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Meena Kandaswamy's The Gypsy Goddess: A Subaltern Discourse

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Abstract:

Oppression, marginalization of weaker sections and downtrodden classes has been rolling on since the immemorial periods in India. The marginalized and oppressed classes are being termed as subaltern. It is true that there is always a prolonged distance between center and periphery, dominant and dominated, colonizer and colonized. Meena Kandaswamy is one of the most prominent Indian poets and novelists who have exceptionally represented Dalit in her earlier short story collections. She not only discloses the grave condition but expresses agonies of subordinated classes. She articulates peasant's pathetic condition throughout 'The Gypsy Goddess'. The novel takes a stock of the agonies of subaltern and it also articulates the unbreakable voices of subaltern class. Kandaswamy is always conscious about controversial social themes, including dalit humiliation, women's rights, social inequality and position of subaltern class.

Key words: Subaltern, discourse, humiliation, marginalization, oppression etc.

Introduction:

The term discourse is a much used word in contemporary criticism. The term is used here simply as formal written or spoken debate or discussion on a topic. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2007) theoretically explain about the term discourse, "Discourse was originally used from about the sixteenth century to describe any kind of speaking, talk or conversation, but became increasingly used to describe a more formal speech, a narration or a treatment of any subject at length, a treatise, dissertation or sermon (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 70). *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (3rd Edition)* defines, "Discourse is a formal exposition or dissertation" (Baldick 92). Untouchables, labours and women are placed at lowest level in society since ancient times. Hence they are dominated and oppressed in society as well as in literature.

In his article *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci asserted the subaltern classes refer fundamentally to any "low rank" person or a group in a particular society suffering under hegemonic of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. Ranjit Guha also defines in the same vein, the subaltern studies as "a name for general attribute of subordination in south Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, age, gender and office or in any other way" (1982).

In the novel, the novelist introduces many characters those have been suffering throughout the prolonged journey of inequality and injustice. Apparently it primarily happens because of the economic and social weakness of the subaltern.

A Plethora Of Subaltern:

Meena Kandaswamy desperately highlights the shades of humiliation. Over many centuries a group of marginalized have been moving away from main stream in terms to class, caste. The

novel is mainly dealt with social oppression and economical exploitation of subaltern. The novel is set in tanjore district of Tamilnadu in India. Meena Kandaswamy makes differences between the landlords and labourers or untouchables as On a sultry afternoon in July, when the sun sets the sky on fire, Gopalkrishana Naidu's gleaming pleasure car (simply 'pleasure' by the villagers ,and 'car'by those who have travelled in one)arrives at the doorstep of Ramu Thevar 's palatial bungalow, having traversed a picturesque Tanjore country side replete with lakes and rivers and lush-green rice fields and tropical coconut trees .In a cinematic wide-angle shot, the door of the ash –coloured Ambassador opens and then we first spot Goplakrishna Naidu's gold-ringed right hand, and then we see the rest of him emerge ,dressed in spotless hand –spun ,hassle-free white cotton .as you (51)

In the case of the novel the marginalized and oppressed did keep away from their basic rights and excluded from main stream. The novelist looks into the matter of Subaltern's agonies and plights. Meena Kandaswamy is a perennial voice of dalit writing .She felt personally the pains of dalit when she was working on her two short story collections. She vividly highlights the appearance of subaltern class in the society and tries to recognize their identity. It is a fact that subaltern class have been moving away from the main stream however this subordinated class has struggling against a group of elite class in terms of economic stability, self identity, dignity ,bread and butter. This object keeping at the centre Meena Kandaswamy diligently shows a prolonged line between landlords and peasants or laborers.

The novel projects a broad spectrum of Subaltern and it also depicts different shades of marginalization .Through the novel she appeals to restructure the system in our nation where subordinated are to be subjugated by policemen and they even couldn't register their complaints. Meena Kandaswamy shows how the landlords torture the labourers in the name of hegemonic power. The novel perfectly discloses the dominated nature of an elite group who look upon down working classes as helpless and weaker. Kandaswamy depicts the nature of suffering and gives a glimpse of labourer's plight as: When women take to protest, there is no looking back .This time it is the tractors.

This is the time it is a Polydol death. This time it is a disappearance .This time it is a strike for higher wages .This time it is the demand for punishment for a rapist –the issues come and go again. Sometimes their demands are related to women alone, like when they demanded daily wages instead of the weekly wage for women. Or when they demanded their right to take breaks to attend to their infants ,because babies left under the shade of trees cried to their death in their makeshift sari cradles or rolled over and drowned in the mud .Most of the time, they fight for everybody. (75)

Since a few years Landlords were torturing not only women laborers but also their infants deliberately. The landlords were monsters which were unable to think about humanity as usual they wanted to bruise the voices of all peasants and they allegedly assaulted women and did have not provide proper wages. In the response to inhumanity of landlords, labour women musters all courage to stand against the landlords with demanding for punishment, their demands for daily wages instead of the weekly wages, even they needed a short break in order to attend their infants. Kandaswamy articulates the misery of women laborers. It is universal picture of marginalized and weaker sections those still dominate by an elite group.

As John Galsworthy articulates in his *Strife* laws grind poor people. In the context of The Gypsy Goddess, The Kilvenmani massacre discloses the inhuman perceptions towards downtrodden people or labourers. Meena Kandaswamy wails out over the terrible incident in her way:

Gopalkrishna Naidu had announced a ten day deadline for the village and as he had stated during his public meeting; he gives final touch to his willingness by setting fire to huts of Kilvenmani villagers. It was so horrible incident that we could not imagine about the deceased bodies

those were burnt in this fire. A gang of agents of Gopalkrishna Naidu started shooting .They were moving in. They were shouting .They set fire to the roof of the huts. They took the straw from one burning thatched roof to set fire to another .Then all the burning huts lit up the village .We saw fleeting figures .We heard bamboo splinters blast. Then everything happened at once .We heard screaming .The loud screams filled up the hand .My little sister and I were crouching like moneys .I held her tight to stop her running .She still .She didn't know what was going on .I put my hand on her mouth so that she would not join the screaming .The screams stopped sometime later. (159) Subaltern projects oppression, marginalization, and gender discrimination, subjugation of lower and working classes and ignored sections of society.

The novel has various threads which is sharply woven the suppression and subordination of subaltern. The Kilvenmani tragedy was an outcome of the social protest of labours (subaltern) against landlords. The tragedy takes many lives of innocent kilvenmani labourers. The men of Naidu come in the village with determination to finish off all labourers or subaltern. As they set fire to huts of labourers, an outcry of Kilvenmani villagers resonate in all directions. The entire village becomes silence for a while and the villagers was thinking that everything is about to wrap up in this fire. The fire was so dangerous that the entire village block in the flame of fire smoking where all voices of labourers were about to bury with themselves. In the aftermath the kilvenmani fire, the wave of fire triggers a lot of chaos and fear between and among survivors in the kilvenmani village. As being witness of this grave tragedy Kandaswamy ponders the post-fire incidents as:

*“Police van came again in the middle of the night .It went away after some time
They didn't come to us. We did not go to them .Mayyi paati kept on crying
None of us could sleep .Some men from our village came back with the light
The police tied them up. “ (160)*

The situation was not controlled by police even the police came over and over throughout the night and Villagers couldn't ready to go with police neither sleeps with peacefully. Instead of catching the accused of the Kilvenmani tragedy they tied up villagers. It means that the police were even men of landlords and they were against the labourers. The novelist talks about the post kilvenmani tragedy in her words:

When the fire of smoke billowing in Kilvenmani village a few men were escaped somehow from the terrible fire .The survivors were started to return to Kilvenmani.

Meena Kandaswamy herself musters all courage to approach to DSP and narrate the Kilvenmani Tragedy but As we approached him he looked down us as criminals .According to him Pakkirisami Pillai stabbed Sellamuthu and He was not in mood to listen him and finally he told his juniors that Pakkirisami Pillai should thrown in jail afterwards he was taken away and she was left alone, She made herself to back her village and saw that everybody was there and it was just looking a pilgrimage of deceased, half village was dead now, those were my people, men who had roamed these fields carrying me on their shoulders, women who were sisters and daughters or mothers from whose hands I have had water to drink and food to eat ,*ellarum uravu murai* ,we were all related ,I broke down ,I was not even allowed to go near their bodies ,they didn't let me even look at them for the last time .I was beaten up by the police and taken into their custody . (180 &181)

In after math the Kilvenmani tragedy the village was come under the dominance of lusty landlords especially Naidu Gopalkrishna .No wonder for them ,police were in favour of landlords and we were not only beaten up but also charged against us as criminal and it was happened because of at the

behest of Naidu the police did not support to villagers. It was a fight for justice and equality against heinous inhuman actions of landlords. All villagers were come under a threat of Naidu realm but finally we had to bet stopping the vandalism of landlords with united over the matter of funeral procession of our forefathers. At the end of the day the fight takes a new turn as Karunanidhi who was going to be the next chief minister of Tamilnadu, came to our village soon after the tragedy He didn't come there lonely media and news paper people followed him and it was about fortunate that somebody was listening our genuine problems. Finally the matter goes to the court where we had expected a ray of hope but Still power again destroys the hopes which was about to decide the prospect of all homeless labourers however struggle was going on till the judgment comes out from Court. In the case prudently Naidu manages all things through his hegemonic power and he gets success in his evil destiny. We can say that justice should not be denied but in the context of the novel where injustice showers upon subaltern class.

Meena Kandaswamy concerns about her brothers and sisters those were about to fight against the accused Naidu and his wild agents. As hearing starts of the Massacre Kilvenmani case in court the accused landlords manage to collect false evidences to run away from the punishment. When they appear before court they falsely deny all knowledge of the fires and the much waited judgment apparently comes out in favour of accused landlords and Naidu.

The post kilvenmani massacre raises hounded questions that can the marginalized speak? It is a fact that the subaltern cannot remain silence for a long time, they have to speak for rights and register their existence. In the same vein the novel highlights the rebellious action of marginalized who would exploit physically and mentally by landlords. Meena Kandaswamy displays that hardly a month after the kilvenmani massacre there was a round of tripartite talks was held with the representatives of landholders, agricultural labourers and legislators to revise the wage structure. Labourers were demanding to increase their wage for harvest. However labourers knew that the landlords never will care about the agreements.

Nevertheless marginalized would to strike and fight against the landlords in the Kilvenmani village but the revolutionary wind widely start at everywhere especially in Coimbatore, Madurai where spinning mill workers and drainage workers indulge.

Gayatri Spivak writes in her essay entitled 'Can the Subaltern Speak'?

"The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish." (308)

She emphasized the condition of women who are doubly oppressed by firstly by patriarchy and secondly by colonialism. In this novel after the kilvenmani massacre the relatives of deceased fill a case against the accused but the case goes ahead at a snail's pace and in the hearing, the session court of Nagapattinam addresses the accused and labourers of Kilvenamani tragedy where lawyers allegedly also interrogated, examined, cross examined labourers in this matter as if they were guilty whereas marginalized knew that they could not bring back the deceased to give witness and they also knew that it was our weak point on that the account of supporting substantive evidence before court in this regard. The kilvenmani case goes on till next two years still labourers were waiting for the judgment day lastly the special Additional First class Magistrate M.S.Gopalkrishnan delivers his verdict during the conclusion of the case the accused who have convicted by the court of session at the East Tanjore District on that Thirtieth day of November Nineteen Hundred should be handed over to the

Tiruchy central Prison and besides No one is sentenced for life ,no one is sentenced to death and only eight accused get punishment of then years in jail. Even all was well for accused and punished landlords because they were already out on bail.

In the response to the verdict of session Court of East Tanjore and the special Additional First class Magistrate M.S.Gopalkrishnan, landlords go to Madras high court as if they knew that law will fuck to all labourers and subaltern and what did they expect from court the same result comes out. It may be caused due to law is made for an elite class and law always grinds the poor and also there is one more reason behind the verdict which in favour of all accused landlords that Naidu's elder brother's son is getting married to the daughter of the brother of a judge of the madras. The court rejects all collected evidences which could insufficient to punish accused landlords in the Kilvenmani massacre. They rejoiced but subaltern was sunk in distress and only offered compensation over the death of brothers and sisters but they didn't need compensation from government. But the story is yet to complete and as subaltern had told that they didn't want justice from the ruling system and the much awaited day was eventually rises when Subaltern takes revenge of their dead friends by killing the monster GopalKrishna Naidu. Thus we can say that Subaltern even never mute for a long time and the marginalized show their strength and stand against injustice. In this way the story highlights all different shades of subaltern.

Conclusion:

To sum up the research article we can say that marginalization and subordination of subaltern is become an emerging issue in even recent times. Through the novel, the narrator appeals to all human kinds to cope with human dignity and we needed to sow the seeds of humanity in the heart of ourselves for destruction of inhumanity under the name of caste, creed, race, poverty, sex and hegemonic power. We can say that Kandaswamy condemns the social injustice of the time and subordination of human kind.

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