

THE SPACE OF ETHICS AND THE ETHICS OF 'POLITICAL' IN M. SUKUMARAN'S STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical constructions and contestations of 'what is ethical' is very much connected to the parallel, yet more deviant question of 'what is political'. To paraphrase Alain Badiou, this troubling question raises more 'combinational paradigms' of underscoring what is political rather than what is ethical. In this paper, I will look at the Malayalam modern writer M. Sukumaran's stories to highlight this problematic paradigm of understanding the ethical and the role of the narrative that situates/explicates the same. More than any other modern writer in Malayalam, Sukumaran's stories are overtly political. Most of his stories aim to create a space for the marginalized, the ones that never map in the geographical and political territory of the state and the succinct way by which the gender disequilibrium is carried out in the society. Sukumaran breaks the parameters of the naturalistic tradition of Malayalam by posing the question of the engagement of the 'ethical' with the subject formation and interconnected subjectivities. His characters, far from being prey to the circumstances, also become the constantly differentiated and understood people as the plane of their discourse changes always with various readings.

Keywords: Ethics, politics, witness, subject, discourse

Modern Malayalam writing has in it ethics operating at two important levels: the concern of the subject as the ethically coherent and inescapable one when we look at the need of the expression and the political context in which the idea of 'being ethical' is implanted. Both these expressions are seriously contested as the philosophical assumptions of the ethics are more wide and multiple. As in all regional writing in India, the rise of modernism in Malayalam, to certain extent coincided with the colonial grid from which the writing took its shape and the fall of any rigid system in which the subject of literature finds its expression. The rise of modernism in Malayalam literature while owing a lot to the translation of western literatures and cultures, also need to be located in the precincts of the rise of the public sphere, birth of the bourgeois individualism, the unequal division of wealth among the Kerala citizens, marginalization of the lower class, the array of the unemployed youth and the disintegration of the family situations. Theorizing the modernity in Malayalam literature involves the task of reinterpreting and rehistoricising the

changing patterns of the Malayali culture in the post 1950s and the various discourses connected to the evolution of a new subjecthood.

Ethics is first and foremost a philosophical conception. This is connected to the expression of the self in the society, the platforms of the self and the level of internalizing the 'other', the question of morality connected with individuals, the issue of the choice, the role of the agent to internalize what the moral code provides and further the exemplification of one's social status. Right from the time of Aristotle, different dimensions of ethics was carved by thinkers and philosophers together. The crucial distinction of ethics was provided by Immanuel Kant. Kant observes : " In law a man is guilty when he violates the rights of others. In ethics he is guilty if he only thinks of doing so" (Kant, 2000:123) However, to take introspection, the Kantian categories and moral precepts were very much challenged while acknowledging its relevance for repositioning ethics in our time. The question of the moral conduct, the level of participation in any social index and the culmination of human behavior are the key elements of looking at the question of ethics in the post- Kantian phase. This also implies that the post-Kantian phase is riven with a series of contradictions as the notion of ethics is both subjectified and taken as the discourse at a personal realm. The relationship between the personal and the public matters a lot in the reconstitution of ethics at the moral plane. The question of an 'ethical community', therefore, is as difficult to postulate as the 'ethical literature' or literatures of ethics. While this debate is endless in its theoretical formulations, the practical implications of ethics are understood by the act of the agent in the society. In Kautilya's *Arthashastra* , we come across the rules codified for the practical realm of man. Later in the Gandhian social tenets also we encounter a moral sphere of activity, which more than a social act, move toward the realms of an ethical plane. Literature, irrespective of the fact that, written in any continent and country is open to all the codes and conducts of the public act of enunciation and rearticulation of the morals. Sometimes, this may serve as the other of what the writer intends to work on; at other times, its implications are wide enough to engulf all acts of interpretation.

In modern Malayalam literature, there has always been a shift from the public to the personal. This shift was primarily a shift from the expression of everything in literature of modernism from the public to the internalization of what the inner world of the writer is all about. Moreover, this shift needs to be understood from modernism's internal combination of act of resistance and the act of incorporation. While in most of the Indian regional languages, literature needs to be understood as an act of resistance, it is equally true that modern literature tended toward recouping many things from the tradition

and other spheres by submerging into the act of involving writing with the social sphere and appropriating what it has generalized. Modern literature, therefore, is the involvement of the personal into the space of engaging in the public domain, where personal many times can become a powerful tool of resistance. P.P.Raveendran observes: "It may not be possible, either theoretically or in terms of a cohesive methodology, to carry forward a sustained argument in support of the presence of an ontologically related body of knowledge with a shared discursive history called Indian literature" (Raveendran, 2009: 28). As Raveendran's arguments may elucidate, it becomes difficult for all of us to think and reimagine a particular point of the evolution of Indian literature as well as modernism in Indian literature. While this is true with all Indian languages, the collective body of modern literature in the Indian context also is the one that needs lot of rethinking. In Malayalam particularly, the works of K Balamani Amma, M.T. Vasudevan Nair on the one hand are examples of creating a separate sense of modernism by their adherence to a particular social aesthetics that negated modernism. The powerful impact of modernism in Malayalam began by the socio-realist writings of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and Kesavadev. These writers created a space of the public very much internalized in the wanderings, struggles and opinions of the individual turned against all social customs. However, the next generation turned the switch of writing from the public to the private with notable exceptions like Anand where the public resurfaces as the domain of all discourse. This includes writers such as O.V.Vijayan, M. Mukundan, Zacharia, Sethu and Anand. M. Sukumaran follows this footsteps with a remarkable difference. Sukumaran's turn is not to reclaim the modern agenda as the ultimate in Malayalam writing; on the other hand, that was meant to restructure the struggles in the individual, particularly the dispossessed within the social milieu. Sukumaran kept the glass open for reflection to the society where all ideologies and promises fell blindly and the turn of the blind mass toward the party politics also evaporated in the air without offering a bright tomorrow. This intense phase of modernism in Malayalam writing was experimented by very few writers- P.K.Nanu, U.P.Jayaraj, and relatively few more including M. Sukumaran. The question of ethics here operates at two levels: on the one hand, this asks the question of the writer's social responsibility by putting the issue of moral rights and on the other, this exposes the deviance of modernism from the stringent assumption of its "newness". Ethics here questions the 'newness' attributed to language, class, caste and orientation. Ethics no more serves as the philosophically right word for a correct life, but this works as the mechanism where correction as an act of moral duty is put into question in literatures.

Set against the backdrop of intense political strifes in Kerala as well as in India involving the trade unions against the landlords, bourgeois class, bureaucrats and the internal divisions within the working class, Sukumaran's collection *Chuvanna Chihnangal* (Red Signs) exposes the nature of the Kerala citizen compelled to live a life of faithlessness, dejection and utter poverty. The *a priori* set up of these stories is the post-independent Kerala politics, particularly the post- 60s politics where the public life in Kerala underwent a radical change. The promises given to the labour class very soon turned out to be fallacious and the new generation or the new class among the trade union leaders turned out to be the new capitalists in the god's own country. The story "Ashritharute Aakasham" (The Sky of the Dependents) is an exposition of the cruel irony of the existence of a labourer who becomes the prey to the inner dynamism of capitalism and the corporate world. The character in the story expresses his homage to the death of P.K., the person who tells him how to be an obedient worker under the owner. His cremation is an ethical act where he becomes the witness. "The cemetery was on the hillside. The pit they had dug was not that deep as their heads were swirling in the intoxication of arrack. If a strong rain comes, the upper layer of sand will wash away and the dead body can be seen. The eagles will swoop down and peck. The foxes after tearing it will deposit the bones at different places. Since this is an unknown body, I didn't have the courage to express such anxieties to the Municipal workers who were drunken louts" (Sukumaran, 2004: 12). This passage is an example of the anxiety of the local worker toward the safe burial of a dead body. His ethics is deeply entrenched in his thoughts of expressing something; but refuses due to the nature of the man who led a life of seclusion. The visibility of the body, here is also the visibility of the danger and derision. If the body would be seen by others, it may evoke a sense of derision. Sukumaran creates the space of the Municipal cemetery as the place of deliberate and hidden discourse of the body. The unnamed character in this story very soon sacrifices his ideas and thinking for the sake of Krishnaveni, his wife and his son. He changes the job and becomes the representative of another company under a new master. His sacrifice also turns out to be the sacrifice of his morals. Sidelining Krishnaveni, he becomes a prey to Aani, a seductress who treats him with drinks and cigarettes. The internal conflicts within this unnamed narrator turn out to be the survival mechanism when the city and the people failed to recognize him and buy his products. Further, when Krishnaveni accidentally comes up in a company meeting, dressed in full attire, the narrator fails to recognize her and later shoots at her. His testimony before the police that he did not like her dress and behavior while she wanted to reclaim him had

provoked him is the final break of his ethical platform of a moral living. He further claims that he loved her throughout his life as she was his wife also opens up the platform of 'ethicality' in conjunction with his act of murder. While lying down inside the lock up, he thinks: "Not even a single ant didn't pain me. I had seen the different ways of solving the crimes in a week. The police which does that became the engines of closing eyelids, beedi smoking and saluting. They wandered inside the station with their blood shot eyes. The wailing cry of the humans out of pain would be falling in their ears like music. Having seen those body tortures daily, I discovered a principle full of selfishness for myself. Man can be killed by throttling or by shooting. But he shouldn't be killed like this inch by inch. The pins, sticks from the coconut leaves, chinks of blade, ruler are not made to kill man" (Sukumaran, 2004: 33). The central question arising here is whose ethics are we likely to protect and maintain? The unnamed narrator's moral disposition to the job and the survival instincts, and later the murdering of Krishnaveni all imply the non-ethical platform of his ethical world. Before his tragic death in the hospital, he realizes that his son and Dhanapalan's son are arrested for attacking the owner under whom he was working. What needs to be underlined is the fact that Dhanapalan was another owner who committed suicide as his company business was collapsing. The systems in collapse and the alignment of the owner-labourer networks create the ethics of the post-60s Kerala society in confusions. The intertwining discourse of the owner and labourer is the one of perpetual confrontation and collusion.

In "Udayam Kaanan Urakkamozhichavar" (Those who didn't sleep to see the Rise), Sukumaran conflates the feelings of a group of young revolutionaries, their activities and aspirations. Written from the perspective of constant dialogues between members in the youth, this story has the canvas of students, government employees, the press and those who live in isolation. The story mixes up the public realm and the private through a series of juxtapositions. The revolutionary in this story P.L. has the existential crisis when he thinks about what to be done and how things need to be revolutionized. Sukumaran writes: "P.L. asked himself. There mayn't be any other doubt popping up in the head of the comrade. Don't worry Comrade. When the net falls on me, the story of the river where I floated and the mountain crags will remain with me as organs without life. It's a light for me the realization that some of my predecessors had worked hard to become traitors. In that light, my followers can travel. Bravely" (Sukumaran, 2004: 241). The question here is not the one of uneasiness a revolutionary is having with his times of capture and surrendering to the powers of administration; but the one of self- choice. This self- choice, that is one day he will become

a traitor, is what marks his identity. Looking at the nature of ethics and the subject's dependence, Barbara Johnson comments, "...if ethics is defined in relation to the potentially violent excesses of the subject's power, then that power is in reality being presupposed and reinforced in the very attempt to undercut it. What is being denied from the outset is the subject's lack of power, its vulnerability and dependence" (Johnson, 2000: 48). The revolutionary P.L.'s decision to become a traitor to the movement is an ethical choice as we see his contemporaries are drawn into that either by choice or by compulsion. The clash between the state of dependence and the state of autonomy, as we see in Barbara Johnson's comments, is exemplified here. But in P.L.'s case, more than Johnson's notion of 'subject's power', his casual observation of what he is or where the movement goes is typically noteworthy. Kerala's left movements and its failure to offer all the needy the wanted is highlighted here as the subject's ethical question; not as 'vulnerability'.

Toward the end of this story we see P.L. going to see another comrade from whom he thinks he will get some contribution for the running of the revolutionary magazine. To his surprise, P.L. meets the comrade who had changed completely and studies for a departmental test. P.L.'s dialogue, "the wasted moments would be important for a careerist" (Sukumaran, 2004:249) is his realization that he alone is left in this world to think and lead the revolution. His doubts also testify to this statement as he thinks himself as the agent who is employed to betray his fellow beings. This doubtful platform of ethics is what creates the divided modern sensibility in Malayalam literature. Abandoning the former comrade walking on the road, P.L.'s mental conditions are described by Sukumaran : "Comrades, I don't have any enmity toward any one of you. At a critical juncture, you all will be with us. That is for certain. That is history." (Sukumaran, 2004: 249). This internal monologue, if we can use that dramatic term, is the crux of the revolutionary ethics of P.L. where he encounters in daily life a number of comrades who have shrunk from the revolutionary activities and have turned out to be the careerists in the Kerala society. At the same time, P.L. does not want to end his dreams of the revolution as he consoles himself in the empty future of its coming. The fervor of revolution and the internal dynamics of the ethically shrunken society of Kerala, as shown in Adoor Gopalakrishnan's film *Mukhamukham* (Face to Face) is becoming the core of Sukumaran's stories. P.L.'s ethics is not the one of abandoning what he believes and make him the object of another movement. His ethics is the belief that he is existing, a contra- dynamic articulation of the Kantian postulate by sacrificing the moral conduct. While in Kantian ethics, we have no alternatives provided, the modern Malayalam story through M. Sukumaran asks the counter- mechanism of stationing oneself

in the valueless society to create some values or rather to search something while everything is vapourising.

“Kunjappuvinte Duswapnangal” (The Nightmares of Kunjappu) is perhaps the most deviant and politically radical story written by M. Sukumaran. This is the story of the rag picker called Kunjappu who has no land, place and identity in the space of his search for the thrown outs. Haunted by the police and dogs, his life is thrust on the pedestal of his own survival, however crucial that may appear before him. His life reminds us Walter Benjamin's famous statement, “the rag picker is the most provocative figure of human misery” (Benjamin, 2007: 262). Set from one corner of the street to another, the rag picker does not have any staticity. He becomes the condemned for all and he stumbles before all structures of power. Kunjappu in Sukumaran's story is such a figure who does not have any place to stay or move around. In his meanderings, he reaches a public space where people have thronged and raise slogans as the counting of the election takes place. He is appointed temporarily by a shop keeper to clean glasses and serve the people who come to the shop. His observations become the plethora of what happens in the surroundings as far as the situation there finds doubly dangerous for his own existence due to the cacophony and the imminent danger of the police lathi charge approaching. Sukumaran analyses the rag picker's mental tensions: “All roads are filled with people. They may be coming here to find out who had won. Though strange, Kunjappu also is here. But he is waiting there not to know the results of the election. It is Appuvannan who had made him stand there. His head is filled with old and useless objects. His dreams flourish in the market place where the old objects are bought and sold” (Sukumaran, 2004: 138). This observation is relevant when we look at the difficult situation of the rag picker and his/her role in any democratic system. The ethics in operation here is the one that looks the citizenry, public space, the voice of the underprivileged and the lack of articulation of those who are condemned to live a life of perpetual danger.

Nowhere in any democratic system, the ethics of the rag picker is not heard or articulated. The reason behind this can be the multitude where in he/she has to live a life of the dispossessed. But apart from being a citizen who lives the life of an animal, this non-represented ethicality gives the rag picker some power of observation, as Sukumaran's Kunjappu shows. The lathi charge that follows the announcement of the election results and the destruction of Appuvannan's shop and the consequent hospitalization of Kunjappu and Appuvannan clearly indicates the dangerous and paradigmatic nature of anarchy embedded in the very democratic electioneering process. Kunjappu looks at Appuvannan's pathetic situation inside the hospital and forgets about

the money he owes him for serving him. While thrown again into the open ground, Kunjappu decides to get his abandoned sack. While going back with the sack, Kunjappu finds a load of trunks arranged inside a lorry. He finds out from another boy that these boxes are the 'ballot boxes'. His doubt is centered on the idea that with what metal are these boxes made of. The last line of the story is, "If it is iron, one day it will rust; this rag picker who doesn't have the conscience, education and the right to vote also may be knowing that" (Sukumaran, 2004: 145). Sukumaran offers a powerful critique of the public space and electoral democracy of India by highlighting the desire of Kunjappu. Whose rights are protected by our democracy? Who are its masters and prey? These questions go naturally beyond the philosophical assumptions of ethics. Dorris Sommer comments: "Ethics means demoting the self to strive the Other, to be the hostage object of the Other subject" (Sommer, 2000: 207). What we find in Kunjappu's case is perhaps the other of what Sommer argues as his desires are always met being a rag picker of a particular place; but it is equally true that his ambition to be one with the public never fulfills. Sukumaran carefully mis-matches the ethics of Kunjappu from the "Other" who perpetually create no space for him to enter. The idea that being the subject of democracy, he too has his opinion and ambition is thrown out here. Kunjappu's ethics being the rag picker is to know from which metal the boxes are made of.

The subject of interpretation claims for the reasoning and validity of a 'witness'. In Malayalam modern literature, this act of witnessing is not clearly outlined. The subject which claims to have an ethical content or the political needs to orient itself toward a series of witnessing – as Sukumaran's depiction of Kunjappu suggests, would be rather mere 'absences' in the public sphere. As Margalit Avishai argues, "to become a moral witness one has to witness the combination of evil and the suffering it produces: witnessing only evil or only suffering is not enough" (Avishai, 2002: 148). Sukumaran, on the contrary, seems to suggest this moral witnessing as an act of introspection. The fate of Kunjappu is resonant of the emptying of the space from where a group of jubilation is taken away and consequently the public space turns out to be the inner realm of the reader where in the clash of various power structures and innocents happen. The inevitable recognition of what is ethical is the subjective realization of the subject thrown out from all platforms of participation and as the fate of Kunjappu suggests, that looks at the 'usability' of the material for a day's living.

The relationship of ethics and literature, though interdependent, raises certain fundamental questions. Can literature be a part of ethics that is always morally and philosophically grounded? Can the subjectivity be an ethical

choice? Are there mutually existing characteristics between ethicality and the positioning of the subject? How do we recognize the politics of ethics when we have a series of differences? These questions, though difficult for a serious theoretical postulation, needs to be pondered time and again to analyse the role of literatures in the more modern context. Alain Badiou in his *Ethics* writes: "Every truth as we have seen, despises constituted knowledge, and thus opposes opinions. For what we call opinions are representations without truth, the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge" (Badiou, 2001: 50). Badiou's insistence of finding out truth from the opposition to opinions is indeed a powerful stand that critiques the systems of governance. This perhaps would be the way how one can offer a vehement critique against all representations in literatures also. Literature, no more is an autonomous entity. There are multiple discourses and paradigmatic shifts occurring inside all writing. Therefore, writing too needs to be understood as the mechanism of governance.

As far as Sukumaran's stories are concerned, we come across a shift of the subject from the intense personal suffering – which was a part and parcel of the modern writing in Malayalam to the place/space where the subject undergoes a realization in conjunction with the ethical choice that need to be taken. The subject here is very much political seeking the space of expression. Sukumaran, unlike other modern Malayalam writers such as M.Mukundan, T.R., M.P.NarayanaPilla, Zachariah and others never makes any aesthetic judgment to this subject of dispossession. The role of ethics in politics is very much highlighted in Sukumaran's writings. The writing is the liberation of ethics in which the 'other Malayalee modern sensibility' is couched in. This writing marks, to paraphrase Badiou again "As for the question why the siren come to a stop, immobilized as it is in the ideality of a lack which, for its part, can not come back, to lack, we will not have time to answer it today" (Badiou, 2009: 82). The need of the hour, though idealized differently, becomes the centre in Sukumaran's writings. It is both an ethical choice and an expression of the political as we find this political is what marks the nightmare of modern Kerala making.

(The translations of the stories are by the author of this article only).

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