

## Gender Discrimination - A Search for Identity

**Dr. (Mrs.) Kanna Muthiah, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sadakathullah Appa College, Tirunelveli, India.*

This paper highlights on Women's Resistance: The struggle from the margin towards the centre based on the critical Reading of K.Chinnappa Bharathi's "Thirst". Even in the present scenario somewhere in a corner, in some remote village in India, caste has its evil eye upon a particular community. People are marginalised in the name of caste. This critical Reading of K.Chinnappa Bharathi's novel "Thirst" highlights on two major issues.

1. The role of women, especially the down trodden
2. The lower caste people especially women of that society and their struggle from the margin towards the centre fighting for their identity.

K.Chinnappa Bharathi belongs to the school of committed writers of the dalit literature. His personal experience has helped him to write in an authentic manner the struggles of the untouchables and the life of the toiling masses who work as bonded labourers or almost like slaves in the fields of the landlords and the zamindars who exploited them. Born in a backward village, Ponneripatti in North Tamil Nadu, Chinnappa Bharathi has succeeded in picturing the life of the hill tribes living far and away from the modern world. Chinnappa was highly influenced by the poems of Subramania Bharathi. As a token of respect he has added the suffix "Bharathi" to his original name Chinnappan.

Prominent Indian writers have taken the issues and problems of Harijans and the down - trodden people. The social bounds are so rigid that any attempt by these people to raise their voice of protest is silenced with the heavy hands of the upper caste people. Bharathi in his novel "Thirst" brings to light the sufferings of these people. Indian womanhood has been conceived as a new changing stereotype in terms of the mythical and religious codifications of women as divine and mother archetype. But women have not taken easily to reconcile themselves with their marginalised situations and they attempt to transgress the codes of conventions laid down by patriarchal male- dominated society.

"Women in India are still caught between feudal values and style of life and the fast approaching 'new life', caught between the burden of the home and the workplace, child bearing, mothering, struggling with conventions, women have to first survive". (Dr.Yashodara Bhut; Changing Images of Women - An Introduction 13)

Forced into a male-dominated society and its heartless customs and partial and loaded world of values, for the women, life has been a great struggle for survival. Her freedom to be born, to eat and to live on this earth has been constantly curtailed. Practices like female infanticide have denied birth to many female babies. Deliberate malnourishment has killed many girl children the institution called marriage considered her a less equal partner to man. Sometimes in the name of dead husband they have been forced to burn on funeral pyres. The

persecution on gender basis has been a continuous and total process. Women have been marginalised in family, community and society. Their entry points to power centres have been barred. And yet the struggle continues, thanks to the preserving women and some sympathetic men like the writers and thinkers who consider them as God, only when there is equality for men and women. In Chinnappa Bharathi we find a sympathetic writer.

Dalit writers write about the plight of down trodden women. Their works are authentic document, of their search for identity. Women organisations are least bothered about the rights of the working class women in rural villages. Indian women are alienated from society like the Blacks of Africa and are denied of even basic needs and privileges in society. As Prema Nanda Kumar says,

"For several centuries, women have been tortured by religious observation and social marginalism." (Image of woman in Tamil Literature P.129)

Woman struggles to claim her individual status in a rigid patriarchal society, where she is sexually exploited and ruined. The case of untouchable women is still worse and they are the one exploited to the worst. The pitiable condition of women of India has been presented with sympathy by many writers such as K. Chinnappa Bharathi. Their works give vivid picture of humiliations women are subjected to. Even among the women the worst affected are the women from the lower strata in society, especially the so called "untouchables". The novel Thirst under investigations clearly shows how women are exploited on the name of caste. Chinnappa Bharathi's Thirst brings out the wretched condition of the poverty-stricken women who work on the fields of the landlord. They are physically and mentally tortured. Their social and economical conditions are pathetic and depressing. Chinnappa Bharathi's Thirst presents how women struggle to live in a male-dominated world. Bharathi's women are made of the ideal stuff. They look after the family, husband and children with dignity, love and compassion. Machi Sarat Babu's description of 'idle women' fits very well with Bharathi's women.

"Feminine ego enables a woman to do feminine duties. She knows the need of other people instinctively. She looks after them. She brings up children and takes care of people, especially her man. She is soft, weak, kind and caring. She is patient and tolerate. She is submissive, adaptable and obedient. She does the free labour of house work. She need not think rationally and logically She need not understand complex things, But she needs to be beautiful and graceful.—" (Manchi Sarat Babu 13)

Among women characters in Thirst, the character of Marakkal is notable and significant. She is the wife of Marappan. A poor farmhand both of them have to work for their living. She is sensitive to the moment each took out the frustration of toil and weariness in her husband. She knew how to tackle hard situations and this capacity has enabled her to maintain good relationship with her husband despite all sorts of pressures and tensions in the family. A farm worker's wife has to be strong, brave, and resilient and should cheer up her husband from topple. Bharathi has given the following portrait of Marakkal:

"She was the embodiment of hard toil, however much she bathed and kept her body clean, every day the smell of the seasonal crops and earth did issue forth from her body. Her

thoughts and talk would always be about the fields and the crops. One could never see her sitting relaxed enjoying a meal in leisure. She would mix up the food in and eat it in a hurry standing all the while, eating leisurely she thought, would be wasting time" (Thirst 4-5).

Marakkal always wanted to work fast and efficiently. She would often say, "Even the crop would be against those who shy away from work" (Thirst 9). This shows her sincerity in work. Marakkal does all the household duties herself She gets up early in the morning, feeds the buffalo with cotton seed solution and clears the floor and the threshold also with Cow dung after sweeping. She then cleans the vessel and prepares *cholam* sauce. Then she wakes up her husband and children. She would often say, "A little delay will mean great disaster" (Thirst 6). Marakkal is presented as a typical village women, hard working at home and fields and God-fearing and devoted to woman her husband and children. She dedicates her life for the sake of the family.

"Marakkal has lost her charm apparently due to too much drudgery and looked older than her age. Long ears with holes for wearing gold studs, the upper part of the ear folded to wear another ornament, slightly wrinkled face. With her 16 orbit saris raised and touched at the waist with the loose end tied around the waist to enable her work truly, she appeared semi nude" (Thirst 3).

Bharathi's Marakkal is an embodiment of all virtues and duties of a loving wife and a caring mother."One peculiarity of the Images of women" says, Mary Ann Fergusson,

"Throughout history, social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes, another way of putting this would be to say that in every age women has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object their roles in relationship to men." (4-5)

In India both men and women writers have seen women in these relationships. Sociologists regard India as a traditionally male -dominated society where individual rights are subordinated to group or social role expectations. In these roles, personality must not dominate the roles assigned in the societal frame work. Consequently in such a set up, purely social, platonic or intellectual relationship between man and woman becomes nearly impossible. A women's individual self has very little recognition and suffers self-effacement in her normal way of life. Indian woman to, so as a part of that set up, has accepted it and lived with it for ages, which still continues in rural villages.

K. Chinnappa Bharathi in Thirst exposes this pitiable condition of woman, through the character of Palaniammal, the eldest daughter of Marakkal. In spite of heavy debts, her marriage takes place without any problem. Her mother-in-law Karuppai is of dominating character and as soon as Palaniammal had entered the house the first day, she assigned her a lot of work. Palaniammal did the best of her ability to satisfy her mother-in-law. The exact feeling of a mother-in-law is well brought out by Bharathi thus:

"The mother-in-law was overjoyed. The daughter-in-law has submitted to her even at the first instance. She had deliberately pointed out a fault. But the daughter-in-law has not argued" (Thirst 66).

This clearly shows that Karuppai had the right to pull up her daughter-in-law even on trivial matters. Karuppai's true nature comes out when she starts to harass Palaniammal, for she

had expected Palaniammal would bring twice the dowry she had given to her daughter. The only thing that made her happy was the arrival of the grandson. Once the fight between Karuppayi and Palaniammal rose to heights and Karuppayi took a broom stick in her hand and beat her. Palaniammal did not expect this and she was extremely patient. People who were around said, "Whatever be the exchange of words, should you beat her with the broomstick?" They grabbed the broomstick from her hand and threw it away" (Thirst 130).

Palaniammal attempts to hang herself. People nearby rush and saved her. She decides to live for her child. Karuppayi felt that one son was enough for her daughter-in-law. Palaniammal's husband also feels so and as she is conceived again, and she is sent to her mother's house to abort the child.

In the portrayal of Palaniammal, we find a range of persecution that have to be faced by women in the course of her life. Most of them spring from the institution of marriage. Indian system of joint family living engenders a situation in which mother-in-law, persecuted sole of yesterdays and tries to pass on her pangs to the daughter-in-law. Palaniammal is abused ,beaten and her right to motherhood infringed upon. She is even driven commit suicide. If Marakkal is an embodiment of all virtues of stoic sufferings, in Palaniammal Bharathi portrays the archetypal suffering.

As the people in the village are illiterates, they believe in superstitions and other things. They are not taken to the doctors even if they are seriously ill. All they do is they strongly believe in native doctor like Komali who alone can treat man and cattle alike for their ailments and prescribe medicine. A woman who was considered to be expert in abortion in the village is summoned to abort the child of Palaniammal. Soon after the treatment Palaniammal is in the grip of pain and she could not bear the suffering, and as a result she dies.

The pangs and pains are common to all rural women in Tamil Nadu. But the Harijan woman has to face much pains, tortures and humiliations. Bharathi highlights one incident, which details the cruelty handed out to the outcast woman of Tamil Nadu Villages. The humiliation done to Valli is the worst of any fortunes. After her marriage with Kathaan, they go to the landlord to seek his blessings as it was the usual procedure, for a newly wedded couple. The landlord is attracted by her beauty and says: "Send her here to gather cow dung" (Thirst 191). When Kathaan expresses his unwillingness to send his newly married wife Valli to the landlord, his mother consoles him: "We are condemned to such a life. A pip's fortune is the filthy mire; to the low class man it is the second hand stuff. That is his lot" (Thirst 191).

Kathaan, for the fault of being in service of the landlord, cannot deny the rottenness of the landlord. Valli the poor woman has to undergo a wretched life. Marriage and institutional rights do not hold well when it comes to 'low caste woman'. Valli is much more exploited than Palaniammal.

Bharathi's women characters are drawn from the poor peasants. His Palaniammal, Marakkal, Valli and Papal are drawn from the poor peasant community. Their life of toil and sufferings are pictured well by Bharathi. But in the case of dalit women like Valli, the suffering is to the core. They are denied of their individuality and discriminated not only in terms of gender

but also in caste. The most important point to be observed in the characterisation of Chinnappa Bharathi is that his woman characters suffer but they don't resist. They meekly yield to the circumstances in which they live and suffer insult or death without any resistance. Bharathi's portrayal of women deals with two worlds of destitution and poverty, where women are accepted in her elemental rules; and of upper class avarice and debauchery where her beauty and image are exploited.

#### **Works Cited**

- Bharathi, K.Chinnappa: Thirst. Trans. S.Visvesaran, Sivagangai: Selma Books, 1993.
- Fergusson, Ann, Mary. Images of Women in Literature, Houghton: Mifflin co. Boston.1962.
- Namboodari, E.M .S. On Chinnappa Bharathi's Novels –A Critical Study. Sivagangai: Selma Books, 1996.
- Narasimhaiah, C.D Foreword, The Images of Women in Indian Literature. Ed. Yashodha Bhat, Associate Ed. New Delhi: D.K. Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.,1993.