***Perumkollan*: A Critique on Political Exploitation of**

**The Dalit in Malabar**

In the history of Kerala there is no place for the culture, art, language, cult and literature of Dalits. Indian cultural history witnessed the partition of labour in terms of caste. Creative and intellectual works were attributed to the Brahmins (upper class) while the Shudras were given the manual works. During the early twentieth century, the struggles and movements of Shudras were raised through the Dalit movements like *Kallumalasamara* (Stone Necklace Movement) by breaking the chain beads for covering the upper part of the body of women. Stone Necklace Movement, (1915) is a major historical event in Kerala in which the *Pulaya* women established their right to decide what to wear and what not to wear. Ambedkar was a leading social reformer who campaigned against the social discrimination of Dalits, women and labourers. Ambedkar argued for a separate electorate for the untouchables. Ayyankali, one of the prominent Dalit reformists of Kerala and the leader of the *Sadhujana* Movement realized the need of social justice and freedom in the society. Unlike Dalits in other parts of India, Dalits in Kerala were conditioned in a dream that was trans-national, anti-imperialist, and anti-bourgeoisie. They were also forced to believe in a Hegelian teleological vision of history for which the grand-narrative known as Marxism supplied the vital political fuel.

Poststructuralist and post-colonial studies made possible the representation of the oppressed and the marginalized in literature. The influential works of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Spivak’s *Fourth World* largely awakened the culturally and literally oppressed sections of the society into literature. Dalit movement is also defining ‘Indian theatre canon’ because they feel a performed text can make more impact than the written text.

Dalit literature, like feminist and gay literature, is largely a corollary of suppression and atrocities and above all an avidity to get recognition, equality and space in the mainstream literature and stimulate the readers to transform their society. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general. The Dalit literature can be called as the struggle for freedom and identity. When Dalit literature primarily focuses on the life and experiences of the oppressed, *Perumkollan* (Mastersmith), a play by Santhakumar places it in the context of political murder in Malabar. One has to look at the recent issues like Nilpu Samaram, where the politically dominant class neglects the struggles and trauma of the Dalits. Here, Perumkollan is repressed and he does not have the ‘right’ to decide whether to make weapon or not for Shivadasan, a local politician. But the representative of the new generation of the blacksmith, Manikyam’s powerful dialogues asserting that she would surely speak the truth aloud in the market in the following day could be treated as the symptomatic returns of the repressed. Santhakumar presents *Perumkollan’s* reference as a literary symptom, an unconscious, inevitable imprint of events on texts in the form of verbal tricks or tropes and effectively reinterprets Perumkollan’s love and fear of his daughter and insight model in terms of traumatic impact and later inscription. Literature of trauma according to Tal is “[…] the identity of its author …. The work of the critic of the literature of trauma is both to identify and explicate literature by members of survivor groups and to deconstruct the process by which the dominant culture codifies their traumatic experience” (Berger 580).

The author, Santhakumar aimed at the de-construction of life of the Dalit or depressed through this work. It reveals the life of a blacksmith and in the process reveals the casteism in Kerala. *Perumkollan* is a powerful critique of the political violence in Malabar and highlights the traumatic or bitter experiences of the ‘poor labourers’ who are utilized for the benefits of others, especially the economically and politically dominant. It can be conceived as peculiar representation of the oppressed. In most cases, Dalit literature documents the atrocities and sufferings of its subjects and brings into the light the voice of the unrepresented subalterns who are often victimized for the sake of others. Though *Perumkollan* can be placed under the category of Dalit literature, it focuses on the political violence of Malabar in the background of caste and labour.

Santhakumar disturbs the boundaries between Dalit communities, political groups and society. As a result of the trauma the Mastersmith experiences, he hugs the knives and gets wounded then he throws the knives, his means of life, to the forge fire. He throws it to fire suggesting that the upper class people destroy the life of the ‘other’ for their sustenance. The reader is called upon to witness the atrocities that the politics has inflicted upon a group of people.

The play begins with a tired rhythm of a song where the lamb asks the knife why it butchers its neck, then the knife answers that the hands of butcher is responsible for this. It is a symbolic representation of the theme of the play pointing towards the victimization of the Perumkollan or Dalits. The play further proceeds into the life of a Dalit. The play was written in 1999 when the social condition of Kerala could be interpreted with a series of political murders in Malabar. Political murders in Malabar were associated with dominant political class who belong to the key posts of the society. The re-reading of the play argues that the social tension outside evoked by the murder creates damage to the family of the Dalits too. Shivadasan a local politician threatens Perumkollan to make weapons for killing comrades of opposite party which leads to the inner conflicts in Perumkollan’s family. Manikyam, Perumkollan’s daughter interprets him as a conspirator. The answer to the questions of Manikyam to Perumkollan could be defined as the representation of the innocence of Perumkollan. She often comes in the front of him and leaves him into trauma with her questions relating to the murder.

Perumkollan falls in the trap of victimization under the self-realization of guilt. He experiences self-inflicted trauma. Even his daughter accuses him for the misuse of the weapon by others. The social tension is implanted to the domestic sphere, at once it damages the relationship between father and daughter and then with the customer. Mastersmith is terribly haunted by a sense of guilt feeling created by Manikyam’s questions. He keeps the pointing finger of Aravindan in his trousers’ pocket, saying that if it is kept in his pocket only he would smell it.

He remembers the old drama in which he acted as a father who killed his son to hide his mistakes from others. In the madness of liquor he forgetting the circumstances says that he acts the same role of that drama in real life and to live forward he has to act. He watches Aravindan coming towards him asking for the pointing finger he has put in his pocket but he refuses to give. And at the end he runs away from his daughter who holds a bomb in her hand and says that he has to return the pointing finger to Aravindan.

The political violence happens outside does not profit Perumkollan any way but he is victimized.

He is being questioned by himself and his daughter. The caste system in Kerala determines Perumkollan to build knife and weapons for others. The purpose of the making of the weapons is farming. But the misuse of the weapons in turn harms the professional ethics of Perumkollan which leads him to throw away the weapons into the forge fire. The forge fire then burns out in flames suggesting the social tension going outside his shed.Thus the Dalit household falls into the general political turmoil.

The whole setting of the shed of Perumkollan can be read as the portrayal of the politically violent Malabar of that period.

“God, forgive me.

The one who makes weapons is Mastersmith.

The weapon he makes,

Cuts flowers and tender leaves,

Cuts roots of trees

Chops human heads

Who is guilty?

The one who made the weapons

Or the one who uses it?

God, I don’t know, …don’t know.” (Santhakumar 19)

The main question Santhakumar attempts to raise through the prayers of Perumkollan is that, should the black smith be termed as a culprit for making the weapon? The whole play suggests that, though there are political parties’ present holding democracy as their key slogan; the social conditions of Dalits are very worse.

Though Kerala has witnessed a series of agitations for the social justice and the uplift of the subaltern class for the last 200 years, the real beneficiaries in most of these were not the Dalits. For example the beneficiaries of the land reformation bill brought in 1970 benefited the Ezhava community and the Syrian Christians.

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