

An Introspection of Struggle and Threat to India Indigenous people in Sujatha Gidla's *Ant among Elephants*

Dr. S. Bharathiraja
Assistant Professor & Head (i/c)
Department of English
Vivekananda College
Tiruvedakam West
Madurai, Tamil Nadu – 625234
bharathieng@yahoo.co.in
Contact No: 8870518474

Abstract

This paper attempts to apply Diaspora and Indigenous life theories to look at the work of Aboriginal/Dalit writer: Sujatha Gidla. It also explores how complexities of discriminations and Aboriginal/Dalit's struggles representation may be analysed by viewing untouchables as members of intra-national diasporas, with the mission sites being fashioned as diaspora spaces. Sujatha Gidla whose recent memoir, *Ant among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and The Making of Modern India*, speaks of her life and her family and the plight of 300 million Dalits. *Ant among Elephants* is the memoir of an Indian woman who was born a so-called untouchable, and now works as a conductor on the New York City Subway.

Gidla's story is one of personal struggle and a certain freedom she has found in America today. She writes that caste is an accursed state in India, especially for Dalits: "Your life is your caste, your caste is your life." With her memoir, Gidla joins the ranks of India's many aboriginal writers who are telling stories to be heard and counted in a system that seeks to keep them down by tradition. Gidla hails from the Dalit community of Kazipet, a small town in southern Telangana state, India

Keywords: Sujatha Gidla, *Ant among Elephants*, Dalit Diaspora, Memoir of a Modern Dalit Indian-American

Introduction

This paper attempts to apply Diaspora and Indigenous life theories to look at the work of Aboriginal/Dalit writer: Sujatha Gidla. It also explores how complexities of discriminations and Aboriginal/Dalit's struggles representation may be analysed by viewing untouchables as members of intra-national diasporas, with the mission sites being fashioned as diaspora spaces. Sujatha Gidla whose recent memoir, *Ant among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and The Making of Modern India*, speaks of her life and her family and the plight of 300 million Aboriginal/Dalit. *Ant among Elephants* (AaE) is the memoir of an Indian woman who was born a so-called untouchable, and now works as a conductor on the New York City Subway.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:9 September 2019

Prof. Dr. S. Chelliah, Editor: Select Papers of the International Conference on Paradigms of Marginality in Literature - Exploring the Nuances

Dr. S. Bharathiraja An Introspection of Struggle and Threat to India Indigenous people in Sujatha Gidla's *Ant among Elephants*

Gidla's story is one of personal struggles and a certain freedom she has found in America today. She writes that caste is an accursed state in India, especially for Aboriginal/Dalit: "Your life is your caste, your caste is your life." With her memoir, Gidla joins the ranks of India's many aboriginal writers who are telling stories to be heard and counted in a system that seeks to keep them down by tradition. Gidla hails from the Aboriginal/Dalit community of Kazipet, a small town in southern Telangana state, India

Background wrongly Projected

Sujatha Gidla was brought up in Elwin Peta in Kakinada, AP. Her family was an aboriginal of south India. But later she was branded as Dalit. All around her was suffering in abject poverty. When you are surrounded by so much misery, you don't see it as anything extraordinary. She remembers when one of her friends in the neighbourhood told her that she'd had roast venison (meat of deer) for dinner three days in a row. She laughed along with her, knowing that was her ironic way of saying she'd gone without eating. "I was thinking of the joke she was making and not that some people don't have anything to eat" (AaE 25).

Childhood Haunting

Yet two things Sujatha Gidla witnessed when she was seven or eight years old especially horrified me. Whenever she thought of Elwin Peta, these moments come back to her. They will haunt her until she dies. A woman named Santhoshamma with her two gaunt teenage sons lived across the street from our house under a thatch supported by four posts. She was only in her late thirties or early forties, but her body was so ravaged by starvation that she couldn't walk anymore. She lay on rags under the thatch, moaning day and night, hungry and in pain. One day she just wanted something to eat.

My mother would hire another woman, named Ruthamma, to do chores in our house. She was washing dishes in a bucket on the kitchen floor. It was the day after Christmas. We could afford apples only at Christmas. A couple of apples for the whole family. Ruthamma looked at the piece of apple in my hand with such a stupid, lustful grin, salivating openly, that she could not eat it anymore. she knew that Ruthamma had never in her life tasted an apple. "Experiences like this made me wish there were no poor people in the world. But how could that be achieved?" (AaE 25).

Sujatha Gidla heard about her uncle (K.G. Satyamurthy - protagonist of this work) and Carey through my mother. She tells us he had sacrificed everything, left his family, and gone off to help the poor. How did he help them? He had a gun. He would threaten rich people, take their money, and give it to those who had nothing. Her uncle was like a cinema hero to me. She wanted so much to be like him. But we were never going to see him, my mother said, because the police were secretly watching our house. If he tried to visit us, he would be arrested and put in jail. All this made my uncle seem like a mysterious star shining in the sky high above:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:9 September 2019

Prof. Dr. S. Chelliah, Editor: Select Papers of the International Conference on Paradigms of Marginality in Literature - Exploring the Nuances

Dr. S. Bharathiraja An Introspection of Struggle and Threat to India Indigenous people in Sujatha Gidla's *Ant among Elephants*

K G Satyamurthy, a Maoist ideologue and one of the founders of the People's War Group (PWG), died in Andhra Pradesh's Krishna district on Tuesday. He was 84. Satyamurthy, a Dalit leader and a revolutionary Telugu writer and poet, died after prolonged illness at Kandulapadu of G. Kondur mandal in the district, about 350 km from here. He is survived by two sons and two daughters. Several sympathisers of the Maoist movement and poets, writers and artists are expected to participate in his last rites on Wednesday. He was one of the founders of the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML), popularly known as the PWG. The outfit merged with the Maoist Communist Centre in 2004 to form the Communist Party of India-Maoist.

He was teaching English at Fatima School in Warangal in the late 1960s when he met Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, a Hindi teacher at the same school. The duo joined the Maoist movement in the 1970s but were unhappy with the mainstream Marxist parties. In 1984, they together founded the PWG. Using the pen name Shiv Sagar, Satyamurthy wrote poetry and visited villages to organise squads. Popularly known as SM in PWG ranks, he played a key role in building the outfit. Hailing from Mala caste, he fought against casteism and worked hard for social equality. Following differences with Seetharamaiah and other leaders, he later came out of the PWG. He criticised the domination of the upper caste leaders in the outfit. (Sharma. AP)

Sujatha's mother also told us that he never kept any of the money that he took for himself. He lived a hard life in the jungles. K G Satyamurthy said, "I practiced sleeping on the bare cement floor to prepare myself for the future when I'd have to sleep on the hard ground. I told my friends that I was going to be a Naxalite when I grew up" (AaE 25). One summer afternoon when her mother was fourteen years old, she was riding my bicycle home from my maths tutor's house when she spotted a group of teenagers singing to a small crowd gathered on a street corner. Fascinated, she got off my bicycle. They were singing about poor peasants and workers, how unjust it is that they suffer from want because they are the ones producing the wealth, not the owners of the land and the factories. Never had she heard a song like this before. "Come on peasant brothers," they sang, "come on, all you exploited and impoverished, join the party of the peasants and the poor and let us all stand up to the landlords."

Struggle and Threat

Sujatha became a radical – a member of the Radical Students Union (RSU), the student wing of the People's War Group (PWG). She joined a street-theatre group and was singing about unemployment, corruption, and the evils of the education system. As an American, she remembered the evil of education in India. After sometimes, supporters of PWG were arrested, and she heard of comrades being shot dead, including many students.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:9 September 2019

Prof. Dr. S. Chelliah, Editor: Select Papers of the International Conference on Paradigms of Marginality in Literature - Exploring the Nuances

Dr. S. Bharathiraja An Introspection of Struggle and Threat to India Indigenous people in Sujatha Gidla's *Ant among Elephants*

When Sujatha was nineteen, she was doing her master's programme at the Regional Engineering College in Warangal. She was humiliated by an upper-caste professor in the Electronics Engineering. The professor made failing his low-caste students. The students led a strike, but police arrested the low-caste students and workers in the REC. She was tortured and beaten. Later, she faced a different house arrest- no-one talked to her. Sujatha Gidla's family was entirely socially ostracized though her parents were college lecturers. Her sister Anitha also suffered. SM was a legend in the districts of Guntur and Ongole. She finished this *Ants among Elephants* and found her uncle's death on April 2012.

Satyamurthy enrolled in AC College in 1948. On 30th January 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was shot by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). But Satyamurthy felt respect for Gandhi. On 13 September 1948, the Indian Army undertook a direct invasion of Hyderabad and Nizam had been disposed. The 224 year old dynasty was overthrown:

In college Satyam became more self-conscious of his caste, but he was a Communist now. As a Communist one was supposed to think only in terms of class and not of caste. When the class struggle was won, discrimination based on caste would disappear. As a Communist, Satyam saw himself as an uplifter of untouchable, not as an untouchable fighting for his own rights. He would continue to take his attitude as long as he remained in the movement. (63)

Satyam had no money to buy books and pay exam fee. Manikya Rao and Hanumayya helped him study and joining Communists Party. Canadian Baptist Missionaries helped the untouchables and educated them. He is from have-nots – the Untouchable-Christian-Communist. Satyam was influenced by social ideologies and literature. His family members are Prasanna Rao (father), Papa (Manjula), Carey, and Marthamma. They lived in Gudivada, Telaprolu villages. Telaprolu is dominated by the landlord caste of Reddys. In 1950s, as soon as the British left India, the power was transferred to the upper caste people. In this village, Satyam joined with his family after college study. By the time he arrived in the village, the communists had all gone underground.

Papa (Manjula) was studying eighth-class. Sujatha Gidla viewed India from USA, “She memorized textbooks, “That’s all it takes in India to do well in school, just memorize everything” (97). The first general elections were held at the end of 1951. Nehru was elected and he came to Guntur.

Conclusion

Sujatha Gidla whose recent memoir, *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and The Making of Modern India,*” speaks of her life and her family and the plight of 300 million Dalits. Gidla who was born a so-called untouchable, and now she works as a conductor on the New York City Subway, USA. By birth, she was brought up in Elwin Peta in Kakinada,

AP and hailed from the Dalit community of Kazipet, a small town in southern Telangana state, India. It is true that every Dalit should bring their life suffering to the world. Vasant's memoir displayed his growth, and his struggle for education and his existential survival. He narrated direct and authentic struggles. His autobiography has full of social message and urges the reader to undertake an ongoing struggle and consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary changes in the social, cultural, and political realms. Poverty and caste oppression are being woven into autobiographies and show how economic and caste are devastating Dalit's life. Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany claim that "In many regions of India it is poverty rather than social oppression that presents itself as the principal disability of people from the Untouchables castes..." (11).

=====

Bibliography

- Abraham, Joshil K, and Judith Misrahi-Barak. *Dalit Literatures in India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2016.
- Anand, Mulk Raj, and Eleanor Zelliot. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2018.
- Anderson, Linda R. *Autobiography*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Aston. N.M. Ed. *Literature of Marginality: Dalit Literature and African-American Literature*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.
- Ganguly, Debjani. "Pain, Personhood and the Collective: Dalit Life Narratives." *Asian Studies Review* 33 (2009): 429-42.
- Gidla, Sujatha. *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005.
- Mendelsohn, Oliver and Marika Vicziany. *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*. New Delhi: CUP, 2007.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Dalit Visions*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2018.
- Sharma. AP: Maoist ideologue Satyamurthy dead" Satyamurthy, a Maoist ideologue and one of the founders of the People's War Group (PWG), died in Krishna district. News18. April 17, 2012.
- Zelliot, Eleanor. *From Untouchable to Dalits: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2010.