

Caste-Informed Female Bodies and Slippery Sexual Spaces: A Study of Select Malayalam Short Fiction

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Abstract

This paper aims to address the spatial aspect of the formation of Dalit female sexual identities with reference to select post-millennial Malayalam short fiction. The article argues that the right to own and occupy the social space and the right to have a free expression of one's sexual identity and desire correlate in the casteist scenario of Kerala. How the social impurity and stigma of caste and the entailing untouchability pervade to sexuality and how tactile defilement becomes synonymous with sexual defilement in the caste-ridden society of Kerala are also brought to light. The paper also sheds some light on the "slippery" nature of sexuality in the cultural landscape of Kerala when savarna (upper-caste) and Dalit people confront each other in/with desire. The paper employs the method of close reading whereas the analytical framework is provided by various theories and concepts related to sexual geography, spatiality and caste.

Keywords: spatiality of caste, Dalit sexual space, Malayalam short story, purity norms, slippery spaces, sexual geography

Introduction

When the formation of Dalit sexual spaces in the cultural scenario of modern Kerala is closely examined, Edward Soja's observation on how space produces meaning and achieves organization as a part of the process of "social translation, transformation and experience" (79-80) becomes very relevant. The construction and access to modern social space have been a much-debated area in Kerala ever since the mid-nineteenth century. The spatial mobility of Dalits was limited in the traditional Kerala society. Their physical movement and interactions were limited to the confines of the agricultural land owned by the feudal landlord who reaped the fruits of their labour (Mohan 43-44). Mukul Sharma also emphasizes the spatiality of caste when he notes that in India even nature is not devoid of caste. He argues that the "images of land animate caste anxieties around labour, blood, and bondage. In dry regions, Dalits must often sacrifice their lives to recharge ponds and water resources. From village to city, and temple to school, caste metaphors of pollution, impurity, and dirt dominate places and spaces, through imaginaries of dangers posed by the presence of Dalits" (41). He rightly renames the villages, land and agriculture, rivers and water, forests and mountains as *Dalitscape*, where the caste identity of the Dalits is formed and sustained (56). Even affective aspects of life like the desire for family and having a home were denied under conditions of caste slavery in pre-modern Kerala. The body of the slave and the familial relations were the most crucial spaces, and the traces of a system of domination executed with physical punishment could be traced in the body of the Dalit slave, which was almost naked. The slaves were denied access to public

spaces such as markets, roads, courts of law and other institutions of governance (Mohan 44). In a study about the social identities of female Dalit Tamasha artistes in Maharashtra, Shailaja Deoram Paik remarks that the society's moral hierarchy of respect and decency stigmatized them as supposedly immoral and lacking in human dignity since their sensual and sexual stage performances and labour were performative iterations of Dalit womanhood. Paik blames the sex-gender-caste complex, which, on the one hand, reduced women to their biological functions and social roles as wives and mothers to produce and reproduce the economy of caste and, on the other, assigned to women different sexual statuses according to their position in the caste hierarchy. As a result, while dominant caste and in general caste Hindu women are deemed socially respectable, "Dalit women are exploited, denied respectability, and rendered sexually available" (Shailaja 2). She argues that the same complex is responsible for the Dalit women's participation in an economy of sexual excess which in turn endorses their *ashli* (obscene) quality, and their status as surplus and thus, sexually available women. Thus, she substantiates how caste violence is central to constituting Dalit Women's subjectivity (2). Ambedkar's formulation of the concept of "surplus women" explaining how endogamy and the control of female sexuality lead to the reproduction of caste also becomes relevant in the context of this paper. He argues that how unmarried and unmarriageable women function as a potential menace to the prevalence of caste, seducing men to disrupt the caste system by marrying outside one's caste. In that way, the regulation of female sexuality becomes central to the institution of caste (5-22). This article aims to spotlight the appropriation of sexual spaces by caste informed female bodies, in the cultural scenario of Kerala, in the light of select post-millennial Malayalam short stories.

Review of Literature

There has been previous research highlighting the entangled relationship between caste and sexuality in the Indian context at large and the Kerala context in particular. How sexuality functions as an extension of caste hierarchy, exposing lower caste women to sexual vulnerability and systemic violence has been emphasized by T.M. Yesudasan (612). J. Devika grows eloquent about the institutional blindness regarding women's sexual autonomy, asserting that despite the progressive social indices of the Kerala Model of Development, the lower-caste women's bodies are abjectified and sexualized, thus weaponizing sexuality to shoo them away from welfare schemes (21-22). She contends that in the 1990s, there was a social panic about unrestricted female sexuality where sexually transgressive women were tarnished and blamed for their victimization (33). How bisexual and queer women in Kerala negotiate their identity against spatial constraints has been explored by Chacko and Chakraborty. They argue how in a caste-ridden society as that of Kerala, where hyper-surveillance persists, queer women are forced to modify their bodies to satisfy heteronormative expectations. For a sense of spatial belonging, they are forced to forge fluid micro spaces (2-3). Rekha Raj observes how, by doubly reducing the lower-caste female body to a hyper-sexualised commodity, and to vulnerable victimhood, the *savarna* writers deny Dalit women of intellectual agency. The corporeal sovereignty is reclaimed by contemporary subaltern women writers by politicizing the body as a site of desire and resistance (118-125). Carmel Christy unravels how caste interplays with Nalini Jameela's social positioning of being a sex worker, whose figure is shaped by the permeability of the notions of the public and the private (97). She also brings to light the hypervisibility of Dalit women as "excess subjects," even in terms of the sexual violence they undergo (130). How sexual actors marginalized through the workings of caste and class stage their struggles through the deployment of delegitimized forms of cultural production is analysed by Navaneetha Mokkil (23).

Though the above-mentioned studies have tried to establish the intersectional association between body politics, sexuality and caste, none of them specifically addresses how caste, sexuality, gender and space are interlocked to each other, thus creating sexual spaces inaccessible to Dalit women. This paper aims to address that significant research gap, spotlighting the nature of sexual spaces created when Dalit women confront *savarna* people with desire, and the constraints such spaces pose to them, with reference to contemporary Malayalam short fiction.

Methodology and the Conceptual Framework

This article is a qualitative study employing the theoretical framework provided by Dalit Studies, Sexuality Studies and Space Theories. It conducts a thorough textual analysis of the select stories adopting the method of close reading. The article employs the concept of “slippery sexual spaces” as an analytical lens for understanding caste-mediated desire. As employed in the article, it signifies the evasive, escapist, flinching, non-inclusive sexual spaces which disown Dalit desire and deny to acknowledge of its authenticity.

The choice of the stories under consideration is grounded in various criteria associated with the concept used. The first story, “Encyclopedia” is selected because it is written by a woman writer, and because of its subject matter, which revolves around the Lesbian desire between a Dalit woman and an upper-caste woman. “Slipperiness” by K. Renukumar is handpicked, owing both to its subject matter that delves into the love affair between a Dalit woman and a *savarna* man, and the subjectivity of the writer, Renukumar being a prominent Dalit writer. Thus, authenticity and representation from multiple angles, from the angle of gender, sexuality, same-sex desire, Dalit subjectivity etc. are ensured to get reflected in the selection. Ultimately, the select stories are noted for their contemporaneity, having been written by emerging post-millennial writers in Malayalam, and their engagement with Dalit sexual spaces as well.

“Encyclopedia”

The story “Encyclopedia” by Sreelatha is about a silenced Lesbian relationship between two women belonging to two castes, classes and other opposing hierarchical social strata. The narrator who belongs to the upper-caste gets physically and emotionally close to a girl belonging to a family of tenants in their feudal ancestral property in her teenage. The tenant girl, who is older than her, turns out to be an encyclopedia of biological and sexual knowledge that no textbooks could provide (56). The story is set in two topographical and temporal spaces: the rural landscape when narrating the past and the urban landscape when narrating the present. Different phases of their evolving emotional and sexual relationship are shown in the story in flashes, where the evolution of sexuality is set against the rural geographical space. For example, the girls witness the illicit affair of the maid servant of the neighboring house, and later her orphaned dead body in the cashew nut plantation with a swollen belly (59). The rural space is portrayed as one censoring and imposing strict hegemonic moral codes regarding sexuality, and those who violate such moral codes as ending up in an orphaned death like that of the maid servant. On closer observation, one can understand that such codes are caste, class and gender specific.

Doreen Massey says in *Space, Place and Gender* states that social relations constitute both social phenomena and space, and the spatial can be defined as social relations “stretched out”. Hence the spatial is socially constructed and is directly related to the economy and society (21). The spatiality in the story can be seen to be constituted by caste relations. For example, the grandfather of the narrator can have an ‘illicit’ physical relationship with Sulu’s beautiful grandmother who is inferior class-wise and caste-wise. The spatial deployment is noteworthy as Sulu’s family resides literally on the fringes of the narrator’s feudal ancestral property as

tenants. This reflects the typical Indian caste geography where “In almost all cases, the Dalit villages are outside the boundary of the main caste Hindu villages. It is this spatial location that complements varna ideology...” (Rawat 1063-1064).

A Dalit female tenant is physically liable to the landlord; in terms of both labor and sexuality. This liability and servility are unidirectional and lopsided. It is determined by one's caste, class, gender and remarkably in this case, spatiality. The spatial relationship is mutual and reciprocative; in other words, it is a two-way relationship. The more a person is spatially disoriented or placed along the fringes, the more is their chance of being socially/sexually servile and vulnerable, and vice versa. Here, one's sexual vulnerability and the hierarchical slot in the sexuality grid are defined by the intersectional vectors of class, gender and caste.

Paik asserts that while the Dalits are degraded owing to the supposedly inherent possession of *ashlil* (obscene) quality, the abstinence from *ashlil* becomes a hallmark of the upper- caste superiority and power (17). In the story, the feudal aristocratic background of the narrator prevents her from furthering the romantic relationship with Sulu. She class-consciously outgrows it (Sreelatha 56-57). The internalization of caste specific moral codes by the narrator is described using the image of a ladder, that was climbed in opposite dyads from the fifteenth year to twenty, and how each rung of the ladder was taking the narrator beyond the access of Sulu. The narrator continues that the moment she used to see Sulu occasionally, someone in her banged the doors against her (57).

Sulu enjoys more sexual freedom than the narrator which seems to be class and caste specific. She is expected to “break fences in the same fashion of her mother and grandmother”, as the warning from the narrator's relatives goes (56). As years pass by, the narrator settled in the city, comes to know about Sulu's multiple affairs from the rumors spreading in the village. She elopes with a ‘Muslim’ bill collector first and gets converted into Islam. Then she abandons him, gets converted into Hinduism again and takes another Hindu husband. She is said to have gone to Bombay with her third husband who is a visa agent, and who later gets imprisoned on some allegedly fraudulent business (57). Sulu's escapades and the daring experiments with her own life seem to have sprouted from the branding she was given from childhood onwards as someone who will “leap across fences and walls.” Her chastity, or the lack of it, is decided by her caste.

The notion of ritual purity of the upper castes and impurity of the lower castes is the most defining aspects of caste according to Louis Dumont (43). Sulu's chastity is defined against the purity norms instituted by the norms of the narrators' caste, class and gender.

Sulu's sexual identity becomes a shadow set against the narrator's towering personality constructed with caste specific purity norms. The narrator as a “*kulina*” (chaste and noble woman) becomes the touchstone against which the purity of Sulu is rubbed and decided. Carmel Christy contends, in this regard, that many groups, including Dalit, lower-caste, minority women, and LGBTQIA have started to challenge and contest the idea that the middle-class, upper-caste woman is the universal representation of womanhood in the Indian setting (4). Paik also grows vocal about conceiving Dalit Tamasha artistes as “dirty,” denigrated, salacious, “vamp”, and nothing less than a “prostitute” by setting them off the opposite of the stereotypical “good,” “respectable” upper-caste Hindu women, who are construed as chaste, modest, protected, and dependent on men (2). Thus, the sexual identities of the Dalit woman and the upper-caste woman are ideologically constructed with the binary opposites of pure/impure.

Paradoxically, Sulu's comparative sexual freedom allows for traversing religious boundaries, but not caste boundaries. In the Kerala scenario, class is caste specific and more difficult to get negotiated in terms of matrimonial alliances. The debates around sexuality and caste that took momentum in the 1990s did not fundamentally alter Kerala's public space, Carmel Christy

argues. On the contrary, caste has simply been camouflaged and presented in the public space in several forms, and this presence has only been helpful in sustaining the absence of the sexual politics of caste in Kerala's public place. Hence the women in Kerala are disciplined and tamed by the covert disguises of caste and its lived experiences as they navigate their life in the public space (9).

The narrator herself claims that like a Train Ticket Examiner, who expels the passengers without valid tickets from the train, she ousted Sulu from her mind without valid tickets from the train, she ousted Sulu from her mind (Sreelatha 58). Obviously, Sulu is not a ticket holder to *high class* travels and her existence and sexual identity are validated on the basis of caste. The slipperiness of the sexual space is created not only because of the lesbian nature of desire that exists between these two women but also because of the boundaries imposed by caste. It is noteworthy that Sulu is ousted by the *savarna* narrator herself from her love life. What happens between them is not the usual jilting that takes place in romantic relationships. On the contrary, it is caste that creates the evasive, escapist, non-confrontational space of desire which triggers the narrator's heartless disownment of Sulu. Such slippery spaces generate a sense of non-belongingness and rootlessness in Dalit people, and make them feel as misfits in an alienating cultural system. As the affective dimensions of life are denied of the cultural anchor and endorsement they demand, the Dalits end up in eternal existential angst.

Interestingly, it is not accidental that the reunion of the old partners, after many decades, is set to take place in an urban landscape (59). The moral geography (Cresswell 128) of the city is different from that of the village and permits deviations and digressions from the linear mode of morality which exists in a rural landscape. Moreover, the anonymity provided by the city which erases hierarchies, though temporarily, gives hide outs to sexually deviant people. Sulu's lack of access to the territorial as well as social space has divided her from the narrator forever. Sulu intrudes into the apartment of the narrator, where she lives alone after some decades of an unhappy marital life (Sreelatha 54). The Lesbian reunion of these middle-aged women at midnight, without fearing the beatings with brooms on the back, can only be set against an urban landscape. The story ends with the unannounced disappearance of Sulu, pointing towards the impossibility of the permanent union of two women, belonging different castes, in the current cultural landscape of Kerala.

"Slipperiness"

The best example for the operations of "sex- gender- caste complex" (Paik 7) and the resultant slipperiness of Dalit sexual spaces can be seen in M.R. Renukumar's story "Slipperiness". This story follows the meta fictional narrative pattern of a "story within a story" where Raman Kochola, a writer of pulp fiction, wonders about the sudden missing of his protagonist Sasikala. He says though "Sasikala tended to storm out of the story in a huff, now and then, alleging he was a misogynist and all," it is for the first time that she has vanished without any warning; first from the countryside and then from the locale of the story itself (Renukumar 185).

Ironically enough, when Kochola retrospectively thinks about the absconding of his characters in the past, the reader comes to find that all of them were men, who had escaped from the village to the city following clandestine sexual affairs with women belonging to different castes. The character Narayanan Nair, the father of three full grown daughters, runs away to the city when the maid servant gets pregnant by him. Kanakappan had to flee the village when his wife's adulterous relationship spread around the village (185). Kochappi's son Jobichan, a Dalit Christian, had been chased to the city having been in love with a Syrian Christian girl. The girl's father uses his caste name *Pulayan* as a cuss word intimidating him: "Son of a *polayadi*, I will beat you to death, trample you in the slush if I ever see you around here..." (185). Lower-

caste names substituting swear words indicate how their existence becomes synonymous with filth and obscenity in the Indian culture.

It is from Kochola's unearthing of Sasikala's past that the reader again comes to know about the relationship she had with Arunkumar Madhavan who used to engage in intellectual discussions with her. Arun Madhavan's words reek of high-brow intellectualism, which is revealed from his dialogues like "no relationship is unidimensional. This intimacy between us, too, is political. That is, the compatibility in our views is what essentially encourages us to continue as friends..." (Renukumar 185). Sasikala begs to differ and says that "I think love is unidimensional at least at its highest point. I don't claim that love is extra-political and so on, but to connect it only with similarities of stance, seems to me..." (186). It is only when she hushes up the sobs the reader gets the first hint that the words spoken relate to the *savarna* subjectivity of Arun and the Dalit subjectivity of Sasikala.

The writer is specific about both the spatiality of the romance with the implicit carnality and the slippery nature of it because it involves an upper-caste man and a Dalit woman. For example, he says that "It was only when returning home through the ridge across the field that Sasikala and Arun spoke of anything down-to-earth, without preface or pretence. On all other occasions, their conversations reminded one of seminar hall discussions" (186). The author also remarks that "Sasikala preferred to speak in a less round about manner, but the apprehension that a sudden opening up of heart would degrade her in his esteem always held her back" (186). The apprehension is obviously caused by the stigma of being sexually vulnerable that presupposes a Dalit woman's subjectivity. The hypocritical *savarna* subjectivity which prevented Arun from wanting to "reveal all and risk sounding like a common *Nair*" (186) results in his slipperiness as far as desire and romance are concerned.

The omniscient narrator who traces the thoughts of Raman Kochola about his characters states: "As for Arun, he would rather steer clear of all decisions and prolong their relationship indefinitely...He was reluctant to translate it into the unbeautiful prose of marriage" (186). In the casteist scenario of Kerala, the prospects of marriage become unbeautiful, prosaic, and devoid of all romantic elements when the partners are a Nair man and a Dalit woman. When, finally, Sasikala musters all courage and makes a proposal to Arun about for marriage, Arun's slippery evasion becomes all the more prominent. He asks her to wait saying that they shall think more about it. "Sasikala could see that it was an evasion. The cold lazy tone of his reply astonished her. She was unable to swallow it whole" (187).

When Sasikala gets back home, she witnesses her seemingly unemployed and uneducated, hence domesticated sister having an illicit sexual affair with someone amidst the plantain clumps (188). Thus, the paradoxical public assumption regarding the vulnerable sexuality and the easy virtues of illiterate Dalit women is hinted at by the writer. It is contrasted with the plight of the educated Dalit woman who enjoys more access to the public space. She meets with an evasive slippery treatment when she seeks the cultural approval and endorsement for her romance with marriage. Both of these conditions are mutually constitutive and inextricably linked in the day to day lives of Dalit women.

The "rustic's hypothesis" Raman Kochola uses to trace the absconding character states that "those who vanished from the countryside later surfaced in the city" (189). It highlights yet another important spatial aspect of Dalit sexuality. By the time he tracks her in the city, she had already grown "untackable, a log of wood that could not be split" (189). Raman Kochola postpones the completion of the story to the moment "whenever Sasikala's present- frozen in the city- would recover its freedom of movement" (190) underscoring the trapped Dalit subjectivities both in the urban and rural spaces.

Conclusion and Scope for Further Research

All these stories bring to light the high-caste declination to accommodate Dalit desire in the social space, for fear of sexual defilement caused by the untouchable impure bodies, which results in the slipperiness of such sexual spaces. They explicate how the denial of access to the social space leads to the sexual ostracization of Dalit people. These stories also indicate how *savarna* people are usually elusive, slippery and hesitant from expressing the desire for a Dalit person because of the hypocritical moral codes prescribed by casteism. The fear of social stigma, ignominy, tactile defilement and impurity also play a significant role in stifling the free expression of their desire.

While contending that the access to social space and the expression of sexual identity are deeply interconnected within Kerala's caste hierarchy, the paper offers scope for further research on the intersection of caste, sexuality, spatiality, and contemporary Malayalam literature. Though the article tries to shed light on the cultural construction of "slippery sexual spaces", how the Dalit people navigate such spaces is left open for further exploration. There is research potential also for probing into the ways in which Dalit people coming under the spectrum of various sexual identities contest such sexual spaces in confrontation with *savarna* people. The covert mechanisms of spatial constraints implemented by the upper caste people, in relation to sexuality, can also be investigated.

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