

The Shrinking Livelihood of the Downtrodden depicted in K.J. Baby's Mavelimantram (An ideal habitat)

Fathimath Suhara.V

Guest Lecturer in English, Govt. Arts and Science College, Tanur, Kerala.

Abstract: Contemporary society is based on the principles of: liberty, equality, right to information and justice, but dalits are destined to remain on the periphery. Thus the so called God's own country witnessed the outburst of humiliation and cruelty against Kerala tribal who stand and protest for a piece of land in the name of 'Nilpusamaram' (stand up protest). Stand up protest is basically for the very survival of the Adivasis in Kerala. The novel narrates the struggle of Adivasis under feudal lords for their survival at Wayanad district in Kerala of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The study focuses on the sorrowful tales portraying the oppression of the worst kind of the dominant caste. The study describes the hardships and sufferings of the tribal for their day to day livelihood. They have to abandon their dreams and hopes for the material pleasures of their feudal lords and the 'Thampuran'. 'Mavelimantram' records the history of the tribal who were subjected to humiliation, cruelty and death, who only wish for their survival and livelihood.

Keywords: Adivasis, Humiliation, Mavelimantram, Nilpusamaram, Thampuran, Wayanad

The present scenario of Indian culture and literature, the historical consciousness of literature have been shown overmuch interest in depicting the social and static problems of the tribal people. The literary writers are attracted to the Dalits, an oppressed class under the Indian caste system, which forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature, varied in themes. Thus the genre of literature has much significance to reconstruct the history of tribal in the contemporary age. By using oral evidences as well as fictive imagination their history and experience were retold with harsh realities. The innate depravity of the feudal landlords or the Thampuran (the king) and their increased animosity over the deprived tribes exhaustively systematize the theme of Dalit literature.

The British colonisation with feudal and imperial principles coupled with imperatives of the ruling strategy, created space for working up subaltern identities mainly in terms of caste and religion. The institutional changes (judiciary, civil administration, commodity market) cultural changes (western style and western mode of living, English education) and economic changes (zamindars and ryotwari system) lend various opportunities to the aspiration of the lower castes. It pushed them up to the social resistance.

This paper analyses one of the subaltern narratives of Kerala, which has thrown light on the problems of the present life and culture of the tribal, who were mainly sported for the question of exploitation and humiliation. It also focuses on the survival and livelihood of the downtrodden tribal people who were suppressed and subjugated under the name of caste, creed and religion. All through the centuries they experienced exploitation, injustice and high handedness from the rulers and even from government. Everyone dreamt of being equal, but still right to equality is an unfulfilled dream of many especially the dalit and tribal in India. Though the cries of the downtrodden echoed around the globe in the contemporary era, a complete solution to the prolonged sufferings were graphed as mere question marks. Why they were subjugated? How they became downtrodden? Who marked them as untouchables? Who is responsible for the unending cries of those fellow beings?

Back to the legends of the God's own country, it is said that Kerala witnessed its golden era, a Utopian form of kingdom during the reign of king Mahabali. The king was considered to be wise, judicious and extremely generous. People were very free and social. Everybody was happy in the kingdom; there was no kind of discrimination irrespective of caste, creed and class. Rich and poor were treated equally and there was neither crime nor corruption. There was no disparity between the haves and have nots. At last the king was ready to sacrifice all his land and property to hold his trust and honesty which reveals how generous and charitable he was. Years have passed by dismantling the pomp and prosperity of the legendary kingdom.

As reverse to the legend, the so-called God's own country witnessed the outburst of humiliation and cruelty against tribal people who stand and protest for a bit of land in name of 'Nilpusamaram'(standing up protest). They are devoid of equality, dignity and justice. Why they were marginalized, discontented and not even been discussed? The answer lies in the historic exclusion and alienation that were consciously imposed upon the tribal people in Kerala. They were subjected to homeless, helpless and hopeless not because of being impotent but of being suppressed and segregated. The suffering starts when they are made bounded labourers to

landlords and they were considered and treated as inferior to animals, bought and sold along with the plantations.

K.J.Baby's Kerala Sahithya Academy Award Winning novel 'Mavelimantram' exposes the historical depiction of tribal people who were degraded to exploitation, cruelty and death. K.J.Baby was deeply attracted to the tribal way of life. He learnt of their cultural practices and of the cruelties inflicted upon them by the settlers who took control of the territories. The study tries to explore themes of exploitation and subjugation, the discrimination, the women subordination and the negligence of old age people.

'Mavelimantram' tells the story of Kaipadan and Ira, a young couple, who escape slavery to set up a mavelimantram an ideal place where there is equality and peace. The novel attempts to revive the mythology of a people without history, or whose history was threatened to erase even from memory. The novel contains the fragment of history of the Adiyor tribe of Wayanad. It documents a moment of their past, allowing the Adiyors to speak and talk back to the powers that marginalized them. The novel attempts to reconstruct the legend pregnant with folk and myth once lost from the hands of tribes who were subjected to wash off their identities.

The novel narrates the struggle of Adivasis under feudal lords for their survival at Wayanad in Kerala of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It deals slave trade, colonial invasion, and other uprisings from the background of the narrative. The story revolves around the attempted escape of a slave couple to the forest of 'mantram' (an ideal place of equality and liberty) from all kind of slavery and bondage. It concludes with signs of anticipated liberation and hope.

The story turns to develop during the time of aristocracy and imperialism, when the East India Company had joined hands with feudalism to reinstate new modes of discrimination and power over subject populations. The novel begins with the leasing of a slave Kaipadan to a new master Subbayyapattar by his feudal lord Ambu Nair. It brings the re-empowering of old feudal systems within the imperial economy of the East India Company's exploitative agenda. By covering the history of migration and land poaching through a skewed portrayal of feudal barbarism that happened in an earlier period by Menokies and Nambiars, Baby playing hide and seek.

Casteism is one of the brutal violence against tribal people who are not allowed to raise their head in front of the lords. The first chapter of 'Mavelimantram' articulate the caste factor in the Adivasi reality through the reference to the Adivasis as "the lowest of all castes"(p.20).It also equates them with other darker beasts like buffaloes: For Thampurans, slaves and buffaloes are the same, like buffaloes the slave must do the work they are asked to do. They are same for them. (p.24)

The human is pushed down to the level of beastly through associations established through the exercise of power. The psychological impact of this association is that the slaves too begin to associate themselves with the beasts by convention. After all, they get only 'kicks' and 'rotten foods' for the hard days toil. Even eating rise is a 'thampuran's privilege'. The condition in which they are kept without proper shelter and clothing too is disgracing. They cannot even sleep like humans. Having no clothes to cover their bodies, they herd together to survive on the heat of the other's body: leave the question of sleeping. Just had to lie straight, even that is impossible. All lie like piled things; men women, children and the old... (p.26)

In such a dehumanizing condition some of the younger ones ask old Jevarapperuman for his response on this injustice. The old slave observes:with sword and words they degrade the humane in us, to make mere beasts. 'Thampuran, is it so easy every time? Are you yourself become beast for every beating that you inflicted upon us?' (p.27).

Brutality and humiliation to a greater extend awaiting them. As they were tortured to increase the production for Menoki and Thampuran even their physical contacts were according to their instruction. The learnt Menoki knows that he needs more and more slaves to widen his farmlands, and thus begins the most beastly episodes in the clan's history. The tribal always forced to procreation to generate slave children for their master. Menoki refers this as 'chavittu' – literally-'kicking'-an animal act: Chemmy was ashamed to hear Menoki's question: 'don't you do the kicking at night for your lord?' Yesterday Thampuran asked him whether the Panachies conceived or not, since they need more slaves and slave children. (p.38)

This subaltern realm has been constructed through generations of torture. Years of discrimination and humiliation of the masters never treat the tribal people as human beings of same flesh and blood. From womb to tomb they are destined to degrade and devastate. Menoki forcing Kaippadan to bury another slave who died of some disease is a type of instance: Menoki ordered to push down the body into a small pit and forced to hit it down with a pickaxe. Kaippadan couldn't do and he received a pain of blows that broken his back. At last with a roar he pick the body with pickaxe, the body broken into pieces. 'Stamp it down, you dog, stamp it down' shouted Menoki and Kaippadan obeyed him. (p.41)

The sufferings of the downtrodden never end and whatever be the extend of torture and humiliation they would not run away since the punishment for them are severe: needles were pushed in to their nails; faces were mutilated with the claws of black scorpions. They were chained and left alone in burial grounds and yoked along with buffaloes to plough the ground. If the males are inflicted with brutal bodily humiliations, the female

are tortured through their sexuality and the organic power of reproduction. A few of the thinking women slaves realise that the birth of a girl child is therefore a double curse in the Thampuran's world since they were treated as materials for the Thampuran's brutal lust. She is destined to produce more and more slave children, especially girl children. Along with their body and sexuality, their pain and shame are under the control of landlords.

It is the lords who robe us, and
It is the lords who unrobe us.
What is there in a slave's body
That the lords have not seen? (p.130)

Towards the end of the novel most of the slaves realised that the British masters were far better than native Thampuran. Each and every one in the clan gets rid of the atrocities inflicted upon them and tries to raise their voice against their masters. But when the British ban on slave trade and grant a minimum level of working condition brought a new life to them. In the words of Karian, a member of the clan, the new developments are promising: In the company we can put on our clothes above the waist level and also lower it below the knee. Woollen clothes for cold night, and have more clothes to wear. The Whites do not treat us as bulls and beasts as the beast like Thampuran did. They are going to end the slave trade. For now onwards we can't be sold or bought, can't be exported across seas. (p.170)

Thus the picture of narrative presents at the end is a seemingly promising one for the slaves. But it is too another face of exploitation from the authorities.

The Legend of Mavelimantru

There are five tribes in Wayanad. Long ago, each had its own culture, tradition and language. Then outsiders entered and slowly corrupted the tribal folk. The tribal began to brew liquor and worked as wage labourers. They became impoverished. Their self-respect and discipline vanished. Their children were selling liquor and drugs. They became ashamed of their background, their culture of themselves. There is a legend which tells their story. There once was a prosperous era named Maveli, when everyone was equal. There was no lords and no slaves. King Mavelimantru ruled then. Three outsiders entered and killed Mavelimantru. They grabbed the land and broke up the tribes. They split the people into castes. The lower castes became the slaves of the outsiders who now considered themselves as lords. The lords were known by different names such as Gounders, Chettiars, Nairs and Nambiaris. The tribal slaves were forced to clear the thick and dense rainforests, cut the hill slopes to make paddy fields and grow crops for the masters. The lords appointed a goddess named Mali to watch over the activities of the tribal people. Mali's watchful eyes followed the tribal everywhere. They lost their freedom altogether. Somehow, Melocharan (the first father) and Keeyurathi (the first mother) managed to escape from the clutches of the lord. The legend described them as 'brother and sister above the hip, and woman below the hip'. They reached Pakkathappan where the goddess Mali caught up with them and cursed them with slavery both in life and slavery as well. Melocharan was sent to work in the forest and Keeyaruthi in the kitchen. One day Melocharan persuaded Keeyaruthi to come with him into the forest. But Keeyaruthi could not adjust with life in the forest. She became affected by the spell of modernity. She no longer wanted to drink from the natural springs but wanted water from the silver pond of Pakkathappan. They went to the silver pond. The water eluded her and she had to climb down the steps to reach it. Lower and lower she went till she reached the bottom, when the water rose suddenly and she was drowned. Melocharan could only grab her hair. In despair, he flung it on the ground. It became a grass called Maanippullu.

'Mavelimantram' is the conceptual space created through the resistance propaganda of the myth of 'mantram'. When the home of the Adiyors, the natural habitat is colonised, the myth of the 'mantram' becomes an attempt to resist looking at home with the gaze of the coloniser. Kaippadan and Ira's flight is marked by a desire to escape the landscape of oppression crossing boundaries and structure, which create an unequal relation of power. Therefore the children of the clan believe Kaippadan and Ira are the incarnation of their first father Melocharan and the mother Keeyaruthi as per the 'mavelimantru' mythology. Melocharan and Keeyaruthi were the first man and woman to make an attempt to escape from the shackles of slavery. In 'Mavelimantram' Kaippadan and Ira share the responsibility of sowing the seeds of 'mantram'; therefore the clan transform the myth and folklore into reality.

The problems of tribal hamlets are as old as the state. K.J. Baby contributed his maximum effort to bring up the petty conditions of the downtrodden which is undermined in the darker level of forest. They are not part of the progressive Malayalees. The fictive imagination of the novelist could be compared with the real issues held in Kerala few months before. They are demanding a set of basic requirements from the government and society of Kerala. The protest is characterised by "standing up" (Nilpusamaram), meaning standing up as a mode of protest, in front of the Kerala secretariat at Thiruvananthapuram. All including women, children and elders are standing day and night until they get their demands met. Among them we can see many Kaippadans, Iras, Chemmis and Karians who were raising their voice against the utter severities of Thampuran like

authorities in Kerala. They are still standing because they have not granted the minimum demands and requirements by the government and the concerned authorities. K.J.Baby sets 'Mavelimantrum' in the period of capitalist territorial colonialism and imperialism. The tribes always intend to escape from caste, creed, sex, culture and society. The exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by age old caste hierarchical tradition in the Hindu society. This hierarchy led to oppression of dalit in each and every sphere of society for centuries.

Throughout the novel K.J.Baby presented the tribal life in a never before manner and shed light toward a harsh reality of human life which was still not touched by the main stream. 'Mavelimantrum' is a work which deals the saga of Adayor tribe of Wayanad opened a bunch of questions to the modern malayalee which they knowingly ignored . Thus the work stands as a milestone in the history of Dalit writing in Malayalam literature.

References

- [1]. Baby, K.J. Mavelimantrum, University press, Calicut, 2005
- [2]. Baby, K.J. Work and Wisdom of Vernacular Educators from India . Web 10 June 2015. <<http://www.multiworld.org>>
- [3]. Krishnasagar, R.K, Dalit Movements in India and its Leaders, MD Publications, 1994 Print
- [4]. Menon, A Sreedhara. A Survey of Kerala History, 1991Print
- [5]. Mishra, J.K, A Critical Study on Dalit Literature in India
- [6]. Sing, Dr. Buta. The Dalit and Dalit Awakening in India, Gyan Publication, New Delhi, 2004 Print