

Revalorising Paraiyar Ethnic Identity through Literary Writings

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ABSTRACT

The present genre of Indian literary writings on untouchability encompasses fictional or semi-autobiographical narratives produced by writers who are mostly untouchables themselves, and the more widely-accepted of such writings are those that solely focus on the oppression of the untouchable community. In the process of privileging oppression, these writers often fail to provide a balanced portrayal of the community's ethnic characteristics. The key concerns of this paper, therefore, are to analyse the motivation of untouchable writers who choose to stereotype their people as "the victimized other", and to bring to the forefront works of writers who have made conscious efforts to infuse aspects of ethnicity, culture and rituals into their writings. This paper analyses two short stories on untouchability written in Tamil and translated into English, *The Binding Vow* (2009/2012) by Imayam, and *Eardrum* (2000/2012) by Azhakiya Periyavan, with the aim of investigating the writers' stand on the ethnic and ritualistic culture of their people. The findings of this study reveal that the writers' privileging of oppression over ethnic issues reflects a strong influence of Dalit ideologies, and that despite such a pattern, there are those who continue to employ culture and rituals as tools to empower their people. The study also implies that the ethnicity and rituals of the untouchable community deserve equal attention as the portrayal of oppression in Indian literary writings on untouchability, and that by privileging oppression, writers are misleading their people into abandoning and rejecting their true ethnic and cultural identity.

Keywords: paraiyar; dalit; untouchability; rituals; pollution

WRITING FOR THE CAUSE OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Writings on one's life or community often draw on memories and experiences that are socially, historically or culturally distinct, and are often produced with the intention of sharing with the world what the writers believe to be objective representations of their respective societies. Objectivity, however, becomes a problematic issue where writing personal accounts are concerned, since narratives which are written on the basis of memory tend to raise doubts as to the validity of ideologies that they claim to represent, the reason being that, such writings are often intensely personal and emotional in nature, and generally exhibit strong traces of personal bias. A classic example that mirrors the above concerns would be the literary writings on the untouchable community in India who have been, for centuries now, marginalised on the basis of their purportedly low caste which is said to fall outside the accepted four fold Hindu caste system.

Such writings, which are mostly produced by writers who belong to untouchable castes themselves, and which are mostly autobiographical in nature, are almost always told with strong leanings towards issues of exploitation, suffering, pain and humiliation, that the

writers have experienced, or have heard accounts of from older generations. However, these writings often provide very little exposure to the ethnic and ritualistic aspects of their identity, which interestingly form the very basis of their marginalisation by members of the upper castes. In fact, the generalisation of pain and suffering in relation to the untouchable community is so firmly entrenched in the minds of writers, critics and readers that a piece of writing is only acknowledged as being genuinely representative of the untouchable community if it mirrors lamentations of pain and suffering, and are radically political and revolutionary in nature. Writers who choose to offer less radical culturally-inclined solutions to the emancipation of the untouchables are harshly criticised for their “regressive ideological position” (Mangalam, 2007. p. 73), and are seen as having failed to contribute towards the liberation of the untouchable community.

Writings on the untouchable community, who are referred to in the context of this paper as Paraiyars (one of the largest untouchable caste groups in Tamil Nadu), are reflective of the concepts of “culture of confession” and “culture of testimony” that Gayatri Spivak (1998) discussed in her article entitled *Three Women’s Texts and Circumfession*, and which she defines as “the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other” (p. 7). Similarly, Gilmore too writes of an autographical genre that insists on “the centrality of speaking of pain” (2001, p. 2) which aptly corresponds with the principles behind Indian literary writings on untouchability. Indian literary writings on untouchability are formally categorised under the genre of Dalit literature, and one of its definitions is that it “portrays dreadful and humiliating event of the *Dalit* world by exposing inequality, sorrow and misery of their class” (Rai, 2009, p. 40).

The literary works of Indian writers on untouchability who are Tamils in ethnicity, and who are formally categorised as Tamil Dalit writers, are the outcome of a desire to move from the centre of the oppression-filled, caste-conscious structure of the Indian society in general, to claim a rightful space for the many untouchable communities in Tamil Nadu. Largely influenced by the rise of *Dalit* consciousness, the spark of which was initiated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who is said to have helped “engender an ‘untouchable consciousness in response to the Gandhian campaign of 1933-34 in favour of the term of reference, *Harijan*, (a term that Gandhi created for the outcastes)” (Kannan & Gros, 2002, p. 24), these writers began representing themselves, and their people under the *Dalit* identity for the purpose of championing their rights against the discrimination inflicted upon them by the upper caste circles. However, it is our contention that in the process of doing so, they have contributed towards the immobilisation of the ethnic identity of the untouchable groups in Tamil Nadu such as the Parayars, Pallars, Puthiya Vannars and several others. The term *Dalit* represents the “suffering masses” whose lives have been dehumanised, and who have been denied of their rights as not only rightful citizens of India, but also as dignified human beings (Yadav, 2009, p. 89). The term, however, represents only the social status of its members, in that, it only defines them based on their experiences of suffering, and not their ethnic identity.. In Tamil Nadu as well, a similar inclination towards embracing the Dalit identity is clearly dominant among the educated urbanites who belong to untouchable castes, who associate themselves with the national Ambedkar-inspired Dalit movement.

A point to note at this juncture is that, although the writers discussed in this paper are officially grouped under the genre of Dalit literature, and are often referred to as Dalit writers, we will consciously refrain from using a similar reference in this paper on the basis of our argument that the term Dalit limits the writers’ accountability to represent the untouchable community in an all-inclusive manner. The reason for our insistence on referring to the untouchable community and the writers discussed in this paper, as Paraiyars instead of Dalits is that, in principle, Paraiyar is the ethnic name of the caste group in question which aptly reflects the cultural characteristics of the community. Although the usage of the term

Paraiyar has come to be seen as a politically-incorrect reference in comparison to the term Dalit, it is our argument that this stigmatised perception that has been linked to the term Paraiyar is a result of a misaligned representation of what is rightfully a group's ethnic term of reference. It is our contention that such misrepresentations could be the result of centuries of dominant indoctrination by those in power whose primary objective is often to influence and shape the belief systems of the less powerful in accordance to the former's political agenda (Mahalingam, 2003, p. 736). A practise as such among those in power has also been described by Sidanius and Pratto in their observation of how members of dominant groups possess the tendency to endorse beliefs that validate "arbitrary group-based hierarchies" such as race and caste (1999, p. 736). According to Arun "the higher castes gave meanings to symbols in a way that helped them succeed in defining themselves as a higher and purer community, and the Paraiyars as lower and impure" (2007b, p. 82). The symbols that Arun refers to are the ones that the Paraiyars utilise on a daily basis in carrying out their ritual-based duties.

Moreover, since the main focus of this paper is to discuss the ethnic ritualistic identity of the Paraiyar community, it is our belief that analysing the untouchable community in the light of Dalitism instead would result in compromised implications, for it is our belief that in the process of championing the rights of the caste-oppressed Paraiyars, Dalit activism has created a new set of qualities altogether for the Paraiyar community which is devoid of the cultural and ritualistic elements that had defined their true identity. Lamidi and Aboh's reference to "communes that bring together the excluded, the stigmatised and the anguished to gain a collective experience" (2011, p. 38) aptly fits the characteristic of Dalit activism which attempts to capitalize on collective identity and in the process, overshadows individual ethnic identity. The very fact that Dalitism has ingrained in the minds of the Paraiyars that being referred to as one is degrading, is in itself a form of indoctrination that the Paraiyars must carefully evade in order to not lose grip of their ethnic, cultural roots. Also, the very fact that the untouchables living in villages of Tamil Nadu prefer addressing themselves as Paraiyars instead of as Dalits (Arun, 2007a, p. 2) simply reflects that they identify better with the former term of reference which refers to their true origins. The reference Dalit, instead, is a socio-political identity that only represents the experiences of marginalisation that an untouchable person is associated with, and is quite generic in nature.

It is our argument that the failure of Paraiyar writers to draw a distinction between ethnic and socio-political identities of their people in their literary works, and provide the necessary exposure to the inherent characteristics of Paraiyar ethnic traditions and rituals that define their true ethnic identity, could be seen as one of the factors that has contributed to the continued misconception of Paraiyar ethnic identity as being derogatory, polluted and impure. Of the many untouchable groups found in India, the Paraiyars appear to be more profoundly affected by the stigma of pollution that is linked to untouchability. This is apparent by the fact that the term "pariah" that has come to be universally quoted in the context of insult, is in fact derivative of the term of reference of the untouchable Paraiyars. Reading lines such as "ADULTERER, religious zealot, drunk, racist, abuser and now outcast...Mel Gibson's gone from earning £10m a film to disgraced pariah" (Sheridan, 2010, p. 1) has come to be universally perceived as an acceptable form of insult without taking into consideration the unjust and unethical implications it has on the Paraiyar community.

We also strongly believe that by generally evading the subject of ethnicity and rituals when depicting the untouchable community, most Paraiyar writers have robbed the community of the opportunity to empower itself through the revalorisation of the Paraiyars' unique ritualistic traditions. Such a revalorisation can be likened to the "self-awareness and rediscovery of the local's identity and heritage" (2014, p. 130) that Al-Ma'amari, Noraini and Ravichandran associate with stages of realization experienced by those who are oppressed.

The concept of caste which associates the untouchable community with concepts of impurity and pollution constitutes a fundamental feature of India's social structure, and is defined as "a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit of tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system" (Beteille, 1966, p. 46). According to the 2001 census data released by the Ministry of Home Affairs, India, there are 166, 635, 700 untouchables, or formally referred to as *Scheduled Castes* by the Indian government, living in India. There are many divisions among the untouchable communities in India which further categorise them into groups and sub-groups (Upadhyay, 2010, p. 7), with each possessing its own unique ethnic and ritualistic identity despite sharing the common stigma of untouchability. The need to stress on the Paraiyar identity, despite the sensitivity and political incorrectness that are associated to it, is justified by our argument that the stigmatized perception that is associated with the term is the result of a politically motivated act initiated by the upper caste society. As a means of exercising dominance over those who are less powerful (Mahalingam, 2003, p. 736), the Paraiyars in this case, the upper caste people chose to misrepresent the ritualistic activities that the Paraiyars were known to practise by associating them with meanings which portrayed them as low and impure (Arun, 2007b, p. 82). It is our contention, therefore, that in its original form, the term Paraiyar is neither derogatory nor insensitive in nature, and that in order to revalorise the ethnic and ritualistic traditions of the Paraiyars as a means of challenging untouchability, it is necessary to first reclaim with pride, the reference of oneself as a Paraiyar.

WHO, ESSENTIALLY, ARE THE PARAIYARS?

In Tamil Nadu (part of South India) alone, there are seventy-seven untouchable sub-groups, under the umbrella of three main groups, the Paraiyars, Pallars and Arunthathiyars (Arun, 2007: 35). Nonetheless, although there exists numerous internal divisions within the untouchables themselves, the fact is that they are discriminated in unison by the upper caste people on the basis of their low caste, which is primarily associated with the 'impure' tasks that they execute as part of the traditional occupations that had been assigned to them for generations. In the case of the Paraiyars, the tasks include manual scavenging, cattle scavenging, announcing of deaths, handling of cremation rites, playing of the Parai drum during festivals and funerals, and acting as village watchmen (Arun, 2007b, p. 84). Of the three major caste groups in Tamil Nadu, the Paraiyars form the highest population (Arun, 2007a, p. 35).

The term Paraiyar is said to be derived from the *Parai* drum that the Paraiyars are known to play in the execution of their ritualistic activities. However, Oppert (2010) in his book, *The Dravidians* that was first published in 1888, refuted the theory of the drum lending its name to the Paraiyars, and instead asserted that it does not appear logical that the person playing a drum is named after that drum, and that the drum must have derived its name from its player (p. 32). Oppert (1888/2010) instead believed that the Paraiyars in the ancient days were mountaineers and formed the ancient Dravidian population (p. 32). Despite the obscurity involved in the origin of the term Paraiyar, the fact that the term has, since ancient days, represented a strong ethnic and ritualistic identity, is reason enough for the Paraiyar community to retain its usage, instead of being influenced by the ideology of Dalitism into replacing their ethnic identity with "the term 'Dalit' which is generic in nature, and can refer to anybody, irrespective of caste, who is 'broken' or 'trodden' (Arun, 2007a, p. 2). While it is true that the term Paraiyar has come to be viewed as derogatory, studies, however, have proven that "the low identity of Paraiyars in the past was a constructed one, not ordained by

God, nor was it naturally given to them from the beginning, but rather it was defined by others, such as the higher castes, through mythico-symbolic discursive formulations, to maintain their domination” (Arun, 2007a, p. 13). The ‘polluted’ identity of the Paraiyars which was derived on the basis of their rituals and practices, must therefore be a form of stratification constructed by the upper caste in order to separate themselves from those who were unlike them in origins, cultural and religious practices.

At this juncture, it becomes necessary to introduce one of the theories behind the inception of the Hindu caste system, which claims that it was the Aryans who invaded ancient India who introduced the concept of caste system. The Aryans are said to be the last of the six main races known to belong to the ethnic composition of India to arrive in India (Thapar, 2003, p. 26) By the time the Aryans were said to have entered India in 1500 B.C., the illustrious Indus Valley civilisation had almost declined (Thapar, 2003, p. 29). The weakening of the social and administrative system of the Indus Valley could have been seen by the Aryans as a timely opportunity to infiltrate the city with their own political, social and religious ideologies. The Rig-Veda, one of the most revered scriptural text known to Hinduism, shows evidence that the Aryans “saw themselves as conquerors” who would vanquish whoever stood in their way (Wood, 2007, p. 55). Caste system, as Thapar (2003) explains, is believed to have been introduced after the Aryan invasion:

The first step in the direction of caste (as distinct from class) was taken when the Aryans treated the *Dasas* as beyond the social pale, probably owing to a fear of the *Dasas* and the even greater fear that assimilation with them would lead to a loss of Aryan identity. Ostensibly the distinction was largely that of colour, the *Dasas* being darker and of an alien culture. The Sanskrit word for caste, *varna*, actually means colour. The colour element of caste was emphasized, throughout this period, and was eventually to become deep-rooted in north Indian Aryan culture. (p. 38)

Anything that is constructed can be deconstructed in order to be further reconstructed to work in the favour of a marginalised community such as the Paraiyars. While it is only fair for the members of all the untouchable communities in India to stand as one in the face of oppression, the fact that the Dalit movement in India has attempted to evoke unity among the untouchables by ‘branding’ them solely as the oppressed Dalits is akin to dictating the identity of a person based on his painful experience alone. It is our argument that those who write on issues of untouchability must not ignore the crucial role the untouchable community’s ethnic and ritualistic identity plays in reinforcing their true identity and self-worth.

CAN CULTURE EMPOWER THE PARAIYARS?

Tamil literary writings on untouchability, whether fictional or semi-autobiographical, have consciously remained enclosed within the parameters of pain, discrimination, humiliation, vengeance, and resistance, since the time the first modern Tamil novel on untouchability by P. Sivakami, entitled *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*, was published in 1989 in Tamil Nadu. The outcome of such a leaning is the stereotyping of novels on untouchability as ‘literatures of lament’ (Kandasamy, 2006), a fact which places these writings in a defensive mode bordering on self-pity, and portrays the Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu in a singular perspective as the marginalised community. While it is true that the discrimination faced by the untouchable community in the face of upper caste domination is indeed severe, so much so that it has been openly described as befitting “the definition of genocide – a crime against humanity” (Bandhu, 2005, p. 110), the fact that leading Paraiyar writers have chosen to depict their

community in the light of oppression alone without adopting a balanced approach which gives due importance to their ethnic identity is the basic premise of this paper's argument. Interestingly, it is writers who are not widely recognised as the "official voices of Tamil Dalit literature" who have taken a keen interest in providing insights into the Paraiyar ethnic cultural practices through their short-stories, which have been written in a purely fictional mode, albeit with inspirations drawn from real situations in the face of untouchability. Unfortunately, such writings have not received much recognition in the formally acknowledged Tamil Dalit literature circle, such as the works of writers like P. Sivakami and Bama, who take a revolutionary stance in all their writings.

It is with the intention of changing the mindset of the literary circle of writings on untouchability, which states that writings of the marginalized untouchables must resonate the sentiments of a literature of protest" (Chandalia, 2009, p. 21), that our paper focuses on analysing writings which specifically focus on rituals and practices unique to the Paraiyar community. The short-stories discussed in this paper are *The Binding Vow* by Imayam, and *Eardrum* by Azhakiya Periyavan. Originally written in Tamil and presented in English for the first time as part of the recently published *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012), these stories provide a fresh insight into the lives of Paraiyars, which are intrinsically traditional and ritualistic in nature.

ETHNIC CULTURE IN PARAIYAR SHORT-STORIES

Imayam's *Binding Vow* is a story that depicts the Paraiyar ritualistic practice of village-deity worship. The story begins with a scene of villagers gathering around a particular spot in a village, known as Pottai *Tank*, where the village's water supply comes from; and where the shrine of the village deity, Ponnuruvi, is situated under a neem tree; to cook offerings of *Pongal* (sweet rice) for the goddess. It is a common practice in Hinduism, particularly among village-folk, to propitiate the village deity in return of a favour, and such prayers are especially prevalent during dry seasons, during which devotees would offer the village gods and goddesses sweet pongal as a way of appeasing them into bringing the rain down to ensure a good harvest in the coming year. The worship of village gods, who are also known as guardian deities of villages, is described as part of India's "vernacular forms of the religion that are expressed, practiced, and narrated by ordinary people, the majority of who live in the countryside" (Valk & Lourdasamy, 2007, p. 180). The Paraiyars' concept of worship is defined by five different indigenous labels; there is the 'chosen god' (istha deivam) which the Paraiyar shares with tens of thousands of other worshippers; the 'family deity' which he shares with his immediate or undivided family; the 'lineage god' (kula deivam) which is shared with members of the local patrilineage; the 'koloni deivam' (hamlet deity); and finally the 'village deity' (kaval deivam)" (Moffatt, 1979, p. 250).

In *Binding Vow*, Imayam has cleverly imbued the religious rituals of the Paraiyar community within the experiences of subjugation of the Paraiyars inflicted by the upper caste community. He depicts how realistically plausible it is in a Paraiyar community, for the memory of a young girl who gets raped, and later murdered by an upper caste landlord's son, to become revered and over time come to be celebrated as a guardian of sorts for the village. It is almost as if the writer attempts to compensate Ponnuruvi's pain and suffering by giving her a divine status upon her death. Such a concept of worship is not uncommon in Paraiyar culture, which domesticates even gods to create a personal connection between the revered and the common man. Valk and Lourdasamy (2007) explain the phenomena as such, "Legends about the interaction between gods and humans are set in the mundane reality of historical time, providing models of religious and social behavior. One of the main functions

of legends is to link social reality with the supernatural sphere and to affirm the active participation of deities in the everyday life of villages” (p. 180).

This interaction between gods and humans finds its basis in the localised origins of village deities, for such deities are said to be noble people who once lived as ordinary human beings, and who, upon death, became revered in the memories of the people who knew them. To the Paraiyars, their gods and deities are part of their ethnic identity; a part of their lives and a part of who they are. In its most practical context, village deities are seen as guardians who provide protection to villagers, and this belief is resonated in Imayam’s representation of Ponnuruvi, the guardian goddess. Ponnuruvi’s life and death needed to be firmly entrenched in the memory of the villagers for it to remain as a lesson to future perpetrators, and Imayam’s uplifting of the ‘victim’ Ponnuruvi to the status of a village deity could be his way of giving her back the respect, dignity, rights that she once lost as a victim of gruesome rape and murder. The custom of worshipping the memory of deceased person is not peculiar to the Indian culture alone. Antonaccio (1995) quotes of a similar practice known as ‘hero worship’ in the ancient Greek religion in her book, which she describes as the worship of a mortal who had passed on, and who is believed to hold power and prerogatives in the same nature as one’s own ancestors and “were remembered, respected, feared and invoked by the living, and were thought to exercise an influence, for better or worse, on present events” (p. 1). What defines such a ‘hero’, according to Antonaccio, (1995) is “the status and power ascribed to them after death or disappearance: patrons and protectors, granters of success in various undertaking, they also bring disaster in the form of plague, barrenness and military defeat” (p. 1).

In *Binding Vow*, it is mentioned that after Ponnuruvi died, several mishaps and deaths began happening in the village. “Unusually, a woman from the upper caste became possessed...on the same day, three women had miscarriages spontaneously...at the same time two or three pregnant women gave birth to stillborn babies...because there was a death every day, or an inauspicious event every week, the entire village was shaken and overcome with fear” (Imayam, 2009/2012, p. 65). The analysis of the ritualistic elements of this story goes to prove that the traditions and rituals of the Paraiyar community do not deserve the stigma it has all this while been associated with. If a ritualistic practice, such as offering prayers to village deities that the Paraiyars have been practising for centuries, and that have sometimes been referred to as a cult worship, can be likened to a form of worship once practised in ancient Greece which is widely acknowledged as the home to Europe’s first advanced civilisation, then the culture of the Paraiyars may not be as backward as history claims it to be. Probably, what it requires to discard the negative image that it has come to be tainted with are the efforts of writers like Imayam.

Imayam’s ability to weave culture into issues of caste discrimination is indeed commendable, for is not often that we find those writing on the subject of untouchability making conscious efforts to depict the true essence of the Paraiyar community. In reality, the identity of the Paraiyar community is deeply constituted by their intrinsic connection with the cultural and ritualistic practices passed on to them by their forefathers. This part of their identity, of course, is often rarely discussed in Tamil literary writings on untouchability, and is often overshadowed by depictions of pain and suffering which have, over the centuries, come to be accepted as their key identity. The polluted status that the Paraiyars now live with is said to be the result of a deliberate reconstruction of their ancient identity into one with negative connotation by those in power during ancient times. There is a famous notion, which remains contestable till today, that the untouchables of India, which includes the Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu, were the original inhabitants of ancient India, and that they were defeated and subjugated by the invading Aryans and had their highly civilised ancient identity reversed into that of the lowly and the polluted (Upadhyay, 2010, p. 4). Efforts by writers such as

Imayam serve to pave the path towards the reinstating of the Paraiyar pride through a reconstruction of identity in the attempt of ridding themselves of the stigma that is attached to their community. By bringing to light the positive significance of the Paraiyars' ethnic practices, the misconceived notion people have of their culture can be altered, and this in turn can uplift the quality of life of the Paraiyar community.

While Imayam's story provides a refreshing insight into the Paraiyar community's religious rituals, Azhagiya Periyavan's *Eardrum*, on the other hand, depicts a sublime picture of the Paraiyars' innate connection with the *thappu* drum, a handmade circular shaped instrument played at temple festivals, funerals and to accompany the *thappatam* (folk dance), and spontaneous singing of folk songs. The protagonist of *Eardrum* is Chinnakuzhandai, who is described as the only one in the village who is familiar with the art of making a *thappu*. Azhagiya Periyavan goes to a great extent to outline how conscientiously Chinnakuzhandai makes the *thappu*, handles and plays his creation; alluding to the intimate connection the drum has with its maker and player, and vice versa. The *thappu*, or sometimes known as the smaller *sirum parai* (the roaring drum), is synonymous with Paraiyar identity, and is often described as the instrument that signifies "the joyful, celebratory side of the Dalits" (Willis & Rajasekaran, 2007, p. 599). Chinnakuzhandai's *thappu* music has a soulmate; the singing voice of his wife, Parvathy, who is depicted as being an expert folk singer whose repertoire included "kummi songs, lullabies, and dirges" (Periyavan, 2000/2012, p. 78), which are singing styles closely linked to Paraiyar women. Trawick (1988) describes her experience with the singing of Paraiyar women as follows,

They lived by hard physical labor-labor that they had transformed over centuries into dance, dance often accompanied by song. When they weeded the fields, when they built the roads, when they lifted water, when they guided the powerful buffaloes pulling the ploughs, when they carried great loads on their heads, they were pictures of grace and strength, and they knew this about themselves, and were proud of it. (p.197)

In *Eardrum*, the significance of Chinnakuzhandai's life is measured by three aspects; his *thappu*, Parvathy, and her singing. And so, when he loses his hearing as a result of his habit of listening to the sound of water gushing out of a pipe, and Parvathy, as a result, stops singing altogether out of guilt (Periyavan, 2000/2012, p. 78), Chinnakuzhandai's life loses a part of its meaning. The essence of *Eardrum* lies in the connection the writer attempts to establish between man and his music, a fact which becomes even more intense in the case of one from a marginalised community like the Paraiyars. A Paraiyar's life is deprived of basic comfort, wealth and most importantly, dignity, and a story quoted by Buck & Kannan (2011) of a writer's older generation's experience best sums up that fact; "Dalit people (Paraiyars in the context of this article) in some situations were required to attach brooms to their rumps to obliterate their footprints in the street dust as they walked through upper caste areas" (p. ix).

Music and songs that are played and sung by these people, therefore, are not merely an expression of their need to entertain themselves. Instead, they are statements of freedom made from the core of their beings. It is when the Paraiyars are singing and dancing to the beat of their *thappu* that they find the meaning of their lives clearly defined, and their primeval instincts as *thappu*-playing and singing performers reawakened (Paige, 2003, p. 1). In a more practical context, music, songs and dance offer the Paraiyars a means of escape from their pain and suffering, and this is noted by Trawick (1988) based on her observations:

In part, the importance of songs to them is due to the preponderance of physical laborers among them: song does not require free hands, and it can transform labor from lonely drudgery into a kind of art form. Song, like dance, is democratic and communal-the only material needed is the body,

and in the very process of creating it, you share it with those around you. Finally, we might say that the songs of Paraiyar laborers were songs of hopeful self-affirmation. Paraiyars knew that times were changing and perhaps they might change in their favour. (p. 197)

The sound of the beat of *thappu* is said to be so powerful that it possesses the ability to reverberate through every cell of the player's being, and of the ones who listen to it, and make them dance in ecstasy to the beat. Arun, in his article on the symbolism of the *thappu/parai* describes his experience of speaking to a *thappu/parai* maker, "while I sat observing his work, he told me that the final sound of the drum should be *urumanum* (like the roar of an angry lion)" (2007b, p. 86). Azhagiya Periyavan (2000/2012) describes Chinnakuzhandai's body language as he plays the *thappu*, and in doing so, elevates its essence to an almost magical realm:

His mind too was vibrating with the drum. His eyes bright and glistened. His face was vibrating with the drum. His eyes grew bright and glistened. His face muscles were stretched and his teeth were visible. His hands, his whole body, the music itself – everything pulsated. The very air reverberated with the sound; the cattle-shed, the house, the street itself seemed to leap and twitch with the sound. (p. 77)

While negative connotations to its origins continue to stigmatise the *thappu/parai* due to its association with funerals, there are historians who think otherwise about the ancient instrument. Valarmathi (1999), in her defence of the *thappu/parai*, claims that it was historically used to announce war, and celebrate military victory, a fact which explains why the *thappu/parai* is also known as 'porrparai' (war drum) (pp. 4-6). Azhagiya Periyavan's choice of giving the *thappu* agency, and portraying the player of the *thappu* as half-deaf could be a symbolic representation of the Paraiyars who are not fully aware of the power that lies within them. The *thappu* is the identity of the *thappu* player, and yet, because he is half deaf, the *thappu* player can only partly appreciate the music that he produces. Similarly, the Paraiyar ethnic identity is the Paraiyar community's most powerful tool that can be revalorised to reclaim the Paraiyar pride that was once robbed off them. and if such a revalorisation successfully takes place, the stigma attached to not only the *thappu*, but also to Paraiyar identity, would be successfully wiped off.

CONCLUSION

Since the publication of the first modern Tamil novel on untouchability, the trend has been such that only works which attempt to revolutionise the minds of the untouchables have been acknowledged as valid representations of the untouchable communities of India. The conscious efforts by the Dalit literary movement to suppress the ethnic identities of individual caste groups such as the Paraiyars, in the name of consolidating the cause under the Dalit identity, may have its political and social benefits. However, in the name of uplifting the lives of untouchables on the whole, the advocates of the Dalit cause have consciously stripped the the untouchable groups in India of its ethnic identity, and have instead branded them as mere victims of oppression. Among Paraiyar writers in Tamil Nadu, however, it is comforting to know that there are people like Iyamam and Azhagiya Periyavan, to name a few, who still regard their ethnic culture as an important tool to empower their people. Unfortunately, though, the works of such writers are rarely translated from Tamil language to English, a fact which deprives the English-speaking world of becoming better exposed to the ethnic and ritualistic culture of the many untouchable communities in India, such as the Paraiyars. In

order for the untouchable communities such as Paraiyars to quash the stigma that is attached to their identity, and reclaim their pride in their ethnic roots, it is crucial that the true essence of the community's culture is made known to the world. As such, it is hoped that more publishing houses will undertake the tasks of translating a wider range of works of untouchable writers, instead of focusing only on those which fit into the standard revolutionary Dalit mould.

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