

Social Realism in Meena Kandasamy's Novel *The Gypsy Goddess*

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ABSTRACT

Social realism, as derived from the Marxist ideology, is something which adheres to reality, avoids romantic embellishments, and creates truthful portraits of life that expose human flaws. In it, we find characters with genuine jobs and problems. It records the life of an average farmer or labourer. The novel *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy is an indictment of Communism and atrocities inflicted upon untouchable coolies and paddy workers. Meena Kandasamy presents the fictionalized version of the tragedy, portrayed on the documents taken from history and interviews of people who faced that actual incident. The landlords murder a communist leader. After that, the Dalit labourers go on strike, Dalit workers are forced to work back on farms, and those who refuse are assaulted and punished by the police. The democratic demand for justice by the untouchables farmers of Kilenmani, Tamil Nadu, are faced with a terrible series of actions which prove 'might is right', and the poor, helpless farmers are only left to suffer and die due to hostile conditions. The novel is a fine narrative of their plight and the traumatic conditions caused by the violence inflicted upon them. In brief, it is a fictionalized work on social realism. The present paper is a brief study of events that occur in the lives of Dalit, unprivileged paddy workers and their exploitation by so-called Upper Caste or Landlords and their realistic representation.

Keywords: *Social realism, Marxism, postmodernism, atrocities, plight, predicament.*

Introduction

The concept of social realism has been at the centre of Marxism and Communism. It doesn't mean it was not used or referred to before the advent of Marxism or Communism. Great novelists like Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and Joseph Conrad wrote novels of social realism. Therefore, David A. Craig called them 'critical realists' for their representation of social realism in their novels. (Craig: 1975, 12). Similarly, in Dalit literature, the concept of socialist realism is very much in currency and considers the overall life, good or bad, of the working and peasants' class. It represents the life of those poor and unprivileged Dalit paddy workers realistically, avoiding romantic superfluities and creating honest portrayals that expose human

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defects. The novel, since its beginning, has been the vehicle for representing society with its essential facts, with some touches of romanticism in between. Dalit and black literature, wherever and wherever it was produced, was never devoid of realism. The Gypsy Goddess, a novel based on factual events of Dalit's exploitation and massacre, represents this social realism emphatically. Meena Knadasamy presents inequality and class differences between the landlords and Dalit communities, mostly labourers, coolies, or peasants working on the landlords' farms. The Gypsy Goddess is an imaginative reconstruction of the tragedy and its aftermath. The protagonist is none but the novelist herself. She writes self-reflexively, constantly drawing readers' attention to its imagined nature and explaining its pronouncements.

Literature and Realism

Literature is but a record of life. It holds a mirror to society and shows its actual image without any admixture of fiction. The novel is always fictitious, but that does not mean it is devoid of realism. Several critics like W. H Hudson, Mathew Arnold and Aristotle have defined it similarly. Mathew Arnold was right when he defined poetry as 'criticism of life'. According to Aristotle, tragedy throws light on the relationship between literature and life; hence, he calls it 'an imitation of action' representing 'incidents and events from the life of a hero or other characters. The hero or protagonist is the product of the society they live in and are moulded in. The history of their life is but a part of the contemporary historical, economic, political and moral events. The novel The Gypsy Goddess mirrors modern society based on inequality and social hierarchy. It is a 'criticism of traumatic conditions of poor, outcaste peasants buried into history and conceived through the narratives.

Kandasamy is credited with having the intention and the art to tell the tale in diverse ways. She writes that she is willing to do anything to get the real story of Dalit and poor paddy workers and their brutal killing by the Upper caste landlords of Kilvenmani, a village in the state of Tamil Nadu took place in 1968. She used the records available in various print forms. The landlords submitted monologues, post-mortem reports, and memorandums in their defence. The petitioner who approaches justice defends his stand in the event that they always have extended benefits to the coolies, peasants, and communist leaders. They have made several attempts to empower the coolies and their leaders. But these leaders have created further problems for the coolies.

Like a true storyteller, Kandasamy begins the narrative rationally but with a tinge of Communism because she is going to narrate a massacre, a crusade, bloodshed, tyranny and sufferings of the poor and underprivileged. Kilvemani is the village in the story's focus, into which the Old Woman married, and the land was blessed with fertility because of two tributaries of the Cauvery. In this village lived a community called Arundhatiyars, an oppressed and untouchable caste. Kandasamy does not want to fit the tragedy in this village in two lines, but she wants to narrate it by giving a highly fictitious touch. The tragedy occurred in 1968; the woman had come there fifteen years ago. Kandasamy relied on the field notes of the lady. She intended to familiarise the readers with her ideas of Marxism and derives them from the information introduced in the appendixes. It again helps to substantiate the theme of Communism. The woman and the novelist are inclined toward Marx and his communist ideology. She is a woman writing the agonies of those who suffered and sustained the age-long tyranny of the 'superstructure'. It is no wonder if she is writing for the cause and bringing the issues to the front because she knows only writing fiction will help her imagine freely. She could give full expressions to what she felt. For the marginalized or subaltern, Communism infuses the power of manifesting the actual story in the guise of fiction.

In a nutshell, the novel's story vividly reveals that it is truly a communist or Marxists novel and all the aspects of Marxists literature, in general, can be traced. It helps to make a strong statement that it has the theme of Communism and socialist realism. It presents the class struggle between the poor and unprivileged Dalit paddy workers. The novel is written in the true nature of revolution, and the workers' riot against the landlords for their natural rights is a testimony. Like any literature of socialist realism, the novel deals with the Dalit man's fight against their brutal treatment and oppression. The Dalit paddy workers fight on social, political and legal grounds to seek justice. Their narratives are the narratives of a lifelong struggle. The time changes, other so-called high caste people take their place, system changes- from feudal to proletarian, but the struggle never ends. The novel is the riveting narrative of this man's struggle for survival against all odds and social and economic system, which put them to the lower strata of society and life-long yoke to sustain unending agonies and sufferings. What they fight for and their sole goal is to bring and establish equality, liberty and fraternity. They only want high caste people and the landlords or the feudal or the industrialists to look upon them from a humanitarian point of view.

The Social Realism and Its Various Aspects

Social realism is represented through several forms and aspects and to begin with, the novel is an indictment of the class struggle. It is based on actual events and incidents in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu. Among the trio are -the landlords and their association, the peasants or untouchable peasants living on the bread of the landlords and the communists supporting the untouchable coolies to raise their struggle, and issues regarding increasing their wages for the labour done by them while working on their farms. There was a constant struggle among them. The incidents of invoking, abusing, beating, taking revenge and killing were day-to-day facts. The novelist herself is the protagonist, to tell the truth that leaves no room for any doubt.

Secondly, the Gypsy Goddess represents the communist revolution. In place of the Green Revolution, the communists wanted to create a Communist revolution that would ensure equality, liberty and fraternity. Their fight is against the discriminatory feudal system and caste-based social system. This can be perceived when Kandasamy writes the protagonist and a witness;

When the month long curfew was finally lifted, our party held a procession to mourn our dead. Kilvemani became Communism, Communism became Kilvemani. Green field, red flags, and black bodies: our every single step was taking us towards revolution. (The Gypsy Goddess, pg. 220)

Thirdly, the Gypsy Goddess is a record of struggle against exploitation, injustice and oppression like much other socialist literature. Instead, it would be better to designate that this novel is an absolute and pinpoint record of the Kilvemani village's struggle, making it realistic.

The novelist begins the socialist narratives with the memorandum submitted by Gopalkrishna Naidu to the Chief Minister to save them and their interest from the upbringing of communists in the village and the Tanjore district. The first speech of Naidu, in which he tirades and barrages, is very significant from this point of view. He exhorts the landowners to unite to safeguard their interests, be ready for the struggle and do anything to protect their land. This invocation only leads them to commit the massacre in which about 44 children, older people and women are burnt and charred to death. The entire village becomes a burial ground. They said that Pallan, Paraiyan peasants were 'ungrateful dogs, parrots who repeated whatever was taught to them; they were foolish enough to fall headlong into the well just because their friend had dug it.

The novel also records everything from medieval history, the arrival of the white man, the arrival of slave ships, colonization of the Dutch, Portuguese, French and lastly the British and the plight of the working class in any age and lastly, the treatment met out by them in the ever

dominating social and class system. The peasants, labourers and farm workers had to live under constant trauma of being thrown away and survive somehow because they were born to live, labour and subdue. This is vividly narrated in very touching words, “We were told that because we worked with our hands, we were the working class. We were told that because we worked. And because they hated work, they hated us”. (GG)

Through the factual record of the massacre, this novel captures the world’s attention toward the inhuman treatment given to these classes by other classes. The revolution is not to fight continuously, as nothing will come out of the fight, but to hear their unheard voices, solve their unsolved problems, redeems them from lifelong penury and allows living a beautiful human life.

As already stated in the introduction, these aspects of social realism have been depicted by a number of writers and thinkers in their writings to create a better way of life, as done by Meena Knadsamy in the Gypsy Goddess. They participated in the agitation as they wanted to change the world. Kandasamy, also the protagonist, personally witnesses what is happening at the village and recording every moment to weave a riveting story that will make everyone look into themselves. She expects all working community and their desires to constitute a ‘socialist attitude’. Mao -tse -Tung, the famous Marxist thinker, also expressed the same thought. In this context, the novelist Meena Kandasamy is a social realist. She is an astute follower of Marx and Engel as far as social realism is concerned. Her novel is but a documentary of social realism.

The Social Realism and Narrative Techniques

In addition to the theme and representation of the tale, the techniques must be complementary to the tale narrated to make it more realistic and trustworthy. Without it, the story would be incomplete and suffer from being called a composite whole. The historical documents used in the narratives, the sequence of the events, the narrative voices and the novel's overall structure support the theme and the representation. Regarding the story of The Gypsy Goddess, Meena Kandasamy purposefully used narrative techniques that fully help to make the novel a whole. We will deal with each aspect of the methods to justify the very object of the paper.

It is a fact that the novel is the Kandasamy's fictionalized form of this catastrophe. It draws on past pamphlets and survivor’s interviews, farm workers’ strikes against the landlords, and the treatment meted out by the activists while on strike after landowners homicide a popular

Marxist leader trying to gather the workers and make them realize what injustice is being done to them. Rather than conceding what wrong they have done, the landlords try to torment them by asking them to go back to work. On the contrary, they charge incapacitating penalties, send the police force to threaten and crush their agitation, and brutally attack Dalit women. But the poor and starving people of Kilvenmani village are unyielding and resolute and continue putting their demands for justice. When the landowners see that they do not yield, they use other forces to crush them. Finally, the landowners send a gangster squad to attack Kilvenmani. They angle dozens of villagers into a single hut and lit it to fire. In this massacre, about forty-two villagers are charred to death, but the gangsters manage to run away. Meanwhile, many villagers who have gone against the landowners for this killing and have lost loved ones in the butchery are sent behind the bar. The innocent are put to death, and the perpetrators are free. This tale required proper techniques and Meena Kandasamy justified it by narrating the tale compellingly. She uses exquisite language to express this lot. For instance, "Dew doesn't just fall on the ground; it "begins to diamond the golden fields".

Kandasamy uses a display of revolutionary narrative voices of the oppressed workers. She has devoted one whole chapter to arouse the killing and has used one single sentence: "facial features disappear and flesh now starts splitting and shin bones show and hair singses with a strange smell and the flames hastily lick away at every last juicy bit as the bones learn to burst like dead wood ...". She has also devoted another chapter to commemorate the tragedy after many years in the form of a journalist but fails to document it at all. This relates to realism. Kandasamy uses many asides in the novel's second half to give it an unusual structure.

The novel's division is also equally fascinating from a structural point of view. The novel is divided into two major parts- prologue and epilogue. The Prologue is further divided into four parts viz. Background, Breeding Ground, Battleground and Burial Ground ends with an optimistic epilogue.

The first part brings out the background of the tale she is telling. Hence, she begins the first part with historical evidence of a memorandum submitted to the honourable chief minister of Madras seeking immediate redressal of the grievances of paddy cultivators. This document is enough to reveal what happened with Dalit paddy workers and how they were persecuted, exploited, murdered, and suffered injustice. This part shows the fight of the petitioners not only against the landlords but also against the Communists who cheated them. The petitioner writes about the coolies, that for ten years the coolies and peasants have constantly been demanding

an increase in their daily wages, and whenever it has been denied to them, they have organized strikes and paralyzed life in their district. Further it states that,

Self-styled Communist leaders, who are themselves comfortably well off, are also responsible for illegal encroachment on other people's land. Not merely they disregard the rights of the landowners, but they do so like militants Naxalites, by instigating the labours to commence farming on these encroached lands. (The Gypsy Goddess, Pg. 3-4)

The petitioner has laid allegations against the communist leaders that they are 'they seek to create famine to make this land a fertile breeding ground for Maoism.' (G.G.,pg 5) The petitioner has written against the leaders that they have made the situation worse for workers and landlords. His grievance is against the workers who fall victim to the communist leaders and the leaders whose demands is ever increasing, making it worse for the landlords.

A quick reading of the petition reveals that the landlord has written it from his point of view and not from the poor paddy coolies. Finally, he prayed for necessary steps to restore the lost confidence of the terror-stricken landowners and liberate the district from the clutches of Communists to prevent violence and bloodshed. Here, the point to be paid attention to is that the petitioner has nowhere said a word about the treatment given by them to the coolies and workers that might have led to this situation, which proves they were only protecting their power and trying to convince that their side was true. The paddy workers had to sustain what wrongs the landlords had been doing with them without any word or voice. It was their lot, and they had to accept it without a grudge. Thus, the poor paddy workers were being used by the Communist leaders and the landlords for their interests. The narrative techniques adopted and mastered by the author tend to prove the slaughters and terrible situation of the oppressed and subjugated people. The novelist, one of the oppressed, could tell the tale in a compelling manner as if it was practically happening before her eyes and she was only a mute witness to them. Therefore, to make it more convincing and trustworthy, she digs deep into the history to find the roots of the unequal social system right from the primitive to the contemporary period and gives every detail to make it very convincing and touching. This helps to make the novelist a social realist, and the novel deals with social realism.

The postmodernist style of writing has undoubtedly helped many writers to narrate the tales of subjugation, marginalization, exploitation and oppression in a more convincing way. Meena Knadasamy, being a postmodernist novelist, makes use of this style and is highly successful in making a worldwide plea to break out the national barrier and appeals world community to confer Dalits of India with equal dignity and identity as human beings. She also exposes the

connection between the state authority and the landowners, which makes the life of Dalit farm workers worst to bring reforms. Even the cost of legal institutions is out of reach for the poor Dalits.

The novel, at the first reading, seems to propagate communist propaganda, but the failure of Communism and the killing of the communist leaders tend to prove the powerful hold and dominance of feudal lords on politics and legal institutions. The novel does not provide any concrete solutions to help Dalit rise. On the other hand, speaking ironically, the landowners use their hostility with the socialists as an instrument to save themselves in court by putting false accusations on coolies and communist leaders.

The Novelist's Vision

Like the Black and Afro -American literature, the novelist has her own vision of a just society based on equality, fraternity and liberty. In Black literature, the spotlight is on black people—their plight caused by ‘twin affliction’ of racism and sexism. In contrast, in India, it is the plight of Dalit caused by the unequal social system and caste system where in the words of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, ‘a graded inequality’ is found, and Dalit and unprivileged are the age-long oppressed toiling away on rice fields in ruthless situations. It was a time when the Green revolution was introduced, but it added much to the miseries of the poor paddy workers as it forced farmers into dependence on poisonous fertilizers produced in America. The massacre and events in the village of Kilvenmani had profound material for a social and realistic novel to be written. Meena Kandasamy made full use of the material to write a fictionalized version of the tragedy.

Her vision is to amend society, and the Gypsy Goddess is a vehicle by which Kandasamy does her best to make it a reality. For this purpose, she has reconstructed the history of Kilvenmani village and bloodshed, paying a great tribute to the people of the village, particularly the Dalit and untouchable, for the rise and fight against the injustice and unequal social system. A comprehensive examination of the novel reveals diverse issues of Dalits, such as injustice, inequality, identity formation, sexual exploitation, economic backwardness, lack of employment and human trafficking of Dalits. In this novel, we find the killing of Dalits for caste and for asking for what had been denied to them for a long time.

Conclusion

As the Marxists talk about socialist realism in their works, Meena Kandasamy, being a social realist, gives the same touch to her novel. She narrates the social history of the village and the massacre in a realistic way. Her aim seems to convince the readers and make them aware of the historical facts by means of the fictionalized summarizing the reality behind the story of Kilvenmani that mesmerizes the lives of the people that suffered through the adversity of what was a terrible situation criticizing the Indian social system as all the victims were untouchables and marginalized.

The arrival of Communism also could not wipe their tears. The resistance of the communists led the landlords to commit genocide, which resulted in the massacre, forming the basis for the fictionalized narratives. They, too, failed before the dominating and oppressive political and legal system. The oppressors in this system were most dominating and were on a higher order of social hierarchy, strong in money and power, and used them to threaten the workers.

The narrative techniques employed by the novelist to depict the tale are suitable to the narratives and help to make the tale more convincing and accurate. It also manifests the vision of the novelist. The post-modern style of writing depicting the plight of the poor, oppressed paddy workers taking the help of the historical events adds to the narrative more convincing. Meena Kandasamy, like a true realist, gets involved in the social events in the town and narrates what is real. The Gypsy Goddess is the ideal example of a depiction of social realism in the light of Communism. The novel brings out her vision of a society based on a trio of equality, liberty and fraternity. It makes a more piercing appeal to every sensible reader.

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