This chapter will look at Our lady of Hope Church, a post-colonial structure that has been influenced by a variety of factors over the ages and contrast it to its current state and significance.

The church of Our Lady of Hope, which is located on the small island of Vypin, possesses a rich history that dates back to the sixteenth century. Vypin is a coastal area in Kerala, known for its landscapes and the interesting past that has been shaped by many different customs and cultures. The earliest known mention of the church appears in a letter written in 1506 by the Fransiscan friars, referring to a church in Vypin. The Fransican friars who reached Cochin in 1503, are assumed to have built the church in the same year. In 1596, a second church was built in the South-East corner of the present cemetery of Vypin. The remains of this church, which was built with stone and lime, can be seen in the ground of the cemetery even today. The present church is the third one built in 1605. It was raised as a full-fledged Parish under the title Nossa Senhora De Esperanca (Our Lady of Hope).

This church is still referred to by some as the 'Dutch Church' following the events that occurred after the Dutch conquered Cochin in 1663. As a gesture of goodwill and to win over the Catholics, the Dutch permitted three screens of St. Francis Church in the

town of Cochin to be removed to the Church of Our Lady of Hope, Vypin. The statue of the Patroness, Our Lady of Hope is installed in a recess atop one of these wooden screens. It is also adorned with pictures of saints painted with old vegetable dyes and exquisite carvings of angels, flowers and designs along the pillars of the screen. It is kept behind the main altar. The two other screens of similar designs are situated on either side of the altar.



Fig. 1. The Center Screen. (*Quadri-Centennial Celebration Memento*. Our Lady of Hope Church, 2005.)

The influence of the West in this structure starts from its very birth. It can be seen in almost all the corners of this building. Our Lady of Hope Church is renowned for its architecture. It is a blend of European influences and indigenous styles. It has a gabled roof and baroque style doorways which was one of the splendors of medieval period Europe. Simultaneously it is imprinted with the use of locally sourced materials, such as the distinctive Kerala style sloping roofs and wooden carvings.



Fig. 2. Our Lady of Hope Church. (M, Vis. “Our Lady of Hope Church.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Our_Lady_of_Hope)

This sacred structure not only offers the local Christian community a place of worship but also showcases the distinctive fusion of traditional and colonial influences. This can be further illuminated through the lens of the palimpsest theory proposed by Sarah Dillon. The palimpsest theory offers an intriguing framework for comprehending the multi-layered narratives incorporated into this church's architecture.

The historical evolution of Vypin, marked by Portuguese influence and subsequent colonial interactions can be seen as layers imprinted on the palimpsest of the region. The existence of three churches showcases a good example for ‘erased layers’. The definition of the palimpsest puts emphasis on the new layers “still bearing visible traces of its earlier form”. The still visible remains of the second church can be taken as literal proof to this. Our Lady of Hope Church, founded during the colonial period thus

becomes a tangible manifestation of the palimpsest theory, embodying the intricacies of cultural, religious and architectural overlays.

The Portuguese Baroque elements on the church's face represent the initial layer of the palimpsest; it reflects the foreign influence introduced by the colonial power. As time progressed, the local community left their indelible marks on the structure. This blending exemplifies the palimpsestic nature of the church.

Apart from the architecture, the traces of its western influence is very evident in the artifacts inside the church. A notable illustration of this influence is observed in the intricate carving located at the bottom of the screen positioned on the right side of the altar. This carving depicts four individuals in mid 16th century attire. The presence of a ruff collar on one of the figures serves as a subtle yet significant detail, further supporting the interference of the West on the church's artistic elements. It provides a vivid testament to the enduring impact of European traditions on the church's interior ambience.



Fig. 3. Carving on the Right Screen. (*Quadri-Centennial Celebration Memento*.

Our Lady of Hope Church, 2005.)

In addition to the artifacts, the representation of religious figures inside the church embodied in statues of the patroness and the saints has been significantly influenced by the artistic traditions of the West. This influence has often resulted in representations that deviate from the historical and geographical context of the figures being depicted. Notably, the prevalent depiction of religious figures with white or lighter skin tones in these statues, when historically these figures, including Jesus, is known to have been hailed from the ancient Middle East. The statue of the patroness, Our lady of Hope mirrors the attire and aesthetic preferences of European traditions. In the case of Our Lady of Hope, the adoption of Western attire becomes not just a matter of artistic interpretation but an instrument through which the West historically claimed cultural and religious superiority. This raises questions about the impact of cultural biases on artistic representations.

Our Lady of Hope Church stands as a living testament to the harmonious interplay as a center of devotion and a preserve for the Anglo Indian heritage. Overtime, the natives have been successful in transforming the church from a symbol of Western influence to a sacred haven deeply rooted in their own traditions and beliefs.

The administration of the church by the natives has been successful in reshaping its identity from its initial status as a symbol of colonial power. The Malyalam sermons conducted six days a week now stand as proof to this transformation. It represents a shift towards embracing the faith in the cultural and linguistic context of the local population.

The Anglo-Indian community of Vypin brings in another dimension to the narrative surrounding the church. Being descended from the Portuguese and the Dutch who have found a home within the walls of Our Lady of Hope church centuries ago, they bring with them a unique cultural heritage that enhances the diversity of the church. Even though their numbers are considerably low compared to the native population, their presence has a significant impact on the management and governance of the church. English masses are conducted twice every week to cater to the spiritual needs of the Anglo-Indian community. This raises the question of how far we can move past the post-colonial past once again.

Chapter 3

Our Lady of Hope Church: A Living Tapestry of Collective Memory

Our Lady of Hope Church in Vypin, with its rich historical and cultural significance, can be examined through the lens of Pierre Nora's theory of "sites of memory". An intricate interplay of memory as an object, practice and discourse surrounding the church is revealed through this theory.

The primary site of memory is the existence of the church as a tangible artifact. The combination of western and indigenous design elements, which are features of a colonial-style architecture is visible evidence of past interactions. There are three wooden screens decorating the altar of the church that stand as a testimony to the trifles of the past. The antiquities inside the church go beyond their religious significance and become cultural artifacts that play a role in shaping the identity of the church. Therefore, the space plays multiple roles as a historical archive, which represents the intricate relationship between colonial and indigenous influences. At times, these representations can also unintentionally reinforce the notion of cultural dominance even in the present.

The deliberate construction of memories through rituals and practices is highlighted by Nora. Throughout the years, Our Lady of Hope Church has attempted to redefine the postcolonial religious identity through the liturgical practices performed in the local Malayalam language. This stands as evidence to the adaptability of the local community who have been resilient in the face of colonial domination. They have not

only managed to infuse their unique identity into the very fabric of the church but have successfully made it into their own. These rituals celebrated every day inside the church exist as a living memory for the local community, and they enforce the new identity they built for the church.

An important practice of the church that has a role in forming the present identity of the church revolves around two statues that date back to ancient times. These two statues are the very impressive and life-like statues of Jesus Christ. One is called “Ecce Homo”, a statue of Jesus standing before the trial and the other is Jesus in the Sepulcher. These statues are put out for display for a single day during the lent season. This tradition was started centuries back which the church continues even today. The grand celebration that accompanies the display of these statues during Lent has evolved into a defining aspect of the church’s identity. More than religious observance, the day is transformed into a celebration of communal spirit and faith. It contributes to the ongoing construction of collective memory within the church community. Through the centuries, this ritual has etched itself into the collective memory of the church, shaping the narrative of its identity. This annual event becomes a performative memory, where the act of unveiling and displaying the statues becomes a reenactment of historical and religious significance.



Fig. 4. The Statue of Ecce Homo. (Photo of *The famed miraculous statue of Our Lord in chains*. Instagram, 6 July 2022,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CfrLW_5vgiS/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODB
 iNWFIZA==)



Fig. 5. Jesus in the Sepulcher. (Instagram, 17 July 2022,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CgG-prqBnMg/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIOD
 BiNWFIZA==)

The native community has ingeniously infused their cultural essence into the presentation of the Ecce Homo statue, showing a fusion of tradition and innovation.

Originally decorated with an olive branch which stands for harmony and peace, the statue now features palm leaves, a species that is widely found in Kerala. This adaptation reflects the community's ability at reappropriation by effectively integrating elements readily accessible to them. The statue now celebrates the community's inventiveness as well as its spiritual significance, resonating more with the local ethos.

The Anglo-Indian community's involvement in the church's management represents a living link to the colonial past. They act as a reminder to the church's roots. The involvement of the Anglo-Indian community in the church's administration, with their ties to the colonial past, holds cultural and historical value. The church celebrates over fourteen feasts with grandeur every year and three of these feasts are traditionally overseen by the Anglo-Indian community. Apart from holding these celebrations piously, they also incorporate Latin hymns and prayers in the liturgy during the feasts. This is their way of paying homage to their roots and showing reverence for their cultural heritage.

According to Nora's theory, the incorporation of different languages into the liturgy becomes a form of memory as discourse. The presence and contributions of the Anglo-Indian community within the church act as a medium for preserving and maintaining historical continuity. In light of Nora's theory, the Anglo-Indian community's role as carriers of memory and the way in which they keep their ties with their past alive are brought out.

Nora's concept of reappropriation extends beyond the mere modification of physical structures; it encompasses a deliberate act of cultural negotiation which is quite evident in the attire and appearance of the figures inside the church. A striking example of this negotiation can be seen in the adornment of the state of the patroness during the feast. Traditionally depicted in a red and blue tunic with a cape, the statue undergoes a transformation during the celebration, draped resplendently in a saree and adorned with intricate gold jewelry. This intentional modification functions as a visible demonstration of the community's ability in reclaiming and reshaping their cultural identity. This practice not only reaffirms their cultural roots but also serves as a means of asserting autonomy in the face of colonial legacies.



Fig. 6. Statue of the Patroness. (*Quadri-Centennial Celebration Memento*. Our Lady of Hope Church, 2005.)

Through such acts of reappropriation, the church becomes a dynamic site of negotiation, where the past is reimagined and reshaped to reflect the evolving identity and

agency of its community, In this way, Nora's concept of reappropriation offers a lens through which to understand the intricate interplay between tradition, colonial history, and cultural agency within the church's visual landscape.

Conclusion

The examination of Our Lady of Hope Church in Vypin through the theoretical frameworks of Sarah Dillon's Palimpsest theory and Pierre Nora's Sites of Memory theory reveals a complex understanding of decolonization and cultural negotiation within a postcolonial architecture. This analysis indicates that although decolonization efforts have made strides in reclaiming cultural heritage and redefining identity, complete elimination of colonial remnants is still a distant goal.

The Palimpsest theory underscores how the colonial influences continue to exist within the architectural landscape, as seen by the church's blend of Portuguese Baroque elements with indigenous design features. Despite the attempts to overwrite the colonial narratives with local adaptations, the remnants of colonialism still persists as visible traces on the history.

Similarly, Nora's Sites of Memory theory highlights the role of deliberate integration of elements into the rituals and practices in shaping a collective memory. It shows how certain rituals serve as an intersection for the negotiation of different cultures. The effect on cultural identity because of the long lasting influence of colonial history is also portrayed.

Through the analysis based on these theories, it is clear that decolonization is a process of negotiation and reconciliation between the past and present rather than total

eradication of certain narratives. Our Lady of Hope church remains as an example to this interplay between diverse cultures where colonial influences coexist with indigenous traditions. This results in the formation of a hybrid cultural identity. The community's integration of English masses alongside Malayalam liturgies is a prime example of the transformational potential of cultural blending in decolonization initiatives.

The question of the possibility of a complete decolonization is highlighted through this analysis. The idea that true decolonization lies in the acceptance and celebration of cultural hybridity is the conclusion that is drawn from this analysis. It aims at ways in which a community can embrace cultural diversity by acknowledging the complications of history rather than a complete erasure of the colonial traces. Through acceptance of diverse cultural influences, societies can move past the constraints of their colonial history and pave the way for a better future. Our Lady of Hope Church in Vypin succeeds in portraying how different traditions can coexist and blend, creating a rich cultural tapestry that holds the significance of both the past and present.

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