

A Critique on Secular Modernity in S Joseph's Poems "My Sister's Bible" and "Identity Card"

Krishnakripa A. K.

M. A. English (2019 July passed out),
Post Graduate and Research Department of English
Govt. Victoria College Palakkad, Kerala
Email: krishnakrishoct17@gmail.com

Abstract: *Democracy envisions secularism and which brings out modernist as well as liberal attitudes in all spheres. Although secularism results in modernity, in the pretext of Dalit subjugation, modernity disguises into pseudo secular modernity through the hidden Hindhutva 'ideologies.'* This paper attempts to do a critique on pseudo secular modernity in S Joseph's poems titled "My Sister's Bible" and "Identity Card". Being a forerunner of Dalit poetry in Kerala, S Joseph portrays the nuances of pseudo secular modernity through his poems.

Key Words: *Caste, Dalit literature, Modernity, Public Sphere, Secular modernity, Subalterns.*

In recent discussions of modernity, a controversial issue has been whether we do have a secular modernity. On the one hand, some argue that this is the real modernity irrespective of any kind of social evils. On the other hand, others argue that what we have is a fake secular modernity. Dalit literature plays a crucial role in questioning the very notion of secular modernity. Within the vast arena of Dalit literature, poetry as a genre have a greater significance in mapping the pseudo secular modernity in a nutshell. In the works of poets like S Joseph and Sunny Kavikkad, a critique on fake secular modernity is visible. In the poems of S Joseph titled, "My Sister's Bible" and "Identity Card", poet portrays the nuances of the hypocrisy of the caste system and the sufferings of the subalterns. Though I concede that in this postmodern age, things change every now and then, I still maintain that all these changes are not something really new but are the changes in disguise of the existing ones. For example, even though the patriots of the state speak about the secular modernity devoid of caste and racial inequalities but unfortunately it operates through different veiled ways. This paper attempts to analyse how the poems of S Joseph titled "My Sister's Bible" and "Identity Card" offer a critique of secular modernity.

S Joseph can be considered as the forerunner of post-modern Malayalam Dalit poetry. The poet makes his own native tongue a unique weapon as a means of protest and resistance to the hegemonic upper class caste privileges. His poems are rich in subtle satires along with the explicit criticisms against the upper class as well as caste hypocrisies.

The poet ties the poem "My Sister's Bible" within the haves and have not's of society and the very idea of holiness is questioned with the image of Bible as a place to keep personal documents:

This is what my sister's Bible has:
a ration-book come loose,
a loan application form,
a card from the cut-throat money-lender,
the notices of feasts
in the church and the temple,
a photograph of my brother's child,
a paper that says how to knit a baby cap,
a hundred-rupee note,
an SSLC book.

This is what my sister's Bible doesn't have:
the preface,
the Old Testament and the New,

maps,
the red cover.

From these lines itself it is quite evident that the “sister” keeps the Bible as a substitute for a document storage space. The one who has an ardent belief in Christianity can’t even imagine the holy Bible without:

the preface,
the Old Testament and the New,
maps,
the red cover.

The poet might have tried to explicate the hypocritical nature of religion as well as the hollowness of religion through the very image of Bible. The fate of the subalterns even after converting to Christianity are not free from marginalisation in the name of “converted” Christians. Likewise, the case of the lower class or dalit people cannot be altered or heightened to a mainstream level all on a sudden with a Bible in their hands. If the dalits convert to Christianity in order to get rid off from the societal evils in the name of caste and class, unfortunately they are not free from those marginalisation. All they might have to go through would be another level within the Christian community in the name of “converted” ones. Their situation is more similar to the sister’s Bible which does not even look like a Bible in its initial appearance, as it lacks some things which makes it a Bible.

The Bible can be seen as a symbol of pseudo secular modernity in the poem. The Bible and its religion still propagates their vision and mission of expanding their strength by acting as a saviour figure by provoking the lower class and gradually converting them to Christianity. Probably, the owner of the Bible in this poem would be such a person who had a dalit past. The Bible cannot be considered as a simple book for those ardent believers of Christianity but a means of salvation and a text loaded with utmost holiness. The poet may be uprooting the sister from her indigenous environment to a very new life where the people around her concretises the have and have not culture into a traumatic level. If so, the Bible can be seen as an agent of traumatic materialism in the poem. A kind of acculturation and adaptation happens in the case of sister in order to be part of the mainstream and the “civilised”.

As far as the lower classes are concerned, it would be not a big deal to change their religion in order to enjoy the privileges that they were once denied to them. The missionary workers find the conversion of the lower classes very easy through sheer preaching and teaching of their “goodness”. It is all under the label of ‘helping’ the lower classes to escape from the clutches of hunger and poverty. So, only a true Christian with the true Christian lineage becomes a man of higher privilege and power with the arrival of the ‘converted’ ones. Therefore, only a true believer can internalise the holiness of the Bible as a divine source of wonder and admiration what a converted Christian (especially a Dalit covert) cannot ever acquire.

The poet also hints the very marginalising attitude of the Christian community towards the converted ones from the Dalit community. In a way, the poet may be trying to give a voice and identity to the downtrodden class in the form of Bible. But the presence of sister’s personal documents play a vital role in creating a unique identity to the woman, although they rest under the shade of Bible.

S Joseph makes a highly satirical remark through the very holy Bible which is meant to treat everyone equally. By converting the text as a storage space for documents, poet reveals the very hypocritical nature of Christianity towards the converted Christians. Although, the ID proof in the Bible can be considered as the poet’s attempt to make a voice to the voiceless, he simultaneously pricks out the hypocritical as well as the saviour syndrome of the religion.

Like “My Sister’s Bible”, S Joseph’s “Identity Card” also offers a critique on secular modernity through the prejudices and inequalities in the name of caste. Though the ID card is something which emphasizes one’s identity in a motley crowd, the poet uses it as a tool or literary technique in order to present his idea. The poet here explicitly portrays how an ID card can transform a person’s identity into entirely different level. To be precise, into a more tarnishing level.

In my student days
a girl came laughing.
Our hands met kneading
her rice and fish curry.
On a bench we became
a Hindu-Christian family.

I whiled away my time
reading Neruda's poetry;
and meanwhile I misplaced
my identity card.
I noticed, she said
returning my card:
the account of your stipend
is entered there in red.
These days I never look at
a boy and a girl lost in themselves.
They will depart after a while.
I won't be surprised even if they unite.
Their identity cards
won't have scribblings in red.

K. Satchidanandan being the translator, gives a note on stipend: a reference to the stipends disbursed by the government for students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

This is a really dangerous situation as far as a "secular" society is concerned. What we see is a context a school through the poet's imagination. It clearly indicates that the prejudices and preconceived notions regarding caste and casteism begins from places like this in the very young age of students. Though a school is a space which put forwards the idea of public sphere, it is the situations like this which gives impetus to the developments of counter and subaltern public spheres.

It is a matter of great concern that our system has no corrective mechanisms to burn out similar tendencies or the State would be behind the Hindutva agenda of annihilation of the lower castes. So, all similar acts and attitudes regarding the caste privileges might be part of the elite Hindutva agendas and their ways to set a religious hegemony in the country. Its ramifications are omnipresent in the current scenario.

Therefore there is nothing to be surprised while witnessing embarrassing situations like this where a place which is meant to propagate communal and cultural harmony turns out to be a different place which soon propagate communal violence in the name of caste and religion. So, a symbolical analysis would reinforce the meaning of 'red' coloured 'scribblings' in the ID card in the light of communal violence.

The ID card in the poem is not simply an image in the poem but serves the purpose as a text. So, the poet hides a 'text' inside his 'work' (poem). Thus, the poem turns out to be a wonder of postmodernist literary techniques like metafiction. Being a living writer and as a Professor of Malayalam literature in Maharajas College in Kochi, S Joseph vividly portrays the very nuances of societal hypocrisies in the name of caste through the medium of an ID card. As a forerunner of Dalit poetry in Malayalam, S Joseph offers a critique on the pseudo secular modernity of the State and thus creates a voice for the "voiceless".

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