



The Illumination of the Downtrodden's Suppression and Humiliation, and Their Quest for an Egalitarian Voice

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues of inequality portrayed in Cho. Dharman's 'Koogai', highlighting the struggles faced by Dalits. It addresses the persistent social disparities that Dalits endure—disparities that, despite efforts, cannot be entirely eradicated. Historically and even today, they are marginalized, treated as inferior, and regarded as "untouchable" by upper-caste men and women. Such dehumanizing treatment remains a harsh reality for them. The study emphasizes the egalitarian voice of these voiceless communities, exploring how systemic discrimination subjects them to deep psychological distress. It further delves into the psychic and psychoanalytical wounds experienced by the novel's characters. At its core, the paper focuses on their yearning to be recognized and treated as human beings with dignity and equality. Finally, it discusses how literature can bring enlightenment and hope into the lives of the downtrodden.

Keywords: oppression, humanity, truths, erasure, disorder, solidarity, violence, domination, cruelty, psychoanalytic study, mind, disruption, subconscious, compassionate, principles, disparity, equality

Introduction

The novel 'Koogai' amplifies the voice of the voiceless, centering on the experiences of victims and their oppressors. It portrays the harm inflicted on them, whether physical or psychological, and examines the resulting trauma and ailments they endure. This paper emphasizes the need for humane and compassionate treatment of the downtrodden. The primary aim is to highlight the inhumanity they face and to shed light on the deep-seated anxiety that remains hidden within them.

Methodology

The methodology for this study emphasizes the importance of subject matter, approach, and method. The chosen subject is 'Koogai' (The Owl) by Cho. Dharman. The discussion includes an exploration of

archetypes, which are connected to recurring images and symbols. In this context, the title 'Koogai'—symbolizing the owl—serves as a metaphor for the poor and downtrodden. The novel's association of the owl with lower-caste communities is depicted in multiple ways. The struggles of characters such as Muthukaruppan and Mokkan, including their meager wages and experiences of oppression, are examined. Their simple plan to enjoy a decent meal underscores the depth of their poverty. The primary approach of this study is to evaluate the human psyche in relation to behavior. It seeks to address the seemingly unsolvable questions that extend beyond the realm of suppression. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, as an in-depth examination of literature falls within the scope of qualitative research.



Discussion and Analysis

Dalit lives have long been subjected to subjugation, with their voices systematically silenced by society. Within the social hierarchy, they are depicted as mere servants to the upper castes and are consistently denied recognition as human equals. In the mindset of the privileged castes, Dalits are believed to be born solely to serve, with no opportunity to live life on their own terms. Throughout their existence, they are offered no alternatives for a dignified life and are instead condemned to perpetual suffering.

Cho. Dharman's 'Koogai' vividly depicts the harsh realities of Dalit life, capturing the struggles they face in their daily existence. At its heart, the novel addresses the principle of equality in humanism. While the concept of "egalitarianism" can be interpreted in multiple ways, 'Koogai' focuses specifically on its humanitarian dimension, where equality—whether provisional or unconditional—remains central.

Although certain opportunities may appear accessible, they are in reality severely limited for Dalits. Caste hierarchies bestow privileges exclusively upon the upper castes, leaving the marginalized without the means to improve their standard of living. This privileged "creamy layer" enjoys the wealth of society and provides their children with comfort and opportunities, while the oppressed struggle to secure even their daily bread. True equality demands that every individual be granted an equal chance to prove themselves and contribute meaningfully to society.

Cho. Dharman's 'Koogai' portrays the stark reality of Dalit life. It tells the story of individuals trapped in the clutches of upper-caste oppressors who treat them with arrogance and cruelty. The bitter irony lies in the fact that, while the law declares all people equal, such equality is absent in social practice. The cruelty and suffering of the marginalized only deepen in the absence of egalitarian values.

The title 'Koogai' itself symbolizes Dalit life. 'Koogai' means "owl," a bird closely associated with the lives of the downtrodden in the narrative. The root cause of their marginalization is inequality—particularly the unequal distribution of wealth, which empowers the dominant to rule over the subjugated. A genuine humanistic approach toward

every individual could help reduce the social issues arising from such disparities.

The economic condition of Dalits is pitiable. Alongside their physical hardships and systemic suppression, they face severe discrimination in the workplace. They are paid meager wages despite working more than sixteen hours a day, and any attempt to demand fair pay results in job loss or punitive action for their defiance.

One example from the novel is the incident involving Muthukaruppan and Mokkan, who perform 'thutti' (funeral) work—a task traditionally assigned to Dalit or lower-caste men. Despite the exhausting nature of this work, they are paid a mere three-quarters of a rupee. They plan to use their earnings for a meal at Nachiyaramma's "club shop," an event that underscores both their extreme poverty and their constant struggle simply to fill their stomachs.

'I'm saying there's another snag. Listen, suppose there's a red chilli in the kuzhambu or the kootu, watch out for it and don't eat it! You eat it, and . . . finished! The spicy-hot taste will yank out your tongue and make you drink more and more water till your stomach fills up. Then all you can do is pay up and walk out.'
'All cool and calm we are going to sit down there. And only then we will eat. Why any hurry? If it takes the whole day today, let it be! When are we ever again going to sit and eat in a "club"?'

(Koogai 3)

This incident evokes a deep sense of pity for the plight of the poor Dalits. The upper-caste community often harbors a sense of superiority over them, and any sign of progress in Dalit lives seems to unsettle them. They feel compelled to strip away whatever small gains or improvements the Dalits achieve.

This incident stirs profound sympathy for the hardships endured by the poor Dalits. The upper-caste community, driven by a persistent sense of superiority, views any advancement in Dalit lives with discomfort. Whenever Dalits make even the smallest progress, it provokes an urge to deprive them of those hard-earned gains.



Slowly the horse cart man came up closer to her.

'Are you going to open the door and keep your respect or are you going to die?'

'Peichi . . . I'll give you fifty more rupees. Just one time.'

'If I had wanted to be like that, why should I go out in the blazing sun and roam around for my living? I could have eaten like a princess. Could have worn any saris I fancied, could have filled my hair-knot with flowers, I could have winked and prinked myself up. . . . Why would I suffer lugging bundles of hay?'

Peichi took out the small palm sickle she kept tucked in her waist. She brandished it at him.

'Don't think this aruvaai's only for cutting grass. I'll gouge out your eyes!

I'll dig them out!' (Koogai 167-68)

Peichi's actions reflect the courage and strength of women, emphasizing the importance of gender equality. In such a perspective, no one holds power over the other, and any wrongdoing—regardless of gender—is judged as wrong. An egalitarian mindset is essential for every member of society.

In 'Koogai', the character Peichi stands as an inspiring figure for all oppressed women. Known for her intercaste marriage, she faces immense hardship when Kaali Thevar is arrested for his crime. Despite her relentless efforts to secure his release, she ultimately loses him and lives as a widow with her daughter, Mariyamma. Her courageous act in protecting Appusubban, who is being hunted by the police for an assault, further reveals her strength. Through her words, Peichi reflects the struggles and hardships that have shaped her thorn-filled life.

'Because I left my caste, my own caste set me aside. His caste people said he left his children and went off with a low-caste woman and so they set him aside . . . and yet, I've let it go, and I'm living a decent life. Murderer's wife, some used to say, but those few have got out of my way now. Left me, all by myself in the middle of a jungle with a

girl child in my hands, stuck between jungle and hut. And as though that wasn't bad enough, I get insulted on the roadside—at a horse-and-cart stand! Where was I born? What was the life I once led? There are crores and crores of my own people and yet I'm orphaned like this—he died and left me! Wicked fellow, wicked!'

(Koogai 175-76)

The novel 'Koogai' delves deeply into the psyche of its characters, revealing how societal suppression inflicts profound psychological suffering. This constant oppression often leads to mental illness. Sigmund Freud's concept of psychoanalysis—aimed at addressing psychological disorders—seeks to organize and reconcile the psychic and emotional disturbances individuals face.

In the context of the novel, every form of societal subjugation—be it physical harassment, dehumanizing treatment, gender-based violence, or police brutality—consciously or unconsciously impacts the mental well-being of individuals, often leading to severe psychological issues. Prolonged misery can drive people toward acts of violence, sometimes culminating in crime. In 'Koogai', when Dalits endure relentless abuse, their suppressed rage can erupt uncontrollably. This is seen in the character of Appusubban, a Dalit man who, after losing his self-control, reacts in an extreme way by killing a constable.

'You Appusubban, just quietly put down the knife.'

'If I don't put it down?'

'Don't die for nothing!'

'May I'll die—but your hands will never catch me!' Appusubban advanced, holding the knife aloft. It glinted in the darkness with every step he took. Staying where he was, the constable shouted, 'Stand right there! One step more and I'll throw the bomb.'

'I can die, my mind is made up. Throw the bomb on me if you have the



guts.'

Confounded by this unforeseen reply, the constable stopped short. With Appusubban bearing down upon him with quick strides, there was no way out for him except to retreat. Muttering threateningly, he moved backwards and just as he reached the front step, Ayyanaar threw open the front door and came rushing out. With a single stroke, he rolled headless on the ground.

... A goat too, bleats only until its neck is cut through.

(koogai 112-113).

Marginalization deeply affects the psyche of Dalits, often driving them to take harsh and extreme measures in response to power. These caste-based injustices strip them not only of their freedom but also of their sense of unity, leaving them isolated and lacking mutual coordination.

The Dalit psyche is explored through the character Seenii Kizhavan, who is constantly ridiculed by those around him. His wife, Chinnakaali, has gone missing, leaving people speculating about her whereabouts, with some claiming to have seen her in distant places like Tiruchendur. Seenii remains in a constant search for her. Years after the death of his son, Govindan, Seenii dreams of him, a sign of his lingering grief. Such psychological disturbances—whether consciously recognized or not—are a recurring reality in Dalit lives, rooted in their long-standing subjugation.

Another incident unfolds at the small stall run by Ayyanaar, the son of Appusubban, who belongs to the Dalit community. A higher-caste man has been taking bananas from his shop for a long time without paying. One day, Ayyanaar confronts him, firmly telling him not to touch anything in his shop. This sparks chaos, leading to severe repercussions for the entire Dalit village.

The police seize the opportunity to exploit the situation, unleashing brutal violence on the Dalits, who have no voice to defend themselves. Innocent lives are lost, and women—some as old as the policemen's own mothers—are subjected to abuse

without the slightest mercy. The upper-caste men, driven by jealousy, resent any improvement in Dalits' standard of living, fearing it will leave them without a pool of cheap labor.

'The khaki shirts raped the village of whatever honour was left after all that.'

(*Koogai 100*)

The "khaki shirts" (police) exert dominance over the lower-caste community, often taking bribes from upper-caste men. When the policemen assault Appusubban's mother and wife without provocation, it ignites his fury. The major act of violence in the story unfolds when the police, influenced by the upper castes, push Appusubban to the breaking point, deeply disturbing his psyche and driving him to crime.

Conclusion

Dalits work tirelessly, yet they are denied the fruits of their labor. They are exploited for all kinds of work and paid meager wages, while the upper castes reap the benefits of their harvests. This continuous exploitation not only deepens their oppression but also takes a toll on their mental health. As they struggle for their basic rights, tensions escalate into violence. In an effort to defend themselves from this dominance, they sometimes resort to attacks—yet such bloodshed only brings further suffering and chaos, rather than lasting solutions. India is known for its principle of unity in diversity, yet in reality, divisions persist. This lack of unity and cooperation enables one group to oppress another. It is not only Dalits but also many other minority communities who suffer at the hands of the majority. Such inequality only worsens the hardships of the marginalized and fuels social unrest. True progress lies in treating every individual with equality, which would not only uplift each person's standard of living but also enhance the nation's dignity. Ultimately, Dalits hold on to a hope similar to that of Martin Luther King Jr.—that people will one day rise above the suffering and harsh realities imposed by the upper castes.

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