

The Subaltern Precincts of Kakkukali by Francis Norona

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to establish that Kakkukali' (Hop-Scotch) , a short fiction in Malayalam by Francis Norona is a proof of the existence of subaltern consciousness, praxis and agency. Mainstream historians and narrators have systematically submerged the social, political and cultural contributions of the subaltern communities into the larger rubrics like nationalism, freedom fight, feminism, marxism etc. Latin Catholic community ,a subaltern community in Kerala is represented in the story mapping the culture of a community through its language, life style and the way the main character constitutes the meaning of life.

Keywords:

1. Subaltern communities ---(Literally Sub+Altern=Under Another) Refers to those minorities that are on the margins of the society. It is generally understood that their contributions to the cultural domain is meager and therefore their visibility in academia is almost nil.
2. Praxis--The term in cultural studies refers to the practice of anything based on an episteme/ideology /paradigm etc.

Subaltern nature of a community is very much determined by its formation as a collectivity through the long course of its historical vicissitudes. In addition to this, the heterogeneous nature of the community in terms of profession , race and ethnicity contribute much to the internal factions of the community and thereby its incapacity to formulate itself as a powerful one to make its presence felt in the mainstream. Latin Catholic community is characterized by both-its historical vicissitudes and its heterogeneity.

This paper undertakes to establish *Kakkukali* ,a short fiction penned by Francis Norona as a pronouncement of the existence of the subaltern consciousness, its praxis and agency at work, marking Malayalam Literature with a culture-specific stamp. The language the narrator employs and the life depicted through the narration are doubtlessly located in the Latin Catholic culture. It does embody this culture that was outside the literary map of Kerala. The language and life are so distinct that several words and structures fall short of the 'literary Malayalam'. Not that there weren't any such works that radically challenge the prejudices associated with literariness of the language but that this language and life were never represented in Malayalam. That must be the cause for it to have been published in one of the leading literary magazines (The Mathrubhoomi weekly) in Malayalam, with the author's photo as the cover picture.

Literature across the globe now evinces a fine sense of accommodating cultures unrepresented so far, and its impact on Malayalam literature also is being felt. Among the plurality of such culture-specific

works, this short fiction ,along with two other works (*Asharanarude Suvishesam-The Gospel of the Helpless-* and *Thottappan-Godfather-*) places the author on the pedestal of the ‘New Writers’ in Malayalam. What is common to all these three works are the language/diction, cultural life showcased through the narration of the story and a fine sensibility of artistic craft. Though all the three are great works when each of them taken in its context, *Kakkukali* alone is taken here to exemplify that the life of the subaltern community of the Latin Catholic community does have the competence to be represented in literature, one of the prominent features of any culture.

Chandrima Chakraborty ,while delving on the film *Lagaan* and its affiliation to Subaltern Studies Project writes :

“As the Subaltern Studies contributors have shown, subaltern consciousness has never been accurately recorded by historians, and subalterns themselves do not have historical records that could be admitted as new evidence to the historical record... Several volumes of Subaltern Studies, edited and theorized most extensively by Ranajith Guha critiques conventional historiography-colonialist, nationalist and Marxist – for treating the subalterns of South Asian Society as devoid of consciousness ,and hence without the ability to make their own history. Colonialist historiography, as various critics have elucidated, aided and abetted the more overt brutalities of colonization by creating categories of the ‘other’ which were used for the subjection and objectification of native societies to justify imperial processes of discrimination, subordination and oppression. Eurocentric perspectives claimed that Europe’s colonization of ‘the rest of the world ‘ made it possible for the ‘barbaric’ natives to enter history and modernity. Nationalist historiography, on the other hand, has represented Indian nationalism, as the sum of the activities and ideas by which the Indian elite responded to the institutions, opportunities, resources etc. generated by colonialism. The Subaltern Studies historians have critiqued the Indian National Congress, which led the anti-colonial or freedom struggle, for appropriating a variety of popular resistance(s) under its own agenda and prescriptions for anti-colonial struggle. They have attempted to establish through a number of case studies how the Congress and the Gandhian campaigns, far from leading movements of resistance, often intervened and subsumed movements that were generated independently and outside it. Marxist historians are critiqued for seeing in the history of colonial South Asia only the linear development of class consciousness and for emptying the South Asian history of the specific types of consciousness and practices of subaltern movements. Thus Subaltern Studies historians have brought to light the absence of subaltern consciousness in these dominant historical discourses...”

The ideological matrix of Subaltern Studies thus foregrounds two facts that are very much relevant here.

1. There have always been consistent and concerted efforts to see the historical struggles of the subaltern communities in their true nature. It was very often , an attempt to redefine these struggles in terms of the larger rubrics like nationalism, freedom fight ,class war etc. from the part of both the historian and literary authors. In other words, traditional historian and narrator denuded the mind of the subaltern of its subjectivity and sense of identity.
2. Subaltern Studies historians have brought to light the reality behind several of these events and reformulate the ideological ambience of these in order to focus on the fact of the existence of the consciousness, agency and praxis on the part of the subaltern. The subaltern has the capacity to reclaim the past from which one can glean episodes of full minded action and contemplation. This enables them to define themselves.

If subaltern studies project focusses on the caliber of the subaltern to foreground their consciousness and be aware of its agency, *Kakkukali* evinces both these.

The very beginning of the story with quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky—

“Heaven is within reach of everyone of us ,and now it is within my reach too; if I chose it I could have it tomorrow, real heaven, for all my life” (*Kakkukali*- p.14)

This quote pronounces the very onus one has to take about one’s life and previews the mental and psychological ambience of the characters that are housed in the story. The language and the diction that the story presents too are directly culled from the page of life that belonged to the community since very long time.

The subject is able to determine, judge and execute things in her life. None outside the real life relished by the subject needs to decide things for her. This paper attempts to delineate the factors that exemplify concretely the consciousness and agency at work among the poor, uneducated people of Latin Catholic community whose life and culture are narrativized in the story.

Consciousness , Praxis and Agency of the Subaltern in *Kakkukali*

‘Consciousness’ as used by subaltern studies scholars is the capacity for the individual and the collectivity to constitute their subjectivity in a specific historical (personal/or collective/social) context. Subaltern studies have shown how the traditional historians, be it Marxist, Colonialist or or Nationalist have perpetuated the notion that these communities do not., in any way, possess consciousness. These historians were keen on endowing an outside agency the tasks to bring the subaltern to the fore, articulate for them and condescendingly approximate their historical struggles under larger rubrics like freedom fight, class war or modernity.

‘Praxis’ and ‘Agency’ are two terms ,the import of which is immensely significant in cultural studies. The thrust in ‘Praxis’ is on the practice of the theory. Theory alone would not suffice in any spatio-temporal context. At the same time, the structure/ideological apparatus/ the theory must be there in order to drive the human chronotope to the real lived experience. Thus the term ‘praxis ‘ refers to action/practice based ideological precincts of any social group.

Subaltern studies scholars have shown that the communities that have been for centuries in the backyard of the cultural mainstream, were provided with both theory and practice for their lives. The theory was the source of the supposed action/practice. The ingenuous, spontaneous responses of the subaltern communities were always supplanted with ‘action plans’, be it in freedom struggle, class war or in effectively subscribing to modernity.

The term ‘agency ‘ connotes some collectivity being the cause of a change and being a tool that effectively implements that change in the society without consciously subscribing to any ideology or theory. Subaltern studies scholars have enumerated several such occasions in Indian history where these communities become the catalysts of such changes and yet were ignored by conventional historians. At best, these historians would appropriate such struggles under mainstream movements like Freedom-fight or Nationalism.

The story *Kakkukali* emphatically pronounces the full -minded action of a girl and her mother in a critical juncture in their lives. It certainly evokes the quote in the beginning of the story. They are capable of creating heaven for themselves.

Kakkukali (Hop-Scotch) is a play exclusively meant for girls. It, in the story, becomes an appropriate metaphor for life and the way one goes about life:

“Hop on one leg with your eyes shut... all lines are thorns... and the fields inside the lines are all leaves...you can step on leaf but not on thorn, if you do,you are dead.” (Kakkukali-p.19)

This is the way the narrator introduces the play to a religious sister who came to take her to the convent .It is poverty and the orphaned state of Natalia that made her give her consent to the messengers of vocation (Call of God), the religious sisters who came to take her to the convent. This is certainly a hopping with both eyes shut, one doesn't know whether it is leaf or thorn that awaits her at the convent. To her dismay, it was thorn, piercing and very painful. Falling on the thorns of life , there is certainly bleeding in her life. On another occasion when she was angry with the Mother of the convent, Natalia prepares a bed of thorn for the Mother on her way. The Mother wounded her feet, treading on it unknowingly. This was, of course , a small taste of what Natalia underwent in mind and body, perhaps a symbolic one that would add to the poignancy of her suffering. Escape to the convent is identified with another very familiar activity and it is narrated thus:

“The weeping of those that exhibited avarice, not seeing the hook hidden inside the bread, rang into my ears. The Sister was still doubtful when I said that even fish cried, How to make out tears from the water in which they are?..”

“Won't there be a hook hidden inside every free bread?

Listening to what rose from the inside so spontaneously the Sister stood like the fish hooked in its eyes” (Kakkukali-P.26)

It is very clear from the quote that the images used here creates a parallel between Natalia's life and the act of fishing or angling. Like the fish is tempted by the food in it, it is the food that tempted Natalia too, into the convent. The same must be the case with the Sister with whom she converses because she stands stunned as if she were caught by hook in her eyes by some sudden realization. This is a clear portrayal of how they can evaluate their lives objectively and evinces their agency and subjectivity towards effecting a change in their lives without any outside interferences. Natalia does respond to the situation , firstly by retaliating the cruelty, insult and torture from the Mother and then, by leaving the convent.

Kakkukali is an extension of the Subaltern Studies Project in the sense that the characters in the story express a cogent sense of understanding their lives and they are able to effect changes in their lives. Through creating a work that transcends the traditional evaluation of the subaltern ,Francis Norona , a person belonging to the community subverts the conventional historian's and narrator's attitude of approximating the subaltern expressions under the mainstream, dominant expressions in order to submerge their distinctive features.

The Literary Distinctiveness of *Kakkukali*

The game 'Kakkukali' is a consistent and pervasive metaphor throughout the story.

Natalia speaks about her experience of playing: “ In the darkness created by closed eyes hopping on one leg I asked aloud, 'Thorn or Leaf'?Mother answered happily, 'It's thorn'.(Kakkukali-p.19)

One is reminded of Shelley in Ode to the West Wind,

'I fall upon the thorn of life

I bleed'

The question of Natalia whether she falls on the thorn or leaf resonates throughout the story. The aura *Kakkukali* that surrounds the story subverts the grand/the literary/the classic and introduces in their stead as silly,girlish, and common a game as *Kakkukali* in order to deal with the serious, literary and

philosophical questions of life. The way the game is looked down upon by the society is succinctly put by the Mother in the convent:

“All your knavery should be buried down along with these” (Kakkukali-p.19). ‘These’ indicates all those objects that Natali brought with her to play the game in the convent. If the Mother views Kakkukali and its associate objects as tools for practicing knavery quite its opposite is Natali’s real mother’s view of the same. It is revealed at the end of the story:

“ Now I hve to sleep peacefully listening to your hopping”(Kakkukali-P.29). All the inhibitions about the game are shed and in their stead, an all pervading calm and stillness in the practice of the game is connoted. It has become philosophical. The title thus turns out to be a metaphor for all the life that is dealt with in the story.

Another motif that challenges the traditional ambience of literariness in Malayalam stories is the image of angling and related objects. Terms that reinforce the image recur in the story and they catch the readers unawares both by the novelty of thought and the mundanity of its practice. There are several other images, metaphors and other linguistic devices directly culled out from the milieu of life that is dealt with in the story and they do not occur generally in the literary ambience of Malayalam literature.

The language (Diction, Structures and Rhythm of speech) employed in the story should be noted for its uniqueness and the representative nature it carries. It does not resemble any of the dialects that is considered ‘literary’ in Malayalam. It is for the first time in Malayalam Literature that the language as it is used in the Latin Catholic culture is employed so beautifully in a work. This is certainly a subversive practice of the subaltern.

(Translation from Malayalam to English in this work is free translation)

Works Cited

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