
**The God of the Threshold: Reclaiming Dalit Narrative in G.Ravi's
Kandankunnu Muthappan**

Saritha.K¹, Dr. Sreenivas Vooradi²¹Research Scholar, Institute of Humanities and Social Science,
Srinivas University, Mangalore, India²Research Professor, Institute of Humanities and Social Science
Srinivas University, Mangalore, India.

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Abstract:

G. Ravi's novel Kandankunnu Muthappan bridges the gap between the specific folk ethos of North Malabar and universal understanding, the belief that every person has built in value simply because they are humans. Dalit literary assertion covers the right of a person or a group to describe their own history, culture, and experience without others doing it for them. It subverts the Brahmanical sacred spaces and takes full pride in Dalit labour. Using tools like magical realism, the author performs a "Theyyam" which adopts a performative structure. Dalit identity is meant not to be defined by the history of oppression but by its rich, autonomous and spiritual heritage. This novel portrays the worship of Muthappan, the popular folk deity, in North Dalit communities' struggle for existence. The protagonist, whose cult is historically rooted in Dalit and Adivasi communities. Ravi's narrative not only depicts devotion but also shows their powerful community's struggle for land and cultural acceptance of social entity existing norms, traditions and values.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Subaltern studies, Folk Deity, Liminality, Cultural reclamation, Muthappan, Kunkan

Introduction

Dalit literature, as articulated by critics like Sharankumar Limbale, is fundamentally means of "awakening" and "protest". It seeks to dismantle the "savarna" (upper caste) aesthetic that has historically represented the Dalit as an object of pity, ridicule or violence and to reestablish the Dalit as the sovereign subject of their own narrative¹. Novel revolves around the folk deity Muthappan, a popular God in the northern regions of Kerala, uniquely worshipped in a non-temple, open-air contest, often by Dalit and Adivasi communities. Muthappan is a God of the hunt, of toddy, and of the forest-a stark contrast to the vegetarian,

sanskritic Gods of the Brahmanical pantheon. He is a deity of threshold: between the forest and village, the wild and civilized, the sacred and the profane. This paper will analyze how the novel leverages this "threshold" identity of the deity to construct a robust Dalit narrative. We will first establish the theoretical frame of liminality and narrative reclamation. Subsequently we will explore three key strategies employed in the novel:

- a) The subversion of Brahmanical space and ritual through the Kavu
- b) The reclamation of Dalit labor, and economy through the deity's association
- c) The use of the deities' oral performative tradition as a metaphor for a non -canonical, community owned history.

Kandamkunnu Muthappan as the God of this liminal space embodies this anti structure. His rituals involve the conception of fish and alcohol (today), acts that are considered polluting with in the Sanskrit tradition. By making these acts central to the divine ritual, the novel inverts the casteist hierarchy of purity. The deity's "otherness" is not a mark of inferiority but a source of his power and accessibility. He is a god who meets his devotees on their own terms, in their own spaces, effectively desegregating the divine. This re-mapping of the sacred into a Dalit cultural geography is a profound narrative act. It asserts that the divine is not the exclusive property of the privileged but is immanent in the landscapes and practices of the marginalized. As globalization disrupts our culture, & as the need of the hour in find out where the sources of our unique culture lie. As time passes, the knowledge about our generation will become unknown to the coming generation. Therefore, we need to gather as much knowledge as possible before our culture is destroyed. A generation that was in lane with nature and did not worry about Tomorrow². The encroachment of modernization has seriously affected the unique culture of the tribals. We need to find them before they disappear forever. As science and technology grew, man began to distance himself from nature Man no longer had time to listen to man.

'Dalit' is a word that is becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary society and literature. Dalit is a familiar word through the activities of the 'Dalit Panthers' movement formed in Bombay in April 1972. This word was first used by a young man from Maharashtra named Namdeo Dasal. Its root is the Sanskrit word 'dal'. The meaning given to the word 'dal' in the Sanskrit-English dictionary published by Sir Munir Williams is 'cut off'. Split, torn apart, broken, dispersed, destroyed, trampled on, etc.) There are different opinions about the meaning of the word 'Dalit', which points to the social reality of the lower class. "In practical terms, the term Dalit refers to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and backward classes. In a broader sense, all those who are excluded by the imposition of untouchability in the name of class or race are Dalit's.

The term Dalit refers to the indigenous people who grew up on this land. It is also believed that Dalit's are this group of people known as the 'Panch Mar' The word Dalit comes from the word "dalam". (The word Dalit is used in the sense of someone who is kept away, someone who stays away). In that sense, all the old Theendal castes of Kerala can be called

Dalits. In the Manusmriti, it is clear that Manu, who claims to be Swayambhū, is consciously trying to brand a section of the population as inferior on the basis of birth by following the divine power. It is claimed that Brahma, the Lord of all creations, who was liberated from the flood, created Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras from the face, hands, arms and feet for the development of the world.

There are still stories in the Mahabharata itself that humiliated and oppressed the lower caste. We cannot forget one night in the Mahabharata war that lasted eighteen days. When Bhīma's son Ghatolkach was killed by the sword called Vaijayanti, Krishna consoled himself by remembering Arjuna's safety. When it is interpreted that the noble birth is that of the upper caste, the pains of the lower caste disappear. The historical records of Kerala testify that the Brahmins and their religion were the cause of the caste system in Kerala. The caste system created by them in Kerala was extremely despicable and disgusting. Unlike narratives that primarily document the stark brutalities of caste oppression, Kandankunnu Muthappan strategically delves into the realm of folk religiosity and myth to construct an alternative epistemology of Dalit life. The novel centers on the worship of Muthappan, a popular folk deity in northern Kerala, whose cult is historically rooted in, and predominantly sustained by, the Dalit and Adivasi communities. Ravi's narrative does not merely portray this devotion; it intricately weaves the deity's legend into the fabric of a contemporary Dalit community's struggle for land, dignity, and cultural legitimacy. The eponymous hill, Kandankunnu, thus becomes a contested site—simultaneously geographical, spiritual, and political—where histories are buried, myths are born, and resistance is sanctified.

Objectives

- Examine the narrative strategy of mythography.
- Deconstruct the representation of caste and space
- Analyze the articulation of Dalit agency and resistance.
- Situate the novels within the broader discourses of Dalit literature and Subaltern studies.
- Interpret the socio-cultural reclamation through folk spirituality

Review of Literature

- Ravi, G (2013) A dominant strand of criticism positions Kandankunnu Muthappan as an act of subaltern historiography. Scholars argue that Ravi excavates the buried past of the Kandankunnu (hill) and coastal communities, countering the dominant caste-class³.
- M. Dasan et al. (2012), in their Foundational Anthology, "The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing" highlight how the novel documents the unrecorded histories of land alienation, the cultural practices of the Kadar (fisher folk), and the brutal caste violence obscured by Kerala's "model development" myth⁴.

- K. K. Kochu (2015), a renowned critic known for his Subaltern and materialist reading of culture, would have approached Ravi's work with a focus on its political and ideological dimensions. He sees this act as a form of intellectual resistance granting legitimacy and textual permanence to a marginalised narrative. Later in the land-owning system & plough agriculture introduced by the Kerala Brahmins is based on the caste hierarchy (Chaturvarna), also known as Avakasham. Furthermore, if the people deviated from the established laws, they were punished by the upper castes. Under the new law, the right to perform Theyyam was given to the Dalits. However, the Dalit communities strongly followed their religious beliefs. So Theyyam underwent many changes in indigenous communities, who were later categorised as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes⁵.
- Shanthakumar discusses the subaltern religious beliefs are highly linked with ecology, and it is visible in their lifestyles and culture. Sacred groves can be seen as a minor form of the geographical living practices of subaltern communities, mainly the tribal culture. The paper situates and historicises various aspects of Dalit issues in the context of Kerala through this play. The paper discusses the dynamics of language, semiotics of performance and politics of translation and examines the Dalit identity and expression of their experience through performance. Dalit writings have emerged in many parts, as a means to create a cultural, political and social identity for the deprived community⁶.
- Damodaran states, the concept of 'purity' and 'pollution' makes every layer of society secluded and divided, giving special privileges to some. The marginalised 'other' is treated as an 'animal-like creature', agonising in pain and grief. Gods in Theyyam, members of this marginalised other, became Gods after they challenge and resist such social evils⁷. He also observed that the extensive caste consciousness that permeates religious contexts, revealing the stark irony of how individuals can be revered and worshipped during the ritual but face discrimination and marginalization in their everyday lives⁸.
- However, as S. Armstrong discusses the politics of translating Indian Dalit Drama, there is a politics inherent in a text involving the approach of the author, the translator, and even the publisher. "The translator's relationship to the text he/ she has taken up to translate is enmeshed in a matrix of power relations"⁹.

This observation brings to light the extensive caste consciousness that religious contexts, revealing the stark irony of how individuals can be revered and worshipped during the ritual but face discrimination and marginalisation in their everyday lives.

Materials

- **Primary source**

G. Ravi's *Kandankunnu Muthappan*.

Interviews and speeches by G Ravi: videos or published interviews where the author discuss his intent, inspirations, and socio-political context of the novel.

- **Secondary sources**

Annihilation of Caste by B.R. Ambedkar¹⁰.

Can the Subaltern Speak? by Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty¹¹.

Reading Postcolonial Theory: Bibhash Choudhury¹².

Methods

- Placing the novel's narrative within the concrete history of agrarian slavery, caste atrocity, and social reform movements in pre- and post-independence Malabar.
- Examining the novel as a social document that captures the material conditions (land relations, modes of exploitation) of the Dalit community.
- Applying Limbale's principles of Dalit aesthetics: "Anger" (Kopam), "Urgency," and "Rejection of Traditional Sympathy."
- Exploring Ambedkarite consciousness in the text: the pursuit of self-respect, education, and political awakening over spiritual salvation.
- Investigating the politics of silence and speech in the novel. Who speaks, who is silenced, and how does the narrative give voice to the community's collective memory?

Discussion

Explaining the Dalit writing style through G. Ravi's novel *Kandankunnu Muthappan* is an excellent way to understand how Dalit literature in Kerala operates. The novel is a landmark text precisely because it embodies the core principles of Dalit aesthetics while being rooted in the specific cultural and social milieu of northern Kerala. The "Dalit writing style" is not a single, monolithic set of rules but a political and aesthetic approach to literature. It seeks to dismantle upper-caste, Savarna narratives and create a counter-culture from the perspective of the oppressed. Here's how G. Ravi's *Kandankunnu Muthappan* exemplifies this style:

Centrality of the Dalit Life-World and Subaltern Consciousness

Usually in Malayalam Literature, Dalits are portrayed as pitiable or noble savages. In *Kandankunnu Muthappan*, it shows the Dalit communities' struggle for existence. The protagonist of the novel is not only Muthappan, the folk deity, but it is the entire Dalit community living around *Kandankunnu*

Reclaiming and Re-interpreting Myth and Folklore

This is the most powerful aspect of Dalit style in this novel. Ravi took this local folk deity Muthappan, who challenged the Brahmanical system. He is often depicted as a hunter and a toddy tapper, and is worshipped with offerings of meat and toddy. This deity becomes the symbol of Dalit identity, autonomy and cultural pride. It uses the local dialect and slang. It shows the community's way of speaking is worthy of literature. The storytelling is raw and direct. It does not avoid describing the caste violation. It breaks the polished "civilized" surface of mainstream literature.

The Aesthetics of the Body and Material Reality.

In contrast to the spiritual or metaphysical concern, Dalit Literature often foregrounds the physical bodily experience of oppression. Dalit writing talks about everyday struggles. It focuses on the body, how it works hard, feels pain and faces violence. Instead of talking about a big idea like the soul or religion, it shows hunger, labour and hurt. This helps readers understand the tough lives of Dalit people.¹³

Political Assertion and the Rejection of Victimhood

The novel doesn't show Dalit's as helpless victims. Instead, it highlights their anger not as something bad, but as a powerful force that drives them to fight back against caste oppression. This anger shows an act of rebellion and helps the community to stand up for its dignity.

Arguments for it being a Dalit Novel:

- **Central Dalit Protagonist and Community:** The story is about Muthappan his Dalit community where their lives and struggles were focused. Their struggles, joys, social position and internal dynamics form the entire subject matter of the book.
- **Explicit Depiction of caste Oppression:** The novel shows how caste hurts the people. It talks about shame and unfair treatment of the poor.
- **Subversion of the Mythological Realm:** Muthappan is a Dalit God. He is the central figure, also as a Dalit God. He drinks toddy and eats meat. This challenged the upper caste belief.
- **Dalit Consciousness and Agency:** Dalit character speaks up. He often rebukes the upper caste for their hypocrisy and works for the upliftment of the Dalits.

Why it is a "Transcendent" Dalit Novel:

- **Focus on the internal world:** The novels look deeply into the Dalit community's beliefs, stories and values. It shows how they connect with their God Muthappan.
- **Universal humanism:** Even though the story is about Dalits, its message is for everyone. It's about justice, good and evil, and human dignity. Muthappan becomes a symbol of hope for all who suffer.

Magical Realism

It is the prominent technique. These concepts often involve finding beauty, creativity or deeper meaning within the routine of life. Example: The transition when the human Kandankunnu transforms into the powerful deity Muthappan during "Theyyam" performance is not called a metaphor but as tangible and realistic. People seek blessings from God directly.

Folk Narrative Styles (Oral Storytelling):

The story is read aloud from generation to generation. This is possible only through:

- **A Non-linear, Episode Structure:** The novel unfolds through a series of anecdotes, legends and episodes from Muthappan's life.
- **Simple, Direct and Lyrical Prose:** Ravi's language is firmly established in Kannur. It is associated with the poetic and rhythmic, reflecting the natural tune of folks' songs and rituals related to Muthappan.

"Theyyam" as a Narrative Framework:

In North Kerala, the Theyyam performance becomes a deity where the entire novel is constructed like a "Theyyam performance".

- Human to Divine Arc: - The narrative follows the arc of a Theyyam, beginning with human struggles of the protagonist, framing the intense preparation and possession, culminating in the power and divinity where the Muthappan is for giving out justice and blessings.
- Catharsis and Resolution: Community provides Theyyam as a performance of catharsis where the novel's episodes end with the moral and spiritual resolution brought about by Muthappan's high status in the community.

Symbolism:

- Kandankunnu (The Hill itself): stands in contrast to oppressive social spaces of the village, represented by freedom, identity, and spiritual power for the Dalit community.
- Alcohol and Meat: These offerings to Muthappan are a strong defiance against Brahmanical norms and vegetarianism.

Conclusion

We can conclude this title by G Ravi, a unique appreciation for the novel as both a literary artifact and a cultural vessel. By translating its unique elements into the novel, it helps readers everywhere understand and appreciate its depth without losing its original essence. Kandankunnu Muthappan isn't just about a local God-It's a powerful Dalit literary work. Ravi uses the figure of Muthappan to reclaim storytelling, challenge Brahmanical spaces and honour Dalit labour and culture. The novel celebrates Dalit identity through rich tradition and spiritual strength. It's not just written-it's performed like a literary "Theyyam" using magical realism to express the voice and resistance of the marginalized community. "Thus, the style is perfectly connected to the theme, creating work which is a poignant social document, a vibrant cultural archive, and a profound work of art.

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