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Gypsy Goddess: Writing Resistance

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Abstract:

This research paper focuses upon a particular class of society i.e. have-nots. It is a fine revelation of the ill treatment meted out to workers and farmers in the hands of landlords in town of Kilvenmani in Indian state of Tamilnadu. It evokes rage and shock from all corners of society. The author tries hard to be a representative of voiceless communities in India living below poverty line. In India, if there are people whose every step seems to be politically motivated, contrary to this, there are sections who are not only recognized by their meagre salaries but also by their pain and struggle for survival. Resistance is a secondary solution to them as their main motive is an urge to satisfy their hunger. To reduce this economic divide between rulers and ruled, haves and have nots, land owners and farmers is an inevitability, so as to maintain country's democratic character. Kilvenmani is therefore the hero of this novel.

Keywords: Communism, Slavery, Haves, Have nots, Kilvenmani, Socio-Political Realignment, Economic Inequality.

The *Gypsy Goddess* is Meena Kandasamy's debut novel. It is an exposition of problems faced by the labouring class who work for an inadequate salary in hard and deplorable conditions. The area of concern is the state of Tamilnadu. The writer ponders deep into the process of class divide between labourers and landlords. This class consciousness prompts one class to have control over other. The novel also focuses upon the infamous incident that occurred on Christmas eve in Kilvenmani in 1968. The author not only works upon entangled set of relationships in society but also deals with technicalities of how to write a novel. Meena Kandasamy finds the traditional linear plot of novel as inapt. According

to her the best way to handle the complications exposed by a storyline is the technique of postmodernism.

The tension between the two warring communities which surfaced from beginning to end in the storyline could be deftly dealt with by the way of postmodernism there by transgressing conventional pattern used in Indian English novels. The novelist always felt an urge to write about complex set of principles which enmeshed society i.e. one set of moral grounds for one community and another set of desires to be reached upon by other community. The writer also recognized poetry as a distinct medium to expose a society ridden with class-consciousness. The novel being a powerful tool exposed the plight of Dalits in class conscious society of Southern India- Tamilnadu. Meena Kandasamy raised issues which remained latent in society owing to certain set patterns as well as performed rituals or practices. She was of the view that people and their social positions were already fixed as per their class. Her motive was to deconstruct such class ridden ideology. The writer not only constructed original pieces of fiction but also translated Dalit literature into English. The plot deals with myths prevalent in Tamil and Hindu culture.

Meena Kandasamy's first collection of poetry was 'Touch'. The fiery rebellious spirit in Meena transformed her into a woman who refused to be accountable to societal norms and practices. When her husband ill treated her, she refused to oblige and divorced him. When she found poor and downtrodden around her working for low wages, her conscience pricked her and she turned to literature as a medium. *Gypsy Goddess* was its direct result. According to James Kidd: "Gypsy Goddess was a novel of self conscious experimentalism and unmistakable fury and it throws down a gauntlet to conservative literary and political sensibilities especially in India" (Kandasamy, 2014: Interview). Meena's family had suffered the brunt of poverty. Her father completed his PhD under hard circumstances. Moreover the bloody incident at Tanjore, Tamilnadu in 1968 in which many women and children died due to fire massacre which was a deliberate attempt by callous authorities to stop the ongoing agitation of workers who demanded increased wages. This inhuman event shocked people to the core and numbed the psyche of the author.

In the novel, postmodernist methodology was used by the author so as to avoid shortcomings raised by the traditional plot. A complex postmodern style along with serious issues of Dalit community and their longing for economic and spiritual freedom complimented each other. The discrimination against these communities is a burning social

issue which deserves attention and a peaceful reconciliation with the past is the only way left for catharsis of violent emotions and tragic stories. According to Linda Hutcheon, a reputed figure associated with postmodernism, in her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism* stated: “Facts are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore, derive different facts from same events” (Hutcheon, 1988:57). The way of presenting facts on a piece of paper is different for different people around. Interpretations of various kinds from intellectual minds tend to change monolithic nature of truth which gets enriched while confronting reality around it. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh said, “There are two different ways to reveal a truth- to create fiction and to make a statement about creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinction between creation and criticism and merges them into the concepts of interpretation and deconstruction (Waugh, 1984:6)”.

When the forces of socialism and democracy tear apart the bourgeoisie fabric of society, it is not only a matter of exposition of gruesome reality but a quest for identity of the entangled self. Literature has the necessary capacity to deconstruct or question dominant historical narrative there by turning the table in favour of marginalized sections of society whether it is race or class or sex or culture. Therefore, one of the contemporary genres in fiction that questions or interrogates the myth of dominance of haves over have-nots is Dalit literature. One such work that serves as a mode of defiance in class-ridden society of Tamilnadu is *Gypsy Goddess*. When compared with *Kuruthipunal*, another work of fiction exposing the brutalities inflicted upon people in Kilvenmani, Kandasamy’s novel is crystal clear in its approach- barriers of caste and colour are as serious modes to propagate racism as sexism. According to P. Sivakami in *Tamil Dalit Literature: Some Riddles*, “Dalit literature is subjective and based on narrow identity politics... it constitutes a celebration of the marginal and denial of all other concerns (Sivakami, 2012:436)”. In the beginning of the novel, there is a prologue. It contains a memorandum written to the Chief minister of Madras by the president of Paddy Producers’ Association- Gopala Krishna Naidu. He writes about the lurking danger of forces of communalism in the village as the government is not paying heed to demands of farmers who work hard with determination to sow paddy in the fields. Meena Kandasamy used an accent different from actual English to satirize the British rule in the country. She felt that British government ate up fair share of Indian economy that actually belonged to the working class. Her technique to grab reader’s attention was not the bombastic style but simple prose.

The first part of the novel was termed 'Background'. Here the primary concern of the novelist was the background and historical significance of Nagapattinam district which had adjusted Kilvenmani into it demographically and spiritually. Demographically because Kilvenmanni belonged to it and spiritually due to the deeper wounds of massacre and its effect upon the psyche of the town- Kilvenmanni. The town symbolized multiculturalism due to presence of Dutch, Portuguese and finally British in the respective area. The novel is rich in stylistic devices as the author alludes to Conrad, Vonnegut, Steinbeck, Dostoevsky etc and prompts readers to remain active and form varied interpretations to already rich and profound matrix. The author does not shy away and frankly tells her readers that people of Kilvenmanni were also responsible for their miseries. So were all Dalits in India. The beginning of the novel opens about a woman in a tiny village. No other information is given about this woman so as to add a touch of ambiguity to the plot. Her name is Maayi. After the massacre in which many people were scorched to death, it was Maayi's responsibility to unite the village people. The author had innumerable choices for the title of the novel such as Tales from Tanjore, Butcher Boys, Kilvenmanni, Christmas day, Long Live Revolution etc. But finally *Gypsy Goddess* was selected. A new connection seemed to be formed between Maayi and 'Gypsy Goddess'.

According to the myth of *Gypsy Goddess*, she was an epitome of seven gypsy women. These women were brutally murdered along with their children so that the titular *Gypsy goddess* was an embodiment of seven gypsy women who were transformed into nymphs in the other world. The title was also a symbol of people who were victims in the heart-rending incident of Kilvenmanni. In the part two, the first chapter- 'Cutthroat Comrades', the central point of discussion was Gopala Krishna Naidu. He was the medium of exchange of words between Paddy Producer Association and government. It was an emergency meeting called up by Gopala Krishna Naidu as it was quite difficult to suppress the rising emotions of working class. Their oppression by the landlords had acquired gigantic proportions. The workers class stood for people who earned low and mean wages but it was also the story of every Dalit in India. The long history of discrimination was quite familiar to bureaucracy and government who always used to put a deaf ear to demands of people in Tanjore district in Southern Indian state of Tamilnadu. The time of setting of the novel was the year of 1968. In India it was the time of much hyped Green Revolution. The communist party formed moral grounds for workers to demand greater share of the produce. In different parts of the country, the landlords and workers were at logger-heads and the callous employers and landlords

crushed the movement successfully. But the rise of greater antagonism between the two stratas of society in Kilvenmanni turned into a new direction. It was the direction of destruction and warfare that the workers questioned the sanity of their employers and demonstrations were held. It was an ominous night of twenty fifth December, 1968 when landlords sent their goons to attack the workers. Most of the villagers had to flee away leaving aside children, women and older people who could not escape the wrath of troubled fate. As they hid in a hut, the goons locked them up.

If this was not enough, they put the house on fire and innocent lives were lost. Around forty four people were burnt alive. It was followed by police investigations and litigations but of no use. The evidences in favour of criminals were removed or wiped off. The victims and relatives of people killed in gruesome incident were booked as criminals for the armed rebellion as it was deemed unethical and unaccountable to law. “We burned all over again...that was it....We think the problem with politicians is that they have seen too many deaths....The death was the climax. The death was like the moment in the movies that no one wanted to miss and where everyone cried (Kandasamy, 217)”. In India it was one of the instances where it could be deduced how non dalits used to eat up economic and social rights of dalits. According to Anupama Rao:

Unlike capitalist relations of production to which labour was central, caste society was not organized around bourgeoisie accumulation[...] In this scheme, the Untouchables labour did not count; It was extraneous because it was already defined as defiled and impure... The problem [...] involves the collision of two kinds of body history- of body as value and the body as dispossessed and disposable life. (2013:53)

While Marxist ideology states that society should be independent of caste and class based distinction. This trajectory of social inequality does not include within its ambit ‘dalit identity’. Dalits and lower classes- their study is a process which is uniform. Beneath this strife, the Dalit life remains untouched. Meena Kandasamy is of the view - No one listens to them. It is quite fortunate that texts like *Gypsy Goddess* throw light upon misfortune awaiting those who form part of Dalit kinship system. The communist leaders regard removal of inequality among people of different classes and castes as their agenda. This has an adverse impact upon the scientific study of Dalit psyche as they feel rejected.

“The communist leaders in the novel believe ... that caste is their main enemy to fight...since it is the caste mentality that divides the working classes...Whenever the issue of caste was raised, this was done only at the edges, at the wing tips so that it could be brushed off before [they] would launch into fight (Kandasamy 218-19)”. Another interesting aspect of the Dalit movement in Kilvenmanni and in the novel was the wave of Dalit feminism. The intricacy in the plot is heightened when women raise up their moral concerns in the novel. Their courage and fortitude could be witnessed when they refuse to be voiceless in their aspirations. Although the women in the storyline had to bear years of slavery yet it fails to bury their determination to attain equal rights to education and jobs on one hand and respect as well as dignity on the other hand. The novel could also be taken as study of traumatic lives of Dalits of Kilvenmanni. The ominous incident which claimed lives of forty four people has been registered in written form in political registers of Tamilnadu.

But choosing it as one of the main thematic concerns in the storyline provides a new direction to this struggle for equality. “When Kandasamy deploys her pen, her keyboard and her passion, her anger, her rage at the ease with which the villagers were blamed for what happened to them [...] she turns the very notion of what makes a novel on its head (Butalia, *Outlook* 2022)”. The novel is not character specific and contains a set of disjointed voices so that the complex narrative aligns with complicity in lives of people in Kilvenmanni. There is one chapter in the novel which is a group of jumbled words in one line. Other chapters voice the concerns of Gopala Krishna Naidu and the communists as well. The novelist reveals how the journalists dig deep into past but their search is futile as all records and impressions to catch hold of culprits are deftly washed out. The story moves to-and-fro between indifferent political structure in India, lust for power among demagogues and people below the poverty line. Though the novel plays between first, second and third narrative yet it maintains

unity and coherence so that the main idea is not obscured. Chapter thirteen- ‘A Survival Guide’ is an amalgam of personal stories of survivors of the trauma. It is the character of Maayi that provides cohesion to fragmented structure of the plot. “The living in Kilvenmanni lack life. Everyone is something else. The survivors of this shocking incident behave in a manner which amounts to insanity. Some of them fail to accept what happened to them while others are haunted by their past. Some among them ended up their lives in state of unconsciousness” (Kandasamy 211). One of the chapters ‘Mischief by Fire’ does not make use of punctuation mark and continues as a single sentence. It is a deliberate step to magnify the amount of pain and hatred inflicted upon the poor farmers in Kilvenmanni. When the

police tried to enquire about the incident they did not put into consideration the dead bodies of two babies. “Male age not known, nobody can identify body height - fifty centimetres” (Kandasamy 151).

In the chapter – ‘A Walking Corpse’, the readers were acquainted with the fact that Gopala Krishna Naidu and the narrator-author were ironically assigned the task by the government to write a letter to chief minister that his life was in danger as he was unable to resolve the stalemate between farmers and landlords in Kilvenmanni in Tamilnadu. The author states the bitter fact that whether it is she- herself or a journalist or a man like Gopala Krishna Naidu- no one can write a balanced article about this incident. Although the perpetrators of violence may be punished in the end but the destruction of peace in the personality of every single life or person who lost their near and dear ones could not be settled down for good by anyways or means. No amount of compensation can arouse the numb psyche of sufferers. “The experimental nature of the Gypsy Goddess allows Kandasamy to confront readers with death, extreme violence... and an unfair and unbearable reality that no conventional realist novel could have possibly depicted with such poignance and forcefulness... The question of postmodernism [...] is the question of survival, of living on after the dead” (qtd. In Crosthwaite, 2009:17).

The novel is not only a narrative about lost lives but life after death- revival of traumatic loss, haunting memories, illusion and delusion as well. Although the world is a corporate reality yet the thin lines of divide between haves and have-nots, between possession and loss continue to haunt the surface of modern world. The Dalit literature needs a special treatment and it would not be unfair to say that looking into the matter as a political agenda and literary approach to it would help to assist the people living below poverty line to live in a democratic and reformed world. In Kilvenmanni, the workers and farmers were denied sufficient wages by their landowners. Therefore, the working classes took refuge under the banner of communist party of India which could not yield good results. Kandasamy had been a part of this circle and her novel had such emotional notes which were significant for readers and political circles to understand her point of view or her side of the story.

The author could feel easily for stifled aspirations of poor people and so were readers who felt uncomfortable at different points in the story. Equal weightage is given to women characters in the story so that their struggle does not remain hidden like a moss beneath the stony cliff. Her rage and passion are constructive. In India, there is a greater need to study the

violence and its causes. Sometimes the violence is religious or class or caste based while it could also be gender based. In this context, writers like Urvashi Butalia, Meena Kandasamy and others have contributed to Indian psyche. The two towering literary figures also put emphasis upon psychology of perpetrators of violence and those who were refused a humane treatment. The post traumatic ills that could be triggered by violence are depression, anxiety, schizophrenia. The marginalized communities for a long time have been treated in an unjust manner. Physical abuse, sexual savagery, slavery, rape, torture etc. are some forms of violence in society that play against human mind in a subtle manner.

These sections have been denied basic rights like Right to Education, Right to Profession, Right to assemble peacefully. It leads to disruption of will power in these people on an individual level due to which they remain backward throughout their lives. These sections of society have no access to wages, healthcare, cleanliness and other basic rights conferred by constitution of India. Their lives are very embodiments of trauma which manifests itself in latent form in their lives. The writer urges and pleads before the readers her cause and demands attention from them. She wants people who are privileged to live a life in a world which is outside their smaller space and use this consideration for those whose voice is lost in silent spaces. The novel is a poignant tale of human suffering. The oppressed belonged to the state of Tamilnadu which witnessed this human loss. It was loss of principles of unity, integrity and justice. If this was social loss, the curbing of economic freedom and other mental health issues were no less a matter of serious concern.

According to Kandasamy, in Kilvenmani brutal forces of tyranny propagated dark and destructive imagery. In such a scenario, literature is one of the finest mediums to evoke positivity and mutual cooperation. "Her pen is not afraid of unveiling that which dercorum usually hides and carries 'the tale of their cunts and their cuntress and their cuntenants'..." (Kandasamy 67) for she is on a fearless mission. The wave of Marxism tried to provide a stuff which the villagers were in dire need of. It was like a ray of hope. The communist party had a different vision for poor villagers. Little did they know that a cruel fate awaited the innocent villagers. Communism had become a popular idea among Dalits in Kilvenmani. When landlords tried to suppress the villagers and this mass movement, the Dalits showed resistance. The hatred of landlords reciprocated itself in the form of harassment of Dalit women, police action and fines imposed upon villagers. The local goons forcibly stuffed the villagers in the hut and set it on fire. The flames ate up vitality of villagers. The mass

movement turned into a death dance. In this context, it would be apt to quote from W.B. Yeats' *Second Coming*, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats 19). Our country has witnessed since times immemorial, the discrimination against women, children and men in general, especially from lower strata. The constitution of India therefore conferred upon every citizen equal rights like Right to Equality, Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of caste, creed, religion, sex or place of birth. But the privilege could be enjoyed by educated people. The people below poverty line strive only for minimum wages.

A similar instance was witnessed in Kilvenmani where action was taken against weaker sections. The people whose relatives lost their lives were sent to jail rather than the goons who attacked them. A similar fate awaited Maayi (Thangamma) whose struggle against caste based discrimination deserved applaud. It was a two forked attack on her right to live with dignity- one as a woman and other as a dalit. Maayi was uneducated and her plight was not only social ostracism but also lack of economic freedom. One such incident was where a woman was treated in a sadistic manner- "...caught her hair, pushed to the ground, stripped naked, beaten up- scars on her left cheek, a sickle split on the right side of her hip, red welts on the palm from fighting the men...(Kandasamy 206)". When these marginalized sections were acquainted with Marxist ideology, they realized about sheer ignorance on their part. How a mischievous web was created by educated upper class people. They wanted to question the evil minded oppressors. Kandasamy shifted her attention from one chapter to other, one character to other so that the reader sees a fragmented piece of novel. This helped her to create an equal impact upon her readers and all sections of society are covered up in the novel. *Gypsy Goddess* becomes a socio-political work and an example of Dalit literature analyzed from Marxist point of view. It is an effective, intricate, erratic work with postmodernist genre. The novel does not remain restricted to one state but becomes a national narrative.

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