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THE 'OTHERED' IN KAVERI NAMBISAN'S THE STORY THAT MUST NOT BE TOLD

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ABSTRACT

Right from the early Post-Colonial literature the focus of the Indian English Writers has been on presenting "India Shining" as "Dark India" but with a bit of hope. In the recent times one can see the Indian English Writers 'promoting' the slum 'chic', or 'the underbelly' in order to show the loss of hope in creating a society of equal relations. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* or *Between the Assassinations* or Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* portray 'India's failed or severely compromised nation-building efforts.' Besides the pessimistic mood, the presentation of poverty or the marginalized segment, when compared to the earlier Indian English Writers, strikes pungently. The readers are dragged and made to rub their "noses" through the "morass of the slums". The poor, who are categorized as an 'Other' or a group of strangers, are not actually so. We are, in fact, made to understand them in such a way. They are actually one of us, but have been forced, by a few (in power), to remain poor or on the other side or at the margin or as strangers. 'Othering' is an act of how the 'non-poor' think, feel and act about 'the poor'. In the *Story That Must Not Be Told*, Kaveri Nambisan portrays how the poor and their problems are not only generalized but are in fact taken advantage of in the name of social service and social justice by 'the rich'. The reason is simple, as Kaveri Nambisan herself expresses her thoughts through the character of the deputy in the novel, '.....You can be rich only if you ensure that someone else is poor.' [The *Story That Must Not Be Told* pg196].

Key Words: India Shining, Dark India, chic, underbelly, marginalized, Other.

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INTRODUCTION

The poor are made to appear as the 'Other' in the society through oppositions and the process of exclusions. The media, the well-to-do, the politicians create distance between those who have the means to participate in society and those who do not. Thus restricting and leaving the problem of poverty to the 'poor' alone. The story revolves round One/Other; Vaibhav/Sitara; Rich/Poor; the Haves/Havenots. The 'One' here is represented by the rich, who have all the facilities and luxuries of the life and the 'Other' are the ones who lack those.

Kaveri Nambisan has tried to show that this projection of differences based on the rich and the poor class needs to be shouldered by all.

Simon Jesukumar, the protagonist, lives in Chennai at Vaibhav Apartments, which lie next to Sitara. Sitara, a slum area, is the major focus of this novel. This place is introduced to us as a vast barren land lying waste. Two very small bits in Sitara are sold to Chellam and Ponnu, two teenage village boys. Both spend their lifetime to repay their debts. They don't know that the land, which they treat as

their own, is unauthorized and thereby they could be thrown out at any time.

Sitara, gradually, gets filled up by people like Chellam and Ponnu, who have either been brought under the lure of earning large amount of money and leading luxurious lifestyles. Or inhabited by people like Chakra or the deputy or Baqua, or the 'Sunu tho', who have run away from their homes in order to escape the misery and drudgery they experienced.

Like other thousands of slum areas in India, Sitara is one among those that is overcrowded by people, covered with garbage and stinks due to drainage blockage. Due to limited water supply and being a mosquito infested place, Sitara is a living hell. In that overcrowded place, one can find Karupaswamy's Tannery and Leather works (where children between 8 and 13 are employed); the embroidery and Lace Works; Baqua's Char works factory; Muthuvel's Baking Unit; Tailor shop; Dr. Prince's Clinic (a compounder turned doctor); a school for the children of Sitara. The school is run by Swami, a product of Sitara and who used to beg in the slum area of Sitara in his childhood. Later Gaffur, a butcher, takes Swami into his service, looks after him and teaches him the values which would be useful to him (Swami) and his profession (i.e. selling meat).

For the slum area people the rich are sometimes mocked at. Thatkan (Ningi's son) out of wonder questions Velu (Chellam's son) that why is it that the rich people's clothes never get dirty and what do they do the whole day sitting inside the closed door. Velu replies,

'Brain work, you donkey. That's why their clothes never get dirty.....Those people sit inside their homes or in the office and think a hundred or a thousand thoughts in a day and that's how they become rich.' [The Story That Must Not Be Told pg43]

But at the same time each one of the person in the slum area wants to aim high and grow rich. Like in the dream of Chellam and his wife Egavalli where both of them picture a scene of crossing the boundary of poverty and imagine themselves as rich. And also as Dr. Prince, whose clinic for the poor

and among the poor doesn't give him enough, announces to his Swamy sir that 'I want a decent home and a car and TV and things' [pg201]. But these things cannot be had at the cost of the debasement of their character or dignity. Egavalli, who goes hungry a number of times and sometimes can't help stealing even, tells her children that

'They should never beg or steal. She urged her children to be honest.....her morality was equaled by her for social standing. The children must dress neatly; they must have enough to eat or at least appear to have enough' [pg60].

The destitutes of the slum area are employed as maid servants. Chellam's wife and daughter work in Vaibhav Apartments and there they are given the left-over's and are also treated as untouchables, as in the case of Senth and Egavalli. Even the children of the slums are not spared. Velu and Thatkan were called for various works like paying electricity current bill, bringing groceries and so on. But are never allowed inside the houses and are treated like criminals even by the watchmen of the Apartment.

The same ones, who employed the Other (the poor) for their advantage later arrange meetings to throw the latter out. In order to safeguard the safety, health, sanitation and a few comforts of the Vaibhav residents from the people of Sitara, which according to them is a crime breeding den, the former, first of all, raise the height of the wall, lying between the Vaibhav and Sitara and complain to the authorities for moving out the people of slum area. Sometimes by the politics of the rich and sometimes by the political leaders themselves, like Dayaratna and Nayagan, the poor are pushed deep into the stinky ground of Sitara.

Simon, a 74 year old widow, is an ordinary citizen who 'was attracted to austerity' (pg.35) and at the same time 'was also infatuated by the indulgences of wealth' (pg35). His desire was to do something beyond his everyday life. His childhood longings and 'half-dreams' to help the society remained unfulfilled due to his father's (rich-man's) attitude. Later when he tried to find an outlet by volunteering to give lessons to the children in the "jhuggis", (pg35) his wife, Harini, stops him. While she, who rejects Marx's ideals and Gandhian

Philosophy, believes that she herself is a true socialist at heart. She puts down Simon's ideals saying:

'It's like picking dirt from under a fingernail when the whole body is filthy. Think big. Social work that does not have a master plan for the country amounts to nothing.' She was to repeat this every time I came up with an idea. [Pg35]

Simon never agreed to his wife's (Harini's) socialist ideology because she wanted to stand apart from the rest of the population intellectually. He could not understand Rashmi's (his daughter-in-law) version of service, as well. Rashmi, who went thrice a week to do social service in her matching dress, slippers and handbag, in order to be called a moralist, appeared like a 'toothpaste for bad breath'[pg90].

But the poor are not fools. They know that the rich, in real, are not interested in their welfare. The people of Sitara suspect the rich people's hypocritical attitude towards the former. And Simon Jesukumar is no different from them (the rich). He wants to feel that he has sacrificed something in his life by helping the poor within his limitations. It is for this hypocrisy that P.K., Prem Kumar, a journalist, accuses Simon on the latter's donation of water cooler for the school in Sitara by saying:

I don't want to hurt you, but let me say this. You want to help, but only if the delicate fabric of your lifestyle does not come undone in the process. Your life must flow smoothly. Then you're okay about charity.[pg113]

Though this is a shocking statement and is difficult to digest, it is, one must say, a harsh social reality. When Simon revisits Sitara to offer his kindness and pity, Baqua kidnaps Simon, along with P.K. and Sandhya (Simon's daughter). Baqua out of anguish for Simon's pretensions, subjects the three of them to live in the stinky conditions like the people of Sitara. Baqua out of anger says:

'.....Being poor is not like they show in films.' (pg133)

Baqua, after making the three of them work, asks Simon mockingly,

'.....A night among the people you want to help. You won't be sleeping here,

though I hope....you won't mind the mosquitoes? I panic. 'You don't, mean anywhere near that swamp?

His face is expressionless. 'Mr Jesukumar, you want to do good. First you must understand, ille?

'It will kill us. It will kill me for sure. We're exhausted and – I can't bear mosquitoes. Or the smell.....Please, please not there.'[pg135]

Baqua, here is trying to tell that the rich sitting at a high pedestal and offering them gifts and service is not acceptable to the poor. If any service is to be extended, in real sense, then it should be at the terms of the poor. That is the rich should step down from the pedestal, live the lives of the poor like Baqua, Swami, Dr. Prince and only then it would be acceptable.

Simon's dream, to be of some help, fizzles out, at the end, as the whole of the Sitara is demolished and the poor are forced to move out and find shelter elsewhere. But Simon waits. He waits with 'a bit of steel' (pg271) (because to do good for the poor is his passion and a source of his survival), so that when his wounds are healed, he would 'go back.' Go back to Swamy, Chellam, Prince and Velu. And as Sandhya tells her father that in order to reform this society,

'We need people like Baqua and we need people like you. Dreamers.....you're both dreamers' (pg257-258)

'One' who can work for the poor by staying outside the margin and the 'Other', like Baqua, who work for the poor by being at the margin.

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