

READING THE ‘SERVANT’ IN ELMO JAYAWARDENA’S *SAM’S STORY*

Esther Daimari

Assistant Professor

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Tezpur University, Napaam

Dist-Sonitpur Assam – 784028

esther@tezu.ernet.in/ estherdaimari@yahoo.in

Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to analyze the ‘servant’ as a character in the postcolonial Sri Lankan novel, *Sam’s Story* by Elmo Jayawardena. It tries to read the servant figure in the novel as ‘subaltern’ and how by using the idea of ‘trauma’ as a narrative strategy, the character tries to resist marginalization and injustice in society. The paper explores the ways in which the novel evolves as a ‘resistance text’ and how the story of the servant becomes not only a personal account but a collective account of the pains and miseries of the underprivileged.*

South Asia has been a hub of manual labour – indentured worker, coolie, contract worker, skilled and semi-skilled workers. With the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, the demand for cheap labour increased in sugar, rubber, tea and other plantations in the colonies. In the context of Sri Lanka, it has witnessed the migration of a huge pool of labour force from the southern part of India, while a considerable amount of labourers from Sri Lanka itself has migrated to various parts of the world. Some others prefer to stay back in the homeland and work as servants, coolies, workers in plantation industry for meagre wages and as sources of other such cheap labour. As philosopher and economist, Karl Marx states, a capitalist society can be divided into two basic classes: one that possess the means of production and the other who do not possess them (Gouverneur 1983: 11). It follows from this that those who are in possession of the means of production are an exploiting class who are able to dictate the relations of production to the have-nots, and those who are not in possession of the means of production are the working class, or rather an exploited class. The ‘servants’ with their wide shared experience of subordination and material want, belongs to the second category, which in the context of South Asian countries like Sri Lanka becomes an interesting subject of study and confrontation.

It is interesting to note that in a handful of contemporary Sri Lankan fiction like *Reef* and *Sam’s Story*, the ‘servant’ is an ‘important figure in the story’. This paper therefore analyzes the servant figures in the novel, *Sam’s Story* as ‘subaltern’ who because of their marginalized

state do not have easy access to education, citizenship and nationality which binds them forever to servitude, which in turn, brings about hostilities between the haves and the have-nots, racial conflicts and indigenous nationalisms. This paper reads the novel as a 'resistance text' where the story of the servant becomes not only a personal account but a collective account of the pains and miseries of the underprivileged, where the protagonist talks not merely of individual injustice, but historical injustice.

The Industrial revolution in Europe which brought about an upsurge in technology brought forth a huge difference between Europe and the rest of the world, with Europe cutting right through other civilizations, thereby bringing about the idea of an unequal world. After the colonization of Sri Lanka by the British, the British made huge profits out of tea, rubber and coffee plantations in Sri Lanka. The workers in these plantations worked hard, existing in the worst of conditions, but, the lion's share of the profit went to the few white tea-planters in Sri Lanka. The British colonialists also favoured only the semi-European Burghers, the high-caste Sinhalese and the Tamils which brought about a huge divide along ethnic and caste lines and affected the rights of the lower class negatively. There came up on the one hand, a English-speaking elite class, who 'customarily wear trousers, speaks English, have modern ideas picked up in the British influenced schools' (Bakshi 2002:36), and on the other hand the lower class of people in sarongs, without shoes and many of them still illiterate. The high-caste elite hired servant boys and girls for themselves and their household from the economically lower-class of people, thus maintaining the colonial legacy.

The figure of the servant brings to mind the image of an ordinary person, almost invisible and powerless, who lives in the houses of the more privileged, "whose hands open their doors, cook and serve their meals, bring up their children, initiate them into sexuality and close their eyes when they die." The servant figure stands out as the 'other' of the elite class on certain visible differences like class and behaviour. They live and work on the fringes of 'respectable' society whose primary motive is sustenance than maintaining a lifestyle. Their poor economic condition does not allow them access to education, economic interests, cultural interests and other goods and services. In *Sam's Story*, Sam repeatedly calls himself poor. He and his siblings cannot afford to complete schooling and are forced by circumstances to engage themselves into some work which can help them earn their daily bread. And this is how Sam becomes a domestic servant at the River House. As a servant, Sam did all domestic chores. He says,

I did everything. I swept the garden; I watered the flowerbeds and the lawn. I washed the cars. I opened the gate when the cars came in and closed the gate when the cars left. I fed the dogs and switched the lights in the house and the garden 'on' in the evening and the switched them 'off' in the morning.
(Jayawardena, 2009:5)

The servant who is almost at all times occupied in satisfying the needs of his master has no independent essence of his/her own and is largely fashioned by his/her masters. They are subaltern as they lack the voice and agency to speak for themselves and are always

represented by others. The subaltern voice which as Spivak says is always filtered through dominant systems of political representation is not heard or recognized as even when they are represented by others, there is always a gap between the social injustice that they face and their representation. In *Sam's Story*, Sam is created according to the whims and fancy of his masters. He is even given his name by his master. His madam did not like his long name and named him Sam. Likewise in the *River House*, he is called by other names like small Boss, Sammy Boy, etc. although he hated to be called by these names. The *Girl in the River House* teaches Sam elite ways like speaking in English and writing letters in an attempt to fashion Sam like themselves. The servants on the other hand, become dependent on their masters as they are vulnerable because of their marginalised status and lack of education and schooling. Sam also enters in a relationship of personal dependence on the employer. He takes the word seriously when the Boy in the house assures him saying, "Dont worry Sammy, I'll take care of you." (Jayawardena, 2009: 17)

At the same time, novels like *Sam's Story* and *Reef* presents a very fascinating treatment of the figure of the servant as the necessarily minor, fragmentary and marginal figure fills the centre of the texts, rather than the margins. The servant figures in the two novels are also the narrators of the story and they emerge as the sole informants about the events thereby evolving as the 'centres of consciousness.' The narrators gradually bring to light their life experiences which otherwise would push them and others like them to invisibility and silence.

In *Sam's Story*, Sam as a narrator jumps back and forth in time and place and talks about his unique discoveries about the world in which he lives. After Sam starts working in the *River House*, he suddenly begins to compare the luxuries of the *River House* with the poor conditions of his house and family in the village. In contrast to the *river House* which is huge with separate rooms for reading, eating, sleeping and even talking, Sam realizes that his home in the village is just a hovel. Sam says,

Back where I came from, in our village, most houses had one room. We did everything there, within those four walls. I mean they were not real walls, more like half-rotten planks. (Jayawardena, 2009: 9)

In the same way, he also compares how the people in the *River House* were capable of Big Laughs while at his own home in the village people hardly smiled. He says,

I cannot honestly remember a single day that someone laughed in my own house. I mean, really laughed, with a lot of noise and stomachs shaking, like people who came to the *River House* did. We smiled at times. Not too often, but we did smile from time to time. Even when we smiled, they were small smiles. I think the poor can give only small smiles. Since we were poorer than the poor, our smiles were smaller than small smiles. Just appeared and disappeared, like a broken moon in a cloud filled sky. (Jayawardena, 2009: 39-40)

While Sam's master and his rich friends drank rich and expensive drinks like the Russian and Scotch, Sam's friends and brothers in the village drank Kassipu after a day of hard work. Observing these startling contrasts, Sam gradually learns about the economic disparity in society which distinguishes him from those to whom he is subordinated. Sam comes to understand how power permeates all levels of social structures starting with the household of the master. He comes to realize his own inadequacies as a servant boy, belonging to the working class whose mother only tapped rubber. But, it is also his access to the private lives of his masters, as a servant boy that helps him determine his sense of identity. He comes to achieve a powerful understanding of the reality of the larger world to which they were denied access. This knowledge in turn, colours and shapes the kinds of resistance in which he engages throughout his life.

Sam employs certain narrative strategies in talking about his marginalization. Sam's narration is confessional and he reveals his personal feelings, secrets and sins tied to his family and society and these secrets are frequently rooted in shame and pain. Sam predominantly highlights his childhood and uses 'trauma' as a narrative strategy while talking about his life. Sam's childhood was traumatic as he saw his mother struggling in the rubber plantations, their family always in debt and ill-treated by Kaluwa and his father. He also lost his best friend, Piya and his own two brothers. Recalling his childhood, he says,

We had coupons by the government to buy rice from the cooperative store in town. It was almost free. So we had rice. If we ate anything else, it was by pure chance. We only ate vegetables, never meat, not even fish. My mother said we were good Buddhists and good Buddhists only ate vegetables ... we all knew there was more to it than just religion.
(Jayawardena, 2009:40)

In another instance he talks about how they made up stories about their riches and status. He says,

We lied ... We made up great stories about what we ate and who visited our houses and told them to Kaluwa ... It was great fun to imagine such nice things, to make up stories and tell Kaluwa ... live those beautiful lies for a while ... I guess when you are poor it is all right to lie.
(Jayawardena, 2009:42-43)

Sam underscores the unpleasantness of working as a servant. He hated being asked questions, called names, doing certain jobs like cleaning toilets and being lonely at his master's house but had to do it all because he was poor. It is this shame of being marginalised, oppressed and hurt that provokes Sam to speak and thus react to the shame of oppression, injustice and pain. He reveals himself as a 'psychologically bruised' and sad figure as he points out that he has very few things to be actually happy about in life. He says that he is someone who is used to getting strange looks from people and questioned about mundane things. He considers his low status to be particularly responsible for it. Sam reveals himself as a witness of class-based oppression when he says,

He (Kaluwa) cursed her (Sam's mother) for always being in debt. Money was the big thing with Kade Mudalali. We never had any money. May be that's why he scolded my mother so much. We must have been quite small to him. (Jayawardena, 2009:44)

His brother's and Piya's death also pushes Sam further towards experiencing trauma. He says that it was something which he could not talk about. Trauma as theorized by Soshana Felman, Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth and Anne Cubile takes specific forms of articulation even when that articulation is silence. Sam later opens up before Janet, another servant at the River House, and tells her of his friend's and brother's death. Sam having described his own individual suffering locates it in a larger context when he describes the conditions of his fellow servants like Janet, who too have lost near and dear ones. Sam who had earlier hated the Tamil workers like Janet and Leandro, believing that they belonged to the other side that threw bombs, now looked at poverty as the root cause of the war. The politics of war became visible to the earlier naive protagonist and he begun to look at everyone else who are poor like himself, including Janet and Leandro as victims, rather than perpetrators. He began to draw certain parallels between his own condition and Janet's condition. Just as Sam's brothers had been forced to join the army because they were economically downtrodden, Janet's brother was also taken away by the Tamil nationalists in the name of nationalism. One of Sam's brothers died in the war, while the other ran away never to return back. Sam's own personal loss makes him understand Janet's condition and the condition of an entire class who had faced oppression, injustice and trauma. Thus, within his own narrative he encompasses the narratives of others of his class like Janet. Sam comes to realize that it is only the lower class who are made to bear the responsibility of the nation. Lack of money and education makes the lower class vulnerable to the call of nationalism and they become frontline combatants in nationalist or revolutionary groups. Suicide and sacrifice are classed. Sam starts to look at himself as a member of a disenfranchised group/community and attempts to speak as an extension of or on behalf of that community, rather than solely as an individual. His story becomes not only his story, but of the entire community.

Works Cited:

- Bakshi, S.R. (ed). 2000. *Sri Lanka Gazetteer*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- Caruth, Cathy .1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Laub, Dori. 1992. *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Gouverneur, Jacques.1983. *Contemporary Capitalism and Marxist Economics*. New Jersey: Barnes

and Noble Books.

Guneseekere, Romesh. 1994. *Reef*. London: Granta Publications.

Jayawardena, Elmo. 2009. *Sam's Story*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd.

Spivak, Chakravorty. 1989. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Grossberg, Lawrence. Illinois: University of Illinois Press. 271–316.