

Defying Bigotries: An Analysis of Select works of Contemporary Malayalam Dalit Poet *S. Joseph*

VINU C. JAMES
M.Phil Scholar
CMS College
Bharathiar University
Coimbatore

ABSTRACT

Dalit writings do not find a place in the discourse of the literary elites in India. Indian diasporic writings is a favourite theme for them, next to fashionable western literature. The implicit assumption is that Indian nativistic literature is inferior in quality and not worthy of critical discussion and investigation. The Indian literary elite which is drawn from the urban intelligensia is in fact not aware of what is going on in the vast mass of Indian villages and the struggles of the lowest strata of society against indignity and deprivation which is the crippling legacy of a longstanding historical past. Dalit Sahitya has a voice of pain and rage. It protests against social injustice, inequality, cruelty and economic exploitation based on casteism. The primary motive of Dalit literature is to retrieve dalit traditions and forms of knowledge and subject them to analysis and interpretation; to examine the causes of dalit 'backwardness' and related issues; to develop dalit perspectives on the past, present, and future of the world. This article focuses on contemporary Dalit poet in Malayalam, especially S. Joseph who use his poetry to resist, in a variety of ways their continuing marginalization and discrimination. The poems are a bitter comment on predicament of the Dalits who still live in poverty, hunger, the problems of their colour, race, social status and their names.

Keywords: Dalit poetry, resistance, contemporary Malayalam poetry, contemporary Dalit literature.

Contemporary Dalit writing reveals the potential of a new realism to fashion narrative art out of the actual experience of the marginalized and the oppressed people. Realism is an effete instrument with the middle and upper class writers who tend to make modish experiments relying on fantasy, parody, burlesque, decentrated narrative and so on to articulate their fractured sense of reality. But the neo-realism of the Dalit writers produces an immediacy of artistic effect by the side of which the experimentation of some of the mainstream writers appear inauthentic and contrived. The stark and crushing reality maged in Dalit fiction and poetry reflects many dimensions of meaning including social, psychological and cultural. It gives starting pictures of the crippling effects of social exclusion, untouchability, poverty and misery on the mind of the sensitive, long-silenced, long-suffering individual. Realism achieves a new power in the art of Dalit novelists and poets such as Sharankumar Limbale(Marathi), Om Prakash Valmiki (Hindi), Bama (Tamil), Kolakaluri Enoch (Telugu), Devanur Mahadev (Kannada) and Gurdial Singh (Punjab), and many others.

Dalit is described as members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion (Omvedt 72). B. R. Ambedkar was one of the first leaders who strived for these counter hegemonic groups. He was the first Dalit to obtain a college education in India. All his struggles helped Dalits to come forward. He raised his voice to eradicate untouchability, caste discrimination, non-class type oppressions and women oppressions. All these ‘Ambedkarite’ thoughts formed a hope for the oppressed classes. These counter hegemonic groups resist through literature. Sentiments, hankers and the struggles of the suppressed is portrayed in Dalit literature. The suppressed community gets an opportunity to converse about what is in their mind through literary works such as poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographies. Dalit Sahitya has a voice of anguish and anger. It protests against social injustice, inequality, cruelty and economic exploitation based on caste and class. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Poetry seems to be one of the dominant modes expressing the Dalit voice (Prakash 48).

According to leading theorists, what gives Dalit literature its unique power and force is “Dalit Chetna” or “Dalit consciousness” [Limbale 116-117; Valmiki 31]. Rooted in Ambedkarite thought, ‘Dalit Chetna’ infuses literature with a social purpose and a

commitment to justice. As Limbale puts it, “that work of Dalit literature will be recognized as beautiful, and therefore ‘good’, which causes the greatest awakening of Dalit consciousness in the reader” (117), a consciousness that, according to Valmiki and Limbale, defines and differentiates Dalit literature from other literatures (Krisnaswamy 2).

Malayalam literature is dynamic with Dalit Sahitya in a variety of voices. Writers are from various castes and gender. They try to resist the oppressions they suffer in the society. Pandit Karuppan, Poykayil Yohannan (Apachen) or Kumaraguru, K. M. Salimkumar, K. K. Baburaj, Pradeepan Pambirikunnu, V. V. Swamy, A. Arun, K. V Sashi, K. K. Shinyamol, Paul Chirakekarod, Raghavan Atholi, S. Joseph, G. Sashi Madhuraveli are some of the few Malayalam Dalit writers who through their works express arguments for Dalits’ rights.

This paper tries to demonstrate the resistance by Dalits of the oppressions they suffer in the society through Contemporary Malayalam poetry. To prove this argument this paper will focus on select Malayalam poems of S. Joseph. The poems are a bitter comment on predicament of Dalits who still live in poverty, hunger, and face problems regarding their colour, race, social status and in their names. Contemporary Malayalam Dalit poets struggle to be the torch bearers who helm the entire Dalit community, to liberate them from the agonies and it makes a bitter sarcasm of the community who considers them as paria dogs. They resist hegemony and disseminate the cultural capitals to the denied and subjugated.

S. Joseph was born in Pattithanam in the Kottayam district and his poems carry the distinct flavor of those formative years spent in a small village in central Kerala. On reading these poems, one is transported to a world of limpid green light, paddy fields and hypnotic silences punctuated by the gentle susurrus of coconut palms (Subramanian). S. Joseph’s poems are noted for the detailed portraits of Dalit life. In a poetry reading session during the Hay Festival at Thiruvananthapuram one of the audience asked S. Joseph why he brands his poetry as Dalit poetry. His reply, “Dalit poetry has had strong resonance in the country. You just cannot ignore the presence of Dalit poetry” shows how deeply he has concerns for the same.

On reading these poems, one is transported to a world of limpid green light, paddy fields and hypnotic silences punctuated by the gentle sussurus of coconut palms.

In his poem “Identity Card”, he shows a world where love seldom triumphs over caste identity. He purely talks about racism where a Dalit is scorned by his non-Dalit girlfriend:

Our hands met kneading

her rice and fish curry.

On a bench we became

a Hindu-Christian family. (3-6)

One day he lost his identity card. He must have never thought along with the identity card he would also lose his love. His girlfriend gave him his lost identity card and told him,

the account of your stipend

is entered there in red. (13-14)

After knowing that he was a Dalit her love faded for him. Whenever he sees a boy and girl deeply inlove he is sure that they will depart very soon of the same reason of his or if they unite he wouldn't be surprised because that boy will never be a Dalit. This is a short poem where much lies unsaid between red scribbles on college ID card and intensely charged lines of verse. S. Joseph depicted the plight of a Dalit who has no right even in his love.S. Joseph depicts his fear that his race may face a threat of extinction in the poem “On the College Wall”. All the animals and birds which are on the verge of extinction are protected. One day the poet saw a newspaper cutting of an extinct fish there on the college wall. The image of a swimming fish was given along with all the path of the inland ponds. The one who posted it on the wall merges with the crowd. While the poet sees the news, suddenly a fear comes into his mind:

While looking on, a thought pops up

Will my race also become such a news tomorrow? (7-8)

S. Joseph fears for his race; that the Dalit community exploited by the so called mainstream communities will soon, like the animals no longer exist.

I weep remembering my race

Facing the threat of extinction (14-15)

In “A Letter to Malayalam Poetry” S. Joseph states that literature has to be wrested from the monopolistic upper castes who have ‘locked up’ poetry in stanzas and meter. He teases the writers who strictly follow poetry in stanzas and meters. Hitherto, the emergence of Dalit poems, poets depend on regular meter based either on number of syllables or on stress. These writers even consider the poems in simple language without stanzas, meter and Sanskrit interventions as trivial. S. Joseph considers poetry with stanzas and meter as a jail. Real poetry for him lives with the impoverished.

If you wanted to fly away, it must be a jail.

A I live among the poor,

In a hutment just like theirs. (8-10)

The poets who strictly use stanzas and meters are referred to as ‘big buildings’, who have locked poetry in stanzas and meter. And the world disregards Dalit poetry which uses simple language with no stanzas and meters.

I know your people:

Those like big buildings.

They locked you up

In stanzas and metres. (21-24)

Poetry is constructed as a rich girl who is depressed by her rich life and yearning to break all chains:

Won’t forget the way you looked at me

All decked in silks and smiles,

you sped away to the temple in a car.

Tired of it all, eh? (27-30)

What you want is freedom, right? (37)

Joseph's poetic universe is very much a fallen world of simmering injustice and violence, of hypocrisy and thwarted dream. It is a world of loans and "cut-throat moneylenders" ('My Sister's Bible'). The poem explores the defying bigotries. It is a book bible but which encapsulates only the stark realities of life instead of new and old testament, maps and ultimately the red cover. The colour red symbolised the intensification of the situation.

This is what my sister's Bible doesn't have:

the preface,

the Old Testament and the New,

maps,

the red cover.

"Someone said something is missing in my poems," says the poet in one of his poems. In a moment of distilled insight (which reminds one all over again why poetry when it works triumphs over more elaborate prose routes to discovery), he arrives at the reason. The reason is wilful blindness, the deliberate obliteration of all that makes the human being a vibrant, inconsistent asymmetrical blaze of life. Joseph's poems – with their taut lines and moments of sudden wordlessness – do not allow you to forget the implications of those losses, the magnitude of those erasures.

Thus the poet resists the dominant sections of society. Marginalization haunts Dalit writers and poets. Identity politics has played a major role in the vicissitudes of Dalit writing in many literatures in India. Identity, for instance, has been a recurring theme for major Dalit poets in Gujarati. The apprehension expressed by Dalit intellectuals recently about the tendency of Savarna and 'savnarised' writers and critics in Kerala to insist that Dalit writers should, for the sake of authenticity, write in their own dialects, or at least in 'simple Malayalam', rather than in a highly Sanskritised idiom is also well founded." (Sherrif 3-4)

Quest for identity is portrayed in the poem “Identity Card” by S. Joseph. And in the poem “On the College Wall” the poet demands that Dalits should be protected. In “A Letter to Malayalam Poetry” Dalit poetry is constructed as the voice of the suppressed classes. In My Sister’s Bible, poet tried to convince the discrimination of Dalit people by upper class family. Based on the above observations it is clear that contemporary Malayalam Dalit poetry resists the othering of their selves by the hegemonic groups.

REFERENCES

Jilangamba, Yengkhom. “Let’s stop pretending there is no racism in India”. thehindu.com. The Hindu, 12 July 2012. Web. 5 December 2014.

Joseph, S. “A Letter to Malayalam Poetry”. Trans. K. Satchidanandan. poetryinternationalweb. Poetry International, 2010. Web. 5 December 2014.

Joseph, S. “Identity Card”. Trans. K. Satchidanandan. poetryinternationalweb.net. Poetry, International, 2010. Web. 5 December 2014.

Joseph, S. “On the College Wall”. Trans. Ajay Sekher. Ajaysekher.net. Ajay Sekher, 23 September 2012. Web. 5 December 2014.

Krishnaswamy, Revathi. “The Dalit Vision and Voice”, ed. Dr. Viswanath Bite. The Criterion 3.4 (2012): 1-6. Web. 6 December 2014.

Omvedt, Gail. Dalit Vision. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd, 2010. 2008. Web. 5 December 2014.

Sherrif, K. “Intro Dalit Poetry in Malayalam”. Roundtableindia.co.in. Round Table India, 02 January 2011. Web. 5 December 2014.

Subramanian, Arundhathi. “S. Joseph”. Poetryinternationalweb.net. Poetry International, 1 August 2010. Web 5 December 2014.

“Why Brand yourself as a Dalit poet?”, timesofindia.indiatimes.com. The Times of India, 18 November 2011. Web. 5 December 2014.