



Reading Dalit Experience in *Kaadhal: Dalit Poems in Malayalam*

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ABSTRACT

Kaadhal: Dalit Poetry in Malayalam is a collection of poems authored by Dalit writers from Kerala, serving as a striking reflection of the struggles faced by Dalits in the region. It reflects on the historical oppression and degradation experienced by communities categorised as Dalits by others in the societal hierarchy. The work aims to depict the shared identity of Dalits and highlight the social, economic, and cultural marginalisation imposed on them by caste-dominant groups through ideologies imbued with divine characteristics. Edited by Dr. O.K. Santhosh, the book features a diverse array of poems that offer a realistic representation of the Dalit experience, capturing the continuous nature of their marginalised status over time. The verses presented by prominent Dalit poets and reformers in this collection echo the sentiments of the Dalit community in Kerala, calling for a united stance among the subalterns to seek the warmth of spring, a reality that has been deliberately denied to them for centuries, as documented in history. The poems express opposition to the systems and traditions that have forcefully marginalised the Dalits both economically and culturally within society. This article examines the aforementioned book through a subaltern lens, focusing on the Dalit experience as illustrated within its pages.

Introduction

The word Dalit is derived from a Sanskrit word “Dal” meaning “to split, crack open, crush, grind and so forth” (Mukherjee xi). The term "Dalit" was first used in this context by social reformer Mahatma



Jyotirao Phule in the 19th century. Later, Ambedkar frequently used the phrase to describe the lower caste members that the English called Scheduled Castes. A Dalit is a person who does not belong to any specific varna in the Indian caste system. It was thought that the Brahmins sprang from the mouth, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vaishyas from the thighs, and the Sudras from the legs of the "Divine Purusha." Thus, Sudras were made serve the other three groups as they were from the legs, the bottom part of the Divine Purusha. They were not entitled to education or land. Because they performed the menial tasks in society, the outcasts were also referred to as Sudras. But Dalits are people who fall outside the varna system and are historically entitled to do the most menial jobs. They are called outcastes. They constitute multitudes of various communities which includes landless labourers, leather workers, poor farmers, scavengers, folk artists, street handcrafters and washermen. The Dalits, who the British called the Scheduled Castes, include a number of communities excluded from the structured Hindu social hierarchy imposed by the practitioners of the ideology of caste. In the 20th century, some educated, enlightened members of these groups embraced a common self-identity and coined the term Dalit to these communities to represent their shared history and experience of exclusion from the caste system.

Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s in the United States, Dalits in India began to speak out against the legitimised oppression and inequality imposed by the Brahmanical hegemony rooted in the caste system. They founded the Dalit Panthers, a social movement in 1970 aimed at the emancipation of the Dalits. The movement sparked a powerful opposition to the caste system in Hinduism. It has since become a historical symbol of social transformation and cultural and political upheaval. With the emergence and spread of modern education, these masses also began to mobilise the rest of their community members about the life of oppression and inequality they live in. The second half of twentieth century witnessed a remarkable boom in the radical social reform movements for the welfare of the Dalits in India.

Dalit reform movements encouraged more articulations of the lived experiences of normalised discrimination, humiliation and untouchability of the Dalits by the casteists. These various forms of articulations of the Dalit experience manifest into a body of literature in the twentieth century called Dalit literature. Emerged in Maharashtra, Dalit literature began centuries ago, as the Dalit fight against caste-based traditions has a long and ongoing history. In the 11th century, Chennaiah, a Vachana poet, and in the 12th century, Kalavve, a saint, used literature to voice their opposition to the caste system. However, in modern times, individuals such as Baburoa Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, and Shankaran Kharat have contributed to making it a lively literature, securing a significant place within Indian literary circles. Dalit



literature possesses unique features that distinguish it from mainstream literature. According to S. P. Punaleker,

. . . emerging as a special stream in the literary landscape, it tends to cover a wide range of ideas and insights governing the social mindset of Dalits. It provides critical insights on the question of Dalit identity. It also contains a critical evaluation of the prevailing social and critical practices. The writers of Dalit Literature include men and women. These writers are either victims or witnesses of the social injustice and violence. (qtd in Paul 64)

The works of Dalit writers, including poems, short stories, novels, and autobiographies, offer valuable perspectives on the issue of Dalit identity and their historical experiences. Through their works, they challenge dominant literary theories and upper-caste ideologies, aiming to examine the overlooked aspects of life. In Dalit Literature, *Anubhava* (experience) is more important than *Anumana* (speculation), which is a key aspect of *rasa* in mainstream literature. Authenticity and vibrancy have become defining features of Dalit literature, as their depiction of history is acknowledged as more genuine than misleading. The authors employ the language typically used by the marginalized and lower-caste individuals.

As an addition to the traditional literary theory of *rasas*, Dalit literature vividly expresses emotions such as shame, anger, sadness, and unwavering hope. It strongly addresses the experiences of suffering endured by the socially, politically, culturally, and economically disadvantaged communities of Dalits in Indian society. As Gangadhar Pantwane, a well-known Indian writer on Dalits, writes:

Dalit is not a caste.

He is a man exploited by

the social and economic

tradition of this country.

He does not believe in God,

Rebirth, soul, Holy books teaching

separation, Fate and Heaven

because they have made him a slave. He does believe in



humanism. Dalit is a symbol

of change and revolution. (qtd in Trivedi 2-3)

Dalit literature is a body of works by Dalits, about Dalits, and intended to raise awareness about the hardships faced by Dalits due to the oppression of the caste system, addressing issues such as suffering, disrespect, discrimination, economic disparities, social unfairness, and belief systems within Dalit communities.

Dalit literature in Kerala is a recent development, used as a tool to spark social activism through articulation of the lived experiences of casteist oppression and resistance against the caste-based social structure and the institutionalised oppression. According to K M Sherrif,

“Dalit poetry as a distinctive mode arrived in Malayalam literature at the end of the Eighties of the last century. Not that poetry with a distinct Dalit sensibility by Dalit writers was absent in Malayalam literature before that. Pandit Karuppan’s Jathikkummi (Caste Songs) were written in 1904. Karuppan, a Dalit from a fishing community called Dheeveras from Cheranalloor, a village in Ernakulam district, went on to become one of the early Dalit poets in the language.” (13)

Malayalam Dalit literature aims to provide significant resources for reevaluating colonial modernity and the experiences of Dalits in Kerala. It portrays the vivid aspects of Dalit life using a distinct Dalit ethno-lingual medium, intending to enlighten the Dalit community. Dalit social activists tackled issues relevant to Dalits through their literary works, which encompassed various forms such as poetry, short stories, and novels in Kerala.

Malayalam Dalit poetry evolved from the lived experiences of casteist oppression and social exclusion of Dalits in Kerala. A literary and political intervention, Dalit literature accentuate the Dalit voices, which used to be silenced historically within mainstream Malayalam literary articulation. Challenging the aesthetics and the casteist sentiments of the mainstream literary articulation in Malayalam, Dalit literary expressions remarkably assert Dalit identity, and mark a tone of resistance, voice of protest and social injustice, in a vividly colloquial semiotics which is often marked as unsophisticated in the mainstream literature. Dalit literature in Malayalam is also replete with verbal imageries of poverty, humiliation, manual labour, and social ostracisation, the lived reality of Dalit living experiences in Kerala. Protesting caste hierarchy, Brahmanical dominance, and social injustice, Dalit



poetry in Malayalam has grown today as a form of cultural activism, and challenges structures of power implanted in language, tradition and religion.

Discussion

Dalit poetry in Malayalam, which serves as a form of protest poetry, is the most widely appreciated among the various literary genres that depict Dalit life and perspectives. *Kadhal: Dalit Poetry in Malayalam* a remarkable collection of poems by Dalit writers and activists, is a compilation of formless poems, memory fragments, and an effort to establish an identity. It brings back memories of childhood, portrays love amidst the unshakable experience of poverty, and values the shadow for its companionship in the midst of pain. It depicts the tears for the deceased ancestors, whose suffering was more profound than that of the singers themselves. It is an effort to create a parallel representation of human experience and ideology, and it removes the casteist lens through which Dalits were forced to view their own lives.

The collection of poems by around fifty poets belonging to distinct Dalit communities in Kerala, the work, *Kadhal*, gives us a multitude of voices on the diachrony of suffering of these communities in a casteist social order. They try to recreate the past, how they were despised by their land and culture. The rhythm of these poems is the sobbing, and the meter is tears. Poikayil Appachan, an activist and poet, says: “*We are the ones who fertilised the soil and land; Our origin is in antiquity, but by way have fallen slaves. let the pain of memory flaw/ As a symphony to mark a glow;*” writes Appachan as he wails on his past. The memory of the past is indescribably painful because it tells him of what he lost in his land. He wails over the Elitist history which discarded his identity. Appachan, in his poem *On My Race*, writes: “*I could see no word on my race/ Among the thousand histories of umpteen race*” (25). It is typical of Dalit literature in Malayalam to attempt to reconstruct the history from the perspective of subjugation and suffering. The elite history is a tale that records the Dalits as uncultured, writes Appachan:

Here is a tale of peoples who,
Were carved in wretched and alien too
By the days bygone in their native land
From his culture of glory felled
To the uncultured a sorry plight. (26 Self translation)



While recreating the history of humiliation and subjugation, they turn to question the prolonged silence of God. Appachan writes in an ironic language:

How can a God who shaped us all!
Grant the right to the rest of the race
To damn and damn my race always
Till the end of earth and that of skies? (26- Self translation)

In an ironic language poet K.C. Kattakada, in his poem, **Puthari**, recreates their history of exploitation and oppression by the upper castes:

The master and mistress to the field they came.
To weigh the crops and utter thousand No as same.
Half the coolie or a mustard portion of paddy
Which is gain over my pain of wadi.
In the darkness of the night
Unto the hut we crept, and hut we reached. (53- Self translation)

Kallara Sugumaran, in his poem “**Indhanappura**”, writes: *My people who die staving/ As a river of blood from the fort of caste flowing (68).*

As a people who were inseparably close to the land, the Dalits in Kerala, as farmers from time immemorial, they were run from their native soil many a time in history. The advent of colonialism and the land reforms act in Kerala also impinged upon the life of Dalits to push them further to the fringes. They suffered from displacement and servitude. Another poet **Ragavan Atholi** writes in his poem **Kandan**:

We were turned with hands of nil
In a piece of land, we dwell
The land bill with no love for soil folk
Blessed us peril, and him leader and lord. (82 Self translation)

These lines of verses with angst and protest also visit to the political scenario of the state; the failure of the progressive ideology demonstrated by the leftist political parties in Kerala. The leftist parties in Kerala focused on the Dalit communities to strengthen the party politics which created a class consciousness among them. This class consciousness created hindrance to Dalit consciousness as being envisaged by the Dalit activists in Kerala. **Ragavan Atholi** mocks at Communist parties:

The comrades who came to us with tricks
Kept talking of dreams with broken wings



Slum and colony in magic were shown

Their leisure games pulled us further down. (82 Self translation)

Contemporary Dalit poets reflect on the economic inequality and subjugation as a continuity and result of the casteist system of the past. In a flow of irony Sunny Kavikkad, in his poem “*Aval Paranhath*” in the rhythm of a folk song writes:

When begged to my country lass,
For the warmth of her kiss,
While standing in the showers of moon light.

She whispered in my ears so shy,
“You are an unlucky guy,
Who never died drowning in any tragedy.

.....

It is no river, she muttered,
But a river of debt as huge as sky
That a death by water for me is certain

In the river of debt with bottom uncertain. (84-85, Self translation)

Commenting on the social construction of the Dalits as uncultured, **Kadhal**, a collection of unrhymed verses embellished with a hefty colloquialism of the Dalit parole, registers, like any other subaltern literature, a strong protest. The rise of a new intelligentsia through modern education among this Dalit social group marks visible changes in the range of vision of subaltern communities. These intellectuals with clear knowledge of their backwardness make valuable attempts to make the rest of the marginal groups realise the hardships and harsh realities of their life being exploited economically, socially and politically. These intellectuals are able to see for the rest the way the ruling class/ caste ideology is at work to silence them. Literature has emerged as a platform for them to address the oppressor, and the multifaceted complexities of the oppression, while drawing meaningful and moving episodes of resistance against the exploitation, discrimination, humiliation and instances of gross socio-cultural injustice. The voice of the voiceless writes back to the centre of discourses, which places an undemocratic god as creator of their deplorable plight. It also satirizes the duality of literary ideas as demonstrated in mainstream literature. A poem titled as “**Pranayapoorvam**”, written by G. Sasi Madhuraveli asks in vain but with definite aim to the history:

Soumini!

You said once black is beautiful



Your bards also sang so as well
Let me ask you one thing then
Why are the blacks so kept in humiliation? (89)

Conclusion

Malayalam Dalit poetry emerged from the real-life experiences of caste-based oppression and social marginalization faced by Dalits in Kerala. Serving as both a literary and political intervention, Dalit literature highlights the voices of Dalits, which have historically been muted in the broader Malayalam literary discourse. By questioning the aesthetic values and caste biases prevalent in mainstream Malayalam literature, Dalit literary works powerfully affirm Dalit identity, conveying a sense of resistance, protest, and social injustice through a vividly colloquial language often regarded as lacking sophistication in mainstream literary circles. Furthermore, Dalit literature in Malayalam is rich with vivid imagery depicting poverty, humiliation, hard labor, and social exclusion—reflecting the harsh realities of Dalit experiences in Kerala. Dalit poetry in Malayalam has emerged as a means of cultural activism, contesting caste hierarchy, Brahmanical supremacy, and social injustices, while also confronting the power dynamics entrenched in language, tradition, and religion.

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