

Centralising the Marginalised through Magical Realism in *Moustache* by S. Hareesh

Dr. Pranav Khoche

N.V.P. Mandal's Arts, Commerce and Science College, Lasalgaon, Maharashtra, INDIA.

Corresponding Author: pranav.khoche@rediffmail.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4362-6174>



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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to present how Vavachan, a youth belonging to Pulayan community, considered a lower caste in Kerala, becomes a legendary character Moustache and gets centralized in the narrative through the use of magical realism in the novel *Moustache* (2020) by S. Hareesh. The paper also tries to show how folklore, myths and songs created about him in the novel present him as a man with supernatural powers rather than a common vagabond. The paper in a way tries to elucidate how the status of the marginalised has been subverted through such devices. His representation as a marginalised also would explore the community's marginalised state in a hierarchical society.

Keywords- Marginality, marginalization, marginalised, social exclusion, magical realism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of the term the marginalised indicates that marginalisation is not accidental or natural state of being but it is deliberate and intentional in nature. Therefore, to connote the intentional strategies the study uses the term 'the marginalised', for the characters that are relegated to the fringes of their socio-cultural, political, intellectual, ideological or individual existence.

II. MARGINALIZATION

According to *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, the process of marginalization includes 'socio-cultural segregation of ethnic and racial groups in terms of their representation in socio-political and cultural systems including various professions.' The term refers to reduction in involvement in society and the considerable loss of opportunities experienced by certain

groups or individuals within a specific society, with a consequent breakdown either in terms of social control or in terms of reciprocal solidarity. Such reduction leads to a progressive decline in social participation, an increase in the level of poverty and ongoing exclusion from social agencies like schools, the job market, political communities and so on. (174).

Singharoy describes Marginalisation,

. . . as a process is conceptualised as cumulatively acquired and spatially related phenomena of social, economic cultural and political denials and deprivations, in- securities and uncertainty, hierarchy and domination which get legitimized and reproduces by the functioning of several normative and societal arrangements to relegate several sections of the population at the social margin despite their protests and resistance.

Marginalization, as a complex process of relegating specific group(s) of people to the lower or the outer edge of the society, operates as function, as cause

and also as a social product. It has been delineated in many intellectual and development discourses as a social process that operates and promotes through the practice of discrimination, oppression, subjugation, and domination which is required to be demolished and the causes of such practices to be eradicated.

III. MARGINALITY

According to Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin the term signifies about the stage of 'being on the margin, marginal. The perception and description of experience as 'marginal' is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethno-centrism, which imply that certain forms of experience are peripheral' (121)

More commonly used term in the parlance of social sciences is marginality which is defined by Germani as the "lack of participation of individuals and groups in those spheres in which, according to determined criteria, they might be expected to participate" (Germani,49).

Janet Mancini Billson in an essay "No Owner of Soil: Redefining the Concept of Marginality classifies marginality under three types: cultural marginality, social role marginality and structural marginality.

According to Billson, the most prominent type is structural marginality that refers to the political, social, and economic powerlessness of certain disenfranchised and/or disadvantaged segments within societies. It springs from location in the socioeconomic structure of society, rather than from cultural or social role dilemmas. It has been described as an unavoidable result of capitalist system characterized by poverty, crime and violence. (31)

IV. MAGIC REALISM

The writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie 'weave, in an ever shifting pattern, a sharply etched *realism* (emphasis original) in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales.' (Abrams 258)

The novel *Moustache* was originally published in Malayalam as *Meesha* (Malayalam for Moustache) and has been translated into English by Jayashree Kalathil. The novel presents the straightforward yet intricate life of the protagonist, Vavachan, belonging to Pulayan caste, commenting along at the multilayered and hierarchical caste system in Kerala. S. Hareesh, the author, points out its all pervasive presence in his note:

At the time period covered in the story, the impact of caste on everyday life was felt more acutely. It controlled every aspect of people's lives – the jobs they

did, the clothes they wore, the food they ate and who they ate with, how they socialised, who they touched, who they married or had sexual relationships with, the rituals of marriage, birth and death, what and how they worshipped, the type of housing they lived in, etc. (X)

Marginalization is closely related with social exclusion. According to A. Mani,

It excludes certain communities from interaction and access to social resources through social arrangements, normative value systems and customs. Social exclusion relates to the alienation or disenfranchisement of certain people within a society. It is often connected to a person's social class, educational status and living standards and how these might affect their access to various opportunities. Anyone who deviates in any perceived way from the norm of a population can become subject to coarse or subtle forms of social exclusion. (03-04)

The novelist also mentions that the caste system doubly marginalised women, a fact that has been presented in the novel with a touch of wry humour. His note mentions that caste controlled women's lives, especially their sexual live. 'Nair women, meanwhile, were required to engage in relationships with men of other upper castes who, in other areas of life, did not considered them to be fully human. (XI)

The instances of such inhuman treatment are found in the novel that underline the severity of their marginalization.

The caste changes people's attitude towards the marginalised as reflected by Damodaran, a character who works with Ezthuchachan, the play's director in which Vavachan acts as a policeman and gets the fame as 'Moustache':

Like all men of Pulayan caste, he was coal black, as though he would turn the water black if he entered a river, as though if, like a dark spirit, he jumped up and touched the sky, black rain would fall. Only his face had lost some colour...a dense growth of hair covered his cheeks... Pulayan men usually did not have this kind of hair growth on their face... have it forcibly shaved off with a razor sharpened on a handy stone. (33)

The vivid description of Vavachan's colour indicates the deep seated caste bias in Damodaran's consciousness.

Moreover he is surprised to find big hair growth on Vavachan's face because Pulayans were not supposed to grow it, being on the lower rung of the caste ladder. The prejudice is found even today in several parts of India where men belonging to so called lower castes are systemically marginalised and are attacked if they sport moustache or ride a horse in their wedding procession.

As it turns out Vavachan's moustache put him literally and metaphorically to centre stage from the ignominious margin when he plays a policeman's character and the audience are scared to see him on the stage. The front row audience 'felt that their age old fear of mythical, discarnate being of darkness, such as

Rakshas and the Makkan, had finally taken physical form and appeared before them. (36)

After the play, his role as a policeman ends but Vavachan refuses to shave of his moustache. This is perhaps his first but significant act of resistance that furthers him from the Pulayan margin. His performance in the play slowly breeds stories about him, mostly fantastic. His remarkably huge moustache are the central object that renders him somewhat supernatural, magical aspects. As Wendy Faris puts it, 'Many of these texts take a position that is antibureaucratic, and so they often use their magic against the established social order' (Faris 179).

When Vavachan, in search of Damodaran, enters the house of Kesava Pillah, a respected landlord, the latter gets scared and in reversal of roles, '...the old fear made him rise from his chair with a sense of anxiety and reverence. The apparent transformation of their master confused his companions. (44)

Such episodes indicate that Vavachan's transformation into Moustache brings him to the centre but it also criminalises him since the upper caste people cannot accept a pulayan, oppressed being toppling the hierarchical order of the caste system. His normal behaviour is presented in a grotesquely exaggerated manner. For example he just kicks a coconut pole in an exasperated way, the witness recounts: 'He caught me by my legs and raised me to the sky... He wanted to crack my head open on the ground.'

The novel uses magical realism effectively to show the marginalised status and its relation to the region as commented by the translator of the novel:

Hareesh's use of magic realism reflects the land itself, and the lives built and rebuilt on the land... As Vavachan and his pursuers navigate its intricate waterways, what emerges forcefully in this tale of magic, myth and metaphor is how the story of human beings' relationship with land has been fundamentally defined in terms of caste and gender.

The Pulayans are said 'to live without food or to draw energy from the wind and the sun'. (48) This belief enables the process of 'othering' the Pulayans, marginalising them further.

According to Amaryll Chanady, a text is deemed to embody Magical Realism when it displays three distinct characteristics. Firstly, it encompasses two contrasting yet internally consistent viewpoints: one rooted in a rational and enlightened understanding of reality, and the other embracing the supernatural as an integral facet of everyday existence, thereby presenting "two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an 'enlightened' and rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday life." (Chanady, 21) Secondly, it harmonizes logical discrepancies found within the portrayal of events and circumstances, addressing "the resolution of logical antinomy" (Chanady, 23). In this manner, Chanady asserts that in

the realm of Magical Realism, the supernatural does not pose a challenge; instead, it seamlessly merges into the perceptual norms of both the narrator and the characters within the fictional realm. The third characteristic is "authorial reticence" (Chanady, 36), which mitigates the contradiction between the real and the supernatural within the text. Chanady posits that these three features collectively constitute the essential criteria for a text to be classified as a work of Magical Realism.

Such 'mitigation of the contradiction between the real and the supernatural' is seen at many places in the novel. At the very outset, Paviyan, Vavachan's father catches a pangolin that speaks to him in a human voice and tells him to slow down. Paviyan is not much surprised or shocked (02). Or there is a long conversation between a crocodile and Paviyan while the latter travels on its back (106) The novel is abundant with such instances blurring the line.

The police report against Vavachan clearly shows bias for the Pulayans and their lower status in the society: 'It is known that contrary to the **customs of the land** (emphasis added) and in a manner unsuitable to the hereditary work of Pulayans this man has established a great big moustache on his face'. (51)

Even sporting moustache by a Pulayan seems to be his crime. It also shows how a legend of moustache gets created by accusing him to every crime that he has not committed. But the effect is exactly opposite. The blame makes the marginalised Pulayan boy famous or rather infamous and thereby gets him to the centre.

An old healer reinforces Vavachan's supernatural powers while talking about Vavachan's grandfather. 'But he dabbled in magic,' he continued. 'Could make himself small, or shapeshift into a crow or cat. (78)

According to Wendy Faris, in the texts where magical realism is used, metamorphoses are a relatively common event. (Faris 178)

Or in another instance Vavachan snatches the ledger of Kaalan, the God of death and reads about all people's death. To get the ledger back 'Kalaan made himself small and hid in the darkness... Moustache read on for a whole day and night. He learned the magic and mantras in the ledger (155).

The use of magical realism thus renders a marginalised some superhuman attributes locating him at the centre.

The overall description of the Pulayans is full of poverty, hunger and deprivation of which Vavachan's family is representative. Chella, Vavachan's mother is marginalised even in her death:

The scant hair on her head was tied together exposing the white of her skull. Her body did not reflect a single joyful moment in her life. The hollow breasts lay shrivelled, while her empty stomach was invisible. The eyes that had watched over and worried about Paviyan for a whole lifetime were partially closed, their corners sticky with rheum. The endless plodding within

the little circle of her life had emaciated her legs, their heels split into deep ravine. (163)

Even the Pulayan labourers themselves are seen to discount the life of their community member over their upper caste landlord's crops. They must repair a crack in a bund or it would flood the field. The social inferiority has seeped into their collective unconscious and moreover they have a fear that 'The landlord would lose his crop, and the Pulayans who had dug the clay, built the polders, planted the field and tended to it, would go hungry'. (166)

It is in a most horrible and yet poignant manner they 'repair' the bund:

So, the people got him out of the field, filled him with arrack and toddy, tied a red mundu around his waist, and put ixora flowers in his waist. They stuck a piece of coconut tree trunk in the channel of the bund, its top end sharpened to a point. Then in a blink of an eye, they tossed the half conscious Aakkan into the channel, impaling him on the pointed wood, and quickly covered the whole thing with clay, rebuilding the bund even before the water had run red from his blood. (166)

The novel uses other devices besides magical realism to centralise the marginalised. For example, over a period many songs get composed on the life of Moustache. Chapter 22 includes all such songs presenting Moustache's legend in different colours. In one song he is compared to 'a bull that defies the plough' (272), adding a rebellious aspect to his character. Vavachan as Moustache has been depicted in these songs in such variety that he gets confused about his own identity. Moreover, the songs also present him as a marginalised. One song narrates that he goes to a temple 'and staying within the restricted space allowed for the likes of him – the polluted, the unclean – he made offerings...' (282).

Vavachan also seems to go through an identity crisis, underlining his marginalised status: Or was it that his memory, just like his future, was only a matter of his imagination? Like the Moustache in the songs, the Vavachan in his memory was only half real. But who is to say what was real? The Moustache in the songs was the one most people believed to be true, and perhaps that made him more real and true than the real one. (288)

Representation of the marginalised and the subversion of the marginalised status has been achieved through many devices that are an integral part of the

narrative. The novel becomes a multi-pronged narrative of social exclusion and structural marginality. The novel thus proves to be a fiction embedded chronicle of the marginalised in the hierarchical caste system.

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