



Revisiting Modernity: A Critical Analysis of the Novel Eri in the Context of Kerala Renaissance

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Abstract

The basic message of the Enlightenment is to lead all human beings to social liberation, particularly the liberation of dispossessed people. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu's novel Eri is part of such an attempt; it espouses moral and intellectual modernity based on equality and revolutionary democracy. Modernity advanced the concept that human beings are free from the shackles of self-imposed tutelage and manifold controls imposed on them. Therefore, modernity was not merely an intellectual revolution; it engendered a transformative shift, crafting not only an intellectual evolution but also forging a new social being and individual.

The individual and society can be seen as a binary concept in modern thought. Here, Eri also attempts to create a modern ideal society, wherein the individual becomes the center of human society. Eri seeks to shape a modern society based on equality and upholding the values of revolutionary democracy. Eri, the eponymous character in the novel, is also able to use the aesthetic wisdom he possesses to develop human nature to its fullest. It is the ideal of Enlightenment, which is the liberation of human society from self-inflicted immaturity (Britstow 2011:4). In the Indian context, it is



caste that often makes people fail to realize the basic aim of Enlightenment, which is to awaken the courage and intellectual capacity to think for oneself. Eri's statement that witchcraft is wisdom and that it makes the subordinate a master over karma stems from modernist conceptions of the individual. The illumination brought into the lives of the underprivileged illuminates the general society as well.

The Dalit community portrayed in this novel possesses rich traditional knowledge and the capability to gain a profound sense of life's purpose and wisdom, which can be attained through enlightened engagement in karma. Despite these attributes, the question remains: how did they end up in a state of servitude?

Pradeepan Pampirikunnu's Eri manages to create a group of inquisitive, critical insiders who believe that every person and thing has its own purpose and dharma (Anil, 2019:23). The novel comes to light as it explores how the sources of Dalit knowledge are neglected for various reasons. In the novel, the researcher discovers epistemological figures that have emerged from his own ethnic background. Only those who think beyond their own space and time can earn a place in history. These thoughts are shaped by fundamental values: humanism, secularism, scientific temper, and universalism. The character Eri in the novel mirrors Ambedkar's vision of an ideal society that is yet to be constructed. This paper is an attempt to critically evaluate the concept of an ideal society depicted in the novel Eri.

Keywords: Enlightenment values, Dalit knowledge, Modernity and individual, Ideal society

Introduction

The intellectual project of modernity, driven by Enlightenment ideals, has historically sought to liberate human beings from systems of domination and ignorance, inspiring social transformation grounded in reason, equality, and democratic values. In the Indian context, however, the journey toward modernity has been deeply contested due to entrenched structures of caste, ritual hierarchy, and social exclusion. Literature emerging from marginalized communities plays a crucial role in exposing these contradictions and reclaiming histories denied by hegemonic narratives.



Pradeepan Pampirikunnu's novel *Eri* stands as a powerful literary intervention that reimagines modernity from the perspective of the oppressed. The text foregrounds the Dalit experience and interrogates the limits of conventional Enlightenment thought in a caste-stratified society. Through the titular character *Eri*—an embodiment of aesthetic intelligence, rational inquiry, and social resistance—the novel reconstructs a vision of social emancipation rooted in indigenous epistemologies and subaltern agency. The narrative examines how Dalit knowledge systems, historically dismissed or demonized, carry within them the seeds of ethical modernity, democratic equality, and collective liberation.

By situating *Eri* within the socio-intellectual milieu of Kerala's renaissance movements, this article critically explores how the novel challenges dominant historiographies, reclaims subaltern subjectivity, and articulates a modernity grounded in social justice rather than elite rationality. It argues that *Eri* offers not merely a literary representation of Dalit life, but a philosophical critique of caste and a re-envisioning of Enlightenment values from below—where the path to liberation emerges through a fusion of cultural memory, lived experience, and political assertion.

The foundational messages of the Enlightenment lead all humans toward social liberation, specifically ensuring the liberation of marginalised communities (Anil, 2022:34). The fictional world of *Eri* embodies the essence of modernity founded on equality and revolutionary democracy, both moral and intellectual. It presents the concept that humans alone determine their fate, free from the chains of imposed guardianship, and that no one controls them. Modernity is not just an intellectual revolution but also creates a new social order and being, where the individual/community dichotomy becomes central in modern thought. *Eri* envisions a modern, idealistic society where the individual becomes the core and fundamental unit.

The transition to modernity encompasses cultural, practical, and social transformations, shifting from mechanical unity to organic unity. This transition signifies the movement from an old society to a new one, where a formerly deterministic society evolves into one with consciousness and beneficial intent. The essence of modernity is based on morality grounded in equality, revolution, and democracy (Anil, 2022:39).

It is argued that all humans are of the same essence and should be treated equally with dignity and value. This leads to the principle that every human should follow a universal, rational approach. Universality, rationality, and equality are the foundation of modernity, revealing the essence of human sociability. Social



irrationality forms the basis for discrimination among humans, while social rationality is key for eliminating this discrimination. Only through theoretical and practical frameworks can the principle that all humans are equal be realized. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu's *Eri* is part of such an endeavour.

The scientific nature of *Eri* gains special attention through its political awareness. Sight, hearing, and touch do not occur merely by chance; there are established norms dictating what can and cannot be perceived. Politics amends these norms through hierarchical organization of the sensory world, leading to marginalised and enslaved communities. The caste system positions bodies within power relations, manifested through untouchability. *Eri* finds an aesthetic rationale to reveal the stratification of experiences within the caste system. The protagonist, *Eri*, emerges from a community that has endured extreme caste oppression to realise the dream of a casteless society.

The setting of *Eri* is the fictional land of Parayanar Puram in the old Kurumbranad Taluk of North Kerala. The novel is a polyphonic narrative in which a subaltern researcher attempts to recreate *Eri*'s historical life through legends, memories, books, and records. The perspectives about the formation of modern Kerala form the foundation of the narrative (Anil, 2019:18).

Pampirikunnu uses the novel's vast canvas to articulate the dynamics of caste and historical erasures of Dalits. Everyone plays their part in each historical process, but histories often ignore them. *Eri* is such a person, and establishing his history is the author's goal. He fills the gaps in history by imagining a logical world where the subaltern subverts the hegemonic caste system through art, creating a new reality. Chaliyan Raman, who miraculously clears his vision through divine medicine, represents *Eri*: he is a magician.

In reality, *Eri* executes a revolt against untouchability. Untouchability constructs a wall preventing the world from entering the lives of humans, confining them to limited experiences. By revolting, *Eri* comes to know the world through touch, eliminating subject/object distinctions. When untouchability is abolished, the world enters more densely into human life. *Eri*'s touch becomes light for Chaliyan Raman. The darkness disperses when bodies previously deemed untouchable touch each other. The basis of experience is the senses, which the caste system suppresses. It negates basic human desires. The impure love of Chappan Komaram exemplifies this suffering.



Eri utilises his aesthetic knowledge to develop human nature to its fullest potential. Magic becomes a form of knowledge that empowers the subaltern to become an agent of his own destiny. This is why Eri becomes adept in what the upper castes call “black arts.”

Understanding that the caste system restricts knowledge and renders humans incomplete, Eri becomes an internal critic of the system (Anil, 2019:19). He employs traditional knowledge for social upliftment. Internal criticism in India involves intellectual and practical resistance against the Varna system. Many experiences do not enter language; those excluded do not gain the status of truth. This is why exploring historical silences becomes necessary.

The marginalised possess rich traditional knowledge and capacity for labour, encompassing art and life philosophy. Yet, how did they become enslaved? Canonical texts often exclude them. Canon formation, shaped by time, place, class, caste, gender, and politics, determines what is preserved. This caste-based ideology must be dismantled.

History significantly influences human thought. Hegel views history as a gradual progress toward freedom (Anil, 2022:30). Eri contributes to reconstructing the history of marginalised people. Kurumbranad’s records show darkness with a few lights. The novel explores how historical narratives are constructed and how marginalised voices are excluded.

The Pulayars and Parayars lack written history; they have dependent history sustained by memory. A materialist historian believes not in linear flow but in disruption. Authority is shaped by relationships and conflicts, not merely chronology. Eri creates such political explosions.

Throughout the novel, voices echo Ambedkar, asserting that social and cultural freedom is more important than political independence. Political freedom is meaningless without liberation from social and internal slavery.

The Modern Society in Eri

The modern society in Eri is the cultural and political territory of modernity—the nation (Aloysius, 2009:6). Eri attempts to create a society where all citizens are equal, free, and respectful of each other. Modernity advances freedom, equality, democracy, and the formation of individuals and collective consciousness.

Eri envisions unity among a vast and equal society. This aligns with Ambedkar’s vision of an ideal society free of power hierarchies and discrimination. Eri explains to Eleppan: “Even though I am a Parayan, you do not keep me distant because you



think I possess knowledge. So, knowledge is important. Magic is knowledge, and it empowers the subaltern.”

The Enlightenment is the courage to think. “Knowledge is Power” is Eri’s motto. Instead of devotion to the divine, Eri emphasises devotion to humanity. He challenges caste by prioritising reason and justice. When asked about his caste, Eri responds: “Not an animal species.” In this way, he creates thinking humans capable of embracing others without prejudice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Eri powerfully reimagines the trajectory of Kerala’s renaissance by foregrounding Dalit epistemologies, ethical modernity, and the struggle for social emancipation. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu’s narrative not only interrogates caste-inflicted historical silences but also constructs a counter-history rooted in self-respect, critical consciousness, and collective dignity. Through Eri’s assertion of knowledge, rationality, and aesthetic agency as instruments of liberation, the novel embodies Enlightenment ideals within a subaltern framework, aligning closely with Ambedkarite visions of a just society. The text thus situates modernity not as a gift bestowed from above but as a transformative process emerging from the lived experiences, resistance, and intellectual labour of the oppressed. Eri ultimately affirms that modernity in Kerala—and indeed India—must be understood through the struggle to dismantle caste power, democratise knowledge, and create a humane world where equality and freedom are not ideals but lived realities.

Notes:

The pariah caste one among the ‘untouchables’ in Hindu society is regarded as one of the lowest castes. In Kerala, they were historically assigned tasks such as handling the corpses of dead animals and crafting utensils and household objects from bamboo.

2. Pulayas were agricultural laborers who were deemed untouchables by caste Hindus. They were treated as slaves often sold along with land and cattle. Many songs express their anguish and suffering, with their children often growing up orphaned.

3. Thevar Vallan is a legendary hero of Kadathanadu region of North Malabar. According to myth, he bathed formidable warriors of Kadathanadu and foreign invaders, including the Portuguese. Despite belonging to an untouchables caste



in Hindu Society, he tirelessly acquired diverse knowledge and skills, overcoming societal barriers imposed due to his caste status.

4. Dr. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu (1969-2016) was born in 1969 in Pampirikunnu, Kozhikode district. He received his MA in Malayalam from the University of Calicut, securing the first rank. Dr. Pampirikunnu completed his doctorate on “Kerala Samsaram: A Dalit Approach.” He served as a lecturer at Sri Shankaracharya Sanskrit University, Koyilandi Centre. Notable for his contributions to Dalit Studies, he authored books such as “Swatvam Sanskkaram Sahitya” and “Dalit Aesthetics.” He was honored with the Sukumar Azhikode Endowment Award, the Bhasha Institute’s N.V. Memorial Academic Award, among others. Dr. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu passed away on 8th December 2016.

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