

A DISCOURSE ON MUTATION OF THE RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE MARGINALISED IN NEIL BISSOONDATH'S 'THE UNYIELDING CLAMOUR OF THE NIGHT'

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ABSTRACT

Oppression is rightly defined as an unfair and cruel treatment by a powerful person or group or government towards the powerless individual or group or minority who always becomes the victims of tyranny of the 'majority' in the shape of marginalisation which is worse than other forms of oppression like exploitation, violence, cultural imperialism, social injustice etc. It is a kind of attack on the fundamental rights of the human beings to live the life in free and fair ambience with dignity and pride. Besides, the constant exercise of oppression widens the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' which forces the minority to give up or repress their dreams for 'bright future' in absence of the education, employment, equality, sense of security, protection against exploitation and freedom to shape the life. Finally it results into the feeling of hatred and disgust for the superiors or authorities who indirectly take away the freedom of individual(s) to shape their own lives according to their wish. The prevailing problem of marginalisation raises questions about our efforts to mitigate the socio-political barrier to elevate the 'minorities' or 'oppressed' to the main stream of the society. The so-called efforts and their sincerity are aptly depicted in contemporary Canadian author-Neil Bissoondath's novel titled *The Unyielding Clamour of the Night* (2005) along with other types of oppression- social, political, cultural, institutional, individual behavioural etc. in the present context of 'diaspora' in which the 'migrants' have to adjust with the situation rather than being idealistic, for getting the success.

KEYWORDS: Discrimination, Dream, Freedom, Marginalisation, Minority, Oppression, Rights

Research Methods Used: Descriptive, Analytical and Critical

INTRODUCTION

The Unyielding Clamour of the Night (2005), Neil Bissoondath's fifth novel, is devoted to the protagonist- Arun's determination to perform his 'duty' in the 'South', another end of the country, to teach the children of the minority or 'two-percenter' of the country who is known for messing up their brain by smoking 'ganja'. Actually Arun wants to practise his ideals at ground level and is also curious to know its consequences upto the end of the novel. Arun's journey and his stay over there, gives an image of oppression of his as well as other characters dreams in the present socio-political ambience.

Arun Bannerji (21), a young man, belongs to a well-to-do family who runs the printing business in the capital- North of the country which probably resembles to Sri Lanka from its description. Arun refuses his parents' offer of a lucrative job of a manager in their firm with high wages as he is driven by his instincts – to perform his 'duties' by teaching the 'rikshas' – two-percenters of the country. No doubt his efforts have fewer rewards; however he is dedicated to

go to the South, a neglected portion of the country, to educate the children of the minority people who really need edification for their bright future as well as elating themselves to the main-stream of the society. Arun's decision is considered as an act of sanity but he wants to prove that he can also perform some serious works like teaching against the unfavourable circumstances, to his self as well as his parents who consider Arun as a 'living skeleton', can do nothing serious in life except being a model for medical students, though his success might be only 'two-percent'.

NEGLECTED EDUCATION

Before departing for the town-Omeara in the South, Arun goes to the ministry office for getting the 'key' of the school where the officer informs him that as far as their knowledge 'the school was still standing' (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.4) means the school or town is 'a neglected place' for the majority. The officer also condemns his assistant- a southerner as 'rikshas' for his laziness and compares him with a 'stone' which even cannot be used as a paperweight! It's a kind of degradation of human beings to a 'stone'- senseless and motionless. Moreover, he bluntly expresses his disgust for the minorities whom he has to accept because of the government policies otherwise he wouldn't hire such people for his office. Even the army is engaged in practising the brutality towards the minority rather than providing security to them. And to cover up the mal-intensions of the government the army does some social work not for the benefit of the oppressed people but to popularise 'the politics of propaganda' hence Seth, an army man remarks that they rebuilt the school to win the trust of people:

... a kind of hut, four poles with a thatched roof. There were no walls, so when the heavy rains came it got drenched. There weren't even any desks. The children sat on the earth floor...It's a simple building, not much to look at, but it's sturdy. Just a single room, I'm afraid, but we had desks and a blackboard trucked in. (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.18)

It's a kind of attack on children's right to education. After Seth's description, Arun is eager to see the school at earliest but Seth instructs him to know more about the place where he is going to, as there is no cinema, no music for entertainment like the capital and only occasional cricket or football match takes place. Even the townspeople are uneasy about getting too close to anyone especially the army. In response to Arun's curiosity about the place, Seth replies that it is a place of uncertainty: "It's a place that's full of shadows, a place where questions have no answers. It's a place where two plus two equals five." (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.19). It gives an impression that people are scared of the army/authorities who generally work for protection and safety.

DIGNITY AT A RISK

In Omeara, Arun meets Mr. Jaisaram, a butcher who doubts about Arun's willing to stay for long time and fix the things in Omeara especially children's education because the government always sends the 'rejected' in the town and after recent bomb attacks on the school and teachers by the Boys, no one wants the schoolteacher's job. He is very much surprised by Arun's prosthesis in left thigh which enables him to walk like a normal human being. Along with that Jaisaram is cautious to establish rapport with Arun as he believes that Arun is a government employee and has army friends means on the first day Arun is suspected rather than welcomed. Though Mr. Jaisaram is an illiterate, he wishes that no child would be without education, so he instructs his daughter – Anjani to show Arun a path to the school. Anjani informs Arun that for next few days, children wouldn't be available at school as they are 'busy'! Anjani also observes that Arun is like a 'naïve' person who can be misguided by anyone though he comes from the capital. She was

also in the capital for two years, as a student at school- Holy Faith Convent from where she was kicked out for '*behavior inconsistent with the moral standards of Holy Faith Convent*' (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.200). Initially, she tells Arun that she was expelled for keeping a copy of playgirl in her drawer (which was brought by her roommate), but later on the real story behind her expulsion is revealed. It is a kind of confession by her as she believes that sin is in the eyes of the beholder. Actually the magazine -'Playgirl' is found in her roommate's drawer but her parents are generous benefactors to the school and the pillars of the community so that the school authorities – the nuns – the Catholics, make Anjani a 'scapegoat' only because she is a 'two-percenter'. She experiences marginalisation and discrimination at the age where it is difficult to forget or forgive the people who lodge false charges on her. She doesn't complain like other damned two-percenter but also she is not ready to accept the punishment given to her as 'mercy'!

She (Anjani's roommate) herself wanted to prove how cool she was by rooming with me (Anjani, a minority girl)... The nuns used the magazine to send me packing and hushed everything else up. They said they were doing me a favour, saving my reputation. They never mentioned the school's reputation, or my roommate's, or her family's. They said they had to protect the school's two-percent program, because they were just as cool as my roommate was, you know? Other parents would've used me as an excuse to throw out all the other southerners, to save their little princesses from our perversity. All in all, a typical northern response. (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.202)

LACK OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

It seems Anjani hates the capital and its people though she has talent like Prakash Kumarsingh, president and sole proprietor of Kumarsingh Enterprises International Ink in Omeara who is a man of dreams and having a great business mind as he believes that a mind without dreams is a dead brain. Kumarsingh is a man of nerves and gives an impression of a restless thinker. His brother died due to poverty and poor medical facilities available in the town. Ironically some army officers who asked for bribe to take Kumar's brother to the nearest town for treatment during the riots, the same soldiers are now his best customers. Kumar provides all kinds of services to the army including women. Kumar informs Prahib- a salutation for Arun that the capital was a good place for everyone except two-percenter like him who has lots of dreams to remove poverty and be in the mainstream of the society. Kumarsingh's dreams and his efforts to convert them into reality are like of 'a go- getter' for Arun but Kumarsingh only wants to supply the needs of southerners, no doubt which are many and reward is less. Though Kumarsingh has talent and skills and business instincts, people in the capital humiliate him with mean jobs like an office boy or a cleaner or a night watchman which seems unrealistic to his dreams. He also feels marginalisation in the capital.

They were fine jobs, Prahib (Arun), for some people. But that was the problem. You see. These good people looked at us and saw only two-percenter. And they had their own ideas about us, ideas that had nothing to do with being a go-getter. They spoke of us as being the 'real' people, Prahib, people who spend their day working in the sun. Somehow this back-breaking work made us real to them. They saw us the way some people in rich countries see organic vegetables. (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.55)

Besides, Kumarsingh has faced migration problems like other people of the town who visit the capital. Even after the destruction of his 'night club' by the Boys or insurgents, there are only 'dreams' which help to keep him going on.

Arun feels strangeness in Omeara as if the southern world encompasses elements that resisted the brain to be optimistic. The same kind of strangeness is experienced by Mr. Jaisaram when he once visited the capital with his wife as it seemed a place not for him – too many streets, too many cars, and too many people, full of noise. Mr. Jaisaram has also experience marginalisation when he says:” I believe I am a two- percenter in your (Arun’s) country.” (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.100). Mr. Jaisaram’s craftsmanship as a ‘shakir’ – a self-taught folk artisan who makes sculptures of gods ironically becomes a butcher!

POLITICS OF PROPAGANDA

Arun is frustrated with the crippled students, whom Anjani considers ‘too much damage’ (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.79) which is responsible for absence of the teacher for long time. Arun understands that only crippled students are sent because they are not capable for any physical labour and unable to perform duties like tending animals, digging the soil, weeding, watering the plants beside their parents. Arun is discouraged with slow business of teaching. He doubts and feels disappointed for the future of the children of the minority who are affected by the terrorism as well as brutality of the army. Seth instructs Arun not to be sarcastic about army’s efforts and never bother about children’s future and teach them only to respect the signs put by the army to protect themselves from the bomb/mines planted by the Boys. The General of the army also orders Arun to make the children a good citizen and teach them how good this country has been to them through history: “They don’t need to read to learn civics, The art of being a good citizen. No littering, no loitering, no laziness. No cheating, no stealing, No blowing up people...How good this country has been to them.”(The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.160) But for Arun it is difficult to teach ‘propaganda’ which is beyond historical facts. The General explains Arun the importance of facts in history which totally contradicts Mahadeo, Arun’s history teacher and motivation who used to say that history must be used to shape today and change tomorrow as it is a weapon-a dangerous, unstable elements which should be handle with care, so it must have a point so history means whatever one makes of yesterday, whatever is most useful. Seth warns Arun not to allow the bad thoughts to enter in his mind otherwise it would be difficult for him to sustain himself very long on that place where anything can happen at any time. The denial of the army for searching Anjani after her abduction propels hatred for the army in Arun’s mind. Moreover, Arun considers himself as an upholder of ideals like Marlow. Arun believes that ideals imposed by the circumstance are not ideas at all but merely ideology; the one timeless, the other false and changeable. (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.130). But the scene at cremation ground reflects army’s ideology not the ideals where they treat their soldiers’ dead bodies as martyrs whereas the parts of the bodies of the Boys- terrorist are thrown, into gutter like waste and they also show no respect for the flesh of ‘humans’!

UNCERTAINTY OF FUTURE AMID DISCRIMINATION

Anjani’s life is complicated because she is dissatisfied in Omeara where no beginning, no end only endless middle means her dreams are oppressed. She is living in a hypocrite country that pretends, where they (minority) hardly exist. The people of Omeara only have past and no future because their present is like a cat’s tail on fire. Arun reminds his favourite teacher – Mahadeo’s words: Today is in your hands. Tomorrow is in your heart (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.240) however he can’t imagine any future for the people like Anjani, Kumarsingh whose unstoppable dreams to shape their lives outside the small town are trapped. Even Kumarsingh can’t go anywhere though he has lost lots of things because he knows very well that there is no red carpet for him outside the Omeara as he is welcomed as ‘outsider’ or ‘foreigner’ in the capital so finally he has to range his dreams to the small town only.

Arun has no choice except to leave Omeara, a place where no birds or fish can freely fly or swim respectively or even sunlight can ever penetrate. Omeara begins to suffocate where even Kumarsingh cannot dream anymore. Arun's insistence to teach upto last moment adds more frustration as no children come and his knowledge of brutality leads him to darkness than light. Before leaving the town, he goes to the Jaisarams and for the clarification of his suspicion and doubts and in the response, he gets bunch of secrets from Mrs. Jaisaram who believes that now Arun is not only a school teacher from the north but also a man of dignity who has loved Anjani, seen southerner's lives, spent valuable time in a place where the people (southerners) fear truth like fish fear the net. Because half a truth or a piece of truth is no truth at all (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.370).

She confesses that her son- Nagarat, a talented young man who wanted to be an electrical technician with his mastery for fixing thing, was not a victim of illegal immigration, but died due to explosion while transporting a bomb which was so powerful that it left little of him. Besides she tells that he was just the courier who would deliver the bombs to the people chosen for either to place or wear them, and she is the real bomb-maker, not Anjani, though she was in the capital. For Arun it is a kind of realization of warning – nothing in Omeara was what it appeared to be (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.318). Mrs. Jaisaram shuts her mouth willing as a self-proclaimed punishment for not being careful while making the bomb which results into the death of his son. She reveals that they only make the bombs, without knowing the targets or the reasons.

The pain behind becoming a 'fish' – the supporter of insurgent is oppression, torture and sense of being marginalised when she says: 'I did not grow up a two-percenter. I was made one.' (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.318). The feeling of revenge against the torture of army/government is such strong that Mrs. Jaisaram hasn't stopped making bombs even after losing her son and daughter which leads them to permanent grief of not becoming the grand-parents. Mrs. Jaisaram tells Arun that their (southerner's) lives are like of 'slaves' who have no freedom to shape even their own lives!

...Your people are telling me what I am. Do you know what it is like when others shape your life, when you cannot shape your own? We are not rich people here, we depend on the sun and the rain and the soil, and that is difficult enough. But when your hear and your mind and your soul are no longer yours, then you are truly lost, you are a slave to others. It (bomb-making or protest) will stop when your people are ready for it to stop. (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.319).

CONCLUSIONS

Arun's dream of Omeara without any trouble is a kind of fantasy because the town would hardly be a happy place -too much labour, too little reward. Arun as a teacher feels hopeless and helpless to solve the existing social problem of marginalisation and discrimination, though the education is one of the remedies. Even he feels losing his freedom to direct his own life as a 'free man' (from the majority) at the town where prevailing uncertainty, frustration, disappointment, brutality, humiliation and injustice force the 'rikshas' to give up hope for a 'bright future'. Arun becomes like a 'fish' enmeshed in a net and a hawker crying his wares in the land of the deaf. No doubt Arun has won the hearts of the marginalised people, but he has to lose lots of things like his 'optimism' as nothing in this life is without cost (The Unyielding Clamour of the Night, p.324). Hence, it's a time to think very seriously how to fight with such 'negativity' and make the efforts of social upliftment really sincere rather than hypocrisy.

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