

THE STRANGE HOMELINESS OF THE NIGHT: SPECTRAL SPEECH AND THE DALIT PRESENT IN C. AYYAPPAN'S STORIES

Udaya Kumar

Dusk is my favourite time; next to that, the night. When dawn breaks, it is as if you have lost something. A sort of *homesickness*. Sometimes, you are sitting on a low branch of a tree, your pals lift you up without warning, and you feel a quivering rush of fear inside. I feel like that when the night ends. Days feel like an unrelenting spell of anxiety. From twilight, consolation begins.

— C. AYYAPPAN, in an interview¹

C. Ayyappan (b. 1949), one of the foremost Dalit writers in Malayalam, passed away in August 2011. Although Ayyappan began writing short fiction in Malayalam since 1960s, it is only in recent years that he began to be known and read widely. Ayyappan's early stories were read as belonging to a modernist imaginary when they first appeared; the unquiet destinies of his protagonists were assimilated into the familiar idioms of an obscure modernist angst. However, Ayyappan did not inhabit the literary space of modernism very well. As existentialist idioms gave way in modernist writing in Kerala to a more publicly vigorous ethics of radical politics after Naxalbari and the emergency, Ayyappan treaded a different historical path alone, staying away from the glare and eventually slipping into the night.² However, the luminosity of a different literary climate has begun to fall on his pages now, giving them a strangely unseasonal legibility.

Today, Ayyappan is seen by many as the most significant Dalit fiction writer in Malayalam. When he began writing in the late sixties, the category of Dalit writing was not available to writers and readers in Kerala. The dominant idioms of resistance in writing and politics came from diverse idioms of left politics. Lower caste social reform movements, especially the successful Ezhava movement and the nationalist and left movements, appear to have prevented the public recognition of an autonomous domain of Dalit articulation, especially in the decades after independence and the formation of a Kerala state. TKC Vaduthala and Paul Chirakkarode, for

instance, were not read as Dalit writers but as writers who focused on the experiences of certain disadvantaged sections in society. The past decade, however, has seen the emergence of distinctively new idioms of Dalit politics in Kerala, and this has also generated a new cultural politics that questions the foundational narratives of Kerala's modernity.³ The new visibility of Ayyappan's texts has an intimate relation to this moment.

Nonetheless, something unseasonal marks Ayyappan's art, and this prevents him from being the toast of the times. The bodies and selves staged in Ayyappan's literary apparatus are forged in what may be designated as the darkroom of social time. Darkness here should not be seen as the constraint necessary for working on photographic plates inscribed by light, to render them legible and restore them to the day, as in the work of memory in literary modernism. Ayyappan's art is more like nocturnal photography, or – if we were to attempt greater precision – a spectrography of the night. It works precisely by impeding a daytime reading of what is recognized as Dalit experience, and issues of masculinity and memory figure centrally in the strange temporality of this interruption.

Spectres haunt Ayyappan's stories: dead people appear before the protagonists of these stories to accompany them and speak to them, blurring the boundaries between the present and the past, the everyday and the exceptional. The time of the ghosts begins at midnight, marked by the siren from a distant factory; they disappear with the break of dawn, when the first roosters crow.⁴ Ghosts are not mere visitors to the world of the protagonists; they are the principal narrators in many of Ayyappan's stories. Links between death and story telling offer a familiar theme in many literary traditions: story telling may ward off death, or rather postpone it night by night, as in the *Arabian Nights*. But death also authorizes the narratability of life, functioning as the sign under which lives acquire completeness. This is one of the senses in which biographies are thanatographies; and, wrapped within the folds of every autobiography, lies the autothanatographic sign, the self-authorizing signature of death and completion. How should we rethink this formal, structural dependence of all autobiography on an imagined death, in the case of Dalit writing, where – if we are to infer from scholarly studies on the topic – autobiography seems to have the status not of just one genre among many, but of something of the order of a paradigm?

Ayyappan's spectral narratives often adopt the first person, testamentary form, frequently and powerfully, invoking the autobiographical as the enabling instance of articulation for their Dalit characters. However, death in the formal sense of a conclusion to temporal unravelling is insufficient to enable the acquisition of posthumous powers of narration. It is a certain

species of death – inauspicious and unmitigated – what in Malayalam is usually called *durmaranam* or bad death – that causes ghosts to be born. Accidents, murders, executions, lives cut off thus before they have run their course – such forms of *durmaranam* constitute the dead person as a victim, a prey to the unjust will of others or the brute and contingent force of the external world. In such instances, the forced exit from life is the act of injustice against which the spectre's continued desire for speech and life struggles. The dead person's spirit returns to the world again and again to fulfil desires unrealized in life, an appeasement the form of which needs to be determined anew.

The world of deaths and spirits and rituals of propitiation has occupied an important place in the cultural history of lower caste practices in Kerala. Rituals like the Theyyattam, for instance, have been studied as commemorating the unjust killing of lower caste subjects, invoking them as Gods and propitiating them.⁵ Such ritual commemoration is seen on the one hand as effecting an admission of injustice and a reconciliation, and on the other inscribing a history of oppression and injustice which later on is mobilized by secular, radical political projects.

The ghostly narrators of Ayyappan's stories do not quite fit this model; they are not victims of murders or accidents. They are the authors of their own deaths; putting an end to one's own life – the voluntary embrace of a spectral existence – is what allows them to speak. Their autothanatography is not just retrospective; it looks forward, scripting forms of volition and action that extend into the future. Suicides in Ayyappan's world indicate a wilful embrace of ghostly life. And spectrality, in these Dalit narrators, is the very condition of their voice and agentiveness.

I use the words "ghost" and "spectre" with some diffidence: these words are not entirely inaccurate, but spectral terminology crosses language borders with difficulty. The Malayalam words "Pretham" and "Bhutham" appear in Ayyappan's stories. There is another word in Malayalam – "Badha" – which I shall invoke to clarify the circuits of spectral inhabitation and narration. The word "Badha" has two senses: one – the literal minimum threshold of meaning – refers to the process of affecting, afflicting or obstructing something. For example, a building that has caught fire is under "agnibadha." In the context of spectral transactions the word "Badha" or "Prethabhadha" refers to possession by the spirits of the dead. In a related second sense, the word "Badha" also refers to that spirit which possesses you: the ghost that enters human bodies, possessing them and taking control over their actions. The currency of this word, especially in its second sense, is linked to the ritual practices of forcing the spirits of ancestors or other unquiet dead to leave the bodies they possess

(ozhippikkal). The word “possession” carries burdensome resonances from the history of anthropology and religion. By invoking a handful of Malayalam words, I do not hope to secure a space of meaning that is immune from these histories; however, these words in Ayyappan’s stories rub against the borders of such histories with an almost haptic, uncanny, vernacular force.⁶ This essay’s aim, among other things, is to sense the traction of that force.

The spectral storytellers in Ayyappan’s stories are possessing spirits or “badhakal.” However, they defy all efforts directed at their eradication or propitiation. Let us consider the beginning of the story “Kavalbhutam” (Guardian Spirit):

Devi, it is me. The self-same evil spirit who has just quit your body, according to your parents and the jewelled magician they summoned. But I cannot leave you. In occupying your body and your hair and your planetary house, I have an aim. You are not aware of this or its seriousness. That is why you had to suffer so many thrashings today. Perched on a banana branch, I watched the grey haired magician beat you until three canes broke into pieces. All that you told them were inflammable lies. Hit first, ask later: this was the shaman’s method. Thus, at the end of your tether, you shouted out all the evil deaths that you knew or had heard about. Ittuli who drowned herself, Elamma who died when the rice boiled over on to her, Perekattu Kuttan who was trampled to death by the elephant, the spirit of Chothikunju from the south – how many lies you told them! None of these dead were in your body. But you were trapped when the magician asked for evidence for each spirit’s leaving you. Scared that you may die from flogging, somehow you thought of me. No way could I come close to you; yet I made you say that a branch of the banana tree would break as the sign of each evil spirit going away. Accordingly I broke at the right moment branches one after the other including the one on which I had perched. You were saved for the time being. Then I made up my mind: I need to tell you certain things.⁷

Badha or possession – or, to be more precise, spectral inhabitation – is not domination or taking over; the possessing spirit or the Badha views it as a relationship between two subjectivities. The spectral speech in many of Ayyappan’s stories is addressed by the Badha to the subject it possesses. This address does not seek to rouse the possessed subject to action, as Hamlet’s father arguably tried to do, but to explain the rationale of the actions being performed by the Badha, especially why it has inhabited the body of the addressee. The mode of self-explanation allows the spectre to give an account of itself, to engage in autobiography or auto-spectrography. We shall later see that the discursive format of the explanatory note, clearly visible in these narratives, has in Ayyappan’s writing a life that extends beyond ghosts and ghostliness.

Most of the spirits who tell stories in Ayyappan’s fiction are men. The

striking exception is "Prethabhashanam" or Ghost-Speech.⁸ In this story a woman spirit, who has come to stay in the body of her betrayer-lover's younger sister to induce incest between them, explains to the possessed girl the logic of her actions. In some of the stories female ghosts appear in the world of living male protagonists.⁹ Spirits carry their gendered identities and personal histories with them in a strangely immaterial experience of embodiment.

Spectral inhabitation in Ayyappan's fictional world mobilizes several attributes of ghostliness familiar to us: the past and the present, objects of insufficient and impossible mourning, melancholically introjected losses. All these lines of thinking consider the ghostly domain as that where the unfinished business with the past is played out. Ayyappan's stories, however, seem to work with a different sense of time. Stories like "Kavalbhutam" or "Prethabhashanam" present the ghosts as unrelenting in their grip over time. Life itself takes place under the effect of the ghosts; their domain is lived out as an unsurpassable present.

"Kavalbhutam" concludes with the ghost outlining his plans for Devi, who spurned his love:

Your threat is ridiculous. When you say that you will kill yourself and that there will be two souls, yours and your husband's, and that both of you will get together to tie me down, I feel like laughing. My Devi, are you such a fool? You think that I stay on your body on account of my anger at your husband, don't you? I am not angry with him any more ... I don't have anything anymore to ask that fool. ... But, don't you long to die! It is to ensure that you don't die that I have kept around you this vigil as strong as fate. You should continue to live. Become a living lesson to both you and your lover. This is your ninth month of pregnancy. There is a saying that there is no difference between the ninth and the tenth. But, for you, there will no difference between the tenth and the eleventh. You will be pregnant for ever and ever. You will die at the age of sixty-seven, delivering a dead foetus! Until then, you will live in constant suffocation. Thinking about you, your lover and your cowardly husband hiding in your womb should also struggle for breath.¹⁰

The name for this unrelenting relationship of binding and suffocation, in the world of C. Ayyappan's male ghosts, is love.

I tell you all this in such detail only because of my love for you. Love is such a terrible deity! It is the ember of that terror that keeps my soul cool. But sometimes, from my eyes sparking fire red with rage, a tear trickles down. Then, I long to howl with earth-shaking loudness: "Devi, why, but why, did our life shatter like a clay pot thrown on the rock?"¹¹

Rejection, the suffocating presence of desires that do not know how to articulate themselves, humiliation, awkwardness, the sense of a love that seems akin to murder – the world of affect that orients ghostly agency is marked by all this. Ayyappan's readers will find them recur in the world

of the living too, sometimes making it difficult to differentiate between the living and the dead. Dreams and nightmares, insanity, the blurring of perception in nocturnal travel – these are recurrent sites of confusion between the logic of the living and the dead. In “Arundhatidarsananyayam,” nightmares come to haunt a young Dalit graduate, waiting for employment: a beautifully dressed woman appears before the dreamer’s eyes – his eyes move from her feet slowly upwards through her body to her face; as they reach her face, the dreamer wakes up with a loud, chilling cry.¹² A careful orchestration of suggestions indicates the appearance of fangs from the desirable lips of the dream woman. In order to escape this horrific nightmare, the graduate begins to read novels, and this brings him close to his beautiful upper caste neighbour, Geethu S. Nair, an enthusiastic reader of novels and the relentless author of tedious short stories. The relay of affect in the story eventually replaces the woman in the dreams with Geethu, but when the identification takes place in the dream, her face falls off like a doll’s head, presaging Geethu’s own subsequent suicide in the story. In “Ekalochanam” the protagonist, who like Ayyappan, is the Principal of a college, is travelling home for Onam. But he boards the wrong bus, eventually gets to his native village instead of his urban marital home where he usually lives. He arrives in the middle of the night in an unfamiliar landscape, and by sheer good luck finds a childhood friend who now runs a teashop where he offers him a space to stay. When he wakes up before the break of dawn, he finds his dead mother offering him tea, and an unfamiliar girl smiling at him, figures who had appeared in his dreams during his nap in the bus. This unfamiliar girl accompanies him to the bus stop, makes love to him on the way as they huddle together on a veranda away from the rain, and reveals herself to be a young girl whose love he had betrayed in the past. As he boards the bus, the dawn breaks, the time of the ghosts comes to an end, and she disappears, and the colours of her fleeting figure hint at a confusion between her and his mother.¹³

Dreams and disorienting spaces and journeys are sites where the boundaries between the ghostly and the diurnal become permeable. The protagonist of “Bhranthu” tries to police them with great success.¹⁴ His sister, suffering from insanity, is being taken to a mental hospital by a Panchayat member and some other well-wishers. When they come to his house, the protagonist pretends to see nothing, making one of them ask him if he too has gone mad! The story takes the form of his explanation: just as the ghosts explain their actions, this sane protagonist – his name is Krishnan Kutty – explains the rationale behind his strange behaviour. He cannot risk his status in society by admitting to the existence of his insane sister and his poor, unsophisticated family whose identity as Dalits will be

evident to any observer. He would like to visit his sister in hospital, but what really is the point of visiting an insane person who cannot even recognize the visitor?

This story, like that told in "Ekalochanam", may be identified as belonging to a second set of narratives in Ayyappan's work. Unlike the narratives of ghostly spirits who live through their acts of possession over the living, these stories are told by the living. At an apparent level the stories in this second group are not about victims but about Dalit men who seem to have succeeded in life, obtained jobs, and married into families with higher material and cultural capital. Their estrangement from their original families and the community, and the accompanying sense of guilt and awkwardness, are the avenues through which these stories explore the Dalit question. Krishnan Kutty, the narrator of "Bhranthu", is – as we saw – a study in this fragile pathos of sincerity and betrayal. "Sarvajnanaya Kathakrthum Oru Pavam Kathapathravum" begins by rehearsing the other side of these affects: after the farewell party on the day of his retirement, the protagonist becomes increasingly suspicious of the behaviour of his colleagues: did the familiar rituals of the farewell function conceal suppressed upper caste sarcasm?¹⁵ His way of getting back is to repeat the same gesture, and to write a novel to humiliate one of his own Dalit acquaintances by highlighting his inferior caste status. "Yes, I will write a novel. And dig up and expose your history. I want to know from where you got your fair skin and light eyes. You know why? For no reason. Just like that."¹⁶ Thus concludes the explanatory note of this successful Dalit subject.

One of Ayyappan's stories has "An Explanatory Note" ("Oru Visadikaranakkurippu) for its title.¹⁷ In this brief text, the narrator, a government employee who participated in a public protest march demanding a rise in wages explains why all the protesters fled in fear without any apparent provocation. The note clarifies that when the march was in progress a group of beggars and lepers and prostitutes – onlookers from the street – joined them in support and started shouting the same slogans. The presence of these real subalterns is felt as an unbearable physical threat by the protesters, and eventually they flee from their presence. Ayyappan's stories of the living, using the form of the explanatory note, effectively rehearse a deep disorientation in their protagonist's occupancy of the social domain. Deception, betrayal, and dissimulation plague instances of success, turning the inhabitation of normalized middle class life into nightmares of anxiety. Assimilation is accompanied by a cycle of disavowal and humiliation.

These stories allow us to see the intervention that Ayyappan's work makes in our conception of humiliation, an experience and an emotion

which has received considerable scholarly attention in the context of Dalit studies in recent years.¹⁸ Studies of humiliation have at times absorbed this experience into a general grammar of victimization and injustice. This perspective on humiliation views it in light of normative frames, comparing the present act in relation to a desirable configuration of social norms located either in the past or in a putative future.¹⁹ However, this moral reading of humiliation comes into conflict with the specific affect that is produced in instances of humiliation, which is shame.²⁰ Humiliation comprises acts of enforced shame.

A moral framework is often used in discussions of shame as well, linking it to self-esteem and indirectly to moral self-indictment. Levinas's and Agamben's discussions of shame show the inadequacy of this approach.²¹ A poor man in tattered clothes may feel humiliated by his appearance in spite of his awareness that poverty is nothing to be ashamed of. An alternative way of understanding shame and humiliation is to consider them as instances of improper, undesired visibility; the subject is forced into a field of vision which he or she is unable to occupy or flee from. The paradigmatic example of this can be found in enforced nudity: the stripped body cowers, making the gesture of wanting to disappear into itself, to erase itself from the field of visibility. Humiliation here is the simultaneous experience of the impossibilities of escaping or inhabiting one's own body.²²

The field of visibility that constitutes the grid of our mutual exposure and thus our identities is the domain of the social, constructed through rituals of mutual exhibition and recognition. This field is destabilized in the experience of forced, improper exposure. The anxious narratives of assimilation in Ayyappan's work reveal the faultlines of the social, which promises inclusion at the cost of a deep disavowal. The lines of disorientation extend from skin colour and beauty and marks of community and family to documented caste identity itself. They open up a world without positivities, a conflicting crosshatch of images and affects. Nocturnal journey on a Moolamattam fast passenger bus can open this up, as can the cursory knowing glances exchanged between colleagues at a farewell party. The language of the social that undergirds progressivist developmentalist narratives slips away, opening a chasm of silence or incoherent speech before which it abandons the subject.

This way of looking at shame and humiliation also opens up the space of the spectral, bringing us back to the initial discussions in this paper. The ghost narrators of Ayyappan's world draw their ability to act from their lack of accommodation in the world. The recurrent trope of suicidal agency may need to be understood in this light. Spectrality stages, as if through reflection in a distorted mirror, the problem of bodily

unaccommodation that we encountered in the structure of shame. Instances of possession in Ayyappan's work foreground an idiom of violent inhabitation, where vengefulness and desire become difficult to distinguish from each other. It would be simplistic to see in the logic of possession in Ayyappan's work a direct reversal of caste violence, the turning of the perpetrator into the victim. More often than not, it is women of one's own caste that the Badha turns against. This is true of "Prethabhashanam" too, where the narrator is a female spirit. In this is sketched Ayyappan's tragic configuration of love, where it becomes the fiercest and most violent way of connecting.

Ayyappan's fictional work draws deeply from the practices and beliefs of the Pulaya community in the part of central Kerala where he grew up. The sound world of sirens and the frightening shrieks of birds that float across the fields, the rituals of exorcism of Badhas and propitiation of ancestors, and the stories he grew up listening to, of innumerable betrayals and brutal punishments, of executions of untouchable lovers of caste Hindus and Christians – they supplied Ayyappan with crucial elements of his narrative apparatus. Ayyappan speaks about the years he spent as a young boy with his grandmother. Like the possessed subject in "Kavalbhutham" who breaks into a litany of unquiet Dalit souls, she could recount the stories of all bad deaths (*durmaranam*) in the area. These stories were so powerful and frightening that young Ayyappan would cover his face with a bed sheet as he listened to them; the cloth would be drenched in sweat soon out of sheer fright.²³ Many of these tales get into Ayyappan's stories. In a benign reworking of a folk narrative in his work, "Elumban Kochatthan" the honest Pulaya worker, in spite of the betrayal of his own sister, and thanks to the unalloyed love of his cousin, goes in search of his five lost buffaloes and gets them all back in rich recompense, five hundred buffaloes thronging around the hill on which he stood.²⁴ This story ends with the buffaloes trampling to death the unloving blood sister, mixing her body with the soil in the fields. But the story he heard in his childhood was even more frightening. Each of the five hundred buffaloes appeared like a Badha, a possessing spirit.²⁵ They already carried, for the listening child, the frightening aura of inauspicious deaths in rich intensity.

Ayyappan spoke in an interview about how this fear eventually led to a sort of mental breakdown for him when he was a child. It was impossible for him to go out or look at the world. Every object, each tree or bush or shadow, appeared like a spirit: dark fear-provoking spirits as tall as a coconut palm, the fierce goddess who comes to strike you down, preceded by long flashes of light. It was atheism and rationalism that enabled him, Ayyappan says, after some years, to gain the courage to walk around, to inhabit the world.²⁶ At the same time, it is this very same rationalism that

prevented him from engaging with the frightening domain of spirits, from which his best stories were to develop later. Rationalism extracted a price for letting him into the world of the day; a disavowal of the night, of the energies and spirits, was that price.²⁷

Ayyappan refers to this disavowed world as a domain of Dalit *atmiyata*; but the word is not his own, it comes from his interlocutor in an interview, but Ayyappan does not challenge it.²⁸ *Atmiyata* has as its meaning both the spiritual domain and the nexus of beliefs and practices oriented towards the self. Ayyappan's own comments move in the direction of a sort of religion that mobilizes the energies of generations of ancestors rather than a single God or multiple Gods. This, as we saw from his stories, is irretrievably tied to the lives of spirits, to spectral existence. It is in this sense that we may read *atmiyata*; it is the domain of the *atmakkal*, dead spirits, demanding an articulation of the self in relation to ghostly experience of inheritance and tradition.

Two frames for thinking the divine are invoked in Ayyappan's stories. One of them belongs to the supraterritorial level, where after one's death, one encounters all the dead, and somewhere in that densely populated other world, one also encounters a single God, the master and manager. Here God appears as an old man, a sort of grandfather figure, chewing his paan and spitting the betel juice at length on to the courtyard.²⁹ The ghosts of Ayyapan's protagonists defy this God, spit on him. It is as if God in this form is no match for the defiant and disruptive agency they acquired by taking their own lives.

However, there is a second theology, based on the community's practices. This centres on Periyapurathu Devi's shrine.³⁰ Even though the shrine is called a Devi shrine, there are two sister Goddesses who reside there. The elder sister's fierce glance destroys in eight days anyone on whom it falls. The younger sister, out of care for humanity, has pulled down the idol of her elder sibling to prevent her from looking at passers by. Nonetheless, whenever she hears footsteps she would ask her younger sister, who goes there? The younger sister would answer these questions, but once in a while, when she runs out of patience, she would tell off her elder sibling, and ask her to get up and find out herself. The elder Goddess would raise her head from where she lies and the look will fall on someone, destroying him, making him die in eight days. If one goes to this shrine at midnight one is sure to incur the wrath of the sisters and meet one's death.

Always, in Ayyappan, such fiercely enchanted worlds find a parallel in the everyday. The protagonist who wants to die goes to the shrine at midnight only to encounter, in the sudden glare of an electric torch, a

naked woman and two street rowdies. The woman embraces him making him flee in panic.³¹ The story ends with the protagonist going to the shrine to commit suicide. He will step on the fallen Goddess to place his head in the noose to hang himself from a tree. He hopes to acquire, as reward for embracing death in front of the Goddesses, half the spirits at their command. Suicide in a defiant and taunting ritual would get him the power and agency to pursue his enemies in the other world.³²

In working with nights filled with ghosts and a day world teeming with anxious and failed subjects, Ayyappan's work, I believe, allows us to think of Dalit identity in contemporary Kerala more than that of any other writer in Malayalam. Ayyappan speaks about the distrust and rage he felt as a young man towards the dominant trajectories of lower caste reform, which had usurped the mantle of progress and denied its benefits to the Dalits. He felt ostracised to various degrees by the upper caste Nayars, Christians and Ezhavas. His most hurtful experience of caste pollution was at an Ezhava house. It was only the communists who behaved to him like to a human being, he says.³³ At the same time, it was not in the idioms of the left that Ayyappan found the space for his fictional, mythographic work. As a rationalist or yuktivadi, he tried to expose the falsity of the enchanted world, only to return to it and draw elements for a fictional apparatus in order to conduct experiments on the real nature of the world far more incisively than through rationalist practice.

Ayyappan's engagement with the beliefs, practices and histories of his community should not be seen as aimed at the valorization and restoration of a tradition. The uses to which Ayyappan's work puts elements of a Dalit mythography are distinctively modern. The mythographic elements work as props for the staging of modern scenes of subjection and desubjection. Ayyappan once compared his turn towards the indigenous to the work of Poykayil Yohannan, the millenarian prophet who founded the dissident Christian sect, Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha.³⁴ As Sanal Mohan's studies point out, Yohannan's project was directed by two impulses. Firstly, it stressed the need to create a history for the history-less community of Pulayas. This history would be a divine history, authorized by God, but carried out by men. The Bible contained epistles to peoples such as the Romans or the Corinthians but not to the Pulayas. Yohannan told his congregation that he was the bearer of the letter to the Pulayas. Secondly, Yohannan's history making was accompanied by practices of commemoration, where the community enacted and lamented the sufferings of its ancestors. Yohannan prophesied that at the end of time he would appear dressed in a slave's attire to lead the community to a new life.³⁵

The Ghost-work in Ayyappan's fiction can be seen as performing a

similar function, in relation to the contemporary. The magician who searches for a Kanjiram tree to imprison an unquiet woman ghost finally uses her lover's body as a substitute, hammering a nail into his chest to keep the Badha, or the possessing spirit, confined within. The lover buttons his shirt up carefully above the protruding nail, and carries on with his normal social life. The domain of the social, with its assured identities, reveals itself as the product of a magical act that imprisons unquiet haunting spirits.³⁶ Ayyappan's stories rehearse a rite against this performative magic: the result is a spectrography that defies realist mappings of the social; figures of time which break with historicist and developmental grammars and strain against the limits of narratability.

The story "Aana" (Elephant) offers a complex allegory of this.³⁷ Framed against shifts in caste power, "Aana" is about a Nambuthiri Brahmin of a renowned, now declining family in the village, who wants to buy an elephant but cannot afford it. He has an explanation for his obsessive desire: in earlier times, in the time of his grandfather, the family owned an elephant called Ramakrishnan. Just for fun, the elders would let him loose in the night to trample and destroy the crops in the village. The villagers tried all they could to tie down this violent elephant, but all attempts failed. Then they started attacking it, throwing at it stones, lit torches, knives, household objects, anything that came to their hands. The elephant retreated into the inaccessible folds of the night. All darkness turned into the elephant. Even as they trembled at the fearsome trumpeting of the elephant, the villagers continued their relentless battle with darkness. The elephant is dead, but it continues to roar in the mind of the Nambuthiri. He wants to buy that elephant, retrieve it from across generations. Here, in an uncanny moment of spectrographic transformation, the words slip, and the Nambuthiri turns into an image of rage. Now he wants to kill the elephant; he is among the obsessive stone-throwers. He stands divided – and united – with his longing for the elephant and his urge to kill him; a desire to translate all unwieldy heritage into the ambit of light and an uncontrollable, blood-thirsty anticipation of the dark.

Ayyappan's Ghost narrators interrupt the enchantment of foundational idioms of the modern social domain. Their autobiographical acts stage the unaccommodation of the social for Dalit subjects, foreground the residue of stigma in its resistance to recompense and its constantly renewed intimacy with life, and respond with idioms of mythical violence. Yet, in the middle of their fierce work of vengeance and destruction, they cry inconsolably, exclaiming why their lives and loves had to smash to smithereens like a clay pot thrown on a rock. Their ghost-speech, the litany of rage and lament with its unflinching grip on time, is – to conjure

with Poykayil Yohannan's redemptive trope – the letter that Ayyappan insistently brings before contemporary Kerala. It is in this sense that his fiction joins the work of history in the deepest sense.

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.
- Ayyappan, C. 2008. *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*. New Delhi: Penguin Books in association with Malayala Manorama.
- Guru, Gopal, ed. 2009. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kumar, Udaya. 2009. "Two Figures of Shame." *Études Anglaises: Revue du monde Anglophone*, 62:3, pp. 345-57.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 2003. *On Escape, De l'évasion*, tr. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Menon, Dilip M. 1993. "The Moral Community of Theyyattam: Popular Culture in Late Colonial Malabar." *Studies in History*, 9: 2, pp. 187-217.
- Mohan, P. Sanal. 2005. "Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth-Century Kerala." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 28:1, pp. 35-63.
- Mohan, P. Sanal. 2006. "Narrativizing Oppression and Suffering: Theorizing Slavery." *South Asia Research*, 26:1, pp. 1-40.
- Palshikar, Sanjay. 2009. "Understanding Humiliation" in Guru, Gopal (ed.), *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 79-92.
- Ramakrishnan, E. V. 1995. *Making It New: Modernism in Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi Poetry*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Rammohan, K. T. 2008. "Caste and Landlessness in Kerala: Lessons from Chengara." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43: 37 (13 September), pp. 14-16.
- Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu, eds. 2011. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India, Dossier 1: Tamil and Malayalam*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Sreerekha, M. S. 2012. "Illegal Land, Illegal People: The Chengara Land Struggle in Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly* 47: 30 (28 July), pp. 21-4.
- Tutuola, Amos. 1952. *The Palm-wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town*. London: Faber.

NOTES

1. C. Ayyappan, "Abhimukham," Interview with Dilip Raj, in *C. Ayyappante Kathakal* (New Delhi: Penguin Books in association with Malayala Manorama, 2008), p. 176. The italicized word is in English in the original. All translations from the Malayalam are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
2. For an account of modernist poetry in Kerala, see E.V. Ramakrishnan, *Making It New: Modernism in Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi Poetry* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995).
3. Writings by K. K. Kochu, K. K. Baburaj and Sunny Kapikad, to name but a few prominent Dalit thinkers, may be seen as belonging to this moment. For a selection of English translations of Dalit literary and political writing from Kerala, see K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, eds., *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India, Dossier 1: Tamil and Malayalam* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011). See, for an account of the land struggles central to this moment, K. T. Rammohan, "Caste and Landlessness in Kerala: Lessons from Chengara," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43: 37 (13 September 2008), pp. 14-16, and M. S. Sreerekha, "Illegal Land, Illegal People: The Chengara Land Struggle in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47: 30 (28 July 2012), pp. 21-4.
4. For a discussion of the acoustic world in which Ayyappan's stories took shape, see C. Ayyappan, "Abhimukham," pp. 167-8.
5. See Dilip M. Menon, "The Moral Community of Theyyattam: Popular Culture in Late Colonial Malabar," *Studies in History*, 9: 2 (1993), pp. 187-217.
6. Ayyappan, in an interview, recalled that it was his later encounter with the work of the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola that gave him confidence in his own exploration of ghosts and their trajectories. C. Ayyappan, "Abhimukham," pp. 180-1. See Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (London: Faber, 1952).
7. "Kavalbhutam," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, p. 7. For an English translation, see C. Ayyappan, "Guardian Spirit," tr. Udaya Kumar, in K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight*, pp. 355-63.
8. "Prethabhashanam," in *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 71-7. For an English translation, see C. Ayyappan, "Ghost-Speech," tr. Udaya Kumar, in K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight*, pp. 350-5.
9. See, for instance, "Bhutamali," "Oru Kashanam Jeevitam," "Neram Velukkukayanu," and "Ekaloohanam" in *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*.
10. "Kavalbhutam," p. 16.
11. Ibid.
12. "Arundhatidarasananyayam," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 17-28.
13. "Ekaloohanam," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 153-66.
14. "Bhrantu," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 34-9. For an English translation, see C. Ayyappan, "Madness," tr. Jobin Thomas, in K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, eds., *No Alphabet in Sight*, pp. 363-7.
15. "Sarvajnanaya Kathakrthum Oru Pavam Kathapathravum," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 128-39.
16. Ibid., p. 139.

17. "Oru Visadikaranakkurippu," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 96-9.
18. See, for example, Gopal Guru, ed., *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).
19. See, for example, Sanjay Palshikar, "Understanding Humiliation," *Ibid.*, pp. 79-92.
20. For a more detailed presentation of this argument, see Udaya Kumar, "Two Figures of Shame," *Études Anglaises: Revue du monde Anglophone*, 62:3 (2009), pp. 345-57.
21. Following Emmanuel Levinas's *Of escape*, which attempts to free the analysis of shame from a frame of moral culpability, Giorgio Agamben sees in the experience of shame a convergence of disidentification and inescapability. "In shame", Agamben says, "the subject ... has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame." Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 106. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape, De l'évasion*, tr. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
22. Levinas, p. 64; Agamben, pp. 104-6.
23. C. Ayyappan, "Abhimukham," pp. 172-3.
24. "Elumban Kochathan," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 64-70.
25. C. Ayyappan, "Abhimukham," p. 186.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.
29. "Kavalbhutam," pp. 14-5.
30. "Arundhatidarsananyayam," pp. 14-5.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.
33. C. Ayyappan, "Abhimukham," p. 175.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
35. P. Sanal Mohan, "Narrativizing Oppression and Suffering: Theorizing Slavery," *South Asia Research*, 26:1 (2006), pp. 1-40; "Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth-Century Kerala," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 28:1 (2005), pp. 35-63.
36. "Bhuthabali," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, p. 33.
37. "Aana," *C. Ayyappante Kathakal*, pp. 78-83.