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ISBN: 987-81-920052-9-4 Price Rs.140/-.

Poetics of the Oppressed

Many stories have been told and retold, but not often of marginalised and downtrodden of rural India. There are a few attempts to bring out the stories of these deprived and marginalised people by authors at different times. Krushna Charan Behera’s effort in this regard in the context of contemporary Indian literature is a praiseworthy attempt. His popular Short Story Collection in Odia titled Itara Itaraa reflects the contemporary social issues focusing on human values and concerns and brings to limelight how there is a binary opposition between haves and haves-not, where there is a consistent oppression of the former on the latter. However, these stories would have been restricted to the people who know Odia language, if this would not have been translated to English language by Anand Mahanand and Ramesh Chandra Malik as Echoes of the Oppressed: Stories of the Marginals. It is a unique attempt which brings forth the life and predicament of the suppressed to the non-Odia reading public.

The translation Echoes of the Oppressed: Stories of the Marginals comprises twenty short stories with a Forward by Dr Peter G.Friedlander of La Trobe University, Australia. Each story has been designed succinctly and creatively, keeping the originality of the source text.
All these stories are based on some issues such as educational, social, gender, women empowerment, human trafficking and poverty. These issues are highly rampant among the marginalised rural community, which hardly get reflected in the urban society. Through these translations, the translators are able to vividly present the marginalised society. The stories like “Kanaka” “Savitri”, “A Girl is Missing”, “Phulamati”, “Rukuna”, and “Lotus in the Garbage” depict how women suffer and succumb in the hands of the cruel society. All these women are not only individuals but represent many types. In the story “Savitri” the authors have crudely depicted the monstrous society that has persistently engulfed the innocent and the poor. An innocent village girl Savitri goes in search of her husband in a busy city of Kolkata. To her horror, she unconsciously finds herself in the mire of prostitution. It has been picturesquely described by the authors as they write:

“Dense forest, thorny and stony path, and many slavering wild beasts are coming from all directions. Nobody is there to protect her” (9).

In the stories ‘Dustbin’ and ‘livelihood’, the author has realistically narrated how young and beautiful girls’ dreams are shattered. Finding no way out, they forcibly come under the clutches of prostitution. Further, the story, “To be the Cause of One’s Own Sorrow”, the character of Kalindi Charan Babu depicts the real hypocrite to poison the minds of the innocent villagers to fulfill his selfish motives. In the story “Gandhiji’s Pilgrimage” the author has skillfully depicted a typical village dispute. Here it highlights how two brothers fight over their property and each one claims for a bigger share. Further, it brings out the nature of unending human desires and clearly delineates how the human heart has turned into a playground of vices like jealousy, selfishness, envy, and hatred. The story “New Sacrifice” brings forth how a man is not yet free of the age-old shackles of superstition and blind beliefs. As rightly expressed in the lines below:

“Dukhia Bahuka was ready. He came to the buffalo with a new sharp axe like a messenger of yama, the god of death. Then he gathered all his strength and gave a hard blow on the buffalo’s head…..another strong blow”(72).
There are certain stories which are heart-touching enough and give us a ray of hope that things can get better. Such stories are “Steps”, “The Disconnected Root” “The Power of Home and World”.

Although all the stories have been translated from Odia into English, the flow and originality has been retained. The authors have meticulously used the language which is simple and lucid and can be understood by common readers. This is not to suggest that the scholars will not have their food for thought. All these stories can be good resource for leisure reading as well as for understanding social issues confronting contemporary Odisha in particular and India at large.