
Confronting the Other: Dilemmas and Contradictions in the Approaches to the Marginalised

Mr. Lalith S

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Govt. Brennen College, Thalassery

lalith2026@gmail.com

Abstract: How and when does the ‘Other’ come into being? How is the process of othering materialized? When a person is humiliated, persecuted for treason, victimized for their sexuality, discriminated for their race or class or gender or caste, denied happiness, displaced in the name of development, raped, molested, immorally policed, thrown acid at, they immediately become conscious of their being as an object, they become the other, they embrace their shame. They become one with their immediate identity, losing all their other identities and manifold possibilities. All the freedom vanishes into thin air and they allow themselves to be objectified, defined, classified, confined, arrested literally. Their self-esteem depends on the other(‘s) esteem (the other extreme). They know themselves as the other knows them. The research paper analyses various literary, social media and everyday affairs and tries to calibrate the position of ‘the other’ in the Indian background of marginalization of Dalits, extreme nationalism and islamophobia.

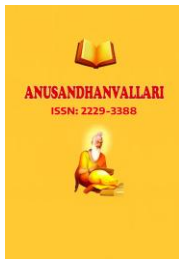
Keywords: The other, political other, Dalit politics, islamophobia, nationalism.

Being is an act of self gratification, recognizing oneself, acknowledging oneself, valuing oneself. That is precisely why debasing hurts, devaluing makes one prone to suicides, births become ‘fatal accidents. The suicide note of Rohith Vemula, the Dalit student of Hyderabad Central University reads like this:

I feel a growing gap between my soul and my body. And I have become a monster. I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan. At last, this is the only letter I am getting to write...Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs coloured. Our originality valid through artificial art...The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust.... (2)

The yawning gap between one’s aspirations and the process of othering or alienation is visible here. Therefore, in a sense Rohith Vemula is a victim of centuries-old caste oppression which led to an existential crisis, and the way he confronted with the other (the monster) is through violent annihilation of himself. If one analyses the responses the suicide evoked in social media and the rejoinders to it, one wonders at the paucity of ethical responses, the impossibility of identifying with the other however much one sympathises with the cause.

Where does one draw the line between patronizing and becoming? So called progressive privileged castes and classes seem to cater to the middle class casteist guilt complex and satisfy themselves by penning a poem or a social media post about it. Generally, the dialogue and reckoning of the ‘other’ can only go to that extent. One fails to become a debrahmanized Brahmin completely. Acknowledging responsibility alone is deemed insufficient. But in another way, this leads to the ghettoization of discourses, the impossibility of a non-Dalit to fruitfully engage with the Dalit discourse.



The case of N.S Madhavan, the renowned writer in Malayalam is no different. He tweeted. “Literature in twenty first century is not fiction or poetry. It is suicide notes.” Immediately he has had to face the question: “Why doesn’t N S Madhavan leave a suicide note and commit suicide thus contributing a lasting piece of literature?” This is the irony. Some can talk about suicide, the others have to act it out, perform it. Hence Vemula’s act is a performative act the way Judith Butler has put it. Would Rohit Vemula ever have hogged the national limelight and become the conscience of the oppressed had he not committed suicide? But that leaves another question open: What would a practicing Muslim subject to systemic oppression do as even suicide is prohibited according to Islam?

The same would be the case of a feminist discourse where a male fails to truly comprehend the female. In Sara Joseph’s parlance, the experience differs between one who gets kicked and the one who watches it. One cannot shed the patriarchy one has internalized completely however much one tries. In the texts of Luce Irigaray, the other indicates the position always occupied by women within patriarchal culture and other masculinist cultures which privilege masculinity as self-sameness or otherwise a signifier of presence, origin or centrality. At the same time the binary between a subjugated wife and the sex worker who derives pleasure and is paid for the job is one who would disturb the whole edifice of ‘Indian culture’

A similar logic applies regarding the question of representation and agency. Speaking for someone else becomes an act of denying agency in a sense stealing somebody else’s thunder. The instance of a Malayalam daily portraying prophet Mohammed in bad light and the controversy that ensued is a case in point. Empowerment and criticism of the other have to come from within, by critical insiders or else one should balk at attempts to ‘understand’ the other.

But there is another other according to Sartre. For him shame is the original feeling of the existence of others...hell is other people.

Other is a scandal because I do not exist while he has the power to freeze me into a being (vulgar, proud, shy,) that I am not. The gaze of others exposes me, makes me weak and fragile, and makes me subject for him...my original sin is the existence of the other”. (27)

Man is no island. Being in the world also means being in the world of (for) others, being objectified 24x7, being in the panopticon, in the eye of the cam-era, constant surveillance, and intrusion in to privacy. But it also opens the possibilities for the other to learn from me, or even be intimidated by my otherness. As Lacan says other is also how I see myself in the mirror, perceiving myself as the mirror image. When entering into the symbolic realm, the Other is when I use language, when I enter the law of the father.

The other is also my love, my object of desire, beyond me, always enticingly close to me. One wants to merge, melt, so that one becomes the other, unified. But desire is almost always for the unattainable. The other’s uniqueness, difference is its very being. No trespass is tolerated; one cannot intrude upon the being of another person. One does it at one’s own peril, at the cost of the relationship. Then there would be no hope for real freedom to exist, ever.

Arundhati Roy dedicates *The God of Small Things* to her mother who “loved her enough to let her go”. Freedom is the language of the other, letting go is the mantra, as unconscious is its language. T.S Eliot, in his *Wasteland and Other Poems*:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
But who is that on the other side of you? (69)

Here, the other is the third in a non-religious context. Neither you nor I. It is always 'them'. In the very process of naming the other, defining the other, creating a discourse around the other, studying the other, speaking for the other; the process of othering starts. The other is always the non-self, the arch-rival, the mysterious.

As per Hegel, the other provides a dialectic in which the only possibilities are being dominated or being dominant. One cannot engage with the other on an equal footing. But human beings, being the torchbearers of renaissance ideals and liberal humanism, have a propensity to insist on the third space, the meeting ground.

As Derrida points out, in writing about one particular cause rather than another, in pursuing one profession over another, in spending time with one's family rather than at work, one inevitably ignores the "other others" (GD 69), and this is a condition of any and every existence. For Derrida, it seems that the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. He does, in fact, suggest that a universal community that excludes no one is a contradiction in terms. For Levinas, the encounter with the other, and more specifically, the face of the other, is positive in that, by challenging the subject's feeling of self assurance and self containment, it inaugurates the possibility of an ethics. It is an appeal for the subject to go towards, to welcome and to take responsibility for the other. Literature is replete with examples of the impossibility of a common ground. Rudyard Kipling, in his "The Ballad of East and West" says, 'OH, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet...' (184). In *A Passage to India* (1924) by E M Forster, the relationship between Fielding and Aziz and that of Adela Quested and Aziz are interesting pointers: "Why can't we be friends now?" Said the other, holding him affectionately. "It's what I want. It's what you want" But the horses didn't want it -- they swerved apart, the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file (278). Similarly, in *The Hairy Ape* (1992) by Eugene O'Neill, Mildred says:

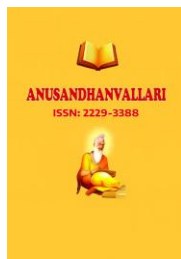
Please do not mock at my attempts to discover how the other half lives. Give me credit for some sort of groping sincerity in that at least. I would like to help them. I would like to be some use in the world. Is it my fault I don't know how? I would like to be sincere, to touch life somewhere. (56)

In Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861), the protagonist Pip tries to understand and master Estella, the inscrutable other who is under the surveillance of the equally mysterious Miss Havisham. But when the novel is adapted as *Fitoor* (2016), it fails to strike a chord as the otherness is appropriated for the sake of typical Bollywood happy ending.

Kamala Das in her "Introduction" (2004) tries to transcend the dichotomy of the self and the other:

It is I who laugh; it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (18)

In the *French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), by John Fowles, Charles attempts to unfold the inscrutable mystery called Sarah Woodruff. When he confronts Sarah as the emancipated Roughwood, he acts beside himself as the



other has become the other's other. In the adaptation by Karel Reiz there is a moment when Sarah confronts herself in the mirror leading to her decision to leave Charles for good.

The creation of the political other has been used as a strategy by the west since colonial times leading to the mass killings in Iraq and Afghanistan and the creation of Taliban and ISIS. The statement of George Bush "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (2001), epitomizes the doublespeak and hypocrisy of the west creating a fear of psychosis among its citizens. The success in radicalizing a sect of Islam which ensued, and clinging onto its more conservative interpretation of the tenets by the clergy was in a way playing into the hands of the west who wanted to demonise Islam and define itself as the civilised self at the cost of the other.

But the pertinent question remains: Is a dialogue with the other impossible in the present circumstances? Is it the need of the hour? Or should we dispense with it altogether and exist as independent entities. We are fast approaching a stage where we will have to adopt either of the multicultural models 'Melting Pot' or 'salad bowl' used when discussing multiculturalism in the US and Canada. Attempts like Akbar's Deen-Ilahi are zeitgeist of the past now. The paeans about the communal harmony of Kerala have also started losing its sheen. Communalism, whether majority or minority led, would leave the land in tatters. The way a civilization treats its others shows how great it is. Therefore, one should ask oneself, "What have we done to our great Nation's others?"

In short, one should never make an attempt to comprehend the other, or even respect the other let alone have a dialogue with the other. One should just let the other be as the other. That would be a safe position theoretically. But politically a violent confrontation with the other is inevitable. The contradiction that one calls India would necessitate a confrontation between the rational and the irrational, the secular and the religious, the atheist and the theist, the tolerant and the fanatic, traditional and progressive, the famished and the opulent and once enough blood has been shed, enough sacrifices made, enough martyrs born the idea of India would survive. Until then *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Alan Paton, 1948)

Works Cited

- [1] Bush, George W. Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People. 20 Sept. 2001, United States Capitol, Washington D.C. Speech.
- [2] Das, Kamala. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. Mumbai: Orient Longman, 2004.
- [3] Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Tr, David Wills. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- [4] Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Edited by Charlotte Mitchell, Penguin Classics, 2003.
- [5] Eliot, T. S. *The Wasteland and Other Poems*. New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1975.
- [6] Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*, London: Edward Arnold, 1924.
- [7] Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Jonathan Cape, 1969.
- [8] Kipling, Rudyard. *The Collected poems of Rudyard Kipling*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994.
- [9] Macey David. *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin, 2001.
- [10] O'Neill, Eugene. *The Hairy Ape*. Auckland: The Floating Press, 2014.
- [11] Paton, Alan. *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Scribner, 2003.
- [12] Sartre, Jean Paul. *No Exit: A Play in One Act*. New York: French, 1958.
- [13] Vemula, Rohith. "My Birth Is My Fatal Accident." *Indian Express*, January 19, 2016.