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INTERFACE BETWEEN HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE IN 'THE GYPSY GODDESS'

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's depiction of non-dominant caste community, political issues, caste, sexuality, violence, gender oppression, it keeps the score card out of the trial and asks the reader to think from the character's life itself. Her poems are famous for its revolutionary or resistance themes as well. I do remember the reading her much acclaimed poems and the way she depicted the Hindu goddess as a revolutionary revelation towards the end.

Keywords: caste, politics, massacre, communist uprising, women and children.

The Gypsy Goddess (2014) almost a predestined one is preoccupied with problems of caste annihilation, development politics, social exclusion and mass murder that occurred on the fateful night of December 25th 1968, in Tamilnadu, a subject closer to her heart. The novel appears to be her way of paying tribute to the innocent women, men and children of Kilvemani village.

In telling the story of Kilvemani village, Meena realizes that the purpose is to break the single-story ideology that is the established mode in the literary canon defined by power politics. She draws upon her African counterpart Adichie's idea of "the danger of a single story" by focusing on the true-life massacre from the perspective of the victims whose story has already been wrongly determined by those in power – the landlords, the government, the police and the judiciary, with the proceedings closed for lack of evidence while the judgment simply said: "it is truly regrettable that the forty-two agricultural laborers who sought refuge in the hut of Pandari Ramayya lost their lives because

the house was set on fire. However, it is a little comforting to learn that the accused did not have any intention to burn them to death"

Overlapping between an Anti-novel and Metafiction, the text at the outset gives a cartographic representation of the entire region of Tanjore district and Nagapattinam Taluk showing the many villages involved in the communist uprising of the labourers against the landlords during the given period. Following this the novel is structured into four parts titled- Background, Breeding Ground, Battleground, and Burial Ground. The Prologue is presented in the form of a petition dated 1st May 1968, Irinjyur, from Gopalakrishna Naidu addressed to the chief minister of Madras, to restore the lost confidence of the terror-stricken landowners who are living in constant fear of the agricultural coolies seeking revenge over the mysterious death of their witch doctor Sannasi and to quell the protests. The story comes full circle in the Epilogue where Gopalakrishna Naidu is killed to avenge the death of the dear ones of the villagers,

on the fourteenth day of December 1980, almost after 12 years after the gruesome bloodbath, when the Kilvenmani people utter the words Mudivu Kandachu, it has been completed. What comes to pass between the Prologue and the Epilogue is not just the story of events that lead up to the fateful night at Kilvenmani but the very process of telling the story, rather the story about the story.

Her readers, she reflects won't be patient enough to listen to over-familiar tales or shared experiences of history and of history being repeated, she decides to try and drown her story in non-specifications for the first thousand and eight narrations. She therefore breaks the stranglehold of narrations by tracing the beginning of beginnings of the historical, political, geographical, economical, socio-cultural and religious stories of Nagapattinam. Even as she carries on in this frivolous style, we are already in the thick of things with mention of agricultural slavery, starvation, class conflict, feudal system, communism, the lifestyle of bonded labourers, and major players of the unfolding drama – Maayi – the old woman, Muniyan- the village headman, Gopalakrishna Naidu- the landlord, Muthswamy- the communist and Sikkal Pakkirisamy the Slain. The reader too would have chnced upon any or all of these sources so the author has to be doubly sure that it is necessary for her to not only engage her audience with the story but sustain its interests to the end. She sets about her task as a rapporteur recounting her tale. Through the rewriting of history and with the apparent aim of writing fiction she makes her search for a story worthwhile by declaring that this “book belongs to the people of Kilvenmani”.

As the novel is set in rural India, she dabbles in everything that is agriculture. The author uses her pen as a metaphor for sickle to plough all those stories waiting to be harvested. She goes on in a refrain like fashion summing up the essence of the story. . the story chooses to linger on the time release capsules that might add up the events leading towards the fateful incident. In making the old woman tell her part of the story the author prepares us for the end which is not the usual and they lived happily ever after sort but that “nobody lived happily. No- bodyoutlived the ever-after” (37).

In ‘The Midseed’ she contemplates on a fitting title for her novelistic experiment. She cannot probably choose ‘1968’ the year of the gruesome murder since Orwell had already used such a title for his work while Christmad Day though gave away the date of the bloodbath, would rather mislead the readers. Tracing a quick abridged version of the legend of Kurathi Amman whose statue was built to prevent curse to the village that had murdered seven women and their children in a ghastly manner. Now Kurathi Amman is Meena’s ancestral goddess, as she makes note of it, but has to proceed with the task of telling her story of Kilvenmani after several digressions. She damns her postmodern situation that doesnot allow for a straight forward narration that makes writing fiction a complex affair. And since the story itself was so sprawling she never wanted to limit herself to just one person but include every other stakeholder in question.

Meena portrays the character of women protesters, who when they take to protest there’s no looking back, almost legation its rendering, revel in their strength of solidarity in fighting against the perpetrators of violence. In Breeding Griund, the cheris become the most vulnerable of habitats for attack, where paid rowdies go on a rampage, pillaging, burning roofs, and clothes, stealing goats and chickens, with the police mere puppets in the hands of landlords, making a habit of: “Pre-dawn heist, operation high- noon, or the late- night show: when the people are unprepared and can be swooped down upon and stashed into police trucks” (77), only to be released three months later. Thus, is represented the lifestyle of the cheris, whose only knowledge being hunger ultimately turn to communism which they believe will find them succor. The story is further developed in the mode of Party Pamphlet, addressing the murder of Sikkal Pakkirisamy, a leader of the proletarians killed on the day of the agricultural strike, and that causes much anxiety among the labourers .

The Green Revolution too had swindled the poor peoples of their life in the name of development. The protests take the color of Red with the author intensifying the tempo building towards the historic tragedy. A newspaper will do for a linear and self- contained story but this one cannot

be told in the same manner and therefore she adopts the authorial voice to say that the murder on 15th November is the flashpoint for the tragedy on 25th December. She captures the attention of the readers from then on with a series of rushed frames, of many stories intermingling, of how the misradsars bring in outside labour, their demand for higher wages denied and the daily wage of six measures of paddy overlooked. Kilvenmani continued striking while the readers are called upon to trust their instincts to hear the rest of the tale.

The Battleground deals with more stories that are collected in the form of interviews with Gopalakrishna Naidu, followed by inspector Rajavel's Tabulation of the Dead on the dreadful day, with the name gender, age, marital status and the degree of the burns making up for the statistics required for the forensic department and the enquiry of the whole. A mother throws her 1-year-old child out of the burning hut, but he is caught by the leering mobsters and thrown back into the flaming hut. It was their collective funeral pyre, the cries are to no avail as the smoke envelops them with the fire spreading in fondness and 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 spring to life and crack along the grain as if maintaining the beasts of a secret and long-forgotten dirge because life has become extinct and there is no time for tears because death holds no terror and their lives go up in smoke but all of them are too dead to notice this vital fact of existence (165). And so goes the story of Mischief by Fire that Meena has been waiting to tell in a long-drawn-out sentence that runs to four pages without any pause or punctuation to let us feel the heat when the fire is on. And then enters to the politics, police and cinema, in the Burial Ground that mercilessly deal with the dead.

In retelling such a history, Meena has not certainly followed the rules of grammar, structure, or even the method of traditional narrative as she herself points that she has left the rules of a novel. Fiction need not stop necessarily stop with being fiction but conjure up past events to root us in the present. In that, she has succeeded in sharing her

sympathies for Kilvenmani with us through evoking a tale that raises several questions about present day India with its caste/class fever still running high. Through experimentation in novel writing, the author has not only experienced history in the process but has made it a shared human experience as well.

Reference

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