

Novels Of Kavery Nambisan – Voice To The Silent

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Abstract

The socio-economic condition of contemporary Indian society is exploitative with respect to the majority of the population and particularly for Dalits. 'Postcolonial Novels' not only depict the impact of globalization but also a fight for human dignity in the caste based society. Caste oppression play a significant role in excluding sections of society from the spheres of economy. The inaccessibility to the resources keep these communities away from the mainstream leading to unequal and unfair treatment of the people. Indian society has been encountering this menace since ancient times and pre-colonial period witnessed exploitation on the basis of caste, a reality none can overlook. First the colonialists, then the nationalists and now the politicians in free India exploit the marginalized (so called low caste people) for their advantage. The contemporary writer Kavery Nambisan has taken up this as a focal point in all her novels.

Key Words: Caste, marginalization, criminal psyche

Introduction

The present paper focuses on the exploitation and socio-economic condition of contemporary caste ridden Indian society particularly, Dalits. 'Postcolonialism' not only depicts the impact of globalization but also is a fight for human dignity from the caste based marginalization. Hegel calls this marginalization as 'regression of the society'. (Walder 95) As a postcolonial novelist Kavery Nambisan resists 'the postcolonial amnesia' (Gandhi 4) by exploring diverse issues amassing details. Nambisan's lucid examination and well thought-out narrative offers a continuum of the post colony and post independent India from communal violence to



corruption which works against the marginalized. Caste oppression plays a significant role in excluding sections of society from the spheres of economy. The inaccessibility to the resources keep these communities away from the mainstream leading to unequal and unfair treatment of the people.

Sir H. Risley defines caste as collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community' (qtd. in Mohanty 2004: 133).

The society in India during ancient times and pre-colonial period witnessed exploitation on the basis of caste, a reality none can overlook. Marginalization is depicted even in Epics where Madhusudhan Dutt came up with *Meghnadhvadh* the first reinterpretation of *Ramayana* in which Ravana, a brave and powerful ruler with moral principles is depicted as demon. Despite his spiritual achievements through tapas, his good qualities were seen through the myopic eyes within the constraints of rakshasa self (Nandy 1983).

It is a small reference from the Epic, *Mahabharata* to highlight the plight of the marginalized castes, a condition that remained the same in the colonial time and even in liberal India. Marginalization of caste in the society is quite obvious as per Manusmriti,'s varnasamkara. This theory made Indian society caste ridden and encouraged caste based patriarchy (Chakravarty 2003). Varna system encouraged the belief in 'Karma' in so called low caste people which led to hereditary exploitation making them slaves and their children serve as child laborers in the lands of upper castes. It also led to the persecution and discrimination and did not allow the untouchables to give up the polluting occupations like removal of dead bodies, carcasses, sweeping roads, cleaning public toilets etc thus dalits were called 'chandals' or 'sudras' or 'polluted people'. Thus caste system is one of the ingrained entities influencing socio-economic condition of a nation. The stratification in the society leads to self-conscious classes as Bacqua in *The Story that Must Not be Told* says:





Is it wonder that the beggar who accepts your coin and touches it to his forehead has nothing but hatred for you? Or the shudra woman who cleans your toilet mentally spits in your face every time she says, 'Vanakam Aiyya'. (143)

Close to this is Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* where Nanji, the protagonist hates:

Gandhiji who said all are equal, and actually encouraged the intermingling of castes....called them 'Harijans', ate and slept and lived with them. She said, 'You can't defile this house by bringing in the polayas.'(169)

The colonialists exploited the already existing caste system and exploitation which encouraged divide and rule policy for their political and military supremacy. The law of equality, employability like trade of liquor and tanning which otherwise is a polluted trade for touchables, brought these marginals into the fold of the colonialists. The new avenue of education in Britain opened by the colonialists for the low castes was exploited by the touchables, who became nationalists later. Excepting few like Mahatma Gandhi, many nationalists who belonged to high castes did not include Dalits in the freedom struggle. The marginalized knew that they do not occupy prominent place in the society and that they were not involved or interested in the freedom struggle pioneered by the nationalists. While a section comprising other classes, various backgrounds, ideas and values converged to form a dynamic group to enthuse the nation with a right kind of patriotic spirit but 'the dalits' of our nation preconceived that the nationalists would do no good to them. Therefore, when the nationalists tried to bring the low castes into their fold, they became suspicious of the nationalists:

The pug – nosed, curly haired yeravas were happy in their illiteracy and destitution,...They could not understand why, all of a sudden, the Gandhi-inspired, Khadi-clad Congressmen pains to settle them....The yeravas listened with laughter in their eyes, to the advice of congressmen. (170)

John Rawl's 'theory of justice,' right over good and concept of justice as pointed out by Sarah Joseph is no longer in use but the 'liberal-communitarian theory' addresses individual





freedom of equal rights and equal citizenship to all and social diversity. However, the nation is not diligent in implementing such rights. Even pluralist theorists failed to articulate for minorities and against their exploitation (Joseph123-134).Therefore, Independence is certainly a 'flag freedom' for these marginalized classes as Frantz Fanon calls it (Patil 2012). Even after independence the life of most of these marginalized did not change in many rural areas in India. Many writers like Romen Basu, Arundhati Roy describe the untouchables as those who are not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They even had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away as in *The God of Small Things* (2002), They even get beaten and ostracized for entering temples as in the case of Sambal's father *Outcast* (1986).

Mango- Colored Fish has one such scene:

It was a small temple built by the untouchables right there besides the mud houses where they lived: an enclosure about four feet by three, and six feet high, made of mud and brick and painted garishly in blue, green and pink. (191)

In *The Hills of Angheri* the outcastes live in hovels at the edge of the village; they fetch water only when there is no one near the wells so on and so forth:

Chowraiah's family lived in the poorest quarter in a house that huddled, along with eight or ten others, at the edge of the village. Their neighbors were mostly Voddas, Kumbars and Chamaars, so poor that they cooked once in two days....Gowru came to school....Her notebooks made of unused pages....Her lunch was rice and lime pickle or a cold lump of ragi mudde....She offered to take the left overs from other tiffin boxes for the cows,..which her friends knew they did not have. (20)

Almost every country has some classes, communities or groups of people who are economically backward and thus deprived of the basic amenities of life and are neglected by the upper and lower-middle classes. These people are also socially alienated and are not allowed to mix with others in any social activity. A stagnant society disregards and trivializes





the marginalized in their midst by denying a decent livelihood. Kavery Nambisan in *The Story that Must Not be Told* takes up the cause in a similar way as Arundhati Roy does in *God of Small Things* or Rohinton Mistry in *A Fine Balance*.

Kavery Nambisan's *The Story that Must Not be Told* depict exhaustion, alienation and collapsing dreams, the new zone - 'exploitation of low caste'. Similarly Arundhati Roy, in *God of Small Things* writes about the atrocities committed on Velutha, "After all they are not battling an epidemic. They are merely inoculating a community against an outbreak" (209).

Chandra Talpade agrees with A. Sivanand on the urgency of rewriting, rethinking history and struggles of the unprivileged. The benchmark for assessing politics is 'politics of food' to the hungry, 'politics of the body' to the homeless, 'politics of the family' for those without an income. Kavery Nambisan explores marginalization based on caste in *The Scent of Pepper* and *The Hills of Angheri*, age and class as in *The Story that Must Not be Told* should not be the question of identity, it should be a commitment. (qtd. in Mohanty 53)

Similar to Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable*, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*, Kavery Nambisan's novels also empathize with the dalits and are a motivating force for the Dalits to rise against oppression and pave way to Dalit Writings. These novels are autobiographical; portray suffering and humiliation, social and legal injustices by the upper castes, police and even politicians, who indulge in rape of low caste women, destroy of their dwellings, and other atrocities such as homicide.

Rukmini in *Mango – Colored Fish* is a maid in Sharada's house and whenever Sharada visits them Sharada's mother says:

'That awful smell! You go into their filthy house' ..she could not associate poor folk with cleanliness.... She hands over the clothes, standing inside the bedroom....Mother not ask Sarasu, Rukmini's mother to come inside, even when it is wickedly hot. (26)

The higher classes always dominated the lower classes thereby preparing them psychologically to accept their fate but *The Story that Must Not be Told*, encourages fight for



identity and dignity as Kittan's wife does. Kittan is a scavenger, who considers his job handed down from generations to generations, with a belief in Karma philosophy. He boasts:

'Once you've cleaned the toilets of rich people and seen their shit, you've seen everything.' (42)

Kittan gets the job of unblocking the main sewer for the Boy's Hostel in Chepauk. Despite pleading with his father many a time, Thatkan had to go into the hole, Kittan guides the boy with commands, threats and abuses saying:

See? Easier than swatting in school. Keep going ... our food comes from other people's shit, don't forget....The boys foot had slipped...into the sewage...found some thirty metres away ...by a team of rescuers from the sweeper's colony. (229-230)

Kittan's wife did not believe in this ideology. She wants to lead a life of dignity but not as untouchable. This becomes an apple of discord between Kittan and his wife:

Ningi signed her doom when she married Kittan. She refused to clean toilets and it led to furious fights between the two. She earned money by selling flowers. (43)

An individual is influenced by the social environment in the country which has been the main focus since the pre-independence days. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and even contemporary writers like Kavery Nambisan, Arundhati Roy and Arvind Adiga deal with this issue in their works. Their novels show suffering, inequality, poverty, deprivation, disillusionment and exploitation of characters, which are weak and thoroughly Indian.

Marginalization actually leads to crimes as seen in *The Story that Must not be Told*, which explores the criminal psyche of the marginalized:

Kumar quotes statistics, reminding me that two out of ten persons living in slum are criminals. (118 Prem) : Lack of sleep and mental conflicts lead a person to swerve away from the mainstream and adopt criminal culture which is true in case of Chellam and Swamy:



On the fourth day it was one shared bidi..., scratching boldly at their masculinity, ogled women. (47) Money in hand, Chellam developed a taste for milli...helped Chellam to forget he was menial. Ponnu suggested a brothel.... For Ponnu, it became a habit. (49)

The novels of Kavery Nambisan though 'panoramic' and 'Indian' yet are apropos the painful memories which requires inward contemplation in resolving the angst in human lives. Negotiation between cultural identity and citizenship, humanity and national development is often contestatory and conflictual. The phenomenon of globalization of postcolonial cities has rendered many on the breadline and displaced.

Responding to a question whether Bakha's position changed after 50 years Dr. Mulk Raj Anand says:

In *Untouchable*, Bakha becomes aware of his dilemma but is not shown to be doing very much about it. But in *The Road* Bikhu, is caught in a situation where he has to fight back. This struggle is now going on in all parts of India.

In *A Town Like Ours*, Rajkumari says that in order to abolish these atrocities on fellow citizens;

We need a virile Gandhi, a military Gandhi, Gandhi on horseback wielding a spear, gun or sword...many limbed Gandhi. (163)

Ethics and civilization no way guard them but make them outcast like the 'Dalits' in the society. Opportunities are not given to them politically, socially or even religion shows no measures to uplift and upgrade them.

Ekalavya in Shashi Tharoor's in *The Great Indian Novel*, is portrayed as a defiant and aggressive character. In the Epic, Ekalavya obliges with the guru's demand, but Tharoor's Ekalavya does not do so. He raises his voice against discrimination and power politics and refuses to accept the demand of his guru similarly, Baqua in *The Story that Must Not be Told* says:





Soon there will be terrorists who cannot bear the burden of poverty. And you know that the terrorists don't discriminate.... Pacing the room, he talks. The world has a thousand sitaras. The future depends on who recruits this army.
(144)

Nambisan's novels depict socio-economic and political status of so called low castes and cautions of the danger that awaits the nation within the Indian social framework.

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