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## **Fighting Back The Iron Hand: A Study of Sarah Aboobaker's When Dharma Cast Its Net and K.S. Duggal's The Masters**

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### **Abstract**

Inequality of any sort, like power or position leads to one dominating the other individual or group. The oppressed is sometimes passive. When they fight back, it gives impetus to other suffering communities. To expose the denial of human rights, literature is used effectively. Sarah Aboobaker's *When Dharma Cast its Net* and *The Masters* by K.S. Duggal portray the suffering of the subaltern and how they reacted.

**Key-words:** Subaltern, Marginalized, Zamindari, Jamaat, Communal, Feudal, Bourgeois.

### **Introduction**

Power struggles in one form or another have been commonly found all through history, all over the world. A common feature in all these is, one who has more power dominates over the one who has less power. The oppressed is sometimes passive. When they fight back, it gives impetus to other suffering communities.

Literature is a valuable tool for creating awareness. Raja Mutthirulandi comments on its potential thus: In the present world of variety of tensions- individual, collective and cultural-literature, with all its form and genres, has the potential to offer us rescue and relief from life's tensions. Literature can also certainly cultivate a better understanding of human rights [...] (v)

To expose the denial of human rights, literature is used effectively. All the historical movements throughout the world since early times- for freedom and equality have been cradles for the concepts of human rights. Jack Donnelly defines human rights as "the rights that one has, simply because one is human" ( qtd. in Mutthirulandi 31). In Ashcroft's study the word 'subaltern' is used to refer to a group or a person who is marginalized by the power of high class people or any individual or group which dominates. The subaltern does not raise hands for his/her rights. It thrives where there is inequality [...] what is the root cause of marginality? Wag mare has this answer: "I think inequality is the main cause of marginality" (16).

The three modes of power are the communal, the feudal and the bourgeois modes. The communal mode of power is found in the community. If anyone breaks the communal understanding or codes of conduct they could be excommunicated. "The feudal mode of power is." characterized fundamentally by sheer superiority of physical force, i.e. a relationship of domination. It is founded on conquest or some other means of physical subordination of a subject population" (Chatterjee 317). In the bourgeois mode of power, "The manifestation of power and the control over the labor is done through securing the rights of property and operation of the market" (Chatterjee 318).

*The Masters* show how the feudal mode of power which is invested in one group leads to inhuman treatment of the powerless. When Dharma Cast it's Net exemplifies communal Mode of power, where individual rights are allocated on the authority of the entire society collectively. The authority is exercised by a chosen group and here it is the Jamaa Committee of the town mosque.

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Ironically, the Jamaat committee abuses the power and authority given to them. The chairman Ibrahim Haji wanted to take revenge on Khatijabi for a private grievance. She refused to give her daughter Nafisa in marriage to Ibrahim Haji. He was a bald headed married man as old as her father and Nafisa was not even sixteen. Empty liquor bottles were thrown in her backyard and strangers were brought to visit her at dusk. She was to be punished according to Dharma Grantha- "For a woman indulging in illicit affairs, one hundred and one whiplashes, and for drinking liquor, a fine of Rupees fifty" (63). No one questioned the men involved in the illicit affairs. When Khatijabi did not recognize the summons from the mosque, they compounded the fine and announced through loud speakers in a jeep that Khatijabi and her family is excommunicated: No one will maintain any kind of contact with any of her family members. No shop keeper will sell them food or any other item [...] (53) When they announced publicly the false allegations about her, the society thought badly about her. Khatijabi felt as if she had been hit. She felt as if lightning had struck her- [...] she couldn't think any further- What next? Oh, Allah! Why are you punishing me? – She said to herself and collapsed on her bed in her room. (53, 54)

In all these troubles, she had to stand alone on her own and face all her problems. When her husband came, he told her, "We cannot survive in this town, opposing the Jamaat [...] why you are obstinate? Like everybody else, just undergo the punishment and come back" (65). To maintain the communal power, he joined indirectly with the abuses and asked her to accept the punishment for the wrong she did not do.

*The Masters* shows the Feudal mode of power. This story reveals the suffering of the ordinary people in the pre-independence days when the Zamindari system prevailed. Before independence British rulers had given Zamindars privileges. The peasants were like slaves. About the Zamindars Daggal writes:

Their cattle could graze in any field. They could ask anyone in the street to do anything and it had to be done. Their evil eyes could fall on any young girl and none could protest [...] Why, if one of their dogs went by in the street, the people would get up and stand! For, were they not the Masters, the privileged ones? (46)

All these changed when India became independent. India became a democracy and every one in theory was equal and the common man was empowered by the voting right. But unfortunately elected rulers blindly followed their former rules once they had come to power. The narrator's wife decided to vote for one who would arrange to clean the drain in front of their house, sweep the streets and remove the refuse that breed germs and cause sickness. But no one called on her. She had no chance to give her ideas. The agents of the candidates dragged the voters into rickshaws to take them to the booth that was only three hundred yards away.

Both Khatijabi and the common folk of Punjab have something in common. They have been robbed of their rights they ought to have as human beings. They have been forced to the margin and hence are called 'subaltern'. Crushed by the iron hand of the dominant power, the plight is pathetic. When the subaltern suffers for generations together, they learn to live or merely to exist in the harsh world around them. To rebel in any form would mean total

disaster "for his subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion and made tolerable- and even desirable- by tradition (Guha 1).

The protagonists of the stories- Khatijabi, a Muslim woman and the common man struggling under the Zamindari system are presented in a context when they cannot but fight back. In *When Dharma Cast its Net* we find an individual fighting back. *The Masters* shows the resultant condition of a big fighting back- the independence struggle of India.

Khatijabi takes up the fight individually. The conflict is between two individuals - a man who wants a woman without considering her interest and the woman. He made a lot of money through liquor smuggling and went on a Haj pilgrimage. Thus he became the chairman of the Jamaat committee. When Khatijabi and her family was excommunicated because she did not succumb to the desire of Ibrahim Haji, Khatijabi did not lose heart. She was determined and had made up her mind to resist and see it through the end. She wondered:

Is she living in a feudal state that she should be summoned to a mosque and given whiplashes on false charges? If she had to indulge in illicit relationships, wouldn't it involve both a man and woman? But in this case, the punishment had been meted out only to her. She told herself, "My name is not Khatijabi if I cannot expose the hypocrisy of these people". (64)

When her husband arrived she thought she could have support. He could not find any fault with his wife. But he was afraid of the committee and tried to change her mind. He told her to accept the punishment without opposition and come back. But Khatijabi "Sprang up like a hooded serpent" (64). Her eyes glowed like fire. She angrily said to her husband,

Should I go to the mosque and face the lashes and accept the wrong that I have not done? Have you mortgaged your reason? [...] I never expected you to stoop so low. I thought you would protect me from these dogs. Anyway don't you also belong to the same species? Don't you wait on an opportunity to oppress a woman? It is we women who are fools to expect protection from you. (64, 65)

The Jamaat committee's confidence was deflated. Everyone realized that if the complaint would come up for investigation, some members of their committee would have to face imprisonment. So they tried to save their face. The Jamaat Committee held an emergency meeting. The maulvi from the mosque summoned Karim Saab. They asked him to forget all that happened. He commented that he was not able to understand how she alone could have committed an illicit act. The committee's action appeared stupid. Khatijabi is illiterate but exhibits a rock like resolve to fight against a feudal patriarchal system. This middle aged lady rises against the oppression of women, not willing to yield and compromise, and finally vindicates her dignity and truth.

*The Masters* presents a picture of change from the old Zamindari system. India was under the control of the British. At that time the ordinary people worked as slaves for the Zamindars. According to law the people paid tax to the Government. But the tax paid went to the Zamindar's pocket. Girls were unable to come to the street freely. If the Zamindar's dog came to the street the people were expected to stand and respect it. But after the

independence, the people's life style changed. The ordinary people were freed from the Zamindars. The people had become so used to the system that at the time of parting the ordinary people cried.

Later when the narrator settled in Amristar town, he lived next to a one-time prince. One day he walked in the garden and he heard a voice of a servant calling the little son of the prince Little Master. Though the system had changed, practices die hard. The Independence struggle had brought about a change in the whole system. Princes came to dwell alongside the common people. Common people had power because they could vote and choose whom they wanted to have as their leader. But the idea of 'master' does not go away. In the mind of the subalterns the power is not distributed. Whoever rules becomes the master. The story shows the fear that the white Khadi-clad figure asking votes with folded hands may become a master someday.

The marginalized groups are distanced from the power centres. Even the Welfare Committees can be blind to their suffering and the protectors like police can be deaf to their cry. The position of the authority changes when the system changes. But it does not assure equality and fraternity. Even though, the person is elected by the people in a democratic set up, there is the danger of him thinking of himself as he power centre and start again to dominate the common people. If people are ignorant corruption can do the same harm. Voters can be coaxed, votes can be bought, essential commodities can be freed from the market and the system of wage less labour can go on as found in the stories.

The protagonists are motivated to fight back in different ways. External support initiates the fight sometimes. To fight back one should have a strong mind. The Independence struggle has been successful to change the system itself. Because India became a democracy Zamindari system, monarchy and such could be abolished and the royalty came to live with the commoners. The short stories *When Dharma Cast its Net* and *The Masters* are indeed an eye-opener to the struggles of the subaltern.

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