

## 5.1. Utopia as Disruption in Paul Chirrakarode's *Pulayathara*

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### **Abstract**

This essay seeks to study contemporary Dalit novels within the framework of utopian studies, using Fredric Jameson's definition of utopia as a disruption of what is familiar and known. Dalit literature, in particular, Dalit novels, has been studied as a critique of Brahminical hegemony through a mimetic representation of social reality. This reading leaves something to be desired, as it focuses more on the sociological aspect of this body of work than on the aesthetic and political possibilities it offers. Gail Omvedt makes an intervention in Dalit studies in this regard. In her book *Seeking Begumpura*, she looks at utopian alternatives offered in the tradition of anti-caste intellectual thought from the Bhakti poets' radical visions of an egalitarian world to the possibilities offered in the political thought of anti-caste leaders in the twentieth century. Through a reading of Paul Chirrakarode's novel *Pulayathara*, this essay seeks to extend this idea to the study of Dalit novels that can be read, using Jameson's definition, as texts that offer utopian possibilities through a disruption of the real. It is argued that utopian possibilities are a crucial element of the anti-caste politics of these texts, which have so far only been read as critiques.

**Key words:** Utopia, Dalit, Possibilities, Disruption, Resistance

Anti-caste resistance has had a long political and intellectual history in India. Anti-caste intellectual thought has been traced as far back as the *bhakti* traditions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and even before in the emergence of counter-ideologies such as Buddhism. One contemporary intellectual who has traced this history is Gail Omvedt. In *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*, Omvedt traces the earliest anti-caste articulations in a utopian envisioning of a place without sorrow and without caste in the *bhakti* poet-saint Ravidas's song, *Begumpura*, dated to sometime in the late fifteenth

to early sixteenth century. She similarly finds a strain of utopian thought in anti-caste intellectual thought, from the *bhakti* poets to the radical intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Mahatma Jotirao Phule, E. V. M. Naicker Periyar, Pandita Ramabai, and B. R. Ambedkar. Yet, Omvedt is perhaps the only one to study anti-caste thought from a utopian perspective. This lens has been absent from contemporary anti-caste studies, especially in the reading of Dalit literature, which has been largely studied as a sociological critique and focuses more on a realistic portrayal of suffering and victimization in Dalit life.

In her book, Omvedt starts with a definition of utopia as an imagined place, and goes on to explore utopia as a visionary process that has two aspects; namely, ecstasy (*bhakti*) and reason (*dhyān*). While utopia as ecstasy is an emotionally charged articulation of the possibility of a better world, utopia as reason is rooted in an historical analysis of present conditions (Omvedt, 2008: 10). One way to look at utopia is as a fully articulated society that represents a better world (Sargent, 1994); another way is to regard utopia as heuristic, as hope, desire, or an impulse that inhabits or engages with utopian possibilities (Jameson, 2005: 1–9).

Fredric Jameson makes a distinction between utopian form and utopian impulse. He defines utopian impulse as being found through a hermeneutic method, while utopian form is one that requires a closure or constraint. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, he is concerned with redefining utopian impulse. Even as Jameson is concerned with utopian representation as an analytical tool, he situates it outside of the utopian form. He theorizes a definition of utopia as disruption, a disruption of the present by the future, a future which offers ideological possibilities. He argues that utopian articulations are necessarily emerging from fixed ideological positions and, as such, singular utopias are necessarily constrained by this fixity. Disruption thus is a radical break from such ideological constraint. It is utopian because it implies the existence and emergence of alternative possibilities to the fixity of an ideological position. Disruption as a radical break leads to a proliferation of ideological possibilities. Utopia, according to Jameson, is the disruption of the present, the known, and the familiar by the future, the unknown, and the unfamiliar (Jameson, 2005: 2–4, 231).

This essay is concerned with Jameson's definition primarily because his rearticulation of utopia situates utopias not in texts that represent alternate or better worlds as fully articulated societies, but as a discursive strategy that considers texts as articulating a utopian impulse. Jameson's redefinition opens up the opportunity to study Dalit texts differently. The following is an attempt to read a Dalit novel through the lens of utopia as disruption, as offered by Jameson. One of the reasons for the privileging of the realist lens in the study of Dalit literature has been the preoccupation with the sociological and mimetic representation of contemporary society. That is a necessary but limited understanding of

the Dalit novel. This essay argues, instead, that Dalit novels engage in a disruption of the familiar ("familiar" being the dominant feudal, caste-based reality) by the introduction of unfamiliar ideas or moments that not only critique the social structure but evoke possibilities of alternatives.

Paul Chirakkaroode's 1962 Malayalam novel *Pulayathara* has been identified as the first Dalit novel. *Pulayathara* was made available to a wider audience with a new English translation in 2019. The novel is the story of a community of untouchables in Kerala society, Pulayans, both Hindu and Christians, who seek to survive in and question the hostile socio-economic system. Thevan Pulayan's son Kandankoran converts to Christianity to marry the girl he loves, even as his father becomes destitute, losing the home he himself had built. Others in the Church meanwhile begin to question the hierarchies existing in the Church between the upper caste and the Dalit Christians, who are referred to as "new Christians".

Since the publication of the new translation, the book has been reviewed and written about widely (Kannan, 2019; Meera, 2019; Phyllis, 2019). The focus of the largely non-academic reviewers remains on the suffering and abject lack that the book represents. The idea of home for the Pulayan represents constant loss and precarity, Nikhitha Phyllis argues (2019). My contention in this essay is that, even though the critique of the feudal caste structures is inherent to the plot and the narratorial voice, the focus of the critics has been a lot more on the critique and rather less on the utopian ideas that the text also represents. This paper will read *Pulayathara* as an enactment of utopia as disruption, through a look at its overall thematic structure, characterization, and narrative point of view.

The title *Pulayathara*, literally translated as "Pulaya's land or home", is itself a disruption of the hegemonic ownership of land by the upper castes. The title is indicative of a reclamation of land by the Pulaya. It is utopian, for it disrupts the idea that land belongs to those who own it and not to those who till it. It also evokes a history when the Pulayas did own land. The presence of a strong and clear narratorial voice which questions the nature of the system from the very beginning of the novel is another disruption that is utopian. The narrator interjects into the plot and questions where and how a struggle could be achieved. He asks at the close of the first chapter if a struggle could not come about if the younger generation stood up to the landlords.

The representation of a process of conversion to Christianity as a rejection of Brahmanical Hinduism may be seen as a transgressive act. Yet even as conversion to Christianity is a recurrent theme throughout the novel, it is not presented as any real alternative to the feudal social structure. The concept of conversion is not a disruption in this novel, rather the disruption is found in the ultimate rejection of the Church itself by the Dalit "new Christians", as they are referred to by upper caste Christians. It is this rejection which is truly utopian.

Disruption has also been enacted through the representation of a younger generation who makes different decisions and is more acutely aware of the discrimination meted out to them. It is in the representation of characters such as Kandankoran that the novel enacts disruption. From among three new Christians who live on Church land, it is the youngest, Paulos, who is described as “an irritant to the parish priest and the upper castes in the Church” (132). When Preacher Stephen comes to preach instead of the new Christian, Preacher Pathros, he asks why Preacher Pathros was not invited when the whole congregation had agreed upon it. On the day of Azhakan’s baptism, he further asks, “Why do our people join the Church?” (101). He similarly attempts to analyse the reasons for the same, attempting to reason out an explanation that emerges as an instinct instead of a direct answer. The narrator remarks, “Paulos could not explain what the profit was. But there was something” (165). Paulos eventually becomes the one to lead the older ones, Outha Pulayan and Pathros, in questioning the functioning of the Church, and suggests that the new Christians should stand for election to the Church council. He also ultimately calls for the meeting of the new Christians, which takes place near the tea stall below the hill-top where the Church stood, after being denied the location of mission land for the meeting by the Church authorities. The disruption is enacted here through the character of Paulos who takes the first step towards questioning the discriminatory practices of the Church, and also calls a meeting of new Christians at the annual anniversary of the establishment of the Church.

Kandankoran converts to Christianity to marry Anna *kidathi*<sup>1</sup>, and adopts the Christian name Thoma after his conversion. He also represents the new generation (allegorically, the future which disrupts), who search for possibilities and alternatives to the slave-like relationship to the upper castes. In his relationship with Kandankoran, the landlord’s son seeks to emulate the relationship that their fathers share, yet he is uncertain whether Kandankoran would show him the same kind of deference. In the first chapter itself, he is described as insolent by the landlord’s son, “with his shoulders straight, chest stuck out, his curly hair smoothly swept backward, his coloured dhoti reaching his feet” (11). The implication is that as a Pulayan, Kandankoran has no right to act and dress in a way that is not deferential to the upper castes. He is disillusioned with the Church right after joining it, as he faces outright mocking on account of being a new Christian, and feels bound by his debt to the Church for allowing him to build his home on mission land. As a final act of disruption, he decides not to baptize his son. He is adamant that “he would not allow another new Christian to be offered to the Church. Let his son at least be free” (197). He rejects the Church as an alternative. Instead, his alternative is to send his son to school and educate him. In Thoma’s decision not to baptize his son, it is the very idea of a better future imagined

through educational opportunities for his son outside of the Church that disrupts the discriminatory present and is thus utopian.

The rejection of the Church by the community of Pulayans at large is the final and most central disruption in the novel. The idea of the meeting begins with the lower caste Christians' realization of exploitation and control of the congregation by the upper caste Christians. They decide to call other Dalits who were educated and who could answer some of their questions, such as what the upper castes gained by making the Pulayans and the Parayans (another Dalit caste group) join the Church. This idea of calling the educated from amongst them to the meeting, not only points to the realization of solidarity with other lower castes but is also disruptive and utopian for the possibility such a gathering of intellectual minds from the Dalit castes would unfold. The very idea of such a meeting, of a celebration by the Pulayans, is disruptive since it gives rise to further possibilities of collective action. Yet, the narrative refrains from showing the actual meeting taking place. The meeting is a radical break, an entry point into a new kind of resistance which offers many possibilities that are left unexpressed. The novel ends on a hopeful note, represented both by the meeting that is about to begin and the idea of a brighter future in Anna *kidathi's* mind. Thoma's son and the meeting are both symbolic of the future that has managed to disrupt the casteist reality of the present.

The disruption in *Pulayathara* is enacted through moments and ideas that challenge both the feudal hegemony and the Christian social structure. The text seems to argue that any real liberation or alternatives are only possible beyond both the Brahmanical and colonial/missionary structures. *Pulayathara* is utopian in as much as it disrupts the familiarity of the feudal society with the unfamiliarity of transgressive moments, and ends with a note of a future filled with possibilities.

## Note

1. *Kidathi* is an affectionate term for a daughter; literally "little one".

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