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Intersectional Slow Violence In Jothibai Pariyadath's Mayilamma: The Life Of A Tribal Eco-Warrior

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Abstract

The contribution of the Adivasi people towards environmental sustainability has always been a prominent factor from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary times. Their consistent non-violent resistances have put forth intersectional issues including race, gender and class along with the slow violence on the environment which otherwise is invisible. The article analyses how Jothibai Pariyadath's Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior and how the text represents intersectional slow violence and the hegemonic dominance surrounding the utilization of natural resources. The text is an oral narrative focusing on a tribal women Mayilamma and portrays the plight of Adivasi people through her. This article, thus, situates Adivasi people as the major victims of intersectional slow violence.

Keywords: Environmental Sustainability; Slow Violence; Adivasi Oral Narrative; Intersectional environmentalism; Mayilamma.

1. Mayilamma and the Narrative

Mayilamma is a simple oral autobiographical narrative which resonate Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* is an English translation of the original Malayalam version *Mayilamma: Oru Jeevitham* (2006) which was transcribed by Jothibai Pariyadath. The translation was carried out by Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Sreejith Varma under 2015 ASLE (the Association for Studies in Literature and the Environment) Translation Grant (Book Review, 2019). The translators identify *Mayilamma*, as a parallel of the oiko-autobiographies that "offer resistance to hegemonic mainstream narrative discourses that obfuscate the violence done to the environment at local and bioregional levels so that this vital information does not invite affirmative action in the form of legislation or monetary compensation" (Pariyadath xxiii).

Mayilamma was an Indian social activist who was awarded Speak Out award by the *Outlook* magazine as she effectively voiced for her people during Plachimada protest and she is popularly known as the Plachimada Heroine (Blogger). Hailing from the native Eravallar tribal community in Kerala, she had a significant part in the campaign against the exploitation of water resources as the founding member

of Coca-Cola Virudha Samara Samita or Anti Coca-Cola Struggle Committee (Pariyadath 1), a leading committee which organized various demonstrations and protests against the Company. Born in the village of Muthalamada, Mayilamma was married at the age of fifteen and became a widow with four children at the ripe age of twenty seven. Despite her challenging situation, she aspired to give her children the basic education unlike of her times. Going beyond her own children, she worked hard to bring Anganwadi (rural child and mother care centre) for the children in the village. She wanted to provide the opportunity which in her case was replaced with grazing cattle as a bonded laborer.

2. Intersectional Slow Violence

Slow violence is “an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2) as the impact of the violence is not immediate but it is consistent in the process. Understanding and exposing the slow violence is comparatively difficult unlike the conventional forms of violence which is visible and immediate. Representing slow violence is hard due to the reduced attention span of the people, where the development of media and communications creates “an age of continuous partial attention” (Nixon 13). Rob Nixon as the introducer of the term presents three kinds of challenges posed by the invisibility of slow violence, that is, representation, narrative and strategic. The representational and narrative issues can be handled by sufficient and effective narratives which should be appealing and dramatic enough to sustain the attention of the people towards the invisibility of slow violence among their individual environment. The solution for the strategic challenge, according to Nixon, is the intensified forms of resistance which is region specific. The chosen text of study *Mayilamma* encompasses the offered solutions - protesting against slow violence on the water resources in the area of Plachimada, a town in Pallakad district of the south Indian state Kerala. The narrative appeals to the empathy of the readers and it reveals the details of the resistance of the local Adivasi people against the exploitation and pollution of ground water.

The inequality in the distribution and the effects of the pollution of the resources varies among the people of various social strata; where the most affected are the Adivasi people who are environmentally marginalised as their “stakes in environment are high due to their dependence on natural resources for livelihoods” (Sharma 46). Considering the institutionalised discrimination intersecting caste and class or any other form of discrimination, women become the major victims as the environmental based slow violence gets magnified with the existing structural injustice by the social positioning and perceived cultural differences (Young 79).

The article establishes *Mayilamma*, a prominent grass root environmental narrative as a discourse on magnified forms of slow violence caused by intersectional oppression of caste, class and gender which henceforth emerges as a global social environmental narrative. The article also claims the importance of indigenous ethnicity and enforces the need for sustainable development and security against neo liberalistic trends as the neo liberal ideology facilitates global corporations to evade the concerns of “environmental injury, remediation and redress” (Nixon 46) of the marginalized people for the benefits of the capitalists rich.

3. Hegemony through the dominance of natural resources

The text articulates how the Adivasi people were marginalized by the dominant class and caste groups as a part of their everyday lives. The concept of hegemony is dominance and this is done by the acceptance of the dominated people which is asserted by the inclusive trend formation of the general ideology of the dominant people (352). Gramsci places the hegemony of civil society (appropriating the ethical content) as sphere belonging to the superstructure of society and the sphere of ideology and cultural organizations. (Bates 357) Here, the hegemonic diffusion of the honorific *muthalali* used by Mayilamma is a tangible embodiment of the assertions of slow violence. Literally meaning boss, *muthalali* is used to address the landowners of upper caste. The meaning of the word moves from a simple title packed with constructed meaning emphasizing the hegemony of institutionalized power structure within caste and class system. In contrast to the traditional cultural and social system of respecting the elders, the people from the Adivasi (tribal) community instinctively play a role in creating

the ideology despite the age or gender. This is the case to the poor people within the upper caste community owing to the capitalist trends. The reinforcement of the ideology is visible in the naming surrounding colonies of the village after the names of the *muthalalis* and Mayilamma states that: “Our Colony was named Vijayanagar when Vijayettan, son of Kathirvelu muthalali, became the Ward Member.” (Pariyadath 20). These hegemonic stances are tied to the environment and the private owning of land and natural resources from being a communal belonging.

Mayilamma’s frequent uttering of the term *muthalali* proves the depth of her acquisition of the systematic discrimination through the centuries. Majority ownership of resources by dominant class/caste group was a tool to manipulate the tribal people who are dependent on the environment which inflicts slow violence upon them. The conversations between Mayilamma and Pazhanimala whom she called *annan* (means elder brother) provide proper ground for the above argument. The following incidents in the narrative reveal the violence which is subtle and hardly visible. As only the traditional form of violence is considered as violence, the slow violence is “incremental and accretive” (Nixon 2) represented here gets magnified in such discourses like Mayilamma.

One such incident is when Pazhanimala had cultivated red gram in the fields leasing from one Mathavan Moothar of Kannimari. The price of lease was fixed to thirty sacks of gram by a mediator from fifteen rupees while the price of bag of gram was around seven rupees. Due to the failure of rain as not expected of the season and pest infestation he could only gain ten full bags of gram. Thus, the dispute ended in court case and as a result, he lost both the land leaving him with no money or work. This incident is representative of the lives many tribal people and small scale farmers which is effectively represented in the narrative as follow:

We who were known as the kings of the forest have now been brought low.... The misfortune of begging others for work as a supplicant with bent legs! The agony of waiting in long queues with pots for drinking water even during the monsoons!” (Pariyadath 19).

The storyteller, Mayilamma mourns that the people who were once known as the kings of the forests had to wait in agony for water even during the monsoons now. As in the olden days, even if the rains failed, the people never suffered from the need of water. The water from Aliyar dam would fill the Kambalathara Lake and it would flow into the Vinkalakkayam dam and Moolathara canal reaching the people. Water was abundant in places like Chittur and Peruvambu. The agricultural fields were like swamps, rich in water, and the rice plant would grow twice a year. The fertile field would be covered in slush and feet would sink when people stood on it. When the forest was cleared, paddy was grown in the low plains and maize, cotton, horse gram and millets on the high flatlands. Cultivation was done according to the seasons and people had work all around the year. They got a part of harvest instead of money as wages. After deforestation, questioning their ownership of the resources, initially the Adivasi people did not suffer much for their survival due to agriculture but in due course, in the recent decades their livelihood options for them are shrinking due to global economy, international agreements on trade and biodiversity, and national environmental and forest policies which affect their sustainable use of the natural resources and when these criteria is paired with “local resource use conflicts, poses difficult challenges to people’s livelihood strategies” (Krishna 149).

The twenty Adivasi colonies around the Perumatty panchayat were migrants from Tamilnadu. In the early days of their settlements, the Adivasi people did not have a proper graveyard. They had to carry the corpse to the burial grounds deep in the forest near the state border. Most of the time they had to fight with the *Gounders* (a dominant caste mentioned in the narrative) who were against the idea of Adivasi people using the forest as graveyard. The text points out one such incident, the *Gounders* who had cultivated in the space of the graveyard and confronted the Adivasi people by addressing them as *Malayali* (keralites) people. The *Gounders* had threatened the Adivasi people of breaking their legs and denying them of their basic rights to land. The people received a burial ground in their new settlement after such disputes. The caste conflict being at one level added with the regional discrimination – Tamilians and Malayalis – made it difficult for the Adivasi people of border lands. They had to become

displaced in their own forests. The tragedy of the people arises as Mukherjee states when there is “unequal competition for resources, where development turns people into ecorefugees” (Rangarajan 91-2).

The institutionalized caste system and its dominance become visible when the Adivasi people lost their lands to the upper caste *muthalali*. As Mayilamma narrates how the land from Kanyakumari to Meenakshipuram was the property of the Kollengode King and he had distributed it to the people he liked and a handsome portions of land were given to Adivasi people. As the landlords would not woo the forest lands or till the lands, and once the forests were cleared and prepared, the land lords who were mainly Tamil *Gounders*, got the lands by means of threat, blackmail and violence. If the tribal people did not accept the offer they provide without any resistance for one or two hundred rupees they would be beaten and the lands would be forcibly acquired. The people had to suffer a lot while clearing the forest. They had to dig up roots and wood chips from forests to sell and get their daily foods which they eventually lose to the rich upper caste and had to work as laborers in the land which once belonged to them.

Mayilamma recalls how her grandfather had lands and how she had played with the copper plate “patta titles” (Pariyadath 44). They did not get the patta back which her grandfather gave them to the *muthalali* for safe keeping. The people did not get their land after they were leased to the *muthalalis*. Mayilamma recalled that how they had lost their lands, and then their house; by the time she was grown up, she remembered to be living in a rented house far from owning a land. In those days she believed the *muthalalis* were generous to give the meager sum of five to ten rupees for their works. She did not realize that they were duped and the men were happy to get spending money for drinking in the toddy shop. She, thus, insisted that the next generations should be educated to thwart such situations.

The hegemonic enhancement with the alliance of environmental natural resources control mentioned above makes the tribal women as worse victims comparatively. During the childhood days of Mayilamma, the only women who go to school from their community were Mayilamma and her friends Koli and Muthamma. The *muthalalis* were not happy about the Adivasi children going to school as “there would be a shortage of hands at work” (Pariyadath 26) and they tried to prevent them from going to school. After a few months she had to quit to school to take care of her baby sister and household work. Her father was convinced that the school anyway was not a place for a girl. The *muthalali*'s manager wanted Mayilamma to take the cows for grazing and her father had to send her to earn money. Mayilamma had to cut grasses and graze the cows along with other children for minimal wages and the overseer would not give those meagre wages if the bundle weighed less. The intergenerational and intersectional ideologies within the communal patriarchal structure enforce the subordination of women. They had to take care of the domestic chores and they also work as daily labourers. “Because of the prevailing gender ideology of many of these socio-cultural groups, women bear the major responsibility for food provisioning” (Krishna 149), which is not the case in the upper caste or rich households.

Slow violence on environment perpetuates with the intergenerational hegemony enforced by the intersectional politics of gender, race, class, region, religion and caste of the marginalized people. In the survey *Water Insecurity*, Nair (2008) analysed the caste wise socio economic characteristics of Plachimada people including the factors of the distribution of population, employment status, education habitat conditions, land ownership, and class wise analysis of educational achievements, occupation, household durable assets. The survey concludes that “the majority of the poor are tribal agricultural labourers” (47) who were not only poor in terms of income but also by the above mentioned factors.

The intersectional add-ons of caste and class makes the tribal women as doubly marginalized. Mrudula, et al., presents that the main cause of the violence against women is the failure to view that women belonged to a different group and the intersection of caste and class influence social discriminations. Additionally, the responsibility of an entire family falls on women in most of the poor households. When the people had to travel an average of two kilometres every day to bring water, ‘the people’ mostly refer to women who had to bear the responsibility of the family as around 88 percent of the responsibility fall on the adult females while only 10 percent men and 2 percent girls took the

responsibility of bringing water. (Nair 53). The polluted water, as Mayilamma recalls, turned even worse and it cannot be used to cook or drink or even bathing. The water caused dermatological and other health issues like sticky hairs and fingers, burn and itchy spots, getting tired often and drowsy, and swelling of the eyelids. Women in particular are most affected as Staci Jeanne Krupp points out that socio-economic factors act as a threat to environmental health in particular to women as they are subjected to wider exposures to environmental pollution than men. Hence, Krupp states “therefore poor women are likely the most vulnerable to environment pollution” (117). With the decline of economic standards due to the loss of natural resources, the tribal women had to lose the privilege of education and their togetherness or sisterhood is challenged. They are placed low at the hierarchy due to the patriarchal system which is magnified with the economy and social injustice.

The systematic discrimination gets aggravated by climate change and the individuals who are “the least responsible for the pollution warming our planet, are the most affected” (Robinson xii). This is relatable throughout the indigenous marginalized communities of the global south despite their sustainable lifestyles.

4. Conclusion

Mayilamma, the Adivasi oral narrative represents slow violence on the people and the natural resources. When the intersectional aspects of caste, gender and class are analyzed along the line, the narrative itself becomes a part of the resistance and suggests for a holistic approach of any environmental issues and the slow violence.

Mayilamma presents the interdependence of the tribal people and the environment and their desire of not become the victim of “imaginative displacement” (Nixon 150). The landscape and ecosystem that the indigenous people occupy is accumulated with cultural meaning and traditional knowledge. Once the natural resources are exploited the environmental changes leads to the destruction of the attached cultural significance. Mayilamma’s community was long dependent on the forest which was disrupted by the change in the environment through globalization which brought in deforestation. As a result, the Adivasi people’s lifestyle changed disturbing their harmony with the forest. Later, with the flourish in agriculture, the Adivasi people adapted using their traditional value to get accustomed with the changing environment. The Adivasi people were the traditional inhabitant of the forests and they were a self-sustaining community who protected the eco system through their cultural knowledge and practices. The traditional knowledge was passed down by the elder women of their community as the women folk gather every day to share stories of the past and present.

The indigenous tribal people have less carbon footprint compared to the industrial society. The consequence of the resource exploitation affects the poor tribal people while the rich consumers reap the profit. Robinson suggests in another context that empowering the tribal communities is the only way to protect the forests and to gradually reduce carbon emissions. Considering tribal people who are the world’s poorest inhabitants and she concludes that encouraging them to manage their forest and the natural resources can uplift their poverty and at the same time contribute to sustainable development maintaining the ecology (75-6).

Mayilamma is a representative act of exposing the slow violence and the successful demonstration against it can be foreseen as the beginning of the mainstreaming of grass root movement which focuses on the indigenous people and their efforts to preserve the local biodiversity. The article concludes that the knowledge of tribal people should be comprehended and appropriated to the environmental governance and the empowerment of tribal people and women who possess such knowledge can contribute to the sustainable development of the global south.

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