



Caste and Gender: *Kusumabale* as a Tale of Coexisting Oppression and Resistance

Arunima A V

Abstract

The politics of caste finds voice in literary narratives in numerous ways. Some of the usual trends are where there is a heart-wrenching tale of oppression, exploitation and a gruesome end. However, some narratives capture the struggle, rebellion, and claim of rights. Nevertheless, these stories conflict with the ground reality, which is always an entanglement of oppression and resistance. Oppressed people make a way for their humiliation or they are sometimes indifferent to the existing injustice in certain situations. On the contrary, the same people resist and raise their voices in certain other situations. In addition to it, the way some of them resist is by flouting the moral rules. The unconventional modes of resistance and oppressive acts that co-occur are the peculiarity of the novel *Kusumabale*. The writer captures reality in the garb of magical realism and challenges the traditional narratives of caste and gender. This paper aims to analyze the oppressive and resistive acts in the novel using the theories of Bourdieu and Foucault. It will be an attempt to discern power dynamics encapsulated in the novel.

Keywords: Oppression, Resistance, Habitus, Internalized Dispositions, Structural Crisis.

Kusumabale is a novel that departs from the conventional narrative style and achieves an impact by describing social reality through mythical and fantastic retellings and events. Dalit writings aroused empathy and pity by committing to realism, they questioned the dominant powers and dared the oppressive forces of Brahminical hegemony by exposing the injustice unapologetically. Devanoora Mahadeva does not adhere to the traditional commitment of Dalit literature to hyperrealism. He enchants the readers with magical realism and an engrossing non-linear narrative. *Kusumabale* is a story about power, resistance and the resultant domination of one group over the other. In the article, “The Embodiment of Caste: Oppression, Protest and Change” Hugh Gorrington and Irene Rafanell (2007) define caste as “a birth status group operating according to three basic principles: hierarchy, endogamous separation and an interdependent division of labour.” (p. 102) The novel does not approach the political scenario of casteism by contextualizing the general concept in which the absolute power is in the hands of the upper castes, rather it unravels a world of discrimination where power and resistance coexist. The novel poses the following questions 1) To what extent the Dalits themselves are complicit in the crimes against them? 2) Where does the dominant power reassert its forces and how? 3) How does the powerless resist the powerful in certain situations? These questions are about both caste and gender. Dalit women are doubly oppressed and they are excluded from the public domain. *Kusumabale* also looks at the gender aspects of power, resistance and transgressions. This paper will be an analysis of the power dynamics in the novel in terms of

caste and gender drawing upon the ideas of Foucault and Bourdieu.

Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* and *The Logic of Practice* puts forth this idea of habitus dispositions,

Habitus dispositions can be defined as social in origin, acquired in infancy, embodied and durable, transposable, hierarchical and reproductive of the social context within which they originated. Dispositions frame subsequent activity and homogenize individuals exposed to the same local circumstances. They underpin the patterned nature of the collective activity and thus constitute group boundaries and group consciousness. Most importantly, they are embedded in the non-reflexive realm of individuals' activity and, thus, acquire a durable nature that perpetuates the reproduction of the social system. (Bourdieu, 1979, as cited in Gorringer and Rafanell, 2007, p. 100)

Gorringer and Rafanell (2007) argue that the caste habitus is sustained through these internalized dispositions. (p. 105) "Ways of thinking, perspectives on the world, patterns of perception, and the principles of judgement and values at work" all go into habitus. (Krais and Williams, 2000, p. 56) Thus, the caste habitus produces individuals who internalize a certain set of rules. Consequently, the hierarchies and prejudices are deemed natural and accurate respectively. According to Bourdieu (1979), a social transformation takes place only in case of a structural crisis. (as cited in Gorringer and Rafanell, p. 106) This structural crisis is exemplified in two instances in the novel. There was a time when Dalits could not interact directly with the people of the upper castes. When education was made compulsory for all, there came a situation where the people of the upper castes had to interact or share the same space with the people of the lower castes. Even though it came with resistance from the people of upper castes and led to the humiliation of the untouchables in educational institutions, it created a structural crisis in the caste habitus. Channa reading an old English paper while waiting for a bus is the outcome of this structural change. This is a counter image to the typical image of an uneducated and uncivilized Dalit. The Brahmin teacher, Guru Madhvacharya, who does not even have the bus fare and is struggling to make ends meet with his pension, infringes the standard norms, with his willingness to accept the bus fare from his Madiga student, Channa. However, this does not dismantle the caste habitus completely and the discriminatory attitude persists with the unwavering internalized dispositions. For instance, his teacher unabashedly expresses his casteism to Channa, when he frowns and talks disgustingly of a Brahmin girl who eloped with a Madiga and had a baby. Internalization of caste from a young age is not sufficient, it has to be reconstituted through actions for the caste to survive. The teacher who claims that caste does not bother him makes casteist remarks about Channa. Caste discrimination takes a new form when the teacher considers Channa to be of a 'superior sort' who should not have been born into the lower caste. Here, the inferiority of the caste is restored because the teacher thinks that education should be a domain of the upper castes and even if the people of the lower castes get educated, it is not something natural to them. Therefore, the structural crisis did not eliminate the caste differences, rather caste got re-established through the actions. The circumstance of compulsory interaction that the education created did bring changes but the teacher reconstituted it by making it clear that education is superior and cannot be a natural attribute of a Dalit. Hence, the caste habitus cannot be maintained only by the dispositions acquired in infancy, it is reconstituted every time and "domination is an ongoing process of power relationships that operate through bodies and, thus minds". (Gorringer and Rafanell, 2007, p. 101)

Another instance of structural crisis is when Nagaraju, the educated Dalit leader comes

to the rescue of Garesidda. Nagaraju is educated; therefore, the powerful people call him “Saar”, a localized version of “Sir”. They urge Nagaraju to advise Garesidda and reprimand him for his actions. They seek justice from Nagaraju and talk in terms of morality. Dalits were supposed to bow down to the privileged, but here, Nagaraju has the power of decision-making. This shift in the attitude of the powerful is brought about by education. They are forced to accept the sensibility and awareness of an educated man. However, Garesidda receives a brutal flogging for plucking sixteen coconuts. Garesidda represents the underprivileged section who are powerless that they can only resort to immoral means to resist or subvert the oppressive system. This creates a morally ambiguous situation where the pertinent question is: to what extent can one steal to quench one’s thirst? Mahadeva urges us to ponder on the thin boundary that separates the act of stealing for need and stealing for power. Garesidda, who stole the coconuts, cunningly settles the issue by offering the amount that those who beat him gave as compensation for their cruel act. Garesidda enjoys a sense of victory through this act, which is his only weapon against the oppressive system. On the one hand, the people of power pay heed to Nagaraju who is a Dalit, which is a sign of social transformation. On the other hand, Garesidda takes advantage of it and gets away with the coconuts. Mahadeva does not portray Garesidda as innocent but the power that the people of the upper castes exercised to flog him is what the writer wants the readers to notice. He voices it through Nagaraju, who says they should have handed him to the police instead of flogging him. Thus, the writer highlights the power they had to act according to their whims when they are wronged, foreshadowing the murder of Channa, where they exercised their full power to take one’s life. Through Nagaraju, the writer shows how a social transformation could happen through a structural crisis in caste habitus i.e., education. Through Garesidda he shows how power is reconstituted through actions because the flogging is a warning to others so that no one dares to transgress again. It is an act of assertion of power when it is threatened by a Dalit (socially inferior). In addition, this incident sheds light on the fact that the oppressed resort to subversive ways to fight against domination.

Foucault (1978) in *History of Sexuality* says,

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always “inside” power, there is no “escaping” it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence, there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead, there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (p. 95-96)

Resistance in the form of Dalit Sangh exemplifies the above-mentioned concept of Foucault. Rather than the major resistances, there are minor and spontaneous resistances. Garesidda’s subversive ways are a form of resistance against the domination of the wealthy. Nagaraju’s opinions and Channa’s act of changing his name to Channarasa are other elements of resistance in the novel. The female characters are symbols of resistance beginning with Akkamadevi, who is said to have had a relationship with a bonded servant and gave birth to Yaada. Her resistance

appears in the guise of inter-caste intimacy and the history repeats with Kusumabale and Channa. Akkamadevi is portrayed as a strong mother who fights alone to bring up her child. She is not resistance personified and exhibits a sense of inferiority because she begs her brother-in-law who she considers equal to Lord Siva. She says that she is willing to drink the water that has washed his feet. (Mahadeva, 2015, p. 18) The circumstances force her to accept an inferior position which is symbolic violence according to Bourdieu. Beate Kraus and Jennifer Marston William (2000) in their article "The Gender Relationship in Bourdieu's Sociology" elucidate that,

An essential element of symbolic violence thus lies in the fact that the oppressed- in this case, women- must identify themselves as inferior by incorporating the prevailing order. Domination also means that the dominant adopts the "prevailing opinion", the worldview developed by the dominant, and along with it, a self-image shaped by the dominant. Men's view of women- their positioning of the male as universal and of the female as particular, as deviant- and dichotomies and classifications that have developed from this vision- also determine women's thinking and perception. (p. 59)

Hence, Akkamadevi's self-deprecating attitude can be viewed as a consequence of symbolic violence. Moreover, the novel gives us the impression that motherhood gives women the power which they otherwise lack. Motherhood is what they long for with no other power in society. Turamma and Kempri who resort to spirituality and rituals to save the child from fate are examples. Eerie is also portrayed as a mother who suffers for her child. "She begs and borrows money from every possible source and prepares every item of the festive cornucopia". (Ramamoorthy, 1991, p. 49) Ramamoorthy (1991) in his review *Tale of Mothers* says,

As truly as Maurya of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, who symbolically receives every child back to her womb as she buries it in the womb of the earth, does Iri recover her smiling child back into her body as it were, as she wears the smile of the dead child on her still face. Who knows her child may yet return, for the mother is alive. (p. 50)

In this passage, Ramamoorthy glorifies Eerie's motherhood. In the case of Kusuma, it is through physical intimacy with the one she loves and bearing his child, that she asserts her power. It is a transgression which Brahminical supremacists cannot let happen. The mixing of blood is the most inadmissible and profane act and Channa's murder is the gruesome consequence of that act. According to Polanki Ramamoorthy (1991), "*Kusumabale* imaginatively realises the prophecy that the woman shall fulfil her biological destiny of motherhood of bearing, rearing and propagating, and that shall annihilate any social barrier that seeks to thwart her destiny". (p. 52) On the one hand, women have no other options but to hold on to the only power, which is motherhood, on the other hand, women's role is reduced to motherhood and hence, they are given a marginal status. Ramamoorthy's glorification of motherhood as their only source of power can be also regarded as a by-product of patriarchal domination.

Bhagavathy, a Brahmin woman, and daughter of the teacher in realizing her desire for Amasa who is a Dalit assert a form of power devoid of maternal instinct. She realizes that she is an outcaste for the three days while she is menstruating and he is also an outcaste. She describes it as "uncleanness meeting uncleanness". This realization is a form of resistance that Mahadeva attempts to draw our attention to. It has neither the holiness of motherhood nor the divinity of love, it is carnal and hence, radical.

When Kusuma is tortured by the magicians one group after the other, she continues

wailing despite them inflicting pain on her. The patriarchal society attempts to brutally silence the voice of the woman. Her hair being torn away and being beaten by the serpent cane are violent and symbolic expressions of the power of a male-dominated society forced upon a woman.

And then

mantrics from all over, came there-eight men
and seeing Kusuma's hairless head
tch! tch! their hands were ties, and
hearing the mutterings from Kusuma's tongue
tch! tch! they were tongue tied

Then

That illiterate Kusuma in French, she said,
'Je veux etre dans ma maison'

'I want to be in my home, be in my home,' she said. (Mahadeva, 2015, p. 114)

Kusuma's statement establishes that violence cannot silence the voice of an agonized and furious woman. Her fury is against the power of the caste that murdered her lover, Channa. Her loss is immense that she resists the power that strives to rob her of her voice. Foucault (1975) in *Discipline and Punish* rejects the idea that the oppressed bodies are social dopes, "rather than blindly following internalized dispositional bodily modes of behaviour, Foucault conceives of bodies that are conscious of being manipulated, trained, tortured and so on". (as cited in Gorringer and Rafanell, 2007, p. 101) Kusuma's final statement can be read as an expression of resistance in the wake of awakening consciousness of being oppressed and dominated.

Marianne Keppens and Jakob De Roover (2020) point out in the article "The Brahmin, the Aryan and the Powers of the Priestly Class: Puzzles in the Study of Indian Religion", that the mystery of the Brahminical power is in their authority over rituals. They acted as a connecting link between the human realm and the cosmic realm. Their command over Sanskrit (the language of Gods) added to the mysterious aura of their powers. The rituals were a "pre-scientific science", "based on the belief of magical-thinking man could by means of certain spells and acts, and especially through their systematized form in the ritual, influence invisible powers". (Keppens and Roover, 2020, p. 3) It was a man's domain but in the novel *Kusumabale*, ritual is a significant aspect and it is dealt with by Turamma, a woman. Her battle with fate to save her daughter's child is a subversion of the traditional images of Brahminical rituals. It is a counter-narrative to the story of the Brahminical domination of the supernatural. The mantrics that come to tame Kusuma are all men, hence, Turamma's magical power is an answer to the Brahminical patriarchy and an instance, where the powerless become powerful.

Devanoora Mahadeva has employed magical realism with lamp spirits, talking bedstead, and personified fate and worry. It is worth noticing that the gossiping lamp spirits are females and the storytelling bedstead is also a female. What are the implications of that? Women are considered to be the gossiping gender. This folktale reasserts this traditional role, however, it can also be read as the parallel world that women create to let out their inner world's narratives which have no respect or value in the male-dominated society. Women's world is largely domestic and their concerns are also limited due to the lack of exposure. The lamp spirits who represent each household signify the freedom that they get when they cross the boundaries of domesticity. Gossip is a coping mechanism through which they voice their opinions. Lamp spirits are given the attributes of the house to which they belong. When Jothamma of the village headman's house is portrayed as authoritative, Jothamma of Brahmin's house is portrayed as dismissive. The gathering of the lamp spirits from across the castes showcases a disruption of the caste habitus. They are not mere spirits, who wander about and

gossip, they have powers to possess someone's body and make them do what they want. The body of the Mari temple, a gathering, united to fight against caste discrimination, listened to Kuriyaiah who was possessed by Jothamma. A female spirit gaining control over a male body and dictating his words and actions marks a shift in the conventional power dynamics. In real society, a woman would never have access to this power to control a man. The novel describes the spirits as enjoying the power they have and the Jothamma laughs thinking about what she has made Kuriyaiah say. The major speakers of the body of the Mari temple were also men. The society that was depicted in *Kusumabale* had not progressed much for a woman to address such a meeting, even though, there were women as listeners.

In addition to that, this particular episode evokes questions related to caste and gender. The fact that those words were said by the spirit and not Kuriyaiah himself is political. Women are presented as figures lacking agency in his (Jothamma's) arguments. It is a justification of why caste discrimination existed directing to the crux of the novel, i.e., the inter-caste intimacy. It establishes the fact that even the untouchables would not tolerate this misdeed. The rationale of the argument is baseless and it is presented as humour which demands serious attention. This scene attempts to trivialize the injustice that has been taking place and also picturizes women as properties lacking agency. The power that men had over women and how that power is internalized by a female spirit and is reproduced in a language of patriarchy is explicit in these words,

Those rogues from among our forefathers.... they picked on every chance to carry them off. Every wife and woman of the upper-caste man that pleased their eyes! Where to? To the Valleys! Get it? Kept them for days.... then returned with them. The slaves.... Tell me now, why was it so, and not otherwise? All said and done, those upper-caste men were good fellows. Tolerant. Think these worthies were named the upper caste for nothing? (Mahadeva, 2015, p. 96)

His arguments are not factual or logical but the actuality to which the author is pointing is the intolerance of the men of upper castes. Even though it is the magic of a female lamp spirit, the language that Kuriyaiah uses is highly masculine. This can be interpreted as an instance of symbolic violence or as a creative attempt of the writer to bring in an element of the fantastic and humour. It draws our attention to the question of morality and justice regarding inter-caste intimacy which is the locus of the conflict in the novel. At the heart of the novel is the murder of Channa. The novel by describing the power relations between different castes and genders concludes that despite resistance there is always a dominant group that instils fear and asserts power through their actions. It is continuously reconstituted to prevent a breach in the power relation between the upper castes and the lower castes. Dalit Sangh could do nothing about Channa's murder and it is a testament to the limitations of their resistance. They weave stories about Channa, who is dead. They imagine that Channa is leading a happy and luxurious life in Bombay. The caste habitus and their internalized dispositions forbid them from questioning this atrocity. The illicit affair with an upper-caste woman is not like stealing coconuts and they subconsciously know that it is impermissible. Their minds are indoctrinated with this notion that nothing can be done against the powerful. Even though the Dalit Sangh protests and strives to give up the bonded labour, Channa's murder testifies that the relative power of Sangh over the upper caste is negligible.

In Foucauldian terms, Channa's death is an instance of reconstitution of power through the act of killing in the face of a transgression of the norms set by the power structure. The complicity of the untouchables in this act is due to their helpless and powerless situation. They make up beautiful stories about Channa to evade the bitter truth. The resistance exhibited by

Garesidda, Nagaraju and Kisnappa can also end up in a similar situation. The fact that Garesidda was flogged cruelly is a testament to that. Power is not unidirectional and as Foucault says where there is power there is resistance. In the wake of a protest, the powerful reinstate their power through violence. Drawing upon the ideas of Bourdieu, a social transformation is brought about by the structural crisis in the habitus (caste habitus in this case). In *Kusumabale* education makes this structural crisis possible with the rigid walls of caste hierarchy yielding to the power of knowledge and awareness. However, the murder of Channa and their inability to respond to it prove that their resistance against the dominant power is insufficient.

In terms of gender, the characters in the novel resist but conform to the traditional roles. Kusuma's relentless wrath and pain are her resistance against casteism and patriarchy. Other characters like Akkamadevi and Kempri realize their power through motherhood. It is a reductive approach but the novel strives to portray the reality of women who are still not exposed to the outside world of knowledge, thus, depicting the actualization of symbolic violence. Mantrics are the personifications of the patriarchal power, who inflict pain on Kusuma to suppress her rebellion. *Kusumabale* is, therefore, a story of power and resistance and the novelist elucidates how the dominant power is reinforced through violence against the dominated. Dominant power is restored despite the structural crisis in the habitus and resistance as exemplified in the novel. Hence, *Kusumabale* is an endeavour to reaffirm the necessity of strong resistance to uprooting the forces of oppressive dominant powers.

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Bio-note

Arunima A V is a research scholar in the Department of English Literature at English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. She completed her Master's degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her research interests are cognitive literary studies, medical humanities, caste, and gender.

Email: arunimaavasudevan@gmail.com

