

A DALIT FEMINIST READING OF THE EARLY SUBALTERN NOVELS IN MALAYALAM

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Abstract:

This paper intends to study the early subaltern novels in Malayalam- Mrs Frances Wright Collins' Ghathakavadhom (1877), Arch Deacon Koshy's Pulelikunju (1882), Potheri Kunjambu's Saraswativijayam (1892) and Joseph Muliyil's Sukumari (1897) - from a dalit feminist perspective. The attempt is to analyse the representation of the dalit female in such novels which were critical of the native tradition in general and the dalit question in particular. The study is rooted in assumption that the particular question is addressed only minimally in such works. But even this minimal representation, knowingly or unknowingly from the part of the novelists, is deemed significant in the backdrop of the strategic exclusion of dalit females from the domains of both mainstream history and canonical novels of the said period. The discourse concerning the minimal representation or even non-representation of dalit females in the select works will cast light on the hitherto unexplored dimensions of the early subaltern fiction in Malayalam.

Key words: Early fiction, dalit, subaltern, feminism, representation

Introduction

“The lower caste Malayalam novels of the nineteenth century mainly addressed the questions of self, community and society” (Menon 41). Besides, there are efforts to place the question of dalit womanhood, though at minimal scope, in those novels which include, Mrs Frances Wright Collins' Ghathakavadhom (1877), Arch Deacon Koshy's Pulelikunju (1882), Potheri Kunjambu's Saraswativijayam (1892) and Joseph Muliyil's Sukumari (1897). Dilip Menon counts the issues relating to women as part of the troubled present addressed by the early novels in Malayalam (41). Barring Pulelikunju, the mentioned novels accommodated a small number

of dalit female characters, but within a constricted canvas, thereby effecting only swift glances into the true nature of the changing position of the gendered subalterns of the time.

The early subaltern novels chiefly being an outcry against the prevailing caste system in Kerala, it is no surprise that the discussion on the condition of dalit women in the novels occurs within a restricted framework. The social movements of the nineteenth century never considered either the emancipation of women or the issues of national importance as part of their central agenda. The principal aim was to counter the caste prejudices stitched on to the collective consciousness of the native people. The inauguration of Christian missionary activities in Kerala during the concerned period, driven by the ideals of Victorian morality and colonial modernity, aimed fissures at the core of the prevailing system marked by the caste hierarchy. The said novels were offshoots of such a grand narrative.

While sticking to the Christian missionary propaganda of destabilising the prevailing social order, the mentioned novels incorporated certain accounts of the injustice and tortures that the subaltern people had to suffer from. Such portrayals focussed on the collective experience of the lower caste people in general that there are only a few references to the plight of the womenfolk of the subaltern castes. The cause of dalit women is merely hinted at or passively referred to in such narratives, as it was not part of the novelists' principal schema. The question of dalit women never assumes the status of even a subsidiary concern in relation to the already stated focal point of such novels.

In all of the early subaltern novels, there is a notion of family as an ideal arrangement in common. Another recurring element is the rendering of the violation of dalit female physique, except in *Sukumari*. While the former is a pointer to the impending modernity, the second commonality is an indicator of the inhuman subjugation of the gendered subalterns which recurred in the immediate past and contemporaneity of the concerned novels. The argument is not that there were deliberate attempts from the part of the writers to contrast the bleak past and the somewhat brighter present of the dalit/subaltern females within the narrative. This parallelism may have been realised quite unknowingly as the writers were seriously indulged in their mission of promoting Christianity through letters.

“In the lower caste Malayalam novels, it is the consolidation of a family that is the issue” (58). This is evident in the description of family as a structural requisite in each of the subaltern novels of the century. Though this formation of familial structures is thoroughly linked to the consolidation of patriarchal notions, the dalit women may have felt the domestic

space as protective to a certain extent. Having freed from forced dislocation and separation from intimate relations as experienced by Vellachi, a dalit lady character, in *Saraswativijayam*, there might have been a rise of an impression of individual consciousness as integral part of the dalit women's existence in the period addressed by the novelists. Being a collective of individuals who could be transplanted at the will of the master, slave castes acquired a space of their own in the form of family only towards the second half of the nineteenth century owing to the colonial intervention in the prevailing caste system in Kerala, through acts like the abolition of slavery.

In a sense, the formation of a private space was liberatory for the dalit women. It should also be admitted that that closed space has become a confinement for them, which remain so even now. Yet the consolidation of .

family as a sub unit of patriarchy should not be regarded as a tool to refute the liberatory zeal as idealised by the formation of dalit homes in the nineteenth century. “ While at one level this discourse of the family was premised on making the woman the subordinate partner, it also envisaged the production of a layer scope for her life- both in the construction of a loving conjugality as well as creating of the modern, civilised norms” (Menon 67).

As mentioned earlier, the early subaltern novels also addressed the grave reality of violence unleashed towards dalit women. Dilip Menon points to this dimension in operation within the imagination of the lower caste novels, “lower caste women were more ‘flesh’ than ‘body’ ...they could be bought, sold or violated at will” (69). There are instances of the violation of dalit female body in *Ghathakavadhom*, *Pulleilikunju*, and *Saraswativijayam*, which shall be noted in detail in the respective pieces on the novels in the coming pages. Certain questions of social significance including those of caste and gender discriminations recur in these works that they provide tools for understanding and analysing specific corners of historicity. “In fact the recurrence of issues relating to women, kinship, and caste argue for a closer affinity with regional resonances of the debates about the status of women in colonial India” (41).

The question of dalit femalehood in *Ghathakavadhom*

Mrs. Frances wright Collins pursued the Protestant missionary propaganda while writing *Ghathakavadhom*. Her intention was to project the relative merits of Protestantism over the native Suriani Christian faction in Kerala. Koshy Curien, the antagonist of the novel, is a Suriani Christian landlord who doesn't allow the converted Christians, the major workforce in

his land, to observe Sabbath. He brutally tortures Old Poulusa, a converted Christian from Pulaya community, and his family resulting in the accidental murder of the latter's infant grandson. He undergoes a transformation from being an embodiment of evil to a reformed man towards the end of the novel as his religious affinity gets transfixed towards Protestantism. The marginalisation of dalit people becomes a focal point in the narrative as it fulfils the author's intention of projecting the barbaric mind-set of the affluent families within the Suriani Christian church. Though there is no deliberate attempt from the part of the novelist to address the question of dalit women, she introduces three subaltern women characters, who are Old Poulusa's wife, his daughter and a woman participating in a prayer group, all of whom are devoid of proper names. This miniscule representation is to merely complement the somewhat detailed documentation of their male counterparts in the novel. The irony is that Old Poulusa, the dalit male whose representation is supplemented by the dalit female characters, is provided a space in the plot just to increment the narrative about his landlord. The minimal depiction of the gendered subalterns is at the bottom of such a chain.

Mrs Frances Wright Collins introduces a few dalit characters in *Ghathakavadhom*, which addresses the predicament of a dalit family labouring under a Suriani Christian landlord named Koshy Curien. The dalit family includes Old Poulusa, his wife, children and grandson. In the first chapter itself, Old Poulusa's wife is introduced. The scene involves an accidental yet brutal murder of her first little grandson in the hands of the landlord, the slayer. The infant was on her hips when Koshy Curien aimed a deadly blow at the old couple. "...and that blow, that deadly blow fell- where? Not on the old man, not on the old woman; but the poor innocent babe rolled from its grandmother to the earth a little corpse. A fearful shriek rent the air" (Collins 17).

This fearful shriek is the first heard voice of a dalit female in Malayalam fiction. She rushed away with the little child affrighted. It was a small group of men, who assembled there, who shouted "It is murder! It is murder!" This loud cry marks the first words by dalits ever represented in a Malayalam novel. Still the dalit women remained without any potential for raising a voice of rebellion. They only shrieked and stood mute spectators to the horrid events which affected their life badly.

The second dalit female character mentioned in the novel is the youngest daughter of Old Poulusa, the slave. She is without a name and obviously not even a mild cry of her is recorded. She is described as a dark face half hid among the trees, the sight of which interrupted

Mariam's, Koshy Curien's daughter, recounting of a biblical story to her siblings and grandmother. This dalit lady was seeking aid from Mariam's grandmother towards ailing Old Poulusa, who was brutally assaulted by his master. Like most of the dalit female characters in the nineteenth century Malayalam novels, her presence is merely hinted at.

Ghathakavadhom allows a dalit female character to utter a sentence towards the end of the novel as a slave woman participating in a prayer group reacts, "Aye, that must be a glorious place for who suffer so much on earth" (77). This is in response to a man's description of paradise as stated in the Bible. This statement by the old lady reveals two dogmas instilled in the dalit female psyche by the Christian missionary preaching, which include the indication that only Christianity can provide solace for them from the oppressive apparatus and the recognition of dalit women as one of the most wretched sects in the world. The sentence has an emancipatory zeal around it and is pregnant with long-time hope of oppressed communities for liberty and justice which still remains a distant dream.

The representation of dalit women in *Pullelikunju*

In *Pullelikunju*, Arch Deacon Koshy proposed to destabilise the traditional order within Hinduism in Kerala by projecting the caste hierarchy and idol worshipping as meaningless. This novel in the form of debate between Rama Panickar and Kunju has three chapters, each dealing with irrationality of caste system, the meaninglessness of idol worshipping and the pro human face of Christianity respectively. Rama Panickar, a representative of hindu orthodoxy, is challenged by Kunju, a reformed upper caste hindu who has a big mouth about the merits of Christianity. Their debate centres on the visible irrationality behind the practices associated with caste system, the deliberate exposing of which caters to the central motive of the author, that is to popularise the tenets of Christianity.

In this novel sans any dalit characters, there are references to the plight of dalit women under the overarching apparatus of the caste system, which include detailed description of a fatal cruelty unleashed upon a pregnant Pulaya woman and an historical allusion to Shannar revolt of the nineteenth century. The heart wrenching depiction of the inhuman torture suffered by a group of Pulaya people, which comprised the hapless pregnant woman and a few kids, at the hands of upper caste men scorches the readers' conscience. The allusion to the Shannar revolt, the first caste linked revolt in Kerala which witnessed the active functioning of the agency of the subaltern women, provides historical validity to the milieu addressed in the novel.

Both references correspond to the novelist's purpose of challenging the follies of the caste system.

Written by a Christian missionary, *Pullelikunju* is a critique of the native social order in Kerala which was as determined and arranged according to the inhuman rationale functioning within the caste system. The novel embodies the Christian missionary propaganda of undermining the native religion thereby promoting the tenets of Christianity. This work becomes significant to subaltern studies as it touches upon certain predicament of the dalit life while exposing the darker side of Hinduism as structured by the caste hierarchy. As stated earlier, there are two occasions in the novel with references to dalit female life of the nineteenth century.

Kunju, the protagonist, challenges Rama Panickar's staunch defence of caste system and the brahminical hegemony. At a point, he asks a pertinent question regarding the curtailment of Shudra women's right to wear upper cloth. While asking the question, Kunju's concern is solely with the Nair women, the highest caste among the Shudra communities. Nair women weren't allowed to cover their breasts in front of Brahmin people. Kunju's question indirectly points to the predicament of the women of slave castes regarding their imposed customary dress code as well. He asks,

Why should a Shudra woman uncover her breasts while in the presence of Brahmin men? How did chastity become not part of the life of Nair ladies? It has become quite impossible for the Shudra women to pass through the public road without seeing the nudity of Brahmin men. They can't bath in rivers without seeing such public display of nudity (Koshy 35).

This passage is an outburst of a Nair man over the pathetic state of women of his community. The slave women suffered certain extreme forms of the curtailment that the upper caste women had undergone. The former had to suffer from inhuman treatments of a multitude of proportions. The Shannar revolt of the nineteenth century, the first recorded rebellion against the caste system in Kerala, was the beginning of a certain phase of resistance to the age old crude reality of oppression that the dalit women had to cope with. There is a passing reference to that historical event in *Pullelikunju*. Rama Panickar asks Kunju, "Haven't you heard of the uprisings in places like Erani, ensued when Shannar women dared to don the upper cloth? That rebellion is a testimony to the fact that people daring to subvert the illogical traditional customs can certainly result cracks in the system at their will" (35).

It is a surprise that Rama Panickar, an ardent casteist, approves the Shannar revolt, a lower caste rebellion. This allusion to the revolt, which occurred in three phases in the nineteenth century, is one of the few instances in which the dalit female self is mentioned knowingly or unknowingly by the novelist. This allusion also points to the fact that the contemporary narratives of the nineteenth century were inclusive of such subaltern movements while the mainstream historians casted blind eyes towards them.

There are no dalit characters in *Pullelikunju*, not to speak of any dalit female ones. The dalit life and the dalit female self is merely mentioned in the novel. Yet there is a description of an unfortunate incident in which a group of dalit people getting brutally tortured by a few upper caste men. Kunju, the protagonist, gives an account of it while asserting his changed stance regarding the practice of untouchability. In his former days of being a hard-core practitioner of untouchability, a group of upper caste men, in which he was an accomplice, unleashed violence upon a group of Pulaya people who accidentally came in contact with the former on a public road while returning from a day's work. The incident was as follows,

The elite group of upper caste men were journeying to Trivandrum. A group of Pulaya people carrying the bundles of rice harvested were spotted on the way. The subaltern group ran away lest they should be attacked by the caste hindus for allegedly polluting them. Kunju and his fellow travellers unleashed violence on a pregnant Pulaya lady who couldn't run fast. She was around eight month pregnant. She and the kids in the hapless pulaya group couldn't pace up. One caste hindu named Adiyottil Pappu grabbed a Pulaya child by its feet and beat the pregnant woman on her back with that fragile body of the child. She fell on the ground on delivered instantly. The atrocities continued further (38).

Kunju was about to give further details of the assault. But Rama Panickar intervened to stop the narration as he couldn't stand the description of brutal violence anymore. As George Irumpayam observes, "Here is a realistic portrayal of the condition of Pulayas who were treated as slaves. The upper castes treated them as though they were mere animals" (*Aadhyakaala Malayala Novel* 38). There were many such instances of dalits being brutally assaulted in the history of Kerala. The account of brutal tortures meted out to a dalit congregation in *Pullelikunju* points to the hardly spoken of series of violations of the dalit female body in history. "Certain incidents and characters in *Pullelikunju* are more realistic and natural than those of *Ghathakavadhom*. Although Mrs Collins takes the life and conditions of Old Poulusa

as one of the major themes of the novel, she couldn't describe the wretchedness of the Pulaya people more vehemently the way Arch Deacon Koshy did" (40). Dalit women were one of the most victimised sects in the history of Kerala. They suffered from the patriarchy within both caste and religion. Being doubly marginalised on the basis of caste and gender aggravated their condition.

Reading *Saraswativijayam* from a dalit feminist point of view

"*Saraswativijayam* exposes the vices and follies of the upper castes and raises sword against the social injustices of the time" (*Aadhyakaala Malayala Novel* 141). This novel presents a seemingly utopian plot in which a Pulaya man becomes a civil court judge in a case in which a Nambudiri man is the accused. By tracing the upward mobility of Marathan, a pulaya man, who eventually become a judge in a civil court, the novelist posits education coupled with conversion to Christianity as the most feasible method of freeing the marginalised from the clutches of caste hierarchy. Being indulged in the account of the progression of a slave man (Marathan) to becoming a man of authority which runs in parallel to the transformation of uncivilised man (Kuberan Nambudhiri) into a refined man, Potheri Kunjambu retracts from detailing the condition of the dalit woman during his time, much like his fellow novelists of the century. The only dalit female character in the novel is Marathan's mother named Vellachi. To a certain extent, her miserable condition following the missing of her son in the beginning of the novel underscores the wretched condition of the gendered subalterns of the time.

Saraswativijayam follows a linear plot development with focus on two characters, Kuberan Nambudhiri and Marathan, a pulaya man. The former, a landlord from Brahmin community, goes absconding after being alleged of murdering Marathan. He gets arrested after fifteen years. When he is presented in the court for prosecution, it is revealed that the judge chairing the case was Marathan, whom he was falsely accused of killing. Religious conversion to Christianity and access to formal western education helped Marathan in this speedy utopian upward mobility.

"*Saraswativijayam* corresponds to the seeding of the concepts of society and individual freedom" (*Aadhyakaala Malayala Novel* 89). Marathan's mother is the lone Dalit female character appearing in *Saraswativijayam*. While the gendered subalterns in *Ghathakavadhom* and *Pullelikunju* are without proper names, Marathan's mother is addressed Vellachi. She is the first dalit female character in Malayalam fiction who was addressed with a proper name in place of pronouns or certain adjectives like Old Woman and so. While the lady speaking in the

prayer group in *Ghathakavadhom* delivers only one sentence, Marathan's mother in *Saraswativijayam* speaks in at least three occasions. Her statement is officially recorded during one of the crucial moments in the plot. Her being the second witness in the murder case of her son grants her a mobility as she gets a chance to speak in a strictly official context which was hitherto not open to subaltern people. Though she is diligent about not drawing the wrath of the privileged castes by revealing all that she knows, her words mark the initial moments of a very slow paced upward social mobility that the subaltern people achieved after the abolition of slavery in Kerala in the mid nineteenth century.

Vellachi appears for the first time in the novel when the antagonist named Kuberan Namboodhiri quizzes her about Marathan whom the latter's servant is believed to have murdered at his order for allegedly singing a song in the public, thereby polluting the ears of the master. The dalits were barred from singing songs in the public. The landlord asks Vellachi who trained him in writing and music. She replies, "It was a foreigner who taught him writing and music. There is a school for lower class people in Ancharakandi. Marathan had told that the white man taught the Bible there."

This revelation infuriates Kuberan that he asks Vellachi why she didn't inform him of Marathan's education. He couldn't stand the slave castes being provided with formal education by the white men. He orders a penance for Vellachi and family that they should immediately vacate the hut where they lived. He also orders that she should not be employed in his land and the neighbouring premises. This point in her life signifies one of the most wretched situations a dalit can come across in life, being denied of a shelter and livelihood, that too immediately following the missing of her son. This pathetic state of Vellachi and two children points to the extremely subordinated status of the gendered subalterns of the time.

In the second chapter, there is a brief narrative of what Vellachi had been through after dispersing from the trial scene headed by Kuberan. The description is as follows,

Vellachi and her children reached their home by dusk. There were none in the hut which remained in the state as they left in the morning. Vellachi went in search of her missing son in the neighbouring premises. None knew anything about him. Consoling themselves by believing that Marathan might have gone to Ancharakandi, the mother and kids went to bed. (43)

Here, the novelist courses to describe the hut where Vellachi and family dwelled. He gives a bleak description of a dilapidated and congested domestic space where the gendered subalterns managed their household duties. In his description, the narrator is particular that the hut has no windows. This signifies the wretched beings' limited access to the world outside.

The plight of Vellachi is described in detail in the second chapter. She becomes frantic the next day as Marathan is still missing. She realises that he has not been to Ancharakandi. Along with her children, she goes to Kuberan Namboodhiri and express their inconsolable grief over Marathan's missing. Kuberan showed no compassion towards them. As entrusted by him, a man named Ramankutty Nambiar made sure that the mother and kids had left the hut. Vellachi was around 45 then. She was a widow too. Marathan was around 16 and his siblings were aged 14 and 12 respectively.

The narrator gives a day by day account of the tragic events in the life of Vellachi,

The landlord ordered her to leave her hut. But she was hopeful that he might change his mind. She confirmed that her son was missing. Two days after Kuberan's order, she was forcefully removed from her hut. The landlord's servants confiscated the few valuables left there. Vellachi and her kids were without a shelter on that rainy day. This was on the fourth day of Marathan's missing. Only God knows what may happen to them on the next day. (46).

In all these descriptions, Vellachi is a submissive figure. She doesn't battle the injustice that her family has to suffer from. But in the fourth chapter she gets somewhat empowered as she was made the second witness in the murder case of Marathan. Her statement being recorded for a highly formal and official purpose points to the slightly empowered state of the slave castes in the second half of the nineteenth century. There are many crucial socio economic factors behind the formation of this agency of the dalit women which began with the Shannar revolt, augmented slightly by the abolition of slavery on its course.

The cause of dalit women in *Sukumari*

In *Sukumari*, Joseph Muliyl presents the lives of a group of converted Christians from Tiyya community. Those characters are ardent followers of Christianity that their life seems to be very reformed and bereft of any hardships induced by the caste hierarchy. They feel liberated from the holds of the caste orthodoxy that their prime concern is not about how to survive but how to lead a perfect Christian life. Unlike the ill-fated dalit lady characters of the other early

subaltern novels, the titular character and fellow female characters in *Sukumari* never encounter any caste related oppression. Moreover, this novel presents a reformed world where the gendered subalterns experience equality and liberty.

“Though an artistic failure, there is certain historical significance for *Sukumari*, the last Malayalam novel in the nineteenth century...It reflects the social changes that took place in the northernmost part of Kerala” (*Malayala Novel* 162). In *Sukumari*, the novelist describes the supposedly emancipated or enlightened life of the converted Christians from the tiyya community. Unlike the dalit lady characters of *Ghathakavadhom*, *Pullelikunju* and *Saraswativijayam*, there is no caste bound or gender related predicament in the life of the major female subaltern characters in *Sukumari*. Instead, they enjoy a sort of upward social mobility. There is a social acceptance to their existence as free individuals with choices of their own. It seems like a conscious attempt from the part of the novelist to highlight the liberation of subaltern hindus from age old restraints as one of the upshots of religious conversion to Christianity.

The subaltern female characters of the novel include Sukumari, Karuna and others. They are free to take their own decisions. They wield power from the uplifted status of being the converted Christians. Interestingly, *Sukumari* has an eponymous heroine, a subaltern woman who is a prized member of the nineteenth century titular female characters from upper castes like Indulekha, Meenakshi and Sharada.

The novel also represents the sprouting days of the upward mobility of the hitherto marginalised communities like Ezhava, Tiyya, Christian and Muslim, which have become an economic and political force to reckon with whereas the dalit communities are still to match up with the pace of upward mobility of those communities. The dalit communities were not provided with the initial momentum that the other communities had in the nineteenth century itself. This disparity in the initial push is evident in the minimal mobility of the dalit female characters in *Slayer Slain*, *Pullelikunju* and *Saraswativijayam*, which is in stark contrast to the almost fully liberated status of the subaltern female characters in *Sukumari*.

Conclusion

There is no detailed representation of the dalit women's agency in the nineteenth century subaltern novels in Malayalam. As stated earlier, the focus was on exposing the evils of the caste system and to highlight the relative merits of Christianity. The novels introduced a

handful of subaltern characters, among whom the female representatives were very few in number. Yet there is a minimal scope for understanding certain layers of the wretched condition of the gendered subalterns. These works also point to the formation of home as an inevitable arrangement for the dalit people which may have direct bearings upon the slightly

elevated status of the gendered subalterns. Besides, the depiction of the violence unleashed upon the dalit female body in the novels, of which the critics are of the observation that such representations have historical basis, also adds to the scope of dalit feminist reading of those novels. The caste patriarchy crushed the Dalit female self under the heavy load of unreasonable restrictions bound to her body. The objectification of the female body remains the basic norm as far as the functioning of patriarchal agencies anywhere in the world is concerned.

As the discussed novels reveal, the marginalisation of the Dalit women occur within the conjoint circles of caste, society and family. The brahminical patriarchy regulates them by denying the dignity of body. For instance, the curtailment of fundamental right for proper dressing is a sort of infringement on the Dalit female body. The question of gender identity is at work as far as the minimal existence of the gendered subalterns as social animals are concerned. Family is the most intimate circle where the forces of intimidation occur in more frequency. The patriarchal figures within the Dalit homes are agents of coercive measures upon the hapless women. Though the said novelists abstain from detailing on the dalit women's predicament within the domestic space, it doesn't mean that they were immune to the violence from the male members of the family. The novelists ignored their cause as it was not even a lesser concern within their propaganda.

The reformatory zeal of colonialism which had a crucial role in the formation of Dalit female agency is contrary to the oppressing strategies of the colonial enterprise which worsened the conditions of black people. Colonialism, for which slave trade was an essential practice for vested interests in commerce, was alarming and destructive for the plight of black community. Colour discrimination added to the plight. The Dalit women were not victimised like their African counterparts as far as colonialism is concerned. Instead, they seized energy and momentum for their fight against the caste patriarchy, which was indirectly challenged by the western set up.

As opposed to the brahminical patriarchy which lasted for many centuries by excruciating the Dalit life, the colonial patriarchy that was in operation for two centuries seeded certain reformative changes for the Dalit community as a whole and the Dalit women in

specific. The empire was not oppressive but rather reformatory for the Dalit people. The renaissance in Kerala which took impetus from the enlightenment in the west also had a significant role in the formation of Dalit women's agency. The caste revolts in Kerala were by-products of the colonial modernity. The end of colonial period marks the first notes of gradual erasure of the Dalit women's agency from the political setting of Kerala.

Rekha Raj points to the 'absence in presence' of Dalit women in Dalit discourses in Kerala during last two and half decades (242). This typical erasure of Dalit women's agency is to be countered. The first step towards reclaiming the agency is to record the active role of the Dalit women in the caste revolts beginning with Shannar revolt. This process of salvaging also calls for serious rethinking and re-examination of the available historical data. It is the foremost requisite for counteracting the erasure of the records of Dalit female activity from the social revolts in Kerala. Such a move shall propel the rising of voices of the gendered subalterns in the contemporary socio political cultural settings as well.

There is a slow paced upward mobility of the dalit female characters from *Ghathakavadhom* to *Sukumari*. All of the three such characters in Collins's novel- Old Poulusa's wife, his daughter and a woman participating in a prayer group- are without proper names. They have no agency that they don't even speak more than a sentence. In *Saraswativijayam*, Vellachi is the lone dalit female character who is given a proper name. She speaks in at least three occasions in the novel including the legal scenario where her words are recorded as a statement in a court trial. This points to the gradual opening up of more space for dalit females in the mainstream cultural expression. This development reaches another level with *Sukumari* introducing a handful of subaltern lady characters who thrive to lead a perfect Christian life after their religious conversion. They seem to be liberated from the caste patriarchy that hitherto strangled their free will. All of those characters are given proper names and identity.

Early novels in Malayalam problematized slavery (Mohan 52). Those works touched on the issue of the marginalised womenfolk of the oppressed communities as well. This inaugural noting of the dalit women's agency ensued with the earliest of the precursors to novel itself. However, this marking of the hapless women remained an isolated phenomenon. This trend didn't extend beyond the last decade of the nineteenth century. Joseph Muliyl is the last of the early novelists to at least hint at the formation of such an agency. Both the mainstream

historiography and canonical novels were silent about the experiences of the dalit female folk. The countering of this strategic exclusion calls for close reading and extensive research.

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