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Oppression and Retaliation: A Study of Prem Chand's *Resignation* and
K.S. Duggal's *The Masters*

Abstract

Basic human rights get denied very often. To expose the denial of human rights, literature is used effectively. The stories *Resignation* by Prem Chand and *The Masters* by K.S. Duggal represent the whole of India and portray struggles from the pre-independence era to the contemporary struggles against terrorism in the border states of India. *Resignation* and *The Masters* show how the feudal mode of power which is invested in one group leads to inhuman treatment of the powerless. The stories focus the pre-independence days. The protagonists of the stories- the Indian office clerk under the British Sahib during colonial times and the common man struggling under the Zamindari system are presented in a context when they cannot but retaliate. The marginalized groups are distanced from the power centres. The position of the authority changes when the system changes. The protagonists are motivated to retaliate in different ways. The short stories *Resignation* and *The Masters* are indeed an eye-opener to the struggles of the subaltern.

Key words: Subaltern, Marginalized, Zamindari, Communal, Feudal, Bourgeois, Retaliation

Power struggles in one form or another have been commonly found all through history, all over the world. It ranges from small units like a home to a larger one like nations. A common feature in all these is, one who has more power dominates over the one who has less power. The oppressed is sometimes passive. When they fight back, it gives impetus to other suffering communities. But very often the struggles of these groups go unnoticed and unrecorded.

Literature is a valuable tool for creating awareness. Raja Mutthirulandi comments on its potential thus:

In the present world of variety of tensions- individual, collective and cultural-literature, with all its form and genres, has the potential to offer us rescue and relief from life's tensions. Literature can also certainly cultivate a better understanding of human rights through critical evaluation of characters, analysis of scenario and examination of diverse voices heard there in. (v)

Basic human rights get denied very often. To expose the denial of human rights, literature is used effectively. All the historical movements throughout the world since early times- for freedom and equality have been cradles for the concepts of human rights. Jack Donnelly defines human rights as "the rights that one has, simply because one is human" (qtd.in Mutthirulandi 31).

In order to examine the sufferings of the subaltern of various kind and to study how they reacted, two Indian short stories have been chosen. The stories are *Resignation* by Prem Chand and *The Masters* by K.S. Duggal. They have been written in the regional languages and translated into English. They represent the whole of India and portray struggles from the pre-independence era to the contemporary struggles against terrorism in the border states of India.

Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. In Ashcroft's study the word 'subaltern' is used to refer to a group or a person who is marginalised by the power of high class people or any individual or group which dominates. The subaltern does not raise hands for his/her rights. It thrives where there is inequality. Inequality of any sort like power or position leads to one dominating the other individual or group. Because of the extreme power and authority held by the higher class people, the low class people suffered badly. What is the root cause of marginality? Waghmare has this answer: "I think inequality is the main cause of marginality" (16).

The three modes of power are the communal, the feudal and the bourgeois modes. The communal mode of power is found in the community. An individual is important only as the part of the community. The authority may be exercised through a council of elders or of leading families, or even by a chief patriarch. In reality the power rests in the whole community. The officials or councils are no more than mere functionaries. If anyone breaks

the communal understanding or codes of conduct they could be excommunicated. “The feudal mode of power is characterized fundamentally by sheer superiority of physical force, i.e. a relationship of domination. It is founded on conquest or some other means of physical subordination of a subject population” (Chatterjee 317).

There may be slaves who toil for their masters and themselves. There may be free peasantry who would pay taxes periodically. In between there could be various degrees of freedom controlled by masters. “Next in the bourgeois mode of power, unlike in the feudal, the non-producers, who are the capitalists dominate over the producers who are wage labourers. The manifestation of power and the control over the labour is done through securing the rights of property and operation of the market” (Chatterjee 318).

Both the stories chosen exemplify these modes of power which result in innumerable suffering. *Resignation* and *The Masters* show how the feudal mode of power which is invested in one group leads to inhuman treatment of the powerless. The stories focus the pre-independence days.

Resignation shows a situation where the suffering is fundamentally caused by sheer superiority of physical force, i.e. a relationship of domination. In this, Fateh Chand, the office clerk is heavily dominated by the sahib, the manager. The manager, by virtue of being an Englishman, feels doubly superior. Years of working under him has made Fateh Chand passive. The job of an office clerk itself can contribute to the passivity. Prem Chand writes,

The office clerk is a dumb animal. Frown at a workman and he will frown back, swear at a coolie and he will throw off his load, insult a beggar and he will find a way of making you feel small; even a donkey will kick up his hind legs if you torment him too long. But not the office clerk. Frown at him, snub him, insult him, hit him, he will bear it all in silence. (31)

Fateh Chand is treated inhumanly. His space is invaded and his dignity is threatened. After Fateh Chand returns from his office, the Sahib sends a chaprasi to ask him to bring a file from the office. After - office hours do not belong to him and yet he orders because “He was drunk with power” (37). Fateh Chand is very tired and when he is late, the Sahib humiliates him. He asks the chaprasi to pull his ears. When the chaprasi declines, he catches both his ears and shakes him calling, “You swine you subordinate!” (37) and kicks him from behind. Fateh Chand wants to strike back, But he is afraid that the English man may shoot

him and as the English are the rulers, the sahib will escape with a fine of three or four hundred rupees. But Fateh Chand's family will starve. So he suffers indignity.

The Masters also shows the Feudal mode of power. This story reveals the suffering of the ordinary people in the pre-independence days when the Zamindari system prevailed. Before independence British rulers had given Zamindars privileges. The peasants were like slaves. Zamindars were called 'masters'. About the Zamindars Daggal writes:

Their cattle could graze in any field. They could ask anyone in the street to do anything and it had to be done. Their evil eyes could fall on any young girl and none could protest [...] Anything, which the Zamindar wanted could have to go to him as a gift, if he as much as hinted at it. Why, if one of their dogs went by in the street, the people would get up and stand! Their joy was the joy of the village and if they were unhappy the entire village had to go sad. For, were they not the Masters, the privileged ones? (46)

All these changed when India became independent. India became a democracy and every one in theory was equal and the common man was empowered by the voting right. But unfortunately elected rulers blindly followed their former rules once they had come to power. The narrator's wife decided to vote for one who would arrange to clean the drain in front of their house, sweep the streets and remove the refuse that breed germs and cause sickness. But no one called on her. She had no chance to give her ideas. The agents of the candidates dragged the voters into rickshaws to take them to the booth that was only three hundred yards away.

Both Fateh Chand and the common folk of Punjab have something in common. They have been robbed of their rights they ought to have as human beings. They have been forced to the margin and hence be called 'subaltern'. Crushed by the iron hand of the dominant power, the plight is pathetic. When the subaltern suffer for generations together, they learn to live or merely to exist in the harsh world around them. To rebel in any form would mean total disaster "for his subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion and made tolerable- and even desirable- by tradition (Guha 1).

The protagonists of the stories- the Indian office clerk under the British Sahib during colonial times and the common man struggling under the Zamindari system are presented in a context when they cannot but retaliate. *Resignation* shows an individual retaliating. *The*

Masters shows the resultant condition of a big retaliation - the independence struggle of India. Fateh Chand means, 'The Moon of Victory'. But like 'The Slave of Defeat' he faced all the problems in his office. Though his sahib ill treated him he took it as part of life and bore it all in silence. He was afraid to retaliate because he depended on the sahib for his livelihood. When the drunken sahib asks him to take a file from the office and insults and assaults him, he goes home asking himself, "could he not at least have given him a piece of his mind? Why had he not taken off his shoe and hit him in the face?" (37)

Fateh Chand is spurred to action by his wife Shardha. He tells a lie that he beat the Englishman with his shoe. She is thrilled. When he says, that he may be punished or the sahib would have shot him, she boldly replies, "Never Mind, you'll see now, no English officer will dare to treat his subordinates like that [...]The biggest thing for a man is to keep honour; if you lose your honour you don't deserve to look after your children. Since you have beaten that devil, I am proud of you" (39, 40). Fateh Chand goes back to the sahib and brandishing a stick, makes him ask for excuse. He even gives a blow on his bare head and makes him promise that he would never swear at one. This gives him a sense of victory. Though it is individual triumph it is a colonised man striking back at his coloniser.

The Masters presents a picture of change from the old Zamindari system. India was under the control of the British. At that time the ordinary people worked as slaves for the Zamindars. According to the law the people paid tax to the Government. But the tax will go to the Zamindar's pocket. The girls could not come to the street freely. Their eyes looked at the girls badly. If Zamindar's dog came to the street the people would stand and respect them. But after the independence, the people's life style was changed. The ordinary people were freed from the Zamindars. The people had become so used to the system that at the time of parting the ordinary people cried.

Then the narrator settled in Amristar town. He lived next to a one-time prince. One day he walked in the garden and he heard a voice of a servant calling the little son of the prince 'Little Master'. Though the system had changed, practices die hard. The Independence struggle had brought about a change in the whole system. Princes came to dwell alongside the common people. Common people had power because they could vote and choose whom they wanted to have as their leader. But the idea of 'master' does not go away. In the mind of the subalterns the power is not distributed. Whoever rules becomes the master.

The story shows the fear that the white Khadi-clad figure asking votes with folded hands may become a master someday.

The marginalized groups are distanced from the power centres. Even the Welfare Committees can be blind to their suffering and the protectors like police can be deaf to their cry. The position of the authority changes when the system changes. But it does not assure equality and fraternity. Even though, the person is elected by the people in a democratic set up, there is the danger of him thinking of himself as he power centre and start again to dominate the common people. If people are ignorant corruption can do the same harm. Voters can be coaxed, votes can be bought, essential commodities can be freezed from the market and the system of wage less labour can go on as found in the stories.

The protagonists are motivated to retaliate in different ways. External support initiates the fight sometimes. To retaliate one should have a strong mind. The Independence struggle has been successful to change the system itself. Because India became a democracy Zamindari system, monarchy and such could be abolished and the royalty came to live with the commoners. The short stories *Resignation* and *The Masters* are indeed an eye-opener to the struggles of the subaltern.

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