

SLUM-DWELLERS STRUGGLING TO BREATHE: AN ASSESSMENT OF KAVERINAMBISAN'S *THE STORY THAT MUST NOT BE TOLD*

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KaveryNambisan's novel *The Story That Must Not be Told* (2010) is a socio-realistic novel which was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008 and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2012 and contains a story that must be told and read, as admitted by Nambisan herself in an interview. The work is completely devoted to the harsh realities and repercussions of modern Indian society where the presence of slums like Sitara is a normal thing. Or it can be said that the picture of Indian society is incomplete without imagining the "in-between world" (Nambisan 50) of slums as it has become an inseparable part of the modern society. *The Story That Must Not Be Told* explores the positive as well as the negative aspects of the Indian society in a vividly realistic manner. A major part of the novel deals with the life of slum dwellers relating it to the lives of the city dwellers presented as a contrast to the slum's life.

Nambisan's *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2010) is a heart-rending story set against the backdrop of the residents of Dharavi, the largest slum of Asia. It portrays the miserable and disillusioned lot of slum-dwellers who repeatedly bear the harsh and painful stings of utter poverty. To increase the hardships of these people, the indifferent behavior of their fellow human-beings make them realize again and again at every step that they are the 'stains' on the society. Similarly in the novel, the so called 'sophisticated', 'cultured' and 'civilized' human-beings of the 'Vaibhav Apartment' who are 'blessed' as they were born in 'upper-class' don't miss even an opportunity to exploit the so called 'savage', 'wild' and 'uncivilized' creatures (NOT HUMAN-BEINGS) of Sitara, the slum. The injured conscience of slum-dwellers forces them to commit insane crimes which relieves them to some extent from the anguish of being born in the family of 'outcastes'. But in their struggle they usually forget that committing such crimes would not change their status from 'VOICELESS SUFFERERS' to 'VOICED REBELS'.

KaveriNambisan's concern is to portray the lives, the deplorable conditions and the traumatic experiences of the 'marginalized', 'voiceless', 'suppressed', 'exploited' and 'desolate' human-beings who are categorized by the city-dwellers as 'outcastes', 'slum-dwellers' or the animalistic creatures belonging from the underbelly of the society. Today the outcastes have become an integral part of the society. As many decades ago when Mulk Raj Anand depicted the plight of 'untouchables' through his debut novel *Untouchable* in 1935 till 2010 with the publication of Nambisan's *The Story That Must Not Be Told*, it is proved that this underbelly has become the basis or the root of the society and the society will be considered incomplete if these people are not in the picture. Only one crucial change that took place from the times of *Untouchable* is that the term used for these people is changed. Now they are not 'untouchables' but 'slum-dwellers'. And earlier there was presence of unity in this marginalized section, that is, untouchables. But today it is not the case, as the slum is also divided into various sections, one

comprising the dwellers who professionally are in the “respectable jobs” (Nambisan41) like maid-servant, care-takers, carpenters, teachers or the ‘1st class profession’ to be regarded as ‘upper class slum-dwellers’; the second one consisting the potters, street vendors, butcher or the ‘2nd class profession’ to be regarded as ‘middle class slum-dwellers’ and the last one includes the people who are in the profession of cleaning of sewers labeled as ‘Achchut’, or ‘untouchable’ for having the fourth class job to be considered as ‘low-class slum-dwellers’.

The third category is the worst sufferer as it is doubly rejected. The slum-dwellers are already on the periphery but where does the third class stand? Through the rejection of the later class by the residents of slum, they are pouring water to the seeds of another emerging section of ‘NEW MARGINALIZED CLASS’, which can easily be traced in the future.

Any nation is not formed just out of the sole representative of one class or one society but is an admixture of different classes and societies. The notion about a nation that it is a united whole of various distinctive classes or societies and depends on their mutual functioning is created by/out of Marxist’s idea of class distinctions. So this notion, in a way, forms the part of a social reality that helps in the evolution and organization of its history. Benedict Anderson, a Postcolonial theorist, has argued in his book *Imagined Communities* that the nation is an imagined political community. A nation is an imagined entity for even the members of small nation are unable to know most of their fellow-beings however there resides in every mind an image of their communion. Moreover, it is a community that despite of the presence of “the actual inequality or exploitation that may exist in it, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (“Nation”). Instead of regarding the concept as false, it is to be considered as something that has been “simply imaged and created” (“Nation”) by the human beings because it is the citizens of a nation who deliberately are creating these man-made barriers that are dividing the society into various sections.

A nation is to be thought not just as a physical entity but as “a soul”, an essence or “a spiritual principle” (qtd. in Chitra S). A nation is that platform where the citizens may possess “the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (qtd. in Chitra S). BUT is this the ‘concept of nation’ that can be applied at the prevailing times – NO, it is not. As we live in a NEW NATION and breathe in a NEW ATMOSPHERE that is dominated by “I-principle” instead of “WE-principle”. The earlier image of the nation is violently shattered and fragmented into pieces that today no one has even “the desire to live together” and what to say of “the heritage that one has received in an undivided form” as now the nation seems to be based on the ‘divisions’ of race, caste, class deeply embedded in the society.

Nambisan in an attempt to paint the picture of nation tries to mingle different aspects of the society in her novel that is largely concentrated on the conditions of slum-dwellers and their curious yet failed yearnings/attempts to connect themselves with the mainstream/other strata of the society. It draws attention to “the transition between Vaibhav Housing Society’s middle-class residents and the literally down-to-earth inmates of the slum next door” (Varma). In *The Story That Must Not Be Told*, she

depicts a poignant tale of the two Indias - the “shining” and the “suffering” which though cruelly juxtaposed, share a symbiotic relation with each other. Set in Madras, the story alternates between the plush Vaibhav Apartments and the surrounding slum, ironically named Sitara. (Ananya Sarkar)

The novel also exhibits the one-sided positive outlook of Indian society/nation that incorporates the cooperativeness of Indians despite the cultural differences. There are a lot of examples in the novel that showcase this positive attitude of the Indians. In the beginning of the novel, Simon Jesukumar after missing his first train as well as all his belongings is sitting in a 2nd class apartment of an another train where there is “courtesy and kindness” (Nambisan 13) for “the white-haired oldman” (13). His fellow passenger, a fat lady sympathizes with the old man and entreats to offer to him “a portion of an orange or a biscuit. Lelona. . .” (13) showing that an emotional human attachment exists between the citizens of one nation. But the same “courtesy and kindness” is MISSING and ABSENT from their hearts when it comes to help the needy slum-dwellers who really deserve this kind of emotional human attachment to mitigate the inferiority complex of being born in the family of ‘outcastes’ that is deeply rooted in their consciousness. When a ‘slum-face’ looks at them with a slight hope of any kind of help, they usually step back with a feeling of disgust. Instead of providing them the basic amenities such as ‘roti, kapdaaurmakaan’, they start planning for the uprooting of these slum-dwellings to make way for their own lavish housing sectors, shopping malls and building estates as is portrayed through the novel. So, before “WE”, here comes the “I-factor”. In the novel too the slight hope of Simon Jesukumar to improve the deplorable conditions of Sitara, demolishes with the demolition of Sitara for the personal benefits of the bourgeoisie.

The feeling of cooperativeness to lessen the weight of the burden of being a resident of Sitara does exist among the poor and hapless people of Sitara. One such incident is when DaadiwalaGaffur, the seller of the best quality meat, offers a hand to help Swamy by employing the unemployed youth to carry the dead animals to his shop without even enquiring about him. Gaffur, despite being a butcher or a meat-seller, has feelings for the animals brought dead by him for the purpose of preparing meat as is evident from his dialogue when he feels sorry for the animals served as food for men, “life for life. An animal must die so man can live. . . . Sorry, sorry” (56). Here lies the scathing contrast between Gaffur, a representative of the dark abyss of our society and the ‘coin-givers’, representatives of the CLEAN strata of the society who feel content by dropping just a coin or two in the lap of beggars or residents of slums.

Unfortunately every coin does have two sides. Positive aspects are always attached with the negative ones. In the bygone times, this emotional bonding and the feeling of cooperativeness between humanity in general was selfless and free from the grasp of casteism, racism and communalism. In this modern age which is dominated by these “-isms”, the selfless service of cooperativeness is declining day by day. Likewise, in the novel, we find many instances where these “-isms” interfere in helping the poor and homeless slum-dwellers of Sitara. The ‘occupiers’ of Vaibhav Housing Society, except Simon and his group, want that the slum-dwellers do all their menial and odd jobs like building new apartments (as Trupti), cleansing their blocked sewer lines, doing their household chores, maintain their lawns so on and so forth. But on the other hand they want the same dwellings to be demolished out of their way which provided them plenty of laborers, maid-servants at low cost or rather it is the place where live the ‘inmates of destiny’ who let themselves loose for the exploitation by the hands of their so called GODS.

The ghastly, horrible and the repellant aspect of INCREDIBLE INDIA is the monster of SLUMS that is rapidly encroaching to engulf the Indian society and is creating a vacuum in society. Slums are both created as well as rejected by the city-dwellers. The section of the society that is ‘powerless’, ‘exploited’, enjoying their ‘voiceless status’ and that is termed as the ‘other’

by the residents of the cities, towns, urban areas or even the occupiers of the metropolitan cities is called slum. It is defined to be the ugly aspect of the society as:

A **slum** is a heavily populated urban informal settlement characterized by substandard housing and squalor. . . . The origin of the word slum is thought to be the Irish phrase '*S lom é*. . . meaning 'it is a bleak or destitute place'. . . slum is a slang word meaning room, which evolved to 'back slum' around 1845 meaning 'back alley, street of poor people'. ("Slum")

As per the reports of the UN-HABITAT, the word 'slum' first appeared in the 1820's, that defines it as:

. . . the word slum has been used to identify the poorest quality housing, and the most unsanitary conditions; a refuge for marginal activities including crime, 'vice' and drug abuse; a likely source for many epidemics that ravaged urban areas; a place apart from all that was decent and wholesome.

Similarly, Sitara is a kind of slum that arose as a "marsh in which fish were plentiful" (Usha K R). Being left unobserved by the city people in the beginning, this marsh-like slum transformed into "the dumping ground of industrial waste and municipal garbage, which gave it a fetid, mosquito-ridden firmness and which seemed the logical place for migrant workers to put up their gunny and palm-leaf huts" (Usha K R). Nayantara Mazumder has rightly given her observations about the slum, Sitara in the following words:

Sitara is a vibrant, pulsating slum. Its inhabitants wake up every morning to the worst living conditions, send their children to the local one-room school and then make their way to Vaibhav, to cook and clean for the people who live there. After a day of witnessing the luxury available to the rich, and all the things that they take for granted, the slum-dwellers return to Sitara and the same conditions to which they wake up every morning. The inhabitants of Vaibhav remain largely passive as Sitara grapples with the absence of water, electricity and hygiene. They are able to lead their lives of comfort because of extensive domestic help and manual labour, most of which comes from Sitara. And yet, concerns of "safety and hygiene" make them squeamish about the existence of a slum at such close quarters, and they slowly galvanize themselves into action to destroy it. Simon Jesukumar is perhaps the only one who, after a cursory visit to Sitara, wants to help the people there in some way. . . . — that something awakens in Sitara. Sitara, after that, is never the same for Simon and his daughter — for the better, perhaps.

Through her story, Nambisan unveils the fixed destiny of slum children. Velu, one of the 'victims' of this 'man-made disaster' worked for the residents of the Vaibhav Apartment. His job is to visit the market regularly to fetch the household items demanded by them. The fate of these children is either to serve their oppressors i.e. the bread-giver or to opt for begging. Like Velu, his friend Thatkan is also employed as a caretaker of the garden of the Vaibhav Apartment. While "he watered the lawns in C Block . . . weeded the flowerbeds, tended the palm trees and cleaned the fountain" (Nambisan42), on the other hand, "Vaibhav residents strolled on the asphalt drive around the garden, they exercised, and their children played" (42). Besides this,

they have the pleasure to opt for another profession of begging. Swamy, a future teacher and meat-seller too spent his childhood in utter poverty. His family's inability to earn sufficient meal a day forced him to beg when he was just 18-months old. His family begged easily "slapping their cavernous stomachs" (55). It is true that a person suffering the unflinching slap of hunger can never think beyond food, like the poignant state of Swamy, a victim who committed the crime of being born in slums, is excellently and picturesquely expressed as "he roamed the streets, a stomach on two legs, thinking food, dreaming food, stealing, loving and hating food, which occupied every waking moment, and which was never enough" (55).

Simone de Beauvoir uses the term "other" and "secondary" for the tribe of woman and considers man to be the primary object having the right of ruling women because he is the MASTER and GOD of women. Same is the case here in Nambisan's *The Story That Must Not Be Told* that is a detailed analysis of the binary relationships of:

A) City-dwellers → living in clean and tidy places → city = Vaibhav Apartment → gleaming with their spark → primary → center → master → oppressor/exploiter.

V/S

B) Slum-dwellers → living in dirt → slum = Sitara → stains on the society → secondary → periphery → slave → oppressed/exploited.

The novel enfolds different layers of the social set-up pinpointing at the same time the mental and physical trauma that suffocates the very existence of the residents of Sitara, the slum. It also creates a striking contrast between the luxurious life lead by the children of 'Vaibhav Apartment' and the children of 'Sitara' who are 'STRUGGLING to LIVE' by eating the stale and left-over food that deserves a dustbin.

The wretched and terrible condition of a mother residing in a slum is excellently portrayed through the character of Valli, the wife of Chellam, who is emotionally attached with her family. She manages all her responsibilities tactfully. Valli thinks of her children's and husband's needs instead of giving importance to her own. She has the courage to bear the stings of hunger by eating "a mere handful of rice" (67), some left-over jaggery and crumbs of bread but can't leave her family to bear the same. Usually, she collects the left-over or stale food which was meant to be thrown away by Gayatriamma and give it to her children to eat and quench their hunger.

Therefore, the novel reveals the never ending class struggle between two economic groups, the first being the bourgeoisie/the ruling class that "owned the means of production" (Nayar 122) and the second being the proletariat/the working class that "owned nothing except their laboring bodies" (122). In other words, it is the struggle between "a class of people that controls the factory and the industry" and "a class of people that works in the factory" (122). The bourgeoisie i.e. the residents of Vaibhav Housing Society have earned their current status as the 'providers of services' and the 'master' who can go to any extent to exploit their slaves (slum-dwellers) have established the notion that slum-dwellers can't even breathe without their support. The need of the hour is that these people realize that it is not the city-dwellers who are responsible for their existence but it is they, the residents of slums or the so called VOICELESS people who are needed by 'the capturers of the colonized souls' living in the "in-between world" of Sitara. Last but not the least, if we the so called CITIZENS OF INDIA are unable to provide just a roof over their heads then we don't have the right to snatch even the rags from these creatures.

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