

INTERVIEW



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## INTERVIEW WITH MALARVATHI (MARY FLORA)

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Ms. Malarvathi (Mary Flora) hails from a small village in Kanyakumari district. She has done B.Lit. (Tamil) in Tamilnadu Open University. She has written two novels: “Kaathirundha Karuppayee” and “Thooppukkari”. She has received the Sakitya Academy Young Writers’ Award for her second novel “Thooppukkari”. The novel is based on the lives of people who are involved in the cleaning works in hospitals and public toilets. It is portrayed in such a way that the readers could see the dirt, smell the faeces, and feel the physical, mental, and emotional pains experienced by the people involved in the profession. By visualizing the lives of the least considered people in our society, Malarvathi (Mary Flora) registers in our mind not only as an award-winning writer but as a great human being.

**Note:** The original interview was in Tamil. It has been translated into English for the purpose of publishing it in the research journal.

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**J. Jaya Parveen & V. Rajesh (JJ & VR):** Is Malarvathi your real name?

**MARY FLORA (MF):** No, my real name is Mary Flora.

**JJ & VR:** How did you choose your pen name Malarvathi?

**MF:** We just translated the name Flora into Tamil, and there came Malarvathi.

**JJ & VR:** You have won Sakitya Academy’s Young Writers’ Award for the novel “Thooppukkari”. Is this your first novel?

**MF:** No, this is my second novel. If you consider books in general, this is my fifth book. My first book is based on my religion Christianity.

**JJ & VR:** What is the name of the book?

**MF:** It speaks about Christianity – spirituality.

**JJ & VR: Is it a prose-work?**

**MF:** *It contains a collection of essays. I have written explanations for the three sects in Christianity. People call it "Siluvai Pathai Puthagam". My first novel is "Kaathirundha Karuppayee". "Thoopukkari" is my second novel.*

**JJ & VR: What is your first novel based on?**

**MF:** *My first novel is based on the people whose profession is breaking stones. It does not go into the profession. But it speaks about a decent family involved in the profession.*

**JJ & VR: "Thoopukkari" is based on the people who do cleaning works in hospitals and public toilets. Do you make field visits to know about the lives of these people?**

**MF:** *No, I don't make any field visit.*

**JJ & VR: Your novel portrays a lot of real-life experiences. Do you visit these people before writing about them?**

**MF:** *No, I don't visit them in person. I read a lot. Whom? People! I take people deep inside. I haven't sat and spoken with them. But I look at them deeply. For an instance, when I go to the bus-stand to take a bus, I see people cleaning the drainage. I stand for a while and watch them. They actually do not know that I am watching them. The drainage which we frown at during the single second we take to cross it – they stand inside it with stagnant water up to their knees and sink into it for cleaning. Whatever is dirt for us is life for them. I have seen many such things, thought what status our society has given to them, and felt whether I could write about these people.*

**JJ & VR: You have written about people working in hospitals.**

**MF:** *Yes, I have written. I have seen people who do this profession during my sister's delivery in a hospital. It happens to all as we visit somebody admitted in the hospital. I observe. The view! That's*

*what I said. Reading the human beings! Normally people don't notice them. But I have observed them washing dirty bed sheets, cleaning the hospital floors in the mornings, carrying dirty clothes tied up on their heads, etc. Others don't look at them. But I observe them. They clean others' dirt. Cleaning dirt is their profession. They get very minimum salary only. They don't have any value in the society. Some don't have any other go. There are other jobs too; but if they go to other jobs, dirt will be in stagnant condition only.*

**JJ & VR: You have written as if a girl from nadar community is going to do the cleaning job.**

**MF:** *Yes. In our community, there is no profession for caste. Profession is only for livelihood. Even nadar women go to hospitals to do cleaning work. When I was young, my mother had gone to work as an ayah. There is no specific job for a specific caste. Anybody does any work for livelihood. Professions change from person to person. When you cross Kanyakumari district, this problem does not exist. Does exist – There is a specific profession for every caste. We don't have that.*

**JJ & VR: Do you say that only people in the particular community has no specific profession?**

**MF:** *That I do not know. We haven't seen that. When we sit as a group and see, there is no profession for caste or religion. Caste and religion do exist. They come out during marriages. Even nadar people go to do fish business. I have mentioned this in "Thoopukkari". When I grow, I haven't felt the stress of the caste. People talk about caste oppression, but I haven't felt that. For us, all belong to nadar community only.*

**JJ & VR: Do you mean to say that there is no caste distinction?**

**MF:** *There are! There are rich-poor differences as any community has.*

**JJ & VR: How did you start writing? What is your educational background?**

**MF:** To tell about my education, I have completed primary education up to eighth standard. Due to family situation, I couldn't continue my studies. After a long interval, I did B.Lit. through correspondence in Tamilnadu Open University. That is all my education.

**JJ & VR: Do you read more in Tamil?**

MF:Yes.

**JJ & VR: Which particular writer do you read more?**

**MF:** Not any particular writer. I read a lot of essay books. With regard to my novel, I neither read a lot nor took everything deep into my head before writing. Realistically, whatever I saw, whatever I felt in life, I took deeper and deeper into my heart. That's all.

**JJ & VR: You don't read any writer in particular?**

**MF:** No. This writer, that writer – nothing like that... I read all the writers.

**JJ & VR: How did you get the enthusiasm to write?**

MF: I write from my childhood. Some issues – sorrows or joys – everybody has specific happiness. Even though we are in a crowd, we have certain pleasures in our minds. For me, writing is happiness. Whenever I see a contradictory world, I feel pain in my heart and think whether I could put it in writing.

**JJ & VR: Do you write diaries in childhood?**

MF:Yes. I write a lot of diaries. I have many diaries.

**JJ & VR: Writing diaries has become a practice for you...**

MF:Yes.

**JJ & VR: How did you publish first?**

**MF:** I did it as a play. Sometimes I would think why I was toiling like this. I asked a publishing company near my house to publish my first book on debt. I assured them that I would sell my books and give the money (publishing cost) back. They agreed and

published my first book. I did the same for all my books. I would sell the books fast until the debt is cleared.

**JJ & VR: You yourself sell the books?**

**MF:** Yes, yes. I go and give the books to my friends to sell. After the debt is cleared, I go for the next book. For this novel also, I spoke with a publishing house called 'anal'. ('Anal' means 'heat' in Tamil).

**JJ & VR: Did you publish this novel also in the same way?**

MF:Yes. I didn't have a single coin on my hand. I went to the publishing house and asked them. I have friends. A few Fathers - priests in the church - are my friends. They read my novel and agreed to publish it. They have published many essay books. But this is their first novel. They haven't spoken about the payment. Anyway, I have to give – 1 in 4 shares... but after selling the books.

**JJ & VR: What is your profession?**

Now I don't have any.

**JJ & VR: Were you working previously?**

MF:Previously also, I didn't have any job. For a year, I worked for a magazine. Currently I am not working anywhere.

**JJ & VR: What about your family?**

I have no father. I have a brother and sister. They are married and have children.

**JJ & VR: A person who was sitting near you made a direct criticism on your novel. He was commenting on your usage of 'dialect' and said that using dialects spoiled the Tamil language to a greater extent. What do you think about the criticisms you face?**

**MF:** I am surprised. I have written my novel sitting inside four walls - writing on my own - whatever came to my mind and whatever I saw in my life... It is

being criticized now, and people say a lot. They call my language 'dialect'. I didn't search and find it from somewhere. I wrote it in the way we spoke in our district. When all are saying, I am surprised, because I didn't expect these things. I didn't plan to go for an award and all.

**JJ & VR: Did you expect the award?**

Definitely, no.

**JJ & VR: Do you have any idea on why you have got the award?**

**MF:** I didn't expect the award. I didn't write the novel for any award. Sakitya Academy is not as what we think. If a creation has to go there (for valuation itself), it has to be very very special. After getting the award, when I look back, I realize the value of "Thooppukkari". Until then, I didn't know its value. The dialect, the theme I have taken (which all have forgotten to notice)... My novel is written truly, with life, and with pain – Truth and pain will definitely get success!

**JJ & VR: Does the novel contain your real-life story? You seem to be one of the characters, not as an outsider in the novel.**

**MF:** I am a literary person. A literary person, to tell truly, is a creator. A creator is equal to a complete stage. He can take all the characters inside him. This novel may be influenced by my mother and a few characters I have seen in my real life. My future stories may not go into it, but they may definitely rub up on my real life experiences.

Reading the human beings! When I see a suffering person, I could go and sit with him. Whichever character I see, I could take it as my character. I could feel all the characters. Each character's pain is my pain. "Thooppukkari" is written in feminist point of view. It has a Dalit perspective. A woman, whatever she loses, will stand – will live. True women freedom is that. "Whoever is not there, I will live." When that thought comes to a woman, from then she will live. The story is written in that view.

In that novel, even the minor characters portray the people, whom I have seen, or what people who live with me have experienced, or what I myself have experienced. I could feel the pain of the people who have lived with me.

**JJ & VR: How did concepts like Feminism and Dalitism get introduced to you?**

**MF:** Feminism – We could see it in our practical lives. Women have a lot of power. Nothing is equal to that. If you take a family, woman is carrying it forward. We may talk a lot, but true women freedom is not completely achieved.

I have a lot of progressive thoughts and views. It's because of my religion Christianity. Christ! He is a communist according to me. I see a lot of progressive ideas in him. When everybody sees spirituality in him, only his revolution is visible to me. I have also read about many leaders.

Dalitism – Though there is no caste problem, there are rich-poor differences. We are badly affected by that. It reflects in my novel.