

Ode to Subaltern Existence: Spectres of Marginalized Experience in the Selected Poems of S. Joseph

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The contemporary world is characterized by interconnectedness and interdependency on an unprecedented scale than ever before in the history of mankind. Such a social milieu is grounded on the hardcore reality of the existence of numerous racial, casteist, ethnic, and communal groups following diverse customs, communal and linguistic traditions, rites and rituals. But the emergent paradoxical truth remains that beneath the tall claims of liberty, equality and fraternity, marginalized communities' issues are often ignored and remain largely unaddressed. Despite several years of independence, the enactment of several laws, and the setting up of numerous organizations and agencies, atrocities and violence based on caste and ethnicity continue unabated across different parts of India. The situation assumes serious proportions in the case of those on the margin, such as the Dalits, the Tribals and other similar groups forced to live within the established framework of gender and casteist identities. The present research article proposes to examine the spectre of marginalized experiences of the Dalits within the socio-cultural and political domain characterized by pungent and scathing discriminatory politics informed by power relations about the select poems of S. Joseph, a Dalit poet in Malayalam literature. It also examines the manner in which the Dalit self in the poems gets projected through the contradictory lens of silence and resistance.

Since time immemorial, literature has been an apt medium to encapsulate the life and times of a given society at a given time. The interrelationship between literature and society is strongly rooted in the belief that literature is the product of a given human society. (The historical context in which the new literary genre called “Dalit Literature” emerged presupposes the existence of contextualized specificities of structural and cultural realities characterized by power relations in the social, cultural, economic and political domains where caste, class and gender intersect to create complexities). Therefore, the role of literature in understanding the problematics of relationships devoid of a catholic outlook cannot be underestimated, as literature has become a medium of appending contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development “(Sikuru 2-3)”.

The term “Dalit” emerged as a significant political-modern concept in the late twentieth century. Since the 1970s, the term “Dalit” has been used as a generic one to

represent all the oppressed people in the Indian social structure dominated by the hierarchical axes of caste, class and gender. The word “Dalit,” with its origins in the Marathi language, was first found in Molesworth’s Marathi-English dictionary of 1975, a reprint of the 1813 edition, which has, over the years with changes in the connotation and interpretation of the term, has come to signify those who are crushed, broken or impoverished.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, many poets and writers emerged from various parts of India whose writings in different genres offered critical insights into the question of Dalit identity and postulated formations to alleviate oppression and suppression within the dominant hegemonic structures of the times. Dalit writings have acquired a revolutionary connotation as they were a kind of rebellion against the Brahminical Hinduist social conditions. Therefore, they were viewed as socially relevant as they were geared towards challenging and transforming the hegemonic groups' dominant social, political, economic, cultural and religious practices. An analysis of the history of Indian Dalit literature shows how the works penned by Dalit writers have been quite effective in chronicling the psychic and physiological trauma undergone by the poor Dalits and their subsequent anger, protest and resistance. There was debate over the question of the genuineness and authenticity of the writer reporting the bleak and inhuman experiences of the Dalits, that is, whether a Dalit writer should be of the same community or anyone who writes about the Dalit. But likely non-Dalit writers, literary expressions by the Dalit writers stand out as a reflection of their lived experiences conveyed authentically in a crude and fiery style. Coming out from an insulted and inquired self, these literary expressions, very often in autobiographical form, effectively arouse the reader’s consciousness regarding the need for an egalitarian society.

In recent times, the question of Dalit identity has caught much critical attention, and there also arose a need to have a crucial evaluation of the prevailing social and cultural practices. Dalit literature, therefore, became an act of socio-political resistance. As a theoretical tool, Dalit literature provides a conceptual framework that rejects the hegemonic influences emerging from the caste system and against the suppressed Dalit voices. As Limbale rightly observes that “Dalit writers persisted in writing and making every possible effort to be heard” (25), and “Dalit literature is a new and distinct stream of Indian literature. It has contributed to Indian literature fresh experiences, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision, and a new chemistry of suffering and result” (17). Thus, Dalit literature is a strong rebuke of the larger forces of dehumanization with a focus on asserting Dalit identity, and by capturing the depth and subtleties of personal experience, these 4 writers aim to create a promotive or congenial environment for asserting or rather protecting their identities. The Dalit movements in India can be traced back to the early decades of the twentieth century, out it was during the closing decades of the twentieth century that the Dalit movement began to receive an impetus in Kerala society. The socio-cultural background of Kerala with the strong roots in practices of Kerala untouchability and hypocrisies of the dominant conservative society predominantly to the upper caste people,

whereas the lower caste people were doomed to a life of sadness, poverty and misery. The resistance demonstrated by the Dalits against the socio-cultural and economic disparities forms the subject matter for many writings about Dalits produced in Kerala. The segmentation and discrimination of Dalits forced them to battle against the entrenched upper caste hegemony, and their rage to free themselves from the torturous existence coupled with the valiant efforts and inspirational teachings and precepts of great social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan and Ayyankali. However, the process of marginalization of the lower social order at work in the socio-cultural scenario finds its impact in the literary area, and many Dalit and non-Dalit writers of Kerala have made significant contributions to contemporary Malayalam literature.

Interestingly a major contribution to Dalit literature is in the form of poetry, and some of the significant Malayalam Dalit writers include Poykayil Appachan, Paul Chirakkarodu, Sunny Kappikkadu, S.Joseph, Raghavan Atholi, G.Sashi, Maduraveli, Vijila Chirappad. There are bitter and defiant outpourings of the rhythm of distressed souls against the social norms of caste hierarchy and the cultural practice of untouchability (Having withstood the brunt of socio-cultural and political changes during the colonial rule, Malayalam poetry stands distinct from the affluent poetic traditions of Manipravaalam). Realizing the hollowness of the hegemonic ruling classes and their cultural strategems, the Dalits writers have questioned the perpetual subservience of the Dalits by the upper castes. As Poykayil Appachan rightly points out:

About my race

I see no alphabet

About my race.

I see histories

Of many races

(Malayalam Dalit Writings,5).

The blatant denial of humanitarian considerations to the poor Dalits whose identity is not recognized and disapproved of is understandable in a society that runs on Braminical cultural nationalism.

Rooted in oral traditions, the early Dalit literature in Malayalam manifests itself in “Koythupattu” (Labour Songs) or the songs sung by the panas or the messenger songs of the Malayans. The pangs of discrimination and victimization subtly render the aesthetics of suffering and resistance. While questioning the hegemonic literary practices, these works establish a place for themselves in the mainstream literary space. Where the essence of social equality and the spirit of justice is subjected to critical thinking, in this regard, Arjun Dangle observes:

Dalit literature originates from a revolutionary struggle for social and economic changes. This explains the various aspects of serious thoughts in Dalits literature. The

literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of untouchables and victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. A feeling of rebellion against the establishment of negativism and scientificity thus characterizes their literature. On the other hand, mainstream Malayalam literature, which drew its literary sensibilities from Sanskrit, laid stress on the educated upper-class society. It is, therefore, not surprising that Dalit literature emerged as a counteractive discourse aimed at creating a counter-culture and a distinctive identity in social conditions characterized by powerlessness, poverty, untouchability and hypocrisy. Studying Dalit literature or the role of this literature from only a literary or an academic point of view fails to present a complete perspective in assessing it; Dalit literature must be assessed in the sociological framework. This overall perspective has been conspicuously absent in the review of Dalit literature so far (237).

Born in the Kottayam district of Kerala, S. Joseph is regarded as one of the key figures in the history of Malayalam Dalit poetry. The poet employs images and expressions derived from his experiences and perceptions. He has focused on the grim social realities of the times where power lies with the affluent class. His first collection of poems, *Karutha Kallu*, was published in 2000. His poetry collection *Uppante Kooval Varakkunnu* won the 2012 Kerala Sahithya Academy Award. *Identity Card* is his third collection of poems, published in 2005.

“Identity Card” is one of the famous poems in which Joseph reveals the harsh reality of caste discrimination in a social milieu that claims to be fully literate. Written in an autobiographical mode, “Identity Card” raises questions about the logic of secularist claims. In the poem, Joseph tells us about a girl, his classmate, who shared lunch and food with him and even enjoyed the thrill of touch, not withholding the religious differences. But their relationship ends abruptly with the girl returning his lost identity card. Here the idea of one’s self and identity are constructed about the “other.” a Dalit’s identity gets reinforced against the hegemonic identities and sets the poet on the path of self-discovery.

Our hands met, kneading
Her rice and fish curry
On a beach, we became

A Hindu-Christian family (3-6)

The girlfriend cannot contain the fact that her classmate is a Dalit, as is clear when she says:

The account of your stipend

The identity card is a visible marker of religion and caste in a cultural paradigm emphasizing identity differences. Joseph’s frustrated engagement and subsequent

disillusionment with the tyranny of caste-based hierarchy and caste rigidity our articulated in a secular system whose mocking attempts to ensure equality are called into question, and as Ambedkar poets out that “Equality will be of no value without femininity or liberty” (182). The poet’s girlfriend is brought up in a social order that does not value granting equality to everyone irrespective of caste, creed or religion. She represents the hierarchical social consciousness characterized by behavioral attributes from the prevalent caste system. IC thus envisions poets, intention to challenge the existing power equations determined by centuries-old illicit ties between patriarchy and casteism. The character of the girlfriend in the poem seeks to bring out the implications of the complex interlocking elements of caste, untouchability and patriarchy in the social system of Kerala. Casteist markers determine one’s purity, and in the poem, the poet is viewed as an incarnation of impurity; social exclusiveness and restrictions define the poet’s life, and therefore, the girlfriend treats him as menial or derogatory. Issues related to personhood and the human dignity of low-income people arise. The over-determinacy of caste causes Dalits and underscores their profound exploitation in a complex milieu dominated by casteist classist ethos of existence.

“A Letter to Malayalam Poetry” appeals to the writers to give up stanzas and meter and adopt the free verse writing style in their literary endeavors. It implores a transition from the traditional nuances of poetry to a broader outlook while creating poetry in keeping with the tone of the times. He argues for a poetic style, a freestyle devoid of stanzas and meter, as he considers the conventional elements intended to enrich the narrative of the poem destroying its beauty. By contrast, poets like Joseph feel that a poet’s instinctive outpour is important, as it is usually a combination of thought and passion. According to Joseph, the essence of true poetry should not be circumstanced to mere technicalities but should effectively capture the lived realities of the contemporary situation in a natural style without preposterous. As Joseph puts it: If you wanted to fly away, it must be a jail.

I live among the poor,

In a hutment just like theirs,
eat what I get (8-11).

He leads a carefree yet difficult life as he looks after the house, including fetching water from afar, clearing “mother's shit and piss” (14) and picking up “tins, sandals, bottles, paper” (15) to sell them. He is a rag-picker in the eyes of those around him, but he is complacent with his life. Despite calling Poetry to visit his poor house by the side of the river, she refuses only to be trapped in “big buildings” (22). People have tied down poetry to meet their end instead of allowing her to be free. Here, Joseph implies the high-handedness of mainstream poets who can be viewed as embodying hegemonic influences looted in casteism. Dalit poetry is generally looked down upon for it is structured around “filth and slush” (34) and is seen as a free articulation of social and cultural inequities. According to Joseph, poetry “decked in silks and smiles” (28) is tired of its rich life, and as the poet exhorts:

What you want is freedom, right?
That is all we have:

You can say what you like,
can bathe in the brook, can
chirp with the wagtails
Visiting the compound (37-42).

The poet seems concerned with the real subject matter of poetry and its impact. Living in an ivory tower, a poet cannot faithfully present the trials and tribulations undergone by the poorer sections of society and presupposes the poet as one among them. The intense differences among different sections of society and the callousness of the mainstream society are filled with deceit towards the marginalized sections who strongly assert their rights and liberties to live with a sense of dignity and self-respect.

“My Sister’s Bible” is a presentative poem by Joseph that brings out religion's hypocritical and hollow nature. The Bible is regarded as a symbol of Christian religious identity. The mainstream Christians carried the Bible in their hands to display their religious affiliation vehemently, unlike the converted Christians, including the Dalits who do not ascribe to the Bible the same religious significance as the Dalits who are converted to Christianity like her sister. To her sister, the Bible becomes a storehouse of personal documents:

This is what my sister’s Bible has: a
ration book comes loose,
a loan application form,

a card from the out-throat money-lender, the
notices of feasts,
in the church and the temple,
a photograph of my brother's child,

a paper that says how to knit a baby cap, a
hundred-rupee note
an SSLC book (1-10).

Instead of the preface

The Old Testament and the New Maps, the red cover (11-14). Her sister treats the Bible as a means of sustenance in their poverty-stricken life. To the poet, the Bible symbolizes the conversion to Christianity, but even the conversion process creates a divide among the different sections of society. The poor converted Dalits are placed on the margins of mainstream society without a voice in the name of religion.

Conclusion

Joseph’s open rhetoric of disagreement with the hegemonic socio-cultural order is explicit

in his poems, forming the concept of man as a social being with equal status will wipe out the issues of marginalization and invisibility, but unfortunately, the dominant hegemonic authority at work in Indian society coupled with the politics of public apathy towards the Dalits forces those on the margins to write back to the center. As Kancha Illiah rightly observes: unless the culture and consciousness of the oppressed is put forward visibly in public debate, unless this culture is prepared to clash with the culture and consciousness of the enemy in public, a society of equals will remain an illusion (168-169).

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