



Resistance through Letters: An Analysis of Malayalam Dalit Poetry

Babitha B, Assistant Professor, Sree Narayana College, Nattika.

Abstract: The present study analyses the origin and the historical background of the Malayalam dalit poetry. The rise of Malayalam dalit poetry in Kerala in the late nineteenth century and its subsequent entry into the canon in the twenty-first century is discussed. Started as a reaction against the inequalities and injustice mounted upon the dalits, Malayalam dalit poetry takes new turn and come up with myriad themes today. Rejection of dalits by the upper caste hegemony, the identity crisis and dilemma faced by the dalits, trauma of the dalit experience, exploitation and marginalization are the concerned major themes of the Malayalam dalit poetry.

Key words: Malayalam dalit poetry, marginalization, exploitation, inequality, injustice.

Caste and the inequalities it created was a major social issue in Kerala. Brahmanical hegemony dominated the society of Kerala for a long period. Following the Chaturvarna system, caste played a decisive role in the power structures all over India. In Kerala, a different mode of caste hierarchy operated in the exertion of power over the lower castes or the untouchables. *Brahmins*, the priestly class held a higher position in the three princely states Travancore, Cochin and Malabar of Kerala, ruled by the royal kingdoms. *Brahmins*, the feudal landlords controlled all the other castes in Kerala. *Nairs* or the warrior class who were allied to the *Namboodiri Brahmins* come next under the hierarchy. Matrilineal system of the *Nairs* along with the *sambandham* helped the *Nair* community to gain land ownership. The upper castes who enjoyed the wealth and luxuries of life exploited the lower castes. *Ezhavas* and *Nadars* were considered as the polluted untouchable class; dalits (*Parayas, Pulayas, Kuravas, Adivasis*) belonging to the lowest of the caste hierarchy were treated as the wretched marginalized community. *Ezhavas* had to keep a distance of 36 paces away from the *Namboodiris* and 12 paces away from the *Nairs*. *Pulayas, Parayas* and *Kuravas* were the untouchable slave castes who comes last in the social caste hierarchy. They had to keep a distance of 96 feet away from *Namboodiris* and *Nairs*, 36 feet away from *Ezhavas*. These slave castes and the *Adivasis* or tribal castes like *Malayaraya*, constitutes the dalits of Kerala. The *savarnas* or the elite upper castes humiliated, segregated and marginalized the *avarnas* or the lower castes. This inhuman caste discrimination and untouchability in Kerala prompted Swami Vivekananda to call Kerala as a ‘lunatic asylum’.

Dalits were treated inhumanely by the other upper castes. They were forced to work in the fields of the *thampurans* or feudal landlords for low wages. They were not allowed to drink water from the public wells and not allowed to walk on the public roads. The most brutal form of exploitation was the existence of slave trade which was allegedly omitted from the historiography of Kerala. Slaves were exchanged and sold in Kerala. Sometimes families were separated in such exchanges. Husbands and wives were sold to different landlords leaving the kids as orphans. Francis Buchanan’s travel records in 1800 AD provide evidences to the slave trade in Kerala. Dalit songs from the Travancore region are the unwritten records of the brutal slave trade existed in Kerala:

Yoked alongside buffaloes and bulls

we plough the fields, we plough the fields!

Father is sold away... thinthara!

We wept... thinthara!

Mother too is sold...thinthara!

We wept disconsolately ... thinthara!

The oldest child is caught ... thinthara!

The plaintain tree is dug out.

He is thrown into the pit,

covered with dry leaves, and set on fire... thinthara! (Mohan 538)

Miserable condition of dalits continued ever after the abolition of slavery by the British East India Company in 1843. Slavery abolition of Travancore in 1855 ignited the attacks against dalits in Kerala. Dalits continued to face the denial of education; through the prohibition of learning and economical exploitation the elite castes controlled the dalits for a long time. "The hegemony of the high castes became so pervasive because all knowledge was generated and processed by them. One of the best examples of this was how learning and using Sanskrit as a language was the privilege of the upper castes" (Kumar 42). Thus Sanskrit gained a prestigious elite class position among all other languages.

Kerala Renaissance in the 19th century under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru and his followers prompted the untouchables to act against the inequalities persisted in Kerala over the ages. Taking inspiration from Sree Narayana Guru (1856- 1928), both Ayyankali (1863-1941) and Poikayil Appachan (1878-1939) initiated dalit movements and protests against the discrimination and segregation invested upon the dalits by the *Brahmin* and *Nair* communities. The Sadhujana Paripalana Sangam (an organization for the welfare of the untouchables) started by Ayyankali in 1907 is one of the earliest dalit movement that stood for gaining rights for dalits. Even before the spread of Ambedkarite movements and birth of Dalit Panthers (a dalit movement started in Mumbai on 1972 to fight against caste discrimination) in Maharashtra, Kerala witnessed many reform movements and literary movements to end caste discrimination under the leadership of Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyapan (1889- 1968), Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) and Poikayil Appachan. Ayyankali's *Villuvandi* travels in 1907, struggles for the right to education of dalit children and Agrarian hunger strikes are notable protests that stood for the rights of dalits in Kerala. Poikayil Appachan's Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), Pampadi John Joseph's Akhila Thiruvithamkur Cheramar Sangham (ATCS), K.P. Vallon's Kochi Pulaya Mahasabha (KPM) and SEEDIAN (Socially, Economically, Educationally Depressed Indian Ancient Natives) are the other social reform movements that worked for the welfare of dalits in Kerala.

Malayalam dalit writing is thus a literary reaction to the social injustice and inequality faced by the dalits in Kerala. At the end of the nineteenth century, novels from Kerala discussed the issues of caste and caste discrimination. Mrs Collins' *Ghatakavadham* (The Slayers Slain) written during 1864-65 and published in 1877, Potheri Kunhambu's *Saraswativijayam* (1892) and Joseph Muliyl's *Sukumari* (1897) are the novels which questioned the caste discrimination in Kerala. Dalit issues began to appear in the early twentieth century itself in the poems "Duravastha" (1922) and "Chandalabhikshuki" by the poet and social reformer Kumaran Asan. Pandit Karupan's "Jaathikummi" (1904) is a pioneering attempt in introducing of dalit issues with the use of simple every day Malayalam diction and language in poetry. Changampuzha Krishna Pillai's "Vazhakkula" and Edassery Govindan Nair's "Panimudakkam" are the poems that appeared with the theme of dalit issues. But these novels and poems are written by the non-dalits about the issue of casteism in Kerala. "Paul Chirakkarodu, who inaugurated contemporary dalit literature with his *Dalit Sahithyathinoru Mukhavura* (A Preface to Dalit Literature, 1982) stated that 'dalit literature is that which is written by dalits'." (K. K. Baburaj, P. 371) When dalits themselves write about their own life, it becomes genuine and authentic. "Dalit

creativity, ... is a cry for freedom of a group of people who were earlier denied the right to articulate their voices. Dalit literature is, therefore, a literature of dignity” (Kumar 10). Dalit writings are filled with the trauma of injustice and inequality experienced by the dalits. Creative writings of the dalit authors first appeared in the form of poetry in Kerala.

Origin of dalit poetry can be traced back to the oral folk songs and labour songs of dalits. “What is most interesting about the Dalit oral tradition is that it does not take into account the notion of an author. Rather, Dalit orality is pronouncedly concerned with an experience that is not individualistic but always collective” (Introduction xxvi). These collective experience of rituals, folk life and labour constituted the spark for dalit Poetry. The Dalit creativity was expressed in the forms of songs while engaging in agricultural labour:

In central and South Kerala, Dalits have had their own oral traditions with immense historiographical potential. *Chengannuradi, Idanadan Paattukal, Krishigeetha*, and other folk songs are instances. It addresses the formation of an agrarian society in which Dalit communities produced the subsistence and surplus and still remained subservient to the dominant political authorities. In North Malabar, there are more than 500 ritual performances known as Theyyam/Thira, the thottam of which is a powerful reminder of the complexity and diversity of Dalit orality and its markedly different epistemological foundation.” (Introduction xxvi)

Dalit poetry flourished, established and popularized in the early twentieth century as a reaction and protest against the social evils in Kerala. Dalit poets used a different, native and subjective style and language in their poems unlike the sanskritized Malayalam poetry written by the elite class. The earliest dalit poets themselves were social reformers of the period. They found poetry as a medium to express their protest against untouchability and casteism. They fought against the mainstream tradition of poetry and established a new form and style in poetry. They rejected the sanskrit tradition followed by the mainstream literature. Malayalam dalit poetry is thus a break away from the earlier tradition which denied justice to the dalits and tribals. Dalit writers developed a new aesthetics in their writings unlike the traditional literature that gave prime importance to beauty. “Dalit writers attempt to be true to their lived experiences and feel that their visions and responses must be translated into art honestly, in its raw, undistilled form without using euphemisms” (Kumar 68). The elder generation of Malayalam dalit poets Poikayil Appachan, Kaviyoor Murali, Kallada Sasi and K. K. S Das are revolutionary throughout their writings in an attempt to bring equality and justice to the dalits. Their poems reflected the cruelties and humiliation induced upon the dalits by the Brahmanical dominance and power structure in society. “While a poet like Raghavan Atholi, writes poetry in a manner reminiscent of the possessed ritualistic performer, evoking forgotten memories, desires and language, the younger poets experiment in loose prosaic forms from a seemingly detached and alienated space” (Dasan et al. 3). Sivadas Purameri and G. Sasi Madhuraveli wrote poems with dalit consciousness. S. Joseph is the most celebrated poet who gained much attention to Malayalam dalit poetry through his subjective and simple poems. M. R. Renukumar, M. B Manoj, Binu M. Pallipad, Vijila and S. Kalesh are the divergent contemporary voices of Malayalam dalit poetry.

Poikayil Sreekumara Gurudevan (1879-1939) popularly known by the names Poikayil Appachan and Poikayil Yohannan was the first dalit poet from the *Paraya* community, the founder of dalit protest movement Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS). His songs *Poikayil Appachante Paattukal* was sung during the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha of 1921. “It is a heart-rending song, expressing anguish and anger at the cruel exclusion of Dalits from history without leaving a trace. His most famous line “Kanuneeloraksharavum, ente vasmsathinayi” is probably the most authentic statement by a Dalit writer.” (Dr. Sakunthala A. I, 2016, P.39) His songs lament about the exclusion of dalits from the historiography of Kerala. The downtrodden generation fails to find a recorded history anywhere:

I see no alphabet
 about my race
 I see the histories
 of many races. (2-5)

K. K. Govindan Asan (1921-2001) is famous for his “Arukolakandam” (The Killing Field), a long poem of 14 lines written in 1973 and published in 1980. The poem unfurls the cruelties of the elite class *Nair* communities upon the dalits. The accusation of the theft in relation with a cow leads to the killing of a low caste slave. Even though the story revolves around the myth of *talisman* and the revenge of slave after death, the poem narrates the exertion of the power over the dalits by the *savarnas*. The elites enjoyed an unquestionable power and authority to kill the untouchable slaves:

They tied his hands to the back;
 Made him bow down and began to hack his head.
 But it never severed off
 And kept spilling blood on every face.
 Four or five of them, they tried in vain.
 They could not cut off his head.
 Finally the victim told the henchmen:
 ‘There is a copper talisman in my body
 Take it out and place it beneath the pipal tree;
 Then cut off my head and go for your wages’.
 They followed his words and chopped his head. (6-16)

Like Poikayil Appachan’s Songs, Kaviyoor Murali (1930-2005) a radical dalit poet, writer and critic in his “My Tomb” writes about the rejection of Dalit creativity by the elite class. He fears that a Dalit poet might die unrecognized as his life:

Here in everlasting slumber
 Lies the one rejected by the elite;
 He who played the dalit reed
 On the Malayalam literary heights. (5-8)

A Dalit poet has the creative spirit in him, but his creativity remains in the periphery of history. Caste remains a problematic issue in Kerala. Elite class constantly rejects the entry of the downtrodden class into mainstream literature and aesthetics.

“Ayyankali ” by Kallada Sasi (1932-1996) is a tribute to the social reformer who “led the way to open up the temples and to worship/ To walk on public roads and to live as humans.” (l. 24-25) Ayyankali is described as the captain who rose to end the long darkness and “the Avarna who stands out of the fourfold divisions of Brahminism.” (l. 42-43) Ayyankali is the great leader who fought for the education rights for the dalits. With that knowledge and letters he learned, the poet is making a garland of poem to Ayyankali:

O knowledge, you came to an ignorant society

To light the lamp of wisdom.

Now let me place here in offering to you

This sweet-smelling garland I made

With the letters of the alphabet. (58-62)

Raghavan Atholi (b.1957), a famous poet and sculptor is worried about the justice denied to the marginalized even after India's Independence in his poem "Where Hunger is Sold". Poet is helpless before "burning the law books of tears that/ drink down the pool of justice" (3-4). The stunning and dark imagery in the poem suggests the present debris where dalits are doomed to live. Reaped heads in ballet boxes, dried up rivers, bullets, painless deaths and nuclear arrogance make the country no more a safe place to stay. The downtrodden are raising questions:

People expelled by Manu ask:

Where are the hearths and the power

That shaped the times?

Where is the lamp that lighted up

The paths that were unseen?

Where is the force that bore the brunt of

The theory of untouchability?

The tongue that ended the pain

Truth that is never sold out

Place and date where and when

Food is not begged for. (56-66)

Poet is referring to the commendable works of great social reformers and the path they have lightened up. Even after the Independence and the establishment of educational rights, dalits are still in the darkness. They are not economically and socially independent, dalits are haunted by the days of hunger and poverty.

S. Joseph (b. 1965), M. R. Renukumar (b. 1969) and M. B. Manoj (b.1972) gains a prestigious space to the Malayalam dalit poetry with their much popular and admirable poems. They liberated Malayalam poetry from the metres and rhythm. With the blurring distinction of genres their poetry is at a time prosaic and poetical. Malayalam dalit poetry is taking a different diversion in the course of its journey. S. Joseph sometimes used dalit idioms in his poems. Through memories and life experiences these veteran poets adopted a narrative style into their poems. With the famous poems "A Letter to Malayalam Poetry", "Group Photo" and "Identity Card" S. Joseph created his own space in Malayalam poetry thereby rejecting all the traditional norms of poetry writing providing a novel experience to the Malayali readers. His poems filled with everyday issues of the mundane life in simple diction touch the heart of every reader. "My Sister's Bible" is all about the life hazards of a dalit woman in Kerala:

These are what my sister's Bible has:

a ration-book come loose,

a loan application form,

a card from the cut-throat money-lender,

the notices of feasts

in the church and the temple,

a photograph of her brother's child,
 a paper that says how to knit a baby cap,
 a hundred-rupee note,
 an S. S. L. C. Book. (1-10)

The poem takes deviation from usual rhythmical and lyrical patterns to introduce the everyday issues before the readers. Poet is getting critical about the concept of religion, and its promise in bringing solace to the minds of the people. Poet's sister is keeping a loan application form and notices inside the Bible. She is not worried about the Old Testament and the New, what she cares about is her struggle to solve her life issues.

Binu M. Pallippad, Sivadas Purameri, S. Kalesh and Vijila entered the mainstream literature through their poems with throbbing issues. Mothers in Binu M. Pallipad's poem "Civilizations of Love (and Death)" is working in the paddy fields with the fire of burnt out dreams. Sivadas Purameri in "A Leaky Room" and S. Kalesh in "Siren" moves through the memories of their tainted past. Vilija picturizes the issues of dalit women in her famous poems "A Place for me" and "The Autobiography of a Bitch".

Early appearance of the reformation and renaissance movements in Kerala under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Ayyankali and Kumaran Asan in the 19th century has its reflections in the Dalit lives too. Dalits in Kerala are provided with better education and job opportunities now. Today, social evils like untouchability and caste discrimination are not readily visible in the society but caste issues are still lingering in the minds of people. Dalit writers in Kerala are fighting against that invisible but visible discrimination in the name of castes. New generation poets Sajin P. J, Valsala Baby, K.K. Nirmala, Praveena K. P, Shaju Nellai, Pushpa Joy, B. Madhukumar, Balu Pulinelly and Jonhson Cheeranchira are making distinctive voices in the world of Malayalam poetry to create a casteless and classless society. The poets are seeking the horizon by breaking the shells of casteism.

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