



Available online at www.jlls.org

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(2), 1429-1436; 2021

An Analysis Of Writer-Activism Paradigm In Jothibai Pariyadath's Mayilamma

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APA Citation:

Vinayakaselvi, A.M., Abinaya, R., (2021). An Analysis Of Writer-Activism Paradigm In Jothibai Pariyadath's Mayilamma, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(2), 1429-1436; 2021.

Submission Date: 27/03/2021

Acceptance Date: 14/05/2021

Abstract:

Movements/protests/activisms are the significant part of articulating an issue to the mainstream socio-culture bulletin. Environmental movements in India has been providing sufficient exposure of the environment related issues from remote corners of the country. Among the numerous mainstream and grassroots environmental movements, some movements remain prominent while others have not been lucid. On the other hand, the written narratives of movements and their issues have been asserting their place in the environmental discourse. Jothibai Pariyadath's Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior is a writer-activists' text of the Plachimada protest. The article positions the select text as a narrative of writer activism which is an integral part of environmentalism.

Keywords: Plachimada protest; Collective action; Environmental Resistance; Mayilamma; Writer-activism.

Introduction:

Jothibai Pariyadath's Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior is an oral narrative of Plachimada protest. It was translated into English by Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Sreejith Varma. The text records the oral autobiographic life and experience of Mayilamma and her participation in the Plachimada protest as a prominent figure. Mayilamma belonged to a tribal community in the district of Palakkad of the Indian state of Kerala. Experiencing water pollution and exploitation at first hand, Mayilamma became a leading figure in the grass root protest in Plachimada. Her strength comes from the traditional and cultural influence of the performances like the traditional folk tales Porattu and Ariyamala dance that she had watched during her childhood. Mayilamma's understanding of her natural environment can be seen through her comments on biomagnifications. As a child, she used to catch fish and crabs in the streams near the agricultural fields after grazing the cattle. Along with other children she would roast them and eat together. The crabs contained medicinal qualities and could clear mucus in the chest. On contrast,

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in the later days the crabs have become “poison crabs” (Pariyadath 31) feeding on the pesticides and fertilizers washed away from the agricultural fields entering the food chain which Carson phrased “death by indirection” which is slow violence (Nixon 9). Thus, the stories and life lessons she gathered from communal gatherings and street plays function as a source of knowledge shaping her life perpetually.

Mayilamma never joined a political party as she resented the party-ism which had “played havoc with grass root development” (Mayilamma, 2005). Her narrative Mayilamma addresses the common people to empathize with the text as it represents the global south which is appropriated as a place “where new visions of the future are emerging and where the global political and decolonial society is at work” (Levander et al., 3) voicing for the victims of environmental degradation. More than being an autobiographical text, her life story evolves to represent the entire process of ‘Plachimada struggle’ as known in the popular culture. Mayilamma represents the non-violent resistance against the state and private corporations that add to the possible optimistic global environmental activism setting milestone in Indian grass root environmental movements. The protest is a representative – David-Goliath struggle prototype – between the peripheral marginalized tribal people who reassure their strength through solidarity and the imperious multi-national Coca-Cola corporations.

Writer-Activism:

Rob Nixon represents writer-activist as a potential witness of the environmental issues as the authority of the usual witnesses are questioned discounting them both socially and culturally. As in case of sexual abuse where within a community the woman in question or any women in general are not counted as witness to present their cases. Likewise, in the case of any environmental exploitation, the indigenous tribal people, women in particular are not considered as the representative of their cases. Hence, the indigenous tribal women become completely invisible as a result of the native cultural and social institution which causes the structural injustice within social hierarchy. The writer-activist and their writings serve as testimony to the world about their individual community or country as they represent the case of the poor people which in the neoliberal world is short lived. Hence, the writer-activist functions as the collective consciousness capable of negotiating. They can also humanize the threats through their imaginative writing making it accessible and by participating in the activism they become “iconic figure heads” and “autobiographers of collective movements” (Nixon 23). They can provide “sights unseen” (Nixon 15) of the catastrophe as a participant giving materiality for their communities to act. The writer-activists vary from organizers of environmental movements to journalists, academicians, writers like Ken Saro-Wiwa, Wangari Maathai, Indra Sinha, Arundhati Roy (Nixon 23) and so on as they amplify the already established protests to the world. Their discourses, hence, create an alliance among environmental justice, women’s rights and rights of the marginalized people and results in the intersectional paradigm shift.

This article argues that the resistance against environmental exploitation should be considered on par with the structural slow violence which is invisible and incomprehensible (Galtung 173) due to the established hierachal structure. The article represents and analyses how the resistance in the form of writer-activism in Adivasi community in the plachimada protest create awareness, environmental education and communications. The method of the research is close reading and critical analysis of the text and the Plachimada protest of the chosen study.

Plachimada protest:

The Hindusthan Coca-Cola bottling plant, the Indian subsidiary of the Coca-Cola Corporation was established in the June of 2000 in Plachimada area which is located in the district of Palakkad of the

Indian state of Kerala. Perumatty panchayat (local self-governing body) — the major factory occupied land, was issued license to start the production of the company in January 2000. The Company chose the particular area after conducting a satellite imagery surveillance locating the place between two large groundwater reservoirs. According to Menon (2013), the company extracted an approximate amount of 500-1500 liters of water every day. The drastic exploitation of water became clearly visible within six month of the arrival of the Company. After analysing the other responsible factors for water insecurity like deforestation, the survey Water Insecurity (2008) concludes that the Coca-Cola Company is the proximate cause due to the large extraction of ground water. The tribal people, as the major victims became “dispensable citizens” who have to bear the aftermath of the resource exploitation for the benefit of “developer-dispossessors” who create sustainable insecurity for the short term gain of the “elite capture of resources or toxic disposal” (Nixon 17).

The sudden increase of water in the wells left the people puzzled. The wells around the village turned blackish and the prominent water sources gradually dried. The different colour wastes came from the company, one white and the other black stank like rotten corpses and the people around the Company could not even swallow a mouthful of food without feeling nauseous. Though they were poor, they had a life, calm enough to eat and drink peacefully. Marginalized people are denied of their basic rights of accessing a clean environment. The bore wells used for agriculture went dry.

The Adivasi people were forced to buy the water which was confiscated from them. They refused to get the water that was offered by the Company which later became a part of their protest. On the other hand, the middle class and rich ‘muthalalis’ could afford to buy water while the poor people had to walk long distance for the once sustainable resource. When water was supplied by tankers after a few years (arranged by the panchayat), the poor people had to compromise even after knowing that those water came from questionable sources as Mayilamma recalls “The man in the khaki pants who pumped water said that none of us would drink it if we were told where it was from.” (Pariyadath 24) Moreover, the queue waiting for the tankers became a time consuming process losing the agricultural women laborers almost two days of employment (53). The water insecurity varied owing to the different livelihood vulnerabilities where the most vulnerable people were the tribal agricultural labourers (Nair 83). After almost a decade from Mayilamma’s death, her son Thangavelu comments to the affordability of the water in an interview stating that the comparatively rich people would buy mineral water while the “Others have to be content with the pipe water.” (Pariyadath 91).

On March 2002, Sargam Metal Laboratories reported that the hardness in the water was high. On 2005, Outlook magazine commissioned Sargam again to test the water from the well which reported that the water was completely unfit for human consumption standing low to meet the standards of usable water. The region was an important agricultural area which was popularly known as one of the ‘rice bowls of Kerala’. Canal irrigation and groundwater was used for agricultural practices. The arrival of the Company destroyed the source of agriculture, making the people lost their job means of being agricultural labourers, ironically, it became contrast to what the people expected (employment) of the arrival of the Company. The Adivasi people started to question after realizing that the increase in the water of the well was due to the seepage of non-recycled dirty water which was used to water the plants in the area. Moreover, the Company passed down the solid wastes as good fertilizers and had asked the farmers to use in the agricultural fields. On July 2003, BBC Radio 4 ‘Face the Facts’ program stated that there were toxic carcinogenic substances in the wastes disposed by the Company, this was confirmed by the Kerala State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB). The Company was ordered to get back the waste to store them in a safe place after this. The Company continued to dump the wastes in the open places even after the judicial order, as Mayilamma recalls in her narrative. The Supreme Court Monitoring Committee on Hazardous Wastes (SCMC) concluded that the Company would supply water

to the people as they were not convinced about the origin of the toxins in the dumped sludge (Bijoy, 2006).

The people believed that the establishment of the Company would increase the employment opportunities for the local population. A similar company was established in Amrampalayam, some ten kilometres from Plachimada. The Soy Company had completely drained the groundwater and agriculture was destroyed. Even after recalling this incident during Mayilamma's discussion with ward members about the Company, she believed "What is more important is jobs for our people...Would our Government do anything that could harm us?" (Pariyadath 11). The villagers in the region were predominantly agricultural labourers who were landless and illiterate. They mostly belonged to the category of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. The people could only get the job of cleaning bottles due to their education. Due to the lack of awareness the poor people (along the line of structural inequalities of gender, class and caste) become a part of neo liberal corporations. The neoliberal subtle claim of the natural resources in the guise of development omitting the social and sustainable security of the people, the exploitation remains invisible. The people could only realize the slow violence inflicted upon them after the effects of the violence became irreversible getting their survival at stake. Plachiamada proves to be one such victim of neo liberalism due to the lack of sustainable development. This microcosmic representation functions as a synecdoche representation of the environmental issues.

A non-violent resistance and collective action:

As a resistance strategy Mayilamma used the Anganwadi which she had literally took many hardships to be established in her place. Anganwadi was the first place where the people realized the dangers of polluted water as the children suffered from diarrhoea and vomit after eating the meal cooked with the polluter water. The water from the wells where used to make the rice gruel and other food for the children. The same water which they have been using for decades together was different now. In the later days of protest the rhymes the children sung Anganwadi were about the protest in Plachimada as a subversive strategy.

A Plachimada bird chirped:

"My throat is parched, dear people!

Your Coca-Cola surely cannot wet my parched throat!

O man from the alien shore,

I am not used to it.

My nest is here, so is my family, my land and its people.

After devouring the rice that quells our hunger,

After sucking dry the water from the Earth's womb

O man from the alien shore!

You and your lackies will leave with your bottles!" (Pariyadath 25).

These kinds of song sung by the children of four years old (average age of the children studying in Anganwadi) represents the augmented struggle and the need for the people's basic resources. When the water crisis began and people travelled far to get water Anganwadi also needed water. Though they sold water at first, they realized that the workers were also working hard to earn money which was spent on buying water. The people felt that it was the only place their children could get basic education and

meals. The colony people of the area took turns to provide water to Anganwadi which became a symbolic hub for early realization of slow violence. It became a place where the community children could get early awareness about both the environment and society. It became a symbol of hope for the Adivasi people who became leading examples to the rest of the world.

The Anti Coca-Cola Struggle Committee launched the protest popularly known as Plachimada struggle on April 22, 2002, Earth day. The protest which was mostly of the marginalized Adivasi people was an expression of their desperation to protect their fundamental rights to the sustenance of natural resources. Rob Nixon discusses that the environmental protests can be considered as a response to the “displacement without moving” (Nixon 19) which refers to the loss of resources making the people to lose their fundamental resources and the cultural significance and knowledge the native people possess associated with their habitats. The homogenous small group, the cost efficiency and the dedicated leadership were the reason for the emergence and endurance (Nair 100) over the long protest. Vilayodi Venugopal who had been working for the welfare of the Adivasi people created the needed awareness which helped to organize the people. The beginning of the protest was humble, the people gathered in front of the Coca-Cola plant and voiced against the pollution and exploitation of water resources. The people were not aware at that point of time about the consistency the people would have to fight for years together without losing the vigour. With time the protest received support from many renowned activists, organizations and media.

The factors like Farmer’s Association, Political Parties, Local panchayat, government departments, NGOs provided the people knowledge, exposure and enhancing the capability of the local leadership. This “collective action” (Nair 85) ensured the success of the successful protest. Listening to many inspiring speeches and seeing how the people from outside spoke about their problem, Mayilamma decided to get on the spotlight to address their problem herself. Beyond her own expectations, she could feel that she spoke naturally as her heart was filled with the suppressed thoughts and emotions of her people suffering. On the fiftieth day of the demonstration, the people dumped the Company’s fertilizers in front of the factory gate to make the Company realize about the stinking smell that emanated from the so called fertilizers. Violence broke with the involvement of police under the complaint of the Company. Mayilamma was verbally abused and one of the protesters, Ambikal’s clothes torn and the driver of Dr Nandakumar of Ernakulam had been beaten while many others taken to the police station. The harassment of women in the protests in a place where cultural burdens push women to be ashamed of themselves, has become a hegemonic strategy to discourage the women participations.

Marking the thousandth day of the protest, World water meeting was organized on 15 January 2005 by the members of the protest. The protest included many prominent figures like Vandana Shiva, environmental activists, academicians, journalist and many more. It was a three day event which commemorated the arrival of Plachimada struggle to the global arena. At one point of time, the angry people flung cow dung at the panchayat office blaming them for providing license to open the Company and as result of the continued show of resistance, on April 2003 the panchayat refused to renew the license. On the month of June, the same year a stay order was issued against the panchayat decision. On December, the panchayat’s idea regarding the issue of license was considered by the Kerala High Court. Despite their recurrent requests the Member of Legislative Assembly of the area did not show any interest until the later stage of the protest: “Protest, public speeches, processions, rallies, humiliation - that is how a year passed. In the meanwhile, all sorts of people came and left.” (Pariyadath 59)

The major water source of the people was the wells and with the pollution they had to go for substitute source. The panchayat laid pipe lines, digging a huge well in the lake Kambalathara but the

water flow continued only for two to three months and then stopped. This incident served as an example of the seriousness of the water crisis of the once sustainable water resource. As a part of the resistance the people did not receive anything from the Company, and they felt it burdensome. Mayilamma recalls how the employees of the Company had to oppose the protesters as a part of their jobs and loyalty following their work. Robinson's fossil fuel workers can be kept parallel with the company workers, as the labourers collude with the corporation in the resource exploitation without realizing the fact that they too are victims. This calls for "Just Transition" (Robinson 122) without excluding the workers of the neoliberal corporations, towards sustainable development. Mayilamma states that the debt of gratitude should not hinder their protest, as it was the cultural characteristics of the people.

Following the protest many court cases were filed against the protesters. Around one hundred and fourteen people had a case on them for dumping the fertilizers in front yard of the factory three more police cases were filed for stopping the Company's water tanker as a part of their protest. The people did not want to compromise with the Company over a few tankers as they continue to extract emptying their ground water reserves. Two cases on eleven people were registered for raising slogans against the Company. The people did not have money for the legal affairs and when the court summons arrived they did not have any means of financial stability as they depended upon donations from individual volunteers and welfare organizations. The people took turns to work if they ran out of money to support their protest. Mayilamma comments "they must have considered me an ordinary housewife who was capable of only making gruel in the kitchen" (Pariyadath 68) and she does not fear going to prison or getting a bad name which typically the women were made to fear about as a part of patriarchal hegemony. By this, Mayilamma presents how overcoming the conventional slow violence on women would contribute to the grass root environmentalism which is intersectional of gender, caste and class in nature. On the fourth Independence Day from the beginning of the protest, the people had also planned a demonstration to besiege the company. Police were under surveillance around the area and when the protesters went up to the gates, they were ruthlessly lathi charged and the crowd was dispersed people running all around. Mayilamma questions that if the government took the right decision in the first place, they would not have become a problem by protesting. She voices that "What is the point in saying that we are free if the land, water and air over which we have the right are not freely available to us? We are all slaves even now. Will eating sweets, planting the flag and shouting 'Jai! Jai!' mean freedom?" (Pariyadath 70). Mayilamma claims that the real freedom comes only if the ownership of natural resources is controlled by and utilized for the sustainable sustenance of the people.

In January 2004 the High Court division bench ordered to monitor the consumption of water in the Company. The monitoring committee found the excessive use of water. On February, Government of Kerala declares, Palakkad District within which Plachimada is situated, as drought affected. (EJOLT) In March 2004 the Company was banned from extracting water till mid-June which accounted to stop the operation of the plant. In 2005, the High Court formed committee submitted a report stating that the maximum allowed water usage should not exceed 5,00,000 liters per day. In June of the same year, the High Court issued an order to the panchayat to grant license and three month license was issued subject to strict regulations. In August of 2005 KSPCB rejected the Company's application stating that heavy metal cadmium concentration was 400 to 600% above the tolerance limit. On November of the same year the High Court demanded the Perumatty panchayat to issue license for the second time. In the same month Plachimada was included under the category of overexploited area. In response to that the panchayat filed a petition in Supreme Court against the order to issue license. (Coca-Cola Lawsuit, 2003) In January 2006, the Company began considering moving its operations away from Plachimada. In June 2010, a legal agency was set up to assess the compensation. In February 2011, a draft bill was approved and passed to form a tribunal to secure compensation and as a result, the Plachimada Coca-Cola Victim Relief and Compensation Claims Special Tribunal Bill was passed in the same month. In

December 2014, the Centre directed the State to approach National Green Tribunal. In February 2016 President of India returned the Bill and in June of the same year a criminal case against the Company under the provisions of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, for groundwater exploitation and pollution in Plachimada was filed. (Mathews 2011) Noel Castree's concept of "engaged analysis" (251) among humanities and other interdisciplinary areas can be appropriated with reference to the above mentioned scientific and social science research of the Plachimada struggle.

Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior is a paradigm of writer-activism and Jothibai Pariyadath is a writer-activist. The protest and the written narrative becomes an integral part of environmentalism which creates an environmental discourse inclusive of social and literary narrative. In Plachimada instead of the Coco-Cola company, the state intervention towards sustainable use of natural resources and agricultural practices would have contributed to the sustainable development in contrast to the industrial development which is widely suggested by the environmentalists around the world. The contributions of tribal people in particular women has been in the raise in the recent decades proving that with enough assistance and traditional knowledge the fight against climate change and economic crisis can be fought successfully. As Rosser suggests that ecological principles provide variant scopes for feminism providing how the empowerment of women can be linked to their natural environment (145).

Decentralization of governance over the natural resources was an existing communal policy of the tribal people who conserved their forest through their cultural practices. Based on the protest and involvement of the local panchayat, the empowerment of the Local Self-governments with the required technical support should be prioritized as a result of their increased transparency and proximity to the people (Nair 106). The neo liberal ideals and the political intervention along with globalizing trends destroyed the established self-sustaining community turning them into victims of resource exploitation.

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