

Understanding the “Making” of Difference In and Through Literature

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Abstract: Every literary text exists with an irreducible difference from each other, which accounts for every literary work's inner singularity. The difference in literary works can be understood only through the reading and writing processes. In this paper, Literature is viewed as an entity to understand and engage with a difference as a mode of being and relation rather than confine different entities to the concept of identity, which is sameness and contrary to difference.

Keywords: Difference, Literature, Inner-singularity, Biriyani, Panthibhojanam.

Introduction

Perception is the "primordial operation which impregnates sensible beings with a meaning, and which all logical mediation, as well as all psychological causality, presupposes." (McCleary, vii)

Perception is the interaction of an individual with the phenomenal field. Our experience forms the natural world, and the real world is brought to us through our perception. There is a perceived world for

us, and the idea of pluralism is that there is more than the one perceived world. Thus, the world is plural literally, and there are innumerable relations between ends and means as there are human beings. Thus, the experience of difference is perception itself.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, this "world is a detotalized totality." "It means that, on the one hand, there is a world that is indeed the same for us all, but on the other hand, we are all in a situation about it. This situation involves our past, class, condition, projects, and the entire ensemble of what makes up our individuality. What is most essential in the human condition and man's relation to the world is precisely what is defined by this unity of the world that we express and yet, at the same time, this singularity, this detotalization of the points of view that we take on it." (Beauvoir 198). We are aware of this world as a whole. However, then the world appears before us only through our perception, and that is singular. When we "perceive" difference, it is about an intentional relation to the world.

In our existence, there is always an encounter with the Other. According to Merleau Ponty, the illusion of knowing the Other is as deep as the illusion of becoming like the Other, and it is possible only if we overcome our singularity. However, it is

impossible to transcend one's singularity as we are all embodied consciousness, unique and different from all others. Thus, according to Ponty, one must move beyond subjectivity to the space of intersubjectivity while encountering others.

The singularity of Literature; Literature as a "Privileged Space of Inter subjectivity."

Beauvoir quotes Marcel Proust, who says, "Literature is the privileged space of inter subjectivity."

"I am thrown into a world with its values and colors. I do not annex it to myself; it remains separated from mine, yet it exists for me. Moreover, it exists for others who are also separated from it and with whom I communicate, through books, in their deepest intimacy." (Beauvoir, 201)

"I think that I say what I say, and that is what you hear. That is a true relationship created through language, which is opacity but is also a signifying vehicle common to all and accessible to all." (Beauvoir 199)

Simone de Beauvoir talks about the singularity of Literature in the above lines. The singularity of literary texts lies in the fundamental difference between one text from another of the same kind.

Man projects himself to the world through language, and language is experiential. Language is the medium through which Literature works. In Literature, language forms the form and medium of our intersubjectivity.

I will try to see how difference, a mode of being, and relation are made in and through Literature, a "privileged space of intersubjectivity." Differences 'in' Literature will be in terms of the irreducible singularity of literary texts. The difference 'through' Literature will understand the world it tries to impart. i.e., to understand and engage with the Other.

For this purpose, I have taken two short stories, 'Biriyanis' and 'Panthibhojanam,' written by Santhosh Echikkanam. I chose these stories because both contain references to food and reflect on how the Self relates to the Other in a particular situation, further reflecting on a universal understanding, as Beauvoir says. The first story reflects how difference is perceived based on geographical location. In contrast, the second story reflects how difference is perceived based on one's representational identity, like Caste, rather than seeing difference as a mode of being and relation.

Both the works are in the form of short stories. According to Sukumar Azhikode, a Malayalam literary critic and scholar, "A short story is identified as a brief prose narrative with an intense episodic or anecdotal effect. There is more to the short story than the mere fact of it being a short tale written in prose."

***Biriyanis* by Santhosh Echikkanam**

The short story *Biriyanis* was written by Santhosh Echikkanam in the year 2016. The title 'Biriyanis' reminds us of the food item 'Biriyanis' usually served on festive

occasions. The word itself has become a marker of joy and festivity as it is usually associated with rare happy occasions.

Following is how the characters are introduced:

Jalandhar Haji - "He had the awesome reputation of being the first man from his village to cross the Arabian Sea in an Uru, a cargo boat, and reach Dubai after a dangerous voyage of many days." (Echikkanam 1)

Asainarcha - "The closest side-kick of Kalandhan Haji who was also his trusted partner in their real estate business." (Echikkanam 1)

Ramachandran Perumala - "Who owned a store in Poyinachi where he kept stationary, newspapers, soft drinks, cigarettes, pan masala and a whole lot of sundry items." (Echikkanam 2)

Migrants from Bengal and Bihar - "At the Poyinachi junction bus stop, Kadireshan and the Bengalee boys stepped out, followed by Gopal Yadav. As the Bengalees crossed the road and reached Ramachandran's shop, they were greeted by the latter." (Echikkanam, 2)

The characters are introduced in the given order and further reflect on a six-tier hierarchy - Kalandhan Haji (employer), Asainarcha (side-kick of Haji), Ramachandran Perumala (trader), Kadireshan (the broker), Bengalees (migrants from Bengal) and Gopal Yadav

(migrant from Bihar). While Kalandhan Haji, Asainarcha, and Ramachandran Perumala were introduced with sufficient information, the broker's introduction is confined to his name. Whereas the migrants from Bengal and Bihar are limited to being called "Bengalees."

What follows after the introduction of the characters is a conversation that happens between Ramachandran Perumala and Gopal Yadav.

Gopal Yadav stepped into Ramachandran's store and asked for a sweet pan to chew. As he smoothed the betel leaf in his hand, Ramachandran asked him in Hindi,

'You seem to be new here?'

'Yes, Bhai.'

'And where are you from?'

'Bihar.'

'Oh, Our Lalooji's country?'

Gopal smiled, exposing his three missing teeth.

(Echikkanam, 3)

Here, we can see that Bihar is termed 'Lalu Yadav's place'. The irony behind this is made clear when in a different situation in the story, we see that Bihar and Jharkhand get separated during the tenure of Lalu Yadav's govt.

Later in the story, when Gopal Yadav introduces his place to Sinan (Kalandhan Haji's son),

Sinan went to Google and then straight to Lal Mathia.

He turned to Yadav and said,

'There is no such place in Bihar, Bhai.'

Yadav raised his eyes from the pickaxe and said,

'Lal Mathia is the name of my village, and it is in Bihar.'

'Stop Joking, man. Lal Mathia is in Jharkhand. See for yourself.

Sinan showed him the map on his mobile phone, moving his fingers over it

like the white cloth on a dead man's face.

Gopal thought, 'oh, Lal Mathia!

You have also lost your roots like me in a land

no more. He took a deep breath and sighed heavily like he always did

at the burial of a dear one'.

(Echikkanam, 7)

The conversation highlights that the structures of power and the bureaucracy that was meant to solve the problems of the masses are caught up in their rigmarole of power structures. The power structures fail to see people in their singularity. The bureaucrats, politicians, and the government see their province as a whole, and everyone living in that place is supposed to be under the control of the power structure that governs them.

Bihar and Jharkhand got separated in the year 2000. The resolution for creating a new state of Jharkhand was made during the tenure of Lalu Prasad Yadav to save his party's government after the split in RJD in 1997. Moreover, both Biharis and Bengalis

were equally responsible for the rise of settler colonization in Jharkhand's tribal areas, which led to the demand for a separate state of Jharkhand.

The following is the conversation that takes place between Assainarcha and Gopal Yadav.

Assainarcha arrived in his 'Fortuner'. . . He glanced at the middle-aged man standing before him, head bowed, hands joined, and knew the worker Ramachandran had found for him by instinct.

Assainarcha did not even bother to look at him when he spoke to Gopal,

You will be paid two hundred and fifty rupees, okay? Are you ready or not?

'Kindly make it three-fifty, Saab.'

Now, let me get this straight! Over here, a Malayali is paid Rs.600, a Tamilian Rs.500, a Bengalee 350, and for a Bihari, it is only 250. This is what we pay here, okay? Besides, this small job will not take more than 4 or 5 hours. Who will pay you more than 50 rupees an hour? Are you ready or not? That is all I wanted to know. (Echikkanam, 3)

Here, we can see that people are perceived as second-grade citizens depending on their geographical location. While Malayalis are given Rs. 600 as their wage, a migrant from Bihar is given only Rs. 250. Here, Gopal Yadav, a migrant from Bihar, is asked to work for a low income, unlike others.

Why is the difference in perception?

The phenomenal field is the real world that appears to us. However, our mind attributes specific predetermined categories, which form our prejudice. The world is plural. Moreover, there is always an encounter with the Other. The realization is that the 'Other' can be a part of our Horizon of Expectations but not our interiority. Thus, the attempt is about stopping to see the Other as an object in one's perspective and as someone like themselves. MerleauPonty calls it reciprocation.

"The experience of the Other is always that of a replica of myself, of a response to myself; the solution must be sought in the direction of that strange feeling which makes the Other forever my second even when I prefer him to be myself and sacrifice myself to" (Ponty 135).

By addressing all the migrants from Bengal and Bihar as "Bengalees" (used derogatorily), we deny the singularity of individuals. We are trying to use language to ascertain the second-grade status of different individuals from different cultures. Words are made of language and are used to represent culture. Thus, language is culture, and by assigning a word to a

particular experience in life, that word itself makes a unique bond with the culture, which makes it inseparable from the culture to which it belongs. However, "the cultural base of meanings was not present when the words were first uttered. When we step out of our everyday constituted language, we rediscover the obscure base upon which its clarity was formed; we glimpse the birth of la parole in a psychic gesticulation, the original act whereby man first superposed upon the neuter world around him the world according to man." (Ponty and Phenomenology of Language). Sedimentation forms the culture that we acquire. Because we share the parameters sometimes and sometimes because we think that we do not share the same parameters, we fail to see the Other as a subject; we look at it as an object.

According to Gestalt theories, we do not perceive things individually. We perceive everything about each other, and thus the context becomes important. The context contributes to the perception.

The form is how content is written and how or why a particular form was chosen can be traced back to the History, i.e., the structure of feeling of the period. "What is told and the manner of telling cannot be separated because the manner of telling is the very rhythm of the search; it is the way of defining and living it. The material they use, how they use it, and the search they conduct and which constitutes their literary work are inseparable. (Beauvoir, 202)

During the 1980s and 2000s, the unemployment crisis was at its peak, and thus a lot of Keralites took to Gulf regions to get a livelihood. However, there was a mass migration of people from West Bengal, Bihar, and Maharashtra to Kerala, searching for jobs. Even though they worked hard to earn a livelihood, migrants from Bengal, Bihar, and states were mocked by addressing them as "Bengalees," irrespective of the state from which they came. Also, they were mocked for their small stature and their effort to speak in Malayalam to Keralites. Similar was the situation in the 70s when people in Kerala migrated to the Gulf searching for jobs. The unemployment crisis posed a considerable problem to the then Kerala society. However, the period saw a mass migration of people from Tamil Nadu to Kerala searching for jobs. Even though the laborers included both Malayalees and Tamilians, Tamilians were mocked using the word 'Pandeas' and 'Annachies'. Tamilians who were dark in body complexion and curly hair (to cite the general trend) with their different pronunciation of the letter 'zha' as 'la' were mocked for their different culture, appearance, and language. However, they later transformed into a society that prides itself on their language and culture.

'Gopala, where in Bihar are you from?'

'Lal Mathia.' He answered.

'And what was your job?'

'It was in the Coal mine.'

He began to talk about the Rajmahal coal mine. When mining was given up, certain

deserted mines left behind scraps of low-grade coal which the local wretches would descend upon to pick up for a living. It mainly was the starving women who did this, and it was during one such journey, that Gopal had met Madani.

He had to push 250kg of coal on his bicycle up to Godha, a distance of some km or so. Sometimes he had to trudge another 20 km to Bangha. However, his daily wages were a paltry ten rupees!

'Ten rupees! God Almighty! ' Assainarcha placed a hand on his head.

'Actually, it was Rs.150. However, I had to bribe the police men and the goondas, change the cycle tube in between, and repair the ball-bearing. After all these expenses, I will have just ten rupees left with me.'

'And you are asking me for Rs.100/ more?'

He fumed at Gopal.

'When did you leave Bihar?'

'Fifteen years ago.'¹²

'You said fifteen years ago your wages back home was ten rupees a day which means it cannot be more than a hundred rupees now. Moreover, here I

am offering you Rs.250! Nevertheless, you are not happy and greedy for more?' Assainarcha growled as he drove the car.

Gopal felt bad. How stupid of him to have told this man his life's troubles. He remembered the famished face of his only child with its slender neck and bulging belly, whom he could never feed enough. So, mad with hunger, she used to fill her stomach with whatever she could lay her hands on, even a fistful of earth sometimes, before she wilted like a flower and slept exhausted!

Assainarcha did not have a child like that.

He said to himself, before we share our pain with someone, we must make sure that person too had suffered in life in a small measure at least. Otherwise, it is better to keep our mouths shut like an accused and suffer silently rather than be laughed at like a clown. (Echikkanam, 6)

Here, Assainarcha does not consider the experience of Gopal Yadav. He considers Gopal Yadav just a migrant searching for a job and thus objectifies and denies him the subjecthood of his being. By objectifying Gopal Yadav, Assainarcha can only make statements about Yadav. There is no way of understanding Yadav as he is

merely an object of knowledge before Assainarcha.

Intersubjectivity, as Ponty proposed, reflects the need to consider other human beings as subjects during an encounter. The realization is that the Other is at the boundary of myself. Thus, we need to cross the limit of our subjectivity to encounter the Other being, expecting that the Other will meet me. This accounts for the rise of dialogue. Dialogue comes from a particular experiential view of the world, and it gives us access to differences. Ponty calls it the area beyond the inter-subjective, and in Buber's view, dialogue is a meeting of one whole being with another whole being.

The story is replete with descriptions and instances featuring 'Basmati' and its aroma. Some of the instances are given here:

'Whatever is going on, Assainarcha? Everywhere people are talking about the marriage feast at Kalandhan Haji's palace. They say it will be the biggest dinner ever in our village! Is it true that cooks have landed from Hyderabad and Abu Dhabi?'

'Sure, it is tremendous, and it will be the biggest you will ever see! This Biryani will be different from the cheap stuff prepared by the local fellows and fed to the riff-raff crowd who gather for every marriage. Believe me, man, we will be serving genuine *kuzhimanthi* Biryani to our guests. Furthermore, between

us, let me tell you, one truck-load of super-fine Basmati rice has already arrived from Punjab!

'One truck load!!
'Ramachandran's eyes popped out.

'Yeah! Even I couldn't believe my eyes when the truck came and braked in front of the house. That is what you call Basmati rice – the real stuff!' (Echikkanam, 3)

The ironic tone is made clear when Gopal Yadav remembers Mathangi, his wife, who had to satisfy her basmati love by chewing raw basmati rice, and his daughter sometime later in the novel. They had to fill her stomach with whatever she could lay her hands on.

Gopal remembered the first time he saw Basmati rice. His wife Madhangi showed it to him from Shukoor Miya's grocery store. She was six months pregnant then. She loved it when he held a handful of the rice to her nose, and her eyelids closed in longing. She knew that it was not meant for people like her, but Gopal did what best he could do for his wife. He begged Shukoor Miya to let him have 50 grams of it for his pregnant wife, and he obliged. Madhani happily chewed the rice out of her hand until they walked back to their house. As she chewed it with abandon, the pulpy rice oozed

out of the sides of her mouth like cow's milk. He watched her with a smile but never let her wipe it. He had tenderly gazed into her eyes as if she were a calf! (Echikkanam, 6)

He remembered the famished face of his only child with its slender neck and bulging belly, whom he could never feed enough. So, mad with hunger, she used to fill her stomach with whatever she could lay her hands on, even a fistful of earth sometimes, before she wilted like a flower and slept exhausted! (Echikkanam, 6)

Later in the story, we see Gopal Yadav standing in the freshly dug earth and his helplessness when asked to level the humongous barrels of left-over Biriyani.

'Finished?'

'Yes,' said Gopal as he rose to his feet. Sinan gave him a hand, and Gopal emerged from the pit. Just then, three or four people carried a substantial green barrel of something and emptied it heavily into the pit. Tons of Biriyani with meat, bones, and all came pouring down into the pit like a landslide! Gopal looked at it, his heart pounding. As he watched helplessly from a mound as it were, another barrel was brought, yet another after a while. More barrels came, and they all met with the same fate. Soon he lost count. Finally, to

top it all, came the last consignment for disposal. This one was a massive copper vessel full of food not even opened. Its drum or the seal of quality was still unbroken.

The pit was now brimming over with wasted food. Sinan turned to Gopal and said,

'Okay, now you can cover it with earth and press it down with your feet.'¹⁶

Nevertheless, Gopal stood paralyzed on the edge of the pit. Come on, man, use your feet and kick it down. It is 11 'o'clock already.'

Gopal raised his foot. On the ground lay his Basmati, he thought.

Sinan yelled in anger, 'Step on it hard, Bhai!'

Moreover, he did it. He kicked hard right on its chest. He thought he heard a cry first.

Then it became a whimper, and slowly it faded out.

'Okay, now you can cover it with earth,' shouted the lad.

Gopal stood sweating, his feet all messy with the ghee and masala of the Biryani he had kicked down. (Echikkanam, 7)

Following is the last section of the short story, where a conversation takes place between Gopal Yadav and Sinan after leveling the left-over Biryani with soil.

'Bhai! You have kids, don't you?

'Only one girl.'

'What is her name?'

'Basmati.'¹⁷

'Is her nikah over?'

'No.'

...

'She is studying?'

'No.'

'Then?'

'She is dead.'

'Dead?'

...

'What did she die of?'

'Hunger.'

Gopal shoveled another heap of earth and threw it on top of the Basmati he had buried. Then he took a long, deep breath as he usually did after each burial. (Echikkanam, 8)

Food as a Symbol of Hunger

In the story, Biryani becomes the symbol of hunger. There is a gradual transformation in the way Biryani is perceived. First instances show Biryani as indicative of joy, happiness, and wealth and that its smell resembles "the fragrance of blooming jasmine" that envelops the mind and soul of everyone there. Later, it takes the form of gluttony and greed where "loads" of "genuine Basmati rice" is loaded for the "biggest dinner of the village". Towards the end of the story, Basmati rice symbolizes poverty, where Yadav's wife had to chew raw Basmati rice to satisfy her desire. In the climax of the story, Basmati rice, which had the garb of wealth and happiness, takes on the form of hunger and deprivation, leading to the death of Basmati, Yadav's daughter.

Here, the word and the experience associated with the word *Biriyani*, specifically *Basmati* rice, transcends the singular notion of happiness and wealth to attain the universality of hunger, deprivation, and poverty.

According to the phenomenology of language as proposed by MerleauPonty, language is conceptualized not as a set of rules or a scheme but as a human experience. When perceived only from the linguistic point of view in the story, *Biriyani* is limited to the singular notion of wealth and happiness. However, when its experiential aspect is also considered, the word transcends its ordinary significance to include the universality of hunger, poverty, and deprivation. The short story *Biriyani* is an ironic take on deprivation and ostentation.

***Panthibhojanam* by Santhosh Echikkanam**

The short story *Panthibhojanam* was written by Santhosh Echikkanam in the year 2006. The title 'Panthibhojanam' is formed by merging two words, *Panthi* and *Bhojanam*. *Panthi* means to sit in a row or on the same level, and *Bhojanam* means food. Thus, *panthibhojanam* means to have food by sitting in a row.

The term also has another socio-political importance in Kerala. Social reformer Sree Narayana Guru and many of his disciples had worked diligently against Untouchability. Guru's famous catchphrase was "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man ."A militant atheist, one of his

disciples, Sahodaran Ayyappan, rewrote Guru's catchphrase as "No Caste, No Religion, No God for Man ."He launched *Panthibhojanam*, where participants belonging to various castes and communities, on May 29, 1917, had a typical feast at Thundidaparambu, Cheraayi, Kerala.

The story is set in a court, and it takes us through the mindscape of five young advocates (four women and a man).

1. Susan Immanuel
2. Ramya Nair
3. Sangeetha Namboothiri
4. Rukmini
5. Sathish Varma21

The story begins with the description of the food brought by Susan Emmanuel – Pork Roast, Ramya Nair – Kovakka stir fry, and MulakuKondattam and Sangeetha Namboothiri – Mambazha Publisher.

Susan Emmanuel, whom everybody calls the mobile restaurant, started unfolding her four-tier tiffin carrier. Ramya Nair took her kovakkai stir fry and mulakukondattam from the Matta rice. However, what fetched her interest was Susan's mobile restaurant. She was aware of the taste of Susan's food and that her aviyal nor Sangeetha Namboothiri's Wabasha publishers are incomparable with Susan's food. (Echikkanam, 1)

Moreover, a message that Susan Emmanuel receives on her mobile from

Sangeetha Namboothiri says, "Do not finish the Pork."

On seeing the message, Susan Emmanuel exclaims, "Is Sangeetha who eats meat a brahmin. Moreover, the conversation between Remya Nair and Susan Emmanuel sheds light on the ancestry of Sangeetha Namboothiri.

Don't you know? Sangee's ancestors were social reformers. So? Susan did not understand what Remya meant. My God! I am telling all this History to you who do not know a glimpse of History.

Remya explained to Susan, "Social reformers were Namboothiris. Revolutionaries. They are not just Pulincurry and Sacred thread. Have you ever heard about Bhattathirippad? Susan said, 'Yes,' recollecting her memory.

Remya continued, "He ordered the temples to be burnt 70 years back. What is your Pork in front of him!" (Echikkanam 2)

The story also contains other instances of identifying Caste with one's food. Remya Nair recalls a conversation that the trio of friends had with Sathish Varma a long time ago when Sangeetha Namboothiri and Sathish Varma associated food with one's Caste and heredity.

Namboothiri – Mambazha publisher and Olan.

Nair – Koottu curry, Mezhukkuperatti, Molushyam, Avial.

Ezhava – Muthira curry, Kadala curry.

Christian – TharavuMappasu, Pork Roast.

Muslim – Beef Biriyani, Chicken Biriyani. (Echikkanam, 7)

Then follows the dialogue of Sathish Varma, who says about heredity, and Sangeetha, who talks about the classlessness of the food made by "Dalits," where Sangeetha says, "Even if Rugmini (Dalit) pursue Ph.D. or reach any sort of higher position in the profession, the foul sting of her chettumeen (fish from muddy waters) is not going to be eliminated."

Sangeetha Namboothiri tries to extend the concept of Caste even to the food we eat. Also, the instance of Sangeetha Namboothiri, who tries to defame Rugmini, a Dalit, by focusing on her "chettu mean," hints at the prejudiced historical categorization of the society based on one's Caste.

Without a doubt, vegetarianism remains one of the essential strategies in social mobility projects. In his book "Who are untouchables? How did they become untouchables?" Ambedkar says that in Rigveda, cows are mentioned as "Mother of Rudras, the Daughter of Vasus, the Sister of the Adityas and the Centre of Nectar" and that cows were considered sacred. He further adds that "Among the Kamyashtis outlined in the Taittiriya Brahmana, not only

the sacrifice of oxen and cows are laid down, but we are even told what kind and description of oxen and cows are to be offered to what deities. . . Further, he adds, "the correct view is that the testimony of the Satapatha Brahmana and the Apastamba Dharma Sutra in so far as it supports the view that Hindus were against cow-killing and beef eating, are merely exhortations against the excesses of cow-killing and not prohibitions against cow-killing." (Ambedkar, 180)

Another instance in the story is the conversation between Remya Nair and Susan Emmanuel regarding C. P. Gopala Menon, who is accused of calling Kappakutty a Dalit by his caste name (prohibited by the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1999). The attempt of Murder is the first independent case advocated by Sangeetha Namboothiri.

"Along with the accusation of calling a Dalit by his caste name, murder attempt has also been charged. What was his name?"

"C. P. Gopala Menon," replied Remya.

"Ahha...Whoever it is, he will be reprimanded for ten years in jail."

...

"The petition was filed by a man named Kappakutty, a fisherman by Caste. Gopala Menon used to transport cement and bricks needed to construct his house through Kappakutty's field. He could have used the

main road, which is not that far away. However, he was still adamant about using Kappakutty's field. Unable to resist the commotion of lorries and tractors through his field, Kappakutty blocked Menon's way."

Then what? Remya's mind fumed with fury and anxiety.

He is a lower caste man. Menon did not like his attitude. He screamed "Pulayan's son" with all the fist and fury he could gain.

Then he beat Kappakutty using a stick that was lying there. The attempt of Murder.

God knows!

Unable to believe the story, Remya moved the glass of Jeera water towards Susan.

Menon of her dreams after swearing Kappakutty left the place through the main road, never to return to Kappakutty's field.

"A menon cannot be this cruel!"

"You will only say this." Susan placed the glass tumbler with a thud. "Both Nairs and Menon's belong to the same category." (Echikkanam 4)

Later in the story, we see Sangeetha Namboothiri saying that she will free Gopala Menon by proving that he did not call Kappakutty by his caste name.

"What is meant by Plum?"

Susan has not heard that word before. She looked at Remya. Neither did she.

"Plum means ground. That is the field." Sangeetha continued.

"One who works in Pulam (field) is Pulayan. Menon did not call Kappakutty by his caste name. Rather he called him the son who worked in Pulam (field)."

Susan thought for a while. She could not think of a law point to substantiate Sangeetha's statement. The court does not need to consider her words. (Echikkanam, 9)

The real world is formed out of our experiences. It is through language that we try to project ourselves to the world. The difference in perception is meted out to the world through language. The prejudiced historical categorizations of the society based on one's Caste and culture are projected to the world using language. Thus, by calling someone using their caste name, we are trying to ascertain a particular type of identity and thereby confine that individual within the boundaries of a fixed category.

Here, we could see that the notion of categorizing a person using their profession has later taken the form of Caste. Also, the setting of the story is a court. Here, the arguments are more of the form of rhetoric used for its own sake and not dialogic. Even the thought of Sangeetha to substantiate the fact that his caste name is not caste name,

but rather his profession, falls under this form. According to Buber, dialogue takes place between two whole beings. Here there is no means of meaningful dialogue by the characters. It is mainly oriented toward their belief in an individual's identity as defined by one's Caste.

Don't you know Rukmini? She was a star in our university, said Sangeetha.

How can we not know her? Amidst being brilliant in academics, she has all sorts of trash like feminism, Dalit empowerment, etc.

Also, Rukmini has hatred towards us, High caste people. Added Susan.

What.. . What did you say, High Class? Remya interfered: We are Namboothiris and Nairs. When did Suriyanis (Syrian Christians) become High class? "My Kothamangalam grandma knows sufficient local History. We are converts from Namboothiris."

Remya laughed: So, you too know sufficient History to survive!

...

"Rukmini has some inferiority complex towards high caste people. She will not spoil a chance to trick us, high caste people." Said Sangeetha. (Echikkanam, 6)

Who knew that Rukmini would trap Sathish Varma with love!

...

Even though there were many lower caste people of marriageable age groups in the civil station, why did Rugmini fall in love with Sathish Varma, a high caste?

Sathish Varma answered that being in love is blind to differences.

Remya however, ignored the clichéd response and thought of another response.

"That is not the reason. On receiving educational and social benefits, lower castes have started to aspire like high caste people." (Echikkanam 8)

Another conversation between Sathish Varma and Remya Nair further sheds light on how the caste system is ingrained in the concept of marriage.

"I made a mistake in Rukku's case. It is almost like I am trapped. I am trying to get out of this. It is impossible to erase what Caste has laid upon one's destiny. It is always better to look for a partner from one's Caste. Why rebel against norms preached by our elders." (Echikkanam, 8)

Here, Remya perceives certain sections of society as low Caste, and she treats it as if it is a God-given permanent liability. Her words reflect her sense of perception of others. By saying that the low Caste tries to be like the high Caste, she echoes the usual societal sentiment that has

set the tag of high Caste as the ultimate superior status to be caught hold of.

Even her perception of the concept of love is confined within the boundaries of Caste. She thinks it is not natural to marry outside one's Caste. In her perception, Caste confines one to love and marry someone only from their Caste. Anything that one does contrary to this perception is not natural and is considered purposeful as if it is done for achieving the status of superior Caste.

According to Ambedkar, "Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind. Therefore, the destruction of Caste does not mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change." Untouchability is a form of discrimination that target people because of their descent. (Annihilation of Caste, 220)

The exponential decay of the radioactive atom of Caste means that Brahminism is practiced not just by the Brahmin against the Kshatriya or the Vaishya against the Shudra, or the Shudra against the Untouchable, but also by the Untouchable against the Unapproachable, the Unapproachable against the Unseeable. It means there is a quotient of Brahminism in everybody, regardless of which Caste they belong to. It is the ultimate means of control. The concept of pollution and purity and the perpetuation of social and physical violence—an inevitable part of administering an oppressive hierarchy—is

not just outsourced but implanted in everybody's imagination, including those at the bottom. It is like an elaborate enforcement network in which everybody polices everybody else. (The Doctor and the Saint, 36)

Towards the story's climax, Remya Nair arranges for a *panthibhojanam* to arrive at a compromise for C. P. Gopala Menon's case.

"When you come tomorrow, bring Mambazhapulliseri. It is my order. Good night"

The next day Sangeetha Namboothiri came with the Mambazo publisher and three-year-old special kadumanga.

After some time, Susan came with a tiffin carrier more significant than the usual one. The smell of authentic Christian dishes filled the air.

"Today, we have two more guests," Susan said.

Who all are they? Susan closed the tiffin and looked at Susan.

"That Dalit, your opposite party. Rukkumani. We have arranged for this feast to add spice to your future hearing. Your mambazha publisher, my mappaz . . . we had to beg before Varma to bring Rugmini to the table."

...

"Sangee, do not tell this to anyone else . . . Sathish Varma has decided to let go of

Rugmini after this case," Susan whispered to Sangeetha.

...

In half an hour, different types of food filled the table in the Bar Association Hall. Remya initiated the conversation by sharing her *aviyal* with everyone. Since Rugmini's love had already told her about the discussion, it was not much difficult to convince her. Sangeetha poured her *mambazhapulliseri* onto Rugmini's rice per a friend's advice. Similarly, Rugmini shared her *chettu* with Antharjanam. Both of their hands touched, evoking a reverberating handshake. (Echikkanam, 11)

What follows is the hearing, "Gopala Menon is acquitted!"

Remya then details a little bit of History while accepting the *mappaz* brought by Susan.

"A feast of this kind happened in 1917." Remya smiled: "In our *Sahadoran Ayyappan's* house compound." There was a historical event where around 200 people had their food and two people like our Rukkumani. By that, Ayyappan was out of the Caste. To be honest, Sathish Varma is today's Ayyappan."

Remya smiled at Susan mischievously and added, "If

we compare this feast with that one, this is not an ordinary feast but a revolutionary act. Isn't it advocate!?"

Rukmini moved her head in affirmation. Sangeetha shared her opinion on Rugmini's food: "Very Tasty."

What followed is that they had the kheer brought by Sathish Varma, and in the climax, Rugmini leaves the place along with Sathish Varma, and Sangeetha Namboothiri is seen vomiting in the toilet.

"Fragments of chettu been kept floating in the wash basin. Remya patted her back. "It is because you ate something, not of your interest."

After Remya left the place, Sangeetha tried to wipe out the breathless chettu been out of the basin. (Echikkanam, 14)

Here, there is a reference to *Panthibhojanam*, a community feast that happened in 1917 under the leadership of Ayyappan. He organized a *MisraBhojanam*, a feast where people of all castes sat and dined under one roof, at the house of Ayyappan's nephew, Raman Pillai, on May 30, 1917, a revolutionary venture during those days, and the conservative Eezhava community opposed it. Around 200 people, including members representing the Pulaya caste, considered untouchable, attended the feast. The effort earned him the moniker

Pulaya Ayyappan; meant to be derogatory, Ayyappan accepted it as a decoration.

Here, Remya arranges for the feast, realizing that a community feast will make Rugmini realize that they are not in agony with her and thereby compromise Menon's case. And that happened. Gopala Menon was left free by the court because Rugmini accepted the compromise deal. The climax is mentioned, where Sangeetha Namboothiri is seen vomiting after Rugmini leaves the place.

Ramya Nair, who often mixes politics and History in her dialogues, once talks about this. She also talks about Yogakshema Sabha and V T Bhattathirippad. Decades after their revolution, Ramya's final comment is still significant in the light that all *panthibhojanams* recorded in History have the lower class have the food usually eaten by the upper caste.

Food as Identity when Viewed through the Lens of Caste.

Quoting Ambedkar, "Another plan of action for the abolition of Caste is, to begin with, inter caste dinners. This also, in my opinion, is an inadequate remedy. Many castes allow inter-dining. However, it is a common experience that interdining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of Caste and the consciousness of Caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin. Unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by Caste

will not vanish. Among the Hindus, intermarriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Marriage is an ordinary life incident where society is already well knit by other ties. However, where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy for breaking Caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste. There can be only one answer to this question, and it is that inter-dining and intermarriage are repugnant to the beliefs and dogmas which the Hindus regard as sacred." (Annihilation of Caste, 218)

Through the story, we understand how one's perception of others is oriented through the lens of Caste. Even though it is an artificial social institution, it remains intact despite efforts by reformers. The caste system has become ingrained in people's minds that even food finds Caste attached. In this story, we get an idea about how the caste system enslaves an individual; birth, marriage, food, death, and whatnot.

By reflecting on the idea of Caste through food, it gives a universal idea about how Caste is ingrained in even the necessities of human beings. Even a revolutionary Nambudiri who relishes the beef fry from a Christian kitchen cannot stomach the fish curry from the Dalit home. It gives the idea that all are slaves of the caste system. However, all the enslaved people were not equal in status. Rather than accept the fact that the world is plural in its

ways, these kinds of prejudiced categories limit another person's subjectivity to a single, artificial category and limit the possibilities of their freedom and existence.

According to Buber, there are two attitudes with which man can interact. I-It and I-Thou. The world as the experience belongs to the word pair I-It, and that of relation belongs to the pair I-Thou. Thus, to acknowledge and exist harmoniously with the plural world, we have to consider the other as a subject and accept his subjecthood. Without It, a human being cannot live. Nevertheless, whoever lives only with 'It' is not human." (Buber, 186)

The post-communist Kerala is believed to have a shared space which includes the differences. The tea shops ate away the castes, or so were thought. However, in the light of modern theories and postmodern socio-political scenarios, these have to be reread. Now it is 'Ask not caste, speak not caste; it has to be endured'. *Panthibhojanam* is a poignant reminder that Kerala society retains part of the old caste system despite its cultural and social advancements.

Conclusion

The stories, geographical boundaries, and representative identification are considered categories of comparison resulting from difference, without considering difference as a mode of being and the relation between things, objects, and entities. In the first story, *Biriyani*, there is the othering of perceiving the migrants from other states based on

their geographical location. In the second story, *Panthibhojanam*, there is othering based on representative identity; castes. Perceiving human beings within the confines of a particular identity reduces that being into sameness, as synthesized unity. It excludes difference, which is the essence of the plural world.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, a literary work puts forward a search and discovery. "That said, this does not signify that every search and every discovery are of equal interest. Each of us expresses the entire world, agreed, but he expresses it implicitly. It can be in the mode of ignorance or through mystifications – he can be mystified – or in the mode of alienation. There are many ways of expressing the world, some of which cannot be made explicit to reveal the truth to us." (Beauvoir, 203)

The search and discovery that should help the reader to understand the world better is the defining feature of Literature. "To understand is to make sense of what is presented to consciousness. Understanding is primarily the apprehension of relations, more specifically integrative relations. I think Literature attempts to restore understanding to experience. More accurately, it attempts to restore and enhance the integrity of experience and the awareness of its significance, which constitutes understanding. Literature activates understanding or creates the conditions for reflective understanding. The scope of perception is enlarged, and contact with

reality is renewed through a new event of understanding, which enriches our experience. Such enrichment of experience is a source of deep creative satisfaction, and this satisfaction is the most valuable gift of Literature. (Sayeed)

A literary writer uses his singular experience to write Literature. It becomes universal because the readers share the experiential aspect of language and the world they are situated about it. Thus, it enables us to provide a new understanding of the situations we are already familiar with as humans. "I believe that literature's task is to safeguard what is human in man from technocrats and bureaucrats and reveal the world in its human dimension, that is to say as it is disclosed to individuals at once connected and separated." (Beauvoir, 206) To conclude, Literature provides us with the privilege of experiencing the Other. We are all embodied consciousness and thus singular in our perception. It is through language that we project ourselves to the world. Literature helps us see the varied number of perceptions through its peculiar use of language. Thus, it helps us know about the plurality of the world, which is plural because of the varied number of perceptions. Thus, the attempt in Literature is to understand and engage with a difference as a mode of being and relation rather than confine different entities to the concept of identity, which is sameness and contrary to the concept of difference.

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