

Expressing the Marginalised Self: Manifestation of Dalit Consciousness in the Poems of Vijila Chirappad

Dr. Edwin Jeevaraj A
Associate Professor
Christ Deemed to be University
Bengaluru
Phone No. 9791239483
edwin.jeevaraj@christuniversity.in

Aswathy V
M.Phil. Scholar
Christ Deemed to be University
Bengaluru.
Phone No. 8111924802
aswathy.v@res.christuniversity.in

=====

Abstract

This paper examines the manifestation of Dalit consciousness in the poems of Malayalam Dalit litterateur Vijila Chirappad. A close reading of her poems reveals a series of serious discriminations and disparities meted out to the lower castes by the ideologies upheld by the dominant castes. The canonical tradition of Malayalam literary discourse never bothered to give a realistic representation of the sensibilities of the marginalized sections of Kerala society. For example, the literature produced by upper-caste Malayalam poets was the result of a torpid lifestyle, detached from the world of sweat and toil. The long silenced and neglected voices of Malayali Dalit writers, especially women writers, have now amassed noteworthy recognition and accolades from literary spheres across India as well as academia devoted to Dalit literary studies. One of the chief traits visible in their texts is a strong note of resentment and resistance, which is the manifestation of their long-suppressed anguish and rebellion. Their use of linguistic structures and thematic content might sound too raw and painfully honest. We come across these tenets in the poems of Vijila Chirappad, who had struggled severely to come to the fore through the medium of literature. This paper tries to provide insights into the different forms of discriminations confronted by Dalit women of Kerala society and how Vijila Chirappad, who hails from this community has given expression to it through the frankness of her poems.

Keywords: Vijila Chirappad, Dalit consciousness, Dalit literary studies, Kerala society, Malayalam literature, Resistance, Resentment.

Introduction

Dalit literature or the literature of the former untouchable castes of Indian Hindu society is the new talk of literary and academic scenario. The popularity of this body of writing is so widespread that it has now come to occupy as an area of serious intellectual discussions in the academia devoted to South Asian literary studies. Dalit literature is a body of writing which gives strong voice to the resisting nature of the long-silenced Dalit community. A number of authors, critical evaluators, scholars and other experts from the academic community have repeatedly worked upon the politics encircling Dalit resistance. In the Indian context, the term was first used by Jyotiba Phule, a lower caste social reformer and revolutionary to delineate the miserable conditions confronted by the untouchables and outcastes of a caste-driven Indian society. Dalits have been denigrated on a systematic basis to live in dejection and penury as they are labeled as the 'atishudras'-the ones excluded from the chaturvarna system of Hinduism and therefore deliberately deprived of any human dignity or mettle.

Though the term 'Dalit' was pervasive in parts of India like Maharashtra, as early as the 1920s, it appeared in the social and cultural backdrop of Kerala society in the late 1970s only. It was during the 1980s that Dalits in Kerala started realizing they had been exploited cleverly by the dominant political and caste ideologies. The upper caste reformers of the times were hypocritical to the core- they appeared progressive within the community while reactionary outside it, particularly in terms of caste relations. The wave of colonial modernity made them insecure about the loss of those privileges they took for granted. Just as the colonizer needed the presence of the colonized to impose their superiority, so too the upper castes needed the presence of the lower castes to thrust their commanding dictates upon. Dalits, during this period, started organizing themselves to fight for their equal rights. One of the prominent movements of the lower castes was the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangam (Organization for the Welfare of the Marginalized), which envisioned an equal political space within the emerging liberal scenario of colonial modernity. The political struggles focused on the right to education and the right to wear clean clothes and access to clean water to wash in.

Sharankumar Limbale, a renowned Dalit literary critic is of the opinion that, "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits"(2004). It comes under the category of protest literature as it protests against the injustice suffered by Dalits. It could also be considered as falling under the category of dislocating literature as it dislocates caste hegemony of the popular literature that prioritize upper-class people and their mindsets. In his magnum opus *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* (2004), Limbale states that Dalit literature lacks a yardstick through which the emerging Dalit texts could be analysed and evaluated. The texts of criticism available are penned down by non-Dalits, which do not honestly reflect the Dalit sensibilities. Limbale has made a sincere endeavor by analyzing works both in the mainstream and in the peripheries and this has indeed made a significant contribution to the Dalit literary realm, when taking into prior consideration the fact that he himself is a Dalit and has manifested first-hand Dalit sensibilities and consciousness in his critical spirit. Limbale traces the position of Dalits from the past literary

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:2 February 2020

Dr. Edwin Jeevaraj A. and Aswathy V., M.Phil. Scholar

Expressing the Marginalised Self: Manifestation of Dalit Consciousness in the Poems of
Vijila Chirappad

texts to the present. He has honestly substantiated that upper caste literary figures like Mulk Raj Anand has denigrated a Dalit as a silent sufferer, which finds a role reversal in the later depiction of assertive Dalit characters by Dalit writers themselves. This is clearly manifested in the Dalit characters portrayed by many Marathi, Telugu and Malayalee Dalit writers including Vijila Chirappad, whose select poems are analysed in this study.

Malayalam Dalit Writing

Malayalam has a history of writing that dates back to the 12th century. The development of Malayalam literature was mainly through epics and legends. Hindu spirituality was regarded as the only solution to the complexities of human existence and many upper caste poets produced literary texts which are far removed from the lived realities of toiling human beings. A typical example of such a Malayali poet is Balamani Amma, who is indeed a reputed figure in the realm of Malayalam literature, but whose poems center mostly around spirituality and her own standpoints on mundane events of life rather than ones voicing a social cause. Not only literature, but other art forms in Kerala also did not relate to any regional, caste-specific, and everyday life experiences of the laboring lot. For example, the life experience of the spectator of a Kathakali or Koodiyattam is not conditioned by any turmoils regarding day to day survival. Mainstream Malayalam literature, as well as art forms have produced a world that is totally alienating to the subaltern individuals. The life experiences of these people didn't find a realistic representation in mainstream literary endeavors. Despite its long literary tradition, Malayalam literature couldn't incorporate Dalits and their actual sensibilities for such a prolonged period.

However, this clear-cut invisibility of Dalits in the written realm was strongly compensated by a powerful Dalit oral tradition, which is still concerned with an experience that is not merely individualistic but rather collective. As times passed we could find Dalit male writers stepping into the literary scenario giving voice to their harsh and humiliating life conditions through their own writings. We perceive a Dalit consciousness which is skeptical of upper-caste consciousness and historiography. To quote Poikayil Kumaragurudevan, "I do not see a single word about my people/ I see the histories of many races/ There was no one in the past to record the story of my race!" (Dasan xxix).

Many Dalit male writers have come to the fore giving expression to the miserable predicament they (in the larger sense the Dalit community as such) have been forced into since time immemorial. Though their literary texts lack the sophistication or refinement that is generally expected of a literary creation, there is a strange beauty in these works which depict the painfully honest and raw narratives of Dalit sensibilities. Though we find profuse texts in the name of Dalit male writers, female writers from this community are quite a few, especially in Malayalam literature. Even in translated anthologies of Malayalam Dalit writing, we find the texts of only a handful of female writers. One among them is Vijila Chirappad, the daring writer noted for her audacious spirit to openly mock and challenge all those conventions which

hinder the progress of Dalit community as a whole and depict a frank expression of their sensibilities.

Purpose of the Research

This paper aims to explore three poems penned by Vijila Chirappad and analyse the elements of Dalit consciousness in it. Her poems are sharp reactions to the unjust predicaments forced upon Dalits for satisfying age-old conventions and prejudices. For no fault of their own, Dalits still have to live in penury, confront social discriminations, stay deprived of educational and job opportunities and moreover denied an equal status with respect to other human beings living amidst them. Compared to the status quo of their plight over the centuries, Dalits have dared to come ahead with their revolutionary zeal. They, who were supposed to stoop before upper caste /class people have now begun to stand firm looking into the eyes of the former. They, who were supposed to remain silent in the face of any humiliations have now amassed the courage to retort overtly. Such a sensibility is evidently seen throughout the poems of Vijila Chirappad. The poems selected for this study offer a wide representation of experiences of Dalit women, especially in rural Kerala, focusing on caste, class and gender-based discrimination. Chirappad's varying tones, ranging from ironic to serious and didactic informs the reader much vividly on the sensibilities she aims to depict before the readers. The feminism that informs Chirappad's poetry is directed to Dalit women's concerns.

Vijila Chirappad and Dalit Consciousness

Born at Perambra in Kozhikode district of Kerala, Vijila has confronted many difficulties as a Dalit woman. She herself has asserted that she has never thought of accepting defeat. Despite the several hardships meted out to her by the hypocritical society, she has never ceased to fight for her rights and it is this indefatigable strength of spirit that has bestowed her a prominent stature in Malayalam Dalit literature. Vijila has three poetry collections to her name: *Adukala Illatha Veedu (A Home Without a Kitchen, 2006)*, *Amma Oru Kalpanika Kavitha Alla (Mother is Not a Poetic Figment of our Imagination, 2009)* and *Pakarathi Ezhuthu (Copied Notes, 2015)*. Some of her poems are prescribed for reading at the Kerala, MG and Calicut Universities in Kerala, which itself is a welcome step as the academia has now become more broadminded to bring forth a shift in the canonical tradition while formulating syllabi for UG and PG courses. Moreover, her poems have also found its position in *The Oxford Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* published in 2012, which is the first English translated anthology of its kind.

Recalling her initial struggles to get her poems published, Vijila says, "You see publishing in itself is an arduous process. And since I'm not even an adopted child of mainstream society, you can guess how hard it has been for me. Yet not even once did I think of giving up. I have had to literally fight to get to wherever I find myself now in the poetic sphere" (Anil). Though her poems might seem unrefined to elite readers accustomed to savor the sophistication of classical literature, they are extremely forthright in its thematic concerns. A look through her poems would make one understand her sincere depiction of Dalit

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:2 February 2020

Dr. Edwin Jeevaraj A. and Aswathy V., M.Phil. Scholar

Expressing the Marginalised Self: Manifestation of Dalit Consciousness in the Poems of Vijila Chirappad

consciousness- both male and female- and the everyday realities they have to deal with in order to survive in a society plagued by the caste system.

Ruth Manorama's perception of Dalit women is in the following manner:

Referring to their plight she said, Dalit women are at the bottom in our community. Within the women's movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously ... Caste, class, and gender need to be looked at together. Women's labor is already undervalued; when she is a Dalit, it is nil ..." (P. D. Matthew 10).

There is a heartfelt rendering of Dalit predicament in the poem "A Place for Me", in which Chirappad speaks about the comradeship or sense togetherness of her community. Though, as an outcaste individual having nothing but poverty and debts to be repaid, the speaker of the poem positively speaks about, "the plentiful bowl of relationships" (Dasan 38) which are like eternal friendships that help her to "hide thoughts of death in forgetfulness" (37). Taking with her the memory she has of her land and the small house, now forfeited to the creditors, the speaker of the poem leaves everything behind, for nothing but these memories remain with her. The creditors- the rich ones, the privileged ones- could deprive her of her scanty possessions but they could never deprive her of the alphabets she is educated with and the friendships she is gifted with. Through this poem, Chirappad tries to fearlessly articulate that though the Dalits are deprived of immense opulence, though they might live in deprived conditions, still, no one could deprive them of the wealth provided by their education. This is a bold statement directed towards the dominant suppressive communities, who have, earlier, bereaved them of the opportunity to learn letters, to get educated and thereby earn a life of dignity. Here, in this poem, one is reminded of the collective spirit the Dalit communities hold. One of the striking characteristics that distinguish between a Dalit text and the text penned by a mainstream writer rests in this regard. A Dalit text voices largely about the problems, issues, resentments, joys or sensibilities of the whole community whereas such a sense of communal unity is rarely found in mainstream writing. Though this is not a general statement, yet one could draw in a number of examples to prove the same.

In her poem "The Autobiography of a Bitch", we discern the blatant outburst of a Dalit woman educating her fellow womenfolk, the "We in the street/ amidst garbage/ hungry, hungry" (Dasan 39), to be strong-willed and determined. The poem speaks about the pathetic conditions in which most of the Dalit women have to survive by confronting individuals who in the poet's words sound like this, "Before us/ No human/ Appears to be great at all!". The women don't seem to possess the valor to bark these inhuman strangers away. These women have internalized the fact that they do not have, "...enough beauty to/ Display either/ Or bargain" (40). The poet might have penned this poem to lay bare before the Dalit women that the mentality they possess should be changed. She tries to educate her fellow dalit women through her daring revelation of the existing status-quo, not to treat themselves as inferior to anyone and stop degrading themselves the way others do.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:2 February 2020

Dr. Edwin Jeevaraj A. and Aswathy V., M.Phil. Scholar

Expressing the Marginalised Self: Manifestation of Dalit Consciousness in the Poems of
Vijila Chirappad

Oh world, world
Our kind
Hides in the backyards
Eyes fixed on leftovers
Lies curled up in back-verandas
Finds solace in darkness. (40)

The poem ends like this. We see a strong impact of social beliefs and norms upon Dalit women regarding their beauty and worth as individuals. They have sort of assimilated the stature and disposition expected of them by the society. By penning down this poem, the poet tries to awaken the Dalit women from the slumber they are in and prove themselves as worthy as any other human beings.

In her poem “She Who Flew Afore” she subverts our notion of a traditional Malayali mother who wears tulsi sprig in her wet hair and sandalwood paste on her forehead. The mothers known to her are the ones who practically go about their lives struggling to make both ends meet. They are far removed from the mothers portrayed on screen, heavily decked in silk sarees and heavy ornaments. The mothers known to Vijila, who herself has tasted bitter realities of life, are depicted in this poem.

In our home
There is no TV
No fridge
Neither mixer
Nor grinder
No LPG
Not even an iron-box.

Yet my mother knew
How to operate these
Much before I did.

Because
Like in Madhavikutty’s stories
And the novels of MT
She is Janu-
The servant. (U Shiji 603)

This poem not only throws light into the monotonous and deprived conditions most Dalit women live through but also throws light into the representation of these women in the literary texts of upper caste litterateurs. If we closely analyze the literary productions of the above-mentioned writers- Madhavikutty and M.T. Vasudevan Nair- we wouldn’t come across

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:2 February 2020

Dr. Edwin Jeevaraj A. and Aswathy V., M.Phil. Scholar

Expressing the Marginalised Self: Manifestation of Dalit Consciousness in the Poems of
Vijila Chirappad

a well-educated or well-settled Dalit. He/She would either be a servant of the upper caste household or an uneducated individual doing menial tasks for low wages in a prejudiced society. Through this poem, Vijila portrays the sensibilities of a poor Dalit woman, unable to climb the social ladder and remain a slave to the dictates of privileged ones. It also mocks the deeply entrenched caste ideologies held by upper caste literary figures, who merely portray Dalits as people hailing from a lower caste group and as people destined to do certain jobs only which wouldn't help them climb the social ladder.

Conclusion

Vijila Chirappad has emerged as a prominent literary figure speaking for the cause of Dalits. Through the honesty and frankness of her poems, she tries to liberate Dalits, especially Dalit women from the agonies they go through on a daily basis. She uses the tone of irony and sarcasm as literary tools to challenge the age-old conventions which consider Dalits as unworthy beings, thereby denying them even a human status. Her poems analysed in this paper hold true of Sharan Kumar Limbale's opinion that unlike upper-caste litterateurs' dishonest portrayal of Dalit lives, Dalit writers themselves penned down their lived realities in a candid and fearless manner. Such a representation subverts the existing status quo of the depiction of Dalit consciousness. In the poems analysed in this paper, it could be discerned that Chirappad's poems give strong representation of the voice of such a woman, who is not relegated to the background by any oppressive forces. In the poem "A Place for Me", Chirappad provides a picture of solidarity manifested by Dalits as a community. The speaker of the poem is a penniless Dalit in the material sense, yet one who holds "the plentiful bowl of relationships".

Though her land is forfeited to the creditors, she is opulent with the weapon of education, which could direct her forward in life. This, indeed, is a bold statement, especially when it emanates from a Dalit woman. Dalits, who were formerly rejected the opportunity to learn letters, now gained access to it and notwithstanding any sort of material depravity they still have hope to build a prosperous future through their knowledge and the self-worth built out of this knowledge. In "The Autobiography of a Bitch", Chirappad gives audacious expression to how a Dalit woman should perceive of herself. By picturing the former as dirty individuals living in penury, by bringing into life the actual existence of a Dalit woman in a caste-driven society, Chirappad tries to achieve a counter-effect. Instead of demeaning them, she educates Dalits to shake off an existence in want of dignity and cultivate a strong sense of volition and self-esteem. In the poem "She Flew Afore", the poet keeps bare the casteist notion of upper caste literary figures, in their depiction of Dalit characters. The texts penned by Madhavikutty and M.T. Vasudevan Nair do not figure, a Dalit character who is educated or who attains any sort of progress in their lives. A Dalit woman, in their texts, is usually "Janu, the servant". Janu is not merely an individual hailing from a working-class Dalit background. She is the representative of the illiterate, unworthy Dalit community as is pictured in the texts of the above mentioned literary figures. Through the sarcastic tone of the poem, Chirappad manifests the consciousness of an educated Dalit, who indirectly hints that despite their lack of basic amenities, they are individuals of self-worth and self-esteem. Now, they have gained a

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:2 February 2020

Dr. Edwin Jeevaraj A. and Aswathy V., M.Phil. Scholar

Expressing the Marginalised Self: Manifestation of Dalit Consciousness in the Poems of Vijila Chirappad

voice and Janu would no longer remain as a representative of Dalit community. Based on the observations made above, it is evident that Vijila Chirappad's poems are a sharp commentary on the unjust treatment meted out to Dalits, especially the Dalit women by the ones in hold of dominant caste ideologies and power. "Dalit women are referred to as "Dalit among the Dalits" or downtrodden among the downtrodden because they are thrice alienated on the basis of their class(poor), caste(outcaste) and gender" (Channa and Mencher 258). She has succeeded in portraying the sensibilities of Dalit women through her poetic creations. The revolutionary zeal of her poems is noteworthy, and it has now begun to draw the attention of a large number of readers, outside Kerala too. The depth of experiences portrayed by Vijila in her poems is too profound that it could move the hearts of any reader instilled with a sense of justice and egalitarianism.

Works Cited

- Anil, Chintha Mary. "For All Its Communist History, Casteism is Inherent in Kerala Society: Dalit Poet Vijila Chirappad." *The News Minute*, 18 April 2016, www.thenewsminute.com/article/all-its-communist-history-casteism-inherent-kerala-society-dalit-poet-vijila-chirappad-41828. Accessed 09 September 2018.
- Channa, Subhadra Mitra and Joan Mencher, editors. *Life as a Dalit*. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2013.
- Dasan, M. et al. *The Oxford Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*. OUP, 2012, pp.xiv-xv.
- Limbale, Sharankumar (tran. and ed.), Alok Mukherjee. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Orient Longman, 2004.
- Mathew, P. D. (1996). "What you should know about police". Indian Social Institute. p.10.
- U, Shiji Ibrahim. "The Burning Embers: Poems of the Dalit Writer Vijila Chirappad as Works of Caste and Gender Discriminations." *IJELLH*, vol. V, issue. IX, September 2017. Accessed 09 September 2018.
- =====