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DEPICTION OF DISPOSSESSION AND DISPLACEMENT IN K.J BABY'S *NADUGADHIKA*

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ABSTRACT

The tribal people in Kerala (adivasis) have always experienced marginalization and exploitation. They have been subjugated, dispossessed and displaced by all the hegemonic forces throughout history. They were denied justice during the colonial, postcolonial and post independent eras. They were evicted from their land and were turned into mere slaves. Continuous encroachments and exploitations resulted in the destruction of their traditions, rituals and culture. They were not allowed to share the benefits of political and social independence. In spite of several legislations for ensuring the possession of land, they still remain landless. The Play *Nadugadhika* by K.J. Baby depicts the age old story of the serfdom and exploitation of the tribals in Wayanad. *Gadhika* is a ritual practiced among the tribal people for driving away the evil powers. By incorporating this ritual, the playwright is exposing the evil powers that are trying to deprive the tribal people of human rights and dignity. Through the skillful use of myths and rituals, K.J. Baby is capable of staging their plight and their struggle for reclaiming the lost land.

Keywords: Dispossession, Displacement, Serfdom, Land Struggles

The Problem of Displacement is a perennial concern of man. All through the history, mankind has undergone severe and various modes of displacement resulting in massive kinds of exodus. At every moment, displacement is taking place leaving millions homeless and deprived. The reasons behind displacement are varied, the common being wars, calamities, riots etc. Most of these are general causes while, at the same time a few are related to specific geographical and social issues. One among such specific cases is the kind of displacement faced by the tribal people (adivasis) of Kerala caused through dispossession augmented by sociopolitical reasons.

Kerala is a mystic land of beauty blessed with 'natures plenty'. Decked with mesmerizing mountains, beaches, backwaters and plains, the state lies between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats. Kerala occupies a special place among the Indian states with its high literacy rate, health care initiatives, political awareness and cultural heritage. It is one of the prime tourist destinations of the country. It has also witnessed many social reforms and renaissance movements. In spite of all these redeeming factors, the problem of exclusion and marginalization of the tribal people (adivasis) of the state remains unresolved even after decades of political independence. The dispossession and the resultant displacement have created much unrest among these indigenous people. Their history is an endless struggle for land ownership and for preservation of their

indigenous culture. "...the Adivasi land struggle has a long history of betrayals, by both the state and the settlers in the Adivasi lands. The most vital cause of such struggles is land alienation following the penetration of non Adivasis into the Adivasi land, besides the 'developmental' activities started by the state" (Seethi).The play *Nadugaghika* by K.J. Baby very skillfully and artistically presents this bitter history of dispossession and the poignant struggle of the adivasis residing in Wayanad, one of the northern districts of Kerala.

The play depicts the pathetic condition of the two prominent tribes of Wayanad, namely, adiyas and paniyas. The tribals have always been treated as the other, the primitive and the uncultured. All the hegemonic forces starting from the feudal times onwards tried to keep them under their sway. The tribals were thrown out of their natural habitat and under the Janmi-Kudiyam system(feudal system) they were treated as personal possessions of their masters. They were allotted only small plots on the fields of the master and were treated as slaves and Baby presents in the play, the ritual of giving 'nippupanam' which binds the slave to the master for the coming year. In order to sanctify this practice, the lords cleverly utilized the religious sentiments of the tribals. Tamburan claims that it is the female deity, Kavilamma who has entrusted them to him. He says: "She came, knocked at my door and asked me if all the slaves were doing their work" (82). When the surroundings are cleared and prepared for farming, they will be sent to other plots. "But before the pumpkin creeper even blossomed, before the plantain bore fruit, we had to move onto the next bamboo thicket the master pointed to" (83). They were always on the move as they were dependent on masters for food and shelter. Ultimately their land, the forest has been snatched away from them. In the play, Gadhikakaran addresses the ancestors: "Those endless forests abated your pangs of hunger. They sheltered you and consoled you in your helpless slavery. Those forests are no more; There is no where we can run away to" (80).

The life of the adivasis has always been that of slavery, dispossession, displacement, and starvation. Velli's laments "Payikkinto" throughout the play which means "I am hungry". This lament is the collective lament of the entire tribe. They were the owners of the forest which had been robbed from them at first by tamburan(the feudal lord) who turned their land into farms and kept them as his slaves. They who had possessed the natural resources were made to labour in his fields with no wage. Some of them protested against this serfdom and tried to run away into the forest which is their home,. But each time they were hunted down and brought back by the lord. They were made to believe that god sent 'Mali' (kavilamma), to trace them and to bring them back. Yachan speaks about their ancestors: "I remember ... I remember the times when the lords could buy and sell us like animals and pawn us like objects. I remember the tales of woe recounted beside this same fire. Many an ancestor ran away from their slavery just as Melorachan and Keeyorithi ran away from each fort they were enslaved in. And each slave who ran away, was hunted down by the lords (83-84). When Karappan in the play tries to flee back to the jungles, everybody is reminding him of this experience of the ancestors and asking him to come back. The religious faith of the people is exploited to keep them under subjugation forever.

The dispossession and alienation presented in the play are found to extend even beyond death. Tampuran frightens them by speaking about their plight in 'keyuloka', the nether land. Even after death they will be deprived of their legitimate place. They are made to believe that while the lords will go to an upper world, the tribals will be sent to the lower world. They will be again ousted from their rightful place. Keyuloka is the metaphor for the terrible psychological dispossession and displacement they are going through : "When we are dead we reach Keeyuloka, the nether world. It is the replica of this world with the same lords and the same slaves. And we remain the slaves, immortal slaves! Once this position is injected into our hearts, our ancestors lost all hope, even to run away, to escape. Darkness descended on them in this world and the next" (87).

The play very clearly presents the glorious time in the past through their reminiscences and through the words of Gadhikakaran. In the past, they were living in peace and harmony in the lap of nature like liberated souls. The play unravels the various stages of enslavement and dispossession through the periods of feudalism, colonialism, independence and post-independence. Through the histrionic rendering of their traditional ritual, 'gadhika', the audience is taken to the various aspects and periods of serfdom and exploitation. Baby shows how they are deprived of dignity and human rights in a caste-based society. Under the feudal system they were evicted from their habitat and their land was encroached by the feudal lords. In the times when Travancore

Christians migrated to Wayanad, they suffered more encroachments. During the period of independence struggle, Tamburan took a very tactful position standing with the colonial powers and then with Indian National Congress after independence. He has always been careful to keep allegiance with the powerful in his attempt to keep the tribal people in subjugation. After the formation of the nation, he changed his allegiance again and supported the left parties in his attempt to keep the tribals under his sway. The play very clearly shows that the condition of the indigenous people remained unchanged even after the building the nation. Gadhikakaran says: "After independence they switched sides-from the British to the ruling party. And we lost the chance even to know a difference between pre-independent and post-independent times. Why, we did not even get to hear the word 'independence'. The lords continued their sway over us, in this world and the next, before independence and after(92). This situation continues the same in the present too.

As the play shows, the Adivasis were never allowed to share the fruits of political and social independence. Even today, they are not benefitted by the government schemes." Marginalized and oppressed by social and economic factors, the Adivasis have never been the real beneficiaries of the government schemes implemented to reduce landlessness among them. Instead, they have been deprived of their customary rights over their natural resources and traditional knowledge systems, leading to several struggles for land across a timeframe of several decades (George). P.T. George also speaks about the observation of C K Janu, one of the prominent Adivasi leaders in Kerala. Although the Kerala State Government decided to limit the individual possession of land to 15 acres during the Land Reforms in the 1960s, excluding plantations from the purview of this law effectively led to the ghettoization of the Adivasi communities, as they were either pushed to the reserves or to three cent plot colonies. In spite of several provisions in the law, the State Government has failed to provide enough land to the Adivasis to ensure their survival. Instead, what one gets to witness is the apathy of the state and its indifference to the Adivasis.

Thus, the play, Nadugadhika presents the traumatic chronicle of dispossession and displacement experienced by the tribal people in Wayanad. Through the skillful use of myths and rituals, K J Baby successfully portrays their struggle for existence and exposes the need for a creative solution to their life issues.

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