

Beyond absentia: Analysing the politics of folk polyphony in exerting Dalit identity in S. Hareesh's *Moustache*

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Abstract: S. Hareesh's *Meesha (Moustache)* is a Malayalam novel set in Kuttanad, Kerala, that unravels the tale of a Dalit Christian, Vavachan, popularly known as 'Moustache.' During an era when growing a moustache was forbidden for a *Pulaya*, he became infamous for owning one. Moustache's story majorly takes place between 1939 and 1947, when Kerala had a caste-based social stratification. Dalits are viewed as mere exchangeable goods and are otherwise absent in the tales produced by the upper caste. However, the folksongs and polyphony in *Moustache* consciously assert the existence of a multicultural society. The songs become strong political statements potent for social change. They foreground the Dalit community's existence, mark their plight, and elevate their life by reclaiming their capacity. The article thus analyses the politics of employing folk polyphony, the concept of Mikhail Bakhtin, as a narrative device in exerting Dalit identity in the novel. The folksongs themselves have a polyphonic nature, along with the polyphonic structure of the novel. With the aid of folk polyphony, the Dalit characters, Vavachan, Seetha, Chella, and Pachuppilla, open up to diverse viewpoints, multiple possibilities, and contradicting positions. They compel the uncouth, savage, seductive Dalit representations to step aside while negotiating and renegotiating their existing Dalit identities. Amongst them, Vavachan transforms himself from a starving lower caste body to the larger-than-life immutable 'Moustache.' Through those narratives, he becomes a man of multiple identities- a Dalit, a saviour of poor people, a lover, a villain, a rapist, a trickster, and many more. *Moustache* unravels a Dalit traversing an elite casteist patriarchal delta space, exerting his agency and multiple identities through the folk polyphonic narrative that tides against the subordination of voices. It extends him as an open-ended tale- a living myth.

Keywords: Dalit, identity, folksongs, polyphony, multicultural, *Moustache*

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Introduction

The article analyses the Malayalam novel *Meesha* by S. Hareesh but considers the English translation *Moustache* by Jayasree Kalathil for quotes. 'Moustache' refers to the character Vavachan throughout the transcript, and Moustache refers to the novel's title.

Moustache (Meesha) transgresses the oppressive social structures and breaks into pluralistic possibilities and alterities of being. Through the novel, S. Hareesh explores the attempts of high castes and societal authorities to eliminate Vavachan for his courageous act of growing facial hair, which is forbidden for Dalits. The novel draws the transformation of Vavachan into Moustache, a living legend, through folk songs, tales, and various peoples' narratives. Hareesh employs many narrative techniques like folksongs, magic realism, and memories, interlinking with the rituals of people from different strata of life, a fluid timeline where past, present, and future encircle, and most relevantly, the polyphonic narrative structure to engage with the monologic, authoritative voice of the dominant caste structure in Kerala. The article employs a qualitative approach with textual analysis as its method. Focusing on the folksongs and polyphonic narrative technique, this article aims to have a dialogue to reassert the Dalit identity by invoking the multicultural society drawing inspiration from Michail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony.

The novel is set in Kuttanad, a below-sea-level farming region on the southwest coast of Kerala, in the early twentieth century (Hareesh 2018, 330). Like in other parts of India, the caste system played a crucial role in the division of society in Kuttanad. The food, housing, clothes, gender roles, rituals, administration, and freedom are decided based on the purity and pollution in the society. In such a society where a lower caste does not have an identity other than that of their caste, Vavachan is no exception. He remains another *Pula*¹ya boy whose presence is marked by his silence and submission to the social structure. However, Vavachan's decision to retain his moustache shocked the world. His parents, neighbours, the paddy fields, and the crocodiles are astonished. The elite class and administrators fear his courage to oppose the caste hierarchy that prescribes his livelihood. They try to eliminate Moustache and his moustache. Somehow, he

¹ Pulaya is a caste group mostly found in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. They are classified as scheduled caste under India's reservation system in Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.

manages to flee from their killing spree and becomes a powerful opponent to the caste system. Resisting the elitist prescriptions of the Dalit's livelihood, Moustache grows into an immutable voice through the folktales of Kuttanad's people.

Methodology

A suitable adaptation of the concept of Polyphony suggests a Bhakthian approach to storytelling with a focus on the choice and use of different voices as an expression of "responsible self" (Hill 1995). Hareesh places himself in the story physically and emotionally, taking a responsible stand - a Bhakthian one. This article explores the possibilities of polyphony in reasserting Dalit identity in an oppressive homogenising casteist space, focusing on the political dimension of folk polyphony as a narrative device in renegotiating cultural plurality.

Polyphony is a musical term that Mikhail Bakhtin uses for literary criticism. In his significant study, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's works have a polyphonic quality that allows the coexistence of diverse voices and points of view. This diversity includes distinct voices from the author, narrators, and characters: those with individual personalities with different beliefs, contradicting ideas, and positions. (Denis Kirpikli 2017). According to Bakhtin, the novel in itself is polyphonic because it has multiple narratives and characters, is dialogic, and does not abide by a single dominant voice. For him, a novelist admits the conflict and convergences of various voices and consciousnesses, and he allows them to talk for themselves. *Moustache* can be read as Bakhtin's polyphonic narrative, as it is open-ended, with multiple voices integrating and conflicting within themselves, holding their dialogic positions.

The novel's characters are from different cultural, economic, and historical contexts. The administration and the dominant casteist structure in the novel target the people who diverge from their dominant oppressive ideologies and try to erase multiculturalism. Here, the Folk polyphony equips the marginalised in moving from the void to plural identities. Hareesh describes Vavachan's metamorphosis from an oppressed n'one' to an egalitarian voice through the narratives of the people: "Endless tales invent and reinvent the legend of his magic moustache in which birds roost, which allows its owner to appear simultaneously in different places and disappear in an instant, which grows as high as the sky and as thick as rainclouds and turn

Vavachan into Moustache, a figure of mythic proportions.” (Hareesh 2018, 330) Along with him, many Dalit characters traverse the margins of time and space to reconstruct and reassert their identity. Hence, as Bakhtin says, Hareesh (2018, 261) made Moustache “Polyphonic-multiform in style and variform in speech and voice”.

Discussion

Hareesh interlaces the story using many narrative techniques: he begins the narration as a story told to his son Ponnu and later invites multiple perspectives of the same event and character throughout the novel. He incorporates conversations between the characters to reveal the unexplored or untold; he peeps into the letters and instructions passed from the administrators to the government employees and forces, to arrest Vavachan, the omniscient narrator, at times reads the mind and delivers us the soliloquies of the loners, the folksongs sung during the agricultural labour, the appearances of spirits, gods and the dead, the narratives and perspectives of the animals and the vegetable world, and stories and gossips spread across the land lend us multiple mythic versions of one incident. The novel travels from the world war scenario to contemporary Kerala, counting historical events and people. S. Hareesh shows the social stratification in which the novel is set as: “As in other parts of India, the division of society in castes based on rules of pollution and purity existed in Kerala... At the time period covered in the story, the impact of caste on everyday life was felt even more acutely....”

Caste hierarchy removed many low-caste people from accessing spaces - that include geographical, cultural, and socio-political. The feudal order sustained in Kutannad, as argued by Hareesh, is through paddy cultivation. Most paddy fields belonged to the temple and Brahmins, whereas Syrian Christians and Nairs owned the rest. Pulaya carried out the physical labour mainly, and Chova to an extent. There is a lack of established wages, where the labourer will get a share of the harvest decided by the landlord. Most of the time, it will be a handful of grains. The low caste faced systemic oppression in multiple ways other than labour. The lower caste people - both men and women - were forbidden from covering their upper body; they were considered untouchables, and there was a persistent belief that even their sight would pollute the air; low caste women were not allowed to wear ornaments; they were prohibited from entering temples and schools, and even public roads. This divide essentially validated the presence of

the high caste in opposition to the low caste. The oppressor holds to their identity as a superior divine being with all authority over the oppressed. They need the low caste to remain the other because they identify themselves as non-oppressed to reiterate their superior existence. This depiction of the text's geographical, socio-political, and cultural background unfurls the injustices existing in the casteist society. However, there are voices against the order in the form of revolts, social reforms, and art. Many of such reforms unwind in the narrative. In the novel, Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and N.N Pillah appear along with mythical and folklore characters like Perumadan and Muthan. Together, history and fiction are blended into the novel to explore the multiforms and voices that exist in society, as conceptualised by Bakhtin.

The polyphonic structure of the novel *Moustache*, in general, with its folk elements, and the folk song chapter, in particular, are analysed to identify the progression of Dalit characters to reclaim their voice and identities, destructing their savage non-human slave representations by the elite caste and to re-articulate themselves.

Hareesh and Vavachan: Branching paths of existential flights

Vavachan-Moustache is a *Pulayan* converted to Christianity. *Pulayas* are one of the largest communities in Kuttanad. They were traditionally agricultural labourers, although some engaged in fishing. “Until the end of the eighteenth century, upper-caste landowners treated *Pulayans* like property and exchanged them along with the land.” (Hareesh 2018, 6)

During an era when growing a moustache was forbidden for a Pulaya, Vavachan became infamous for owning one. He gets to play the role of a policeman with a moustache in a musical drama. His character appears in two scenes and has no dialogue. The elite audience is frightened to see the well-built, dark policeman with his extraordinary moustache. He refuses to shave it off even after staging the drama. Keeping his facial hair or refusing to shave off his moustache makes him different and dreaded. Vavachan’s audacity to make a choice irks the government officials and the elite people from Kuttanad, and they decide to catch him and shave off his moustache. He flees to escape them, and they continue to chase him. This chase opens the possibility of many heroic tales about Moustache. Vavachan and his mustache become the talk of the town. From then on, he

transforms into someone unfamiliar to himself, the family, and society: from Vavachan to Moustache.

Hareesh, as a social agent, discusses the social norms, conflicts, and coexistence of different people and their voices in *Moustache* and raises the sword of multiculturalism. To hail plurality, he includes the birds, crocodiles, witches, gods, spirits, fishes, songsters, farmers, and people from other places to voice out their versions of the story; he incorporated local myths, folklore, and the elements of magic, which blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. The polyphonic nature of the novel, along with the folk songs, contribute to the growth of the Dalit characters to reclaim their voice and identities, permeating their savage non-human slave representations by the elite caste and constructing themselves.

Writing a novel demonstrating a multiplicity of realities was a struggle for Hareesh because the campaigns alleging he hurt religious sentiments. *Moustache* was initially serialized in Mathrubhoomi weekly, a Malayalam periodical. Hareesh was forced to withdraw the novel from the Weekly after the publication of the third chapter, and he had to deactivate his social media accounts. Bewilderingly, the crowd vigorously hunts the polyphonic narratives emerging through Hareesh. Here, the author has no choice but to become Moustache and join him on his flight from the destructive ethnocentric forces to survive. The novel, thus, traverses the author-character boundaries and the lines of time and space and substantially revoices the Dalit polyphonic identity.

Polyphony in *Moustache*

In her translator's note, Jayasree Kalathil observes, "Hareesh invokes how other people's voices mark identities and politics throughout the book" (Hareesh 2018, 11).

Coppelle Cocq, in his article *Polyphony in Sami Narratives*, says that the polyphony of the text reflects the author's outlook toward the socio-ideological contexts. Likewise, Hareesh never dictates a monologic narrative position and leaves the novel open-ended. He includes characters from different social strata to deliver their versions of the tale, which may converge or conflict with another person's story. The novel weaves the narrative through bedtime stories, staging of a regional drama, agricultural folk songs, oral tales, and the communication between the people of Kuttanad. The novel incorporates nature in its chronicle. It takes advantage of the folkloric tradition to have imaginative and creative escapes from real-life

struggles and to employ a world of mythical proportions. The divine, spirit and the dead ponder their thoughts and mark their existence in the tales.

The Folksongs and polyphony in *Moustache* consciously state the coexistence of different social, ideological, and cultural contexts within Kuttanad. They foreground the Dalit community's existence, mark their plight, and elevate their life by reclaiming their capacity. The Dalit people, other than Moustache in the novel, for example, Pachupilla, Chella, Seetha, and Kuttathi, negotiate and renegotiate their identities and become multiple or open-ended. In real life, Vavachan is a deprived Dalit Christian who scuffles with social injustices and flees from them in search of the road to Malaya. He is stranded and starving throughout his way. The tales saying Malaya is a place with no struggles and hunger motivated him to stride. For him, Malaya is going to be a hunger's paradise. Nevertheless, in the polyphonic narratives of the village, he is a living myth. The novel travels with Vavachan, who has no voice, to Moustache, backed by multiple voices through the songs sung by the labourers at the fields and the waterwheels. In the stories of the rural people and administrators, Vavachan is a well-built dark rakshasa who kills the opponents with one hand; he appears in two places at once, and his moustache is the place where frogs lay eggs, and a dotted eagle nests on, he is wicked and rapes women. The elites and administrators who view Pulayas as objects to enslave and exchange for their pecuniary advantages begin to fear Moustache. They assign additional troupes to terminate him. Whenever they try to eliminate him, he becomes a sword of Dalit rebellion. The folksongs about him create an egalitarian world for the Dalit.

Let us look at the chapter *Songs* to see how the rhizomatic voices contribute to this.

The Songs

“...and he lived with his woman
Moustache the Handsome, Moustache the playful
Three pots of toddy on his way home, he drinks
With three pots of rice at home, she waits” (*Songs*)

Songs, one of the chapters in the novel, is exclusively devoted to the folk songs about Moustache and the lives associated with him. The folksongs themselves have a polyphonic nature, along with the

polyphonic nature of the novel. They compel the uncouth, savage, seductive representations to step aside while negotiating and renegotiating their existing Dalit identities. The songs become strong political statements potent for social change.

Each songster has their version of moustache tales. Moustache's native, caste, and character vary from one song to another. "People had come from all over to work the fields from Kainadi, Kainakari, Kumarakam, and Vechoor, and all of them had songs about Moustache" (Hareesh 2018, 275). He is from Kaipuzha, Pulinkunnu, and Mundar in some tales; in some others, he is a "sharp, swarthy Chovan," a Valaan from Thanneermukkam, a Parayan from Chalakkappalli field, and so on.

The songster incorporates their values, beliefs, opinions, and creativity to craft him anew, only to be revised by another songster. "The Moustache they were singing about, is that really you?" Ouseph asked. "It sounds like you, but it's not quite you either. How is it possible that you figure in the songs made even before you were born? Were there others like you before you?" (Hareesh 2018, 276) "Confused, Moustache wondered who these songs were really about." (Hareesh 2018, 275)

While Moustache marks his entry to the folksongs with his larger-than-life stature, a mythical environment follows. The untouchable's (Vavachan's) ordinary world merges with that of the Gods, where endless battles with power erupt, and encounters with nature and spirits occur; he vanished and showed up at more than one place at once. Moustache has enemies he killed and conquered; sometimes, the songsters mocked him for getting defeated by them. Hence, Vavachan adorns incarnations of the savior and the destroyer alike. He rebels against the oppressive norms of purity and pollution through the songs. For instance, one of the songs depicts Moustache's visit to the temple of Lord Vaikathappan, a space that is restricted to the Dalits. He stayed within the temple and made offerings of sweet jaggery payasam, gold, and coconut to the lord. Hence, the song challenges the norms of the 'unclean' and the 'untouchable.'

The Dalit community and nature alike believe him to be their savior and have unwavering faith in him. In the novel, Ramanujan Ezhuthachan casts Vavachan as a policeman in a regional play and initiates his journey to Moustache. For Ezhuthachan, the policeman with a thick dark moustache is just a side character of no importance. But, when the songster's version of 'Pulaya Rama' through the

mythification of Moustache is crucial in validating their faith and existence. They hail his name similar to the stone Sree Narayana Guru consecrated as 'Nammude Shiva' or 'our Shiva' for those denied entry to the temples in Kerala. They celebrate their faith through the folksongs about him. This is evident from Moustache's conversation with a baby frog. He accidentally crushed it with his hands, almost killing it. He asked, "Why didn't you cry when I put my hand on you? I would have to take it off immediately" (*Songs*). The baby frog said in reply, "How could I cry? Everyone talks about you, tells your stories when they are sad or in danger. It is the songs about you that keep us going, gives us hope that tomorrow will be a better day. That's what my mother and her mother used to say. So who would I call to, cry to, when you squash me under your hand?" Moustache thus becomes their inspiration in sustenance, permeating all sufferings they endure.

These songs are not only about Vavachan's journey, but they become the nourishing land for many Dalit people to traverse their boundaries and mark their identity. Many individuals who do not even know each other come close to each other; they embrace and fight, build comradeship, and grow together; they fail or die in one tale and wait until they win and resurrect in the next. The songs reshape Seetha, Pachupillah, and Keshavapillah, freeing them into multiple possible existences.

Seetha - the tale of a fierce mystery woman

Seetha branches into many tales between her homecoming and her desertion of the land. Ulladathy Kathu, popularly known as Kavala Kathu, after her trip to Edathua church, brought twelve or thirteen-year-old Seetha home. Kathu has multiple stories about Seetha's homecoming. She dismisses some neighbours, claiming Seetha as her youngest sister who has always been around and whom they might have missed to notice. Seetha becomes the daughter of her sort of brother in some other conversations. When Kathu is drunk, she boasts about how she bought Seetha for money. Seetha remains a mystery while she grows up. The stories about her beauty spread far and wide. The women who were jealous of her called her "Ulladathy whore" and bitched about her illicit affair with the same old man whom Kathu had kept. The stories about her uncontrollable desire threatened men, and they cooked tales through which they could tame her. Meanwhile, Seetha quenches her body heat by drowning her nude body in the canal around her house, fiercely pelted mud balls on the duck herder who

commented on her body, and attacks and abuses the ‘world famous Moustache’ until they summon each other; screams and struggles deathlessly in the hands of the mad crowd follows him when they assault her. The crowd takes her away with their escapade, and the commoners fail to dig for the truth about her flight. Hence, to mend the mysteries, they create their versions of Seetha, in which she shoots many identities.

Seetha is his romantic interest in almost every ‘Moustache tale.’ According to them, some of Moustache’s journeys are to Malaya, whereas most search for Seetha. In some versions, he was forced to leave her as instructed by his mother for twelve years. Seetha argues to take her with him to traverse the endless fields. However, he is skeptical as there are killer crocodiles and ruthless robbers. Somehow, he loses her in the entangled paddy fields. Although Perumadan, his God, told Moustache once that “you will find her but of no use,” most folksongs aid him to ensure their reunion.

Pachupillah reinscribed...

In some songs, his acquaintances, like Pachupillah, help him find Seetha. Unlike Vavachan, Pachupillah bribed a seventy-year-old songster couple, Panakkan and his woman, to renegotiate his identity through the folksongs. He was facing difficulties in his rice trade. Pachupillah’s only solution was to take advantage of people’s fear of Moustache. The songster couple is famous for their songs while sowing and reaping the paddy fields. They slowly carved Pachupillah as Moustache’s loyal friend by inserting him in the folksongs, solving his crisis. Vavachan wonders who this person is when he hears the songs narrating his joint ventures with Pachupillah. People adore their comradeship while in search of Seetha. They fear his muscular power when he fights back their enemies and even rescues Moustache in some feuds. He enunciated himself as ‘Moustache’s man’; thus, Pachupillah reinscribes his fate from a poor farmer to a wealthy tradesman using folk songs.

Keshavapillah is another name in the Moustache songs, without someone instigating it. The songs make him frail and rot; they scorn him by singing about how the prawns waited in the water to nip off his balls. He was a snakehead whisperer and owner of hundreds of paddy fields. He was infamous for his destructive behaviour towards his enemies. He used to destroy his enemy’s paddy fields by making cracks in the bunds. But in the songs, his fields are sour from the fear

of Moustache, and when the fields dry, the salt crystallizes in them, eventually overrun by water weeds and couch grass.

The songs are capable of praising and mocking. They are rebellious enough to tear away the restrictions and borders of the casteist society. They enable the Dalit to fight battles, buy boats, eat, drink, and sleep to the fullest, enter the temples, make offerings, escape death, and be reborn again with the same Dalit body but a voice to mark their existence.

Affect on the reader

In Moustache's migration through the chaos, the audience follows him- through the fields, water lands, to and fro in time and space. The audience sees him from both the insider and outsider perspectives. They experience love, lust, hunger, pain, anger, danger, the risk of death, and life along with him. They feel the injustice committed on the Dalit by the upper caste and certainly by the moustache himself. The novel compels them to read between the perspectives. The structural inequalities and the quest of the protagonist and the author urge them to probe its contemporary relevance.

Conclusion

Moustache unraveled a Dalit traversing such an elite casteist patriarchal delta space, exerting his agency and multiple identities through the folk polyphonic narrative that tides against the subordination of voices. With the aid of Bakhtin's polyphony, the Dalit characters, namely, Vavachan, Seetha, Keshavapillah, and Pachuppilla, open up to diverse viewpoints, multiple possibilities, and contradicting positions. The folk polyphony empowered the voiceless people to raise their voices, make the authority hear them, and rebel against the norms of untouchability and purity. The elite class and administrators began to fear their courage to oppose the caste hierarchy that prescribes their livelihood. The author never tried to propel a dominant ideology through the novel but enabled dialogism to display a multicultural society. Here, Hareesh took the responsible stand as a social agent to mark a social change, a Bhakthian one.

Through the multivoiced narratives, Vavachan becomes a man of multiple identities - a Dalit, a saviour of poor people, a lover, a villain, a rapist, a trickster, and many more. He transforms himself from a starving lower caste body to an open-ended tale: the larger-than-life 'Moustache' - a living myth.

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