



Writing as Resistance

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Abstract— *The paper analysed the novel Koogai (2015), written by Cho. Dharman. The paper looked at the alternative discourses in the text. The paper owed theoretical framework from Nancy Fraser's idea of counterpublic. The paper dives deeper into the text to underline the relevance of language, motifs, myths and legends to create a counter narrative against the established narrative. I have attempted to provide an insight regarding how Dalit writers interrogate the casteist public sphere to posit writing as the means of registering protest and asserting their voices.*

Keywords— *alternative, Dalit, public sphere, resistance, writing.*

INTRODUCTION

“For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power, it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless.” – Bell Hooks, Talking Back.

The aforementioned quote by Hooks proclaims the essence of this paper. Dharman, like Bell Hooks, acknowledges the significance of the cultural discourses to frame a counterpublic space. Nancy Fraser in “Rethinking the Public Sphere” argues that the counterpublic domain felicitates the Dalit writers to create an alternative domain against the homogenizing tendencies of the public domain. The paper attempts to examine Cho. Dharman's novel *Koogai* (2015) to study how the author resists the socio-cultural domination of the upper castes and reclaims the lost cultural identity of Dalits. The paper also analyses the author's conscious stylization of the narrative in an unconventional way to issue a political statement.

Dharman, in the novel, throws light on the hierarchical relation not only between the upper castes and the lower castes but also within the Dalit communities, e.g. the men of the Pallar community held Appusubban as an untouchable because they mistake him for a cobbler. Ironically, people who themselves are socially ostracized do not inhibit to behave in similar manner with communities lower in social hierarchy. The identity

politics within the Indian society can be understood in the light of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that deals with the identity politics; Said argues how the oxidant tries to fashion its identity with reference to its difference with the “other”; the “other” here refers to the colonized/oppressed/ marginalized. Just like the upper castes identify themselves in contrast to the entire Dalit castes, the lower castes appropriate the same identity- politics in order to assert their identity, which is otherwise negated to them in a Brahmanical society.

Dharman depicts a realist picture of the stratified Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. The three communities- Pallars, Paraiyars, and Chakkiliyars are culturally and spatially distinguished from each other. Being an insider, he is well aware of the nuances of the local social fabric, that reflects in his portrayal of the three communities. The homogeneous representations of the Dalits' community tend to negate the multiple and rich culture of the subaltern. The author insists on sketching the Dalits' communities with all their diversities to affirm the differences and resemblances within the Dalits to underline the affluent cultural ethos of Dalits.

The title *Koogai* symbolizes the oppressed and the downtrodden communities, especially Dalits. A Dalit is compared to an owl as both of them refuses to retort back at their tormentors. The metaphor of an owl is apt to voice the plight of the Dalits owing to their similar experience of exclusion and oppression. Just like the other birds who

take advantage of the owl's inability to see in the daytime, the upper castes invoke the long tradition of their authority and religious discourses to enforce the Dalits into servility. Dharman explicitly identifies Dalits with the Koogai in "From Kooththu to Koogai" while underlining that the objective for writing this novel is to "throw some light for at least some koogais, to be seen!" (Dharman xi). The metaphorical representation of the owl enables the author to rhetorically question the authority of the upper castes on social and natural resources and their right to deprive Dalits from their rightful share: "if fruits are for birds, are owls not birds too ? (xii)".

Sangam and classical Tamil literatures' references to the bird largely carry negative connotations; these texts held the bird as inauspicious. Therefore, Dharman's choice of a castaway symbol to entitle the novel only to invert its popular, mainstream symbolic significance, underlines his project to register his protest against the construction of a subaltern's identity by the dominant in a Brahmanical society. Just like the owl, a Dalit's existence apparently brings pollution in the caste ridden society. The comparison between the two throws light on the politics of humiliation as discussed by Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana in *Dalit Studies*. Literary discourses' preoccupation with the Dalits' experience of humiliation in the Brahmanical society, moves away from the melodramatic realism of earlier Dalit literature by not only recalling the shared trauma but moves ahead to reclaim their lost dignity; e.g. in the novel, Seeni, who embodies the qualities of endurance and patience like a koogai, erects a movement to emancipate the community from the shackles of casteist oppression.

The motive of the owl enables the author to redefine the idea of heroic figure. For instance, Rama is the staple heroic figure for the mainstream social discourses, who killed Ravana and Bali to establish "rama rajya". Unlike the conventional hero, Koogai saami never resorts to violence to harm others in his way to help the needy. Koogai comes across as the guardian/protector figure for the Pallars. Seeni recounts how koogai Sammy almost enforces Seedeivi through his cleverness to bless Seeni. The author acknowledges the aforementioned "yogic" qualities of patience and endurance as the true representatives of the heroic virtues rather than the aggressive ones.

Dharman treads upon a different path from his literary predecessors in terms of his characterization. His characters are not essentially black and white, where all upper castes are oppressors and all lower ones are victims respectively. Characters, in the novel, are not to be analyzed through the lens of such casteist presumptions.

Characters like Natraj Iyer and Appusubban lie somewhere between the good and the bad. The novel contains positive upper caste characters like Natraj Iyer, however, his initial benevolence is largely derived from his realization that the older feudal social structure is losing its stake in the wake of incoming wave of industrialization and modernization. But this does not rule out his goodwill in donating his land to Pallars. Also, Appusubban, a Pallar, exemplifies humane values, is a murderer nonetheless. The readers are left to adjudicate characters in lieu of characters' social contexts rather than being guided by the authorial intervention.

The most intriguing character of the novel is Peichi. Dharman's novel transgresses the singular characterization of a Dalit woman as a victim of sexual violence, by investing her with agency and subjectivity. Rawat and Satyanarayana in Introduction to their book quoted Gopal Guru's essay, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," (1995) where he emphasized the crucial role of caste identity in instituting forms of domination, exclusion, and violence upon woman. Laura Breuck in *Writing Resistance* underscores the Dalit-feminist perspective that interrogates such singular depiction of a Dalit woman as a victim that leaves little scope for a humiliated woman to assert her subjectivity. Discarding the conventional victimhood assigned to a Dalit widow, Peichi refuses to be a victim. Peichi traverses the taboo of public-private dichotomy, as she not only provides for Appusubban's daily sustenance but also visits courts (a masculine domain) to ensure justice for him. As a doubly marginalized woman owing to her caste and gender, Peichi not only survives herself but protects Appusubban with her life as well. The equation between Peichi and Appusubban inverts the gendered understanding of the notions of the protector and the protected, where the woman is always conceived of as a weaker sex to be protected by the patriarchal authority. However, the character of Peichi emerges as the epitome of cleverness, dignity and courage.

The strain of protest evident in Mookan and Muthukkaruppan, in the beginning, materializes into Dalits upsurge in the latter part of the novel. Dharman articulates the transformation of Dalits' consciousness in the novel where they are the subjects of their own emancipation. The author formulates how financial independence gives way to destabilize social traditions and taboos. The Pallars, in the novel, having gained the ownership of lands, have now attained financial independence for the first time, yearn to assert their equal rights in the society. Therefore, they decide to participate in the zamindar's last rites not as menials but equals. The economic security accords certain freedom that ensues in destabilizing many caste norms. Now Pallars youths go to school, ride bicycles and do not

take off shoes while crossing the upper castes' street. In fact, a reverse process of segregation happens: "And they have dug a separate well, setup separate shops all by themselves" (Dharman 105). As the narrator recognizes, the Pallars reverse the myth of the sacrifice of Eklavya, who has to sacrifice his thumb for transgressing the caste norms. He perceives Pallars' protest symbolically as the recovery of the lost thumb of Eklavya. The author's proclamation of the objective for writing *Koogai* gets materialized fictionally in the organized movement by the oppressed Dalit castes, first, against the zamindars in rural system, and second, in urban landscape against the alliance of police, contractors and owners of the factories.

The novel is set in a post independent era where modernity is rearing its head and agrarian communities are migrating to the cities. However, as Peichi observes, the hierarchal social structure retains even in the urban social system. The feudal landlords have now become contractors and owners of factories. As Althusser discusses in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" that every dominant authority needs to create the relations of power to perpetuate its hegemony (33-36); the dominant group employs the state apparatuses to create and maintain the relations of power to preserve the status quo. The police, judiciary, and media are accomplices of the dominant power that subdue every attempt to destabilize the hegemony using physiological and psychological violence.

Dalit thinkers like Phule and Ambedkar identified the city-space as a route to emancipation. However, Breuck in "Alienation and Loss in the Dalit Experience of Modernity" quotes Gopal Guru to maintain that the culture of city is a symbiosis of tradition and modernity. In "The Dalit Re-configuration of Modernity", Satyanarayana again quotes Gopal Guru, to argue that the new bourgeois class (which largely comprises feudal landlords like Nataraj Iyer and the Jameendar) at the center of power reiterates the previous politics of exclusion. The upper castes limit the fruits of modernity to themselves to enforce the working class (which consists of the migrated Dalits) into a mechanized life. They are treated like machines to function at the cue of the owners of the factories and mills. Chakkiliyars are the first ones in the village to migrate to the city. Their exodus is propelled by their desire to get away from the exploitation by the upper castes as "no one took his upper cloth off his shoulders and brought his palms together in a servile kumbidu" (Dharman 69). However, the façade about the urban social structure as the modern, democratic and liberal debunks in the novel, as the Chakkiliyars and Pallars are relegated to urban ghettos which are again segregated on caste lines.

The novel incorporates the local folk lores, myths in the magic realist narrative to write a fictional historiography of Dalits. The realist mode of history and literary production is appropriated by the mainstream writers. The dominant discourses either entirely invisibilise the Dalits' existence or represent them as the "other". Therefore, the unconventional stylization of narrative is stimulated by the need to break free from the imposed identity and assert Dalit's cultural and historical space in the alternative discursive domain.

The inversion of the popular myths, in the novel, carries political significance. The novel is replete with instances where Dalit characters are identified with mythical super-humans and gods. Shanmugun, a Chakkiliyar, becomes mythical Harishchandra; Peichi, a lower caste woman, is said to be searching Hanuman and thereby, inverting the gender and caste politics underlying the conventional myth about Hanuman looking for Sita. The novelist employs the similar upper caste's politics of appropriation where they colonize the cultural heritage of the lower castes as part of the larger Hindu meta-narrative. Badri Narayan in the introduction to his book reveals how the dominant discourses remodeled the Dalit heroes as avatars of Vishnu which subsumed their glorious past into the larger Hindu identity. Phule's critique of the caste system reciprocated the appropriation- politics of the upper castes by turning the nationalist imagination of the "golden past" on its head, by its interpretation of the avatars of Vishnu as different stages of Aryan conquests.

CONCLUSION

Dharman in the novel traces the marginalized Dalit characters like Eklavya in the mainstream discourses and brings them back to the center of discursive practices. The choice of the title, the selection of the myths and folklores, the characterization carry a political significance. One can conclude that the author not only reclaims the lost cultural heritage but also creates new culture in terms of the myths where the lost thumb of the Eklavya has been reappeared again.

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