

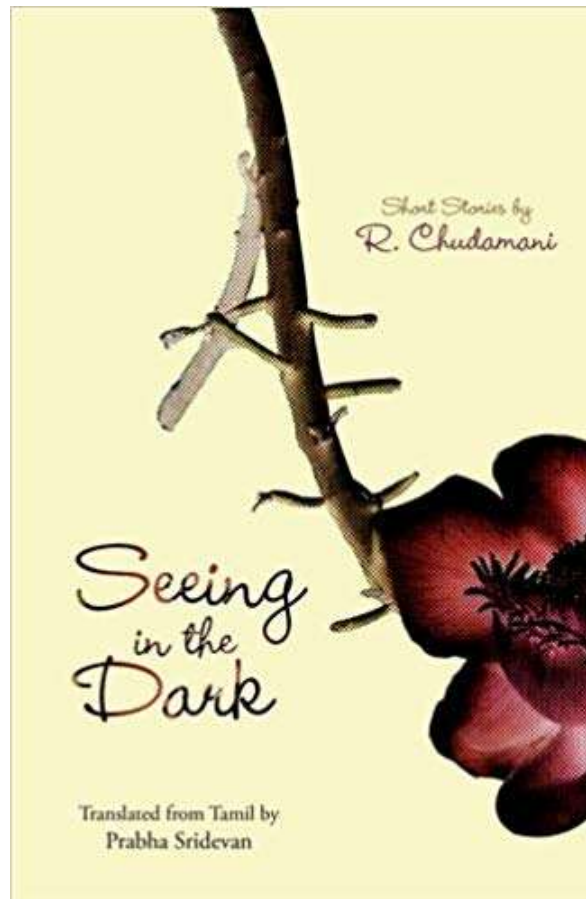
Marxist Feminist Approach to R. Chudamani's "We Don't Know"

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Abstract

R. Chudamani was a much-admired Tamil creative writer in the recent past. She is known for her short stories. Chudamani's short stories deal with personal and public lives. The short story "We Don't Know" taken for this study deals with social issues in the society. It also

reveals how women are oppressed in the androcentric society. The plot revolves around the protagonist, Abhirami who was abused by antagonist, Velappan. This paper focuses on Marxist feminism. Marxist feminism emerged between 1960s and 1970s. It centres on women's liberation which, it is assumed, can be achieved by the eradication of class difference and capitalism alone. This paper also aims to analyse the characters in the short story, *We Don't Know* which determine the Marxist feminist approach.

Keywords: R. Chudamani, "We Don't Know," Marxist Feminism, Class Conflict, Caste, Women Oppression.

Introduction

R. Chudamani, a well-known Tamil writer in the contemporary Indian Literature, has penned numerous short stories, dramas and novels. She has written both in English and Tamil. Though her short stories were not well acclaimed in the beginning, she became the gallant descriptivist of society through her short stories. She focuses on the themes such as human values, women's rights, gender sensitivity, class division and social issues. Particularly in one of the short stories "We Don't Know," Chudamani has portrayed aspects of social issues in the story such as oppression of women, politics, discrimination between lower class and upper class, and others.

Feminism is the socio-political movement which fought for women's rights, women's identity, women's struggles and eradication of oppression in the patriarchal world. Feminism conceives the ideology that society is dominated by the power of patriarchy. According to Raman Seldon "feminism has sought to disturb that complacent certainties of such patriarchal culture, to assert a belief in sexual equality and to eradicate sexist domination in transforming the society." (125)

Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism emerged slowly in the period of 1960s and 1970s. Marxist feminists played a vital role in this period. They argued that women's liberation can be achieved only through the eradication of capitalism and class difference. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* by Engels was the first book to initiate the theory of Marxist Feminism. It pleaded that men and women are equal and are responsible for the domestic needs. It also added that in the past sexual relationships were heterogamous, and properties were passed down matrilineal. Growing social status of men questioned everything persisted so far. Thus, Patriarchy, monogamy and denial of property ownership were imposed on women. According to Engels, this process is almost like enslavement. Man fixed that women should be submissive and virginity and sexual purity are fixed as primary characteristics of women. This outlook took several dimensions according to social status and socio-economic system over the world. It is closely related to the system of apartheid and racism.

This paper is based on the theory of Marxist feminism.

R. Chudamani, is known for portraying the society in her short stories. Particularly the short story “We Don’t Know” provides the scope for Marxist Feminist analysis.

Framework of “We Don’t Know”

“We Don’t Know” is the short story which focuses on a working-class woman and their problems in the society. Chudamani doesn’t portray women as weak sex. She rather portrays them as strong and honest women who fight for their identity and justice. This story is a good example for that.

Abhirami is the protagonist of the story who was abused by a man, named Velappan. So Abhirami seeks for justice through the panchayat. The setting of the story opens in a panchayat where Abhirami complains against Velappan, who abused her. The Panchayat declared that Velappan is not an accused. She cannot tolerate this decision and in front of the whole village she shouted, “He was the one, and he is the one (as a criminal)”. But there is no witness, although all the people who saw Abhirami being dragged by Velappan belonged to the lower caste just as Abhirami did.

Armed, Yet Silent Witnesses

Abhirami, a low caste woman works in the field of the high-caste man in the village who has the power and money. One day Abhirami was ordered to work in the house of Periya Muthalali to take care of his grandson. After her work she takes care of the child. The problem started on the second day when two men came from the rice mill and asked Abhirami to go with them saying that Chinna Muthalaliyamma has asked them to bring her, since the gold chain worn by the child was missing. Abhirami doesn’t pay attention to their words and starts to work again. She knows that Chinna Muthalaliyamma will never say such things. She knew that it was the fake reason which was made by Chinna Muthalali (Velappan) who saw her the previous day. She avoids responding to the two men, but the Chinna Muthalali who followed them scolds her in harsh words and drags her to the mill. The fifteen people standing there with sickles in their hands watched it but did not raise their voice against this.

The next day, the panchayat gathers in the village where Abhirami complains that Velappan has sexually abused her. Without any fear standing in front of the panchayat, Abhirami points out that “He is the one who ruined me”. Velappan has both the power and the money and he belongs to the ruling party. Meanwhile, Velappan’s father met panchayat president and shared the message that they came from the “same ancestors”. The panchayat asked the lower caste people about the incident and the reply was “I don’t know”. Later the Panchayat declared that “Velappan is innocent”, purely because he hails from the higher-caste.

Brawn of the Phrase “I don’t Know”

After a month, Velappan went to Chennai for the political gathering with his people and the local secretary, since he wanted to contest in the forthcoming election. Unfortunately, the next morning he was found dead under the tamarind tree with sickle gashes. Velappan’s

father got raged and asked his hired men to set fire to the whole village. The police inspector made an investigation about the death and enquired the village people and the reply was “I don’t know”. One woman among the group of fifteen men and women who watched Velappan dragging Abhirami told the police that it might have been the work of “Sickle demon”. The police inspector was taken aback when the crowd stared at him. The story ends with the investigation report that “The simple villagers believe that the tamarind tree demon has done this.... they do not know anything else” (7) or may be the rival party from the nearby village might have murdered Velappan.

Eminence of Justice over Class Consciousness

Class and caste play a vital role in the society. Chudamani exposed the social problems through her characters. The characters in the story show how people are divided in the society in the name of caste and class. *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* defines that “Marxist feminism’s primary task was to open up the complex relations between gender and economy” (135). Here Abhirami has shown that she belongs to a lower caste most of whom are poor, so she needs to work for money under the upper class. But she was suppressed abused by the people who belong to ruling party. The power and money exploit the low class. Next, the fifteen people (both men and women) who belong to lower caste cannot raise their voice against their landlord who belong to upper caste. When Abhirami was dragged by Velappan, these fifteen people “... stood like a stone, petrified by his autocratic strength and the power of the two henchmen. Used as they were to living in servile fear, the grass bundles and sickles dead in their hands, they watched mutely...” (5). These fifteen people cannot fight against the higher caste people who have both political power and money.

The characters who belong to the upper classes are Velappan, his wife, his father and the panchayat president. Velappan is the one who abused Abhirami and behaved rudely with his words and behavior. Velappan scolded her as a “Thieving slut, what impertinence! You won’t obey if we send for you? You will, only if we drag you.” (4) In this story Velappan’s father is so close to panchayat president and he reveals this saying that they hail from the “same ancestors.” Next the Panchayat head says that “the men are not to be blamed. They do not approach the women on their own. It is the women who provoke men to rape them by their behavior, the way they dress, and their expressions.” (6) These things show how they think high of themselves and how women are looked down by the society and the upper class people in the village.

Firmness in Abhirami

Chudamani has displayed the woman who fits in the context of tradition and she doesn’t show the character Abhirami as a weaker one. Instead Abhirami is shown as a strong woman who “did not conceal what happened to her. She did not shrink with shame. She did not drown herself in a pond. Though she was tossed by grief, humiliation and rage, she stood up straight, looked at Velappan in the face, and pointed out, ‘He is the one who ruined me.’” (5)

Thus, in spite of being a working-class woman and down-trodden both in caste and economy, she seeks justice in front of the panchayat with courage. Though she was oppressed by the men of upper-class she stands for herself. But she doesn't get the justice she asked for. On the other hand, Velappan dies suspiciously under the tamarind tree with sickle gashes at the end of the story. The police inspector investigated the people and reported that the village people believed that the "tamarind tree demon had done this" or it might have been done by people belonging to the neighboring village because of his popularity in politics.

Conclusion

The analysis of the story "We Don't Know" gives a vivid picture of the society which is divided in the name of class and caste. It also brings out how the working-class women are oppressed by the upper class. The character Abhirami and the fifteen people who seek justice for her struggle for their justice to create an ideal society without any discrimination. Marxist feminism helps the readers to identify the problems of working-class women and what they seek as solution. It also reveals the challenges that they face in an androcentric society.

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