

Chronicling the Slum-subaltern: A Reading of KaveryNambisan's *The Story that Must not be Told*

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ABSTRACT

*The novelist as a social chronicler records the social, cultural, political and economic lives of the people who inhabit a society. From the perspective of Subaltern studies, the colonialist and nationalist approaches have assigned the subaltern only secondary roles in history. Subaltern theory stresses that the dominating class imposes rules on the 'other' who have lost their voice on account of their race, class or gender. It therefore becomes crucial that their small voices be made audible. My endeavour in this paper is to read KaveryNambisan's *The Story that Must not be Told* as an interesting social document that chronicles the deplorable conditions of the life and struggle of a distinct subaltern group who constitute the majority of the urban Indian population-the slum dwellers. Slums have become a universally accepted reality today and an inevitable phenomenon accompanying urban growth in all countries.*

Keywords: *Subaltern, Slum-dwellers, Rural-urban migration, Population explosion, Deplorable living conditions, Inevitable phenomenon.*

The novelist as a social chronicler records the social cultural, political and economic lives of the people who inhabit a society. In Indian English literature, as elsewhere, novelists have used "imaginative fiction as a social act in order to communicate the human angst . . . impacted by industrialization, market economy, rise of individualism, quest for selfhood and conflicts arising out of societal or systematic exploitation" (Dasan 19-20). The past few decades have seen the emergence of divergent voices in literature which includes writings from the margins like women's writings, dalit writings, transgender writings, diaspora writings and writings on migrations, displacements and globalisation. These marginal narratives could be grouped under subaltern literature which generates counter discourses to the prevailing dominant discourses and historiography. In the post-colonial scenario, the Gramscian term 'subaltern' gets a wider perspective as it refers to the third world countries and the marginalized groups in the society. Borrowing the term in the early 1980s, Marxist Indian revisionist historiographers use it to refer to all those "of inferior rank- "both men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals and the lowest strata of the urban sub proletariat" (Spivak 25). From the perspective of Subaltern Studies, the colonialist and nationalist approaches continue to be a form of elitist historiography that assigns the subaltern only secondary roles. This paper attempts to focus on a distinct subaltern group - the section of migrant labourers who inhabit the slums in our country and the stereotypes of poverty and misery associated with them.

Tracing the history of slums, David Howden remarks that "Slums have been part of human communities since Mesopotamia but our modern concept of segregated slums for the poor comes from the Industrial Revolution. The difference between then and now is a question of scale, with today's slum dwellers being one-in-three of all city dwellers." The term "slum household" describes "a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following: durable housing, sufficient living area, secure tenure and access to clean water and sanitation". The UN report states that this rapid growth of population and urbanisation are definitely creating a planet of slums which is expected to double by 2030 (Planet). Slums have become a universally accepted reality today and an inevitable phenomenon accompanying urban growth in countries like America, Sweden, Hong Kong and Singapore to name a few- all have this 'other' deplorable neighbourhood existing side by side its affluent society. In India, slums are known by different names- *gallies*, *juggi* and *jhompi* in Delhi and Mumbai, *cheries* in Madras, *keris* in Bangalore and *petas* in Andhra Pradesh ((Mohanty 37). Though various NGO's and Slum Improvement programmes (PMIUEP, NSDP, VAMBAY) have been implemented to alleviate these miserable lot, no substantial change has occurred in their lives.

The preoccupation with the poverty and squalor prevalent in the slums of England during the last two decades of the nineteenth century had found its way into the Victorian novel. Slum fiction, as it came to be called, quickly became an independent sub-genre, concerning itself with the murky aspects of contemporary urban life (Diniejko). This fiction has been much indebted to Charles Dickens's social novels and is believed to be pioneered by Walter Besant and George Gissing in the 1880s. Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *The Unclassed* (1884) and *The*

Nether World(1889) portray urban poverty and the depravity of the life of slum dwellers in London. It was later developed by Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Morrison and Somerset Maugham. The working class described in the slum novels represented the ‘other’ of the nation who were looked upon by the upper class with disgust and fear. Beginning with K.S Venkataramaini’s *Kandan, the Patriot*(1932) and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*(1935) and *Coolie*(1936), the Indian English novel too began discussing the case of the neglected and the downtrodden of society. Rohinton Mistry’s *The Fine Balance* also deals with the atrocities committed towards the deprived classes of society during the emergency period in India.

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My endeavour in this paper is to read Kavery Nambisan’s *The Story that Must not be Told* as an interesting social document that chronicles the deplorable conditions of the life of the slum subaltern. The publication of Nambisan’s novel coincides with that of Arvind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*(2008) and the celluloid bagger of eight Oscars-*The Slum Dog Millionaire*. What they share in common is that they narrate stories of the marginalised- the poor and destitute. Kavery Nambisan, the surgeon turned author in her work, *The Story that Must not be Told* (2010) captures the workings of a slum- Sitara, in Madras from her close contact with the life of the migrant labourers in Lonavala.

The slum, Sithara, initially a marshy area, became the dumping ground for industrial waste and municipal garbage. It is only natural that the swamp seemed the most convenient place for them to put up their gunny and palm leaf huts. Ironically, the name chosen by Nambisan for the slum bears no resemblance to its literal meaning. It is not “the dwelling place of stars” but “labouring men, women, children and screaming infants” (1) living in deplorable conditions. The setting of the novel closely reflects Dharavi, Asia’s largest slum. Sitara is “Dharavi’s thangachi. Little sister. A man from up north, with business in his bones, named it Sitara. Nachchattiram.”(50). The inhabitants comprise of people who are uprooted from their rural settings and forced to move to unknown cities for survival. They trust their future in the hands of a contractor who assures them work. Chellam and Ponnu migrate to the city in the hope of making it big and continue to live their demeaning existence. The other characters who inhabit Sitara include Swamy, the teacher who reaches school with the shreds of meat on his beard as he’s also a butcher, Prince, the doctor without a medical degree who runs the Sitara Multi-specialty Polyclinic, Tailorboy, Paneer Selvam, Baqua, the inscrutable fixer, Dayaratna, the don who decides the fate of the slum and sees it only as a vote bank for his party leaders.

Their journey from their village to the city endorses that the socio-psychological situation of the lower class remains unchanged. While the older generation cling on to their land, the young with little schooling and no experience are lured by the better prospects in the cities. . But poverty remains the fulcrum on which their lives continue to revolve as the cities are not able to absorb the large influx of new residents in a proper way. A.S. Narang argues that “the vulgar consumerism and the five-star culture of the dominant groups is in sharp contrast to the destitution of the masses who continue to be denied access to such basic needs as safe drinking water, minimum nutrition, employment, health care, education, housing and sewerage” (43). In their daily interactions, this urban poor comes into contact with people who have vastly different opportunities and lifestyles. This makes them acutely aware of their decrepit surroundings and they perceive these physical conditions as a humiliating reflection of their own worth. The attitude of the dominating class- be it the village or the city, remains unchanged. In the novel, it is only a wall that divides the multi-storeyed Vaibhav apartments where the upper middle class live and Sitara- the slum. The residents of Vaibhav depend on the slum to get their menial jobs done but care little for them as humans. The slum harbours their dreams and the grim realities shatter them. This struggle to clamber is nurtured in the dreams of Chellam and others. Chellam with his handsome looks, dreams of becoming a film star. Velu dreams of making it across the wall to a life in Vaibhav with his dream girl, Kanmani. Thatkan dreams of becoming a police officer and having a medal pinned on to his uniform by the President. The boy meets a tragic end as he misses a step while cleaning the sewage of the Boys school and goes all the way down. Senthia, a good student is forced to leave school and work as a housemaid to earn money for the family. The same grinding mill takes its toll on the next generation too. As they resign themselves to their fate, Chellam remarks: “Through the ages, there have been the rich and there have been the poor. God made the boundary. Very few are chosen to cross over.” (75)

The ever increasing poverty around makes an affluent middle or upper class man who has a moral and ethical side to him to help eradicate the existing conditions. The protagonist of the novel, Simon Jesukumar, the seventy-four-year-old widower who lives in Vaibhav apartments shares friendly relations with the boys, Velu and Thatkan who run errands for him. In his earnestness to help the slum children, he visits their slum and donates a water cooler to the slum school. The pathetic plight of the slum, makes him realise that these little acts of kindness achieve nothing. Nambisan espouses questions for introspection and action through the voice of Simon. Simon’s nagging guilt makes him wonder: Do they hate people like us? The disturbing experience he encounters in Sitara with

Baqua gives him food for thought: “The poor will not go away. There are too many of them. Looking for work, for food, for a place to live, a place to shit. And what do people like you, the Vaibhav people say? Stop dirtying our neighbourhood. You will soon ask the government to throw us out of here “(138). This gives him the mettle to stand up against the other residents of Vaibhav and speak for Sitara. Unfortunately, scheming politicians and governments care little for them and bulldoze their way into Sitara. “Sitara with its ornaments of tin and plastic, its runnels of filth, its stinking heaps of brown and yellow and all those junk metal huts which were once snug homes, has gone. All of Sitara now lives outside Sitara. All of its blood pulses elsewhere” (268). *The Story* raises the question -Are Slums harmful? Are they a disgrace to the country? Dominated by a population conventionally stigmatised by poverty and low status, Sitara illustrates how traditional caste-based occupational and regional divisions exert its strong hold on the structures of political governance and economy. At the same time, it testifies to an intimate encounter with consumerism, liberalisation and its resultant cultural globalisation. It is quite evident from the novel that the slums serve as economic resources and what is needed is the vision and the commitment on the part of the policy makers for the betterment of their lot. As urbanisation is inevitable in today’s world, *The Story* definitely voices the plea of these suppressed and neglected populations for a place in the city.

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