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SUBVERTING FIXATED IDENTITIES: LOCATING COMMUNITY IN S. JOSEPH'S SELECT  
POEMS

BETSY PAUL C PhD

Associate Professor in English  
St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur 680011  
Kerala, India



ABSTRACT

Hierarchical relations in inter-caste correspondence are what is usually discussed about in discourses related to caste in India. But studies have noted that the contemporary interventions regarding caste brings forth a renovation of caste as a social collection or community which seek to relate itself with other social groups horizontally. Such interactions get recorded not only in historic narrations but also in the literary domain. This paper looks into select poems of the Malayalam poet S. Joseph to see how they delineate these horizontal interactions and their individual problematics within the theoretical contexts of Dalit and postcolonial studies including Homi Bhabha's discourse on "Hybridity" and Franz Fanon's explication of colonial phases. The research puts forth a substitution of Fanon's "fighting phase" or Showalter's "self-discovery" with another term to describe the third phase in the mobility of the Kerala Dalit experience, namely, "moving away," which we can find in the selected poems. At the same time, the research avers that this moving away can transform itself into a leading onto, the directions of which are yet to be charted in literary and critical discourse.

Keywords: Dalit, New Malayalam poetry, S. Joseph, identity, caste identity, Fanon, community

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An individual in India, like his/her counterparts elsewhere, is situated within a complex web of identities. But, a historical legacy specific to this geographical location has added a further tier for identification and stratification, namely, caste. Anyone trying to grapple the "Indian individual" cannot escape from this realization. As economist Amit Thorat states, "Indian society is primarily an identity based society. This identity of an individual stems from caste, ethnic, religious or even regional belongings among others" (47). These identities determine the political, economic, and social status of an individual. Thus, in his paper on how caste, ethnicity, and religion influence poverty, Thorat concludes, "religious and social identity.... goes a long way in determining people's final level of well-being, at least in economic terms" (Thorat 53).

In their introduction to *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*, which anthologizes contemporary South Indian Dalit writing, Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana comment that "in the decades over the turn of the century, caste was renovated to include the idea of a group as a 'social collective' or 'a

community.” According to them, “this ‘community’ seeks to relate itself with other social groups horizontally – as against the hierarchical, vertical relationships of domination and subordination” (19).

This paper seeks to see how far an individual is capable of this renovation, this transference from a suppressed identity to that of being a member of a powerful social collective capable of horizontal negotiations which may determine that particular individual’s “final level of well-being” as could be seen in S. Joseph’s poems. It seems worthwhile to inquire what desires and resistances, and, which sort of assimilations and negotiations, are involved in the process of putting together the new identities in contemporary India.

Contemporary Malayalam regional poetry, like many other regional language poetry in India can be seen as a site which records the nuances of resistance and the emergence of new selfhoods. The poems of the Malayalam Dalit poet S. Joseph (born 1965) can act as pointers to discern how a self emerges from the poetic site, and to see how far that self is individuated, and, how far its community gets inscribed in its self-construct.

Joseph has, to date, six poetry collections to his credit. He is the winner of the Kanaka Sree Award from the Kerala Sahitya Akademi and his second and third books were on the shortlist of the best Malayalam books of the year in noted journals. His *Uppante Kooval Varakkunnu*, won the Thiruvananthapuram Book Fair award for one of the ten best books of the year 2009.

Joseph’s poem “Identity Card” which belongs to a collection of poems with the same name, so captivated the attention of the above-mentioned anthologists of contemporary Dalit poetry that they quoted the complete poem at the outset of their introduction to the volume. According to Tharu and Satyanarayana, the poem “opened a number of themes and concerns” of their anthology, including the “many-layered betrayal” of a Dalit “by a politics, a government, an era” (2). The poem, written in a simple narrative format, speaks of the isolation a Dalit college student when he realises that his upper caste girlfriend recognises his caste through his misplaced Identity Card. Tharu and Satyanarayana reads the poem as comprising of two stories, one, “focused on love in the localities of caste and the pain of parting,” and the other, recording the modern protagonist’s journey “from a desire limited to individual fulfilment ... towards his communal identity” (2-3).

This journey from individual desire to communal identity is hardly a unique, local phenomenon. Members of every suppressed community have recorded instances of such personal trajectories. Franz Fanon theorizes the colonial phases of such a passage in a native as comprising of firstly, assimilation, secondly, disturbance leading to awareness of the native’s identity as related to his community, and thirdly, ‘the fighting phase’ (179). Feminist theorist Elaine Showalter too posits three major phases as common to all subcultures, which, according to her were, imitation, protest and “self-discovery” (11-12). Joseph’s poem records firstly, a phase of assimilation, where the protagonist is a modern, secular, urban, well-read self. Then comes the shock, the phase of communal “awareness,” according to Fanon, or, if we stretch the lines a bit and read between them, the “protest,” as registered by Showalter. But, it is in the third phase that Joseph seems to deviate from both Fanon and Showalter. The poem exhibits neither Fanon’s “fighting phase” nor Showalter’s “self-discovery.” Instead, it is a “never looking at,” a sort of a moving away, a “bunking,” from, a reality of red-marked stigma which confronts his confluence with the so called mainstream normalcy.

This “moving away” seems to be the characteristic third phase, (which might hopefully precede a more confident fourth phase of the future) in the contemporary Dalit writings in Malayalam. The poet C. Ayyappan’s interview published posthumously in *Mathrubhoomi*, a popular Malayalam literary weekly records the need for Dalits to hide their identity. He further talks about many of his well to do acquaintances whose children went without their stipend to hide their caste identity. Moreover, when he talks about his own life, he acknowledges an escapist mentality, a “moving away” in him. “This is a type of an escapism. One of the factors for it may be that I have no previous knowledge or training in any subject. In my house, I am the first person to do a lot of things” (28). Literature being more complex and truthful than any logical and linear explanations, this seems to be the lived experience of the Malayalee subaltern than any gospel of hopeful empowerment.

This moving away could be seen more emphatically in S. Joseph’s poem “Group Photo,” which appears in his collection of poems, *Uppante Kooval Varakkumbol*. In the poem, again in a contemporary background,

(but the poet specifies, "it needn't be in a college"), a girl wants to stand next to the Dalit protagonist in a group photo and even pays the money for it. But he "disappears" at the exact moment causing her to stand next to a boy of "her own caste." Since technology is developed, the protagonist muses, maybe he can morph his picture instead of the other boy. But he does not do it, transferring the poem from the levels of "self-discovery" or its consequent "violent action," to a hybrid moment of dissipating identity. He realises that this problem is not his alone, "yes, this is the experience of many persons in many places/ including women/do not read with me always" (61). And, finally he ends the poem by universalising his pain into the pain of some other Malayalees too. "There is a damned life endured alone by some Malayalees." Here the protagonist's identity avers a transfer and a denial. His poem is not just a Dalit poem, but the lamentation of "some" Malayalees. And, he is not just a Dalit poet, but the poet of all those who endure a damned life alone.

S. Joseph's poems delineate an experiential world which seems to slip out of the colonial/postcolonial confrontations with the 'other' to a level of "getting off" or "moving away" from the 'other,' with an empathy with the 'other'. This empathy comes from an understanding of one's own "hybridized identity," to borrow Homi Bhabha's term.

In his poem "On the Table," the protagonist is a thief who comes to a house which "fills simplicity within it/ fills happiness within it," not to steal money, but because such a life "tempted" him. He steals three books from the house, written by mainstream writers from far and near. Further, he takes a decorative mat and guavas for his children. In compensation, being a considerate thief, he leaves a "thief's autobiography" back in the house (*Uppante Kooval Varaykkunnu* 31-32).

The thief here, is not shown as vulgar or uncouth, but as civilized and sophisticated as the scene which tantalises him. He also seems to empathise with the inhabitants there. Describing the tasteful decorations within the house, he even spots a tear drop. The 'other' is not outside, but through desire has been internalised in such a way that the other's tears too are all too visible. Not only that, by leaving the thief's autobiography in the house, the Dalit poet's entry into the mainstream literary world, and its consequent internal rearrangement of the home that is Malayalam poetry, becomes inevitable. The oppressor and the oppressed merge here into the agonistic split of a hybrid persona in the postmodern Malayalee.

The story, but, does not end with the poem, for the thief-protagonist in the poem, has left the visible poetic space to further unseen spaces, unseen only to the eyes of mainstream literature. He did not just disappear, but he vanished by leaving his imprints not just in the place where he left, but all through the way. Going along the landscapes of his poems, one finds oneself in unfamiliar terrain, a whole new earth unearthed out of the subterranean folds of that earth, whose surface areas alone, were, till now, drawn by the upper caste writers. The disappearing, "bunking," then becomes a "leading," whose directions are as yet unknown, and, consequently, the feminist, postcolonial, marginalized, and, subaltern tools are as yet inadequate to measure its length, breadth, depth, or final destination. Joseph himself seems to assert this in his "A Letter to Malayalam Poetry" in which he invites (leads) Malayalam poetry to his own house:

"What you want is freedom, right?

That is all we have:

You can say what you like,

can bathe in the brook,

can chirp with the wag-tails

visiting the compound,

can sit on a mat on the veranda.

Mother and Father will

keep you company".

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