



Resisting Discriminations: An Analysis of Selected works from Contemporary Malayalam Dalit Poetry

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ABSTRACT

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, especially poetry, is the liberation of Dalits. This paper focuses on contemporary Dalit poets in Malayalam, Raghavan Atholi, S. Joseph and G. Sashi Madhuraveli, who use their 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

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

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Pambirikunnu, V. V. Swamy, A. Arun, K. V Sashi, K. K. Shinymol, 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 Raghavan Atholi, S. Joseph and G. Sashi Madhuraveli. 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 *pariya dogs*. They resist hegemony and disseminate the cultural capitals to the denied and subjugated. Raghavan Atholi's poem "Kandathi" is a bitter comment on the hardships of a Dalit woman; his translator, K. M. Sherrif points out 'Kandathi' is the name of Atholi's own mother. The poem portrays a Dalit woman's struggle against poverty, hunger and her love to live peacefully. She was also economically exploited by her landlords. Poverty of a Dalit woman is clearly depicted here -

Before the garbage heap in the street

A hungry woman waits. (1-2)

Clutching at her sinking wages,

A bundle of fodder

Wrenched out of the earth

Balanced on her head,

She waits. (5-9)

She is residing in a small black hut where she is waiting for the world to change.

Late into the night

In her pitch black hut

Guarding a cold meal

She waits. (10-13)

While the paddy is stored in the barns of the landlords, her hut is empty. Her family has nothing to eat. All day toil had made her ugly.

Full barns,

Empty hovels,

A goddess shrunken into an old crone. (23-25)

She is a loving mother and a hungry woman. Holding her wages, after her all day toil, hungrily she is waiting. Although hungry she is preserving her meals for some one. Even if her life is sinking she is not ready to give up. She is waiting for a peaceful life with good food, a piece of land with a peaceful atmosphere.

She waits for the light that went out to return,

For a handful of rice untainted with blood,

For a piece of land untainted with greed. (38-40)

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.

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 in love 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.
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)

In his poem "Pranayapoorvam", G. Sashi Madhuraveli discusses the plight of a Dalit who has a black complexion. From time immemorial all the poets have praised black, then how come dark skinned people were dishonored, asks G. Sashi Madhuraveli:

Darling,
Black have beauty, you said
Poets too sung,
then how were the blacks scorned. (1-4)
blistering Sun and
fiery Earth
are not dandling us. (7-9)

Further, the poet asks the goddess Kali whose trunks had she worn as a garland and he comments that it is the trunks of Dalits. The poet infers, 'what is society's concern for blacks', so he asks his lover not to fawn about his colour so much. In this 21st century too Dalits are considered as inferior. Though society always considers blacks inferior to others, towards the end of the poem, the poet claims black as a symbol of turbulence, endurance and love:

Black is the seed of struggle,
mountain of turbulence,
shadow of endurance,
colour of love. (24-27)

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 '*savarnised*' 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)

Raghavan Atholi, S. Joseph, G. Sashi Madhuraveli and other contemporary Malayalam Dalit poets and their poems resist the hypocrisy of the hegemonic groups. In "Kandathi" even though woman is hungry and tired she is waiting for a piece of land where she can live peacefully. And Raghavan Atholi argues for land for the villagers without distinction of caste or creed and in such manner that there will be no landlord, no tenant and no landless laborer. 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 G. Sashi Madhuraveli's "Pranayapoorvam", he argues black is the colour of struggle, love, endurance and turbulence. Based on the above observations it is clear that contemporary Malayalam Dalit poetry resists the othering of their selves by the hegemonic groups.

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