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## **Representation of Nature and the Dalits: A Close Reading of *Karukku* and *Gun Island***

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### **Abstract**

The Dalit community coexists with nature that acts as their chief benefactor in a world of exploitation. They carry out tasks like labouring, collecting firewood for the basic necessities of survival. Besides this, it is in the company of nature that they earn the pleasure in taking part in primitive sports like fishing or festivities and belief in the supernatural. This paper attempts to explore the extent to which coexistence with nature influences the lives and decisions of the Dalits and the way they stand in face of casteism. It also attempts to explore the supernatural aspect associated with nature and the way this influences the choices and decisions of a Dalit. The former is studied from an objective perspective by referring to the Paraya community of Bama's *Karukku* while the later is highlighted by referring to the choices of an individual Dalit named Tipu from Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*.

**Keywords-** Nature, Dalit, Caste, Supernatural, Freedom

### **Introduction**

The interconnectedness and collaboration between the Dalit community and natural environment that surrounds them has the greatest significance in terms of survival. However, the relation such a community shares sometimes go far beyond the hand to mouth existence. The Dalit community reduced to their primitive state of livelihood in postcolonial India owes much of their suffering to the still dominant ideology of casteism and tradition. Yet this primitive existence with the ecosystem encompassing the entire span of their life also reflect the state of romanticism, childhood joys, unbridled relation with one another in villages. It can be deemed 'natural' for living under such earthly, fresh yet paradoxically dangerous circumstances; the Dalits adapt to their atmosphere and become a part of the environment. The question arises: do Dalits co-exist with the natural world to such an extent as to let it influence their character and life against oppression? Do all the decisions made by a Dalit correspond to the nature they live in? This paper shall attempt to study these questions by focusing on Bama's Paraya community in *Karukku* and the life and choices of Tipu from Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*.

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### Sustenance and Sublimity in *Karukku*

The poem of Vaharu Sonawane *In the Lush Green Jungle* provides a two-fold aspect of Dalits' relation with nature – that of habitation and oppression:

“In the lush green jungle  
Those tattered huts  
Like scattered teak leaves  
- - -  
naked children  
playing games  
of primitive communism  
and slavery” (Dangle 25)

It is apparent as the Dalit being held the lowest in the caste structure, the foremost decision they make regarding the choice of work is in relation to their sustenance and here nature's influence is abundant. As mentioned in *Karukku* they consist mostly of agricultural workers in the village where Bama's Paraya coexist with their neighbouring Pallar community. This is the primary means of labour and the lack of it compels them to carry out other odd jobs such as collecting and selling firewood. Depending upon the community they live in, the villagers have certain tasks commonly reserved for them as these are the basic means by which they earn their livelihood. It is nature that becomes the chief benefactor in their struggles. The Nadar community “climb palmyra palms for a living...the Koravar who sweep streets and then the leather-working Chakkiliyar. Some distance away there are the Kusavar who make earthenware pots.” (Bama 7) The difficulty associated with such tasks includes the dangers of predators like foxes. The reference to 'Naari Paara' highlights the ones faced by field labourers as “foxes living there would raid the fields roundabout and completely ruin them.” (1)

The lowly and underprivileged existence of Bama's Dalit folks does not hinder their joy in an otherwise melancholic life. The close association with nature makes resplendent before their eyes the primitive sports such as catching fish in vast stretches of water tumbling from mountains during rainfall, planting millets and cucumber when the lake floor went dry during the hot days, driving cattle for treading out the grain or walking along the shore of a filled up pond. They also take delight in naming what are otherwise small ordinary ponds. A few recurring names include 'Aiyar kulam' called pond of Aiyars and 'Taamara kulam', the lotus pond. Names are also given to the fishes they caught in those rivers selling which is another form of their livelihood. The cheapest fish are called 'paaruku kendai', 'silabi kendai' while the expensive ones include 'keluti', 'ayirai' and 'viraal'. With nothing but the delight in observing these ponds brim over during rain and catching fish in earthen pots, such names became associated with Tamil Dalit culture.

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From their perspective, these native pleasures occupy a major cornerstone among their childhood memories and Bama, herself a Tamil Dalit woman, heightened its importance by elaborating them in details. This can be seen in the way she describes on the very act of catching fish. “Little boys aimed their stones at them. Padak! Quick as a flash they would disappear into the water...If you used the earthworms from rubbish heaps as bait, then you could catch fish very easily.” (3) The use of the second person ‘you’ in these lines shows her attempt at connecting directly with the reader, familiarizing with them what appears to be a meager sort of sport which no doubt is a nostalgic event in their lives. In a similar way she familiarizes the plights in their struggle while undertaking painful endeavors. Besides fishing, collecting groundnut crops in the land of the upper caste Naickers was another task carried out by the labourers. Collecting the groundnut plants, separating and cleaning the pods for the Naickers’ granaries help the labourers earn at the most five rupees. Alternately if there is the lack of such work they would be occupied in collecting stray onions. The efficient manner with which they carry out these tasks show the strong bond these villagers have formed with nature. However, the association does in no way make the task easier for the Dalits. The hard physical labour of collecting firewood shows a different relation – the extent to which this task makes their life a greater struggle. And here their freedom in collecting wood is curbed by the figure of a ‘Guarder’ to whom they had to bribe beforehand. The primitive hardship in this task is devoid of any proper equipment and stand in contrast to the joys in casual fishing or climbing trees. For they had to “climb the steep mountain slopes one by one... the twigs and thorns would scratch and tear your face, your hair, your arms and legs” (51) and in spite of that they needed to “push and shove and crawl our way through bushes and briars.” (52) The hardship reached its extreme when Bama witnessed how her mother had vomited blood after carrying firewood. That the close connectivity with nature would make life less tough for the Dalits compared to the upper castes is paradoxical when such shocking instances are brought into focus. However, it must not be forgotten that this strife in carrying out primitive tasks is actually a part imposed by casteism that has reduced their position to stagger like this against all odds. The natural world is not to blame, especially when considering that this co-existence is not by choice but forced upon the Dalits. The glimpse of happiness they have is based on the liberty they freely take in playing or collecting wild ‘manjanatthi’ and ‘kodukka’ fruit. That is why despite working “so hard and suffered bodily pain, our people laughed and were cheerful.” (55)

### Primitive Festivity

Living under the oppression of untouchability, the Dalits were denied any proper rights of their own. Much like the constant shifts in their regular tasks of earning money, the joys they share by being close to nature is also in a sense fleeting and short lived. All their pleasure loving

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sports needed to be done stealthily and in secrecy, behind an authoritative figure of the caretaker and “the man who held the fishing rights for the pond” (3). If the village people are spotted, then they had to abandon all fun in roasting fish in small fires of straw which would all be confiscated. Therefore the short duration of their adventure under every risk would only deepen their sense of sublimity. It should not be forgotten that the villagers were mostly illiterate as the privilege of schools were reserved for the upper caste Naicker community. So the festivities they hold together is an important part of their culture just as the belief in the supernatural has become associated with their character. It is to be noted that the lowly Dalit festivals and culture do not have the grandeur in their celebration as the ones in the upper castes. Their monuments and places of worship consisting of ruined pillared structures only find veneration in their eyes. On the other hand, hunting is another form of festivity undertaken as a ritual. The men had to engage in hunting, not just as a past time but to prevent the ambush of wild pigs and foxes from destroying their crops. It is interesting to note that such tasks like hunting which is meant to avoid trouble is turned into a form of rewarding sport and would be celebrated and taken for food. That is why a wild pig caught would be washed and garlanded and carried across villages to be displayed. The hunter would be rewarded with a ‘veshti’ before the pig would be butchered and distributed. On special occasions, like the New Year, even cows would be slaughtered. As survival is the primary motto of these communities, religion does not appear to be the influential factor. Then again, there is the local myth of Muniappasaami shrine which blends their ideology regarding festival and belief in supernatural. Once a year, the folks would make offerings of food and money to this shrine. It so happened that a thief called Bondan stole this money along with the temple bell. After that stories got circulated that Muniyaandi would walk at night with a burning torch threatening to burn the street until the bell is returned back to the temple. The existence of this ‘terrible Devil’ was only in the rumours spread but the shock displayed by the villagers after the shrine was robbed and the fear which compelled them to make Bondan return the bell and money shows the strong rooting of these beliefs.

### **Casteism and Freedom**

It is worthwhile to imply that by being attached to nature, Dalits earn a feeling of excitement arising out of a sense of temporary emancipation. In *Karukku*, the Paraya community is bound by their duties to the Naicker lands and households, fetching for them besides bearing the pangs of untouchability. They had to receive water from a height with cupped hands and eat leftover stale rice and curry. What is otherwise a state of exploitation to which even the children were not exempted, these fun and sports would act as their only liberation. Therefore it is natural for these Dalit children to lose themselves in one of the few moments of excitement though they are not devoid of risks. It can be seen in the game of touching the tip of a coconut palm. Bama referred to this game and how in their joy, her playmates liked grabbing and twisting the coconut. However, the fun of the moment did not serve to strengthen the trait of unity when they

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are faced by an imminent danger. The fear of being chastised would instinctively make them avert the blame to one another. When her turn came, the twisted coconut accidentally fell and only she had to bear the accusation of being called a thief and denied entry to school for no apparent fault. The truth is that hegemony through casteism got attuned to the consciousness of Dalits. The influence created by schools and churches retain a greater strength over the Dalits than closure to nature possible could. Was it her fault in dropping the coconut or even playing there? When Bama was called before the headmaster at an assembly, he pointed out her wrong doing but not before stating first and foremost. “You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya.” (19) It becomes clear that her actual fault was being a lower caste ‘Paraya’ more than climbing the coconut tree and in this also she had no hand. Would a child from the Naicker community be held accountable like this for indulging in a similar game? Apparently that would not have been the case. While nature does not demarcate a Naicker child from a Paraya in having fun in touching coconut, the conventional tradition is what pardons one community while blaming the other for the most ignoble fault and making their life difficult. To continue school, she had to go to a priest, who equally blamed her, and obtain a letter to be permitted back. So being under the burden of an existing structure that only provides Dalits with moments of humiliation and struggle, the moments spent with nature give them the true value of lived experiences.

The nurtured division between Dalits and upper castes did not always make the former jointly stand against their oppressors. Feud and rivalry often arises between many sub-castes of one village existing in a state of diaspora. There is an uneasy sense of peace where there is “fight to the death one moment; the next moment they join together again.” (47) And living in communion with nature that grants them these small liberties do not help avoid skirmishes. This can even be a fight over one ripe banana. The truth is that being the lowest section of society, there is always a struggle through deficit and both the Pallar and Paraya community live through starvation. The rivalry and bloodshed occur out of this lack of basic necessities and their fights are more instinctive, less because of some conflicting ideology. Both are aware of their exploited existence and the resulting anger instead of being directed towards the upper caste oppressors is vented out against each other in form of hostilities distinctly mentioned by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He refers to “aesthetic expressions of respect” which is the educational system in capitalist societies, rewarding of workers for their loyal services and policemen in the colonies acting as spokesmen of the colonizers – who develop “around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission” (Fanon 29). The police are the repressive state apparatus, government agents who use pure force to maintain control over the natives. The state of domination gives rise to the state of violence and anger in their minds. The colonizers take measures to circumvent the natives by keeping active this anger and making sure it is not directed against him. As the result, the Algerian natives remain bound by their chains and their violence is redirected towards each

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other expressed in bloody tribal wars. Such violent feuds “only serve to perpetuate old grudges deep buried in the memory” (42). In *Karukku*, it is the Naickers who take the role of colonizers and in a way create the feuds through untouchability and the village much like the Algerian one is a starving town. So it can be seen that nature instead of liberating the Pallar and Paraya rivalry becomes a subject of their feud. A united stand was lacking against a common enemy like the instance of Chaaliyar folk who hired policemen to beat them up. Instead of standing together, the Pallar folk betrayed the hiding location of some Paraya people. Despite the fact that these communities take part in festivities together, their culture does not help avoid the conflict and vengeful murders. A hacking and burial of a Paraya boy would counter result in a “hapless Palla boy” getting killed. Therefore the question inadvertently put by Bama, “Appa, should we come to blows and actually kill each other over a mere banana?” (Bama 45) has the answer hidden in itself.

### The Supernatural in *Gun Island*

Whereas the influence of nature towards the Dalits were related in an objective manner in *Karukku*, Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* had the individual perspective where a change in the course of the life of a Dalit from the Sunderbans can be seen to initiate his journey. In Bama’s autobiography it was the community who acted upon their beliefs in a superstition, but a very menacing presence hinted at played upon the life and choices of Tipu. Arjun Dangle in his introduction to *Poisoned Bread* raised an important question directed to Dalit writers – “should they be lost in a false world of feeling or consider man a helpless puppet in the hands of the supernatural?” (xlix) Earlier, he focused on the aspirations of these exploited people in the same introduction. Though *Gun Island* is not directed towards the tradition of Dalits in the conventional context, the narrative attempts an answer to this question in a positive light by fictionalizing how indeed Tipu became a victim before the supernatural lurking presence of Manasa Devi who manifested herself in the form of a King Cobra and bit him. But it would be wrong to call this presence ‘menacing’. It was indirectly responsible for Tipu’s journey with Rafi through Bangladesh, Egypt to Turkey and Venice, their exploitation at the hands of traffickers and conversion into refugees. But it is this force that emerged as the ‘miracle’, giving hope for freedom towards the end of the novel.

It is interesting to note that this whole journey that influenced and directed the decisions of Tipu began at Sunderbans. He was an accomplice to the narrator Dinnanath Datta while they were travelling by boat to the fictional shrine of the Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar) amidst the jungle. What made this shrine unique was the time in which it was built, around the 1690s before the founding of Calcutta and the legend of this Merchant associated with it. Unwilling to become the disciple of the goddess Manasa Devi, the merchant was plagued by snakes, had to endure her wrath in the form of “droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities... finally taking refuge in a

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land where there were no serpents, a place called ‘Gun Island’ – Bonduk-dwip” (Ghosh 16). The story did not end there for the goddess kept on pursuing him and the merchant during his plight was captured by pirates to be sold in one ‘Shikol-dwip’ (The Island of Chains). Finally when he gave in and agreed to build a temple in her honour she set him free through a miracle: “the ship was besieged by all manner of creatures, of the sea and sky... the captives managed to take over the ship and seize their captors’ riches.” (17)

Interpretations of the legend vary within the novel but the unflinching element is the recurring presence of Manasa Devi who appears through nature itself. The gradual change in the American educated Dalit with an insolent attitude (such as addressing the narrator as ‘Pops’) began to occur since he was mysteriously bit by the King Cobra with one fang. It began with the visions when due to the venom coursing through his body Tipu fell under a trance and began to see shadows, probably reflecting some past misfortunes. The queer element was uplifted once more when he could recognize Rafi by his real name Ilyas who was an accomplice of the Merchant in the legend and later, knowing at the exact moment of its disappearance, about Rani, the dolphin who was the subject of Piya’s study. Though brushed off as coincidences, the supernatural aspect of these visions could not be denied. The seizures of Tipu continued after his recovery and his behaviour became all the more erratic with “a kind of darkness closing in around him” (236) that compelled him to leave his mother and home. So was it that the supernatural atmosphere was trying to act as a guide? It would be awkward considering he never coexisted with the Sunderbans in the way other Dalits did who ironically became the victims of Cyclone Aila and had to endure hardships because of their dependency and confinement. Or is it that nature was trying to help him avoid a danger? For later in the novel a flood emerged in the Sunderbans and the shrine was swept away. It would be strange yet to consider that the visions made him go restless and avoid one form of hardship by placing him in an arduous journey towards another. But it must not be forgotten that Tipu had found an interest in the world of ‘dalals’, illegal ways of obtaining passports and the “people-moving industry” (60). So it might not be wrong to say that by influencing this overseas journey and placing him under these ‘dalals’ and other refugees who migrated, nature opened before him from a closer angle the shocking world of human trafficking and connection houses.

The change in Tipu’s character was highlighted when even after getting separated from Rafi in the Iranian border, he made online arrangements for him and stayed in touch with him all the way through Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and Austria. Even after Rafi reached Venice, Tipu did not want him to bother making any payment when he was stuck in Turkey and took the entire responsibility on his own. It is after this his life took another dramatic turn when he had a vision of an Ethiopian woman who was “like a forishta, an angel” (241). Later it became clear that it was Manasa Devi herself who emerged in human form and performed a similar miracle as in the

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Merchant's story to ensure the safe transport of the refugees: "She stood absolutely still... with a halo of birds spinning above her, while down in the water a chakra of dolphins and whales whirled around the boat" (282). The absent presence of this supernatural element only confirms the abiding influence of the natural world not only in molding an individual but also liberating him.

### Conclusion

*Gun Island* is not a Dalit text in the sense *Karukku* is popularly considered and it does not deal with the issue of caste oppression. The social situation in both the texts, apart from their different regional and linguistic context, starkly resembles each other in the close association with nature. With the theme of emancipation explicitly conveyed, the controlling factor of surrounding background, of both the Sunderbans and Paraya village, regarding every character development could not be overlooked. This is shown to be true for both the individual and community and the chosen texts, despite their contrasts, have contributed to a meaningful discourse.

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