

## The Undertones of the Broken: Resistance and Reconstruction in C.Ayyappan's "Prethabhashanam"

Soumya Prakash A

Assistant Professor in English, Gregorian College of Advanced Studies,  
Trivandrum, Email:soumyacinoy@gmail.com

### Abstract

*The aim of the present paper is to examine the varied underlined, invisible ways of suffering embedded in the lives of the dalit community, particularly woman and their life experiences portrayed in C.Ayyapan's story, "Prethabhashanam". Dalit women face additional discrimination and abuse including sexual abuse by upper caste men which is discussed in "Prethabhashanam" (Spectral Speech) in which the writer offers an indirect critique of the sexual harassment and degeneration of Dalit women. "Prethabhashanam" not only presents the plight of the lower caste society but it also plays the role of a constant reminder of the hardships faced by the subaltern women in the society. Their condition is pitiable not only in Kerala but throughout India. The present study tries to envisage the reconstruction of prevailing unequal order, C.Ayyapan's writings is the saga of resistance against the hegemony of upper class literature which pretends to be omniscient and all-encompassing while presenting a narrow, one sided, twisted and biased view of reality.*

**Key words:** Caste System, Discrimination, Sexual abuse, Degeneration, Oppression



### 1. Introduction

India happens to be one of the world's largest democratic, but ironically it continues to remain as a cast-structured society. In India, it is found that a large section of people live a life of subjugation and insufferable sadness. The caste or varna system in India has segregates thousands of Dalits, from the mainstream culture to a subhuman and debased existence. After centuries of suppression, the Dalits are in the struggle for emancipation under the liberation movement spearheaded by Babasahed B.R. Ambedkar. In the words of M.F. Jilthe, "The Voiceless found a

voice here; the world less found a word here". The Dalit "the Broken people" who were formerly known as the untouchables, who lacked economic opportunities, deprived of other opportunities. Dalits in India occupy the bottom level of India's rigid caste system often termed as India's Hidden Apartheid. The caste system in India ensure that a large population has been segregated from the mainstream and deemed to carry out the job that are dirty and demeaning. Dalit in India have no access to land, live under depolarized conditions segregated from other caste Hindus, and are focused to carry out jobs that are supposed to be ritually polluting for the caste Hindus. Dalits continue to be caught up in the vicious circle whereby they are perceived to be "polluted" or "dirty" people by virtue of their birth, and are excluded from the mainstream social religious, and economic life. They lived in the margins of the society doing agricultural jobs, and menial occupations like disposing the dead bodies, working with leather, cleaning toilets and sewage etc. ("Philosophy of Hinduism" 45) The Dalit women often were victims of sexual abuse and violence. Even today they suffer social injustices and male dominance. Cases of violence like beating up pregnant woman for not disposing cow carcass, rape for not adhering to the caste norms, etc. have been reported.

Dalit or the broken is mostly used for the group in India who were depressed and regarded as members of the lowest social group in Hindu caste system. The term Dalit derives from the Sanskrit *Dalita* which means divided, split, broken, scattered (significantly also similar to the Hebrew dal) that may be translated as broken, downtrodden. The anguish and agony suffered by the generations of Dalits reflects in their literature. Dalit literature developed as the Dalit consciousness was awakened by the enigmatic thinkers and reformers like Buddha, Sarahapa, Kabir, Jyotiba, Phule, Hira Dom, Dr. Ambedkar etc. Initially the Dalit experiences were penned by Non-Dalit writers. Rabindranath Tagore in *Gitanjali* (1913) and Premchand in his "Sadgati" (1931), sympathise and empathise with the downtrodden Dalit it somewhat seems superficial. Yet it can be judged as a beacon of light which showed the way to many more writers. Dalit literature aims to highlight the disabilities, difficulties, atrocities, and inhuman treatment meted out to Dalits in society. Madara Chenniah, a cobbler saint from the 11<sup>th</sup> century is the earliest of Dalit writers who is regarded as "father of Vachana poetry". However in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it started to mould itself as a sword of resistance. Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal and Gopal Baba Valankar were the first set of writers who portrayed the plight of Dalits in their writings.

## 2. Malayalam Dalit writings

Early Malayalam Dalit writings were inspired by the teachings of the social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan and Ayyankali. The creative spirit of the Dalit community is witnessed in the heart warming songs of *Panas* and *Malayas*. But the creators of these songs were not acknowledged. Poikayil Appachan was one of the first Dalit poets in Malayalam literature. In the beginning, the Malayalam Dalit literature remained in the margins of mainstream literature. Their stories artistically conveyed the angst and anguish of a degraded community. T.K.C Vaduthala is the first Dalit novelist in Malayalam to write from the perspective of a Dalit. He has got three novels to his credit, *Kattayam Koithum* (The Sheaf and Reaping 1960), *Nanavulla Mannu* (Wet Soil 1970) and *Changalalal Nurugunnu* (Chains are splintering 1979). His novels mainly depict the hardships of the Dalits who were deceived by political parties, their social oppression, disunity

and caste discrimination. His writings does not create a fake word of comfort but reinforces the harsh realities that the Dalits face. He portrayed the stark reality where neither Christianity nor Marxism could redeem them.

Paul Chirakkaroode is the first novelist to write about the caste conflicts in the Christian church in Kerala. In his novel *Pulayathara* (The Hut of the Pulaya 1962) . His other remembered works to commemorate the Dalits were *Mathil*(Wall 1963) ‘Nizhal’ (Shadow 1966) and *Velicham* (Light 1968 ). *Pulayathara* exhibit the Christian conversion of the Pulaya community in Kuttanad and the complexities it created in the socio- cultural realm. The ugly face of feudalism can be traced back to the writing of Kunnottor Gopala Krishnan in his work *Kuzhiyan*(Child in the pit 2003). The title *Kuzhiyan* itself refers to a Dalit child who was kept in a pit which was dug close to the place where his parents work so that they could keep an eye on their child while they are at work. The novel is a typical representation of the real life situation of the children above the age of two or three months who were usually kept in pits, while their parents worked in the nearby fields. The novel reflects the life of Dalit community 150 years ago.

### 3. C Ayyappan

C Ayyappan is the most remarkable representative of Dalit literature in Malayalam. In his works one can find the presence of ghostly figures of social outcasts and a mythical ambience where the rebellious entities refuse to surrender to any sorcery and questions the power of God. These characters possess an intense expression which cannot be compared to laughter , tears or anger. His short fiction is remarkable for its keen sense of cultural reality, social inequality and caste. Sarcasm, pathos , black humour, social criticism are the issues discussed in his writings which has plural signification. His works makes the reader rethink the omissions, lacune , silences of modern Kerala society. He has got a foremost position as Dalit writer in Malayalam literature. C.Ayyappan was a professor of Malayalam in various government colleges and retired as the Principal of Government College ,Malappuram.

His notable works include *Njan Marupadi Prateeshikkundu* which is in the form of letters in which protagonist is a Dalit man who falls in love with a Brahmin woman but at the end is humiliated by her saying that he mistook her friendship as love. Sankunni ,who was cheated by an upper caste women , Devi brings her to trial by entering her body after his death in the theme of Kaval Bhootham.

### 4. A Spectral Speech

“Prethabhashanam” [A Spectral Speech ]a typical Dalit commemoration narrates the story of a Dalit girl who commits suicide when she was betrayed by her lover due to her Dalit status. He chose a Christian girl over her. When alive ,being a woman of lower caste she was always silenced and in order to speak the truth she enters the body of her lover’s sister to take revenge for the hardships she went through because of him. The story delineates the mental and physical torment of a lower caste woman who had a pathetic life and after death had to take a medium to speak her mind.

The opening lines of the story protrude the devastated feelings of the dead woman which she articulates to the body she dominates in the beginning of the narration. “Give heed to my words, I’m going to speak to you and shift the grain from the chaff in your mind. You lie chained here I’m the only one left to speak to you . And I shall speak nothing but the truth” (Prethabhashanam 91).The sister’s body she

takes to express her anguish is now unveiled by the harsh realities of what had really happened in both their lives. The Ghost says that now she is first a lost soul, a ghost who is dissatisfied and is selfish who wants to articulate to the sister of her lover about the hidden truth. She represents all the indigent women of her time.

Now the girl, the sister of the ghost's lover is freed from the expropriation. She now needs to know why she is being chained and what really happened to her and her brother and why her father is imprisoned. The story proceeds to the ghost's narration about why she committed suicide and how she became a lost soul. When the story progresses one could see the mental agony of a normal Dalit girl who was tormented mentally and physically by a man of a higher community and caste for his selfish pleasure. She was his secret lover. Their relationship started when she was just fifteen, at a time when she was a dumb, silly girl.

Kunhako approached her with sexual vigour and zest a number of times and this made the innocent girl asked him the question. "Will you marry me?" He replied with a counter question "How could I ever marry you?" since he belonged to higher caste. He couldn't even imagine to marry the daughter of an untouchable woman who was a servant in his house.

As their meetings become regular the girl falls head over heels in love with the physically abusing lover. Their relationship comes to an abrupt end when she conceives. She was spat upon and beaten by him when he realised that she was harbouring a desire to give birth to his child.

The relationship between the Dalit girl and Kunhako is compared to a leech clinging on to her thigh and growing big with her blood. She didn't have the 'guts to pluck it off'. It is the same with the case of all under privileged women of the age which the writer, C. Ayyappan tries to portray with the image of the Dalit woman in this story. The story breaks through the inner truth why Kunhako was murdered by his own father. The reason behind the boy's murder eludes into the feudal system of the dissolution, mostly of the outcast.

The Ghost entered the body of the Kunhako's sister sixteen days after her burial. On that day Kunhako came home late and he got attracted by the physical beauty of his sleeping sister who was sleeping in her room. He then felt repentant and backed down from his thoughts. The ghost took advantage of this moment and got inside Kunhako's sister's body. The girl was reluctant to leave Kunhako day and night and she was not able to be at peace without his presence. Everyone realised the presence of the ghost in the girl except her brother. He never believed in the existence of ghosts or demons and he saw her behaviour as sheer madness. When their relatives demanded that the girl should be "secretly nailed on a piece of kanjira wood and taken to Chottanikkara temple. Their father opposed the plan by saying that What if she remembers whatever she has done and then does something terrible?" (Prethabhashanam 94)

The father killed his son when he saw his daughter and his son in a situation which is unethical and sinful to any human beliefs and ethics. But there was a hidden reason. It is because of the system prevailed during that time when the Dalit women were forced to compromise their dignity for the pleasure of upper caste men. They were poor and powerful. And it was common practice that the Dalits were the victims of the lustful eyes of the feudal bureaucrats. Kunhakos father stood against the relationship between the Dalit girl and Kunhako not only because he upheld the exploitative system. There were chances that he was the Dalit girl's father too.

Because “your pappa’s younger brother too had fooled around with her at the time she used to work in your household” (Prethabhashanam 94 ). Such are the words of Kunhako’s mother of its God who revealed to me my paternity. He called me a sinner whose nakedness had been unveiled by my own brother.

Here Ayyappan characterizes the hierarchical system where the Dalits , especially the Dalit women were subjected to violence , exploitation and oppression being the outcasts , untouchables and Harijans as described by the Savarnas. He also questions the religious beliefs through his protagonist asking God with valour , ‘ how the hell does an untouchable woman become sister to a Christian old man?’(Prethabhashanam94) . And God is literally dumbfounded as if a banana had been thrust into his mouth. His eyes popped out and he bows his head. The narrator breaks through the story even to question the existence of God and the religious beliefs of the time. Even the God became dumbstruck by the queries of the ghost about her religion and relationships which she couldn’t maintain when she was alive.

Rosykutty the Dalit Girl and Kunhako ends up to be siblings as the story proceeds. This is one of the harsh realities which was one of the outcomes of the outcast being abused by the men of the upper class. The sexual assault resulted in the unsure paternity for most of the broken children the Dalits of the time.

Now you have learnt everything , haven’t you? It was my nakedness that Kunhako unveiled. When he hugged you , he was hugging me, for you were I. It was which your papa corrected. That’s why he is now in jail, serving a life sentence. (Prethabhashanam 95)

The word “corrected” in the quotation refers to the need for the correction to be done in the system prevailing in a society where the exploitation continues in various parts of the world. Our belonging to a lower caste ,which is a mere creation of the privileged to take advantage of the underprivileged results in the poor being poor and the rich or the feudal lords taking advantage of the situation to assault the underprivileged beings around them.

In Northern parts of India , caste system still prevails in a very gross manner where the 16 percent of India’s population, the Dalits are still the targets of sexual abuse of upper caste people. The contradiction is that the underprivileged is termed as “untouchable” when the upper class use them to fulfil their sexual cravings and desires and torment them to the maximum. The discrimination of the Dalit women is twofold because they are born both Dalit and Women. Rape has long been used as a tool to maintain the power of the upper class upon the women of lower strata. Still crimes against Dalits are not properly registered and investigated. The caste system is a century old phenomenon in the suburbs of India still and they are still the victims of a bonded labour, discrimination within the walls of the classrooms and workplace.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Dalit girl in C.Ayyappan’s story fights an uphill battle against the system where the woman is shamed as prostitute even if she is a victim to forced sexual violence. She is the voice of all the women especially Dalit women who are silenced by the social system where they don’t have the freedom to speak out the pain and anguish of their soul or body which she does after her death. The inter caste rape pins the blame on the victims who lacks community support. India is still in the grips of caste driven discrimination and attacks that Ayyappan proclaim to be

dissolved in all his stories especially the story which was discussed above. This makes the story relevant even in the system we follow today ,even if India is said to be a developing country.“Prethabhashanam” explores the wounded self and dark territory of Dalit consciousness which accept their subordinate state in society and tries to subvert that subjugated consciousness into a strong, self-sufficient and respected one. It subverts the Dalit consciousness that accepts the lower caste people as untouchables, contemptible, polluted and inferior.

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## About the author



Soumya Prakash A is an Assistant Professor in English, Gregorian College of Advanced Studies, Trivandrum. She has presented more than five scholarly papers in National and International Conferences. She has published more than two articles. She authored a book: *A Glimpse On Indian Diasporic Writers*.