



Faith, Chains, and Awakening: Caste, Conversion, and Resistance in *Pulayathara*

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Abstract: *The article critically examines the portrayal of caste-based oppression and religious conversion in Pulayathara (1962) by Paul Chirakkaroti, published by Rainbow Publications, Thiruvananthapuram. The novel presents a compelling narrative of Dalit experiences in Kerala, illustrating how conversion to Christianity—often seen as a path to social liberation—fails to eradicate caste discrimination. The objective of this study is to analyze how caste identities persist despite shifts in religious affiliation and to explore the psychological and social resistance of oppressed communities. The research aims to demonstrate that religious conversion did not dismantle the hierarchical structures embedded in Kerala's society; rather, it reshaped caste marginalization under the guise of faith. Using Dalit theory and subaltern studies as the theoretical framework, this analysis delves into how the novel reflects internalized oppression, helplessness, and emerging consciousness among the marginalized. The study incorporates insights from Dalit Epistemology, History, Literature, and Aesthetics by K.K.S. Das (Kerala Language Institute, 2011), and Perspectives on the Oppressed in Malayalam Literature by T.K. Anilkumar (Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2004), as well as Racial Symbols and Contemporary Malayalam Literature by P.V. Sajeew (Progress Books, 2019), to contextualize the resistance in Pulayathara. Through character-driven narratives, the novel critiques religious and social institutions, revealing that structural change must begin with collective awareness and an assertion of rights, not mere spiritual rebirth.*

Keywords: *Dalit Identity, Caste Discrimination, Religious Conversion, Kerala Literature.*

Introduction

The ethnicity, identity, and social consciousness of a community are shaped and reinforced through a collective that preserves its heritage. Consequently, ethnicity inherently possesses a communal character. In Kerala, the caste system and its re-creation have been the reasons behind dividing the people into numerous strands. The caste concept, which evolved based on social and occupational divisions during colonial times, was born during the era of Brahmanical dominance. As a result, the oppressed communities, who were once marginalized, became ostracized and alienated from society. The marginalized oppressed communities, influenced by the ideas and activities of Christian missionaries during the colonial period, converted to Christianity. "The Dalit community that converted to Christianity is a segment of the Dalit people. They are part of the national, ancient community, but religiously they are distinct from the Dalit community, and socially they stand

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apart from the Christian society." (K.K.S. Das, 2011: 322). This observation highlights the reality of the oppressed people's belief that they have moved beyond being considered mere slaves, to being recognized as human beings. The novel 'Pulayathara,' published in 1962 by Paul Chirakkaroti, provides insight into this reality.

The religious conversions promoted by missionaries aimed to uplift the oppressed communities but, in reality, did not nurture or strengthen their caste identity, self-awareness, or pride. Instead, they tended to weaken and diminish them. The oppressed communities in Kerala, who endured severe caste-based discrimination and humiliation, experienced the brutality of caste violence firsthand. After the spread of social and cultural activities by missionaries among these communities, they began to be attracted to Christianity, both individually and collectively. The belief that religious conversion would bring social progress was naturally embedded in these efforts. The oppressed communities in Kerala recognized that caste was based on birth, which determined social hierarchy. They needed no further proof of this. From the post-independence period onwards, the Dalit community in Kerala, with this awareness, was represented by Paul Chirakkaroti. Though many novels depicted the oppressed, 'Pulayathara' stands out as a novel that vividly portrays the true picture of the oppressed people who experienced religious conversions, directly reflecting their realities. This novel emphasizes the unchanging reality that the status of the oppressed does not alter regardless of religion, and it highlights their resistance. The analysis here focuses on the depiction of this resistance within the novel.

After the social and cultural activities of missionaries spread among the oppressed communities, these marginalized groups were attracted to Christianity both individually and collectively. The belief that religious conversion would lead to social progress was naturally embedded within this effort. The oppressed communities in Kerala recognized that caste was based on birth, which determined social hierarchy, and did not need any further proof of this reality. From the period immediately after independence, Paul Chirakkaroti represented this awareness among the oppressed communities. Although many novels depicted the oppressed, 'Pulayathara' stands out as a novel that vividly portrays the true picture of the oppressed people who experienced religious conversions, directly reflecting their lived realities. This novel emphasizes the unchanging truth that a person's status as an oppressed individual does not change regardless of religion. It also explores how oppressed individuals resist and respond to this reality. The focus of this study is on the portrayal and formulation of this resistance within the novel.

The Oppressed People in the Novel

In this novel, two categories of oppressed people are depicted. The first group consists of Pulaya farmers who toil tirelessly in the fields of Kuttanad. The second group includes those among the Pulaya community who have converted to Christianity. While the first group continues to follow the traditional ideas handed down by their ancestors, the second group has abandoned these beliefs and is leading a different life. However, the novel 'Pulayathara' emphasizes that both these groups experience similar discrimination, contempt, and a sense of shame about their identity. Despite their differences in beliefs and lifestyle, their feelings of marginalization and dehumanization are fundamentally alike. The novel suggests that this shared oppression and degradation have sparked some awareness and thoughts against slavery and subjugation within their minds.

By revealing the social conditions of the oppressed at that time, 'Pulayathara' also shows how society constricts and suppresses their lives. The novel underscores the common struggles faced by the oppressed communities and highlights the pervasive nature of social discrimination and the need for awareness and resistance.

Helplessness and Resistance

Through the portrayal of Thavan, the Pulaya, and his son Kandankoran, who are called out in Narayanan Nair's song, the novel depicts a community facing social bondage and the effort to break free from it. Thavan, the Pulaya, is someone who has dedicated his entire life for Narayanan Nair. However, when he feels that he no longer benefits from his labor, a new master is allowed to settle on his land. In no way does Thavan, the Pulaya, have the power to resist this change; he is overwhelmingly helpless. The scene where his friend, Kunjol, is made to live in the pit where Thavan's land has been turned into a burial site is a heartbreaking experience for Thavan.

The idea that one oppressed person can enslave and subjugate another is reflected in the mindset of the master of the household. When all the despair, helplessness, and resentment inside him reach a boiling point, he begins to question whether he can change his condition. But he knows well that he cannot ask anyone for help. As the novel states, these oppressed people can only cry in helplessness when their identities are stripped away and they are made to suffer. Their anger and pain can only be expressed through suffering; they cannot seek justice or change. The novel makes it clear that only through this sense of helplessness can they be transformed—an act driven not by resistance but by their utter powerlessness.

Lack of Awareness and Abandoned Resistance

Thavan, the Pulaya, and his son Kandankoran arrive at the land of their distant relative, the Pallithara Peter, where they are to rest. The person called Kiliyan had converted to Christianity, and that is why he is called Peter. It was on the mission farm (the land of the church) that fresh Christians were accommodated at that time. The local priest suggested that Peter, the convert, be excluded from the last prayer meeting held at the church in Kunnummol, because he had recently become a Christian. The priest, however, was in favor of bringing in Stephen, a convert from the entire community, as an adviser. "Stephen is a good man. He belongs to the entire community. Even if his preaching is a little bad now, it doesn't matter. He need not attend Peleno's sermon," reassures Thomas and others, showing that their comfort in changing religion—though they may change their faith—remains unaffected.

The decision to exclude Peter and favor Stephen reflects the clear mindset that 'changing religion' does not change their social status or suffering. The newly converted Christians feel disappointed about this decision. But they accept that "they have no opinion on these matters. Or, if they do, they do not speak about them. They are merely listeners, nothing more" (p. 40). When the oppressors hold the belief that "they are slaves without opinions," it is the oppressed who are pointed out by 'Pulayathara' as the real slaves—those who remain passive and resigned, lacking awareness or resistance.

Only when he saw the preacher arriving at the monthly gospel meeting did the members, including Pallithara Peter and Outappulayan, realize that Peter the preacher was not the same as the others. Peter felt as if his heart had stopped beating. As a committee member, he was humiliated for the

first time in his life. He felt ashamed and embarrassed. He thought of calling his father and asking him about it. But when the novelist points out that this insignificant man has no language, it becomes clear that the feeling of the oppressed changing their religion and joining the oppressors is merely an illusion.

In the group of newly converted Christians, young Paulose asks, "Ninga randaayum committee-iliyo? Ninga paranju Peterosho desi varunnu... Athinu shesham prasangam paranjatara?" (Did you both come to the committee? You said Peter, the preacher, is coming... Who finally gave the speech?) They neither have the courage to ask nor the answer to give, simply standing with bowed heads (p. 52). Though some of the newly converted Christians might have initially felt enthusiasm, that enthusiasm is gradually cooling down.

It can be understood that the oppressed are those who have internalized the fact that they have no right to question or seek answers. Because they have no awareness that they possess the right to ask questions, Peter, despite being humiliated, cannot do anything. This novel affirms the argument that "within organized religion, old hierarchies, caste structures, caste discrimination, the dominance of the wealthy, subordinate elements, and the existing social and economic order are maintained" (K.K.S. Das, 2011: 323).

Although those belonging to the same faith are united, the novel highlights that the distinction between a true Christian and a new convert (Puthukrishthiyan) has always been maintained by the Catholic Church. When the newly converted Christians sit in front of the church, the traditional Christian occupies the seat at the back, often called the 'charubancha' (a humble seat). However, the oppressed Christians do not have any complaints about this seating arrangement. They do not even feel that they have the right to complain. The words "Melaalarkale munne chammram padhinjuppikkunnathupolum oru padaviyaanu" (Even placing a cloth in front of the authorities is a status) (p. 51) emphasize the fact that Dalit Christians are unaware of their identity or rights, and they feel that justice is denied to them.

The scene where Peter refuses his wife Maria's request to place a coconut for those sitting on the floor further illustrates the condition of the oppressed. The reason for Peter's refusal is that the mission owns the coconut trees, and only the church members have the right to pluck coconuts from them; Peter, as a subordinate, believes he has no right to do so. At the same time, it is important to recognize that when the mission planted coconut trees on the land, the church members went and plucked coconuts without Peter's objection. "Peter looked on, and when they plucked coconuts, he did not protest. He did not even feel that his rights were being denied. If he had felt so, he could have objected" (p. 47). The poor man's belief that 'God's wrath will fall if he dares to pluck coconuts from the church land' reflects his ignorance of justice and his acceptance of subordinate status.

Even when their labor and sacrifices are exploited in the name of faith, they remain unable to recognize that their rights are being denied. The novel thus underscores the deep-rooted social and religious inequalities, where the oppressed are made to accept their subordinate position under the guise of faith and tradition, unable to question or challenge the injustice.

Protests of Exclusion

The voices protesting the seating of the untouchable Pulayan and his son, who did not convert their faith, under Peter's seat in the churchyard, are heard in the voice of the servant Thomm. His words, "Peter is a Pelan (untouchable) who has become a new Christian, so he does not know the rules of the church," cause irritation in Peter. Several questions arise in his mind in response to this. He feels he should ask, "Does the law of the Church Assembly apply only to new Christians?" But he chooses not to ask. Instead, he wishes that even future generations would ask that question (p. 68). This indicates that the protest is being suppressed, according to the narrative.

The words of the tea shop owner Pillaechan, "Povappettapara neeyum Pellenneeyum palliil cherkum avare drohikkunnu; avare maattinirthanam" ("Poor Pelan and Pelen, they will be hated and removed from the church"), are presented as a harsh reality in the novel. The words of Kalippayan, revealing the social attitude, are also in line with this: "Atollatha kochamra. Enthothina avaer nyngayae palliil cherkunnu? Nyngayae adimayakkan." ("That's nonsense. Why are they trying to join the church? To enslave us.") Others, regardless of caste or religion, see these marginalized people only as slaves or objects of oppression. Even if they believe in God and the prophets, when they are moved to other religions, the social system that excludes them from joining the community further pushes them into deeper subjugation.

The words of the servant, "We need respect from the upper castes," are met with silence by Thomm from Kandankoren. Even if he is mentally exhausted, there are moments (p. 135) when Thomm feels he must reject the servant. This situation reflects the suppression of protest, indicating that the protest is being subdued or suppressed. It can be seen that helplessness is what prevents Thomm from protesting further. This does not mean that he is free from anger; rather, there is a lingering thought in the minds of the oppressed that someday they might retaliate or respond if given the chance.

The Resistance Formed Through Sharing Resentment

The tendency of the church to constantly suppress the lower caste Christians can be understood from the perspective of the oppressed community. However, the novel also highlights the condition of the oppressed who share their resentment, stemming from the realization that they are ignored. The truth that "religious conversion provided the oppressed society with religious community, customs, beliefs, and lifestyle, but did not develop freedom" (2011:324) is also evident. This is why, even when the three individuals form a committee, they are unaware of many things, which is why Paulose Othamuppan tells him. The activities related to the church festival happen without informing the newly converted Christians who are part of the committee. Upon realizing this, Othamuppan feels ashamed of being part of the committee. Paulose tries to stop Othamuppan from saying, "Go to the church and ask the priest once," but Othamuppan realizes that "there's no need to ask such questions" (p. 138).

When the meeting begins, the person sitting next to Peter asks, "Who is coming to speak today?" Peter's reply, "How should I know, mate?" stirs anger in the youth. In response, he retorts, "If you don't know, why are you even a committee member, then?" Hearing this, Peter bows his head. This marked his realization that he was in an unjustified and wrong position. The thought that "I shouldn't repeat this anymore" (page 140) came to Peter, and this became an acknowledgment of his awakening.

When the committee members realize that there was a mistake in deciding who should participate in the evangelistic meeting during the village anniversary, and they recognize this error, the elder stands up and asks, "Who called this speaker?" (page 141). The surveyor feels a profound insult. The words, "Let him speak, I will listen, but when he does so, I also need to object," become a declaration of recognizing their own rights. The statement, "Members, do not deceive these people without the knowledge of the community. It is a sin against God" (page 142), sparks a sense of self-reproach in the oppressed groups. These words inspire the oppressed to rise up and take action. Peter, reaching the church tower, is coming to the realization that his fellow believers were merely slaves. When the Christians, the Harijans, decide to unite and organize, the elder's question—"What will we do if the priest doesn't agree?"—stirs Paul's enthusiasm. His response, "The priest must agree. Even then, we will proceed with the assembly, right? Do you see!" clearly shows that he is motivated by this conviction.

Pulayattara's nature of resistance

From a state of helplessness, where despair is overwhelming, the signs of subordinate resistance transforming into a blazing protest fire can be observed at Pulayattara. However, those responsible for quenching this fiery resistance are well aware of how to do so. It is certain that the elders will not ask the Pulaya to be expelled. The scene where helplessness turns into pain is due to this very reason. The oppressed are unable to recognize the cruelty associated with faith and the discrimination spoken in its name, and it is precisely because of their innocence that they remain unaware. The desire that questions be posed to the elders, even to the next generation, stems only from helplessness.

When the servant asks Thomas, "Whose place are you lying in?" — "Whose?" — "Is it your master's, or are we lying in yours?" (page 69), the reply from Peter, with the counter-question, aims only to give meaning to the proverb "If you get angry, you will get beaten." The falsehood of converting to religion solely for the purpose of marrying Annapatti is understood to be futile. He realizes that it is nothing but deception without any principle. Nothing else is happening there except for gaining a single slave. All that has happened is the loss of one's own identity and name. On the other hand, they have gained nothing. Those who cannot see themselves as human beings are the ones who will be taken to the heavenly kingdom. Though they are not prepared for direct interrogations, the novel indicates that an inner fire of protest is awakening within him. The convert, who firmly decides to name his son after his father, also determines that he will not become a new Christian (pages 170-171).

Conclusion

The novel *Pulayathara* serves as a mirror to the socio-religious realities faced by Dalit communities in Kerala, showing how oppression persists despite shifts in faith. Through its characters, it reveals how religious conversion—while initially promising equality—ultimately failed to dismantle entrenched caste hierarchies. Instead of liberation, many converts found themselves excluded within the very systems they thought would uplift them. The portrayal of helplessness among characters like Thavan and Peter reflects how internalized oppression often stifles the urge to resist. Their inability to assert themselves stems not from lack of will but from

generations of conditioning and structural barriers. The priest's refusal to fully embrace the newly converted Christians serves as a metaphor for institutional resistance to social transformation.

Yet the novel doesn't end in silence. It documents a slow-burning awareness rising within the oppressed—through dialogues, committee disagreements, and unspoken protests. This subtle evolution from passive suffering to questioning and confrontation marks the genesis of resistance. The moment Peter bows his head in quiet realization is less a surrender and more a prelude to awakening. Ultimately, *Pulayathara* invites readers to reflect on how genuine resistance can only flourish through self-awareness and solidarity. The novel urges communities to move beyond symbolic gestures of inclusion and work toward structural justice—dismantling caste not just from faith, but from society itself.

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