

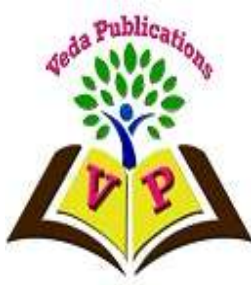


SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE DALITS: REFLECTIONS OF S. JOSEPH'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT



Colour, caste, race, gender are the wide-ranging elements used to discriminate the people in the society. Nobody knows how the concept of untouchability and class distinction evolved in the world. Marginalization of a certain section of people has become a practice among the people across the world today. Even if the miseries and agonies of this section get unnoticed by law and society, certain writers came forward to extend a voice for the voiceless classes through their literary endeavours. S. Joseph, one of the leading Indian poets writing in Malayalam brings forth the issues that affect those who labelled as Dalits. 'Dalit' means scattered in Sanskrit. It is a term widely used in contemporary India to indicate the lower class people who are subjected to untouchability and marginalization. The present paper is aimed to discuss how S. Joseph delineates the plight of the people who toil in the lower rungs of the society through his poems.

Keywords: *Marginalization, Dalits, Suppression, Subaltern.*

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Of all the literary genres, poetry has remained in the forefront to create poetic pleasures among the readers. Poetry is a form of literature that uses aesthetic and rhythmic qualities of language, such as phonoaesthetic, sound symbolism and meter to evoke meanings in addition to, or in place of, the prosaic ostensible meaning. Rather confining to these mere traditional concepts of poetry, contemporary poetry creates a new perspective upon poetry through its varied subject matter, use of syntax, meter, rhyme, rhythm, poetic language etc. Poetic tradition of regional languages is also got changed in accordance with these emerging trends in the contemporary poetry.

As we date back to the history of Malayalam poetry so far, it's evident that it had undergone colossal changes in its style, language, poetic techniques with the changes in the contemporary social and political scenario. Contemporary Malayalam poetry stood far apart from the affluent poetic tradition of Malayalam poetry which began with 'Manipravaalam' and has witnessed eminent works of great poets in the literary field.

"Underlying all poetry is prose. But poetry that is simply prose is anti-poetic... Traditional poetry achieved its form and metre by forgetting certain experiences and people. That is the mode in which poetry became poetic and prose acquired its genius. Now poetry is discovering those forgotten people. The prose of their experiences is pushing its way into poetry.' says S. Joseph, one of the leading contemporary poets in his 2004 article titled *Poetry in Search of a Prose*" (Dasan,123)

The Naxalite movement was critical for public life in Kerala during the 1970s. Though Joseph was witnessed and attracted to it, he only watched from a distance. He has been writing poetry since he was sixteen, but he has not been directly involved with the Dalit movement either by action or through his poetry. He feels poetry is poetry; it should not be gripped by a movement. But knowingly or unknowingly his writings are leaning towards a generalized subaltern outlook. He says, "I have taught and lived among tribal children, fisher people, blacksmiths. My poetry is about them. Today when I look back, I can see that my poetry is about all these people who are "outside" the mainstream. It is a

world that is not found even in Naxalite poetry" (Satyanarayana,452).

The caste issue is morphed into a problem of the social and economic marginalization of one section of society, and the caste problem is seen as a problem only for the lower caste who suffers from it. Dalit writers like S. Joseph captures Dalit community life in urban and rural settings. In their arguments and narratives, the caste acquires a new meaning. Narrating the first-hand experience of agony and alienation, Joseph emerged as a pioneer of contemporary Malayalam Dalit poetry, which gives an authentic and genuine voice for Dalit community.

Dalits have hitherto been burdened with imposed identities – as untouchables, depressed classes, Harijans or scheduled castes. Though the modern society promises equality and freedom to all, the dark ages of religious differences are not left behind. What he encounters is not a traditional taboo, but a modern stigma. In the poems *Identity Card* and *Group Photo*, what we encounter is modern means of discrimination in a modern institution. Kerala state is renowned for its educational achievement. But in the very same state, how the class of a person turns out to be a cause of discrimination is well expressed by S. Joseph in *Identity Card*. A girl came to class with a smiling face, shares a bench and food, enjoy the thrill of touch. But at the moment she noticed the stipend amount he receives on his identity card, it marked the end of their relationship. The card and stipend mark his caste and class and costs him his love. Anti reservationist considered those who had made use of reservations and stipend as inefficient.

"She said,
returning my card:
'the account of your stipend
is entered there in red"(12-15).

Caste and colour consciousness of a subaltern person is foregrounded in *Group Photo*. Due to the ongoing caste discrimination and humiliation that he had gone through, he was reluctant to accept an upper-class girl's invitation to stand beside her in the college group photo. Even if he can change her stalker that took his place in the photo with the current photo techniques, the



complex that drags him back and believes it's as his fate.

"How does a poor, low-caste fellow, dark to boot, live in Kerala?" (14-15).

The question he raised is highly commendable and the narrator's words "I will disappear once in a while..."(18) echoes the cursed life of a community whose appearance and disappearance get unnoticed in the social life.

A Letter to Malayalam Poetry is significant in two levels- one is, it focuses on the transition in the Malayalam poetry with the advent of poets like him and the other is, it highlights the living condition of poor people through the voice of a rag picker in the poem. Ragpicker invites poetry to his thatched hut where she can enjoy freedom as a bird, burn in sun, bath in the brook, have gruel and sprouts by sitting on a mat on the veranda. Poetry used to live and well looked after in big bungalows, speeding in cars, speaking only in meter and rhyme. Though it sounds like an invitation to poetry, poet attempts to explore the life of poor people and says poetry should reverberate the voice of this voiceless class.

This idea is further explained in the poem *Different Poems* where the ploughman, the reaper, the forest-dweller, the toddy tapper, the mason, the beggar, the boatman, the gravedigger- all of them who belongs to the lower class if the society says about their labour through their own poetry. Poet narrates his experience when he goes to work with a Mason in the poem titled as *Mason*, which again proves poet's urge to document the life of poor.

The landscape of his poetry is startlingly new- it moves into hitherto unknown places where the subaltern people belong abundantly. Hillside, river banks, rocky mountains, bamboo plants, screw pine leaves, sugarcane fields etc in his poems like *One's Own*, *Running Ant*, *Dhwani*, *The Fishmonger*, *The Song*, *Water*, *Fading away in the Shade of Umbrella* etc are vivid examples to prove this argument. He has no pretensions to being an environmentalist, but the ardent beauty of nature and the environmental degradations portrayed in his poems express the chaotic situation of nature as well as the subalterns. The narrator in the poem *One's Own* lives in a hillside where he used to wash, bath and went fishing in the rivulet. He went further with

the rivulet doing the same tasks until it merges with a large river. He announces "I am only a poet of rivulets, a small poet. My own rivulets call out"(16). Rivulet stands as a metaphor for the marginalized people, and the poet's hesitation to go with river exemplify the lower class people's fear to come front due to the humiliations they had suffered so far.

Everything that we have across can be re-written as something new and worthy, but the life city dwellers and plight of villagers is written and read as such. Poet acclaims this in *Running Ant* and feels sad that even in literary works their fate can't be re-written. The predicament of a Fishmonger in *The Fishmonger* signifies the life and death of an ordinary man is irrelevant. Modern developments and innovations are meant for the well being of the people, but it reaches only within the privileged classes relegating the poor people even more marginalized. Emphasizing the pathetic condition of a fishmonger, who died of epilepsy while washing vessel in a tiny stream poet emphasized this perspective. His dead body floats and disappeared into the water without notice by anyone. "There is no sign of fishmonger now"(25). The plaster wall of a motor workshop parallel to M.C road indicates the modern progress hinders the view of the dead body in the stream to an onlooker opposite to the wall. This clearly indicates how the world of the privileged and non-privileged class gets divided in the ongoing innovations.

Narrating the life of basket makers and their world in *Basket*, poet further discusses the plight of marginalized. 'Ottal' is a rare plant which is used to make baskets, hemispherical in shape. Conjoining two baskets result in a sphere, shape of the earth, the planet we live. Poet compares 'Ottal plant' with the marginalized; both are on the verge of extinction. Basket making represents the creation of their own world by a marginalized class who strives hard to meet their livelihood amidst of the discrimination and humiliations.

In *Prison*, the poet speaks of two prisons, the real one the convicts are held behind the iron bars and the outer one where the bars are made by religion, caste and colour. The certain culprit in the real prison seems to be the victims of the class chaos



of the outside prison. The narrator says about the prison without having any experience with the real prison but engages with the prison outside every day.

Black on black is the most beautiful combination, declares the poet in *Black*.

“On a black face
eyebrows, eyelashes and
lips have a special charm” (1-3).

The strays of eyeliner on a drenched black woman, the black shirt worn by a black man, the black colour of hair and skin etc. through the images of this poem, the poet shakes the concept of other, black has its significance on if there is the contrasting white. When the black colour of hair considered as a sign, but the black skin of a man is low while the animals' entice. Basically colour of human race is black. Due to the emergence of colonial power, politically, economically and socially the white dominates the black. Even in the post-colonial and postmodern age, the same practice continues, thus the black remains as a trademark of the subaltern. Though once the black was regarded the symbol strength, now it is the reason to push away the people mainstream due to black. With the status of skin white, the black got crushed and sidelined without allowing to enjoy any privileges that the modern society guarantees equal to all. Black and white remain as rightful combination except in the case of human, where black always hidden under white. “Black you can say lies hidden beneath the white”(24).

When the poet sees the picture of an extinct fish on the college wall, he thinks of his own race is getting extinct slowly from the society. When these images and descriptions of the animals facing extinction help to prepare a list and take measures to protect them, where a group of people facing the same threat that go unnoticed as it's a racial extinction, said the poet in *On the College Wall*. In *Just a Few*, the narrator wonders why only a few people anxious about the pathetic life of poor or marginalized or the environmental hazards. This implicates that he too among those few people, those who are poor who worry about their community. Their problems and hazards reverberate among themselves unheard to the world outside. When the people ran for the developments, they ignore the pain of poor which get noted in *Eases and*

Difficulties. When the Engineers think of the railway doubling poet's concern is for the man standing on a sand hill which gets depleted in the construction. Most of the facilities that we are enjoying today are the results of the difficulties suffered by poor.

He creates a powerful impact on the Dalit theme with *My Sister's Bible*, this Bible has everything – a ration book, loan application form, card from a money lender, notices of the feast, a photograph of brother's child, a hundred rupee note, an SSLC book- except the Old Testament and the New. According to a subaltern, his day to day life and joys meets with these things, not the preface and contents of a real bible. What helps them to fill their belly and mind is the real God for them.

The poet uses a lot of other similes and metaphors from the daily life of people to express the plight of the outcaste. The image of a captive elephant in *Elephant*, “No place to go?”, the question used to ask his mother when he was a child marks in the poem *Dhwani*, poets who recalls the time when they had no well and had to collect water from the wells of the affluent drawing it with an arecnut-palm- spathe pail tied to rope in *Water*, the image of a young girl who faded away in the shade of an Umbrella in *Fading away in the Shade of an Umbrella* are proclaim him as a poet of marginalized.

Dalits are nameless and faceless people in dominant Indian culture. S. Joseph tries to recover and re-present all those nameless and faceless figures, their memories, sorrowful experiences through his poetry.

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