

## Problematic of the Body and Subaltern Visibility in S Hareesh's Novel *Moustache*

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### Abstract

The novel *Moustache* authored by S Hareesh tells the story of Vavachan, a character belonging to the *Pulaya* caste in the princely state of Travancore who started wearing an immense moustache after his appearance in a cameo role in a musical drama. The novel is an ethnographic study of the *Pulaya* people of the mid-Travancore region of Kerala at a crucial juncture of their social transformation. The article attempts to study the pivotal role played by the corporeality of the body in the historical Dalit mobilisation and Dalit resistance and in gaining agency and visibility. The paper studies how Vavachan, a *Pulayan*, reclaims the autonomy of his body and uses it creatively for contesting caste hierarchies. It further examines how the body of Vavachan has been conceived as the ghostly subjectivity by the spectral perceptual practices of the hierarchical society and how it has been dehumanised by marking as the deviant and criminal body.

**Key Words:** Dalit Body, Agency, Subaltern Visibility, Ghostly Subjectivity, Spectral Perception

Dalits in India were historically marked by their bodily functions and corporeal features and thus they were segregated in the larger social structures and put in a hierarchical social order. The practice of untouchability and unseeability, two strategies used by the dominant sections of the society to separate the physical presence of the Dalit body from the rest of the society, made the separation of Dalits more

tangible and problematic. The practice of relating the caste body with the physical body determine the sociality and social identity of Dalits in India. They are put to the corporeal and physical experiences of body like pain, hunger and deprivations. Michel Foucault, analysing the sexual body, has observed that organisation of power over life was deployed by the discipline of the body, the regulation of the populations, by the careful anatomical administration of bodies and the calculated biological management of life. This technique of 'biopower' has played a significant role in structuring and hierarchizing the society by keeping the caste body as disciplined and docile bodies according to the Brahmanical norms of the society. Regarding 'biopower', the practice of disciplining the body for structuring the social body, Foucault observes:

Its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the 'disciplines': an 'anatomo-politics' of the human body... focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population (139).

Foucault examines and analyses the evolution of the conception of power in the West from the "sovereign power" to "bio power" and identifies the strategies used to control and regulate the population by making them disciplined and docile bodies. A careful analysis of the hierarchical society in India exposes the techniques of subjugation perpetuated by the dominant sections of the society for keeping the lower caste people separated and marginalized from the mainstreams of the society by keeping them internalizing the Varna system and thus, disciplining and regularizing them at the level of their bodies. Peter Brooks, in the context of studying the signification of body in Shakespeare's plays, argues that "the body is omnipresent as both

metaphor and physical presence, be it the anointed body of the king or the sweating, decaying body of Falstaff, and the organization of human society is regularly described in terms of a body, whole or sick”(4). Hence, the narrative value of body is that it acts as a prime agent in narrative plot and meaning. It functions as a site of signification and a domain for inscription of stories and hence it has a value as a signifier.

Roland Barthes argues in his *S/Z*: “Symbolic field ... is occupied a sole object, from which it derives its unity... This object is the human body” (cited in Brooks 6). Barthes emphasizes the close relationship between the narrative text and the body. This close relationship between the narrative text and the body is evident in the novel under study *Moustache* authored by S Hareesh which makes the documentation of a time in the history of Kerala where the lower caste people *Pulaya* were separated largely from the mainstreams of the society and kept as disciplined and docile bodies by using the strategies of structural violence in the form of hunger and physical violence like torture and rape. The novel tells the story of Vavachan, belonging to the *Pulaya* caste in Kerala, who wears a big terrifying moustache after his accidental appearance in a cameo role in a play and since then he started maintaining the same moustache without shaving it. Vavachan turns this moustache into a potent weapon to resist the hegemonic practices of this hierarchical society. Vavachan's moustache evokes terror in both the dominant sections of the society and government officials and he began to haunt them through his subterranean and magical practices. The present paper is an attempt to examine the problematic of the body in situating the *Pulaya* people in the social landscape of Kerala by analysing how the body has been conceived and strategized as a potent political tool for reconfiguring and recontesting his caste identity by the character Vavachan in the novel *Moustach*.

### **Problematic of the Body in *Moustache***

The story of Vavachan alias moustache binds the narrative structure of the novel *Moustache* which moves through the rough spacio-temporal timeframes of Castiesm in Kerala in the early period of twentieth century. In the novel, the body of Vavachan unifies the

narrative of the text and the textual significations are marked on his body. Here in the narrative, body becomes the primary source of symbolism, both social symbols and narrative symbols. His body further acts as a prime agent of the narrative plot and meaning. Vavachan's body becomes the Barthian symbolic body and it performs the functions like binding and unifying narratives and thus becomes the referent of multiple significations. In the novel *Moustache*, textual meanings converge with the body and body and the text become mutually dependent. Socio-cultural significations and discursive practices converge with the representations of the body in the novel and thus body becomes a key signifying factor. He maneuvers his body in such a way, by keeping a terrifying moustache, to terrorize a caste ridden society and to reverse its hierarchical norms and practices. Vavachan's strategy is a corporeal manipulation to attain agency and visibility in such a society like ours in the first half of the twentieth century. The novel is structured as the story of Vavachan or Moustache narrated by the author to his five year old son Ponnu and many layers of narrative appears regarding the identity of Moustache. This becomes more evident as Vavachan, the Moustache attains mythical aura. Similarly, the author breaks the space-time conjunctions of the story by connecting the practice of wearing a big pointy moustache by the policemen in mid-Travancore region with Vavachan, the Moustache and also by pointing at the fact that Vavachan lived in all ages and Moustache of the present age died on "the last day of the holidays"(Hareesh 326).

The novel tells the wretched life of Dalits in Kerala where they were put to the horrific practices of caste discrimination which made them suffering from the tangible realities of hunger and physical pain. This physicality of suffering made body a prime concern for them. The novel provides ample evidences of the demarcating of Dalit body and putting it to the various forms of suffering. Hunger is given by the author as the acute form of this physicality of suffering of the *Pulaya* people in Kerala. Vavachan's father Paviyan steals banana from the field of a woman named Seetha, and for that he has been severely reprimanded. This incident acts as a hint to the subsequent chapters of the novel and acts as the locus of the socio-cultural scenario

of Kerala as it contains the problematic of the caste discrimination and acute deprivations of the Dalit people here:

‘My bananas are not for *Pulayans* to come and cut down as they pleas’, she said.

The woman rushed toward the boat, and called Paviyan an obscene word that never should have come out of the mouth of someone of her age. Sitting on the plank of the boat, Vavachan looked reverentially at the breasts looming high over him, and his heart paid as it did obeisance as it did when he watched the light that came on the evenings on the stone crucifix in the faraway Kaippuzha church (6).

This incident at the beginning of the novel is equally a pointer to the destiny of Vavachan’s life as he later set out a journey seeking this woman Seetha after she has been captured and brutally raped. The descriptions of the body get prominence in the novel as body plays an important role in the socio-cultural and economic activities of the society and the capital of corporeality and physical labour were considered as the investments of the agricultural practices of those times. The novelist writes of Paviyan, Vavachan’s father as “Paviyan was confident of his ability to row in the dark, and he stood at the bow of the boat, his black body indistinguishable from the darkened sky” (8). At another occasion, this Paviyan lifts and carries a huge bronze vessel of Luca Mappila which was “so heavy that one or two people could not move it, and usually required at least eight people to carry it away” (77). Incidents of these magical proportions involved with the human body are highlighted in the lives of subalterns as body politic constitutes many of their everyday realities.

Hunger was a prevailing bodily experience in the lives of Dalits in Kerala and the novel provides ample evidences of hunger as appearing as a devastating physical experience that affect the socio-cultural upbringing of the individual. Vavachan, while making the boat journey with his father Paviyan and when they lost their ways in the subterranean water ways of the region, thinks fondly of the Kanji provided by his mother and this is emblematic of the searing hunger in their lives:

As his legs went numb in the cold water, Vavachan thought about the warm, unsalted kanji water he sometimes had. Whenever she got some paddy, chella used it not to make Kanji, but Kanji water, and the children, enticed by the most pleasant aroma in the world, would it drink dry (10).

There are many instances in the novel where the author presents the *Pulaya* people including Vavchan to fight hard to sustain their livelihoods.

The boat journey that Vavachan took with his father Paviyan at the beginning of the novel sets the future course of his life by giving it a significant turn. It is in this journey he experiences the feeling of acute hunger and meets Seetha, Narayana Pilla and Sivarama Pilla. Seetha curses Paviyan for taking banana from her orchard and the other two were on their way to Malaya. Vavachan, after becoming a terrifying and mythical figure with his moustache, sets out on a journey with the mission of finding Seetha, whom he had lived with briefly, and finding the way to Malaya, a place of dignity and freedom. Thus the author frees Vavachan from the spacio-temporal conjectures of the narrative and gives him a magical aura in the rest of the novel. The making of Vavachan as a policeman in a play acts as the significant moment in the narrative which gives him an opportunity to escape from the stringent and painful realities of the caste life in Kerala. He has been selected for this role estimating his bodily features that was the typical *Pulayan* body: "Like all men of *Pulayan* caste, he was coal-black, as though he would turn the water black if he entered a river, as though if, like a dark spirit, he jumped up and touched the sky, black rain would fall"(33). By focusing on the blackness of Vavachan's body, the upper caste people kept them distant from their corporeality and avow their own 'whiteness'. The performance of Vavachan in the play stunned the audience into silence and "a wave of absolute terror washed over the audience" (37). The unexpected and out of the script move made by Vavachan is described by the author as:

Just as everyone sat back expecting a solemn end to the story, he rushed on to the stage with heavy footsteps and, as though

his quarry had escaped into the audience, he looked directly at them and roared: ‘Da...!’ The audience had a clear glimpse of his blood-red tongue and sharp teeth, and they felt that he had truly turned into the fearsome king, Ravanaan (37).

This expression of an overwhelming anger that came from Vavachan towards the power centers of the society is a deviation from the pre-narrated script and it’s symbolical of the daring of the caste hierarchies of the society by Dalits through the powerful make over and reimagining of the body. Vavachan, after this incident, decides to keep the moustache unshaven that catapult him to a journey across the time and space and elevates his status almost to a mythical level. Here, the body acts as a device for attaining empowerment and asserting the selfhood. Then onwards, Vavachan started manipulating on the physical body in a caste-ridden society for the purpose of gaining subjectivity and agency. *Moustache* is thus a narrative of the symbolical journey of a *Pulayan* from the peripheries of the society to the centre using the strategies of the maneuvering of the physical body. The subaltern body of Vavachan thus functions as the site of representational trauma inflicted by Casteism in the socio-political and cultural spheres of Kerala.

The novelist sets Vavachan free to an endless journey across time and space with the help of local lore and with mythical proportions. He began wandering in the large expanse of Kuttanad delta terrifying people and making them contriving stories about him. One young man who was one among the group of young people searching Vavachan describes him:

He was as tall as that banana tree over there...And his moustache-ho! It was this long. And it had blood in it. Must have eaten something raw... (79)

He continues: “At first it looked like a big black tomcat, and I was scared it was going to attack me” (78). The author narrates the story of Vavachan in surrealistic and mythical terms:

Birds made their nests in Moustache’s moustache. Snakes hid in it. One time, when he went into the canal to have a bath, the moustache stopped the water like a dam. The fish and the frogs

thought it was the mangrove roots, and laid eggs in it. Moustache could not come out of the canal. If he did, the eggs would be destroyed, wouldn't they? So he waited for a couple of weeks until all eggs hatched, and the baby fish and tadpoles swam away (83).

Not only human beings, even creatures in nature too were terrified by seeing the moustache of Vavachan and this enhances the mythical nature of the narrative of Vavchan. The author writes:

A puffer fish, coming up from the wilting hyacinths by the water's edge, was startled by Moustache. It had never seen a creature with such a big moustache before, and taking it to be a fish-hungry otter, it puffed up its belly, displaying its fear even as it tried to frighten off its enemy (117).

Then we can see Moustache speaking to the fish and asks about Seetha: "Puffer fish, have you seen a woman?...her hair looks like this"(117). Though Vavachan had grown in to a figure of mythical proportions, he has been presented as a character having a humane qualities and this is evident in his sympathetic attitude towards the sub human creatures and his determined effort to find Seetha. The author writes about the magical proportion that the moustache has attained: "moustache had outgrown him, and it was the moustache, not Vavchan, that now paid attention to the paths and canals, and took careful stock of the wind and rain" (117). When he entered into water, "terrified of his moustache, the water did not make a single ripple" (124) and he was able to reduce the size of his body "smaller than the mushroom and squeezed under it"(125). The author writes of Moustache chasing *Kaalan* and snatching his ledger from him and reading it and, this incident is presented as the apotheosis of Moustache attaining the mythical aura. Attaining agency by reading the secrets regarding the destiny of mankind is symbolical of Vavachan, a *Pulayan*, growing into a mythical figure and reclaiming subjectivity and agency. Vavachan's peep into the future of others' life is metaphorical of the awakening of the conscience of the depressed class in our socio-political milieu. The author writes of Vavchan's reading of *Kaalan's* ledger:



Moustache read on, for a whole day and night. He learned the magic and mantras in the ledger. He sighed deeply reading about Seetha; swore eternal hatred for all snakes reading about Chella. He read about Ezhuthachan and his drama troupe; felt sorry for Thanulinga Nadar and the destiny awaiting him (155)

The act of reading and thus entering to the world of knowledge has been denied to Dalits historically. The narrator reverses, through the mythical figure Vavachan, the course of history and makes a textual subversion of many of the facts of history and propagates a counter reading of history. The very devices used by the dominant sections of the society to silence and ostracise the depressed sections of the society are used as powerful tools to reclaim their history from erasure. In a way, the body of Vavachan acts as a symbolic signification of the traumatic past of Dalits in Kerala as it carries the wounds of history or mistakes of history.

The mythical stories of Vavachan's moustache is intertwined with the surrealistic stories of the place. Here, people live in both real and surreal worlds simultaneously. The spectral perception of the ghosts and phantom figures were a part of their daily lives and it had dominated their daily chores before the advent of modernity. One life of Vavchan is the corporal world of physical realities where he satiates the desires of his body and the other is the spectral and surrealistic world in which he lives as a mythical figure. Though he lived in the imagination of the people with superhuman capabilities, he remained as a victim of acute bodily feelings. The novelist narrates about the hunger of Moustache:

When his thirst was quenched, hunger rose roaring inside him. He stepped into the canal, plucked water lilies and, discarding their petals, ate their hearts. Smeared with their oil, his moustache shone brighter than before (115).

The author presents Moustache as a potent sexual symbol too. With the strength of two crocodiles and pitch dark facial hair he would satisfy the bodily desire of any woman. The author writes:

...women came looking for the man with the moustache; the wheelhouse and reed beds in the endless fields became the locations of his sexual conquests. In them women swam across

canals and trampled over swamps to find him, unable to resist their desires. Women from well-to-do households, with the means to eat three square meals a day, were more affected, the stories went, and they offered themselves up to him in the water, in the open, in the mud (293).

Hence, it could be argued that Vavachan, the moustache was presented as a man with a potent body and ordinary bodily feelings like hunger and thirst who attain strength and vigour to dare a caste-ridden society by magnifying his moustache, a potent corporeal mark of masculinity. What Vavachan has been denied has been achieved through the clever manipulation of his body and thus he cleverly strategizes his body, which has been demarcated and segregated as the caste body, for achieving dignity and social respectability. His bodily features started outgrowing him and he revised the caste structures and social hierarchies by the clever strategising of his body. As he more and more subverted the deep rooted caste notions of the society, the hegemonic sections of the society started their hunting of the body of Vavachan and this is evident in the long report furnished by *Pravrthiyar* Sankunni Menon in the Praja Sabha:

He is the son of a *Pulayan*-Christian named Paviyan, who lives in the Chozhiyappara fields in Kaipuzha subdivision. They say his name is Vavachan. It is not known whether he has any other names...He grew the moustache after he performed a part in a stage play. For some time now, no one has seen him in Kaipuzha subdivision or in the area between Neendoor and Kaipuzhamuttu, and there is no record of any activity (137-138).

Vavachan's growth into magical proportions and his manipulating of the caste body to terrorise the hegemonic sections of the society were deeply antagonised by the dominant sections of the society. Vavachan began to upset and challenge the balance of an asymmetrical society by manoeuvring his body. He began to be thus perceived as a disquieting figure associated with power, revolution and destruction. Further, his moustache was taken as a symbol of male chauvinism or the dominating tendency. By intentionally keeping a moustache, Vavachan evokes the fear of 'the other' in the elite

psyche. The fear of Vavachan and his criminalisation corresponds to what Zizek has mentioned as “a politics of fear” and “it focuses on the defence of potential victimisation or harassment” (cited in Cortes 168). Harassment of Vavachan by hunting his body is indicative of this politics of fear nurtured by the hegemonic sections of the society. They assert their ability to dominate and represent all marginal groups through the structures of governance for the purpose of effacing the public visibility of Dalits. The long report presented by *Pravrthyar* Sankunni Menon in the Praja Sabha is indicative of the determination of the dominant section of the society to find and eliminate the body of Vavachan, which is a threat to the caste-hierarchies prevailing there.

### **Ghostly Subjectivity and Subaltern Visibility**

Speaking about “spectral perception” and “boomerang perception” in the context of the colonial practice of making ghostly subjectivity, Maria Lugones provides an analysis of beings that are caught between two perceptions that relegate them to lack of independence and lack of sociality (Cited in Ortega 402). Lugones claims that the status of these beings is similar to those on exile and those who are denied an identity. These beings have been described as “ghostly subjectivities”. Lugones explains:

It [ghostly subjectivity] is a state of estrangement from self in between two perceptions, neither one of which allows one to position and identify oneself in the world except as an image. Neither perception provides a home or a sense of belonging. One is divested of historicity, living in an uncreative limbo, used, arrogated, doomed to carry out other people’s agendas (402).

Spectral perceptual architecture was there at the heart of Coloniality and Lugones had made extensive studies of the ghostly subjectivity in this context. Following the theoretical postulation of Lugones, Mariana Ortega views that “flesh and blood beings are turned into specter and are thus negated, abrogated, abjected and used as fodder for the operations of empire, capitalism and colonization”(403). The same colonialist perceptual system prevailed wherever Casteism was practiced in India. Bodies to be erased were managed by turning them to specters or ghost subjectivities and thus

they were used as profitable entities for perpetuating their dominant ideologies. In the novel *Moustache*, as the body of Vavachan is a threat to the caste equations of the society, it has been decided to efface and thus it has been turned into a specter like figure. This ghostly subjectivity of Vavachan has been consolidated by the spectral perceptual process of the hierarchical society by giving magical and supernatural proportions to the body. Thus he is being marked as the deviant and criminal and his 'flesh and blood' self has been seen as a disposable being and a "ghostly subject" by the perceptual operations of the system of power. Vavachan thus, is both a non-being and a potent being, a non-being or a ghostly figure from the perspective of the dominant society and a potent being from the perspective of the subalterns who can reverse the caste equations of the society. He intentionally dons invisibility and makes appropriations of his subjectivity upsetting the dictums of a hierarchical social order and by being ghostly; he terrifies the dominant practices of the society. Colonialist spectral perception of the society dehumanizes Vavachan's body and presents him as a law and order problem and thus they attempt to hunt him down. But Vavachan, by cleverly using his moustache, began to haunt the same hierarchical society back. Thus he makes the creative use of his moustache as it provides him a creative space to hunt back the society and reverse its caste equations. As the moustache symbolizes a resistant response from a subaltern sense of the self, the novel carries "the tension between the dehumanization and paralysis of coloniality of being, and the creative activity of being" (408). The novel hints at the multiple significations that the symbolic moustache carries and how it becomes a potent weapon and a creative tool in the hands of the character Vavachan in his reclaiming the autonomy of his body and reconfiguring of a caste-ridden society and recontesting the idea of subalternity. Vavachan echoes Emmanuel Levinas's "irreducible otherness" (cited in Cortes 168). The magical and supernatural proportions that his stories gain obviate the fact of the resurrection of the suppressed class in Kerala. The wild hunting of Vavachan is evident of his moustache becoming a textual allegory of the impending resurrection of *Pulaya* people in Kerala. He reclaims the contested social spaces and ponders the impossibility of erasing

the history of haunting the subaltern body. Thus the author hints at the potent and varied political meanings possible in the symbolism of moustache.

The novel *Moustache* is an ethnographic study of a people in their important historical juncture of evolution. Through the presentation of an almost mythical character Vavachan, the author hints at a social and political mobilization that later emerged in the history of *Pulaya* people in Kerala under the leadership of Mahatma Ayyankali, a social reformer who worked for the advancement of Dalits in the princely state of Travancore. Ayyankali had used the caste body to reconfigure the Dalit identity by forming ‘Ayyankalippada’ which made the Dalit youth training in martial arts (Madhavan 767). Madhavan views that Ayyankali had turned the “untouchable caste body into martial body” (768). Vavachan’s corporeal skills and strengths are evident of the fact that he has been presented by the author as a character who have imbibed the messages of Ayyankali for Dalit mobilization and consolidation of Dalit identity. Vavchan has purposefully transformed his caste body into a martial body of gigantic proportions and magical power. Similarly, the attempt of the author to mythify a character like Vavachan with his magical moustache could be taken as the part of a larger project of the author to reclaim and resituate the past with the conviction of the “invention of a historical past for the political present” of the *Pulaya* community in Kerala (769). By signifying the relevance of body in the formation of Dalit identity and Dalit resistance in Kerala and by exposing the problematic involved in the spectral perception and subaltern visibility, the novel *Moustache* marks a significant moment in the evolution of Malayalam fiction writing.

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