

Modernism in *Ooru-Keri*

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Abstract-

*Modernism has different characteristic features that include experimentalism, individualism, nihilism, formalism etc. This is the twentieth century phenomenon that revolutionized the world of literature, philosophy, arts and social structure. The impact of modernism on literature particularly in India is also remarkable. Dalit literature is characterized with rejection of established orthodox thoughts, nihilism, individualism and experimentation. Scientific attitude, reasoning, and revolt against established values remained at the core of this literature. The Dalit autobiographical narratives challenged the orthodox world which was full of conventional thoughts. The writers came with these thoughts are from different states of the country such as Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Gujarat, Punjab, etc. The major influence on the Dalit literature was of the ideology of the revolutionary son of the country, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. His modern thoughts brought revolution in the Dalit writers. To this call of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, many writers came up with an innumerable works of art. Karnataka was not behind in literature. With the teaching and preaching of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar through his writings and speeches, the Kannada writers also got influenced and came up with literature in almost all genres of literature. Siddalingaiah is one of the Kannada writers who contributed a lot to literature in the form of narratives and poetry. His autobiographical narrative *Ooru-Keri* (2003) shows the influence of Ambedkarism and reflects the tenets of modernism. This paper focuses on the tenets of modernism reflected in the narrative *Ooru- Keri* (2003) by Siddalingaiah.*

Keywords- Modernism, nihilism, experimentation, individualism, orthodox norms, tradition, Dalit autobiographical narratives, etc.

Modernism is late 19th century phenomenon in the fields of arts and philosophy that has brought some drastic changes in the Western society for the first time. It implies the rejection to the established values and departure from the values. The main characteristic features of modernism include Formalism, Nihilism, Individualism and Experimentalism. This is a movement having Nihilism, Individualism, Experimentalism and Formalism as some of the values that brought artistic, literary, cultural, philosophical and social changes in the modern world of the West. It shook not only the world of the West but also the eastern world. Modernism is a revolutionary thought process that brought drastic changes in the

social system of the whole world. It compelled to change the whole structure of the society. The traditional value system was challenged with the new norms based on the universal values such as fraternity, equality, brotherhood and justice. It spread education and brought changes in the society by making the common people aware of their humanistic rights. The value system of modernism can be termed as an awareness of newness, new morality, and new perspective towards life. It is found in literature as well as in philosophy. There are number of Dalit writers whose writings reflect the characteristic features of modernism. *Ooru-Keri* (2003) by Siddalingaiah is one of the Dalit autobiographical narratives that show the characteristic features of modernism. Therefore the main aim of the paper is to explore the narrative *Ooru-Keri* with the major tenets of modernism.

The first characteristic feature of modernism is to stand against orthodox and established value system. As far as India is concerned, before the creation of the Constitution of India, there were orthodox norms prevailed all over India. As a consequence of an orthodox Indian society, there was no ray of hope for the downtrodden Indians to live as a human being. It was tough time to revolt against this orthodox society of India. It was necessary to advocate the humanistic rights and ask people to fight for getting the same. The second characteristic feature of modernism is Individualism that states that individuals are free to think and express. An individual is free to adopt any religions or any belief system that the individual finds it appropriate to him/her. Individualism believes in fulfilling the life of a person, if human being finds itself in any conditions. Every individual is free to think and work as per the opportunities available. Unfortunately, in India, individualism has no value at all, because people are divided into castes, where caste is the smallest unit of Indian society to consider. The truth of India is that it is not made up of individuals but of castes. In this regard, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar rightly pointed out the situation of Indian society. After observations on the Indian society, he found that caste is the base of India that ruined the whole Indian society due to its brutal system of gradations. He said, "The Indian Society does not consist of individuals. It consists of an innumerable collection of castes". (Ambedkar Prospects 48). He took a stand that every individual should be considered as the unit of Indian society and not the caste. In the fake glorification of caste, India had denied individual identity and freedom to its citizens.

The third characteristic feature of modernism is Nihilism. It is a process of thoughts where stagnancy has no place. Nihilism rejects religions and established values that bring stagnancy to the society. The fourth characteristic feature of modernism is experimentation. Experiments provide evidences to prove the things and deny the existence of the things which are without evidences. It is the process that proves something which is hypothesized by doing experiments. The experiments about the society are very difficult and risky as they are related to emotions and feelings of the people and sensitive things related to the society. Modernism does not believe in supernatural elements such as ghosts, witches, etc. It believes in experiments and empirical phenomena. The causality remained one of the tenets of modernism. It follows the self-consciousness and rejects the conservative values of the past.

Siddalingaiah is a twentieth century Kannada writer who wrote in Kannada. He has written his autobiographical narrative named *Ooru-Keri*. In this narrative, he has given his life journey starting from his childhood experiences in his village to the slum life of city with various challenges of orthodox society and experimenting new ways to pave the path of reforming the society. The narrative has some characteristic features of modernism. Chopra has appropriately commented on his autobiography. He said:

The autobiography is truly symptomatic of Modernity, embracing and challenging it at the same time, because it places the Dalit not as a figure of pity, but one that is imbued with authority, knowledge, and a renewed sense of Self, ready to place himself in the arena of Globalization and urbanization to defy the norms of invisibility and hyper-visibility of caste in the public discourse. (Chopra web).

Siddalingaiah took his education in adverse conditions that led him to judge the things scientifically. He knew the important role of science and technology in the upliftment of the Dalits as he was influenced with the thoughts of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He came to know the essentiality of education in the enhancement of the life of the masses. He strongly believed that the only education can remove the superstitions from the minds of the people, because the superstitions have taken the society in the vicious circle of illiteracy and ignorance. He was very much fascinated by the modern thoughts of nihilism. He wanted to make the Dalits aware of their poverty and ignorance that took him to the slum area to deliver lectures on non-existence of gods and ghosts. The result was that the people listened to him

carefully and started thinking empirically. When he had a discourse with the graveyard workers, He narrated, “The grave yard workers and I argued frequently on the subject of god. I was an atheist. They were staunch believers. They were not ready to accept my argument that god did not exist.” (OK 73). But when Siddalingaiah went with the same family to Tirupati, the family experienced an event. While eating in a feast, the owner of the house stated that his faith in god had been diminished. On the reply of the narrator he started giving an explanation of the event. He explained that a man at the temple tried to pick his pocket and rob him while he was standing in the queue to get a *darshan* of the deity. Here, the narrator said the faith of the master of the house had not vanished fully. But the daily discussion with him and his family made them to think scientifically. The discourse between the narrator and the owner of the house compelled the owner to analyze the things with reason. It is vivid that the writer tried to establish scientific attitude among the people through his narrative.

Siddalingaiah was an atheist. He used to talk on scientific attitude for hours together while dealing with the audience. He would like to talk on gods and Goddesses and their false role in the living of the people. He used to say that there is no existence of god or ghost on the earth. This always remained the topic of discussion of every person irrespective of age and gender. He firmly used to deviate from believing in gods and ghosts. He had participated in a debate competition when he was taking his education. The topic was ‘God exists/does not exist’. Of course, many participants delivered their speeches in favour of ‘God exists’. They took the support of the ignited lamp used for an inauguration. The other contestants said that the lamp is ignited and it is giving light to us that show god is in evidence. When the narrator (Siddalingaiah) went to speak, he was annoyed with the theory of lamp propounded by earlier contestants. But he took the same thread to make the audience comprehend what he was going to prove. He went near the lamp and extinguished by a gust. Then he declared “I have put out the lamp that was god incarnate. If your god does exist, let him stop me from speaking.” (OK 80). Nobody came forward from the audience and Siddalingaiah continued his speech smoothly. He, then, won the first prize. After his speech, he was urged by the students to light the lamp but he refused to do so. As he was the staunch supporter of atheism, he refused to light the lamp again. He denied kindling the lamp, because he thought that if he lighted the lamp again that would be against the speech he had delivered there.

Some religious rites and ways of worshipping gods and goddesses spread superstitions among people. The people unnecessarily spent money on such occasions just because they were told to perform the same by the religious men. That ruined them completely, because they have to borrow money from others to perform the rites. Secondly, they are asked to live as told in the religious books. They were exploited by the religious men without hesitation. The people should avoid performing religious rites was the aim of teaching of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Periyar Ramaswamy Naicker. They advised the Dalit-bahujans to give up worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses. Even, Periyar Ramaswamy Naicker criticized the Hindu gods and goddesses. He asked the people in south India to give up worshipping the deities. In his speech delivered at Bangalore, he said in his style, “There is no god, no god, and no god at all. He who created god is an idiot. He who propagates god is a fool. He who salutes god is a wild beast.” (OK 91). This reference of Periyar which is introduced by the narrator in his narrative shows modernism. The thoughts of rejection of gods and goddesses publically reflected in the narrative enlighten the people and make them aware of their unnecessary exploitation at the hands of upper caste people and the religious priests. Periyar’s analysis of the things from *Puranas* was logical while delivering his matter. There arose so many questions in his mind when he looked the irrelevant stories from *Puranas*. After analyzing the stories only one thing comes in the mind of the narrator that one should completely reject the existence of gods and goddesses. Siddalingaiah introduces the speech of Periyar in his narrative just to spread scientific attitude among the people.

Once, Siddalingaiah organized a rationalists’ convention with his companions. The convention was organized in the hockey field of Central College. The main objective of this convention was to fight for the formation of a casteless and classless society. But the orthodox people intentionally wanted to spoil the convention. When they asked the organizers about the topic of convention, they were told that this was the anti-superstition convention. Being not satisfied, they proceeded to ask why superstitions should go. They continued with their point of view regarding god that the birth of human being is impossible without god. There was a conflict between the two parties on existence of God. The conversation between them led them towards serious discourse. The question asked by the orthodox people to the organisers was answered by the narrator:

Birth happens when the male and the female come together. Keep a male and a female locked up in separate rooms and no children will be born. Only if there is physical contact between them are children born, we had to say to keep them quiet. (OK 93).

The answer shows narrator's scientific attitude. But, the orthodox people just stuck up to their conventional thoughts. They just see their benefits by keeping the people in religious faith with superstitions. When the narrator told them about destroying the caste system, they posed a question 'where is caste?' When a student from the convention asked them whether they were willing to let their girls marry outside their caste, they got outraged and assaulted whoever they could lay their hands on. They used knives, daggers and cycle chains as they were already came with preparations to disturb the programme. This clearly discloses their thinking of diminishing the caste only at surface level. They are not ready to accept the change in the old norms. When they were beating the participant students and people, the participants ran hither and thither.

Modernism also seeks for change in the old order and looks for establishing new norms of living. Exploiter and exploited are also the terms at the center of analysis of modernism. The narrator pointed out the Indian social system in terms of lower caste and upper caste in which how the Dalits got ruined and exploited. The narrator found it necessary to make the students know the system in which the Dalit community got ground at every step. To do so, the narrator along with his friends started teaching the students about the social condition of Dalits and the importance of education for them. They started night coaching classes for the Dalit students who cannot afford the tuition fees. Besides, they also used to make the students know about the social system and its ways of exploitation. In this regard, Siddalingaiah said:

Our lessons took a progressive Perspective, but this sometimes went to extremes. A teacher had written the word 'akka', meaning sister, on the board. He was describing the big 'ka' in the word as an exploiter and the little 'ka' as the exploited. His idea was to describe the manner in which exploitation took place in society. (OK 102).

Instigating the Dalit children for education and awareness of their social situation was the only purpose behind conducting the night coaching classes. The writer and his friends were

toiling day and night to achieve the goal set by them. The narrator reminded, ‘O Rajanna and O Sridharan for their great pains in making the teaching arrangement a success’ (OK 102).

Thus, the tenets of modernism are found in Siddalingaiah’s narrative *Ooru Keri*. The episodes given in *Ooru Keri* about the speeches delivered by the narrator on the non-existence of God reveal the nihilism as the trait of modernism. The proclamation of Periyar Ramaswami Naicker in his Bangalore speech delivered about God that was presented by the narrator in his narrative also reveals modernism. The narrative asks the people to follow the way of science and give up believing in god. In the other event of the narrative, the thought of asking to upper caste people for agreeing to marry their caste girls with other caste boys is the revolt against the traditional customs which disclose modernism. Teaching the Dalit children in the night coaching classes and making them aware of the social system of India is a step against the established orthodox norms of the society. In this way, the narrative is an embodiment of modernism.

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