

Reflection of a Dystopian Society in G. Thilakavathi's *Kalmaram*

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Abstract

G. Thilakavathi is a former I.P.S. Officer and writer from Tamil Nadu, India. She is the first woman to become an Indian Police Service (IPS) officer from Tamil Nadu in 1976. She is a poet, short story writer, translator and novelist. Her collection of short stories *Theiyumo Sooriyan* and *Arasigal Aluvathillai* have won the Government of Tamil Nadu's best short story prize. Her literary works have been adapted into film and television series. Her novel *Kalmaram* was awarded Sahitya Academy Award for Tamil in 2005. Thilakavathi is very talented in merging comic and serious elements in her works. Her writing style is in colloquial slang which invites the readers inside the huts of the plebeian. She portrays the exact lives of the working-class people in a crystal-clear manner. The novel *Kalmaram* focuses on the poverty-stricken lives of the construction labours, the cunning nature of the capitalists, carelessness of the politicians and resilience of the construction workers as well as the female characters. The main aim of this paper is to probe the social evils faced by the working-class people.

Keywords: G. Thilakavathi, *Kalmaram*, capitalism, dystopia, patriarchy.

The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction states that dystopian works depict a negative view of "the way the world is supposedly going in order to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction" (360). In this novel *Kalmaram*, the author Thilakavathi has concentrated on the unrecognized hurdles and struggles faced by the working-class people. She focuses particularly on the construction workers. People from villages migrate to cities when the agriculture becomes impossible without proper rainfall. A fancy city weaves fantasies in the innocent eyes of the people to settle in urban areas. The rural people come to cities in search of betterment in their life. Unfortunately, their state of living gets worse when they become a construction worker. They face many risks in their life like not receiving sufficient wages. It is hard to get compensation from employers for unexpected accidents and there is no safety in this job. The working-class people are forced to lead a miserable life in cities. The women workers have to come across the sexual harassment created by the male workers. She tries to expose their way of life to the contemporary sophisticated high class and middle-class people. She wants to see a change in their life and as well as in the society.

Struggles of a Single Mother

The novel begins when Adhilakshmi reaches home after finishing her work as a house maid. “She brought some leftover rice and vegetables from her owner’s house” (27). This scene tells the readers that these people are surviving with the leftover food of their masters. They rarely go to hospitals or buy medicines when they fall sick. Their poverty does not provide them the ‘luxury’ of spending money on medicines and hospitals for petty issues. When Kaveri gets toe web infection, “she took the kerosene from the kitchen and applied in between her toes” (28). They try to cure themselves by doing simple first aid. Adhilakshmi is the daughter of a mason who employs more than fifty other masons under him. She falls in love with the man who works under her father and elopes to get married. They find it tough to run the family with a single earning, so she accompanies her husband to work in the construction sites. There she faces all sorts of bitter experiences as a female mason. Unluckily, her husband falls down from the third floor of a building and dies. He wants to educate his son Kasi and to see him become a doctor. His death pushes the family into a deep pit called poverty. Kasi drops out of his school at the age of ten and works as a child labour in various fields to raise the family. Adhilakshmi’s job as a house maid and Kasi’s salary help them to get the elder daughter, Kanniamma, married. Adhilakshmi is worried if her son too will end up with the same fate, like his father, so she does not allow him to work in construction sites. As a single mother she works hard to raise her family.

Irresponsible Male Characters

Kaniamma’s husband and Kasi are not ready to take the responsibilities of the family. They live their lives as a livestock in the beginning. Both Kaniamma’s husband and Kasi lie to the bride’s family that they earn sufficient salary to run a family and get married. Kaniamma’s husband has HIV but ignores medical treatment. When Kaniamma advises him, he abuses her saying that she is not a virtuous woman. He blames that her immorality is the reason for his sickness. This brutal attitude separates him from his wife. He is hospitalized and his life becomes miserable after Kaniamma leaves.

Kasi is unemployed for many months even after his marriage. His status of being unemployed destroys the respect that his wife has for him. He is disappointed with continuous failures and lives an unfulfilled life till he is hired by R.R.M. a wealthy business man, in his construction site. He works sincerely but not soulfully. The sufferings of the labourers and R.R.M.’s selfish bossy attitude depress him.

Betrayed Marriages

Women are betrayed in terms of marriage. Most of the groom’s families think that their son will become responsible if their son gets married. Hence, they lie to the bride’s family that their sons have a permanent job with good salary and savings. Kanniamma and Ragini are two scapegoats of marriages of betrayal. Kanniamma is the second daughter of Adhilakshmi. Her neighbours threaten her mother to get her daughter married as early as possible. They believe that bringing up a female child and protecting her from the wicked world is a challenging task for the parents. The sudden

marriage wraps her inside a sadistic family life. Kanniamma is tortured by her husband and in-laws. They loot her jewelry and sell it in the bank without her knowledge. They lock her in the house in the name of custom and traditions.

Pregnant sister-in-law came home. Both of them are head of the childless. They should not meet each other. ‘So, they ordered me not to come outside and locked me at the back. One can be without food, one can be without water. Is it possible to remain normal without attending nature call too?’ (44)

Kanniamma informs her husband that her mother-in-law ill-treats her during his absence. Her husband does not care about his wife or the baby inside her womb. Instead of enquiring, he scolds her for complaining. Hence, without informing her husband she moves to her mother’s house. There, she spends her days thinking about her painful past:

He will hit me continuously and crush me to the floor during the quarrel. I will move away to hide myself and cry. He won’t leave me for that too. He will come there and twist my hand. He scolds me that I create a big scene for a small pat. Do you think men won’t raise hand towards their wife, always? He beats me until my body aches, kicks until my hand and legs swell, vulgar and abusive words, rolling me wildly in the mat. (88)

Kasi’s mother exaggerates to the bride’s family that her son earns thousand to two thousand rupees, in order to get the hands of Ragini in terms of marriage. Ragini has studied till tenth standard, so everyone treats her with more care. Only after getting married she finds that her husband is unemployed and not fit for any job. In beginning, she expects more from her husband and gets disappointed often. Her focus is only on the money. Her character has a transformation when she gets the job of a Supervisor under her husband’s boss R.R.M. Whenever her boss scolds the poor workers during unexpected accidents, she feels pity for them. She realizes that money cannot buy happiness. Hence, he helps the workers when they are in need. Ragini encourages her husband in all aspects.

R.R.M.: A Cunning Capitalist

R.R.M. is shown as a benevolent business man in the beginning. Everyone believes that the man is not only rich in money but also by heart. He hires Ragini as the supervisor of the construction site because he thinks that hiring an educated supervisor may cost him more and may not be trustworthy. She accepts whatever he gives as salary and does not ask for more. His selfish nature is revealed when he does not show any concern towards the worker who gets injured during the constructing work. When the victim’s mother cries for help, R.R.M. answers her “Did I ask your daughter to get injured? She must be more careful and dutiful during her work” (147). It is the responsibility of the boss to take care of the worker who gets injured in the site, but R.R.M. is not ready for that. Each time he shouts at the victims of the unexpected accidents. Once he hands over

jewels and currencies to Ragini when the vigilance comes for raid. Unaware of the upper-class tricks, Ragini hides them in her hut and saves him.

Unconcerned Life

When Kasi goes to Chinnathayi's hotel, he overhears a controversial argument between two different political party volunteers. Everyone boasts about the decorations and expenditures of their own leader's political meetings. Chinnathayi shouts at them for praising the men who do not help the poor in anyway.

The stagnant water reaches the height of knee, under the pipe. We are placing the pots above the bricks one on top. Why can't you put cement over there? Is there a street light? It went off within a week. Why can't you put light over there? (50)

It shows the government's careless attitude towards these voiceless people. The ruling party as well as the opponent is not ready to solve the queries of the poor people. The politicians walk down the road only during the time of election and give false promises to get vote. The sufferings of working-class people are not considered by anyone.

Suseela: A Supporting Character

Suseela is a good friend of Kaveri. She has done her Masters in Arts and joins her Doctoral degree. For her research, she decides to concentrate on the problems of the construction workers. She stays in the area where the other construction workers live. After seeing their difficulties, she drops her thesis work and starts helping the people around her. Everyone thinks that she is here to convert them to some other religion. As days moved on, she becomes one among them and guide them. She even criticizes the politicians for not taking proper measures to solve the problems in their area. Her ideas are optimistic. She encourages everyone to work for their progress. Once a man insults Suseela saying that if she would have submitted her thesis regarding their problems the government would have given something for them. Suseela angrily replies:

See... we got independence. It is our duty to earn in this Independent country. We have rights to ask the profits according to our efforts. It is a pleasure for this Democratic country to give discounts and prizes to boost up the employees. . . The government is not a philanthropist existed during olden days, to give everything. We didn't lose our self respect like beggars and ready to accept whatever they give. (62)

Suseela encourages her friend Kaveri and her family. She introduces Kaveri and Ragini to the Mason Training School for Women. She advises them to be independent and not to look to others for financial aid. Without her optimistic verses neither Kaveri nor her family would make it out of their difficulties. Suseela elevates their thinking like a supporting pole. She helps them form a union and teaches them all the advantages of being a member of the Union. Suseela feeds them with strength and spirit when they need it the most.

Conclusion

Throughout this novel, the author Thilakavathi has concentrated on struggles of the working-class people in a dystopian society. People suffer due to poverty and the irresponsibility of politicians. Women suffer in terms of marriage and other customs. This story has exposed the agonies of construction workers and their families. They are suppressed both economically and socially. Through her writings the writer has brought their life and sufferings to light.

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