

## **GENERATIONS OF SILENCE: JOURNEYS OF THE EXILED IN O V VIJAYAN'S TALAMURAKAL**

### **Abstract**

The word Cosmopolitanism has largely been defined as rhetoric comfortable describing psychological identities, cultural geographies, political visions, aesthetic practices and ethical principles. As a conceptual and analytical category, cosmopolitanism also offers a means to articulate a contested language for lives lived across social borders. It can also be seen as an attitude of open engagement with unfamiliar people and places sympathetic perspective-taking, which places a positive value on openness to unfamiliar parts of the world. (Black 47). In other words, the term appears in recent scholarship as a free-floating category, which is insufficiently grounded in space and time (Mohanty 1), necessitating an understanding of alternative trajectories to the 'dominant versions' of cosmopolitanism (Mohanty ix).

### **Author**

**Dr Prathyaksh Janardhanan**

Assistant Professor

Faculty of Business Administration

GLS University

Ahmedabad, Gujarat

In The Introduction to *Cosmopolitanism* (2002) Breckridge defines the Cosmopolitanism of our times as:

Cosmopolitans are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility and bereft of these comforts and customs of national belonging today. Refugees, peoples of the diaspora and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitan community....Cultural pluralism recognises difference so long as the general category is still fundamentally understood within the national frame.... But it often fails to acknowledge the critique of modernity that minoritarian cosmopolitanisms embody in their historic witness to the twentieth century (Breckridge et al 4)

This chapter is an attempt to understand the conceptual category from below: from the point of view of the minoritarian communities, for whom the cultural elitist tag of the global cosmopolitan (Mohanty vii) could perhaps be a dream. Postcolonialism and Cosmopolitanism tend to concur on the question of how to live together in the world, despite the manifest differences (Bhabra 313) More specifically, this paper attempts to look at how casteist issues from a regional context get represented and articulated from within the larger framework of the nation-region axis since the regional novel in question here are a Malayalam novel by a renowned Malayalam novelist, O N Vijayan

It would be pertinent here to quickly encapsulate the key debates that have been central to our understanding of region and nation. In *Indigenous Imaginaries: Literature Region and Modernity* (2017), E V Ramakrishnan argues for the need to regionalise ( which essentially can be seen as a category to contest the essentialist claims of both the national and the local) Indian Literature through a deeper understanding of embedded cultural cosmologies in the literary texts of Indian Languages (Ramakrishnan viii). In the context of Kerala, the need to surpass the nation as the sole register of a regional encounter with modernity can be attempted through the idea of cosmopolitanism, because it provides theoretical resources to identify non-national cultural registers of Kerala Modernity ( Bose and Varughese 8).In his article titled "A Local Cosmopolitan: Kesari Balakrishnan Pillai and the Invention of Europe for a Modern Kerala', Dilip Menon argues that regional subjects have managed to negotiate global modernity in historically situated ways through transnational migration ( 132). Further, J Devika in 'Migration, Transnationalism, and Modernity: Thinking of Kerala's Many Cosmopolitanisms. argues that transnational migration has enabled different social groups to negotiate global modernity in concrete ways which resist thinking about modernity in Kerala along the nation-region axis, which can be seen as detrimental to the diversity of local cosmopolitanisms (Devika,127). On the other hand, the overemphasis on identities and communities inadvertently limits the possibilities that could be offered by cosmopolitanism as well (Bose and Varughese 9)

The chapter seeks to analyse whether local cosmopolitanisms can provide the much needed space to the minoritarian communities to articulate their voice from within. This would be seen through a close reading of O V Vijayan's *Talamurakal*. Caste as an institution and practice in South Asia has at best befuddled social anthropologists, political theorists and historians (Ganguly 5). Debates and counter debates on caste and its relationship with conceptual categories mentioned above are well documented. However, the discussions on caste cannot but briefly mention the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate. Briefly, one of the key areas of contention is seen in Gandhi's nationalism, which smacked an elitist ideological stance on

caste. This formed the foundation for Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi's Nationalist Appeasement model.

Further, Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1985) opines that Gandhian ideology was an 'intervention in the elite nationalist discourse', which aimed at a 'political appropriation of the subaltern classes' (Chatterjee 100). Ambedkar's criticism of the freedom struggle under Gandhi questioned its explicit focus on freedom from foreign rule and a rather weak focus on solving internal issues such as caste oppression. Ambedkar's dissent against this homogenization affirms the voice of the marginalised, which would have been silenced under the larger national discourses of secularisation and equality. This is exemplified through one of B R Ambedkar's exchanges with Mahatma Gandhi in 1931, where he wrote:

Gandhiji, I have no homeland. ... How can I call this land my homeland and this religion my own, wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink? ... If in my endeavour to secure human rights for my people, who have been trampled upon in this country for ages, I do any disservice to this country, it would not be a sin. (Quoted in Keer, 2009)

Ambedkar's criticism of the retrograde nature of casteism in India and the conspicuous apathy by the elite sections of the society sadly stands true even to this day. This is seen in Debjani Ganguly's *Caste, Colonialism and Counter Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste* (2005) which analyses the secular, institutional, presentism and pedagogical interpretations of the term 'caste' to showcase its inability to account for all the dimensions of human exploitation and oppression (Ganguly 239).

In the foreword to *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition* (2015), Gopal Guru attempts to succinctly encapsulate the key debates on caste at both the nation and the regional levels. He traces modernity to two key developments: the setback to the Marxist paradigm and the failure of liberalism to contain the different social forces within the permissible limits (Bose and Varughese ix). In the post-independent era, modernity came to be closely associated with the Nehruvian ideas of development, but what got missed out, according to Gopal Guru was the modernist conception as envisioned by thinkers from the margins (Bose and Varughese ix). Further, he argues that the thinkers such as Jotirao Phule, Bhimrao Ambedkar, and Tarabhai Shinde had to borrow intellectual resources from colonial modernity due to their lack of access to the local epistemological field. He ends by arguing that democracy as a value and modernity (as a prerequisite) to sustain it have been accessible to the upper castes much earlier, who have used democracy to keep its gains for themselves (Bose and Varughese xv).

The history of caste oppression and the resistance against it in Kerala is similar to the rest of India in the sense of the dominance by the upper castes such as the Namboothiris (upper-caste Brahmins). The resistance against caste oppression in Kerala, however, was slightly different. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the resistance against the caste system was initiated through the intervention of the British missionaries and the propagation of Western education.

Resistance against caste oppression was mediated through the intervention of the reformist saint Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928), who consecrated a stone at Arivipurram and named it the 'Ezhava Shiva' in 1888 (Kumar, 248). Further, there have been several social movements led by social reformers such as Chattampi Swamikal (1853-1941) and Ayankali (1846-1941). The establishment of social institutions such as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) and Nair Service Society (NSS) in 1903 and 1914 respectively also contributed to the upliftment of the lower castes and resisted caste-based oppression. The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) and Guruvayoor Satyagraha (1931), which aimed at providing complete access for all castes to temples, are some of the key landmarks of the struggle against caste oppression in Kerala (Kumar 260). However, the discourse of dissent also introduces the paradox of transforming humans into victims. These symbolic acts of temple entry movements shared eating and even inter-caste marriages implicitly trap them in the discourse of victimhood (Ramakrishnan 62). This enunciates the need for a departure from the form of the novel, to move beyond the logic of modernity and to focus on the specificity of the everyday experience of social exclusion (Ramakrishnan 63).

In the chapter titled "Narrating a Community: The secular Modern and the Discourse of marginality in the fiction of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer" which appeared in *Indigenous Imaginaries: Literature, Region, Modernity* (2017), E V Ramakrishnan explores the contradictions between the ideological thrust of the mainstream novel and the compulsions of the communitarian perspective of the novelist from the margins (Ramakrishnan 110). Although the novel as a form is unique in its ability to embody the 'speech of the people, the novel as a narrative of modernity cannot accommodate the culture-specific aspects of a minority community (Ramakrishnan 114). This foregrounds the need to create a discourse which does not just contain differences but articulates them as well, which can be seen as an attempt to move away from the solid discourses of modernity and identity (Ramakrishnan 126).

The entire oeuvre of O V Vijayan (1930-2005), one of the pioneer modern Malayalam novelists, can be seen as a constant struggle against the need to experiment with the form itself. Being from a lower caste, himself, Vijayan too faced the limitations of the form, so that it can at the very least represent the traditionally disenfranchised sections of the Indian society (Ramakrishnan 63). This seems to inform his experiments with the form of the novel.

His first novel *Khasakinte Ithihasam* (The Legends of Khasak) revolutionised the modern Malayalam novels and the social imagination of the Malayalee reader sphere. The novel marked a departure from the moribund social realist traditions, which somehow had lost their capacity to represent a society caught in moral dilemmas which could not be resolved in a simplistic manner (Ramakrishnan 144). His second novel *Dharmapuram* (The Saga of Dharmapuri), a dictatorial novel, mounted a scathing criticism of the Emergency declared in India. The scatological and pornographic imagery used in the novel depicted the deprivation of the modern nation state. Further, the novels such as *Gurusagaram*, *Pravachakante Vazhi* and *Madhuram Gayatri* focused on creating an alternative moral vision to oppose and question the fraudulent nature of Indian modernity.

O. V Vijayan's last novel *Talamurakal* (1997), attempts to narrate the issue of caste in Indian society. Set against the background of the Ponmudi household (Tharavad) and their lifelong struggle against the caste system, the novel raises pertinent questions on the

complexities of the caste system This is seen in the prologue to the novel where Vijayan states that apart from his loving father, the novel dedicates itself to his grandfather, who emboldened him to develop the practice of asking big and important questions. True to the Prologue, the novel raises pertinent questions on the strategies employed by the lower castes to resist the dominant caste systems. This is seen in how the three generations of the Ponmudi Tharavad attempt to get rid of their lower caste status through exposure to Sanskrit, English education, and finally conversion all of which don't produce the desired social ascension.

As the title suggests, the novel details the struggle of three generations against casteist exclusion: beginning with the grand patriarch Chamariappan (who later converts to Christianity and becomes Theodore). The novel is narrated from the perspective of Chandran, the grandson of Chamariappan who is a member of the third generation. The first chapter titled "Ramabhanam" (The arrow of Ram) begins with little Chandran listening to the recital of Ramayana by his grandmother Devaki (Vijayan 7). The opening chapter also inaugurates the role of English education as a counter to caste oppression. This is seen when Chandran, in an attempt to rid Chelly of his fear of Ram's arrow (because he had heard that Ram had killed Shambuka, a lower caste sage for learning Sanskrit), rechristens him as Jesus (Yesu Christu in the original) (Vijayan 9).

In the article "Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading Saraswathivijayam" (1997), Dilip Menon argues how Partha Chatterjee's inner domain framework as outlined in *Nation and its Fragments* is essentially elite and Brahmanical because the inner domain sourced itself from a 'spiritual domain', which implicitly excluded caste (Menon 292). This argument is furthered in, Akheel Bilgrami in "Two Concepts of secularism" (1994) which argues how religious minorities (and lower castes) have always been treated unequally (Bilgrami 212). Nevertheless, Dilip Menon argues that while the lower castes may have been excluded from Chatterjee's elitist model, the access to colonial modernity (education in particular) allows them access to the knowledge of the discourses which had subordinated them. (Menon 292). Missionary discourse in the late nineteenth century enabled the oppressed lower caste people to mount a powerful critique against traditional caste hierarchies. The late nineteenth-century lower caste Malayalam novels showcased a vision of equality and brotherhood through Christianity. These novels focused on travel, escape from slavery and social mobility through English education, which in turn endowed the marginalised subject to return rich and endowed with values from abroad that enabled them to resist casteism (Menon 2006).

However, the novel depicts the lack of elitist caste status in terms of an existential loss not as an issue of monetary affluence but as a deep sense of loss from within. This is seen in the desperate attempts by Chandran's ancestors for a higher societal status (which implicitly meant Brahminhood), which forced them to gain it by learning Sanskrit education to raping Brahmin women using their monetary clout (Vijayan 12).

Krishnan's journey to Kashi and Benaras to learn Sanskrit so that he could break the codes of the system can be read as an attempt to achieve Brahminhood by mastering the Vedas. His interactions with Chattunni Vaidyar (a lower caste Ayurveda physician who believes that physicians are above castes because they can touch all castes alike) broaden his perspective of the caste system. Krishnan's journey can be read as the search for his identity and a desperate attempt to transcend their lower societal status. Krishnan's journey (both physical and mental) can be read as a quest in search of the intricacies of the

Sanskrit/brahminic tradition so that he can get a better understanding of the dominant system. The journey thus can be read as one of self-realization and purging of the self for a better understanding of the person's own identity (Vijayan 13-17).

The futility of Krishnan's quest is exemplified in the Chapter titled "Karmapathangal" (the ways of Karma) when he throws Manusmriti and Bhagavad Gita in the Ganges (Vijayan 32). This act validates the inefficacy of countering social oppression through an understanding of the discourses that underlie the oppression. This is also seen when Gopalan ruminates over the futility of fighting against caste oppression because acts such as conversion to Christianity had not affected the deep-rooted caste system. He realizes that all actions against the caste system were futile, and would it be possible to ever breathe the air of equality (Vijayan 37).

Another example of societal transcendence by force is seen in the chapter titled "Swasikunna kallukal" (The Stones that Breathe) when Appu Karnavar buys a Brahmin concubine named Sivakamy, in the hopes that she would be able to teach him the Gayatri mantra (which is one of the key mantras of the elite Brahminic Vedic system). However, his inability to utter the words correctly frustrates his endeavour (Vijayan 26). The inability to learn and speak the elite language shows the deep rootedness of the hegemonic caste system in India. This seems to cognate with the arguments made by Suresh Kane in his essay titled "This is not Babasaheb's Annihilation of Caste" published in *Hatred in the Belly: Politics behind Appropriation of Dr Ambedkar's writings* (2015) Suresh Kane attempts a scathing criticism of Arundhati Roy's Introduction to the *Annihilation of Caste* in the Book "The Doctor and the Saint" because Roy's misreading of Ambedkar's seminal work hints at her elitist status. Further, Suresh Kane quotes and seconds Kanshi Ram's speech at the first International conference at Kaula Lumpur, Malaysia where he argues that as long as the caste system is beneficial to the upper castes, it will never be annihilated (Ambedkar Age Collective Location 490).

The conversation between Millie and Gopalan also shows that neither conversion nor Sanskrit education emancipates the lower castes and offers a clear social upward mobility. The continuous reference to Christianity and conversion foregrounds the role of Christian missionaries in Kerala and many lower caste people converted to rid themselves of caste oppression and to escape poverty. The novel also hints at some of the key social reform movements such as the temple movements such as the Vaikom Satyagraham and the allied movements which fought for equality in entering the temples. This is seen in Chamiarppan's futile movement to open the Kalpathy Temple for the lower castes.

The novel questions the oppression by the upper castes, through the examples of Gopalan, who converts to Imtiaz and Chamirappan's son-in-law Vellapan who argues that despite being in the police force, he is constantly reminded of his lower caste status (Vijayan 171).

The predicament of Vellayappana as discussed in the Chapter titled "Snehatinu vendi" (For Love) also foregrounds the deep rootedness of the caste system in India. Despite being a part of the British police force, which gave him minor leverage in terms of authority, Velayappan is continuously affected by the brahminical caste oppression. This reminds us of Ambedkar's argument that caste oppression existed in India much before colonisation and this enunciates the need for an internal criticism of the Indian societal system. This is also

one of the major reasons why social reformers from Jotibha Phule to Sree Narayana Guru focused on eradicating the evil of the caste system. The novel draws heavily from the struggles of the social reformers to argue the inevitability of caste oppression. The character of Vellayappan as an agent of the state thus embodies the ambiguities, conflicts and paradoxes of the caste system.

A more subversive approach toward questioning caste and marginalisation is seen in Pavitrana's activities in the Paraya (lower castes than the Ezhavas) slums. Pavitrana, the elder son of Chamariappan, fraternizes with the Paraya castes and works for their upliftment. This has been shown in sharp contrast to the actions of Krishnan, who travels to Benaras to attain brahminhood. The example of Pavitrana also brings back Vijayan's criticism of Marxism as an ineffective medium to effect social change. This is seen in the chapter titled "Madhura Svasthyam" where Suku a friend of Pavitrana informs him that he had joined the party. Pavitrana's cheeky response to the news shows that joining the party was as ineffective as his grandfather had converted to Christianity. In other words, both the acts did not mobilize any social change (Vijayan 101)

In the chapter titled "Kavalalaya Sudharshanam" Chandran describes Gopalan's uncles' long letter, which reads as a declaration. It discusses the futile attempts to question and subvert the deep-rooted caste system in India through Sanskritization or conversion. The chapter ends by arguing that the only possible alternative to resist the caste system is to embrace western education and learn English, which would be the tool to emancipate people from the oppression of caste (Vijayan 282)

Towards the end of the novel in the chapter titled "Shanti, Shanti Shanti", we see the birth of the son of Chandran and Rosemary, which they argue could be the solution to the problem of caste because the child is born of a mixed breed and the sexual act attempts a transcendence of boundaries. This is exemplified by the name of the child 'Theodore Vel Wagner', which fuses the past (Chemeriayappan was rechristened as Theodore) and the present (the surname of Rosemary) (Vijayan 284).

This chapter attempted to read *Talamurakal* in an attempt to depict the experience of the socially disadvantaged and the strategies employed by them to negotiate their way through the oppression from their home first. As discussed above, *Talamurakal* attempts a critical analysis of the caste system in Kerala. The novel which progresses through three generations, and many centuries of oppression, also focuses on strategies (discussed above) such as conversion and learning English.

The desperate attempts by the Ponmudi landlords remind us of M N Srinivas's argument in *Social Change in Modern India* (1972) where he argues that one of the key trends of societal ascension is that the lower castes Sanskritise and the upper castes westernise (Quoted in Pandian, 1737). However, the novel showcases the ineffectiveness of the conventional methods of social ascension: Sanskritization, and Westernization (through English education and conversion). The symbolic degeneration of the once affluent Tharavad (due to their machinations for upper-caste mobility and their stagnant growth as opposed to the changing times), the foiled attempts to ascend the social ladder and the suicide of Chandran and Rosemary at the end of the novel all hint at the inevitable silencing and symbolic exile of the subaltern. The newborn who bridges the past (Chamirappan) and the

present (Chandran's wife) is shown to have been born into an uncertain world, and might not have to continue the fight for equality in an unequal world.

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