

TALES OF UNTOUCHABLES: A DISCOURSE ON PERUMAL MURUGAN'S SEASONS OF THE PALM

Krishna Liji.

M. G Research Scholar,

Dr. R. Venkataraman

Research Supervisor,

Dr. T. Senthamarai

Co-Supervisor,

Vels Institute of Science and Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai.

Abstract

India's age old caste system assigned its people under certain hierarchical status. Among the social hierarchy, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and, Vysias performing spiritual, nation building together with protection and merchandise respectively, other professionals were classified as Shudhras which means others. Consequently, Dalits were segregated. This segregation continues even to this day as evidenced by realistic writings from Dalit writers and others writing in support of Dalits. Dalit is a term used for the oppressed and who are considered insignificant. The Indian Society has been divided on Varnashramadharma or Chaturvarna, considering the top as always pure and invested with plenty of entitlements. The bottom, polluted with no entitlements are assigned plenty of duties. Dalits are oppressed, subjugated and marginalized in society. Perumal Murugan, a celebrated contemporary Tamil writer has won great appreciation from critics and readers for his strenuous work in Dalit literature. As a lecturer in Tamil literature, he focuses his writings on people living on the margins of society. The representation of the oppressed in Dalit literature celebrates the Dalit condition as unparalleled and one of permanent entity. This paper intends to bring to fore how Dalits are victimized, brutally treated and rendered to be devoid of any identity and to interpret their maladies. This paper picturizes the intricate caste system and the state of despair of the victims through the eyes of the five main characters of different years of age, whipped with the choice of abuses directed towards them by their masters.

Keywords: *Subalternity, Brutality, Untouchability, Caste, Society, Segregation, Dalit intelligence.*

TALES OF UNTOUCHABLES: A DISCOURSE ON PERUMAL MURUGAN'S SEASONS OF THE PALM

- Krishna Liji
- Dr. R. Venkataraman
- Dr. T. Senthamarai

Introduction: Dalits and Dalit Literature

“If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization” (Location of Culture 40).

Homi K. Bhabha asserts an individual's priority in society is in accordance with his culture and identity. Untouchable is identified to be a great sin, which is sprinkled on the Dalit people in society. The upper caste call them impure and polluted.

The term Dalit leads to the meaning of 'depressed' since the early 20th century. They are the group of people, disputed with their state of being. Dalit is a category associated with inferiority and stand subordinated by their religious, economic and social status. Dominance is a prominent term in describing the relationship between castes. Anyone out of the Varna system is untouchable.

Varnashramadharma elucidates approximately four thousand endogamous castes and subcastes in the Indian society. With its specified hereditary occupation, they are categorized into four Varnas – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The Dalit comes outside of this hierarchy as 'avarna castes, the Anti-Shudras arranged in hierarchies of their own-the untouchables, the unseeables, and the unapproachables' (Annihilation of Caste 131). Dalits were forced to live in segregated settlements as untouchables and were not allowed to use the public roads, temples, common wells and the children were not allowed to get education from the privileged caste schools.

A literary creation of Dalit people, born and brought up under the shade of Dalit communities gives emergence to Dalit literature. It forms an important and distinct part of Indian Literature. It emerged in the year 1960 in Marati language and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangala and Tamil. The pain and the brutality faced by the Dalit people are expressed through poems, short stories, and most importantly in autobiographies. The

genre is closely related to African American literature, especially in depicting the issue of racial segregation and injustice in slave narratives.

The essence of Dalit literature is the Dalit consciousness, the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a rebellion against the caste system, simultaneously giving importance to the human element. It analyzes the past and the present from Dalits' perspective and provides space to the muted and muffled voices, giving opportunities for social, political and cultural development.

Dalit: Untouchables with Compassion

Seasons of Palm is the third novel of the Perumal Murugan, translated by V. Geetha into English. The Tamil culture and history have been included along with the caste system and gender. Murugan depicts the life, pain, suffering, brutality and the so-called responsibilities of Dalit children for upper class people in the society. It also exhibits the protest, resistance and subversion of young children in a brutal world.

The novel forecasts the relationship between landlords and their Dalit servants, apparently the Dalit children. The children are separated from their parents as they are given for their parent's masters for laboring them for their benefit. The novel acts as the literature of protest, resistance and subversion, where Murugan points out the everyday brutality of the caste system in detail through the characters, Shorty, Belly, Stonedeaf, Tallfellow and Stumpleg who are all personifications.

The hard, physical laborer and the protagonist of the novel Shorty attempts to get a good conduct from the master, but always fails. This shows the urge of the Dalit to receive good recognition in the society. Murugan has put a great attempt in showing the mentality of the subaltern through Shorty to the readers. Hoping for a better place in society, as an individual among the others, not only Shorty but also the other children try their best form to show their individuality in the community. In Hoping Against Hope: A Discourse on Perumal Murugan's Koolamadari, Daisy states that 'Born into the untouchable class in Southern India, the children work as goat-herds and face heartbreaking hunger and dispossession along with the universal difficulties of adolescence' (13).

The happiness of the children is fragile, as their merriment no longer goes a day. They struggle to keep their smile and joy, when they are together, herding the goats under the palm dotted pastureland. Their enjoyments are by sitting under the tree together, sharing food prepared by their own mistress, playing games together and collecting food to fill their half-filled stomachs. Loosing of one goat, pays them a whole day merciless whipping. If any goat trespasses to another masters land, or if any goat dies while delivering its kid, the children faces brutal punishment.

The children struggle to live a life of endless punishment and abuses in the society. Their world of independence is unknown for them as they protest to live in an unequal society. Arundhati Roy states that, "The social status of an individual by itself often becomes a source of power and authority is made clear by the sway which the Mahatmas have held over the common man (The Doctor and the Saint 132).

The absurd happiness of the protagonist signifies the actual state of each Dalit individual in the society. His gaiety exists only when he is with the herd and his friends, especially in the palm plantation. His herd listens him, as he listens and obeys to his master. The sacrificial goat Veeran, the utmost important goat of the master obeys Shorty's words. "Veeran has not disobeyed him; he was held by the power of his voice" (Seasons of the Palm 9). But, the power of Shorty's mistress' voice is incomparable with his tone with the herds.

The koel that Shorty seeks in the novel is an exquisite comparison, which symbolizes the thirst to know the beauty beyond the shackles of caste system. His interest in listening the black koel's alluring song signifies the hidden beauty in the outer world. "The koel is a shy bird. It does not show itself easily. It changes its perch often and somehow manages to tuck its sheer black into the green of the neem" (Seasons of the Palm 10). However, the children are under the chains of caste system, they are not in a situation to identify the issue of being downtrodden in society. Their parents fix them as slaves for their masters. Besides portraying cruelties on the untouchable Dalits, the novel centers round the dream world of the young adolescents of the community. They struggle to hold their existence in a world of injustice.

Nature plays the penultimate role in the lives of children in the novel. The story gives a rustic sensibility that it centers on nature and its part in the lives of the children. As they get very less quantity of food from their mistress, they go about searching for food from the pastureland to fill their empty stomach. The green palm trees give rich nutritious food such as nuts, fruits and juice for the children. The tree acts as a mother for the children. The tree shelters the children when it's a hot day and provide food when they feel hunger and thirst. Murugan solely presents the nature as a useful companion for the children in the novel. The restricted children get a good space and nurture with nature and they forget that they are labelled as untouchables in the society.

As the children are bonded with their masters and to their responsibilities, the protagonist Shorty's character progresses in each and every section of the novel. The punishment he gets from his master for entering into another masters plantation while collecting nuts are cruel and brutal, as he has to wake up the following day to herd the goats in the pastureland. Even the importance given to animals are not given to the children, as they are meted out the basest treatment by the upper class people or the masters in the society. The names given

for the children in the novel are in accordance with their physical appearance. They are named by their masters based on their human body, both literal and symbolical. Arundhati Roy states that, "Caste was implied in people's names, in the way people referred to each other, in the work they did, in the clothes they wore, in the marriages that were arranged, in the language they spoke" (The Doctor and the Saint 11).

The children in the novel are suppressed, but they are intelligent and interesting as their change in personalities when they play together in the pastureland. The intelligence and smartness is seen when they are out of their master's grip, but they are helpless about their circumstances. The merciless whipping of Shorty exhibits the actual fact of the relationship between the master and the slave in the novel. The little bit of innocence in Shorty's character diminishes, after the whipping treatment from his master.

The world of the protagonist shrinks even more after this incident that he is webbed in the midst of intractable circumstances. The pain and agony he suffers moulds him into a different person by the end of the novel. The death of Selvam, the son of Shorty's master is a turning point in the life of Shorty as it questions whether the well acts as a place of resurrection or an ever-washable curse for Shorty. He takes the chance of whipping on his master-cum friend Selvam towards the end of the novel.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan is a renowned non-Dalit writer in Dalit literature. His writings aim on the experiences and the treatments of the marginalized and represent the oppression face by the subaltern in the society of caste system. His novels and poetry mainly centers on caste, untouchability, brutal injustice, subalternity and segregation. His novels project the aspects of caste and caste cruelties faced by the Dalits in rural and urban parts of Tamil nadu. All his novels have a rustic touch as they take readers to the rural life. Seasons of the Palm plays a pivotal role in shaping the minds of readers to enter into and know the psychological trauma faced by characters in the novel. The detailed description of the nature and the rustic life is well explained. The children are I presented in diverse ways and their attachment to nature and the work assigned to them manifests the reflections of the real life of a Dalit individual in society. Murugan proves that the Dalit writing is not only to criticize the upper class people but also acts as a purpose to bring change in upper class community to make them understand that they are also equal in the society along with other castes and religions. Meanwhile, Dalit writings urge Dalit people to educate their children to overcome caste discriminations and exhorts tem to stop working on menial jobs for the upper caste. Murugan assimilates the concept of untouchability and casteism through the characters in the novel which presents the brutal injustice of the masters in the society.

Works Cited:

- Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Haymarket Books, 2017.
- Murugan, Perumal. *Seasons of the Palm*. Translated by V Geetha, Penguin Books, 2017.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.
- Daisy. "In Hoping against Hope: A Discourse on Perumal Murugan's *Koolamadari* (*Seasons of the Palm*)" *Language in India*, 2 Feb. 2011, www.languageinindia.com/feb2011/daisyseasonsfinal.pdf.
- Ambedkar, B. R., and Mulk Raj Anand. *Annihilation of Caste: An Undelivered Speech*. Arnold Publishers, 1990.

