

Mythic Realism in the Garb of Poetic Symbolism in Cho. Dharman's Koogai "The Owl"

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Abstract

Subaltern narratives are born of lived experiences and folk wisdom, with a unique flavour of the soil, tempered with tears and sweat. Dharman's narrative technique "The Owl" is unique and Ms. Vasantha Surya, the translator deftly captures the cadence and core of the mystic rendering with aplomb. The spoken register of the karisal region is earthy but can be easily followed by all but in translation, it requires footnotes and references. Cho Dharman, who has too many fish to fry and several axes to grind, tries to convey more with symbolism and Greek chorus-like authorial intrusion by using a style that is a blend of mysticism and myth. This paper aims at capturing the purpose and intent of the author.

Keywords: Subaltern narratives, mythic realism, poetic symbolism, authorial intrusion

Introduction

The mix of poetic rendition of certain purple passages is a ploy and technique to lift it to the level of the best in Dalit literature. Dharman's craft is so perfect that it reads as good as the original in Tamil. Tamil is a complex language that it is impossible to render all the multifarious innuendoes and registers in any other language, not in English at least.

Kudos to the non-Dalit, brahmin translator for being so faithful to the original and creating some very unique translations of Tamil idioms and sayings in the translation. She

has so competently captured the lyrical cadences and exuberance of Cho Dharman's 'poetic rendition' that it leaves the reader with awe and amazement.

"Koogai" is Cho. Dharman's most ambitious work to date, and poses a challenge to current typologies of Dalit writing. It can only be compared to KoveruKazudhigal (translated as 'Beasts of Burden' by Lakshmi Holmström); published in 1993, Imayam's stunning debut boldly narrated the story of Arokkyam who belongs to a caste that provides traditional washing services to Paraiyars and thus is a doubly marginalized community. Both novels are a treasure trove of Dalit oral lore and traditions, which have found no chroniclers.

Koogai is a nocturnal bird. A member of the owl family, it bears a close resemblance to the barn owl. A number of poems in classical Tamil literature evoke a common perception that this bird is an ominous creature, its calls auguring future events, especially bad tidings. The eerie hoot of the owl is particularly inauspicious and, in popular parlance, it is even called sakkuruvi, the sparrow of death, as its hoot is said to foretell death. Bharathidasan, the great poet of the Dravidian movement, derisively dubbed fatalist Hindu philosophy as 'sakkuruviVedanta! The distinguished translator, M.L. Thangappa, in a long poem titled Aandhai Pattu, inspired by and modelled after Bharati's 'KuyilPattu', describes in felicitous language the graceful flight of this much-reviled bird.

Dharman is therefore making a bold statement in titling his novel Koogai. Seeni, an old Pallar man, deifies the koogai, fashioning it into a kind of a guardian angel of his community. This invites ridicule as the obsession of an old man. But Koogai is much more than that: it is an evocative symbol that stands for all oppressed communities, and especially for the Dalits. Koogai is a giant but can display its prowess only at night when it seeks prey. At other times, and especially when the sun shines, it is helpless, and is endlessly pecked and teased even by smaller birds. In Dharman's hands, Koogai becomes a particularly apt metaphor for the Dalits. In a section of the novel, which aspires to Marquezian heights of

magical realist imagination, Koogai wins the respect of the upper-caste Gengaiya Naicker. The community falls when they neglect the owl temple.

Set a generation earlier than his first novel, Koogai portrays the lower-caste social reality of the karisal region with great aplomb and demonstrates an understanding of social reality that would do a sociologist proud.

The following passages give the reader an idea of how the author tries to shift gear and go into the mythic mode, from the mere narrative, from the omniscient narrator to Greek chorus-like prediction and running commentary;

“A mother parrot looked out of its hollow in the trunk of a bald palmyra tree.

Not far away was a falcon, watching.

The trembling parrot perched at the nest's entrance, screeching and squawking.

The fledglings shuddered.

Thought the parrot, 'The falcon too, is a bird like me.

Both our lives are ruled by the wind's currents.

Green is my colour, and white is his. Am I not the child of this forest?

Is there such a thing as a white forest? Does a white tree exist?

What has become of the forest's wild, uncowed spirit?...

I am this very forest ... I, myself. Its valour is in me.

Any terror I feel will encourage the enemy.

Don't I have a beak? Don't I have sharp claws?

Can't a beak that plucks at a fruit tear into flesh as well?

Won't the claws that grasp a branch rip through flesh?

If a tortured life is fit only to throw into a burial pit,

let's see what colour it is,

in the light thrown by the burning body!

The falcon waited and waited, but the parrot never left the nest.

It forgot the mantra for hiding deep inside the hollow, too.

Jatayu, who confronted Ravana and did battle with him,

when he bore Sita away--was he the ancestor of the falcon, or was Ravana?

A falcon carries away its prey...

Yet, didn't Jatayu fight to protect the parrot Sita, who built a nest in the forest?

Perched in the hollow, the parrot rolled and rolled its eyes at the falcon,

but the falcon never moved.

The fledglings forgot their hunger--they were too scared to breathe.

As the branches of the banyan whirled and swayed, and its leaves were turned to parrots,

all of them, until it seemed as though it had never been otherwise....

That leaves were indeed quiescent parrots, that there was no difference between leaf and

parrot'.... Making a terrific din, thousands of parrots flew around burning stars.

The falcon swivelled its neck this way and that, aghast at the sight.

Wherever it turned there were green parrots,

all the leaves of all the trees not only in this forest but in all forests everywhere

turned miraculously into parrots in flight....

The falcon took flight, too, and sought escape.

But the beaks that had plucked at fruit tore into falcon flesh.

That very species of falcon became extinct

Only trees can destroy other trees. The webbed roots spun by trees hidden in the ground are

the seeds of future generations. Rotting leaves fertilize and nourish them, as rain drenches

the forest.... Which god of death, which Yama has the strength to conquer them? ” (The owl,

p.31-32)

When the author says,

“Any terror I feel will encourage the enemy. Don't I have a beak? Don't I have sharp claws? Can't a beak that plucks at a fruit tear into flesh as well?”

The means the oppressed people should not be silently suffering. Instead, if they unite and fight back, the oppressors will be annihilated. We can read multiple meanings into this kind of mythic mysticism or plain symbolism. When Harishchandra, Raavan, jatayu and Sita serve one archetypal purpose, the mystic symbolism is done with the parrot and falcon, though the whole owl idea is an extended metaphor. The context is one of revolt against caste hegemony and sexual exploitation of very poor Dalit women and here it is the cobbler Shanmugam Pagadai's wife all these years and the oppressor is going into his own “daughter” and the menial meek cobbler is now the executioner Yama:

“There, like a sacrificial lamb awaiting the knife, sat the newly-wed groom Madhukkan. In a moment his garlanded neck would receive a lightning slash and his chopped-off head would fall to the ground. The aruvaal was ready to drink his blood. But that guardian of the cremation ground and burner of corpses, that noble Harischandran who had become Shanmugam himself, knew that Madhukkan was not to blame. He seized the earthen pots stacked and upturned in the courtyard and hurled them around with a mighty damaardamaar, making a thunderous tumult, fearsome as death. Bridal wreath flip-flapping around his neck, Madhukkan took to his heels and headed south. Shanmugam stood listening keenly at the door to the sounds of Vellaiyamma's struggle inside the hovel through the din, as mud pots tumbled about like rocks rolling down in a landslide. From the flimsy thatched walls came the sound of hot, heavy breathing. Like an owl emitting a thin hoot in pitch darkness came a single shriek from Vellaiyamma. It shook awake every one of the seven nodal pulses in Shanmugam's body. And then he banged the door of the hut.

That blow of Shanmugam's upon that door fell like the fateful blow that descended on the Lord's back, when He defied the oppressors of the meek. He who had undertaken to carry an old woman's burden in return for a dish of pittu did not feel the blow they dealt Him, but the tormentors felt it at once, upon their own backs.

Shanmugam hid himself to the left of the doorway. As Muthaiya Pandian opened the thatched door and thrust his head out, he struck him down. Blood spattered like holy vermilion. Shanmugam's paroxysm matched that of a devotee who fervently smashes a coconut in lieu of his own head, and offers it up to a deity. Going back into the hut he picked up Vellaiyamma in his arms and came out, pushed Muthaiya Pandian's inert body inside, and locked the door."

A popular tale of Lord Murugan, who turned up as a young lad at an old widow's house just as she was despairing of being unable to carry the headload of earth that it was her lot to deposit, as forced labour, at the king's construction site. 'I'll carry your headload of earth, Thaiy,' said Murugan. 'But first give me a dish of pittu, I'm hungry!' He ate it all up and went to sleep at once. Pretty soon, the king's guard turned up to find out why no headload had been carried to the site by this particular household, and he gave the sleeping lord a thwack on the back with his cane. At once a great whack fell on the attacker's back, on all those with him, and on the king's back too.

Soon the Chakkiliyar-kudi was ablaze. Flame-tongues whirled about in a dance of terror. Hordes of people hurried to the spot. Having lost all their belongings, burdened only with their honour, the small band of cobbler folk followed Shanmugam like a row of miniscule ants. They waded through marshes as though walking on firm paths. Flocks of egrets rose up and flew with them, mocking the solitary crane on the shore who stood austere on one leg, intent on nabbing fish. Like a fiery ball a kingfisher plunged into the

water to skewer a fish. It flew up again to a treetop perch, drops splattering from its fluffed-up wings, only to be knocked off by the egrets in their headlong flight

Cho Dharman puts spunk and courage into his people and teaches them to break free

“Birds that wade in placid pools can fly up too,

and span the heavens in wondrous mega-formations.

Who teaches them the art, who instructs them in the skills?

For an egret is only as tall as a pool is deep. Even less.

A pool can be so shallow that it barely covers the egret's feet, and as for the ocean,

it's a world beyond the ken of any egret.

And yet to the creatures in the pool, the egret is the Cosmic Form,

it is the all-devouring Death. For the egret knows the pool's secrets.

The flock descends to the middle of the pool, to an island overgrown with grass....

You who have taken birth!

All life lies open before you!

When you cannot search and discover something of worth in all that now lies open,

what will you look for after you are dead?

What will you find in that dark and unplumbed abyss of nothingness? ”

Mouth agape, Koogai waited in a hole on the peak of the bill until the night arrived and the sun fell into that open mouth. Its hunger unappeased even after it had swallowed the sun, it set off in search of prey and a mate. Aandhai, its despised relation, let out a plaintive hoot. Aeon after aeon, Aandhai has nourished himself solely on the sight of the stars, devouring them with his gaze. Saakuruvi the screecher, another lesser kinsman to the Great Koogai, let out a shriek like the very conch of Yama.... Somewhere a life was being seized, for every one of Saakuruvi's shrieks means one life less on Earth. Each is a cryptic entry in

the account book of the God of Death. And meanwhile, Koogai regurgitated the sun and fixed it in its eye-sockets.... To light the way to its prey....

This is another poetic passage in which the most important character is losing her “self” to Kaali Thevan, an older married man.

She stood in Kaali Thevar's garden, drying her sari. Having tied one end to the trunk of a coconut tree, she was winding the other end around another 'coconut tree'... herself. The sari slipped, baring her breasts ... two green coconuts. Her wet, dripping hair rippled across her back.

Mulberry trees grew thick on the edge of the well. In that village of Azhaganeri, KaaliThevar's well was the only one where 'Harijans'-as they called us-could bathe. Maybe that was because it was quite far from the village and close to the cremation ground on the canalbank. But KaaliThevar's big heart was as much a reason for it happening. It was a well which never went dry, with a pulley and the water was good to drink.

The leaves of the thickly-growing castor bushes were like so many open hands, with outspread palms. On either side of Peichi stood the karunkanni cotton bushes, like holy pedestal...

She was watching a spider ... having slung its web on the wind and fastened it between two plants, it lay in wait for prey. The sun was at eye level, setting the web alight. Insects dropped down upon its fiery expanse like falling stars, like scattered flowers, and were burnt to ashes.

The spider knew the art of walking on air and the meaning of what it is to wait, and it knew too, how to savour life as it hung patiently by a single thread. With the vagaries of the wind, it whirls in limbo and mates, conceives, and gives birth. A cicada blundered into the web and the spider pounced on it and squeezed it tightly. Subtle is

the skill of spitting out a web of fire, and the spider is adept. Knowing nothing of the art of web-walking, the cicada loses and the spider wins, thought Peichi to herself, as she stood there and watched the spider.

A yellow rat snake was coiling itself around her hips, a black cobra with an outspread hood loomed over her and encircled her waist.... Two arms. On the back of her neck, a fiery breath and the prickly feel of a moustache ... she staggered. A tall coconut tree seized her sari and unwound it entirely. The spider's web was ripped apart....

Tying up her hair and re-arranging her crumpled clothes, she retrieved her sari from the tree and wrapped it around herself. As she stood there trembling, KaaliThevar tried to pacify her... .(The Owl, Page177-78)

Like King David, an older, much married man, espying the bathing Bathsheba from his balcony and falling for her, Kali is able to see this young, voluptuous woman and in no time the seduction is accomplished.

But the cat has tasted fresh milk and it keeps coming for more and this pallar woman becomes a sensation. Amiable Kalithevar absolves himself by marrying her and leaving all his property to his first family and starts living a simple life with his newfound love, Peichi. However, this romance is star-crossed and ends on a tragic note, making Peichi, a widow at a young age. The novel has many purple passages like these and Cho Dharman conveys more through symbolism and mythic realism in the “Owl”

Conclusion:

Dalit authors are the intelligentsia of the subaltern and their mission is not getting pity from the reader. They endeavour to instil spunk, and confidence in their brethren. The education Dalits received has transformed their lives and has given them an inkling of dignity and semblance of power. Cho Dharman, who has too many fish to fry and several axes to

grind, tries to convey more with symbolism and Greek chorus-like authorial intrusion by using a style that is a blend of mysticism and myth.

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Bharati: Subramania Bharathi (11 December 1882 – 11 September 1921) was a Tamil writer, poet, journalist, Indian independence activist, social reformer and polyglot.

King David: 2 Samuel 11:2

Koogai: a type of owl

Karisal: black cotton soil

Pagadai: a cobbler/ sweeper caste aka Sakkiliar, the most oppressed in Tamil Nādu

Raavan, Jatayu and Sita: characters in the Indian myth Ramayana

Pallars, Paraiyars: the two oppressed, SC communities of menial labourers in Tamil Nādu and other places

Thevar: a community of landed gentry

Pittu: a delicacy made by steaming raw rice flour; it is eaten with shredded coconut, banana and palm sugar

Thayi – literally it means mother. Here it is a polite way of addressing a woman.