

The Nexus of Power in Kokilam Subbiah's *Mirage*

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Abstract

The Sri Lankan bilingual writer, Kokilam Subbiah's *Miraze* deals with the life of Valli and her family and other migrants of Senthur, a village in Ramnathapuram, Tamil Nadu in the tea plantations of Sri Lanka. The indentured labourers and their subjugation form the narrative of the novel. Their economic standard persuades them to be the bonded labourers in the hands of the powerful. Power operates at the level of the mirasdar, white Dorais in the estates, the Kanganys, the Kanakkapillais, and the epidemic cholera during their journey. This paper traces out the implanted power structure and its impact on the pitiable labourers.

Key Words: *plantations, indentured labourers, subjugation, bonded labourers, power.*

The English rendering of *Thoorathu Pachchai* (1964), *Mirage* (2007), by Kokilam Subbiah, snaps at the lives of the Tamils of Senthur, a village in Ramnathapuram, Tamil Nadu who embark on their journey as a result of the acute famine that strike the southernmost part of Tamil Nadu. *Miraze* highlights the dominance of powerful over the powerless poor migrants.

The migrants are enchanted by the captivating words of the Kanganys. The Kanganys rightly utilize the helplessness of the poor. The language they use to attract the poor is so appealing in the beginning. The mirasdar, Sethulingam Pillai is a powerful man who owns most of the wet and dry lands of the village. Senthur and the villages surrounding it are affected by drought and famine. Velan, Valli's father mortgages all his land to the mirasdar and "the interest was more than the cost of the land" (11). Despite of his position in the village, he is perceived as a powerful man in Senthur. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines power as "a disposition; an ability or capacity to yield some outcome" ((727). It talks about active and passive powers. Active power represents mirasdar, white Dorais in the estates, the Kanganys, the Kanakkapillais, and the epidemic cholera, and the passive power indicates Valli, her family members and the indentured labourers of the tea plantations of Sri Lanka.

Velan and his neighbor Sellan learn about the job opportunity through Karupiah Kanganay. Velan resolves to go to Kandy along with Muthamma, his second wife and his daughter Valli and leaves Sellatha, his first wife in Senthur. After selling "his land and property, he has left his village with his wife and children—he has embarked on this adventure like a nomad" (17). The Kanganay promises them a better job in Kandy and he uses "honeyed words"

(18) to prepare them and now he has “turned to something sinister” (18). They take their journey on their foot and stay in the *ambalams*, large thatched resting shed for travelers, once in a while to prepare food with their belongings. Everyone loses the interest to continue this journey—to return home, to go back to their village” (21). Kangany’s power over them becomes more arrogant. Velan remarks: “the kangany treats us like cattle and we are not sure of our future” (25). Mookan, Velan’s relative reveals the uncertainty: “wherever we go, we are fated to live like dogs. I am also apprehensive about my future” (25).

The kangany becomes more arrogant and impatient. He reacts to a child who stubbornly refuses to get into the ship, weeping and screaming: “move saniyan! Is it not enough feeding these wretches? I wonder why they have dragged them along” (26). He “pushed the child with his umbrella, making him tumble to the ground” (26-27). The child’s parents become speechless over his power.

They begin their journey with “disjointed reminiscences from their past life, their dreams of striking it rich and returning to their homeland” (28). They are caught between “the captain and the kangany, the rain and the cold, fear and hopelessness” (29). They “endured the journey without food or water ... The journey was uneventful, they lost two lives, a child who dared to put its head out, and was dragged into the ocean, and a man was struck by a bout of vomiting and diarrhea” (29). He dies of dehydration later. His body is thrown into the sea and the people lose the little hope. For them, everything turns into a mirage. They reach the Hamilton Estate in Kandy. They “felt like they were being led into a prison” (33). The kangany dictates them to report to work at the first siren call. Muthamma is different from others. She wishes to go back to her village and believes that “starvation was better than exile” (35). The labourers are unable to tell their inconvenience to anybody and are “unable to resist the vagaries of fate, their bodies and souls felt deadened by their burdens” (36).

The kanakkapillai in the novel try to harass Muthamma when she is alone. But burst out angrily “stay away from me! I don’t want you coming here offering your sympathy” (40). She thrashes him for giving her money: “What! You want to give me money? That too from the kindness of your heart, that’s funny. You don’t give us the wages we legitimately deserve! Chi! Have you no shame” You pick on poor people like us. Get away from here” (41)

The workers are exploited in the name of work. Velan is not steady financially even after the stay for four years on the estate. Besides, he is not given any loans. He remarks at the kanakkapillai’s statement: “I have too much debt in my account and he will not be able to give me any more loans or send any money home” (43).

When he informs his plan of returning to India, he is curbed by the extreme power of the kangany. He is insulted and reminded of repaying the loan:

“Oh, so you have planned to go back home, have you? Well, what about the loan taken from the kangany? You have not even paid the interest for it. Besides, what about the money you often borrow and send home, who is to repay that? You better find a way of paying up all your debts before you think of returning to India” (48).

Meanwhile, Velan is reminded of the deduction of money from his wages for his white and black blanket the previous year. This blanket account “had stretched on for so many years, with the interest adding on remorselessly to the principal” (49). When the number of workers increased, “more forests were cleared, and prepared for the tea bushes” (53).

Valli is married to Sengamalai, a labourer in the Rasikollai Rasa Estate. Prior to her marriage, she works hard in the Hamilton Estate. She labours along with her father. After her marriage, she has to serve in the new estate during day time and she “would be ordered around by her mother-in-law to fetch water, make tea and do the cooking” (83). She plays a subordinate role before and after her marriage. When Velan makes a visit to Valli’s home, the household is in an uproar. Kuppan and Ponnamma, her in-laws abuse her: “you wretch, what do you lack hers? Who is ill-treating you? You slut! Wait till I pull your eyes out” (89). She is unable to tolerate their dictating power.

Valli’s life remains the same after her marriage. Her in-laws harass her for the food she cooks. They tease her: “Is this rice? You call this a curry? How can we eat this? Kuppan would rant drunkenly. Some days she would be dragged by her hair and beaten up mercilessly” (89). When she heard that her mother had died, she “cried, begged and pleaded, to at least be permitted to see her mother’s final remains. But even this was denied to her” (89). She is more grief-stricken after this over the indignant power of her in-laws.

Valli’s son, Raman dies of cholera, an epidemic spread through Ceylon from India. Though everybody in Rasa Estate, Raman could not escape from the clutches of it. She “felt as if a part of her had died with him. All the hope that she had built on him had been washed away” (121). The kangany and the kanakkapillais misuse their power not only on the workers but also by stealing tea from the factory.

Civil war in the country too turns these innocent lives into martyrs. Their grief was so intense when rain devastates the estate. It destroys much of the crops. In addition to this the war brings about scarcity of food, including rice. They are in Ceylon “leaving behind their native villages, their kith and kin, they had come to this country to escape the famine. Here, they sacrificed their lives for the prosperity of the estate” (131).

Lakshmanan, Valli’s another son remarks at their slavish life: “We are slaves aren’t we? Whether you wish to call yourself that or not, you know we are not given proper wages for our work. Do they even allow us to move around freely?” (132) . . . We are all slaves over here,

aren't we? We've got to go running when the summons come" (162). He talks about the presence of power: "Generation after generation they (people) have lived this life of slavery. Will they ever know freedom? However, much they toil, would any boss dare to give them what is legitimately theirs? They will only want to make more and more profit to live a life of luxury" (163). The poor remain powerless under the surveillance of the white dorais, kanganyas and kanakkapillais. Their children hardly get the opportunity to study. But the powerful kangany admits his son to a school in Colombo and has the plan of sending him to England for further studies.

The kanganyas hold their power to oppress the labourers. Valli spends her time on the tea plantation for three generations. She recalls the situation of the past to her grandson, Mari who opposes the kangany: "Can a labourer on the plantation talk so brazenly and get away with it? If he has spoken like this in those days, the punishment would have been severe" (183). She remembers her father Velan "was shipped mercilessly for having dared to question the kangany" (183). When Mari begins labour union to raise the grievances of the labourers, he is arrested first and Kumaran, another grandson, is taken to the police station and she received the news that "Kumaran had died in the hospital" (197). *Mirage* is a social history of the indentured labourers who have been working on the tea plantations of Kandy, Sri Lanka. It highlights the pathetic life of the migrants who had made their entry to Ceylon during the pre-colonial era. They enjoyed no privileges even after the country's independence. They were denied citizenship. Rajiva Wijesinha observes that the Indian Tamils "rendered stateless" (74). He explains it further: "Not only were those who had come over to work recently denied citizenship, but even those who had been born in Sri Lanka had to satisfy various requirements if they wanted citizenship. These requirements included certification of the place of birth of father, grandfather and great-grandfather" (74). He expresses the impracticality of this due to the "paucity of records in those days" (74). Subbiah remarks that *Mirage* is "an attempt to bring to the fore the unchronicled, unvoiced lives of the indentured labourers from India working on the tea plantations of Sri Lanka" (*Preface*).

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