



MEMORABILIA

**An Anthology of Essays on
Memory Studies**

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Dying to Tell a Tale: “Spectral Speech” as an Attempt in ‘Autospectrography’

Drisy K.

Ayyappan is one of the most leading representatives of Dalit literature in Malayalam. Ayyappan began to be acknowledged and read widely only in recent years, though he began writing short fiction in Malayalam since 1960s. His short stories are ingenious recounting of the lived experiences in the verges of Kerala society, which are narrated by a profound nous of cultural reality, social disparity and caste. The narrative panache of Ayyappan is divulged by a distinct kind of humour and magical power. The short fiction of C. Ayyappan discloses an unconventional exploration of contemporary subaltern memory. An intrepid assertion of freedom that questions social hierarchies resonates in the stories of Ayyappan.

Ayyappan’s stories are preoccupied with the presence of spectral figures of society’s outcastes. These rebellious entities, refusing to capitulate to any black magic, question of god and power, are crafted in a mythical vibe. Through different narrative techniques and tropes, Ayyappan endeavors to bring the masked realities and often marginalized or forgotten critical issues, lying at the substructures of things in Kerala, to the attention of the readers. His works have stimulated us to re-examine and reconsider the exclusions, silences and lacunae of Kerala modernity and the eternal legacy of Kerala renaissance. Social criticism, cynicism, sarcasm, sardonicism, pathos and black humour fashion his texts byzantine, polyphonic and convolutedly shaded in terms of plural signification.

His stories like “Spectral Speech”, translated into English by Prof. V C Harris, are sensitive fictional vocalisations of subaltern discourse in an increasingly hegemonic world. His short fiction “Spectral Speech” is also renowned for its outstanding photographic and cinematic legerdemains that conjure up spectres, wizards and ethereal spirits that state about the viciousness of the past and becomes virtuous representatives in the present. He has elucidated the factions and breaches in the modernist practice of narration that hedged questions of caste and gender in Malayalam.

Most of the spectres who tell stories in Ayyappan’s narrative are men. The notable exception is “Spectral Speech” or “Prethabhashanam”. In this story a woman spectra, who has resided in the body of her impostor-lover’s younger sister to prompt incest between them, expounds to the possessed girl, Rosykutty, the reason of her actions. The interesting thing is, in the story, the spirit bears her gendered identity and individual past with her, which is an inexplicably metaphysical manifestation of experience.

The story "Spectral Speech" (*Prethabhashanam*) exhibits the physical and psychological torment borne by an 'Avarna' (lower caste) woman who is made taciturn and wretched. In the story, the narrator is a Dalit woman, "a dumb, silly girl", who commits suicide when betrayed by her Syrian Christian lover (92). Now, with the intention of revealing the truth, she, as a spectre, enters the body of her lover's sister. She was not permitted to voice what she wanted to, when alive. Consequently, after her death, she renovates herself into a speaking subject and avenges herself by looking for another medium to open up her anguish. Ayyappan suggests an implicit appraisal of the sexual harassment of Dalits by the higher caste people, by making the victim articulate of her traumas and humiliation. "Spectral Speech" is unrivalled in its exposition of the predicament of the lowest echelon of society. The story stands as a stable aide-memoire of the reality that the society allows a subaltern female representation only after the death.

The common vogue of Ayyappan's fiction is denoted by the reappearance of subaltern men or women, posthumously as ghosts and spectres. From within the realm of fiction, his storyline signifies counter-hegemonic resistance and confrontation, and democratization of culture. In "Spectral Speech", the spectre says to Rosykutty, "I'm going to line your eyes with the nakedness of truth. Don't bat your eyes or turn your head. What if my fingernails get into your eyes!" (92). Here she, as a subaltern woman, attempts to take domination over the higher caste woman, Rosykutty, after her death, which is prohibited to the live ones belonging to the lower caste.

The spectre sabotages the established space-time frame of narration with retribution. With a noticeably postmodern narrative technique, decorous refinement and memory structure, C. Ayyappan's stories criticize the mainstream writers and their representation. She discards the language of the superficial world and conveys through the language of the netherworld. They set up a discussion of the sub-worlds or other supernatural worlds. In his own language, his works are the sniffles and grouses for self-esteem. He summons spectres for vengeance and resistance. Most of his characters are enlivened with a retaliating insight that the deceased cannot be undone again.

By discarding the sense of 'Savarna' (upper caste) language, the woman spectre here fabricates the Dalit counter-speech structure and makes speechless the hegemonic vocalising systems, with a remarkable vitality of language perceived from a narrative, unnatural and unconscious. She endeavours to make counter-speeches. She epitomizes the subject construction of the expunged and the invisible in the public sphere of Kerala.

"Spectral Speech" projects the triple marginalization suffered by a Dalit woman in terms of caste, class and sex. Here, though the girl was a primary school teacher, she was continuously

rejected by Kunhacks because of her Dalit identity. The spectre says "...no Christian could ever imagine marrying the daughter of an untouchable woman who had been a servant in his household" (92). When she raised the desire to give birth to Kunhacks's child and bringing it up, "he spat dirtily and said he felt nauseated. And he hit me on my face with a clenched fist" (92). Even if he didn't really want to marry her, she reveals, "at times your brother would draw me out of my house in the middle of the night and once his needs were taken care of, beat the hell out of me" (93). Through humour, Ayyappan draws out the continuous physical assaults confronted by Dalit women. In this story, not only the protagonist but her mother also had been physically exploited by the upper class men. Her mother's "nakedness" had been "unveiled" by both Kunhacks's father and his uncle before her marriage, when she used to work in his household (95). Humiliation, the smothering presence of desires that do not know how to express themselves, rejection, discomfiture, the sense of a love that appears akin to murder and the realisation of the experiences and miseries of the entire Dalit community—the world that accommodates the spectral agency is marked by all these, which leads her to take vengeance on the misdeeds committed by the higher echelons in society by reappearing in front of them.

In the milieu of the subaltern battle for sustenance and survival, Ayyappan suggests the passions and cravings of life. Ayyappan tries to point out that the God, everyone believes, is a 'patriarchal Savarna God' who stands only for the upper class males. This is evident in the comment made by the spectre that "it was God who revealed to me my paternity. He called me a sinner whose nakedness had been unveiled by my own brother" (94). But Ayyappan challenges God to make his character raise the question "how the hell does an untouchable woman become sister to a Christian, old man? And God was literally dumbfounded, as if a banana had been thrust into his mouth" (94). Here he attempts to upturn the 'Savarna' gaze that analyses the subaltern body for veiled desires. Ayyappan exposes the unscrupulous soulless activities of upper caste people towards the lower ones and mocks at the 'Savarna' God simultaneously.

It was with a lot of expectation that I watched Kunhacks die. I waited with bated breath to be able to move up to his soul that was about to separate itself from the body and throw my arms around it. But the moment he died I realized the truth: Kunhacks had no soul! What he had was mere breath, or life. Why? Perhaps because he was a rationalist who didn't believe in the soul. Or because of the way the Bible-babbling God went about crying and weeping and gnashing his teeth. (95)

“Spectral speech” reminds the readers about Ayyappan’s own remarks which shift in the direction of a form of religion that activates the powers of generations of predecessors rather than a particular God or multiple Gods.

What may be described as the darkroom of society is moulded in the physiques and selves presented in Ayyappan’s literary paraphernalia. Udaya Kumar, in an article “The Strange Homeliness of the Night: Spectral Speech and the Dalit Present in C. Ayyappan’s Stories”, quotes some words of C. Ayyappan in an interview with Dilip Raj in *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*.

Dusk is my favourite time; next to that, the night. When dawn breaks, it is as if you have lost something. A sort of *homesickness*. Sometimes, you are sitting on a low branch of a tree, your pals lift you up without warning, and you feel a quivering rush of fear inside. I feel like that when the night ends. Days feel like an unrelenting spell of anxiety. From twilight, consolation begins.

Udaya Kumar gives the explanation of Ayyappan’s favouritism for darkness. He pronounces:

Darkness here should not be seen as the constraint necessary for working on photographic plates inscribed by light, but to render them legible and restore them to the day, as in the work of memory in literary modernism. Ayyappan’s art is more like nocturnal photography, a spectrography of the night. It works precisely by impeding a daytime reading of what is recognized as Dalit experience, and issues of masculinity and memory figure centrally in the strange temporality of this interruption. (178)

Spectres haunt Ayyappan’s stories: deceased people become visible before the protagonists of these narratives to go along with them and talk to them, making the margins between the present and the past indistinct. Spectres are the foremost narrators in many of Ayyappan’s stories; they are not sheer guests to the world of the protagonists. Connections between death and storytelling propose a memorable leitmotif in many fictional traditions. But death also approves the chronicling of life, working as the sign under which lives obtain completeness. Udaya Kumar calls such narrations “thanatographies”.

This is one of the senses in which biographies are thanatographies; and, wrapped within the folds of every autobiography, lies the autothanatographic sign, the self-authorizing signature of death and completion. (178)

Ayyappan’s spectral stories recurrently take up the first person, testimonial form, frequently and effectively, reminding the autobiographical as the effective paradigm of vocalisation for their

Dalit characters. The deceased being's spirit revisits the world over and over again to accomplish longings unfulfilled in life.

The spectral narrators of Ayyappan's accounts are the creators of their own deaths; bringing one's own life to an end. What allows them to speak is this deliberate embrace of a spectral subsistence. Their "autothanatography" is not just retroactive. It looks ahead, sketching out forms of free will and action that spreads out into the time to come. Suicides in Ayyappan's creation hint at a voluntary embrace of spectral life. And in these Dalit storytellers, spectrality is the very condition of their voice and expression.

The ghostly raconteurs in Ayyappan's stories are possessing spirits or spectral inhabitation or "badhakal" in Malayalam. Nevertheless, they disregard all endeavours focused at their elimination or appeasement. The spirit, that gets into mortal bodies, inhabits them and takes power over their deeds. The occupying spirit or the Badha beholds it as a rapport between two subjectivities. The spectral speech in "Spectral Speech" is delivered by the inhabited spirit to the subject it owns. The manner of self-construction permits the spectre to give an account of herself and to engage in autobiography or autospectrography, which had been unheard when she was alive. Thus the spectral storytellers of Ayyappan's fiction take out their power to act from their absence of sojourning in the world.

Illustrations of possession in Ayyappan's composition foreground an idiom of violent inhabitation, where vengefulness and desire become tough to discriminate from each other. It would be simplistic to see in the sense of possession in Ayyappan's work an explicit reversal of caste violence, the transformation of the committer into the victim. The narrative sketches Ayyappan's heart-rending structure of love, where it becomes the most aggressive and brutal. Nevertheless, in the midst of their aggressive drive of retribution and destruction, they weep desperately, lamenting why their lives and loves shatters to fragments.

The most notable point in this story is the incestuous relation between Kunhacks and Rosykutty. But according to the spectre,

It was my nakedness that Kunhacks unveiled. When he hugged you, he was hugging me, for you were I. It was with me, with me alone, that he did 'wrong'. (95)

When a woman is born in a Dalit community, whether she is economically or politically empowered or not, she has to bear certain suppressions, humiliations and physical and mental assaults from the patriarchal society she survives. Even after her death, she has to carry the Dalit identity. In this story, more often than not, the possessed spirit turns against a woman, Rosykutty.

Even though she is a 'Savarna', when the Dalit woman's spectre possesses her, she is also bearing a Dalit identity. Kunhacks views her as a Dalit girl rather than as his sister and uses her illness to his advantage. She is victimized by her brother himself because of her possessed soul as a Dalit. Even as a spectre herself, the Dalit woman is not free from the clutches of the patriarchal society. Nevertheless, at the end of the story, the spectre liberates Rosykutty by returning to her grave. She says, "Here, I grant you my freedom. Look at your feet for proof of my leaving you. Where, where is that chain?" (95). It echoes the fact that a Dalit girl's body as well as soul is always in chains. Here when the spirit sets the girl free and returns to her grave, Rosykutty is regaining her lost identity as a Syrian Christian.

The history and present of Dalit life struggles for subsistence and human self-esteem are perceptively epitomised by his fiction in elusive and strategically political ways. The rebellious and critical power of his fictional account is imaginative and unparalleled in Malayalam. Social criticism, sarcasm, satire, irony, pathos and black humour make his texts heterogeneous. Ayyappan talks about the disbelief and wrath he experienced as a young man to the established paths of lower caste reform, which seizes the veil of development refusing its profits to the Dalits. He revitalizes the genre of fiction through a sombre and engaging exchange that relocated the ethical cognizance of creative writing on the key and burning issues of the social ambience, its culture and history.

Works Cited

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