

A SENSITIVE SOUL WRITING OUT ITS FRAGMENTED EXISTENCE: A STUDY OF KAVERI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *TUKDA-TUKDA JEEVAN*

(Submitted: January 12, 2019; Accepted: February 27, 2019)

Volume 1 Issue 3, pp. 66-68 February 2019

Dr Avinash Kumar

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, DAV Post Graduate College, Siwan, a constituent unit of Jai Prakash University, Chapra, Bihar

All the theories that vouch for an impersonal method of artistic expression are presented with an intriguing game of binaries by the literary genre technically labelled as 'autobiography'. The literary critics are forced to revisit the centuries old question whether an artist is entitled to narrate his own story from a subjective point of view. The subjective-objective narrative technique binary gets complicated in an autobiography when one seeks answers to the question of 'truthfulness' or the social realism in a text. If an author is supposed to give value to the social reality in his/her artistic expressions, the experiencing self of the writer cries for space in creative art. When a writer is writing his/her own story, the experiencing self cannot be denied space in the literary expression. This is the highlight of autobiography writing across continents, especially in the tech-savvy and information hungry generation of the millennials.

A quintessence of discursive objectivity is presented in the autobiography of Kaveri, the widely acclaimed Dalit writer hailing from the erstwhile undivided Bihar. The autobiography *Tukda-Tukda Jeevan* (2017) is a powerful rendition of the struggles of a Dalit writer who aspired to create a space for herself by attaining financial independence ever since her first encounter with the social stigma of being an untouchable early in her childhood. The narrative hinges on the fact that the life of a Dalit girl with dreams of independence in her eyes has multiple ruptures. Each experience of Marginalisation leaves a rupture in her feminine self that defines her identity. Therefore, the title of the novel also reiterates those scars of fragmentation that played a crucial role in shaping the authorial world view. The double jeopardy of being a Dalit and being a girl is beautifully brought out in the story of Kaveri, which immediately places her work into the rubric of postmodern post-feminist discourse.

In the last three decades, gender studies have focused primarily on how societies have determined and managed sex categories, the cultural meanings attached to the roles assigned to those categories and how individuals have understood/reacted to the identities thrust upon them across time and space. Rather than building a grand narrative of feminist discourse, the focus has been to draw up small/local narratives of gendered roles as socio-cultural constructs that challenge and subvert the overarching established narratives. In other words, gender studies have been naturally intertwined with culture studies, which is crucial to the postmodernist approach to literature. The essential aspect of postmodernism is to incorporate within a broad rubric of cultural studies all schools of thought that subvert the powerful coercive ideological apparatus.

Postmodern theory evolved as an atheistic and anti-realistic system of belief in opposition to the existing concept of Modernism. Postmodernism expands the area covered by modernism by its insistence upon the relevance of fragmentalism and a compulsory skepticism. According to Peter Barry, postmodernism emphasises that 'reality' is beyond the spheres of human understanding and those who claim to have access to the reality are actually displaying their politics of power. He further explains, "The prominence of fragmentation has been featured by the modernist to register a deep nostalgia for earlier age when faith was full and authority intact" (83). Peter Barry goes on to argue that fragmentation for the postmodernists "is an exhilarating,

liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it” (84).

The postmodern approach also points out that construction of the binary terms of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ is not the ultimate truth or reality but a politics of power. As the meaning of a sentence or a word should be determined by the reader and not by the author, the reality of cultural and social binaries should also be determined by the individuals through the construction of new identities. With the politics of ‘identity’, the postmodernists emphasize on empowering the minorities, women, and homosexuals.

In the 21st century, in spite of gender equality gaining primacy across the globe, body has become more important. There are men who still treat women as their property because of physical weakness of women. The domestic violence, rape cases inside home, outside home or in different offices with working women indicate the mindset of men who only see women through their body. Therefore, the question is raised against the existence of the categories like sex and gender, which create huge gap between men and women. The postmodern take on gender does not aim to achieve gender equality. It rather interrogates the existence and the truth of gender on the physical plane.

The gender studies emerged around 1980s and the first area of discussion was how to make a clear division between gender and sex. Michel Foucault in his work *The History of Sexuality* (1979) has empathically challenged the understanding of ‘sex’ as a biological fact, arguing that sex cannot be simply understood as a biological category; rather it should also be studied as a social practice. Foucault has analysed sexuality with different perspectives and establishes it as a cultural category like gender.

In the backdrop of this theoretical perspective, the opening lines of Kaveri’s autobiography are remarkable (translation mine):

How to begin and where to end the narration of pain inflicted by a barb piercing my soul? The public demands me to write my autobiography. What will happen if a heart that has suffered for long is poked again? A big explosion. I have discovered while reflecting upon my childhood that I was not able to bear injustice at all. The barb of untouchability stung me during childhood, which forced me to drop out from the school. My childhood could not bear that the teacher would drink water touched by upper caste kids and slap me for touching the bucket. (07)

This initial shock leading to the first fragmentation in the life of the author opens up the sluice gates of her further struggles. Born in a Paswan family that was hardly capable of feeding the belly of five children, Kaveri’s rebellious response was met with sensible treatment from her grandmother and father. She was taken away to another place located in Sizwa Kolvari. Her education resumed and the conservative social tentacles continued to grow around her concurrently. Unlike her elder sister, she fought with her grandparents to continue her education in a co-educational school and the taboo of keeping distance from the boys was shattered by her. The willpower to stand up to the conservative norms hidden in the garb of ethics and morals in an educationally challenged social milieu opened up the channel of knowledge for a young sensitive mind.

At the age of fifteen, Kaveri was married off to a person from a different *gotra* and the next fragmentation of her young adolescent self happened. The autobiography has thrown up some astute questions within the Dalit discourse in rural India. Whereas the marginalisation of Dalits is generally assigned to a Brahminical or upper-caste dominated social structure across centuries, the narrative of Kaveri revolves around her own community. The biggest challenge before Kaveri is presented by the female members of her own paternal family as well as her in-law’s family. The wife of Kaveri’s elder brother was extremely rude towards her. Similar treatment was meted out by her mother in-law after marriage. This continues in the next generation as well. Her daughter-in-law hates her in equal measure. The women of her own family are the biggest perpetrators of

Marginalisation upon Kaveri. This is in stark contrast to the general belief that Dalit women face discrimination only from the upper caste men and women. When she goes to stay in a girl's hostel for her studies, the next caste-based marginalisation is witnessed. However, this is a limited discrimination as the behavior of girls other than three-four culprits is quite good towards her. She exclaims that a few rotten fishes pollute the whole pond, but those fishes do not represent all the fishes living out there.

The patriarchal system considered the woman's body as an object of pleasure. This jeopardy was painful for a girl who wanted to carve a niche for herself in the society. Here also the biggest threat comes from within the family. She is repeatedly raped by her own husband who has little respect for her except for fulfilling his carnal desires. The younger brother of her husband and a close friend of her husband also attempt to outrage her modesty on numerous occasions, but her husband does not find anything wrong in their sexual advances. The ethical symbol of chastity represented by virginity of wife at the time of marriage is the prime concern of her husband. After her marriage, the woman is just an object of pleasure which can be used by him and his relatives without any social taboo. The woman is supposed to keep silent and bear the exploitation as a part of her existence.

Kaveri revolts against this atrocity and chooses the path of education and financial independence as her liberating agency. She exposes the imbecile masculinity of the Dalit males who seem to be no different from the upper caste Hindus when it comes to oppress the so-called weaker section of their own household. Kaveri grew in stature as a writer after joining the DVC +2 school in Maithon and the autobiography ends on a positive note as she sees a silverlining in the form of her grandchildren. She lives away from her husband and tries to support her son who faltered in his career.

One character who holds the narrative through her absence is the daughter of Kaveri, who died prematurely due to the family condition. Her memory reverberates throughout the text in the same way as Seth feels for her dead daughter in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. There is a powerful similarity between the two mothers as they struggle to emerge out of the trauma of that loss. The autobiography is also dedicated to her daughter Jyotsana, who died young in deep agony. The modesty of the daughter was outraged at the age of five by a neighbor, with whom Kaveri fought frantically without any support from her husband. As a matter of fact, whenever the protagonist is violated, the husband remains an effeminate mute spectator.

Therefore, in conclusion, the autobiography of Kaveri, *Tukda-Tukda Jeevan* is a brilliant narration of double jeopardy faced by the women from the most vulnerable social section of India. Within the overarching construct of social Marginalisation lie several fragmented narratives that escape the critical discourse. These 'local' and 'personal' narratives can be seen as concrete bricks that are joined together to form a grand narrative in the postmodern discourse. The thin strands of family relations are ruptured in these narratives and a composite picture can be drawn only by looking at those ruptures from a clean lens. Kaveri's autobiography gives an insight into the process of her creative oeuvre and allows the reader the liberty to challenge the constraints of legitimizing ideological apparatus functioning with the power structures of Indian society.

Works Cited

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester University Press, 2002.
Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vintage, 1979.
Kaveri. *Tukda-Tukda Jeevan*. Isha Gyandeept, 2017.