

“Can a Pulaya Speak of His Life?”: Autobiography as Ethnography in Kallen Pokkudan’s *Kandalk kadukalk kidayile Ente Jeevitham*

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Abstract :

*Autobiographies of individuals from marginalized communities have often been sites of epistemological resistances placed against the mainstream narratives of history that sideline and denigrate the former. Marginalized autobiographies thus become a recording of collective counter memories. Autobiographies of the marginalized communities are, in that sense, ethnographies that document the collective experiences of that particular community. It is in this context that Kallen Pokkudan’s *Kandalk kadukalk kidayile Ente Jeevitham* (*My Life Amidst the Mangroves*) is analysed here. The study takes a two-pronged approach towards the subject. Firstly, this study looks at the emergence of a renewed socio-literary consciousness, which emerged after the Muthangastruggle of 2002, which resulted in a renewed interest in the life narratives of marginalized communities within Kerala. Secondly, the study posits that while Malayalam literature has a dearth of auto-ethnographies, marginalized autobiographies of the post-Muthanga phase are at once, an expression of the individual’s life, and also the recording, response, and celebration of his/her community’s struggles against a discriminatory system. Therefore, Kallen Pokkudan’s *Kandalk kadukalk kidayile Ente Jeevitham* can be taken as an activist’s auto-ethnographical writing that documents the fragmented lived experiences of the Dalit community in Kerala.*

Keywords: *Autoethnography, Marginalized Writings, Print Imagination, Representation*

Introduction

Auto-ethnography as a postmodern social research method and also an exercise to record one’s communal life, essentially subverts traditional social science’s emphasis on generalizable truths written in a third person voice. It is a reflexive take on lived experiences that are situated in the present and remain fragmented, supplanting the positivist notions of objectivity and academic neutrality. It recognizes the postmodern narrative that it is impossible to escape the language game. Instead, as a response to the crises of representation and legitimation, one must engage in creative language practices such as the use of a subjective personal narrative.

“Critical auto-ethnographies critique harmful, dominant narratives, which often go unnoticed because of their mundanity and/or lack of acknowledgement. Critical Auto-ethnographers fervently seek social justice” (Allen 74). Auto-ethnographers reclaim their voices as opposed to the ‘scientific’ ethnographic writings that are often “esoteric, to embrace and engage their fallible bodies as they

listen to themselves, others, pasts, and presents” (Allen 74). As an attempt to break free of the objectivistic norms of conducting studies, Autoethnographies celebrate the multiplicity and polyphony of these narratives, while giving space to hitherto unheard voices and expressions.

Social justice is identified by Sally Denshire as a common trope of auto-ethnographies. “While auto-ethnography contains elements of autobiography, it goes beyond the writing of selves” (2). Brodkey claims that “Autoethnography invites writers to see themselves and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations and relations in contact zones” (29). While traditionally auto-ethnography has been a purely social science exercise rooted in the post-modern turn that the discipline took, the concept can be adapted to explain the practice of writing autobiographies. Autoethnography therefore can be seen as an expositional tool to expose one’s past in relation to the caste and cultural identity of an individual. As racial tensions and its complexities can be explored through auto-ethnographic writings by activists, especially in the African-American and Aboriginal context, the same can be applied to engage with the nuanced modes of functioning of caste within individuals as well as their societies.

The Dalit/Adivasi Turn

Dalit autobiographies, even while being popular throughout India, did not appear very often in Malayalam until the break of the new millennium. The dearth was supplanted by the publication of Kallen Pokkudan’s *Kandalkkadukalkkidayile Ente Jeevitham* (2002) and CK Janu’s collaborative autobiography *Janu: C.K. Januvinte Atmakadha* (2003). As argued by Ranjith Thankappan, with the publication of these texts, Malayalam literature took a “Dalit/Adivasi turn” (195).

This socio-literary turn within the society, stems from a larger awakening of a social awareness with regard to marginalized politics. ‘Kerala model of development’ hailed as “a schoolhouse for the rich world as for the poor” had masked the socio-cultural inequalities that divided the society on the thresholds of caste (McKibben 123). This was particularly so with regard to the unequal distribution of land and natural resources amongst the dalits and adivasis. While there were constant demands for a just distribution of land among the Adivasis since the formation of the state of Kerala in 1957, the limiting of the Land redistribution policy of the state to agrarian lands and not to plantation land - which were located near and around Adivasi settlements - had largely kept the Adivasis landless. It was after almost half a century long struggle, Adivasi GothraMaha Sabha (AGMS) decided to take over the Wildlife sanctuary in Wayanadu and declare it their own. “It was on January 4, 2003, that the Adivasi GothraMaha Sabha... entered the deforested portions of Muthanga and its vast eucalyptus plantations that have been successfully passed off as forest by a shrewd state and forest department”(Bijoy, C R, Raman, 1975).

The Muthanga struggle, while remaining a failure in terms of having their demands accepted by the state, was groundbreaking in terms of being a clarion call to challenge the claims that Kerala Model of economic development and social justice is inclusive and egalitarian. It further drew the attention of the public sphere who saw the police action against the Adivasi protestors as brutal. Many studies and writings were published, books were written, its leaders received wider attention, and public sensitivity arose positively towards the general state of the marginalized in Kerala.

At the same time, the incident triggered an awakening of the marginalized consciousness, which resulted in giving an impetus to later struggles. The years after Chengara saw the rise of several people’s struggles in places such as Plachimada, led by women from the marginalized communities themselves, such as C.K. Janu, Mayilamma, SeleenaPrakkanam et.al. In the years that proceeded, all of these women have had their lives written by collaborators and published by leading publishing

houses. These works were received well by the Malayalam reading public and were discussed and studied academically. They have further been readily translated into English.

While the writer-activists might not have thought of their life writing as auto-ethnographical, Pokkudan seems to deal with the question of his caste identity as the root of his personal identity and hence asks whether a Pulaya can have a biography. As it lacks the established narrative structure and narrative devices, Pokkudan's text seems to be just as much a conversation, a performance of sorts, leaving aside the social scientific narratorial expectations and signals "a break from objectivistic models of knowledge and an experimental journey into literary forms of expression, as an epistemological statement" (Iake&Decesare 202).

Auto-ethnography and Communal Representation

Auto-ethnography as a genre has been explained as a multifaceted, polyphonic entity, which is difficult to define or pigeonhole as "it has been argued that there are as many ways to do auto-ethnography as there are auto-ethnographies" (Bolen 75). Auto-ethnographies essentially present shards of memory interlaced with communal experiences. They also work as recordings of the communal and social identity to which the author belongs. The autobiography thus becomes an ethnographic record of one's identity, its nuances and marginality. Life Writing defies all norms of the genre and deconstructs the established biographic, historiographic and ethnographic norms.

"Auto-ethnography is an autobiographical genre of ethnography that emphasizes the lived experiences of researchers to access culture as communicative accomplishment" (Bolen 73). Bolen provides an overview of auto-ethnography as a postmodern social research that subverts traditional social science's emphasis on truths that can be generalized when written in a third person independent voice to preserve objectivity and neutrality. It is considered as an essentially postmodernist process which presents the varied, fragmental and temporal representations of one's self and others in the culture and society. While the ethical question of providing representations of the experiences of the other may be raised, the texts however remain as a source of communal or shared identity than that of an individual and is accepted as a means to passionately pursue social justice. It further critiques the often neglected, dominant narratives and hegemonic practices, be it linguistic, ethnical, or cultural through its reflexive takes on past experiences, as evidenced by Pokkudan's criticism of religion and communism.

'Personal as Communal'

An autobiography becomes an ethnographic record of one's identity, its nuances and marginality. As a form of life writing, it defies all established patterns of the genre and deconstructs the established biographic, historiographic and ethnographic norms. Auto-ethnography, in its most expressive form, is a political tool that occupies the space denied to the marginalized in the mainstream histories and political epistemologies. It asks questions pertinent to the process of marginalization itself. It is in this regard that KallenPokkudan raises the question, "Can a Pulaya have a Biography? What Biography! When everyone else pass away, what is to be said of certain lives that merely perish, some might ask" (Pokkudan& Madayi32).

In the text, Pokkudan is at once an individual who fights against the social and political injustices on his own and a representative voice of a largely denigrated community when he asks whether marginalized lives will ever have scope in the annals of mainstream history. The pages that come after this questioning are in itself the answer to the query. Auto-ethnobiographies that record the lives of the community are subject to this exclusion themselves. Curiously, these words echo the voice of

Poykayil Sreekumara Guru, a Dalit social reformer during the nineteenth century who famously said, “Not a letter is seen on my race, while I can see many annals of others” (Appachen 14). The space, which was denied thus, to the marginalized communities, their tales, folk songs, mores and customs find space in these texts. These expressions that fail to find space in the mainstream imagination, are recorded here.

Many intricacies that form the individual and the self in a typical autobiography seem to be suspended in Pokkudan’s text. Any necessity of continuity or consequential self building does not seem to come within the ambit of the text. Instead of it being an attempt at an exploration of the self and its development, it works as a recording of his community’s life. The text does not work to form a tapestry of Pokkudan as any conventional autobiography would. Pokkudan stations himself as the reminiscing narrator of a shared experience. The authorial voice plays the role of a documenter of common experiences than as Pokkudan himself.

The narrator eschews all opportunities to present his life story and chooses to present a discontinuous and hence fragmented script of a marginalized community estranged from the mainstream by socio-cultural traditions, ideologies, public institutions and even writing traditions. As the miserable experiences of an individual can be attributed to one’s shared caste identity, Pokkudan has portrayed himself differently, as a communal caste being, an identity that will inevitably be pigeonholed by the public sphere.

As Udayakumar explains in the case of the autobiographies of Kamala Das, this autobiography too does not showcase either the invention or the testimony of a self, nor does it follow the narrative pattern of a story which is often a feature of autobiographies (As qtd. in Sreekumar 76). Even the use of a plural collective pronoun “njangal” (Malayalam equivalent of “we”) instead of the singular “Njan” (I) points to the lack of a singular authorial self within Pokkudan’s text. The self-conception or self-explication as seen in other autobiographies does not seem to be a goal of the author. Pokkudan, the narrator and the subject interweave the past and the present of his community as his own, while his own experiences are equated to that of the experiences of the community. The past sticks to the text as an attachment that combines experience and trauma, which constantly remind the reader of how things were and how things came to be.

Throughout the text, Pokkudan raises questions on how literary visibility is directly proportional to socio-political capital and challenge the reproduction of social inequalities within print culture and dominant public imagination. Throwing a question towards the audience, on whether the marginalized can write of their lives, Pokkudan poignantly critiques even the language which differentiates between the deaths of a marginalized and an elite. As earlier writers, especially those belonging to the Indian progressive movements, understood caste solely on economic grounds, the matter of representation was understood solely as an economic inability and not as an act of collective social discrimination. In this sense, Pokkudan’s autobiography is a pathbreaking text that “offers a critique of the institution of publishing, which functions as a cultural site that reinforces the exclusion of Dalits in the mainstream history and print culture” (Thankappan 205)

At the thresholds of personal and collective memories, Pokkudan engages both with the established systems of power and with his own personal identity. The collective memory of pain and discrimination engages critically with the former as no individual can do so alone, and at the same time, a variegated personal identity is developed as a paradigm for a prospective, inclusive envisioning of print imaginations

Conclusion

The text *Life Amidst the Mangroves* was recanted and shunned by Pokkudan later, criticizing certain editorial interferences and choices, to publish *My Life* (2010) in collaboration with his son, Sreejith Paithalen, incorporating his “political experiences full of agony” which were not a part of the first autobiography (Ajaykumar; Pokkudan 7). At the same time, the first autobiography, even while taking into account its shortcomings and flaws, was perhaps the first step in presenting a counterhegemony towards the mainstream understanding of the marginalized lives. As a critical insider, Pokkudan was able to transcend the personal to study and present the communal authentically to a wider audience that hitherto remained oblivious to certain social experiences. It was a political step in countering the established print culture within Malayalam and paving way for a wave of writings from the marginalized communities as well as a change in political vision which led to an added visibility to marginalized political thinkers and writers. The times changed, just as Pokkudan had stated at the beginning of his revised autobiography, “it’s the problem of the zeitgeist. It shall change. Just that I wont be around for it” (7).

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