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## **Dissenting Dalit Voices: An Analysis of Select Oral Songs of Dalit Women in Kerala**

By Anne Placid<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The caste and gender configurations in literary and socio-historic spheres that misrepresent or eliminate Dalit women's voices in mainstream chronicles uphold the notion that caste subjugation has been unresponsively endured by Dalit women. This depiction of the gendered caste subaltern in the mainstream narratives is interrogated and countered by the oral songs of Dalit women in Kerala. This paper examines how the songs as the sites of the register of the voices of Dalit women hold cultural and historic significance carrying the bearings of the Dalit feminist standpoint. The oral songs which contain the feminist consciousness of the gendered caste subaltern in the nascent form provide a lineage to contemporary Dalit feminist writings.

*Keywords:* Dalits, Dalit literature, Dalit oral tradition, Gendered caste subaltern, Caste patriarchy, Dalit feminist standpoint, Subliminal protests.

### **Introduction**

This inquiry and review of the Dalit oral tradition illuminates the sketching of the literary map of the 'banished' and counters Gayatri Spivak's observation that the subaltern cannot speak (1988:283). The oral tradition of the subaltern simultaneously interrogates the un-representation and misrepresentations of the caste subaltern in the mainstream and offers an exemption to the notion that the caste subaltern is incapable of musings beyond mundane existence. Walter J. Ong's words are significant here: "oral cultures can produce amazingly complex and intelligent and beautiful organizations of thought and experience" (1982: 57). Oral cultures energize the contemporary literary engagements of the Dalits. Vansina's definition of oral tradition as "documents of the present" also inheriting "messages from the past" (1965: 10) underlines how, far from being a thing of antiquity, oral traditions can engage with the contemporary world too.

Dalit women's presence in oral renderings of the caste subaltern challenges the denial of the gendered caste subaltern's subjectivity and is also a lineage to Dalit feminism today. Although there is an increased interest in the study of Dalit Literature, the area of Dalit Orature remains vastly neglected by scholars. Though the relevance of Dalit Oral Tradition in Dalit Literature is not properly investigated, even by the Dalit academics and critics, the fact remains that the distinctive subversive voice and aesthetics of Dalit Literature is inspired by its oral roots.

Oral tradition—being the principal mode of literary transmission before the nineteenth century—has profoundly molded the Indian literary sensibility, poetics of composition, and the conventions of literary reception. Unlike the western tradition, literacy was not equated with knowledge or wisdom, while primacy was accorded to the oral forms. Though western modes of

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composition emphasized the fixed nature and stability of the written word, the primacy of oral tradition is attested by the rich corpus of literary artifacts that exist in the realm of orality across the globe. Much of the oeuvre in the written tradition has been inspired by the oral tradition across world literature. The ancient Greek oral epic *Odyssey*, for example, profoundly influenced many great works of Western literature like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), Kazantzakis *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1938), Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949), to mention only a few, and it continues to inspire contemporary literature across the world.

In regional works of literature in India, the influence of orality in the mainstream tradition is well recognized and has been a popular subject of academic interest. Malayalam literature is no exception. On the thematic, stylistic, and aesthetic fronts, mainstream literary texts have clearly been influenced by oral traditions. In fact, as G N Devy, the noted linguist and cultural activist, observes, the classification of literature into oral and written streams is itself arbitrary:

A close analysis of any significant 'written' work of literature will indicate that it has internalized and consciously foregrounded features 'of spoken language, such as speech rhythms, conversational tones, and musical tonality, dialects, and regional styles. Similarly, no composition belonging to a given oral tradition is free of linguistic self-consciousness: and devices serving to aid memory, such as pauses and stops or 'punctuation', allusions to earlier compositions and texts, and even stylistic clues that help in the exploration of the authorial imagination are all features of written literature. (2010: 30)

Thus, the written text always carries traces of orality, just as an oral form has many specifications of textuality.

### **Marginality of Orality**

Though all languages are musical and undoubtedly stem from orality, the epistemological affiliations, and the prevalent notions of acceptance by the 'cultured' relegate the diverse oral traditions to the background. The constant communion with the cognitive and linguistic devices of the written tradition prompts one to think that the verbal and cognitive patterns involved in oral tradition are too simple to be valued and recognized. For instance, in his book, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that orality shouldn't be valued more than the written word (1998:43). This situation of linguistic subalternity is accentuated when it comes to the case of the caste subalterns. Caste discrimination with its associated discriminative tools spread over the economic, cultural, and social spheres makes the lower castes more and more invisible. This being the prevalent attitude to the oral tradition, the caste subaltern has to fight for the recognition and preservation of their cultural artifacts located in orality.

### **Significance of Dalit Orality**

G.N. Devy, in his book *After Amnesia*, explains how the death of an oral language leads to the extinction of a community itself, especially if it is a fragile one. According to him, the expression of native imagination and cultural identity is deeply tied to the oral tongues, where the tongue becomes a signifier of the essence of the community and the vanishing of an oral tongue is akin to the vanishing of that speaking community itself. Devy explains how each tongue holds a

unique world view—one's perception of time, space, relationship with oneself, society, nature, and God. Devy's observation is relevant in the context of the Dalit communities in India. The neglect of the oral traditions of the caste subaltern amounts to the effacement of the community itself, especially so in the absence of written historical records of the same. Oral traditions involve the society instead of the individual for they are historical documents of a social nature inscribed and preserved in the memories of the members of society, transmitted by word of mouth from person to person. They also imply a collective nature as the collective memory of the society is the repertoire of the community's wisdom and experience which is transmitted to the next generation and aids in the construction of the social and cultural history of the society. It is the perception of society that unfolds through oral renderings. Undoubtedly, a shared experiential world is implied in oral renderings.

### The World of Dalits' Orature

The caste subaltern has a rich oral tradition that enshrines their various streams of knowledge, experiences, world views and attitudes, hopes, even in despicable situations, their grit to go against the odds, and oblique expressions of anger and resentment against the caste center. The oral renderings of the Dalits are mirrors held up to their life because, as Poikayil Appachan (1879-1939), the pioneering Dalit poet lamented:

About my race  
I see no alphabet

Oh, that there was no one  
In the ancient world  
To write the story of my race. (Dasan 2012: 5)

The cultural hegemony of the caste system ostracized Dalits from the world of letters and literacy, rendering them invisible in history. Dalit folk literature in Malayalam—consisting of songs, tales, dramas, legends, myths, and proverbs—have immense historical and anthropological significance and aids to reconstruct the history of subaltern castes in South India until the very end of the medieval period.

The art forms of the upper castes and the Dalits in Kerala reveal the socio-economic and cultural contexts of their production. The polished elite art forms like *Koothu*<sup>2</sup>, *Koodiyattom*<sup>3</sup>, and *Kathakali*<sup>4</sup> took birth from life circumstances of high castes who exist in affluence and leisure. For instance, sometimes Kathakali performances extend over several days since the upper caste audience has enough free time, compared to Dalits who toil in the fields of upper-caste landlords and have little free time. Since the high castes lived at the expense of Dalit people's labor, they had enough leisure for the enjoyment of their art forms. In the case of Dalits, their literary forms—especially the oral songs—were not mere literature, but life itself. They sprang from their everyday

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<sup>2</sup> Kooth is a solo socio-religious narrative performance held in *Koothambalam* (theatre hall in temples for staging *Kooth*), independently or as part of *Koodiyattom*.

<sup>3</sup> *Koodiyattom* is a traditional performing art form of Kerala dating back to the *Sangam* era consisting of the elements of theatre and *Kooth*.

<sup>4</sup> *Kathakali* is the official art form of Kerala. It is a classical 'story play' genre of art distinguished by elaborately colorful make-up, costumes, and face masks.

work and folk culture and were part of their ritualistic expressions. Dalit oral songs rely on content rather than structure. They served as a means of reducing the hardship of their toil. Since they were the reflection of life itself, they could not be detached art forms where the speaker or the singer was the experiencer. Since the creative expressions of the lower castes existed in the sphere of orality, they did not have such serious thoughts related to its polishing and perfection as there was no need to do so.

### **Women in Dalit Orality**

While all oral expressions are marginalized and excluded from the canon of literature, the Dalit oral expressions are doubly marginalized because of the discrimination and stigma attached to the aspect of caste. Further, most of the Dalit literary expressions reflect the prerogatives of the male members of the community, while women's presence in these expressions is nominal. Dalit women get only a token representation in Dalit literary works. For example, autobiography, a popular genre of Dalit literature, is the forte of male writers who express their struggles, sufferings, and identity crises while they are mostly silent about the plight of Dalit women. The oeuvre of Dalit literature is scant in the representation of the varied realities of Dalit women. Though the male Dalit writers are vociferous about Dalit woman's oppression by caste patriarchy, they are silent about the oppression from the Dalit patriarchy. Gopal Guru notes how Dalit patriarchy replicates the value system of caste patriarchy in oppressing Dalit women:

It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event. Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women, which the high-caste adversaries had used to dominate them. The experience of Dalit women shows that local resistance within the Dalits is important. (2003: 83)

In a society in which women fight against the structures of gender and Dalits fight against the structures of caste, Dalit women must fight against both, and sometimes against upper caste women as well. Hence, Dalit women are triply marginalized, and their position is at the bottom of society. As mentioned earlier, while Dalit oral-literary expressions are doubly marginalized, those of Dalit women are triply marginalized. Contemporary Dalit feminist writings that fight oppressive social mechanisms can find a lineage in Dalit women's oral renderings against the caste center and thereby offer an epistemological resistance to their triple marginalization.

The voice of the gendered caste subaltern in the oral songs of Dalits traverses the invisibility of Dalit women of yesteryear in the literary canon. The Dalit oral songs are mostly sung by women at their workplace, for recreation, for relieving the tedium of physical work, etc. They register Dalit women's dissenting voices, their struggle with the power structures of the society. They bring to light the selfhood of the Dalit women, which is nowhere else recorded or registered.

## Community Songs

Among the oral songs of the Dalit community in Kerala, the work songs of the *Pulayas*<sup>5</sup> and the *Parayas*<sup>6</sup> are prominent. These songs detail the excruciating experiences of a community-driven away from the centers of power and caste. They belong to the category of community songs. “*Aiyilandi Kunnalari*” (Kunnalari of Aiyilandi), “*Kaalipulayi*” (*Pulaya* girl named Kaali), “*Cherupulayi*” (Little *Pulaya* girl), “*Omanathampuran*” (Dear Landlord), “*Munyalan Padathe Kunnalechi* (Kunnalechi of Munyalan field)” are some of the songs sung by the women of the community as the *Krishippattu*<sup>7</sup> that showcases the experiences of the Dalit women of the feudal times. The singer in “*Aiyilandi Kunnalari*” unambiguously exposes the double standards of the *Aiyilandi Moothampuran*<sup>8</sup>, who while summoning the Dalit woman for work in the fields, does not forget to mention the age along with the number. While *Kunnalari*<sup>9</sup> and her companions start their work in the fields, the *Thampuran*<sup>10</sup> reaches there and with his honey words directs Kunnalari to come near him:

Want to chew betel leaf ..... *Theyyam tharo*<sup>11</sup>  
I will chew if you give..... *Theyyam tharo*  
Then you come along ..... *Theyyam tharo*. (Sajitha 2012: 19. Trans. Mine)

She is asked to enter his house, to serve food for him, and later to sleep with him. We hear the mutterings and controlled laughter of the Dalit women in the songs that mock the caste sense of purity and pollution of the lecherous upper-caste male:

The *Thampuran* who bathes on touching the male  
The *Thampuran* who doesn't bathe on touching the female. (Sajitha 2012: 19.  
Trans. Mine)

Another song in the same vein is “*Omanathampuran*” (“Dear Landlord”). Here the derisive finger is pointed at the lewd designs of the landlord. He leaves the rows of unattractive old women and casts his lascivious eyes on the young women on the fields. The song “*Kaalipulayi*” (*Pulaya* girl named Kaali) issues a warning to beware of the landlords who desert young Dalit women after satisfying their sexual needs. The landlord who approaches *Neelipulayi*<sup>12</sup> finds her husband *Pulayan*<sup>13</sup> as a hindrance. So, he illuminates her on the way to killing her husband. The *Pulayan* dies after consuming poison mixed rice served to him by his wife. The treachery of the landlord is later understood by her, and she realizes that she had followed hollow promises:

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<sup>5</sup> *Pulayas* are a low caste group found in the South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka as well as historical Tamil Nadu.

<sup>6</sup> *Parayas* are a low caste group found in the south Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

<sup>7</sup> *Krishippattu* are songs sung by the lower caste community, especially women, at the time of various activities in the field such as sowing and reaping to relieve the tedium of their toil.

<sup>8</sup> *Moothampuran* means the eldest landlord.

<sup>9</sup> *Kunnalari* is the name of a dalit girl belonging to the place called *Ayilandi*.

<sup>10</sup> *Thampuran* is the feudal landlord.

<sup>11</sup> *Theyyam tharo* is a common refrain sung by a chorus in popular Dalit oral genres like *Vella pattu* (songs sung by fishermen) and *Krishipattu*.

<sup>12</sup> *Neelipulayi* - *Pulaya* girl named Neeli

<sup>13</sup> *Pulayan* is the common name of men belonging to the low caste *pulaya* community.

The seed-filled granary is not there for me *Kaali*<sup>14</sup>  
The dish and goblet is not there for me *Kaali*  
The coconut groves are not there for me *Kaali* .....  
You too search for your own ways (Sajitha 2012: 19. Trans. Mine).

The song is highly evocative of the life circumstances of Dalit women and contains a warning and a means of self-defense. The song can be a shield for the beautiful Dalit woman who is precariously exposed to the sexual advances of the caste higher-ups. The song appears as a piece of advice from an elderly woman for the younger ones to protect chastity and advice for the women of a community that cannot intellectually or physically challenge the caste dominance.

The song “*Munyalan Padathe Kunnalechi*” (Kunnalechi of Munyalan field), takes a step further. The landlord comes asking for betel leaves from *Kunnalechi*<sup>15</sup>, asking who is reaping the field. Her friends then remind her to ask the landlord:

When comes and becomes close, ask  
Will he marry to make you his wife. (Sajitha 2012: 20. Trans. Mine)

Her friends very well know that Kunnalechi’s question will surely unsettle the lustful landlord. The song “*Cherupulayi*” (Little *pulaya* girl) climbs another scale, for, Cherupulayi does not allow the landlord to come even near her. Though he wants to keep her under his *olakkuda* (parasol) and to satisfy his desire for her, he is apprehensive of the common folk’s opinion. Her jingling bangles will reveal his sexual intent. So, he asks her to remove her bangles:

Remove your bangles  
And come under my parasol dear. (Sajitha 2012: 20. Trans. Mine)

To this invitation of the landlord, the Dalit woman snaps back, revealing her inner strength:

Parasol for me today  
But bangles for me always. (Sajitha 2012: 20. Trans. Mine)

The same is her retort when the landlord asks her to remove her earrings. She unequivocally states that she doesn’t need the momentary comfort and safety of being the concubine of the landlord. It is her bangles’ jingle that she values more, the freedom and dignity of self that are important.

It is the voice of the strong-willed Dalit woman that is heard from these oral songs. The songs were the ways of making sense of the difficult situations in which Dalit women often found themselves in and how they protected themselves. The oral songs were a way of mitigating the distressing experiences of the gendered caste subaltern. Such songs stemmed from the special freedom granted by the landlords to the gendered caste subaltern. The songs are devoid of the emotions of revenge or self-pity and are mostly dominated by the spirit of satire.

Many of the folk songs express the lechery of the landlords and expose their double standards regarding the Dalit body. The caste codes demanded the Dalit body to be perceived as a

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<sup>14</sup> *Kali* is the black Hindu goddess, the horrible destroyer of evil who wrecks terror. She is the chief of the *Mahavidyas*, a group of ten Tantric goddesses, a consort of Lord *Shiva*, "The Destroyer" within the *Trimurti* (The name *Kali* is very common among Dalit women in Kerala).

<sup>15</sup> *Kunnalechi* is the name of a girl belonging to a low caste community.

polluting one, the sight of which had to be shunned for fear of defilement. At the same time, while the Dalit male body, which was thought to represent physical prowess, whetted the sexual desires of the upper caste women, the Dalit female body was viewed as the object of sexual gratification of the upper caste male. The Dalit folk song “*Enne Nokkaruthe*” (“Don’t Look at Me”) presents such a situation. The son of the landlord casts his lustful eyes on the young Dalit woman who is working in the fields. The young beautiful *Pulayi*<sup>16</sup> is busily engaged in the weeding activity in the field. The vulnerability of the Dalit woman is etched in the song. The following lines unmistakably express the helplessness and precarious position of the Dalit woman:

I have been given a vast field  
Full of weeds and screw-pine  
Don’t stare at me  
Look straight  
The young son of my landlord  
If I don’t finish the weeding today  
I won’t get my wages  
If you show me the *Anantapuram* forest  
I shall go and hide there. (Chandran 2004: 14. Trans. Chandramohan)

Though in the form of a plea, the poem contains an implicit expression of resentment.

“*Theendalu Jaathiyaane*” (“I am an Untouchable”) takes the form of a dialogue. Here also, the lewd designs of the landlord towards the young Dalit woman are in focus. The landlord, in his attempt to seduce the Dalit woman, invites her inside his house in the absence of his wife. He asks the Dalit woman to come and sit close to him on the golden mat. The words of the woman in reply, couched in sarcasm, are an interrogation of the double standards of the caste patriarchy. It holds up to ridicule the cunningness of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. The same subaltern body which is ‘shunned’ as the locus of pollution is ‘included’ for carnal gratification:

If I sit on the golden mat  
Won’t the landlady see me?  
For sitting on the golden mat  
Aren’t I of an untouchable caste? (Chandran 2004: 16. Trans. Chandramohan)

To this question of the woman, the landlord’s answer is evasive as expected:

If you are of an untouchable caste  
Isn’t there a pond to bathe? (Chandran 2004: 16. Trans. Chandramohan)

The same spirit of bitter sarcasm animates the song “*Ippol Aithamilla*” (“No Untouchability Now”):

*Thampuran*<sup>17</sup> stealthily came at night  
Came out also the lovely dame  
In daylight, he never comes here

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<sup>16</sup> *Pulayi* is the common name of women belonging to the low caste *Pulaya* community.

<sup>17</sup> *Thampuran* is the feudal landlord



It is defiling for him in daylight. (Chandran 2004: 93. Trans. Mine)

The theme of lechery of the caste lords and the subsequent sexual exploitation of the Dalit women are also the focus of the songs like “*Ippol Aithamilla*” (“No Untouchability Now”) and “*Avalum Vannu*” (“It befell her too”). The song “*Avalum Vannu*” unveils the foul-faced morality of the feudal times where a newlywed *Pulaya* woman falls prey to the sexual advances of the landlord. Hearing about her, the landlord summons her for the work in the fields and the fate of all other beautiful lower caste women befalls her.

The mentioned community songs of Dalits provide valuable insights into the working of feudal landlordism, which was the reigning social and economic order of Kerala during the medieval period which continued until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As evident from the songs, feudalism was caste-oriented and thrived extricating the surplus value of Dalit's labor power. Dalits worked in the fields of upper castes like slaves, and in addition to brutal economic exploitation, Dalit women were subjected to sexual abuse by the caste patriarchy. The absence of any reference to their male counterparts in the Dalit women's songs suggests the powerlessness of Dalit men. They could do nothing to protect their women from high caste sexual advances. Although suggestive of the vulnerability of the Dalit women, the songs are also evocative of the ability of Dalit women to talk back; one can hear their subliminal protests against the oppressive system.

### **Thottam Songs**

Yet another category of Dalit folk songs that carry Dalit woman's presence is the *Thottam* songs. *Thottam* songs are the ritualistic songs sung by the *Theyyakolams*<sup>18</sup>, who play the role of deities in *Theyyam*<sup>19</sup> performances. As K.K.N. Kurup says, "during the very dawn of human history heroes were given a respectful place in society, and even after their demise, they were generally deified and worshipped by the people" (1977: 37). Though this was spoken in the context of the upper caste people, a few lower caste heroes and heroines also were deified and venerated.

The cultural artifacts of the marginalized community are never recognized and valued by the mainstream tradition, and they fail to find a place in the canon. But even when many Dalit intellectuals lament the fact that Dalits lack cultural capital, the cultural artifacts like the *Theyyam* stand in relief. Here, it is interesting to note that while the human beings are denied acceptance by the mainstream culture, the Dalit Gods get accepted by the upper castes, and the human beings who get possessed are also venerated and treated with awe. They interfere in the religious matrix of the upper castes and challenge, deconstruct, or undermine the mainstream mythology. The upper castes tried to appropriate the lower caste deities as can be seen in the case of the *Theyyam* performance, especially in Northern Kerala. Earlier, the performance which was confined to the *kavus* (groves) now has come to be performed in the upper-caste households. Upper-castes who used the physical prowess of the lower castes were afraid of the wrath of the lower caste deities

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<sup>18</sup> *Theyyakolams* are those who play the role of deities in *Theyyam* performances.

<sup>19</sup> *Theyyam* is the traditional, ritualistic mask dance performed by the lower castes, especially in the northern part of Kerala. It is a powerful presence in the social matrix of Kerala.

like *Chathan*<sup>20</sup>, *Kali*<sup>21</sup>, etc. For the lower castes who did not have the space to express their frustration and anger against the caste center, the fiery deities were a sort of catharsis. The lineage of the deities like *Neeli* and *Kali* continues even to the modern age in the form of blood sucking *Yakshis* (female vampires) in films and novels.

*Theyyam* (also known as *Theyyattom* or ‘dance of God’ is a traditional ritualistic performing art form of lower castes of northern Kerala) disrupts the usual codes of pollution and purity because the upper castes, who consider even the sight of a lower caste as polluting, bow before the *Theyyakolams* (those who play the role of deities in *Theyyam* performances). Thus *Theyyam*, though obliquely, boosts up the Dalit identity by foregrounding the Dalit myths. It goes a long way in asserting and reinstating Dalit identity. Moreover, many of the *Thottam* songs contain strong indictment and criticism against the iniquities and absurdities of the caste system. The prominent *Theyyams* like *Puli Maranna Thondachan Theyyam*, *Pottan Theyyam*, *Aippalli Theyyam*, *Neeliyar Bhagavati Theyyam* are vehicles for expressing the suppressed emotions of a trampled down community.

*Neeliyar Bhagavati Theyyam* is based on the story of Neeli, the daughter of Kunjikkaali and Chathan. She is condemned to be sacrificed after being accused of sexual depravity. Neeli falls prey to the vengeance of the lord of Elamura, since the latter’s licentious advances are rejected by her. The story narrated from the perspective of Neeli’s parents exposes the heartless caste dictates of the times. Kunjikkaali interrogates her husband Chathan, sensing his mental and emotional distress. After much persuasion, Chathan reveals the heart-breaking news to his wife that their dear daughter has to be sacrificed the next day:

Kunju<sup>22</sup> Neeli of Neelimala  
 Our darling *Kunju* Neeli  
 The first and the last child  
 The boon of the god of the hill  
 .....  
 A loving girl born like that  
 Faces charges of sexual depravity  
 Four lords from four feudal families  
 Will assemble at the holy grove  
 I am told to bring Neeli there  
 Tomorrow at 10.30 am  
 And kill her at the stone altar  
 To sacrifice Neeli for the god  
 I am to cut my Neeli to pieces. (Nair 1979: 31. Trans. Chandramohan)

The grief-ridden Chathan and Kunjikkaali cannot sleep that night. Early morning Chathan wakes up Neeli and asks her to bathe, wear new clothes, and follow him to the sacred grove to make an offering to God. He also asks Neeli to take a machete with her. With tear-filled eyes, Chathan sees

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<sup>20</sup> *Chathan* is a negative spirit of Lord *Shiva* "The Destroyer" within the *Trimurti*. According to legends, *Chathan* is born out of the relationship between Lord *Shiva* and a tribal woman. (The name *Chathan* is very common among Dalit men in Kerala).

<sup>21</sup> *Kali* is the black Hindu goddess, the horrible destroyer of evil who wreaks terror. She is the chief of the *Mahavidyas*, a group of ten Tantric goddesses. A consort of Lord *Shiva*, "The Destroyer" within the *Trimurti* (The name *Kali* is very common among Dalit women in Kerala).

<sup>22</sup> *Kunju* – Child, a word often denoting endearment as is used here.

the *Nair*<sup>23</sup> lords from the four feudal families assembled at the grove to witness the sacrifice. Neeli approaches the stone altar like a “helpless deer” (32) and places her head on the stone. Wailing in agony and with prayers to God, Chathan strikes Neeli’s head with the machete. Miraculously Neeli turns into a stone statue. While Chathan falls unconscious on the ground, the *Nair* lords and the village who witness this are filled with fear and become speechless. Neeli’s voice is heard from the sky:

Nobody is alive today on the earth  
Who can accuse me of acts of sexual depravity and kill me (Nair 1979: 33. Trans.  
Chandramohan).

The transformation of Neeli validates her innocence and she is deified. Neeli becomes *Neeliyar Bhagavathy Theyya Kolam* (Goddess Neeliyar). Through the not-so-violent yet strong resistance of Neeli, *Neeliyama Thottam* is inscribed in the Kerala social conscience as the loud declaration of the pride, pluck, and determination of the Dalit woman, interposing the conventional mentality of viewing the Dalit woman as a mere sexual object.

### Narrative Songs

There are narrative songs in the oral tradition which are popular among the Dalits that glorify valorous feats of the heroes and heroines in the Dalit community. *Vadakkan Pattukkal*<sup>24</sup> belong to this category of narrative songs. But, here Dalit presence and representation are sparse. The prevalent notion that “*nattilperumollathu naduvazhikku*” (“the lord deserves the best”) was extended to include the case of women, and the *naduvazhi*<sup>25</sup> held that he deserves the beautiful women in the land also. Against these forays into their self-esteem and individuality, the resistance made by women finds expression in the *Vadakkan Pattukal*. Some of the songs showcase the defiant spirit, though a subdued one of the lower caste women also. Archcha, the wife of the ordinary toddy tapper *Karumparambil Kannan*, raises her fingers against the malicious social law of *naduvazhi* system. She disguises her husband as a *Brahmin* (priestly caste) and sends him to *naduvazhi*’s house to take revenge upon the latter. On realizing the true identity of *Kannan*, the *naduvazhi* sentences him to death by hanging. Archcha, who reaches the scene minces no words in condemning the wicked deeds of the *naduvazhi* as is evinced by the song:

*Adyamkayaranam thamburanum*  
*Pinneyumallo Kannanthanum*  
*Adyam pizhayangu theerthuthannal*  
*Pinnapizhanjanum theerthutharam* (Panikkotty 2006: 21). (Translation of the  
song is given in the footnote)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Kshatriya* is a warrior caste

<sup>24</sup> *Vadakkan Pattukkal* is a set of ballads popular in Northern Kerala that depicts the valorous feats of the heroes and heroines of the Malabar region.

<sup>25</sup> *Naduvazhi* means landlords and descendants of the royal household in Kerala.

<sup>26</sup> Thampuram is to be hanged first/Then should Kannan be punished/Thampuram is to be penalized first/Then should I pay the penance.

Archcha categorically states that *naduvazhi* must be punished first before awarding punishment to *Kannan*. The strong indictment is against the male-dominated and caste-dominated society represented by the *naduvaazhi* wielding power.

Another popular song is “*Poomathai Ponnamma*” which is again a loud declaration of the self-pride and courage of a Dalit woman who eventually gets deified. While the Dalit woman is viewed as a mere body to quench the lust of the upper caste male, Ponnamma emerges as the personification of vitality, courage, and self-pride in the song. Ponnamma, the beautiful and intelligent *Pulaya* girl, is employed in the household of the ruler of Kadalumkara:

If Poomathai<sup>27</sup> Ponnamma sings a song  
The blooms will have fragrance and honey  
If anyone listens to Poomathai Ponnamma’s song  
His whooping cough and swelling in the body will vanish  
If an unwed girl listens to Poomathai Ponnamma’s song  
The unwed girl will get a husband. (Nambiar 1991: 113. Trans. Chandramohan)

The *naduvazhi* of Kadalumkara is enamored by the beauty of Poomathai. But all his attempts of seduction are rejected by the *Pulaya* girl. He offers her gold and land and even promises her to find a husband for her in return for a sexual favor. But all these are boldly spurned by the proud girl. The infuriated *naduvazhi* resorts to calumny. Aided by Aayithira Pulayathi, he succeeds in spreading scandal about the character of Ponnamma. The *naduvazhi*’s henchmen, at his orders, make Ponnamma hold a pot of cow dung water in one hand and a broom on the other, and parade her in front of the whole village, seated on a donkey. They burn down her hut and tie her to a mango tree. Her head and breasts are singed. Ponnamma is made a spectacle of disgrace. With burning pain and humiliation, Ponnamma, on reaching a well, jumps into it and ends her life. The gruesome incident of sending an innocent girl to agonizing death after subjecting her to disgrace has fierce repercussions. *Naaduvaazhi* finds his *kovilakam* (Palatial building) in flames, and Aayithira Pulayathi commits suicide. The truth about Ponnamma is revealed before the people, and she is elevated to the stature of a deity.

The *Vadakkan Pattukkal*<sup>28</sup> contains several socially and historically relevant pictures about the status of women in the past. Some songs reveal the hollowness of the caste system and the associated notion of purity and pollution where the women were involved. One such custom that figures in these songs is *vannathi*<sup>29</sup> giving *mattu*<sup>30</sup> to high caste women during menstruation and delivery. A *vannathi* washes the menstrual clothes of the girls who attained puberty and the clothes at the time of delivery of the upper castes. The absurdity is that *vannathi*, who was considered as a medium of purification, was simultaneously regarded as impure because of her lower caste status and was kept away from the home while giving *mattu*.

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<sup>27</sup> *Poomathai Ponnamma* is the name of a celebrated heroine of a popular Dalit folk song of the same name.

<sup>28</sup> *Vadakkan Pattukkal* is a set of ballads popular in Northern Kerala that depicts the valorous feats of the heroes and heroines of the Malabar region.

<sup>29</sup> *Vannathi* is a woman belonging to the lower *Vannar* caste group, who is traditionally involved in the laundry.

<sup>30</sup> The cleaned clothes *vannathi* (low caste woman) brings for the high caste women to wear during their menstruation and delivery.

## **Illumination of Dalit Women's World**

All the above-discussed songs are mirrors held up to the daily life and realities of Dalit women. They represent the society and the kind of relationships that existed at the time. How the gendered caste subaltern perceived herself also can be heard from these songs. While the mainstream literary and historical representations uphold the picture of the Dalit woman as an object of pity, always at the receiving end of ignominy, taking it all lying down and lacking in selfhood and individuality, the picture that emerges from the oral songs is strikingly different. The Dalit oral songs shed light on the mainstream uncharted terrains of Dalit women—their dynamic nature, courage, determination, and self-pride in the face of harsh realities and spirit of resistance against injustices.

At the same time, the songs truly present the caste dominant feudal society of Kerala because though *Neeli* and *Poomathai Ponnamma* get deified after their deaths, they have to undergo all the ignominy and agony that is kept in stock for any caste subaltern who refuses to succumb to the dictates of caste patriarchy. They attain deification through acts of self-sacrifice, at the cost of their lives. The *savarna* (upper caste) tactics of containing and appropriating the elements which transgress the structures of caste codes can be viewed here. Unlike the upper caste valorous women like *Unniyaarcha*<sup>31</sup> of *Vadakkan Pattukkal*, they attain glory only after much suffering and physical agony. Thus, these songs become valuable documents in recreating the Dalit woman's life of the feudal times of Kerala.

The oral songs also provide insight into the gender relations within the Dalit community and the division of labor that existed between men and women. The women worked cheek by jowl with the men. Dalit women enjoyed more physical mobility compared with their counterparts in the upper caste communities. While the high caste women could never venture out of their household freely for fear of getting defiled due to the customs like *Mannapedi* and *Pulapedi*<sup>32</sup>, no such impositions bothered the gendered caste subaltern. Following the postcolonial strand of reading the fissures, absence, and gaps where representational absence is a kind of presence, we must presume that the absence of references in the songs to the household, its blisses, to their male partners, connote the not so pleasant domestic life of Dalit women. The helplessness of the menfolk and their inability to interfere with the caste matrix also must also be assumed.

## **Conclusion**

The oral songs were an integral part of the life of the Dalit women, for they were the moorings of their mind to keep their sanity, to keep them afloat amidst their inclement life experiences. It is to be presumed that it must have been the wishful thinking of the caste subaltern to give vent to their frustration and helplessness under the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy. Because of the stringent caste codes of the feudal times, the oral songs containing rebuke and ridicule directed against the caste center could not have been sung within earshot of the caste authorities. When all sorts of overt and explicit opposition would have been unthinkable and would have been silenced with death, these artistic expressions contained the desire for the resistance of Dalit women. The oral songs of Dalit women are historically, culturally, and aesthetically significant for they register the feminist consciousness of the gendered caste subaltern

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<sup>31</sup> A legendary warrior and heroine celebrated in the popular *Vadakkan Pattukal*.

<sup>32</sup> The customs by which a male from the untouchable *Mannan* or *Pulaya* community could procure an upper-caste *Nair* woman since such a woman will be ostracized from her community, *Nair* women lived in constant fear of the *Mannan* or *Pulaya* men.

in the nascent form. The subliminal spirit of resistance and protest in the gendered caste subaltern's oral expressions has become more vociferous and explicit in contemporary Dalit feminist writings.

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