

Retrieval of the Mythical and Dalit Imagination in Cho Dharman's *Koogai: The Owl*

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Abstract

This paper presents the Dalit writing in Tamil, a late bloomer like its literary counterparts in other regions, especially Marathi or Kannada. Literary scholars opine Tamil Dalit literature has only emerged actively since the 1990s and developed into an important and vocal expression of Dalit rivalry and allegation. The English translation of Cho Dharman's *Koogai (The Owl)*, which was first published in Tamil in 2005, has now been released. The novel depicts a vibrant tapestry of human conditions and Dalit exploitation. The story includes descriptions of little traditions, folk deities, animist lore, aboriginal beliefs and faith in magic. The story narration is wed to Tamil Sangam literary canons associated with the close relations between the land and the human condition. *Koogai* is a novel set in *karisal nilam*, the black cotton-growing soil region of southern Tamil Nadu, in the early post-independence years. Modernity is raising its head and agrarian communities are transferring to the city, Brahmins and Dalits alike. The earth is a tough thing in the narrative, demanding labour and loyalty, not offering easy gifts like the fertile delta of the Thanjavur provinces. Here, it yields grains, fruits and trees, only due to the enormous hardships its people go through - the Dalits who work hard on these lands, the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars of Chithirampatti, Subramaniapuram, Kovilpatti and Tirunelveli.

A re-emerging feature in the novel is the *koogai*. An owl-like bird with fiery eyes, it pays its visits at important moments, reappearing as a guardian spirit and a magical messiah. The Pallars worship this ancient bird as *Koogai Sami*. Dharman expresses that the wise bird is a real *yogi*, and a metaphor for the difficulty of Dalits: "flying free and having their rights over the forest" but compelled to "live an invisible life". His writings, he says, are an entreaty to allow the *koogais*, or Dalits, to appear from their areas of segregation into open spaces. This paper investigates the author's personal life and the mythical traces of the people's beliefs.

Keywords: Cho Dharman, *Koogai*, Dalit exploitation, landless farmers, leather workers, sweepers, village drummers, caste discrimination, casteism

Introduction

Cho Dharman is one of the famous Dalit novelists in Tamil literature. Born in 1953, he hails from the village of Urulaikkudi a recurrent place name in his fiction, including *Koogai*. Dharman was born into the caste of Pallars, or Devendrakula Vellalar as they now call themselves. He trained at an industrial training institute and worked for a few years in a fireworks factory. After working for about a quarter of a century, like many contemporary writers, he took voluntary retirement in the year 2000 to pursue a full-time writing career.

This paper presents the Dalit writing in Tamil, a late bloomer like its literary counterparts in other regions, especially Marathi or Kannada. Literary scholars opine Tamil Dalit literature has only emerged actively since the 1990s and developed into an important and vocal expression of Dalit rivalry and allegation. The English translation of Cho Dharman's *Koogai (The Owl)*, which was first published in Tamil in 2005, has now been released. The novel depicts a vibrant tapestry of human conditions and Dalit exploitation. The story includes descriptions of little traditions, folk deities, animist lore, aboriginal beliefs and faith in magic. The story narration is wed to Tamil Sangam literary canons since they are also associated with the close relations between the land and the human condition. *Koogai* is a novel set in *karisal nilam*, the black cotton-growing soil region of southern s Nadu, in the early post-independence years. Modernity is raising its head and agrarian communities are transferring to the city, Brahmins and Dalits alike. The earth is a tough thing in the narrative, demanding labour and loyalty, not offering easy gifts like the fertile delta of the Thanjavur provinces. Here, it turns fertile, yielding grains, fruits and trees, only due to the enormous hardships its people go through—the Dalits who work hard in these lands, the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars of Chithirampatti, Subramaniapuram, Kovilpatti, Tirunelveli and other places.

Koogai is unflinching in detailing the cruelty the Dalits face. From the higher castes' "saliva-laden" dining leaves (like the banana leaves) they are asked to eat from, the separate tumblers at the tea shacks, women begging for water for their infants from the caste women at the common well, to the rape and violation of Dalit girls and women, their very physical presence in non-Dalit areas of villages provoking violent thrashing and abuse, and the exploitation of Dalit peasant labour—Dharman pens the details – the raw wounds of the inhumanity and humiliation without flinching.

The novel hints at the tragedy of progress and migration that propels Dalit communities to move by the truckloads from farmlands to neighbouring towns to work in matchbox and ginning factories, and as stone-breakers in quarries when they are cheated of their rights to the land.

Dharman's storytelling strength lies in the characters he etches and the beauty of the landscape he evokes. There is Old Seeni, the elder farmer who shows the way with grit; the playful Muthukkaruppan and Mookkan, who defy reviled traditions and try and wolf down a meal at the "club house", nothing more than a shack where intermediate castes congregate for a meal; the raw courage of Appusubban; and the doggedness of Ayyanar. Feisty and brave Pechi is not easy to forget. She is a witness to the rapid changes that move her people to new areas, newer forms of oppression, religious conversions, a new greedy political class that needs the numbers of her people for elections.

At one level, *Koogai* appears to be a work of historical fiction set in the middle decades of the last century, when wave after wave of agrarian and industrial changes began to sweep over the country. While a few castes' communities have managed to ride the crest, most of those who suffered inhuman exploitation in pre-modern times have been buoyed up by egalitarian rhetoric, only to be subsequently cast into other horrific conditions of deprivation and anomie. Anyone who has watched the trajectory of any Dalit family's history in the last years would recognize the pattern - one which their finest leaders have striven to change and which their enemies seize upon as proving the rationale of caste. As Peichi says at the end of

the novel, in those days, in the old backyard place, they had nothing in their hands. And what they hold their hands now, she says, are a bottle of arrack and a party flag.

Such irony leavened with flashes of fierce humour, as in the episode of the youths daring to eat with other castes in a ‘club-shop’, and in the anecdote about jailers ‘releasing’ Dalit prisoners to steal pigs for them to feast on, makes *Koogai* stand apart from today’s ponderous works of historical fiction. It differs, too from magical realist novels, where it is a whimsical sleight of hand that dazzles the reader.

Koogai shows how the so-called ‘untouchable’ communities have been up for grabs by vested interests and are subjected to what is known in Tamil as chiththira vadhai- a grotesque medley of torments. The novel describes age-old divide and rule stratagems that keep popping up under the nose of the law and the survival strategies of men, women, and the transgender in a society where gender violence and contempt for labour have received sanction under perceived notions of destiny. Some of these responses, of individuals and of groups, are valiant and ingenious. When Seeni insists that the Pallars’ work of cremation be treated with ceremonious respect as the contribution of mourners and not as the task of menials, he not only puts the upper castes to shame, he gives them notice that his people will no longer be available for such work. Some responses are desperate and abject, as when Karuppi offers herself to Muthaiya Pandian in place of her young daughter.

Authentic myth has a certain dispassionate quality. Yet, it sings and shouts truths that are sometimes tangential, sometimes right on target, in a range of voices compelling the attention even of iconoclasts and cynics. The last pages of this novel reveal the competitive fury fed by ancient animosities used by modern manipulators. The myth in the making could revive the flagging spirit of all those who have been wearied by the repeated failure of negotiated and compromised egalitarianism. Peichi grieves, but then wipes her tears; not all can be vanquished.

It is difficult to imagine the awe and wonderment that Latin American writers, especially Gabriel Garcia Marquez evoked among Tamil writers. The confluence of social realism and magical realism created a kind of literary sensation. Magical realism was recreated, mimicked, and aped, choosing our own words. Rising above these jejune experiments, Cho Dharman’s *Koogai* is a genuine creative mutation of both literary modes, well adapted to the existential reality of contemporary Tamil Nadu and to the karisal nilam region in particular.

Owl as an Icon

Koogai’s recognition has several reasons. First, it is in tune with the Dalit oral lore and is entirely different from the mainstream modernist writing. Secondly, it foregrounds positive Dalit values like reverence for nature and reveals the hidden power of the community instead of portraying them as just miserable beings fit only for sympathy and charity. Thirdly, it is multi-layered as against the one-dimensional, mostly autobiographical, Dalit writing that most of us are familiar with. Fourthly, it raises koogai, the owl, to the level of a symbol and an icon; the old man Seeni considers it a god with rare powers to appear anywhere and turn from a stone bird to a real bird and back and guide its followers in crises. It is a metaphor for all the oppressed communities, especially Dalits, as it is mostly unsung and underrated, considered dark and ugly, hardly a bird at all. In classical Tamil writing as well as in popular belief, the owl is the bird of death, an ominous, hateful bird whose very hooting is inauspicious. It is teased and attacked during the day even by sparrows as it cannot see in the overpowering sunlight and hence prefers invisibility. But it is really strong, as it realises at

night when it is left to itself. The neglect of the Koogai temple leads to the community's decline, though its devotees like Seeni always find the god's help and support, and there comes a day when even Gengiya Naicker, an upper caste man, begins to respect the bird. Fourthly, it is as much about resistance as about suffering and is genuinely radical in its attitude to the status quo. Fifthly, it has all the qualities of a serious work of fiction: innovative structure, fresh idiom, memorable characters and episodes, deep sociological and psychological understanding, a profound awareness of the kinship between man and nature demonstrated several times through diverse episodes and captivating narration.

Here, too, Dharman's chosen region for depiction is the *karisal* land whose lower-caste reality he understands in all its complexity. Dalits here were regularly beaten up for dressing or behaving like the upper-caste people; even eating at a proper hotel was considered an act of arrogance. The novel begins with such an incident where Muthukaruppan and Mookkan are beaten up by Muthaiya Pandian, the Thevar village watchman, as the two Dalits had dressed in clean dhotis and shirts and gone to the new eatery "the club-shop" run by Nachiyamma where they ate a meal of the white rice—"club-food"—sitting on a bench rather than squatting on the floor as they should have done. Dalits are supposed to take only "inferior" grains. If at all they wanted to eat that food, the watchman feels, they should have bought the food in a rice-pot and eaten it sitting under a tree. Only Seeni's intervention and put-on humility finally save the "sinners". But the same Muthaiya Pandian has no hesitation in sleeping with Karuppi, the Chakkiliyar woman, wife of Shanmugam Pagadai who is sent out by the watchman with a rupee to have a bottle of arrack. Karuppi meekly submits to this daily rape out of fear: she lies huddled on a mat "like a chick hiding from a hawk".

Seeni's devotion to the Koogai god even after the fall of the temple, which he wants to restore, and the Pallars' growing resistance to oppression are central to the narrative. The Pallars of Chithiraikkudi rebel against their tormenters who have been denying them every human right and regularly violating their women. This drives them to the slums of the neighbouring Kovilpatti, an industrial town, where to their dismay they discover that the owners of the factories and the mills too are from the same upper caste that had been exploiting them in the village. The novelist does not use terms like feudalism and capitalism, but it is evident that the landlords have now invested in factories in the cities, as has happened throughout the country in the last century. Nataraja Iyer, a Brahmin lawyer and land owner, however, comes to their rescue by leasing them his family land for cultivation and later, as he leaves the place, giving them each the ownership of the land that they had been cultivating. This is not an innocent act of charity; he wants to empower the Dalits to fight the intermediate castes who were now rising up against the old landlords. There are also other contradictions that come into play in the novel like that between the Paraiyars, for whom conversion to Christianity was an act of protest, and the Chakkiliars, for whom it becomes another form of enslavement.

Pallar Resistance

Some of the most exciting episodes in the novel are scenes of resistance, like the Pallars refusing to dig the grave for and announce the death of the upper-caste man Pandi Mama or Seeni standing up to the zamindar – landlord (Jameen, as he is called) and saying his people can no more work for him as they have to work on their own land. Each act of resistance brings punishment, and these acts slowly strengthen the Pallars' resolve. The vengeful landlord even tries to poison the only source of water the villagers had. It is in fact a ruthless class-caste struggle where the subaltern classes move forward and backward in their attempt to emancipate themselves. This struggle, however, is interspersed with poetic passages that reveal the beauty

and harmony in nature: birds and beasts—owls, parrots, falcons, drongos, mynahs, cranes, yellow-billed babblers, crows (a crow even helps the brave woman Peichi by attacking the police), deer, cows, oxen—as well as trees are an important presence in the novel. Even hills like the Guru Malai and Kazhugu Malai come alive and gain the stature of characters.

Seeni is aware not only of the kinship between man and nature, but also of the different communities in the village: “However many castes there may be, there’s a very thin net that is binding all of them together. We mustn’t tear it. We have to take out the tangles in that net, that’s all.” There is a sense of the sacred that informs the whole narrative: a community is ruined when it loses that link with the larger universe and with other communities as well as trees, creepers, birds and beasts. The owl also represents that bond as the many legends about it scattered across the novel demonstrate. Seeni represents this spirit.

He also instils self-respect among his people, as when he leads the ceremonial cavalcade of Pallars and Paraiyars to pay tributes to the Headman Gurusami Thevar led by the drummers and offers him garlands and many measures of paddy. The novelist comments: “In Seeni’s gait was the glee of a Yayati who has regained his youth, the exultation of an Ekalavyan who has recovered his lost thumb.”

Another memorable character is Peichi, the proud wife of the late Kaali Thevar, a strong and intelligent woman who saves Appusubban from the police and finds legal help for him. Her story runs in almost a parallel narrative. The lyrical passages on the divine owl that frequent the text and the life of Seeni together create another parallel narrative, along with the *siddhans* and the alchemists and a whole world of myth and magic. *Kusumabale* and *Koogai* in their different ways go beyond the established canons, not only of Dalit narratives, but of the Indian novel in general and point to the future course of the genre where it frees itself from Western models— both realist and modern—and creates its own narrative modes and critical norms.

Conclusion

The paper follows to unfold this narrative in full through the tales exchanged by the Jothammas, the House Lamp Spirits. Here is a Dalit novel that is free from sloganeering, magically capturing the Dalit spirit in its imaginative vitality and linguistic creativity.

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