

Subaltern Literary Concept- Subjugation of Untouchables in Meena Kandasamy's THE GYPSY GODDESS

A.Subbulakshmi¹

¹ II M.A English Literature, V.O.Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi

Abstract- “Subaltern contains the group who are marginalized, oppressed and exploited on the cultural, political, social and religious grounds”. Subaltern literature reflects different themes such as sufferings, marginalization, gender bias, slavery of lower and working classes, ignored women, neglected section of society, poor classes etc. Meena Kandasamy claimed her identity as a Dalit woman who is an Indian poet, fiction writer, translator and activist. Her work expresses the voice of the Dalits, the people at the lowest stage of India's ancient caste system. Despite the fact that the Indian constitution abolished this system, Dalits still face widespread discrimination. She speaks about the contemporary issues of her native India. She clearly reveals the societal assumptions that assign specific roles to people based on caste or gender. Her first novel *The Gypsy Goddess* spotted the line between fiction and massive critique in describing the 1968 massacre of fourty four untouchable men, women and children who were striking for higher wages in Kilvenmani village, Tanjore district. While analyzing this novel, we could come across various issues of Dalits such as unjustness, inequality, the pattern of identity, economic backwardness, lack of employment and handling of Dalit have been detailed closely. Dalits were enduring these kinds of oppression from long time due to their caste.

FULL PAPER

Subaltern literature reflects various themes such as oppression, marginalization, Gender discrimination, subjugation of lower and working classes, disregarded women, neglected sections of society, deprived classes etc. In the context of globalization, ‘Third World countries are encountering the state of poverty and oppression.

Gramsci stressed the connotation of this expression in terms of Gender, Class, Caste, Race, and culture. Gayatri Spivak includes a new dimension to the term ‘subaltern’ for the colonized people, oppressed generations, working classes, blacks and muted women. Antonio Gramsci opines that the subaltern classes allude to any lower rank person or group of citizens in a distinct society suffering under the hegemonic domination of governing aristocratic class that denies them the fundamental rights of involvement in the making of provincial history and culture as active individuals of the same country. Perhaps, Gramsci, at that time had in his minded the workers and peasants who were marginalized, oppressed and suppressed by the fascist leaders.

Meena Kandasamy, the Indian poet, novelist, translator and activist. She focuses on caste annihilation, feminism and linguistic identity. As an activist, she closely works with the issues of caste, gender and how the people were divided into

stereotypical roles on the basis of caste and creed. Being a dalit writer, she presents a fierce critique on Hindu and Tamil myths by using a feminist and anti caste perspective to retell them through her work.

Meena Kandasamy's first novel *The Gypsy Goddess* was published in 2014. This work casts a spotlight on the plight of dalit agricultural workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, who are murdered by oppressive upper-caste landlords. The work is based on a massacre that took place in the village of Kilvenmani on Christmas day, 1968.

The Gypsy Goddess is the fictionalised retelling of the truth behind the story of Kilvenmani and the wider Tamil Nadu region in 1968 that evokes the lives of the people that suffered through the adversity of what was a terrible situation. It also criticises the Indian system, as all of the victims were untouchable dalit agricultural labourers who were segmented and ostracized by the higher orders of society at the time. In the same system, their oppressors were landlords that were much higher up in the hideous pecking order, which along with their money and power, enabled them to treat these workers in the worst possible ways imaginable.

This novel was chosen as Independent newspaper's debut of the year and short-listed/longlisted for several awards including DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, the International Dylan Thomas Prize, and the Tata Literature

Live First Book Award. The novel has been translated into German (Reis und Asche, Wunderhorn Verlag, 2016), Dutch (De Zigeunergodin, Atlas Contact, 2016) and French (La Colere de Kurathi Amman, Plon/Feux Croises, 2017).

Caste violence has become an important element in the political life of contemporary Tamil Nadu. We may define caste violence as systematic, organized and sustained acts of physical and cultural violence directed against the less powerful, marginal, and in a hierarchical sense lower social groups by members of the dominant landed groups.

Rural violence is not a new and novel feature. Medieval inscriptions record numerous instances of burning down of entire villages in the fifteenth century during clashes between the Idankai and Valankai groups. Caste hierarchy was reinforced through a range of measures that included dress codes, restrictions on the use of certain musical instruments, habitation exclusion by creating Tindacheris in which particular social groups were sequestered, limited access to common areas such as the sacred space of the temple, educational institutions and the like.

In the habitation areas of the dominant castes the dalits are forbidden to wear footwear and the men folk are made to tie their upper cloth round their waists. Such conventions become the cause of violence, when educated youth resisted such display of deference to the higher castes they faced serious retribution. The temple festival is yet another arena that generates conflict.

In Kilvenmani village, the untouchable people who were working under the landlords have to wake up before the sunrise; walk in line every day break. They have to wash their faces in any puddle of water and brush their teeth with red bricks which were the colour of their earth they work. They were not allowed to wear more than a lain cloth. While women had to woke up every morning with a prayer that there was some tamarind and dried chilli and half an onion in the home, anything to make the burning, red hot chutney that can be licked from their fingers to tolerate the tastelessness of the left over rice. Burma rice, which grew in Tanjore was the best rice in the world. But the dalit people were fed only the second grade food, the cheaper Burmese rice.

These poor people had to carry a serattai, the coconut shell to the tea stall because they were not served in the tumbler. Women from cheri, could not take water from the wells or the lakes, they had to wait for the caste-Hindu woman to take pity and pour the water into their pot. Before petrol or chrisoil made its appearance, the coal powdered buses did not let the

people of cheri sit with Hindus. In the cinema tents, they were made to sit separately.

The landlords built a cement shelter for their cows. But these dalit people have to huddle under a blanket of night sky because they are considering as 'Untouchables'. In the Margazhi night, the cold winds are cruel and howl as they always do and they huddled together. An old jute sack is a luxury in this month. Their children sleep like mice with their heads inside old cardboard cartons so that cold does not bite their little nose. They hide their faces in their mother's saris.

Landlords without any shame, the loots from their own servants when cheri people were in the rampage. The landlords enter the cheri with their rowdies, they select the poorest cheri's in their spheres of influence and pillage them. They take away the goats and chickens and the brass vessels and all the small scraps of paper money that the women have carefully hidden inside. They steal all the stores of paddy. Sometimes, they would burn their roofs and clothes and they even spill the little salt they find. When the people return, they were forced to start all over again.

The landlords punish the women by stripping them almost naked and whipping them by tying them in trees in front of the whole village. Police punish them by making them kneel and walk a few miles on their knees until they have no choice but to crawl but nothings breaks them. They are bold beyond the bruised skin and bleeding knee. Women were always stripped bare before they were beaten. Poor women, they shriveled in shame. The ones who died from the beatings were silently buried. Who survived swallowed their shame and some poison.

Saanippaal, cow-dung mixed in water was given to the beaten woman or man as a punishment. Sometimes, this punishment drains them to death. This co-dung was soon replaced by being forced to drink a cocktail of fertilizer, so, that disobedience brought no disgrace, but death.

Saanippaal would be waiting for the beaten woman or man - cow - dung mixed in water - a concoction that would drain them to death...

being forced to drink diluted cow- dung was soon replaced by being forced to drink a cocktail of fertilizer, so disobedience brought no disgrace, but death. (Goddess 264)

The agricultural workers asked the landlords for extra half measures of rice but the landlords refuses to their demands. They instructed the shop keepers not to sell anything to the untouchables of the cheri. The dalit people lose their younger

children to starvation and their elder children to disease because of the lack of sufficient food and medicine.

The villagers went to another landlord Ramanuja Naidu but he told them that “Hoist the flag of Paddy Producer Association. Remove the red flag. Report for work this instant” (Goddess 114). That will never happen. Kilvenmani villagers were clear about certain things; they were not asking for land or homes. They were asking for work because they need food, they were asking for six measures of paddy, because they were hungry. Their wages were not enough for their stomach. They were dying of starvation. They are not ready to give up their strikes, until their demand is met but their demands are ignored. Landlords ordered not to employ anybody from their village not even women.

Gopalakrishna Naidu, one of the landlords went wild. He entered the village with many rowdies with gunshots. They had guns, petrol and many other weapons with them. Many of them ran into the paddy fields to safeguard themselves. Some of them seek shelter in Ramayya's hut because there is no where safer to go and they believe in the strength and safety of their numbers and in staying together. They united themselves inside the locked door. But the mob arrives soon and set fires to the hut. They unlocked the door and stumble out but they are pushed back inside by the mob. A mother throws her one year old son out of the burning hut to save his life. But the child is caught by the mobster and they chopped the child into pieces and they throw back into the hut. They all were died. 44 members were died. Most of them were women and children. Two women of them were pregnant. The official count of the dead stood at forty two. The other two were habeas corpses. They had burned, leaving behind no distinct trace.

After this great massacre, children started to die in their district. The news paper claimed these were mystery deaths. It was mystery to people who did not know about starvation. Not the children of the landlords or the children of shopkeepers or the children of the teachers were died, only the children of the toilers and coolies died. But the media did not notice this death. The young people of today have not seen things like beatings, killings, police shootings, meetings what that day Kilvenmani people had seen.

The early dalit writers of the 1970s and 1980s depicted untouchability as a symptom of structural inequalities based on caste, but Kandasamy views it from different levels and depicts untouchability as a form of human rights violation. She has pioneered the third phase in the dalit literature by assimilating the western theory and criticism in the dalit

literature. She deliberately puts her novel in the sphere of western literary tradition.

A detailed analysis of the novel unfolds different issues of dalits such as injustice, inequality, the formation of identity, sexual exploitation, and economic backwardness, lack of employment and trafficking of dalits. This novel discusses the complex relationship between caste and casteism in the resistance against the landowners, ongoing protest of the communists and dalit activists.

Tamil Nadu has witnessed a sharp rise in atrocities against dalits because our society was strongly structured by the caste system. Dalits were considered as lowest in social status and they were subjected to untouchability. They all were neglected, oppressed, downtrodden and exploited by the upper caste people. They were routinely abused by the police and upper caste people. Death is the rule of nature but people were changing themselves as a blood thirsty beast in order to satisfy their selfish attributes. Here, we find killing of people for caste.

India is the largest democratic country in the world, yet a section of people are living a life of suppression, unendurable and intolerable sufferings. Dalits are suffering from caste based violence at the hands of dominant caste people due to their social economic and political status. They were considered as easy available for all forms of violence.

Kilvenmani often finds in the discourse of dalit atrocities as one of the earliest and most violent crimes in post independent India. The true democracy has not been achieved till yet. One can only wonder how much more aboriginal blood of dalits will flow under the bridge before the dream of Ambedkar and Mahatma will see the light of the day.

Work Cited:

Dharmaraj, M. “Indian Writing in English: Subaltern Literary concept – Oppression Of Untouchables in Rohinton Mistry's a Fine Balance.” *International Journal On English Language and Literature*. (n.d.): 36-37. Web. PDF file.

Duarte, Silvia. “Meena Kandasamy: Angry Young Women Are Labelled Hysterics.” *Sampsonia Way*. 22 September 2010. Web. 16 February 2018. <<http://www.sampsoniaway.org/literaryvoices/2010/09/22/meena-kandasamy-angry-young-women-are-labelled-hysterics/>>

Kandasamy, Meena. *The Gypsy Goddess*. Noida: Harper Collins publishers, 2014. Print. Virupaksha, Bahu. “Beyond

Kilvenmani: The Dravidian Movement And Violence Against Dalits In Takil Nadu.” Sulekha.com. 18 February 2009. Web. 18 february 2018.

<<http://creative.sulekha.com/beyond-kilvenmani-the-dravidian-movement-and-violence-against-dalits-in-takil-nadu-410755-blog>>

IJRAA