

The Pariah Women in Kanthapura: A Subaltern Representation

Dr. Trisha Wangno

Assistant Professor, Neelam Taram Govt. College Yachuli, Arunachal Pradesh

ABSTRACT

In Gramsci's subaltern studies the subaltern consists of the proletariat classes mainly the middle classes; the working class and the lower class. His work does not mention women as a different class among the subalterns. Hence Gayatri Spivak's article "Can the subaltern speak?" demands a space for women in subaltern studies. However in the novel Kanthapura as in other Indian writings caste plays a dominant influence in the psyche of the Indian society. Women in general form a different section in the subaltern studies but lower class women called the sudra or pariah women are attributed the lowest in the strata of class or caste divide. This paper is an attempt to try and represent the roles and contributions of the pariah women and find a space for them to voice their identity in the social structure.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Kanthapura, Pariah Women, Caste.

Raja Rao's Kanthapura is a poignant reminder of all the hardships and sacrifices undergone by our fellow countrymen at the hands of the colonizers. While at the same we are also made to realise that the caste and class differences among us exists to a great extent. In Kanthapura, there are several layers within the classes itself and in its periphery too. The ones who are outside of the caste systems were the Mohmedans or Muslims and the British masters. Within the caste system in Kanthapura, the most visible ones are the Brahmin men like Bhatta, Moorthy, Rangappa.... and others, the second class are that of the Brahmin women mostly the elderly widows with land ownership, then there are the money lenders; the business class men like Range Gowda and then there are the lower class men the pariahs who work in the rice-fields, the coconut gardens or the coffee estates of the British masters. Finally there are the pariah women who are the lowest of the low. In this study focus is being made to highlight the voice and the identity of this subaltern class of the pariah women and study them in relation to the other classes.

The Brahmin class consisting of highly educated and rich landowners taking pride in the fact that they were descendents of generations of high caste Brahmins were held in great regards by all the classes. These men belonged to two different groups; one who had dealings with the British government and their offices, courts etc while the other one was the follower of the Gandhian Principle of protest aimed to secure freedom from the oppressors. There were barely any one-on-one dealings among these men and the subaltern women, whatever they had was through the subaltern men. Their relation and conversation mostly was limited to working in the fields, coconut gardens or in the toddy trees. Initially even the highly worshipped and respected Moorthy, the epitome of Gandhian ideals believing in equality of castes and classes had qualms about associating with the pariahs.

...and Moorthy, who had never entered a pariah house—he had always spoken to the pariahs from the gutter-slab—Moorthy thinks this is something new, and with one foot to the back and one foot to the fore, he stands trembling and undecided, and then suddenly hurries up the steps and crosses the threshold and squats on the earthen floor. But Rachanna's wife quickly sweeps a corner, and spreads for him a wattle mat, but Moorthy, confused, blurts out, No, no, no, no/ and he looks this side and that and thinks surely there is a carcass in the back yard, and it's surely being skinned, and he smells the stench of hide and the stench of pickled pigs, and the roof seems to shake, and all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him, and his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it, he feels he would like to say, Hari-Om, Hari-Om. (104)

Gradually though he undergoes change and comes to a realization that the principles he preaches and the fight he has set out to fight without the use of violence can only be successful if he himself follows what he preaches. Under his leadership it is mostly women who join in large numbers from both the Brahmin caste and the pariah caste and suffer as much as their male counterparts, sometimes even more. However among these women, the Brahmin women mostly widows are the ones who enjoy a higher status in the society along with being landowners. The widows did not have to work for wages and they could spend their free time in meeting each other in gatherings which mostly happened at the temples and listened to scriptural readings called kathas or hear stories about the Mahatma mixed with religious references. The younger widows could afford not to pay attention or even take part in such gatherings although they were educated and could read and write well enough. Their interaction with the pariah women are mostly about doing chores, working in their fields as waged workers. Apart from that there are hardly any close relations between these women. One such instances are when the narrator Achakka, herself a widow describes her village, it is there we find lines, streets and boundaries of segregation among the classes in the very same village i.e. Kanthapura:

Our village had a Pariah quarter too, a Potters' quarter, a Weavers' quarter, and a Sudra quarter. How many huts had we there? I do not know. There may have been ninety or a hundred—though a hundred may be the right number. Of course you wouldn't expect me to go to the Pariah quarter, but I have seen from the street-corner Beadle Timmayya's hut. (13)

Even though the brahmin women kept track of the sudra women's family, their children and their situation, it is not explicitly mentioned in the novel whether this situation is also vice versa. The high class women also had higher status than the sudra men but not the upper class men. Unlike higher class women, the sudra women did not possess land or their own identity in the society except as someone's wife or someone's mother. She was inferior to the sudra men, hence she was the lowest even among the subalterns. The husbands controlled every decision making; whether to work or not, whether to use the modern medicine for fever or not and whether to support the freedom movement or not.

Then Moorthy feels so desperate that he says to Rachanna's wife, And you, Rachanna's wife?

* and Rachanna's wife says, ' If my husband says " Spin ", I shall spin, learned one. Moorthy said that would be fine and he went out to see Rachanna, who was sitting by the veranda, sharpening his sickle in the moonlight, and with him were Siddanna and Madanna and Lingayya, and when they heard about the Congress Committee, they all

said, ‘ As you please, learned master ’.—‘ And your women? ’ asked Moorthy.—‘

They will do as we do,’ said Rachanna. (106)

The sudra men were segregated, spit at, not allowed to visit temples and other places where higher classes visited but when it came to their households, they still were superior than their wives. These women could not have imagined that even they could have their own thoughts, opinions or their own identity. They are underpaid but they have to work just as hard as their man folks and sometimes even involve their children. Therefore it is only understandable that they ask how much they will be paid if they joined the freedom movement or spin khadi clothes as asked by the Mahatma’s proxy Moorthy.

At this Rachanna’s wife says, And what will it give us, learned one? ’ and Moorthy says something about the foreign Government and the heavy taxations and the poverty of the peasants, and they all say, ‘Of course, of course,’ (105)

Despite the minimal references there are instances which show the brave acts and voices of these pariah women and the stand that they take, the sacrifices they make even when it is not required or expected of them.

But when Bade Khan sees us, he will fall on us.’ And Vasudev says, ‘In the Estate he spits and beats everyone. Already he has moved down to the hut by the main gate, and he and his dog and his woman keep guard over’ everyone that crosses the stile. But, sister, the fever of the country has got him, too, and he moans heavily from his bed. And his woman is not so bad, you know. When she sees me, she winks and lays her head upon her hand to say “He is asleep,” and I slip out like a rat. After all, she is one of us. ..(155)

Pariah Rachanna and his wife Rachi are in the front among the sudras in the freedom struggle. They are also the ones who suffer the most. The other sudra women also face similar atrocities by the policemen when they stand hand-in-hand with the men and women fighting for freedom against the oppressors and are often being beaten mercilessly along with them. The educated upper class women and the pariah women though meek are fierce and bold when it comes to protecting their revered and loved ones.

And the maistri comes to pull them off and whips them, and the women fall on the maistri and tear his hair, while Moorthy cries out, ‘No beatings, sisters. No beatings, in the name of the Mahatma.* But the women are fierce and they will tear the beard from Bade Khan’s face. (88)

The pariah women helpless but they retort to the beatings and fierce opposition from police by raising their voices loud and demanding that they release their men who have been imprisoned for their non violent acts of defiance.

...as Moorthy is being dragged down the steps Rachanna’s wife and Madanna’s wife and Sampanna’s wife and Papamma and Sankamma and Veeramma come forward and cry out, Oh, give us back our men and our master, our men and our master, (124)

It is also the women who motivate their men when they are hopeless and frustrated on being unable to

find work due to due to social injustice and hardships faced by the lowers caste people in their everyday life.

...and Pariah Timmayya says, Oh, why shall I wake? My yoke is without bulls, and my field without grain,' but his wife, strong woman that she is, she says, Go, man, the gods are not so unkind,' and Timmayya grumbles and groans, and with neither flower nor caste-mark he goes into the street... (158)

The representation of the pariah/sudra women in Kanthapura is scanty and the novel just shows the picture of events and their precedents from one side of the class, as narrated from the Brahmin woman's perspective. The subaltern perspective is missing. Even though sorrows, loss, hardships and atrocities at the hands of foreigners unite the women of different classes together and their acceptance of one another can be seen to some extent but towards the end the class divide still remains. Female representations are very few in most literature but fewer still are the voices heard of the lower class women.

References

1. Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Trans. & Eds.). International Publishers.
2. Gramsci, A. (2021). Subaltern Social Groups: A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25 (J.A. Buttigieg & M.E. Green, Eds. & Trans.). Columbia University Press.
3. Rao, R. (2005). Kanthapura. Oxford University Press.
4. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.