

An Echo of Cultural Embellishments of Dalits: with reference to Iyayam's Beasts of Burden

Brindha S¹, Dr. Ramya S², K.Ragupathi³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, KPR Institute of Engineering and Technology, Coimbatore - 641047. Email Id: brindha.s@kpriet.ac.in

²Assistant Professor (Sr.G), Department of English, KPR Institute of Engineering and Technology, Coimbatore - 641047. Email Id: ramya.s@kpriet.ac.in

³ Assistant Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore. Email Id: ragu.english@gmail.com

Abstract

Dalit culture embraces the tradition and culture of not only dalits but also the Dravidians of South India. The Literature of Dalits is a torch bearer that brings to light the unique beliefs and values of Dalits. The paper focuses on the cultural tints of dalits as stroked by the Dalit writer Iyayam in his novel *Beasts of Burden*. It also briefs the custom, language, ritual and tradition of dalits that signify the roots the dalits cling on. Through the depiction of culture, the unity of dalits is unveiled and thus illustrating the true colours of dalits life. Iyayam's magnificent use of language and narration has portrayed the ethnicity of Dalits and their rich cultural lifestyle.

Keywords: Dalit Culture, Tradition, Custom

Literature is kaleidoscope that offers the changing patterns of the custom, social designs, economic settings and political systems of a Nation. It reflects all colors truly and evidently, as white and grey. Literature evolves as the custom evolves; it transforms as the tradition takes a new shape. With that being said, Literature is the manifestation of not only an individual, but also a cult and a nation as well. Each literature highlights the unique aspect of a cult and a nation and also embraces the light and shadow of both.

From main stream literature, dalit literature journeys to marginal literature. In dalit literature, grand narratives of poetical embellishments are replaced by simple narrative of real experiences. It not only identifies an individual but also a group that has always been marginalized. It portrays reality rather than a specific ideology. Dalit literature is the "celebration of difference", states Darshana Trivedi, in the article 'Literature of their own: Dalit Literature Theory in Indian Context', in the book *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration*.

Dalit literature smoothens the uneven edges of the social structure so that its dream of designing a caste free society with equality, liberty, fraternity and justice can be served to the people.

To me, Dalit is not a caste

He is a man exploited by

the Social and economic

traditions of this country.

. . . He does believe in

humanism. Dalit is a symbol

of change and revolution, says Gangadhar Pantwane (Prasad 2)

Asserting human rights, sensing the self-pride, revolting and rebelling against social injustice, engraving the personal and collective suffering of the people, hoping and aspiring to form a new society devoid of discrimination, are the missions of dalits. Pen is used as a weapon for their struggle and also for provoking the people. It is a process of restoring the humanity. Dalit literature serves as a source of resistance. It encourages the potential of a being, there by bringing one's self out of the shell. It tries to produce the individual, the social, cultural and economic freedom. This revolutionary literature aims at giving cultural identity. The paper focuses on the cultural symbols and beliefs of the dalits as reflected by Imayam in this novel *Beasts of Burden*.

'Imayam is one of the first Tamil writers to bring the dalits to life through his exquisite novels', remarks Sundara Ramaswamy. Imayam is a prolific writer who has thrown light upon the issues of gender through his novels. Imayam is the pen name of V. Annamalai, an English teacher at a high school in Vridhachalam, Tamilnadu. He has made his mark on the Tamil literary scene with his very first novel, *Koveru Kazhudaigal* (1994), which has created heated debates on issues like the role of a Dalit writer in the context of oppression seen within the Dalit community. The well – known translator, Lakshmi Holmstrom has brilliantly captured in English, his powerful and original voice. She has translated *Koveru Kazhudaigal* as *Beasts of Burden* (2001). The changing times of a village is unfolded with tiny details through the eyes of Arokkyam, a washerwoman who serves a dalit community of agricultural labourers. Rich in ethnographic detail and native idiom, the narrative throws sharp insights into the life style of dalits.

Imayam has thrown light upon the custom, language, ritual and tradition of dalits, signifying the culture and roots they stick on to. The book gives the readers access and insight into the lives of about India's 300 million dalits, whose struggle for equality continues even today. Through the depiction of culture, it is evident that there is a great cultural unity among the dalits. Though they practice different religion, Dalits are neither Hindus, nor Christians, nor Muslims, nor Buddhists. They practice all the rituals and customs irrespective of their religion; this is true and obvious when Arokkyam, the protagonist of *Beasts of Burden*, though a Christian by religion, performs the rituals of the Hindus. This proves the fact that, dalits are dalits irrespective of religion.

In his novel *Beasts of Burden*, Imayam depicts the cultural aspects such as slaughtering of pig, the wedding celebration, harvesting, soothsaying etc. The dalits follow a rare phenomenon of slaughtering the pig for rain. This resembles the same custom of slaughtering the goat. After the slaughtering gets over, they auction the parts of the pig to the people. Usually on the other occasions such as Pongal, Diwali and Aadi peruku, the vannaans are given the privilege of taking the entrails of the pig. They believe that if they sacrifice pig to the Mariamman, the Amman Goddess will show mercy on them by a downpour. By the

way the flowers fall, they tell the wishes of God. They also look for omens and portents. At the evening time, the old ones go beyond the boundaries of the town and gaze at the sky to watch the direction in which the birds fly; thereby they calculate the coming of rain. When all these efforts fail they come to the conclusion of slaughtering the pig. They even call the Aiyar to hear his forecast. Datchinamurti the aiyar has prophesied, 'This year the god is riding on a pig, the darker grains should yield plentifully' (Imayam 176).

These rituals echo the roots of the dalits, their spirituality that has blinded them to think rationally. They are indeed still immersed in the superstitious believes, proving them to be innocents. Imayam points out an episode of how an old woman transforms into a soothsayer after being possessed by god. In the novel, the old woman Mutthamma is possessed during the pongal festival when she starts chasing ghosts and evil spirits. The goddess leaves her only after having been worshipped with sacred ash and camphor. The old woman Mutthamma never has realized that goddess has entered her and that she has danced in a frenzy manner like a street performer. She even utters the words of the goddess, 'In eight days, counting from today, the river will overflow its bank' (Imayam 187).

Imayam has pictured through his fantabulous style of writing and language, certain episodes that demonstrate the dalits' attitude and beliefs. Instead of glorifying the novel with grand diction, the writer has showcased the quintessence of the verisimilitude through natural and unadorned diction. The writers have nowhere employed the language of the erudite, and so takes the reader close to the down-trodden, making them live along with the characters. Even the minor event, in the life of the dalits, is given priority by the writers. For instance, Imayam, discloses the custom of dalits by portraying how people pay tribute to the deity and how the old Mutthamma being possessed by the goddess, dances in a frenzy, uttering,

'De!' 'De!' 'De!'

'Mother, thaaye', tell us why you have come'

... 'Ah ha... ha.... haha...'

'Speak to us, mother, Mahamaayi'

'What is your complaint?'

'Rain ... Rain ... we need rain ... '

'In eight days, counting from today, the river will overflow its bank'. (Imayam 187)

Wedding is another grand celebration of the dalits. If a wedding or special event happens in a particular caste in the town, the vannaan serving that particular community is supposed to be loaded with work. The pandal is tied with mango-leaf festoons. The presentation money is supposed to be collected in the cloth spread out. The guests are seated on the coverlets and the bridal chamber is also decorated. When a wedding happens in a colony, there is no differentiation between who belongs and who does not, the rice and the curry is dispensed to everyone alike. In the wedding all have to be seated only on the ground, including the bride and the bridegroom. The wedding is used to be simple in nature and the

bride has to bring donkey, varagu, cholam and some cash. In the wedding of the vannaans, pigs are slaughtered. The vannaan families usually collect different items like chilies, lentils, tamarind and vegetables from the town or colony people, for the food that has to be served on the wedding.

Harvest season brings harmony in the lives of the dalits. At harvest time, all the people work and toil in the field at full stretch. The very old and the very young people, who are unable to work in the fields, chase the pigs and chicken. The livelihood of the whole year depends on the grain gathered at that time. 'During the harvest season, everyone behaved as if they were rich, and suddenly acquired the generous attribute of giving as soon as they were asked' (Imayam 51).

Harvest season is a season of zest and merry making. Dancers and street performers go from house to house singing their songs. The Kaavadi – bearers set out in their saffron – colored clothes, carrying sacks. They collect grains from the nearby village for the feast, which is supposed to start with the street play of ten days in honor of the goddess Amman. As soon as the month of Thai has started, the thaathan, the eldest of the community, is supposed to blow the conch from street to street every morning, for the feast.

The nomadic kuravars barter sacking needles, beads, hairpins, ribbons, eye make-up and face powder in exchange for grains. The Thombans sharpen the horns of cattle and conduct games and performances at night. The Naidu girls sell bangles, the gypsy women use to roughen the surfaces of grindstones, the Kurattis weave basket and trays. The palm readers, the people who foretell the future with the parrots that pick out cards, sorcerers and spellbinders and the boom-boom maattukkaran with his cow are gathered for the feast. The harvest season, thus, is considered as the august occasion for the dalits.

The dalits follow a lot of rituals even on the day of death of somebody. They use to show camphor and light incense sticks in front of the dead. The vannaan is supposed to make the processional bier with the bamboo canes, with which they carry the dead body. The drummers play the drum and the vaaykkarisi, that is the uncooked rice, is sprinkled on the dead person's mouth. They use to sing songs for the vaaykkarisi donors, praising them and asking for money. After covering the body inside the grave, one of the relatives of the dead has to push the earth into the grave, three times with the back of his hand; and will leave to take bath without looking back. Thus, the dalits held their rituals as a heritage.

Imayam has briefly sketched all the custom and rituals, to demonstrate, how keeping one's culture alive, plays a vital role in the dalit's life. They retain and perform all rituals because it serves as a means for their livelihood. All these cultural values have become a part of their life without which their life cannot be fulfilled. Dalits indeed lead a rich life in terms of values and culture, though not in terms of economy.

A dalit writer records the experience of the dalits and the pains of their burden, creating a history through a language that is regarded as the least important one. Imayam has beautifully culled out the radiance and elegance of the language. The language of the dalits exhibits their personality, their poverty, their place in the society, their prosperity and their passive-resistance towards prejudice.

Imayam has used phrases and similes in English as the dalits use in their native tongue. He has attempted to bring out the essence of the language by the figures of speech. The use of this particular style of language adds flavour to dalit literature, enriching and

establishing its uniqueness. There are indeed transliterations, for which, the meaning is brought out in the glossary. When Chadayan blasts Arokkyam, for demanding the entrails of the sacrifice, Imayam has beautifully sketched the conversation in which Arokkyam pleads, 'It's not like that, Yejamaan'. 'What do you mean, illinge, nollinge, not like this, not like that?' (Imayam 181). This conversation exposes the reality and also enumerates the humorous presentation of the novelist.

In addition to the belief of being possessed by the Goddess, Imayam has also traced the belief that people have, on the guduguduppai man. It has been assumed that ghosts and evil spirits follow the guduguduppai man and so people are not supposed to come out when he walks on the road. He tells predictions at midnight and at daybreak he used to come for a few coins or for grains. Imayam has indeed furnished the minute details of these beliefs thereby briefing the innocence of the people. These predictions and foretelling of the guduguduppai man have intensified the faith and hope of the people in him and at the same time they take it as a caution to prevent the worse. Imayam has exactly chiseled the idiosyncrasies of the guduguduppai man, when he predicts the future of Arokkyam's life, who says,

Above all else, kali . . . kali . . . kali . . . has already looked upon this

family, eight days ago

gudu gudu gudu gudu

Your illness will pass; that which you have lost will return and come to

fruition; your family will improve its

fortunes and prosper once more

gudu gudu gudu gudu

Kali . . . kali . . . kali . . . Kali

gudu gudu gudu gudu (Imayam 174).

The rituals of the dalits are highlighted with music and dance. These two art forms are part and parcel of their life, making them energetic and enthusiastic. Music and dance have been their legacy which is handed over to them generation after generation. Music reflects not only their happiness but also humiliation. During the festival season the drummers play the music, which is accompanied by dance. The singing involves songs that reveal the glory of the God, the song that puts forth the misery of the people to God, the songs that praise the rich persons of the village, and also songs that voice out the philosophy of life. Imayam elucidates this through the song of Periyaan, which is often sung by Savuri,

Eight feet come towards you

Two feet lie stretched out

Within the pot comes a fire
Along come the family and kinsfolk
The drum comes with its heavy beat
A thousand, thousand follow on
Many come with stricken hearts
Wearing garlands of silence
Eight feet come towards you
Two feet lie stretched out.” (Imayam 243)

Dalitism has a history of recognizing, respecting and accepting all cultures. It is pluralism par excellence. Dalits wish to establish a society based on multi – culturalism and pluralism. They believe that a culture that is guided by pluralism is less violent in nature. It provides space to all people of all religion. The history of the dalits depicts them as an eco-people, who worship earth as mother, and who has established relationship with nature in order to draw energy and life from her. They also perform the glorious act of worshipping the ancestors.

Culture is the thread that binds society, organizes it and governs it. Culture values the norms and conventions of the society and develops in the people the spirit of unity. Culture cultivates humanism and spreads the glory of a system. Dalits have a very rich and deep cultural heritage comprising folk tales, songs and various art forms. The custom of worshipping God and Nature, keeps the conventional style and form of living, alive in all the ways possible. Dalit literature is a proud reflection of Dalit culture. Imayam has decorated his work of art with his unique odour, thereby magnifying its magnificence. The novel is sprinkled with drops of nativity and humour. The language has been used as a weapon for culling out the culture and tradition of the marginalized. The transliterations bring out the brilliance of the writer as well as the novel.

References:

- [1] Imayam. *Beasts of Burden*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Chennai: East West, 2001. Print.
- [2] Prasad, Amar Nath, and Gaijan.M.B. *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2007. Print.
- [3] "Dalit Literary Movement." *Indian Culture & Lifestyle*. Web. 12 Apr. 2010.
- [4] "Imayam." *Katha*. Web. 2 July 2010.
- [5] Raj.M.C. "A Dalit Perspective on Pluralism." *Dalitreeds*. Web. 18 June 2010.

