



Dalit Testimonios: A Rhetorical Listening to The Trauma and Ineloquence in *Nooru Simhasanangal*

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Abstract : *This paper examines the book Nooru Simhasanangal by Jayamohan. It delves into the significance of Dalit testimonios in challenging India's dominant narratives. It examines how these testimonios provide an alternative historical perspective by narrating the traumatic experiences of Dalits, thereby exposing concealed tensions within established historical narratives supported by Hindu law, colonial ideals, and even post-independence Indian politics. The concept of "abject" as defined by Kristeva, as explored in this testimonio, serves as a powerful lens through which we can analyse the consequences of oppression and exclusion. The process of Dalits evolving into modern citizens through changes in habits and social practices is a complex journey marked by both transformative experiences and persistent societal biases. While changes in habits were crucial for their integration into civil society, as emphasized by Sanal Mohan, upon examining the selected text, I argue that the enduring discrimination faced by Dalits despite their modernization efforts underscores the idea, as Habermas puts it, that modernity remains an "unfinished project." (Habermas 3)*

Key words: Dalit Testimonios, Alternative Historiography, Abjection, Exclusion, Modernity, Social Transformation, Unfinished Modernity

Dalit authors assert that the trauma of Dalits is, to some extent, the consequence of a flawed religious and historical

narrative tradition. This is because Hindu law, colonial ideals, and even post-independence Indian politics have all depended on narratives that portray Dalits as lesser citizens within the Indian nation. These narratives weave stories of heroism and idealism under the label of “mythologies,” yet in reality what persists is a subdued community structure. Kanchallaiah challenges cultural narratives that have traditionally portrayed the notion of “Indianess” in ways that excluded certain groups or individuals. He further observes that textbooks and historical writings have neglected Dalit beliefs and practices, remarking, “We knew nothing of Brama, Vishnu or Eswara until we entered school. When we first heard about these figures, they were strange to us as Allah or Jehova or Jesus were” (Ilaiah 7).

Through this theme of exclusion, Dalit writings shed light on the contradictions present in dominant discourses within India. These writings create an alternative history of India by narrating their traumatic experiences, they reveal the underlying tensions, conflicts, and suppression within prevailing historical narratives.

John Beverley delves into the larger historical, political and ethical questions that testimonios bring to the forefront. He traces the development of testimonio from its inception during the Cold War era to its prevalence in the era of globalized economy. Beverley defines testimonio as a “book or pamphlet of novel or novella length... narrated in the first person by a protagonist who is also the central figure of the events being recounted with the narrative unit typically revolving around a ‘life’ or ‘significant life experience’” (Beverley 92). It is also a narrative where the main character documents their own experiences while serving as a

representative of collective memory, identity and shared experience.

Dalit testimonios foster connections through the powerful narratives of their life experiences, raise awareness about the concealed aspects of India's history, and empower individuals engaging with these narratives to become activists in response to the profound impact these texts have on them. This is why Pramod K Nayar refers to them as 'claim narratives' (Nayar 256). These texts create opportunities for discussion through their expressions of cultural trauma and calls for justice. The central focus here is on the narrative aspect, specifically the claims made within it, which initiate and steer the journey of rights and politics.

Within Dalit Testmonios, there are two essential components that comprise what Nayar refers to as "the ethics of witnessing" (Nayar 250). One element involves the narrator's own "performance," depicting personal, communal and social suffering. The other element is the call to the reader to observe and acknowledge everything that has been documented. According to him, "performance" underscores the artistic and representational facets of Dalit writing, implying that these "performances" bestow political significance upon the narrative (Nayar 250).

Dalit testimonios are organised based on the "witnessing" conducted by the Dalit narrator, who is the primary witness, and then by the reader who observes and acknowledges the witnessing account of the narrator, who serves as the secondary witness. Primary witnessing encompasses two interrelated aspects: the telling of personal struggles and survival, and advocating for the experiences of the "Other." In Jayamohan's book, *NooruSimhasanangal*, the central

character, Dharmapalan serves as the primary witness. He guides the reader through a journey, starting from his childhood in the forests and streets alongside his mother, leading to his eventual role as a civil service officer. Through his life story, he transports the reader to a realm of pain, starvation, and psychological torment, which might appear entirely unfamiliar to the reader who has not experienced it.

During an interview attended by Dharmapalan, when one of the interviewers asked him whom he would support when he has to make a judgement in a case where one side represents virtue and the other side represents a Nayadi, he stated that he would definitely take the side of the Nayadi. His reasoning behind this choice is that virtue is comprised of a set of rules and regulations, and at its core, virtue must uphold *dharma*. Equality, he believes, is the foremost and holiest of all *dharmas*. If a Nayadi and another individual is pitted against each other based on the principle of equality, then the Nayadi has become a victim of injustice. He is innocent, regardless of whatever he may have done. When serving as the primary witness, Dharmapalan transitions from narrating his own heroic survival to advocating for the suffering of others. He introduces to the reader the life of the people belonging to the Nayadi community whose “very footprints . . . on the road were supposed to cause pollution. Thus, they had to take circuitous routes to cross rivers even when there were bridges. They were prohibited from taking bath in the streams, which the high castes used for the purpose. For this reason, they seldom washed their clothes.” (Rajan 1199)

Interwoven within his narrative, he discusses the plight of his fellow community members who endure similar hardships. During one visit to the hospital where he seeks

treatment for his mother, he encounters a doctor. In his capacity as the person responsible for maintaining law and order in the district, he queries the doctor about the unsanitary conditions at the hospital. The doctor replies, “Sir, I entered through the SC quota. People like me often find themselves out of place here. They regard me in the same manner as they would an unsightly insect. It has been eighteen years since I joined the service, and I hold a senior position. However, to this day, I have not been able to examine patients while seated in a dignified chair” (Jayamohan 18). After listening to him, Dharmapalan says, “Even if you pursue a different occupation, it’s the same story. There is no alternative, even if you take civil service exams like me. I am a scavenger in the civil service” (Jayamohan 19).

Gopal Guru points out that you cannot truly grasp the Dalit experience unless you are a Dalit yourself or have at least experienced what it means to be a Dalit subject with no choice to be otherwise. He emphasizes that Dalits need to advocate for their collective rights and assert their cultural rights. Here, Dharmapalan extends his personal distress to encompass the collective body of his community. Here, he endeavours to narrate not only his own trauma but also that of his community. Simultaneously, they aim to establish a shared platform with “sympathetic others” by making an appeal to their readers. According to Nayar, this is the ethics of primary witnessing.

Secondary witnessing requires from the reader what Spivak refers to as ‘a surrender to the special call of the text.’ As readers of Jayamohan’s work, we are invited to do nothing short of using our imagination to immerse ourselves in the distinct realm of experience and its associated political

battles. This is because the experiences and related struggles of the Nayadi community described here might appear entirely unfamiliar to the readers who are not part of that community and have not experienced them. Readers are called upon to mentally position themselves within the depicted contexts of the texts. It is through this engagement that the audience shapes their sense of humanity – According to Nayar, this embodies “the ethics of listening” in Dalit testimonios.

To adopt Dominik LaCapra’s description of secondary witnessing, he “would argue that the response of even secondary witness (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathetic unsettlement that should register in one’s very mode of address in ways revealing both similarities and differences across genres (such as history and literature)” (699).

The listener should understand and appreciate the unique experiences of the victim. It is not possible to absorb the Other into ourselves or try to take the place of the victim. Therefore in LaCapra’s terms, one should refrain from seeking identification with the victim but can engage in the act of “registering and reflecting upon” the trauma. Wendy S. Hesford, in her book, *Documenting Violations*, refers to this as an act of “rhetorical listening” (Hesford 104). Through their engagement with the narrative, “rhetorical listening” prompts readers to envision a trauma that transcends the boundaries of textual representation. “Rhetorical listening” requires readers to listen to Dharmapalan’s voice, as well as the voices of others in the Nayadi community, while also paying attention to the unspoken aspects in his narrative. It also encourages readers to envision the narrator’s trauma, which goes beyond

what is explicitly represented in the text, as they engage with the narrative.

Given that a Dalit body is forcibly confined to a space of dirt, hunger, and suffering, in a Dalit testimonio, the body assumes a central role, enduring the weight of numerous degrading discriminations. Ultimately, the Dalit body becomes an object of abjection. When Dharmapalan says, “My mother touched my face with trembling hands, then ran her curled, clawed hands over the scars on my face. It was then that I realized that members of the Nayadi community recognize each other through scars and sores,” it reflects the consequences of political and social dynamics arising from the atrocities and suffering he has endured (Jayamohan 46). Abject-types are manifestations of abjection found in global trauma literature. They are thought-provoking because it compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths.

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the term “abject” is defined as “Brought low, miserable; craven, degraded, despicable, self abasing.” Additionally, it characterizes “abjection” as a “state of misery or degradation.” Kristeva explores the concept of abjection by drawing heavily from Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. The term ‘abject’ pertains to the human response (such as horror or revulsion) triggered by the potential collapse of meaning, resulting from the blurred lines between subject and object, or between self and other.

The reason these elements elicit such intense reactions in us, as Kristeva suggests, is because the abject concerns itself with what disregards boundaries, positions, and norms. The abject poses a challenge to our comprehension of reality. Between the abject and the subject, there exist spaces that

Kristeva referred to as liminal spaces. We tend to avoid these spaces because of their unsettling and potentially abject nature. According to Kristeva, abjection is a process through which our identities are formed. We define our identities by excluding the Other.

The people of the Nayadi community inhabit the disputed borderland straddling the realms of humans and non-human animals. This borderland is molded by the cultural constructs upon which the division is founded, a space referred to by Kristeva as liminal space. There is a disruption in meaning as our minds attempt to comprehend the reality of the life they lead. Dharmapalan's mother cares for him in a manner resembling the way an animal tends to its offspring. "She made efforts to separate him from his clothes, akin to a mother pig's reaction when she sees a foreign object stuck to her child."

In Jayamohan's *Nooru Simhasanangal*, there is a vivid depiction of Dharmapalan's mother's conduct, which is difficult to distinguish from that of an animal. There are instances, such as his mother urinating in Sudha's room, akin to how animals mark their territory by urinating there. When Dharmapalan says, "I am a small, black mouse. There is an apology in the body, appearance, movements and voice of a mouse. It has the attitude of 'let me live.' Its world exists beneath the feet of others, amidst the garbage. I always observe a rat's spine. There is no need to bend its spine; God has given it as it is," he identifies more with an animal than with a human (Jayamohan 40). K Rajan in his study, finds that the Nayadis' "diet also included some other animals and birds haunted by them – pigs, hares, monkeys, goats, wild squirrels, rats, doves, quails, fowls and paddy birds" (1200). The people

of the Nayadi community were forced to live in the forests and away from the sight of others, because they were described as a 'wretched race,' that had been 'banished' from the villages. As they were compelled to live alongside animals, and were required to stay away from the roads and paths frequented by people from other communities, they assimilated some of their characteristics.

The concept of the abject pertains to the human response to a potential collapse in meaning resulting from the blurring of distinctions between subject and object, or between self and other. When the "upper-caste" individuals opt not to associate with a Dalit, it reinforces their identity within the realm of "upper-caste." In this manner, abjection compels them to define their identity. Kristeva suggests that this is because the abject deals with what does not adhere to borders, positions or rules. Therefore the abject poses a threat to our comprehension of reality. Our identities are shaped through the act of excluding the Other.

According to Sanal Mohan, "Changes in habits were important for the evolution of Dalits as modern citizens. Moreover, in the prevailing situation of distance pollution and untouchability, slave-caste men and women had to evolve as socially presentable bodies by adopting new social practices. This would be possible only if they abandoned habits that the upper castes abhorred. It appears that such a change of habits had been considered as fundamental for claiming social space and becoming part of the evolving civil society that was always inimical to them" (75).

Expanding on this point, he states "A close reading of missionary writings of the mid-nineteenth century in the Travancore region of Kerala shows how much missionaries

were concerned with the changes in the habits of Dalits who joined the missions” (Mohan 75). In this book, Dharmapalan arrives at Swamy Pragnananda’s ashram, where he undergoes significant transformations that ultimately become a turning point in his life. His habits undergo a transformation from that point. Dharmapalan encounters modernity at Swamy Pragnananda’s ashram. They changed his habits and provided him with education. However, later in his career, after years of experiencing modernity, Dharmapalan comes to the realization that “I transformed into an animal living in a zoo in the city. When I get angry, it is interpreted as a lack of culture inherent in my caste” (Jayamohan 52). Despite his efforts to modernize himself, those around Dharmapalan still deemed him not cultured enough. He was constantly held accountable for the “lack of culture inherent” in his caste. Even after becoming a district collector, Dharmapalan stated, “I am not a member of the machinery of administration” (Jayamohan 19). It is evident from this that modernity, as Habermas puts it, remains an “unfinished project” (Habermas 3).

In the book *NooruSimhasanangal*, the narrator demonstrates a remarkable skill in transitioning between his personal experiences and the broader narratives of his community. The text serves as a societal record with a distinct political agenda. Nayar argues that this agenda involves advocating for human rights. Thus Jayamohan’s book *Nooru Simhasanangal* forges a link between Dharmapalan’s personal suffering and the communal trauma endured by the Nayadi community. Within this framework, his trauma encompasses not only the physical aspect of his individual body but also symbolizes the collective body of his community. In this manner, Dalit testimonios carve out a

discursive arena for themselves within the landscape of official public spheres, a concept Nancy Fraser has defined as “subaltern counter-publics” (Fraser 67). Fraser coined this term by drawing inspiration from Gayatri Spivak’s “subaltern” and Rita Felski’s “counter-public.” She suggests that these counter-publics emerge as a response to being excluded by the dominant publics. As Anglican missionaries attempted to engage with the slave castes from the late 1840’s onward, the potential for an alternative public sphere also started to develop.

Dalit testimonios connect the suffering of individual bodies to the broader experience of collective trauma. It serves as a societal record with a clearly defined political purpose. The survivor or traumatized individual exists within a social context, where suffering is not solely imprinted upon the person, but originates from a systemic condition. As Nayar, LaCapra, and Hesford suggest, as readers of this text, we are called upon to possess the ability to imagine the suffering as we become engrossed in the narrative, to closely observe the situations in which certain individuals of the human species are stripped of their human qualities, emphasizing the significance of consciously recognizing this traumatic context.

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