

Water: The Sole Witness of Injustice in the Context of Society and Literature

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Abstract

Social activists believe that if there is going to be a third world war, water would be the main reason behind it. The transformation of water from the role of 'protector' to the role of 'destroyer' is not far away so as the day one country throws missiles on another country just to conquer the water resource. Nevertheless, in a country like India, conflicts for water have been occurring for several centuries. Water, being one of the basic survivals, also plays a symbol of prestige for discriminating-people and discriminated-people. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, a Dalit feminist, gives a vivid picture of issues for water through her poem "*Water*". The poet recollects her childhood memories of how water made her run for her family's daily needs. She accuses the water which plays both ends against the middle. She concentrates not only on caste issues in water but also throws light upon various politics and business commodities behind water. In addition to her poem, this paper seeks the social pragmatism which reflects in literature penned by other writers in the same genre.

Keywords: Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, *Water*, Dalits, oppression, untouchability, water scarcity, social issues.

Introduction

Almost every village in India depends on common well for basic needs. Usually, in those days, the well would be situated in the centre of the village. In fact, people set their shelter nearby the place where they can get water easily. Almost all living things on earth need water to survive. 'When water fails, functions of nature cease, you say; thus, when rain fails, no men can walk in 'duty's ordered way'' goes the great saying by Thiruvalluvar. Without water, life could not even be imagined. Hence, water is the driving force of all nature.

Religious Beliefs about Water

Nevertheless, some evils in the form of human beings have formulated certain rules and regulations to access the well and they restricted a group of people in the name of caste. Those restricted people are commonly referred to as untouchables. They should not touch the well and if they touch it, even if accidentally, the water would be considered as impure. As a result, the untouchable person who touched the water would be punished severely. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani portrays such kind of issue in her poem “*Water*”. She says that the well knows untouchability would never disappear. She adds a lot of reliable facts to stand her statement through her poem.

“It knows the agony of the panchama,
who, not having the right to draw a pot of water,
waits all day near the well
with his empty pot
until a shudra arrives.” (Water 138)

Through these lines, Swaroopa Rani bangs the pathetic conditions of the untouchables. As they are not supposed to touch the well, they have to wait near the well to get a pot of water. Someone from upper caste would come to draw a pot of water from the well and the person would draw a pot of water for the untouchable who is waiting near the well for hours and pour it into the pot of untouchables from a distance with a cautious mind of not touching the pot of untouchables. If they touch it, it would be considered as defame. Here, the poet ironically uses the term “shudra” to call the oppressor who oppresses the people in the name of caste.

Moreover, the same kind of incident comes in a Tamil poet, Vairamuthu’s debut novel “*Kallikaattu Idhigaasam*” in which the protagonist Peyathevar helps a Dalit girl who waits near the well with an empty pot. He accidentally touches the pot of the Dalit girl. As a result, he is dragged to stand as a convict in village panchayat and he is given punishment too. Likewise, the same kind of incident happens in Rabindranath Tagore’s play “*Chandalika*”, in which a girl gets abused for doing so. When we look at these incidents, it is clear that the same issue is in practice in all states of India without any difference.

In “*Ode to Nightingale*”, John Keats says that nightingale stands as a living witness of all the historical events which occurred over generations. Likewise, in “*Water*”, Swaroopa Rani mentions that water is the sole witness of the social injustice which has been occurring for several centuries. There are numerous people died in the fight of obtaining the basic rights in the society, i.e., to get equal rights in drawing water from the common well. So many battles have happened regarding this issue. Swaroopa Rani compares it in her own style,

It is the Mahad struggle at the Chavadar tank.
“A single drop of water embodies
tears shed over several generations.

In the many battles we fought
for a single drop of water,
our blood flowed like streams.
But we never managed to win
Even a small puddle of water.” (Water 139)

Discrimination over water is in practice mostly in villages and even in some cities. In Premanand Gajvi’s short story “*A Sip of Water*”, he portrays how city folks see this social injustice as a strange incident. The city people have not beheld it and so they shoot it in their camera when they see it in villages. They admire how these people can withstand this and practised to live within these limits. City people can see the practices of village, but they could not understand those practices properly. Gajvi vividly portrays this like a conversation between a Dalit and a non-Dalit. Without giving any names to the characters, Gajvi uses numbers to represent the characters and used them as his mouth piece. A Dalit-sibling asks his master,

“We don’t have water to drink. The city folk come and take our photos. The village folk come and break our pots and throw them out. How are we to live, my lord?”
(Ghotbhar Pani)

To obtain equal rights in using the common well, several people including women and children have shed their holy blood and it flowed as a stream on earth. But in result, they get nothing, and their agony continues still as it is. In these battles, a massacre happened at Karamchedu in Andhra Pradesh is one of the most important and unforgettable incidents. Swaroopa Rani reminds the incident as,

“It knows the righteous rage
of Karamchedu Suvarthamma
who opposed the Kamma landlords
with her water pot
when they asked her not to pollute the pond water.” (Water 139)

Suvarthamma, a woman who belongs to the oppressed community, could not tolerate the injustices and so she raises her water pot by saying that she is going to draw water from the common well. In return, she faces a lot problems and numerous Kamma (name of an upper caste) landlords who were oppressing the untouchables could not resist her action and this issue ends in a massacre of over a dozen Dalits at Karamchedu including Suvarthamma on July 17th, 1985.

Dalit women also go to the well where the higher caste women use to draw water. The same water fulfils the needs of the people, but its reputation gets changed based on the pots in which it is filled. The upper caste people throw the pots of Dalit-siblings away just because their royal pots touched the pots of so-called upper caste people’s pots. Even the diseased people like lepers are

allowed to draw water from well but the sound-health Dalit-siblings are not suppose which denotes Dalits are considered as worse than lepers. In a song by an anonymous poet, it is mentioned as,

“Our women go to the well for water.
But you push their pots away.
Just because our pot touched yours,
you get the smith to remake it.
You let the lame, the blind, and the lepers
come to your well for water.” (Jambavapuram 4)

Water reminds the memories of the author which happened in her childhood days. To incline this, she uses a refrain “When I see water / I remember”. She recollects her childhood memories how she was running for water for her family’s daily needs.

Usually the oppressors of Untouchables denote that Dalits are impure; they would not take bath regularly; and because of that there comes a bad smell from their body. In reality, Dalits were not given sufficient water to take bath regularly. Subsequently, with the problem of water deficiency, expecting them to be the symbol of purity and sanctity is purely madness. The so-called personnel who think that they burden the responsibility of preserving the purity of the village in their shoulders, as Atlas in Greek mythology burdens the earth, made the untouchables to stay away from cleanliness.

There is a famous proverb which describes the significance of cleanliness, i.e., “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” (The term ‘cleanliness in this proverb may signify not only the outer cleanliness but also the inner cleanliness of one’s own). Consequently, due to the absence of cleanliness, untouchables are made to stay away from Godliness too.

Except the untouchables, the entire village take bath luxuriously, that too, twice a day. But the poor untouchables are forced to the situation of taking bath weekly once only. The poet inscribes this pity as,

“When I see water,
I remember
How we welcomed our weekly bath
As if it was a wondrous festival!
While the entire village bathed luxuriously—
Twice a day.” (Water 139-140)

The Indian Constitution clearly mentions in its Article 15 (2) that “no citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to the use of wells, tanks, bathing Ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated for the use of the

general public.” But they would not bother about this article and do what they want to do. Poor marginalised people are still being oppressed due to lack of awareness.

After a certain limit, Dalit-siblings sensed tiresome in the struggle of getting reputation and equal rights in water. They felt fighting against these people would not bring them any benefit. Therefore, they decided to quit and looked back their journey in this struggle where they find something which Pydi Theresh Babu penned as,

“Enough,
we have lost enough streams,
until now.
Enough,
we have lost enough self-respect
until now.” (The Great Hindu Ocean 53)

Here Babu mentions they have lost enough streams. The term ‘enough streams’ leads to dual meanings; one is water streams; another one is blood streams on these issues. Only the poet can say which stream he mentioned there. Dalits want to be respected as equal as other caste people. They felt their self-respect completely disappeared in this water issue.

Being tired in this struggle, Dalits decided to quit and stand still for their basic needs without depending upon the higher caste people. The upper caste people own the freely flowing water and hampering the Dalits not to touch it. At least wells are dug by themselves and so they can order a group of people not touch it. To some extent it is acceptable because well is an artificial resource. But these Dalits are not allowed to touch even the natural resource like river. Nature gives it to the people and comes from somewhere and in its journey towards sea, it fulfils the needs of the people. In its journey, animals like buffaloes, dogs, goats, frogs are free to take bath as per their wish. But it is all the poor Dalits are not supposed to touch the river at anywhere and at any cause.

“Water comes from clouds, flows down rivers and streams they flow into the sea.
That goes up as steam, then clouds, then water from clouds so who owns that water.”
(A Sip of Water)

The same sort of problem takes part in Munshi Premchand’s short story, *Thakur’s Well*. The central character of the story is a Dalit woman, Gangi, who has drawn a pot of water to her ill-health husband to drink. The pity is some animal fell into the Dalits’ well and drowned to death. As a result, water has turned rotten and smells too terrible to drink. Even though he could not withstand the smell, he has no other go and decided to drink that weird water by closing his nose. On seeing this pity, Gangi plans to draw (steal) a pot of good water from the village well by late night when everyone in village fall asleep as of dead-bodies. when she confesses her plan to her husband, he gets shocked and warns her not to do so. He tells her what will happen if she gets caught.

“You'll come back with your arms and legs broken, that's all. You'd better just sit down and keep quiet.” (Thakur's Well)

On behalf of the Dalit-siblings, they dug separate well for their basic need, as they do not want to continue their age-old conflict for drawing water from the common well. Even then they could not enjoy their right over their own well. A few miscreants contaminate the separate wells and avenging those peoples by any means. By the end of 2016, there was an incident took place at Melakkur (a village in Tamilnadu) proves that the existence of untouchability in most of the places. The caste Hindus dumped a hearse in Dalits' well. This issue required the presence of revenue and police officials to hold peace talk between Dalits and caste Hindus. However, the relationship bridge between Dalits and caste Hindus has been broken completely and it will take a long period to renovate it. The incident has been published in newspaper too.

According to sources, a funeral procession of a deceased 75-year-old caste Hindu woman, Chinnammal, was taken out on Thursday evening. The body was later buried at a burial ground near the Dalit settlement. The villagers suspected that after the last rites, a few miscreants dumped the hearse into the well, which was one of the drinking water sources of the settlement. (The New Indian Express)

Water feeds the thirst of living things without seeing any partiality unlike the six-sense animals do; now and then it declines to satiate the thirsty throats; and occasionally it kills the people by its horrible force. (Floods, cyclone) Water shows its anger in the form Tsunami that swallows the village after village. Therefore, Swaroopa Rani appropriately calls water as the Preserver and Destroyer. The poet marks it as,

“It can give life
But it can also devour lives.
The water that refused to quench parched throats
Became the killer tsunami wave,
That swallowed whole,
Village after village.” (Water 140)

The poet concentrates not only on Dalit issues on water but also the invasion of water by the corporate companies. They suck water like a leach and renamed it after “mineral water” and sell it in bottles. Eventually, they made the whole world to believe that it is the safest and most hygienic water and the senseless people too buying it. In addition to this, the business-minded corporate companies add something in water; changes its colour as well as its taste and nature; and incarcerate the freely flowing water in small bottles and selling it in market in the name of cool drinks. Swaroopa Rani writes,

“This water...
... slowly, surreptitiously,

Dances its way into the Pepsi man's bottle.
With its new name 'mineral water' ...
...Now
Water is no mean matter.
It's a multinational market commodity." (Water 140-141)

The poet satires the politics behind the water between the states in India in this poem. She condemns that water is the trouble-maker which creates a lot of battles in its journey from the village well to the pots of untouchables. Similarly, in its journey from one state to another, water provokes conflicts among the people.

"Between the village and the wada
Between one state and another,

This water can ignite many struggles and strife." (Water 140)

Water drinks lives of different states and different castes. Even then its thirst for blood is not parched and still it is dying for more bloodshed in the name of struggle to hold the right over water (river or well).

"It can make the blood run in streams.
But it can also sit innocently
In a Bisleri bottle." (Water 140)

Water is considered as one of the most important elements in five prime elements of nature — Land, water, fire, air and sky. While the fire among the prime elements has no such defile and impure problems in its state, it is all this poor water only has been defiled by the untouchables. If a person is defiled by touching an untouchable accidentally, he uses water to restore his purity. If the water has the power of turning one from impure to pure, how would it be defiled by the contact of an untouchable?

Water, as a dumb creature, witnesses all these issues which has been occurring for several ages, and remains as mute. All these issues on water are being done by evil human beings, on contrary Swaroopa Rani accuses the water itself for this. It is, just like a doll in the hands of children, being played accordingly. It is not the fault of innocent water but the fault of human beings. However, water avenges the convicts by giving a collective punishment and holds back the justice in the course of time. Present central government has initiated some steps to make India as Cashless-country. Likewise, one day it will become casteless-country. If caste should be eradicated from the nation, there should not be a place for caste in three places such as graveyard, water and temple. If this happens, probably there would be no issues in the name of caste.

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