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The Oppressed

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Article

Do the poor get every opportunity in the world? We can hear the voice of the suffering, discriminated and exploited people are essentially the same across the world. It is a voice that bursts from the crushing silence over decades or centuries. It is a voice of deep agony which we can feel in the Australian film ‘Million Dollar Baby’ (Clint Eastwood) and the Bengali film ‘Koni’ (Saroj De from India).

Australia and India were colonies of Great Britain for hundreds of years. The history of oppression by the fair skinned man – although differing in details and extent – is shared by the Australian black and Indian brown-black people. India won freedom in 1947 and all the people are apparently treated the same. Australia changed its governmental stance of assimilation to the multicultural one in the 1970s and the indigenous people are recognized with equal rights to human beings (in theory). Do Indian dalits and Australian aborigines get equal treatment? ‘Koni’ and ‘Million Dollar Baby’ say an emphatic ‘No’.

The aboriginal’s period of colonization and the period following it is the gloomiest part of the Australian aboriginal life. It is replete with discrimination, ill-treatment, loss of land, people, culture, language and religion, and natural surroundings. Memories of trauma and turmoil, massacre and violence at both physical and deeper levels dominate this period.

The independent India is not completely free from oppression. There are fourth world societies in India in the form of upper class and castes and displaced and dispossessed aboriginal and poor communities. The dominant strata of society have portrayed and treated the outcastes as sub-human. The rich educated people still carry colonial legacy as their paradigm. They do not resemble themselves with the poor. They get all the opportunities and think that opportunities would continue to galore. They don’t recognize poor as human beings. In the film ‘Koni’, named after the protagonist, Koni is treated like an untouchable.

The swimming trainer Khitish spots Koni swimming in the Ganga and tries to make her a champion swimmer. But sadly enough, Koni was disqualified immorally in Calcutta’s multiple swimming competitions. Had Koni been a daughter of the rich and the influential, would she be treated and disqualified likewise. No. this shows that division of class exists even in the so-called modern urban society. Koni is economically sub-altern. Trainers of Jupiter club, the competitor girls of different clubs refuse to recognize her as a human being. They banter, torture and treat her inhumanly. Koni always eats alone, stays alone in Madras, where she was sent for competition. The juxtaposition of lonely Koni and the decorated swimming pool with many rich swimmers comes alternately. Koni name’s was discarded from the competition list. Her trainer Khitish is neither rich nor influential and so the inevitable had to happen. Koni’s last resort, her trainer, was also dismissed as a trainer from the Jupiter club.

Maggie in 'Million Dollar Baby' was refused training in boxing classes because of her origin and status. Indomitable, she works hard and tries to learn independently in the gymnasium. After a long time, touched by Maggie's determination, the trainer Frankie, starts her on the training. Soon enough, she becomes a very good boxer. However, she, being poor and aborigine, is looked down upon by other boxers.

Frankie wants to see Maggie as World Champion, inasmuch the same way Khitish wants to see Koni as National Champion. Maggie and Koni both try hard to learn the sport. While Maggie practises boxing rigorously with minimum of food, Koni despite working in a tailoring shop, continues practising swimming despite the odds. Both of them, equally focussed on their goal, and eventually are taken to the championship competition. Maggie gets the chance, while Koni doesn't as she found herself betrayed by the club officials. Maggie continues to win games one after the other and Koni sits in the gallery as a spectator. In the final boxing competition, we see Maggie being kicked off by the notorious boxer Billie during the break with Maggie losing her sense and rushed to the hospital. In the last event of swimming competition, Koni gets a chance to participate and wins. Maggie as boxer goes into darkness with her leg being amputated. Koni or Kanakchapa as a swimmer wins the war.

The two films start in black screen. 'Million Dollar Baby' uses darkness most of the time. Sometimes a lighted boxing arena pops out to throw some light into Maggie's dark gloomy life. But the film ends in darkness where Maggie sleeps for ever with the Gymnasium remaining dark for the rest of the time.

Koni's trajectory starts from darkness to light. However, there is repeated use of darkness in the film; but the film ends in white screen, never-ending sea where Koni is seen going far, and we see a hope written on the screen: 'It's not the end – traversing starts'.

Maggie is an aboriginal boxer. She doesn't succeed in the hands of the white Australians. Her talent remains half-recognised. She has been murdered. The whites cannot show aboriginals as champions. Koni, though she is poor, ultimately succeeds in making her talent accepted, at least by a few. Though 'Jupiter club' officials connive her, it is Pranabendu from Bhowanipur club who gives her a chance to prove herself. Despite the endemic class division that India has witnessed through the ages, there have always been some conscientious people who had come to the succour of the poor.

It is true that white film makers have in depth dealt with aboriginal themes and characters. But their treatment has always been limited. Though the aboriginal cry of oppression and injustice is portrayed, Maggie moves on lighted ring but ultimately she has to fall.

Her spirit is the winner here. She has the determination to go to the top. She is successful in making her trainer Frankie to think about her. In her sickness, Frankie sends her in deep sleep by pushing an injection to keep the winning spirit in her kindle. She succeeds in carving out a place in the people's mind as a winner in her death.

Maggie's and Koni's fighting spirit take them to a place where the sea or the sky is the only limit. Both struggle against insinuation, oppression and injustice. Their firmness sees them through. They not only prove themselves as equal human beings at par with the so-called privileged class, but rise far above their respective situations of humiliation and torture.