

The Voice of the Marginalized: An Analysis on S. Joseph's Poetry

Babitha B.

Assistant Professor of English
Sree Narayana College, Nattika

Abstract

S. Joseph, the pioneer of the contemporary Dalit poetry in Malayalam revolts against the mainstream tradition of Malayalam poetry. S. Joseph was born at Pattithanam, Kottayam district, Kerala in a Dalit Christian family. His life experience as a Dalit Christian prompted him to write poems about life. Through simple diction and language, his poems discuss the issues like caste, colour, discrimination, inequality and marginalization that exists in the society of Kerala. His poetry stands out as it involves the social realities and life of the marginalized. S. Joseph's poems reflect the alienation and identity crisis faced by dalits. The present study is an analysis of the selected poems appeared in the English translations of his poetry collection *My Sister's Bible* (2016) published by Author Press, New Delhi.

Keywords: Dalit poetry, Marginalization, Discrimination, Alienation, Identity crisis

S. Joseph shattered the pillars of traditional Malayalam poetry with his simple and non-lyrical prose-like poems. K. Satchidanandan in his study on S. Joseph's poetry called him a pioneer of contemporary Dalit poetry in Malayalam. S. Joseph's poems are about the people and nature around him. He writes about his own life experience, people he meets and memories. Most of his poems are like a journey through the memories of his own haunting past, the past of his own men. Ajay S. Sekhar comments that S. Joseph's "poetry is also about the ordinary and every day. He says he writes for all. But his poems signify deeper realities and are rich in philosophical overtones and layers of multiple meaning". (P.2) He is often worried about the thoughts of other people. He is curious about the world and what the world thinks about him. His poetic creativity is entangled with the life surrounded. Even he wonders about the life inside a prison which he hasn't ever visited: "I have never gone to jail/nor seen any prisoners." (1.1-2) In his poem "Prison", which he has "looked from beyond the moss ridden wall", the poet is thinking about the jail and the people inside it. He wonders if a convict inside it might be thinking about him:

Maybe, a convict from inside the jail

will stand thinking many things
 about the outer world and me.
 He doesn't know me,
 but his memories starting from the prison,
 if they forge ahead,
 may sometimes
 come and touch this cell from which I write these words. (l. 7-14)

Poet is wondering if there are cells for religion, caste and colour inside a prison. When the world outside the prisons is ruled out of caste and colour, how can a world inside the prison be different? Here the poet creates two separate worlds within a society, inside and outside of a prison. The two worlds are separated with high walls. In this society man has created the walls of caste and religion and separated the people.

The ordinary world seems extraordinary for a subaltern. His broken identity crushed between casteism and untouchability frequently makes him believe that the world is unusual. His poetic creativity and readability exists 'between these lines' he has written. Driving a vehicle, opening a shop, availing a loan, clearing an examination, singing a song and writing poems are extraordinary for dalits. Poet in his "Between these Lines" talks about the extraordinary things of an ordinary human being: "We are just ordinary people, aren't we? / But we try to do extraordinary things." (l.12-13)

Identity and beauty consciousness are discussed in the poem "The Mole". The absence and presence of a mole get problematized here. A girl who has a big mole on her right cheek who "lived some distance away/ by the hillside with cashew trees" gets marked in his poem. The mole represents the shadows of caste discrimination still hanging in the minds of the people. No wonder the girl with a big mole on her right cheek gets alienated from society, "Isn't she the daughter of that woodcutter, / she has no friends – said Mother." (l.9-10) Her beauty gets masked under a big mole. Caste, colour and beauty are interrelated. The one who still carries the burden of caste on his/her black skin is constantly alienated and discriminated. Big mole on her right cheek is none other than the black skin of a dalit. Shattering the invisible glasses of casteism poet "look at her, removing that mole". His poetry is identified with that missing big mole. There is something missing in his poems:

There are no cashew trees there now.
 Someone said,
 That there was something missing in my poems.
 Isn't it the problem of a big mole?

I asked. (l. 13-17)

The elephant in the poem “Elephant” symbolizes a dalit who is forcefully chained in the bourgeoisie feudalistic society. Dalits were turned into slaves and were forced to do labour for the feudal landlords in Kerala, likewise elephants are caught from the forests and paraded in the festivals. Poet makes a comparison between an elephant in the forest and a fish in the water. Fish is caught from the water and turned into a dish. Fish is caught as food for the hungry, there isn't anything unnatural about it. But something seems uncanny about the elephant which is caught from the forest. Elephant is captivated and turned into a slave and is a spectacle for the masses, similar to the dalits, the true forest dwellers. The strength and valour of an elephant or a dalit cannot be undermined. Here the blackness of an elephant signifies the darkness of a dalit. Dalits are the first forest dwellers driven out from their lands and captivated by the elites who treated them as slaves. One can never compare an elephant in the forest and a fish in the water:

The elephant in the forest
 is the fish in the water.
 Fish is caught from the water,
 water remains intact.
 Elephant is caught from the forest,
 forest is left intact.
 Fish is turned into curry, fried,
 elephant is made to lift logs,
 is caparisoned and paraded in the festival. (l.1-9)

Poetry of the mundane world is celebrated in “Different Poems”. For a dalit writer, his/her life itself is poetry. Poetic inspiration is none other than one's own life experience. Unlike the sanskritized traditional poetry, the poet is not discussing the beauty or sensuousness in the poem. He uses his own aesthetics in the poem, dalit aesthetics is different and distinct as it is about the social values and realities:

An exclusive aesthetic condition of Dalit literature will disregard the Dalit writers' fundamental role, and hence it is not acceptable to Dalit writers. Rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetics for their literature- an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic. (Limbale, P.19)

Dalit literature rejects the traditional aesthetics and expresses themselves in a new aesthetic differently. If life itself is poetry, what is the poetry of a ploughman, washer women, toddy

tapper, forest-dweller, mason, boatman, sex-worker, beggar, grave-digger and a labourer? Even if they are creative, will the traditional creative poets accept them? The creative spirit in these downtrodden rises out of their own life experience. Covering the field with cow-dung and leaves and levelling it is the poem of a ploughman. For a mason, when he looks at the stone, the stone looks back at him. He creates poems from stones. When a boat man writes poetry, “he draws a wrinkled circle/ with the water that he/ scoops out of the boat.” (l. 20-22) Poet is challenging the norms of traditional poetry writing in the lines “one may think/the grave-digger has no poetry.” (29-30) A grave-digger is always stereotyped as heartless and stubborn, the one who confronts death regularly: “He is singing, / All our hopes get buried/ In the churchyard’s six feet of earth.” (31-33) The poet is here deconstructing and dismantling the rules of traditional poetry writing.

S. Joseph’s poems are sometimes philosophical, like a saint who has realised the absurdities of birth, life and death, the poet writes about the philosophies of life. Poet is not worried about the frets and fears of life. He is not pondering over the life hazards and struggles of a commoner. “When we part” is a philosophical poem which portrays life from two different points of views. Mother’s worries get juxtaposed with the tranquillity and calmness of the son. Mother gets worried about the youngest daughter who has to be married off and the elder one who has left home long ago. The younger one is still struggling to reach somewhere in life. The material world and physical world seems challenging for a moral. Everybody is running a race to reach some goals. As Shakespeare quotes, life “is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ signifying nothing”. (Act5, scene5, l. 25-26) The attachment and bonding towards kith and kin makes human beings different and distinct. Space is something important for them. Their life is closely attached with the space they believe as their own. But sometimes they are doomed to leave that space of their own. Mother in the poem is upset about parting from their house and is planning to sell the house to solve the tangled crisis in life. She is worried: “Where shall we go in this old age? / We shall be dead and gone soon.” Presence of the poet's daughter is a linking chain that connects two generations, “she comes in between and touches me”. The poet gets philosophical:

I said:

amma, we too will part

and later die.

Never will we unite in such a house any longer.

Shall we ever meet anywhere, later?

Now the child runs around us. ((16-22)

“Dhwani” is a heart touching poem which points fingers towards the bitter realities every woman confronts in Kerala. Again, the concept of space gets problematized, the marriage as an institution chains and blocks the freedom of women. Patriarchy denies a space of their own to the

married women. Life before marriage is a preparatory stage for the girls in Kerala. The elders in the family and society directly and indirectly reminds them about the duties of an excellent wife. Once these girls get married they have to leave their parent's house to live in their husband's house, where they are a complete stranger. Naturally, women find it difficult to have a space for them. They have to adjust to all the life situations and are forced to stay at their husband's house as there is no space to go anywhere else in this world. "No place to go" is a great crisis, as space is related to identity formation, these women are facing identity crisis throughout life. You feel as if caught between a limbo. Mother in the poem "Dhwani" is a typical dalit woman, who regularly faces identity crisis throughout her life. After every quarrel with her husband he again and again realises that she has no other space or place to go:

Look, I will leave you and walk away to my home,

she had protested yester-night,

Mother wore the chatta and mundu and left home.

But when she reached the stone beneath the slanting

coconut tree

She just sat down there.

Having sat there for sometime

As she returned

We the male children would ask Mother in a mocking tone:

No place to go, is that it? (l. 3-10)

S. Joseph's poems are narrative as they have something to tell the readers. A story is hidden behind each poem. "After sixteen Years" tells about the nostalgia and pain of lost love: "I love you/ she wrote on the palm of my right hand/which vanished no sooner than write it." (l.1-4) Poet is standing at the crossroads where he parted with his lover sixteen years ago, "that path through which/ she faded away waving/ from that junction." (l.12-14) The conflict between the real and imaginary repeatedly appears in the poems. The unreal imaginaries of the faded love stand against the reality of the crossroads in which the poet is standing sixteen years ago.

S. Joseph's poetry is at a time rebellious and meditative as it discusses the issues of subaltern in a mild and simple diction. His voice is loud and clear, he rejects the traditional aesthetics and digs a new path in the contemporary world of Malayalam poetry. He inspired many more writers to raise their voice in their own distinct way.

Works Cited

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee. Orient Longman, 2004.

Joseph, S. "Between these Lines". Translated by Thomas A.J. *My Sister's Bible: A Collection of Poems by S. Joseph*. Authors Press, 2016.

---. "The Mole". Translated by Thomas A.J. *My Sister's Bible: A Collection of Poems by S. Joseph*. Authors Press, 2016.

---. "Elephant". Translated by K. Satchidanandan. *My Sister's Bible: A Collection of Poems by S. Joseph*. Authors Press, 2016.

---. "Different Poems". Translated by K. Satchidanandan. *My Sister's Bible: A Collection of Poems by S. Joseph*. Authors Press, 2016.

---. "When We Part". Translated by Ajay S. Sekhar. *My Sister's Bible: A Collection of Poems by S. Joseph*. Authors Press, 2016.

---. "Dhwani". Translated by Benoy P. J. *My Sister's Bible: A Collection of Poems by S. Joseph*. Authors Press, 2016.

---. "After Sixteen Years". Translated by Benoy P. J. *My Sister's Bible: A Collection of Poems by S. Joseph*. Authors Press, 2016.

Sekhar, Ajay S. "Poetry of the Periphery: S. Joseph's *My Sister's Bible*". *Indian Literature* 304, LXI, 2. Mar 2018 (220-223).

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Samuel Neil. William Collins, 1876.