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Women Plight and Exploitation of the Outcaste Groups in Meira Chand's *The Bonsai Tree*

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Abstract:

The Bonsai Tree is one of the best novels of Meira Chand. Meira Chand (1942-) is one of the best writers in diasporic literature. Born to Indian-Swiss parents, the author presently lives in Singapore. Her works are always engaged with the theme of sense of belongingness, outsider's confusion and alienation. She has produced more than six novels. Being double diasporic, she undoubtedly feels the pain of an outsider in an alien land. Speaking about *The Bonsai Tree*, the main theme is to explore the search for identity and belonging. This paper throws light on the plight of women and the exploitation of outcaste groups. Meira Chand takes us through many regions of Japan where slavery is on its peak and people crying for their justice are denied every now and then. The magnificence of author speaks through the wretched position of slaves.

Keywords: Slavery, underprivileged, Brothel, untouchables, gruesome, gangsters.

The Bonsai Tree is regarded as one of the best diasporic novels of Meira Chand. The theme of this novel is to explore the search for identity and belonging. A young British woman, Kate in the present literary work finds the role of a wife very stultifying in Japan. Wishing to confront her domineering mother-in-law, Kate looks for her own individuality and finds work as an interpreter. But in her desire to get away she discovers facets of Japan she did not know earlier, Japan's race of untouchables called the 'Burakumin', the gangsters, the discarded of society and the areas demarcated for prostitutes. The remade modern miracle that is Japan seemed a chimera to Kate then. Burakumins were discriminated against for a long time. It was not difficult to deduce their ancestry because the Japanese family registration system was fixed to ancestral home address until recently.

Thrown into an alien and estranged land, where the role of a wife is different, Kate is soon devoid of all her romantic illusions. Her struggle to retain her individuality and adopt her new environment, after a shattering encounter leads her to work as an interpreter. In a bar she meets Tarnura, a business rival of the Nagais. When escaping from him Kate finds herself in the modern miracle of Japan. In this novel, the author highlights not only the contrast between Japan and the Western world, but the barriers that face the outsiders who try to assimilate with the people who for much of their history closed their doors to outsiders.

The story begins with the conversation between Kate and her friends who were trying their best to keep Kate away from Jun, with whom she had fallen in serious love affair. Jun was a Japanese lad in his prime youth with a good musculature, a handsome look and an attractive physique. He was in London for his business studies and there he met Kate, an English young girl developed on all the modern lines. Both were willing to tie a knot of marriage. Jun being from a conservative family and a rigid culture, it was going hard for Kate to assimilate in that environment of her in-laws, that is what her friends frequently had warned her of:

The Japanese abroad are very different from the Japanese at home...away from Japan they seem to loosen up, forget some of the rigidities they conform to at home. When they return they often find it difficult to adjust. Your westernised Jun will revert to a very Japanese when he gets home. That is no slight to Jun, but just he will have little choice if he wishes to survive...our feelings have nothing to do with Jun, just the difficulties you will face in his country. There is no place for the foreigner in Japanese society. In Japan, the pressures on mixed marriages are great, you must understand, that's all that worries us. (*The Bonsai Tree* 2)

Kate on arriving Japan found herself in a totally different environment where everything looked strange to her. The houses, the lanes, the rooms, and more miserably the food she was served with was not apt to her taste. "The meal was already laid on the low table, in many small delicate dishes. A meal of yellowtail and crab, hot bean paste soup with needle mushrooms, steaming rice, pickles and a salad of roots and sesame seeds". (*The Bonsai Tree* 10)

The language was still a barrier between Kate and her adjustment in Japan, although she was trying hard to learn it from different sources. Kate was scolded badly by her mother-in-law for not being present at the door to greet her particularly when she entered. Itsuko was of the idea that the people of west were spoiled people. They were unsocial. They were not well mannered. They did not have respect for others. They did what they felt good. There is no one who can dictate terms to them, so she thinks badly about them, "Manners, 'manners', she comes from another world, a world of do-as-you please. I know. I have travelled. There, I have seen a daughter-in-law is waited upon by her mother-in-law". (*The Bonsai Tree* 10)

The novel depicts in true sense the apathy shown to the people of different cultures. That is why Itsuko wanted to marry her son with the daughter of a local diet member who according to Itsuko would have known her duties, known her place, would have been well aware about the position of her mother-in-law. Just after some years of their marriage Itsuko suggested her son to send his wife back to England, "In the old days a mother-in-law had a daughter-in-law on trial and sent her home if proved unsuitable. Send her home or even latter dissolved the marriage". (*The Bonsai Tree* 12)

Meira Chand has revealed a new real face of Japanese society that is too dark to be sunk in. This face is the face of an immoral and ill degraded society where women are considered as a commodity to earn by selling their flesh and chastity. Prostitution centres were at every nook and corner of Japan. Organised sex has always been big business in Japan. The family pattern of old Japan was highly polygamous, explicitly allowing a man who could afford it any number of official mistresses. The Japanese attitude to sexual pleasure was traditionally inhibited. The wives of Japanese men accepted their husband's liaisons without any complaint. "Until recently women were regarded as a disposable commodity through out the far East". (*The Bonsai Tree* 57) There were a set of rules for the prostitutes who were allowed beyond the walls of brothel on certain days. Tragedy was that a parent either himself makes his female children sex slaves or sells them to a brothel management or other clients. "Today we view the selling of parents of female children as a vicious practice; surplus daughters were a burden and advantageously sold into prostitution". (*The Bonsai Tree* 58)

There was no place for romantic love. It was greatly disapproved. Courtesans who fell in love with clients had to be purchased out of service by their lovers or agree to end the affair or to enter into a suicide pact as an honourable end to their shame. 'Yoshiwara' a city of Japan was the main hub of all such practices. Brothels had developed many charming acts to attract the customers. Women who were found to breach the code of the brothel were awarded with stern punishment. "Women found engaging in prostitution secretly, without permission of the brothel, shall be jailed for three to ten days. If caught second time she shall be manacled with irons for one hundred days and the seal on the manacles inspected every day by the police". (*The Bonsai Tree* 58)

This was the most inhuman and cruel culture of Japan where women prostitutes, as depicted by the author, served as sexual server to men. They were, in modern terms, "sex workers". Women whose humanity was confined to their sexual parts. In essence, a prostitute was a sexual commodity, whose primary role was to serve as an object or a product consumed by men. Such was the tough culture of Japan so far as the novel is concerned. It was not easy for any foreigner to assimilate in such typical customs and culture. One has to make his or her conscience dead then only living was possible in that place. Such type of adverse atmosphere always gives birth to illicit affairs and ultimately leads to the results that are better known by everybody. Call it a tragedy that to become a prostitute was done on the consent of parents of that lady for which she had to send a petition, "A woman wishing to become a prostitute or a courtesan must send a written petition to the police station of jurisdiction. Included must be a document of consent signed and sealed by applicant's father and mother." (*The Bonsai Tree* 58) Such was this human trafficking that when a first class prostitute was sick, a brothel master might pray for her recovery at the temple. It was considered one of their important duties.

Meira Chand, in this literary work has revealed in detail the depth of this dark culture of Japan. There were classes of those prostitutes, lower class prostitutes and higher class prostitutes. It was worst for a lower class girl. She was merely entrusted to a quack and was thrust into some gloomy room.

The culture of Japan allowed the wives to happily and willingly permit their husbands to have as many women as they can in order to satisfy their sexual urge. There was nothing ill or regretful in sex for men. "For men sex was by no means sinful, but women, as part of the self abnegating role imposed upon them by men and culture, were necessarily restricted. Chastity was expected of them while men were allowed the greatest freedom both before and after marriage". (*The Bonsai Tree* 59)

In a more transparent way Meira Chand has depicted such apathy towards Japanese culture that it leaves the readers shock struck. As per this work of fiction, the functions of women were different: women as domestic manager and breeder and women as charming plaything. A man was simply a master of her divided parts. The only affection a respectable man might show his wife was the affection of a master for a domestic pet.

Social injustice was the order of life in Japan according to the author's text, thus depicting the Japanese as the people of the third world. The stern and outdated culture of Japan did not allow men to give a helping hand to their wives. It was considered as unmanly. A woman could never request her husband for a domestic help in her illness or during belly bumping. "Another strange imported idea if she wants to suffer, then it's her affair. But why should you be made to turn a hand to such domestic things? It's neither right nor manly". (*The Bonsai Tree* 67)

Meira Chand has highlighted very aptly the culture of business rivalry in Japan where every competitor tried to outshine the rival by illegal means and proxy. Tarnura, was such a business rival of Itsuko who once was her business partner, but breached her trust and departed. He always tried to play a prank with Itsuko to replace her as number one business establishment. He even tried many times to steal the blue prints of Itsuko's new project. When he failed he paid a gang master to send his henchmen for destroying Itsuko's business establishment. He was always looking out for an inch of Itsuko's weakness to make it a feat. The only weakness in Itsuko's business establishment was her stickiness to old, cultural and traditional business techniques and practices. Jun always had a sharper nose for the change but to obey his mother was mandatory. "I still say wage structure must begin to change. It can't take the strain of continual economic growth. Rising costs and increasing competition will force us to it in the end. Many firms already see this and are changing. We should start now. We are a traditional culture, certainly; Itsuko replied". (*The Bonsai Tree* 108)

The author has rightly trapped in that face of Japanese society where a man is a womaniser. It is an ancestral trait in Japanese men that they descend in from ages to future generations. When Kate came to know about the Chieko, the already wife of Jun, though devastated, Kate very unlikely presented herself as an understanding person. She understood Jun and his problem, so did not want to develop a crack in their relationship because of this fact. But adding salt to the injury was when she later came to know about the child, Jun had already from his earlier wife, which he had never revealed to her. “It has been a shock. I shall feel worse tomorrow probably than I do today. But I’ll understand. It is something from another time, another life before we met”. (*The Bonsai Tree* 127)

The things turned from bad to worse for Kate. When once she was chased by a wicked person, she pleaded for help to an old lady who breached her trust and wanted to make her a commodity and sell her to the clients. Meira Chand has thrown light on the attitude of Japanese womanisers who were of the opinion that woman is a playful thing that is to be consumed for the sexual satisfaction. Kate once in the darkness of the night was haunted by many devilish sex mongers but she luckily escaped from their clutches. Finally, she met a noble soul ‘Father Ota’ who was the head of a Christian missionary working for the upliftment of down trodden people of Japan and he helped her in saving her chastity.

So far as *The Bonsai Tree* is concerned, in Kamagaski, the homeless could often be seen sleeping in the streets throughout the day and doya hotels (cheap and untidy rooms) abounded the area. Non-profit and religious organisations frequently gave out food rations, creating long lines of people in public parks. Father Ota was one of the members of such missionaries who had been assigned with the job of care taking of the people living in slum areas. “It’s all right. Father Ota had placed a hand on her shoulder, pushing her gently back in a chair. ‘You’re safe, this is Christian Mission. The men are harmless only poor’”. (*The Bonsai Tree* 184)

In Kamagaski, people were considered as animals. They worked without pay. It was a sort of drudgery for them. They suffered a lot due to apathy of government and common people towards them. Though, harmless, but they were very poor people. The room Kate stayed in with ‘Father Ota’ was very untidy, no mating, penetrated roof with foul smells. There were dirty old clothes. The people living there were existing without existence. Even Japanese were did not know much about these people or they were not interested to know. There were small rooms with large number of half naked men. These men were an exploited substitute behind that whole Japanese industry. There were different classes of these slum dwellers. These were Japan’s famous ‘Burakumin’ the untouchables of Japan.

Their basic rights were violated. Meira Chand, with the help of this literary work has stated that the people of Kamagaski were the corner stones of Japan as they were all worked on construction of high buildings, roads, factories, etc. but with mere or no wages.

Meira Chand in detail has exposed the most gruesome and inhuman face of Japan. Slave trade, slum dwelling were some of its aspects. 'Kamagaski' an area in Japan was the hub of slave trade. Author has depicted the same thing in her historical novel *A Different Sky*, the place that occupied these slave girls was kongsi fong. It was the place where many Chinese slave girls lived and all of them were victims of slavery. We find there a strange Chinese custom, in which a man keeps many concubines despite having his own wife. There is a prominent character Mei Lan, a Chinese girl who according to their custom should be sold to brothel. But right from the beginning, she had heard many stories of these slave girls from her maid Ah Siew who herself was kept as concubine by Mei Lan's grandfather. Ah Siew narrated all miserable tales to her and all those stories strangled her. "Mei Lan's heart gave a lurch. Ah Siew had never spoken like this before. That girls could be sold for a kati or rice of three pieces of silver turned her blood to ice. Mei Lan, stared at Ah Siew, imagining the tunnel in her mind leading back to a past of dark images". (*A Different Sky* 187)

Home to approximately twenty five thousand people, the area of Kamagaski was a far city from the Lit. Neon. Lit modern image of Japan's sprawling urban centres. The people there were looked down with cold unseeing eyes. It was a nameless city with faceless people.

Meira Chand has described the condition and status of the people living in Kamagaski in detail through the conversation of Father Ota and Kate. Father Ota described almost every aspect of this society of Japan. Kamagaski was not the single like city in Japan but there were 'Sanya' in Tokyo and the other 'Kotobuki' in Yokohama as well. These areas were the most exploited areas in Japan. "And this is not the only place to disappear. There are two other areas like this in Japan. One is Sanya in Tokyo and the other Kotobuki in Yokohama, but Kamagaski is by far the largest. These men are an exploited substitute behind the whole of Japanese industry". (*The Bonsai Tree* 187)

Kamagaski has been a destination for the poor to go in the hope of work as a day labourer. And as such there were some centres that were key location and gathering point. A horribly unwelcoming building where increasingly older men sat and wait with all their worldly goods. "Father Ota drew a short finger over the map, prodding here and there to define a place. Here again is Kamagaski with its day labourers and this is the Burakumin quarter... These are our day labourers, and this is their soup kitchen. Kamagaski is a town of them living on half a square kilometre". (*The Bonsai Tree* 186-188)

Meira Chand has stated Kamagaski as a place filled with anything but hope. Just desperate and extreme poverty. The only other escape was the ever present drug addiction which escaped the inmates from anxieties but behaved as a trap that never lets them to go back. Yet despite its horrendous poverty Kamagaski had a distinct sense of community along with an openness rarely found in Japanese cities. Father Ota took Kate to the every corner of this city

where found the people smiling, talking and even offering the things to each other. They were looking out for one another as it seemed.

Meira Chand has revealed a shocking truth about Kamagaski. Despite the country's biggest slum being visible, it could not be found on official maps of Japan. Here it is worth mentioning that such was the isolation of this area that the area of Kamagaski was pulled out of the recent Osaka Asian film festival on censor ship grounds. The scenes of this slum area were removed on the ground, that it was insensitive to residents. We still remember the interview of the director of that film where he said, "To me what they were asking was a cover-up attempt to make this place non existent".

Universal declaration of Human Rights worth states that "All human has the right to liberty, education and equality". Yet we allow slaves to be tortured and have no freedom, with no equality and no education for them and it is seen almost everywhere in the world.

Slavery is an institution where human rights are constantly violated. The barbaric treatment that slaves endure with patient shrug, rents the sole purpose of universal declaration of human rights.

In the light of the memoir and treatise, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the slaves endure pain and torture. A young woman was beaten with dried and rough cow hide until blood gushed out of her back. She was beaten for she was a slave worker. Slaves are not any different creature. They are like we people. They are not different, just because they are enslaved, or they belong to different class or colour. It does not mean they do not deserve to be free and equal.

It is like, a slave is a sole property of someone and they (slaves) are forced to work for meagre amount and sometimes no money. Slave trade, like in other countries, has classes too in Japan. A kind of slave called as Chattel Slave. In this kind enslaved person is forever and for every generation a slave. Even their families and their children too are enslaved by birth. Their women are forced to indulge in prostitution, and other immoral and illegal activities.

At present there are about two hundred million child labourers between the age of five and seventeen. Maximum of these children are enslaved property of someone. These children are the main victims of human trafficking. Here reminds us one of the great writers of the twentieth century namely Khalil Gibran, Lebanese born, his striking lines over child labour wins everybody's heart:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of life's
longing for itself.

They came through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they
belong not to you. (Gibran 17)

A poem *The Negro's Complaint* written by William Cowper, at a full length describes the different aspects and classes of slave trade.

To sum up, it can be said that *The Bonsai Tree* is a story of depiction of multicultures that existed in the past or still exist. Different lands are bestowed with different cultures. Most of these cultures are outdated and inhumane. It also depicts that the strict stickiness to one's culture leads to extremism which brings intolerance. This intolerance leads to the widening of cracks among the humans of single kind, which then proves fatal to universal harmony and brotherhood.

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