

# Subjectivity of christian dalit: reading subjectivity through a tamil song



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In a caste-dominated Indian society, it is impossible for a servant to exercise her freedom with her master but in a Christian frame, it assumes new meanings, albeit with its unique challenges. Especially in a feudal context, the dominant caste person being the master, a servant and his/her/their master in a discourse is a fascinating phenomenon. This quest about the subjectivity of the marginalized Christian in an Indian society, informs the Liberationist framework to situate the possibilities of a vibrant personhood for a Christian Dalit. In a caste-ridden society, *viduthalai* [1] or liberation is a prerogative for persons dominated by the structures of domination and the mundane practices of caste. Through a close reading of the song *Arunodhayam* [2], not only is the subjugated person's selfhood explicated, this paper also brings up the subjectivity of Godhead who becomes part of the two-way conversation, bringing to the fore the mutuality of this relationship of an otherwise Lord-Servant vertical relationship. This analysis aims to open the text towards multiple readings implied in a text [3]. The Lord-Servant relationship is where the divine other and the human self or the divine Self and the human other is traversed through the multi-faceted Indian caste-Christian phenomenon. Often, in normative, western Christian Theology, the divine agent is contextualized within the abstract Aristotle's unmoved mover, a notion he described in his work *Metaphysics* [4]. But, in this paper, the rationale is to foreground the often-objectified Dalit as a subject, like Christ brings to limelight the 'voiceless' Samaritan women [5] through his discourse of reasoning and spirituality with the woman in the well. The choice of my author too, like the Samaritan woman, remains a faceless person but nevertheless someone with a voice who found his/her/their way to be published in the songbook of a non-mainstream, non-

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mainline, non-denominational[6]church, i. e. The Salvation Army. This paper thus as its method and in its content foregrounds the voices that are seldom heard in the halls of higher learning but voices God intends to listen to, intently and with goodwill. I was driven to choose this, as I am curious as to why mainstream academia and the world often choose to speak *of* and *about* the Dalits , but rarely *with* [7] . Through this analysis, I would like to propose a re-reading of the relationship of the Dalit and in specifically the Christian Dalit[8]subject, who is either an object or a partial subject in a caste hegemonic world, with God.

The agency I found in Zoe C. Sherinian’s analysis of Rev. James Theophilus Appavoo’s song titled *Yesusaami Katruthantha Sebam*, or The Lord’s Prayer, I felt must be revisited and resituated. While I appreciate Sherinian’s analysis as a white woman musicologist, I sense her analysis does not offer the oppressed subjectivity a fuller agency outside the paradigm of resistance against injustice and thus falls for one of the dualities that circulates in Dalit discourse; the pathetic servant or the always-angry villain. The Christian Dalit remains a subject who is in a condescending relationship vis-à-vis God’s mercy. My proposal is an intersubjective reality, wherein God and the Dalit subject are in a posture of discourse that moves beyond identity centered around *pathos* . Christian Dalit Identity, I found problematic as framed within the realm of suffering, *pathos and* resistance , and thereby must move towards realities of sovereignty and autonomy of the Dalit personhood, which is expressed through song as a mode of writing. My notion of the songs as writing Dalit subjectivity is socio-ethically similar to James Cone’s *The Spirituals and the Blues* [9]where he states, “ Black people did not

unquestioningly adopt the white interpretation of scriptural language. Rather they invested scriptural language with the meaning that was consistent with their struggle to affirm themselves as people, their identity and their freedom." (McFarland 310)

Ethnomusicologists study music as human expression and meaning (Campbell 2004, 27) which does not treat justice or liberation as its end[10]. While my concern is to recover an autonomous subjectivity and intersubjective reality of the Christian Dalit's relationship with Godhead. Through the song, *Yesusaami Katruthantha Sebam* and in text *Tamil Folk Music as Liberation Theology* as a work in general, Sherinian looks into the cultural historical phenomenon of the music of Tamil Dalit community in Madurai. In Sherinian's words, her work "... elucidates the agency of those who use and freely recompose Christian folk songs as everyday acts of resistance to the inhuman systems of caste gender, and class oppression in India." (Sherinian 3) I pose an intersubjective reading through the song *Arunodhayam* as it brings up the liberating possibilities of the Christian Dalit personality. I believe, the limits of suffering must be broached, to bring out the aspects which are beyond suffering, though suffering cannot be disregarded as a necessary aspect of the self-construction of the Christian Dalit personality. It is owing to the hermeneutical trope of the use of exodus experience[11]and God as a suffering servant which is part of this template of positioning Dalit Hermeneutics and fashioning of the subject. Thus, reproducing the image of pathos on the one hand and on the other or the assertive and angry Dalit existence, creating a duality of images within the larger Dalit discourse. Stanza 4 of the Song phrased " *Maa kirubai venumae,*

*Ilavidil naan verumayae*" [12] falls for a similar trap, of exhausting one's own personhood, in order to attain agency is both realism and a reason to critique such a literary trope, as it reifies and reproduces the dominant and non-dominant categories. This makes liberationist agenda, a demanding task.

I also avoid an essentialist view of unitary Christian Dalit identity and thereby avoid fixation of Dalit identity as a phenomenon etched in stone. As caste works itself across through multiple modes and intersections vis-a-vis urban, rural, metropolitan, cosmopolitan, gendered, to name a few axes that affect the performance of caste and its effects on Christian Dalit's human realities. In the backdrop of these human realities, God's relationship with the dehumanized Dalit section of the society is a witness to God's personality as well. This expressed in Jesus' own words, a preference for the poor in spirit, according to his sermon on the mount or in Gustavo Gutierrez's words, a preferential option for the poor[13]. It is this hermeneutically-rich intersubjective reality found within the egalitarian relationship with God that offers the Dalit subjectivity a space to explore the world, one's being in relation to fellow humans, one's being in relation to God. It is a text of multiplicities and not merely a text that can be deconstructed to perpetuate abstractions, but my agenda is to foreground realities of liberation for the community and engagement with God . The author works against the norms of caste that disrupt the universal ethics of love, by engaging in God's love as solidarity for the Dalit community, for the scope for this paper and for the oppressed majority, continues to be my rationale. In the chorus of the song, the phrase *Arul Baranae Kelumae* brings up the possibility of the Dalit

subject as the initiator of conversation in an unequal order of caste, made possible through the Christian framework. No servant or the non-dominant person can afford to ask a master to listen to his or her plea or ask the master, either a man or woman, to reason with his or her thought. The phrase exposes the role of a proactive agent rather than that of a meek slave that a caste order continues to demand. Here the author is asking God to listen to her/his/their woes. Even when a person in a slave position tries to reason with the 'higher' caste, the thoughts and feelings are bound to be disregarded.

In Tamil, this phrase translates as asking the blessed lord to listen to the appeal. This happens when speaking to someone in authority. This also means, do listen to me, the conversation like God's discourse with Job and Isaiah, where this conversation happens on a level-playing even though the two agents involved are differently placed corporeally. This exposes the discourse of subaltern subjectivity as a radical exercise of inter-subjectivity which cannot be dictated by time and space. Here caste is not able to disrupt the relationship that God offers a believer. This reality which is post-conversion in nature, for descendants of ex-untouchables offers a space of re-orienting their personality through a recovery of their autonomy. From a discourse of *being* untouchable within the Indian caste particularity, this conversation moves into an egalitarian universality. Here in the conversation, universality for the person, selfhood is explored within God's divine expansiveness and God's vision for a world that is devoid of caste, gender and class prejudices. A new creation-world in Christ that is brave and does not tie caste prejudices to one's name is made possible, through a non-

rigid hierarchy. This self-fashioning by the subaltern author is equally a riposte to Indian American scholars like Arjun Appadurai who, in a review article titled *Is Homo Hierarchicus?*, states the need for recovering postcolonial processes of subjectivities. Appadurai proposes to move beyond the western anthropological reification of caste and its concomitant factor i. e. hierarchy, to locate the cultural processes and identities. Sherinian, rightly points out the fact that Appadurai overlooks the daily violent realities perpetrated by dominant forces in India. Contesting another facet of the song is reading subjectivity in a globalized-cum-caste-particular reality.

*Karunayudan Kadantharavil Kaapatrineer Theivemae, Karanguvithu Sthothirikiraen - En Yesuvae, Siranguninthu Sthothirikiraen.* This explains the realities of a globalized world economy which intersects with caste economy. This plea of the subaltern subject expresses the reality of majority Indian population who are middle classes and poor while the minority affluent class-caste reap the fruits of liberalization, privatization and globalization of the 90s era. Intellectuals like Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff and Kwok Pui-Lan[14] explain this aspect of social and economic situations in a world that is driven by poverty and unequal relations which are decided by neo-liberal policies of capitalist oppression. The aspect of Selfhood is expressed through the stanza *Karunayudan Kadantharavil* as well, it exposes the double solidarity i. e. God the dominant subject expressing solidarity with the servant-believer, the dominated person within the caste and capital twin hegemonic world. *Karunaiyudan Kadantharavil Kaapatrineer Theivamae*, as the stanza continues, proposes a significant reference to God as a benevolent protector. The deity who protected the writer the previous night

when he/she/they was/were trying to sleep, because living in a colony that is full of caste zealots literally puts the life of Dalit Christians at risk. This Lord-Servant relationship exposes the protector-friend who cares for the servant-friend amidst the conflicts of caste and continues to honor their relationship. Such fraught realities are part of the modern-day India where technology to fly to moon is a possibility, but not enough human will to treat one another as human enough. Sherinian notes that “ despite the ostensibly egalitarian underpinnings of Christianity, many Tamil Christians identify themselves by a specific caste or *jati* (sub-caste) group.” (Sherinian 16) It is thus in a world where the Christian and the Hindu hegemonic world come together to affect the citizenship for the Dalit Christian, and he/she/they turns to God’s divine mystery to search for an egalitarian life-world in order to exercise agency. Through this discourse, a kind of Popular Liberation Theology, to borrow Leonardo Boff’s and Clodovis Boff’s term, is born.

This theology is not the theology of the high-brow academia, not the liberation theology that happens in closed spaces of the wealthy institutions armed with all the politically correct jargon or the events accessible only to first world scholars with access to the mainstream university spaces and press. This is the diffuse and disparate, born-in-and-through-the-pains of the people kind of theology where in God listens like she listened to Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl who was left in the wilderness. Such is the fraught nature of the Christian Dalit status caught between two worlds, between Hindu hegemony and that of the Christian caste Christians. Whereas, in a caste society, there is no possibility of a relationship between the object and the subject. The early morning prayer demands that God must also take



initiative to be in this subject-subject relationship. This inter-subjectivity of the person in relationship with God becomes an act of sovereignty against dominant hierarchy-ridden structures that divide-and-rule the subaltern population. The benevolent force in God thus not only protects the oppressed sections of the society but anticipates in waiting to have conversation with persons forced to the margins of the society.

*Karanguvithu Sthotharikiren* refers to being respectful in a posture of humility with hands folded, to express reverence and to express utmost humility. It can mean, that the essentialized notion of Dalit subjectivity is expressed and reproduced via the *pathos* of human existence and a person who bows down to God in reverence. This is often seen as abjection according to the caste ethos. The posture in *Karanguvithu Sthotharikiren* is not the reverence for the caste norms and the caste norms that inflect such a posture. This is a radical posture of recognizing God with utmost recognition of one's locatedness in the world and belonging to a liberating relationship that liberates from bondage towards contours of flourishing for the self and for the world. This mode of subjectivity is about different historical processes that happen in time and space, which cannot be homogenized according to the Hindu caste realm's dictates. This is a recognition of the gift of life that is made possible through this inter-subjective posturing before a divine agent who helps inaugurate an egalitarian ethos for the Dalit subject. In this regard, one must consider the historical social contradictions that demarcate the norms of the Hindu lord for the Dalit and the Christian conception of Lord who is present to redeem the oppressed, towards a liberating life world.

Stuart Hall, states in his piece that “ the recognition that there are different social contradictions with different origins; that the contradictions which drive the historical process forward do not always appear in the same place, and will not always have the same historical effect.”[15](Stuart Hall 92)

Another interpretation of why the person acts in a way of reverence is by Jyoti Sahi, an Indian artist who works on tribal and folk cultures, and Indian Christian art forms. Sahi states that, “ Humility, by the way, comes from the earth ( *humus*) and is characterized by a kind of earthy common sense.”

(Sugirtharajah 91) Therefore, locating the organs of a Dalit subject in abjection helps understand the once-objectified through, A. P. Nirmal’s statement analysis of religious tradition. A. P. Nirmal states that “ The dominant religious tradition denied to the dalits the right to pray. Rama therefore, simply killed Shambuka and performed a religious act ... For Dalits, Rama, is a killer-God.” (Sugirtharajah 35) On another note, it is also such a religiosity in the realm of the Christian framework that sets off the possibilities for interreligious belongings. Such multiplicity of the subaltern subject that can be traced, for instance, in Raj Nadella’s reading of hybridity of the Samaritan woman in contextualizing multiple religious belongings. Such readings helped me situate the Dalit subject as a non-singular subject that will be situated in an axis across different landscapes.

Thus, I set out to show that the Christian Dalit subject has asserted his/her/their agency, through the song, not in a manner of pure *pathos* or anger that is often cloaked in the discourses, both Christian and Secular. This is a multiple way of situating one’s own subjectivity within multiple points of interactions and convergences which cannot be subsumed through a single

interpretive framework. As Joseph Prabhakar Dayam notes in his *Gonthemma Gorika: Reimagining the Divine Feminine Dalit Christian Theo/alogy*, the non-Christian theological traditions that "... poses a challenge to the traditional Judeo-Christian theological language that conceives the 'wholly otherness' of God as the essential nature of the divine." (Clarke, Peacock 140), my agenda was to write a note on resituating the language in which Dalit Subject is framed. And unlike Zoe Sherinian's analysis of the Dalit Subject, like most of the Dalit discourse, who is the passive subject who learns *from* God or the Self that always protests, my analysis has situated the subject through multiple modes of interaction, most often as the interactive Self in a discourse and at other times, the suffering agent. Thereby, I have disrupted my own conceptions so far, of a singular mode of situating the Christian Dalit and probe this further for another occasion.

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[1]Viduthalai refers to liberation in Tamil. It has secular connotations but shall be appropriate for a Liberationist reading of Christian Songs.

[2] *Arunodhayam* is a reference to the dawn, and in this song it is in relation to the writer's interaction with God. Here, it refers to the Tamil Song title found in the Salvation Army Tamil Song Book.

[3]Text, in this paper, refers to the Songs analyzed.

[4]“ The Internet Classics Archive | Metaphysics By Aristotle.” Classics. mit. edu. N. p., 2018. Web. 18 Dec. 2018.

[5]“ Oremus Bible Browser: John 4.” Bible. oremus. org. N. p., 2018. Web. 17 Dec. 2018.

[6]To employ the phrase a White Progressive Male Clergy, here in the US, used to introduce me to the congregation.

[7]I encountered this notion of *with* while reading Joseph Prabhakar Dayam’s treatment of *Mission At, With and From the Margins*, where he states, “ the church’s mission is to be understood not in a paternalistic language of ‘ mission to’ but as mission at, with and from.” Dayam in Rajkumar, Peniel. *Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives* . Regnum Books International, 2014.

[8]The language of begins to emerge after Arvind P. Nirmal’s *Towards a Christian Dalit Theology*

[9]The discourse of spirituals by James Cone talk of bondage, and the collective assertion of the Black fraternity

[10]Foo

[11]A. P. Nirmal, like the Black Theologians continue to use the exodus narrative while recovering and recreating the story of liberation and

[12]This stanza asks for God to be gracious to him/ her/ them and without God’s grace, the person will be emptied.

[13]Gustavo Gutierrez expands on the idea of *Option for the Poor* in *Transcendence and Historical Liberation*

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**[14]This aspect of globalization that affects the third world is discussed in the essay *Liberation Theology in the Twenty-First Century* by Kwok Pui-lan**

[15]Stuart Hall discusses this idea of Signification and Representation in *Signification, representation, ideology*