

VOICING THE PROTEST: AN ANALYSIS OF SANTHAKUMAR'S *DREAMHUNT* IN THE BACKDROP OF THEYYAM

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Abstract: Dalit literature or literature of the suppressed has developed a separate aesthetics, an aesthetics which defied the common concept of literary aesthetics, with its alternative narrative strategy and thematic representation. Drama, even while fulfilling its prime role as the medium of entertainment, has become instrumental in bringing about social revolution. Folk arts, indigenous theatre, tribal art, music and dance are an indivisible part in Indian civilization and have added to its richness, even before the drama of present day with a well designed script came into existence. Every Indian state has its own home grown theatre forms with focus based on its own provincial problems. Dalit theatre is an outcome of Dalit rebellion and a progeny of Dalit literature.

Keywords: Dalit Theatre, Dreams, Poverty, Theyyam.

Introduction: The word theatre comes from the Greeks. It means the seeing place. It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation. - *Stella Adler*

Post Independent India saw the rise of Dalit theatres, indisputably an offshoot of political movement led by Dr. Ambedkar and Phule. The Dalit Literary Movement thus developed as a movement of commitment, protest and liberation. Beginning with poetry and autobiography as the appropriate medium of expression, Dalit theatres gained prominence in the recent years to come. Developed as a theatre of revolt, it questioned the Brahminical supremacy, caste hierarchy, ascendancy of Sanskrit, untouchability etc. Thus it became an instrument of protest against the established norms of society. Dalit theatres have played a crucial role in creating social awareness among the Dalit community and in teaching them their rights as human beings and citizens of India. It gained ascendancy over other literary forms as it could appeal to the illiterate and poor section of the society. Instead of creating literature for the entertainment, it brought to light the lives of the subaltern folk, reinterpretation of epics from Dalit point of view, preaching of Ambedkar, Phule and Budha etc. As it portrayed the lives of those who stood in the lowest rungs of society, it can be called as the theatre of the 'proletariat' in the truest sense of the term. Hence its implication as 'a social theatre' is to be accredited.

The socio cultural history of Kerala will make known the pivotal role played by drama and theatre in the secularization of artistic forms and how it brought about democratization in the arena of art. And this was made possible by the popularity gained by the Dalit folk forms and theatre tradition sabotaging the hegemonic practices which had confined art forms to temples and mansions and seemed standoffish to lower class. Instead the folk performances were brought to the streets and staged in open places

where everyone can make free entry without any discrimination of religion, caste or status. The Dalit ritual performances of Kerala like Theyyam, (a popular ritual form of worship of North Malabar in Kerala and the performers of Theyyam belong to the lower caste community), Poothan and Thira (a ritualistic art form found in the South Malabar region of Kerala, Performers are traditionally from the Mannan Hindu sub-caste), Chimmanakkali (an art form of Pulaya of north Kerala, South India) and Kakkarassi Natakam (a folk art form popular in Central Travancore. This musical dance drama has a peculiar structure. The protagonist in most of the plays is known as Sundara Kakaan. Besides, there are other characters like Kakkathis, Vedan etc. The handsome Sundara Kakaan is the spokesperson of the Kakkala community, an itinerant clan of clairvoyants) can be seen as imbued with theatricality. These art forms are a platform for Dalit Community life, to voice their protest, angst, struggle, resistance and life perception.

One of the noteworthy writer - actors, who brought the Dalit issues to the stage in Kerala, is Santhakumar whose plays *Karutha Vidhava* (*Black Widow*), *Swapnavetta* (*Dreamhunt*), *Sukhanidrayilekku* (*Into Sound Sleep*) and *Daaham* (*Thirst*) have played a pivotal role in bringing into mainstream the Dalit life and perspectives. Santhakumar uses the folk form of Theyyam performance to show the remonstrance of lower castes. The word Theyyam is derived from the Sanskrit word Daivam which means god. Theyyam is fearfully respected by the folk and tribal communities of Kerala and they are the representations of folk and tribal deities. While the mainstream Hinduism as it were practiced today, remained primarily the religion of Brahmins and Kshatriyas, there arose some group who wanted to question this hegemony. As Brahmins reserved the right to hold pooja for themselves, the Thiyya community appropriated a religious form of

their own which is known as Theyyam and many of the large ancestral homes in Kerala had their own theyyams. These gods were not the known ones of Aryans, but the local heroes who sacrificed their lives for great causes or for their land. Hero worship or ancestor was not a new thing to the primitive communities of India. Theyyam performers were Dalit Hindus who belonged to the Vannan and Malaya communities.

Theyyams are worshipped with suitable paraphernalia including dance, music, poetry and drama. The performance of Theyyam is also known as Theyyattam. The major thing to be noted about Theyyam performance is the regional color added to it. A Hindu form of worship with regional variation, it has become more of a cult than a dance or art form. Theyyam is believed to have originated even before the Aryan invasion, the testimony of which has been found in the Tamil literature of Sangam period. Before Theyyams came to be performed, Shakti pooja was the popular ritual, which was later influenced by Vaishnavite movement. But Theyyam is more or less connected to the fertility cult of worshipping mother goddess. Theyyams were usually performed in temple groves as a public, often to appease the spirit for the well being of all those who attend the performance. Sometimes the entire village gathers for the performance, and then it is called Otta Kolam. The Theyyam performer has got a special costume of bright colours, and very elaborate ornaments especially a distinctive crown which invites attention even from a distance. Theyyam is often performed to worship Kali, the Hindu Goddess. It often performs ancient folk tales especially rudiments of tribal culture. Theyyam performs the stories of Gods and heavenly spirits especially familiar in Kerala. Theyyam performers believe that immortal spirits occupy mortal bodies to perform a ritual dance so that the whole villagers will be benefitted by that.

Dreamhunt or Swapnavetta, by A. Santhakumar depicts the protest of those, whose dreams are shattered by the caste system or to be more specific class structure of the society, where even the right to dream is invested with the haves. By mixing up the fact and fantasy and or through dream technique, the predicaments of lower class are brought to light through the nostalgic remembrance of the past by Kannan Theyyam. In other words, Theyyam is used as a background to highlight the marginalization and repression suffered by the lower class. The Kannan Theyyam is a Gulikan Theyyam. There are different types of theyyams, each differentiated by the use make-up, head gear, multihued costumes, attractive ornaments and natural body paintings. Most of the theyyams including Gulikan Theyyam are performed by men and the performance is often accompanied by the beating of drums.

Gulikan Theyyam has got a special costume and make-up, often wearing a distinct mask, with Lord Shiva's trident marked on it. He wears such a make-up that his eyes appear round and fiery eyes, his teeth made to appear chisel, bamboo leaves used to cover the original hair of the man impersonating as Theyyam. Theyyams use coconut barks to decorate their legs and sometimes they use coconut leaves to cover their waist clothes. Gulikan Theyyam appears unique with its fear provoking performance done with fire.

The plays is a hide and seek game by the reality and dreams, where the lower class lives are bestowed with the occasional bounty of the fulfillment of their wishes only in their dreams and or they can chase their dreams only in their dreams. Parvati has passed the marriageable age yet her wish to get married has not been fulfilled yet. She gets her dream of nuptials realized only in her dreams where she feels the presence of a bridegroom who often reminds her that he is incapable of adding color to her dreams.

Parvati: "I don't know where you are from, what your name is...when I wake up I do not recall your face. Why do you come into my dreams and awaken desire in me?"

Bridegroom: Reality is so terrible, that I am incapable of offering you a life in the real world.

Kannan Theyyam also often takes a stroll down the memory lane to find a reprieve from his tormenting present. Once, in his good old days, he used to enjoy the prime of his theyyam outfit and all other respectability. He wails how the lower class festivals were hijacked by the upper castes now.

Kannan(Sadly): All the Bhagvathi groves have been turned into temples...it's Ramayana reading Bhagavatha reading...theyyam and theyyam performers are ousted. How can this Kannan Theyyam live, without Bhagavathi groves to perform in?

Parvati: Achcha, you have forgotten everything (laughs mockingly), that theyyam performances in Pallippuram grove were stopped, long ago and mimicry and music are held instead; why do you unnecessarily get the theyyam decorations ready? (P.171) `

The drama revolves around the torn pieces of the dreams of three or four characters in the play and shows how their attempts to stitch and re-stitch their dreams turn futile. Kannan Theyyam dreams of the return of his halcyon days where in the month of *Vrischikam*, during the season of festivals, he becomes the king of his locality as he takes the role of Gulikan Theyyam, when he gets waist pouch full of coins, rice and coconut and when people stand in queue for taking blessing from him. Parvati dreams of a bridegroom who may turn up in her life one day to take her to the world of bliss. Kannan Theyyam's son

nurtures a dream of secure job, a life with the girl he loved, a secure house for his family and a good alliance for his sister. But all their dreams turn fruitless. Kannan Theyyam's glorious days have now become a matter of distant past. Parvati's dreams remain mere dreams and Prabhakaran hangs himself in desperation, when his love Sreedevi gets married to a rich bank employee.

The shattering of dreams reaches its culmination when Gulikan Theyyam, instead of drinking the blood of rooster, takes it from the veins of Parvati. Gulikan Theyyam is supposed to invite the spirit of Yama, the Hindu God of Death. Hindu scriptures teach that Gulikan was created by Lord Shiva and while performing *Theyyam*, they demonstrate how Gulikan was thrown to the ground by Shiva in rage just because Parvati got frightened of Gulikan. Here Kannan Theyyam takes the role of Gulikan Theyyam, the role of Yama. He not only does frighten Parvati but takes her life too, and no Shiva turns up to save Parvati from his claws.

Though the characters in the play are desperate and accept defeat in their race for better life, the play is not ending in a subservient and acquiescent tone. Instead, the bridegroom of dreams makes his appearance with an exhortation to the downtrodden. Even in death, you dream with your half closed eyes. Your tresses still have the scent of dreams. Words of love still tremble on your lips. As you lie underground, with dreams that death cannot end, you must call out, call from your grave, ask who hunted down my dreams, why did boiling youth wither and die...ask, aloud! Ask! (P.179)

The Dalit folk theatre stood for that section of people who have been deprived of social, economic and educational advantages by the intricate Hindu caste system. As Dr. K.A. Gunasekaran, Professor and Head, School of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University says, "This theatre works as a catalyst for generating awareness on social and women's issues." These theatres replicate the apprehensions and agonies, troubles and tribulations of the abandoned, their remonstrations and their ambitions for a life with self-esteem. Through these indigenous theatric

forms, the conformist and hegemonic theatre were questioned and subverted.

Dalit ethnical art forms and writings add momentum to the Dalit emancipation, women liberation and to the deliverance of the underprivileged by bringing the injustices they suffered on to the stage. It is the theatre of those who were relegated to the lowest rung of the society. This theatre of protest like the Afro American theatre strives to gain dignity for those whose lives and rights were being stolen by the privileged.

Theyyam can be acclaimed as a folk religion, as it worship mother goddess, trees, animals, heroes of the land, ancestors etc. They might have village deities, often folk heroes and heroines replace the gods. But it cannot be entirely separated from conventional Hindu rituals. The worship of Durga or Shakti otherwise known as Shaktism and the worship of Vishnu known as Vaishnavism and the worship of Shiva known as Shaivism have influenced the Theyyam performances of Kerala. Bhagavathy groves were unique feature of Northern Kerala. Bhagavathy is said to be the united form of the Hindu Goddesses-Lakshmi, Parvati and Saraswati and theyyams were performed in order to please her. In some groves, Theyyam performances are accompanied by blood offering ceremony, which makes it a continuation of the ancient tribal customs and practices. But as blood offering is not permissible in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, such theyyams are not performed in the temples. For such performances, an outside place is selected and those Theyyam artists who take the blood of roosters will not enter the temples. Ironically, Gulikan Theyyam of the play takes the blood of his daughter and that too outside the grove. But unfortunately, these forms are getting extinct and will be a part of history, unless something is made to preserve it. It is the oral and precious heritage of humanity, which cannot be thrown in to the recycle bins of history. With the advent of Aryanism, a sophisticated form of Hindu religion, the tribal religions, practices and customs of India, which were practiced by Dalits lost significance. The play *Dream Hunt* is an elegy on the sad but slow demise of India's rural and ethnic traditions.

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