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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Imagining the Dalit Identity: An Analysis of Narrative Techniques in Select Dalit writing

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### Abstract

This paper analyses the narrative techniques of two Dalit texts; an autobiography called *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki and a novel called *Koogai: The Owl* by Cho. Dharman. Through this analysis, the paper presents an account of the changing socio-political conditions of the Dalits in India after independence. Using the theoretical framework of narratology, the paper argues that the two very different narrative styles present in these two texts are reflective

of the respective conditions within which their writers found themselves in and the larger socio-political questions that the Dalit emancipation movement was dealing with during those periods. Another aspect that the paper covers is how these two texts present the inherent conflicts and contradictions within the Dalit identity. It then asks the question whether these contradictions should be flattened to present a more homogeneous conceptualisation of what it means to be a Dalit or whether the identity should be imagined alongside these contradictions.

**Keywords:** Narratology, Homogenous, Marginalization, Dalit liberation, Autobiography Identity, Cultural background, Healthcare, Social-political conditions, Caste-based and community-based discrimination, Tradition, Dominant culture

### Introduction

This paper looks at the narrative techniques of two Dalit literary texts- Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997 [2003]) and Cho. Dharman's *Koogai: The Owl* (2005[2015]). Through this analysis, the paper looks at the process by which Dalits as a socio-political group have sought to imagine and present their group identity to make claims upon the state. The paper argues that the very diverse narrative styles in these two texts are reflective of the different phases that the Dalit liberation movement underwent after India's independence. Finally, the paper will conclude by presenting a discussion of how these two texts pose a problem in the creation of a unified Dalit identity by highlighting the different gaps and contradictions that exist within it. The conclusion will also provide a direction towards whether the problem of generating a distinct Dalit identity can be resolved, and if yes, how can it be done.

### Caste Politics after India's Independence- Dalits and their Literature

India implemented a constitutional democracy and universal adult suffrage after gaining independence in 1947. However, an undemocratic and uneven social life ran counter to the idea of political democracy. During the colonial era, a small number of upper caste elites who solidified their place within the State and its many institutions, such as the bureaucracy, dominated power.

The Indian National Congress (also known as Congress) party, which ruled the nation for the first two decades following independence, was predominately an upper caste and notables' party. The Congress practised clientelist and vertical politics, which allowed it to maintain its authority. It allowed for the inclusion of upper caste political figures who, in exchange for access to public funds, used their local clout as moneylenders, landlords, or notables to sway support and votes for the party (Jaffrelot 2003: 48, 49 and 66). In spite of the fact that the Indian Constitution was egalitarian and mandated that all citizens had the same rights to occupy public office, the majority of the lower caste and other parts of the plebeian populace were kept out of the political authority.

The founding fathers of the Indian Constitution, including Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, believed that individuality and anonymity would result from the adoption of a modern, secular democracy, rapid industrialization, and planned state-directed

growth. Caste was one of the old, communal systems that was anticipated to disintegrate under the weight of these factors (Kaviraj 1999: 102).

Socialists who were influenced by and versed in the techniques of western liberal philosophy, Nehru and the writers of the Constitution were. They were aware that the individuation brought about by the modern State and industrialization led to the individual becoming the most important social unit around which life was structured. For India, they anticipated a like trend. Modernists like Nehru, however, failed to recognise how traditions may adapt and alter in response to historical circumstances. In addition, the West organised social stratification around the issue of class. Class-based groups were transient, and the makeup of each one changed over time in response to shifting economic situations. The permanency and composition of caste-based groups, on the other hand, are established and were further solidified by the caste enumeration conducted by the ethnographic colonial state (Kaviraj 1999: 103 and 110). As a result, caste could not be eliminated in post-colonial India. In actuality, after India gained its independence, social life and politics started to be organised progressively around the concept of caste. The Congress and the upper caste elites' political supremacy was seriously challenged by the lower castes in the 1970s when they started to politically organise themselves. The counter-hegemonic movement was expressed in terms of lower caste identification and not in abstract terms of individual citizenship rights because the upper castes held hegemony over the State and its resources (Witsoe 2013: 19). A "democracy of castes" (Kaviraj 1999: 104) was created as a result of this mobilisation, which meant that members of the lower castes started to lay equal claims to authority and administration alongside their upper caste counterparts. This went against the varna system's hierarchical tenet that only the upper castes had moral and political authority.

Two lower caste groups participated in political mobilisation in India: one was composed of Shudra varna members who the government classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) for administrative purposes. The other group of previously untouchables, who identified as Dalits and were included in the Scheduled Castes (SCs).

Dalits lie outside the framework of the varna system and have been considered untouchables due to the nature of the 'impure' work that they did such as skinning of dead animals, burying the dead, washing clothes soaked with menstrual blood, etc. as mandated by the caste system. Since they were considered 'polluted' because of the performance of these 'impure' tasks, they were forced to live on the outside the boundaries of the village society, since even the shadow of the members of certain Dalit castes was considered 'polluting' for people belonging to the upper castes. *Manusmriti* a religious text compiled by the Hindu sage Manu lays down the injunctions of the caste system and how members of different castes are supposed to relate to each other. According to Ambedkar, while caste existed in Hindu society even before the compilation of the *Manusmriti*, it was through its compilation that the caste system as an institution was canonised (Dangle 2009: XX).

After the promulgation of the Indian Constitution in 1950, untouchability was banned and it was declared a criminal offence. Further, through Article 16 (4) of the Indian Constitution 15% of the seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) in public sector jobs and state-funded higher educational institutions (Desai and Kulkarni 2008). Through these reservation

policies a miniscule of Dalits began to acquire some semblance of social and economic mobility and began to mobilise themselves for the goal of social uplift and political empowerment of Dalits. The word Dalit is a Marathi word which means ‘broken down’. The word does not occur in the Constitution of India, and it is used by Dalits to refer and assert themselves politically. Through the usage of this word Dalits refer to themselves as ‘broken people’ who have been ‘broken’ due to thousands of years of caste discrimination. It is difficult to ascertain who used the word for the first time since we find the existence of words like *padadalit* (crushed by foot) and Dalit even before India’s independence. However, it could be stated that the word gained more currency after India’s independence when Dalits gradually began to mobilise themselves.

In the cultural sphere Dalit literature became an important vehicle for the self-expression of the political consciousness of Dalits in independent India. While certain critics trace the origins of Dalit literature to the 14<sup>th</sup> century poet Cokhamela, according to noted Dalit critic Arjun Dangle, the person who paved the path for the development of Modern Dalit literature was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Dangle 2009: XXIII). Ambedkar who was born into the untouchable Mahad caste in Maharashtra, was a prolific writer, erudite scholar and the chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution of India.

Dangle (2009: XXIII) argues that although Ambedkar did not write any literary fiction, and his writing oeuvre comprises mostly of articles and books dealing with issues of caste and India’s anti-colonial movement. Yet, Ambedkar by effectively mobilising Dalits towards the cause of their emancipation, paved the path towards the acquisition of political consciousness among them which was later on found expression in the writings of Dalit writers and poets.

In independent India Dalit literature emerged first in Marathi in Maharashtra. The first Dalit literary conference was organised in 1958 by the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha. The conference discussed the aims and objectives of Dalit literature in detail and passed a resolution that stated “the literature written by the Dalits in Marathi [must] be accepted as a separate entity known as “Dalit literature” and realising its cultural importance, the universities and literary organisations should give it its proper place (*Prabuddha Bharat* 1958 cited in Dangle 1999: XXVIII). Dangle (1999: XXII) himself describes the purpose of Dalit literature in the following lines, “This literature [Dalit literature] is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Their literature is thus characterised by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity”.

### **Theorising Narratology**

Narrative is the story-telling method that is followed in various forms of literary fiction such as short stories and novels. The corresponding branch of literary theory that deals with narrative is referred to as narratology. Abrams and Harpham (2012:234) define narratology as a “general theory... that deals especially with types of narrators, the identification of structural elements in narratives and their diverse modes of combination, recurrent narrative devices, and the analysis of the kinds of discourse by which a narrative gets told...”. Narratology owes its influence to the Russian formalists, who made a distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. *Fabula* refers to the story of the fictional work, also referred to as plot, whereas *syuzhet* is the way the

story is narrated. The narrative style of fiction writing has been influenced by the prevailing socio-political conditions. To draw upon the definition of narratology stated earlier, the narrative of various of fiction have been subject to the various discourses that were contemporary to the literary work. Thus, in 19<sup>th</sup> century England George Eliot formulated the concept of ‘literary realism’ or ‘classic realism’ which focused on ‘truthfulness’ and ‘sympathy’ as the two important qualities of art. This entailed that a work of art should be an exact reproduction of real life. The question of representation is so crucial in Eliot’s literary theory that she has defined her work as ‘life- drawing’ (Goulimari 2014: 104). Further, Eliot’s work also featured characters from the lower strata of the society, who were not included within the realms of literary works.

Several 19<sup>th</sup> century British novelists such as Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens and George Eliot were proponents of this classical realism style while writing works of narrative fiction. Writing in the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution which ushered massive changes in the British society, these novelists tried to portray the existing realities as they saw it unfold around themselves. These novelists drew certain inspirations their romantic predecessors, while at the same time discarding some of their theories. For instance, Eliot drew from Wordsworth ‘the serious treatment of- and sympathy for- “low and rustic life” (Wordsworth 2012: 507).

On the other hand, Dickens rejected the imagination and idealisms of the Romantics and sought to portray the ‘stern truth’ of life in his works (Dickens 1949: IX, Goulimari 2014: 105). He also refused the binaries of good and bad characterization and instead opted for morally and psychologically complex characters (Goulimari 2014: 105). The Victorian period gradually made way for the Modernist period in England, a period that was marked by immense speed where life was constantly fleeting away. The term was coined by the French poet Charles Baudelaire who used the word ‘modernité’ to describe this period and stated that that the work of the modern artist was to carve out the transcendent, eternal truth out of this constantly changing and transitory time (Baudelaire 1992: 402).

The Modernist period in literature greatly influenced by the experiences of the First World War involved departures from the existing literary conventions. The changes in some of the literary conventions that were witnessed in modernist literature include breaking down of the linear narrative structure of novels, as could be seen in the novels of James Joyce such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, doing away with the rhyme and metric structure in poetry in favour of free verse such as in T. S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), and also resorting to the use of memory and remembrance for writing narrative fiction (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 226). Modernism would eventually lead towards postmodernism in literature. However, before discussing the literary characteristics of postmodernist writing, this paper will present a brief discussion of Marxist literary theory, which will then put us in a better position to appreciate how postmodern literary theory came into being.

Karl Marx’s philosophical ideas were strongly influenced by the dialectical philosophy of a 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher called G. W. F. Hegel. Marx simultaneously drew upon and also altered the ideas of Hegel while formulating his own theory. Hegel saw history moving forward as a contradiction of thought, which he referred to as dialectic. There exists, according

to Hegel, a thesis regarding truth, which is contradicted by its opposing idea- the anti-thesis. This anti-thesis “is not just a contradiction of thesis, rather it supplies a part of the truth that the thesis lacked” (Goulimari 2014: 108). This conflict of the thesis and the anti-thesis eventually produces a synthesis- and it is through the synthesis that history reaches towards the absolute or the complete truth (Goulimari 2014: 108). Marx while drawing upon the theory of dialectic of Hegel, refused Hegel’s theorisation that history moves forward through the conflict of thoughts. Rather, Marx argued, it moved through the conflict of the material and the economic life. Marx therefore suggested that every society in history had an economic base upon which every other aspect of human life was dependent. The Marxist literary theory therefore postulated that the cultural element of a society- its art and literature was dependent upon and reflected its economic base (Goulimari 2014: 108). The Marxist literary theorists referred to this domain of culture as the ‘superstructure’ of a society which was totally dependent upon the base.

From here, Marxist literary critics developed a literary theory called ‘socialist realism’. The term referred to literary and artistic works that accurately portrayed the existing realities of the society and upheld the Marxist idea of the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which eventually would lead to the formation of a classless, communist society (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 368). The Russian novelist Maxim Gorky’s novel ‘Mother’ is usually considered one of the first literary works written in the tradition of socialist realism. While the literary or classical realism of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian writers was concerned only with the truthful reflection of their existing societies, the Marxist concept of socialist realism was not just content with truthful representations but would also require portraying how these existing conditions could be transcended through class conflict leading eventually to the formation of a classless society. The experiences of the Second World War, the Nazi holocaust and the widespread destruction brought about due to the atomic bombing of the twin Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had a profound impact on the European psyche. It also greatly influenced the existing philosophies, art and literature.

The philosophy that came to be developed in this period was described as postmodernism. It entered into popular imagination through an essay by the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard called *The Postmodern Condition*. In it he defined postmodernism as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1979 cited in Haider 2018). By this what Lyotard means is that postmodernism is suspicious about grand, universal theories such as Marxism in explaining the universal phenomena, and instead resorts to localised and multiple understanding of things.

In literature postmodernism signalled not just an extreme continuation of the Modernist trends and theories, but, at times it also included a radical departure from it. For instance, postmodern literature did away with the modernist distinction of high art and low art and therefore, sought to incorporate elements from popular and mass culture in serious artistic works (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 227). Through the account presented above, this paper would like to state that the modes of literary and artistic work have been dictated by certain theories which have emerged as a product of the corresponding socio-political times. In that light the author will analyse the narrative styles of two primary texts in this chapter: Omprakash

Valmiki's autobiographical work *Joothan*, translated by Arunprabha Mukherjee, and Cho. Dharman's *Koogai: The Owl* translated by Vasantha Surya. Dalit literature has reflected the concerns that have animated Dalit politics and the questions pertaining to their emancipation from caste. Thus, Dalit literature is a dynamic space that has constantly undergone changes in response to the changing conditions of Dalits in India. The two texts that are being analysed in this chapter are two different kinds of texts: an autobiographical and non-fictional work and the other a work of fiction. The two texts have originally been written in two different languages (Hindi and Tamil) and their authors belong to two diverse regional locations- Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, both of which have a distinct trajectory of Dalit politics. Through the analysis of the narrative techniques of these two texts, this chapter will also try to situate them within their respective domains of Dalit politics.

### Contextualising Dalit Autobiographies

In 1990 the Mandal Commission recommendations were passed by V. P. Singh, the 7<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of India. The Commission recommended that 27% of the total seats in public sector jobs, public universities and legislative assemblies must be reserved for the Other Backward Classes (OBC) (Kumar et. Al. 2008: 11, Jaffrelot 2011: 468 and 470). The decision was met with severe hostility from the upper caste groups. It was also around this time that in North India, a political party called the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) which aggressively asserted its Dalit identity, was enjoying widespread electoral success. All these factors combined to politicise the Dalit identity. For the first time in the history of independent India, Dalits and other lower caste groups had access to the public sphere and began to accumulate some amount of social and cultural capital, owing to the benefits that they acquired from the reservation policies (Beth 2007: 546 and 547).

In the cultural sphere, Dalit thinkers and critics began to debate and discuss questions pertaining to what comprised and what could be defined as Dalit literature, who had the right to speak on behalf of Dalits, etc. The noted Dalit critic Sharankumar Limbale notes that the representation of Dalits in literary texts has passed through three stages: erasure, containment and finally assertion (Mukherjee 2004: 5). In the period of erasure, Dalit characters are absent in the texts written by upper-caste writers. It is as if Dalit life and Dalits were not worthy enough of being mentioned in these literary texts. As Mukherjee (2004: 5) writes, "It would appear that the upper caste Hindus achieved in literature what they could not in real life, namely, a complete silencing, if not erasure, of the untouchable Other with no chance of being polluted by the untouchable's shadow".

From here, the representation of Dalits moves to a phase which Limbale refers to as 'containment'. In this phase, Dalit characters appeared, not as self-owning subjects, but as objects of pity for the upper castes. The focus in these writings was still very much upon the representation of the upper-castes, and the reformation they were undergoing, so that they could treat the Dalits with sympathy and not oppress them. Mukherjee (2004: 5) writes, "Unable to imagine the untouchable Other out of existence, Brahminical literature now sought to confine it within a discourse marked by 'sympathy' and 'compassion'." Examples of writings of this kind include Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable*, U R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* and *Bharathipura*, etc. Finally, Dalit literature entered the phase of assertion. It is in phase that the

two texts that are being analysed in this chapter, can be located. In this phase, Dalit writers began to write about themselves and their societies. The reason why, Dalit writers could finally do that was due to the transformative impact brought about by the reservation policies, and the electoral victories of political parties based around a Dalit identity, as was discussed above.

These Dalit writers focused on the lives of Dalits and their oppressive experiences due to the persistence of caste, and not on how upper-caste people were trying to reform themselves. Autobiographies became one of the first modes through which Dalits began to assert themselves in the domain of literature. As Beth (2007: 547) argues: “Dalit autobiographies’ role in informing public perception of Dalit life has meant that the dramatic increase of this autobiographical literature in Hindi since the 1980s has led to an important shift in the conceptualization of Dalit identity”.

Some of the important texts in this tradition were written in Marathi, for example Kumud Pawde’s *Antasphot* (Outburst) (1981) happens to be the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013: 71), Sharankumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi*, etc. The Dalit autobiographical writing in Hindi literature started with the translation of these Marathi writings. From the mid-1990s Dalit writers began to write their own autobiographical accounts in Hindi (Beth 2007: 547). Examples of such writings include *Apne Apne Pinjare* (1995) by Mohandas Naimisharay, *Joothan* (1997) by Omprakash Valmiki and *Tiraskrit* (2002) by Surajpal Chauhan. In South India several Dalit autobiographies appeared such as *Karukku* by Bama, *Brahmana* (1994) by Arvind Malagatti.

### **Reading *Joothan* as a Testimonio**

The tradition of writing life-narratives or autobiographies by people belonging to historically marginalized and oppressed groups was first seen in the autobiographical writings of black people and the African-Americans. A crucial difference in these autobiographies and those written by people who are famous and successful is that these autobiographies are ‘narratives of pain’. The pain is caused due to the suffering and trauma that is inflicted upon people who belong to these marginalized groups. For instance, the pain of Black people because of their racial identity, and the pain of Dalits in this case, due to their caste identity. The pain narrated in these autobiographies is not only of the writer of these texts, but also the collective pain of the oppressed social group to which he/she belongs. Thus, through these autobiographies a connection is made between the ‘individual self’ and the ‘collective self’ (Beth 2018: 1 and 2).

These autobiographies also achieve an important transformative potential. By writing their autobiographies, these autobiographers belonging to oppressed social groups transform their ‘narrative of pain’ to a ‘narrative of resistance’ (Beth 2018: 1). Thus, in these autobiographies the Dalit writer as well as the Dalit community to which he/she belongs transform themselves from being objects of pity to self-owning subjects who can narrate their lives as they have experienced it. These kinds of autobiographical writings have been described as a ‘testimonio’. John Beverly (1992 cited in Nayar 2006: 84) defines a testimonio as: “A novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or significant life experience”.

In a testimonio, the narrator speaks for himself/herself as well as the group to which he/she belongs. Therefore, a testimonio has also been referred to as a ‘collective biography’ (Nayar 2006: 85). The reason why the narrator is granted the authority to speak on behalf of the community is because, by belonging to the oppressed community, the writer of a testimonio has the experience of the oppression that he/she and his/her community has gone through. As Nayar (2006: 89) writes in the context of discussing Bama’s *Karukku* as a testimonio: “The crucial component of testimonio is that the singular is universalizable- that any Dalit would have had the same experience as Bama’s narrator”.

Witnessing is another element that grants a testimonio its authenticity. The narrator is a witness to his/her own suffering as well as to people of his/her community (Nayar 2006: 92). Therefore, texts written by non-Dalit writers are not granted the same amount of authenticity as those written by Dalits themselves. This is because, neither the upper-caste writers have themselves undergone caste oppression, nor are they a witness to the oppression of Dalits.

Considering the theorisation of a testimonio made above, this paper would like to refer to Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* as a testimonio. This is because, the author of this text is a Dalit himself who belongs to the *Bhangi* caste; a caste whose people have traditionally been engaged in sweeping and cleaning activities and hence considered polluted and deemed untouchables. As a testimonio, *Joothan* narrates both the individual pain of Valmiki himself as well as that of people belonging to his caste. As was stated earlier, Dalit autobiographies are ‘narratives of pain’ that become ‘narratives of resistance’ through the narration of that pain. The narration of pain can be seen in the title of this text itself. The Hindi word ‘*joothan*’ translates to English as leftovers and refers to food that one would throw away because it is no longer consumable. The title alludes to the upper-caste practice of giving away leftover food to the Dalits who would work for them and usually for free. Through this analysis of the title of the text, it can be inferred that the pain being narrated in *Joothan* is not just the physical pain of being beaten up by the upper-caste people, but also the mental pain and trauma suffered everyday through constant humiliation and subjugation.

In *Joothan* Valmiki counters the official narrative of caste being a relic of the past that existed only in the traditional and backward societies and has no place in a modern, constitutional democracy like India (Beth 2018: 3). Valmiki achieves this by not only showing the presence of caste within the domains of his village where people live closely-knit, communitarian lives, but also in urban, secular spaces which apparently grant anonymity to people. In the remaining parts of this section of the paper, an account will be provided of various phases of the life of the author, as he has narrated in this autobiographical text, by analysing them with the theory of a testimonio which was discussed above.

*Joothan* starts with Valmiki describing how Dalits exist at the margins of the village society. The lives of Dalits in a village society (and in urban spaces) goes through a very tragic dichotomy. The existence of Dalits is paramount to the purity of the upper-caste Hindu society. This is because, Dalits carry out all the supposedly ‘impure’ tasks of cleaning people’s toilets, skinning dead animals, removing and burning dead bodies and their ilk. Yet, it is the performance of these tasks that renders them untouchable (Mukherjee 2004: 3). Valmiki (1997 [2003]: 2) expresses this tragedy in the following lines of *Joothan*: “Untouchability was so

rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one [a higher caste person] happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away”.

The caste identity of the Dalits residing in Valmiki’s village is the only identity that they are ascribed to. These people were not addressed by their first names but were referred to by their caste names. Hence, people belonging to Valmiki’s community were called as ‘*Oe Chuhre*’ or ‘*Abey Chuhra*’ (Hey Chuhra!) (Chuhra is a caste of sweepers and cleaners), and Valmiki himself narrates in the text that when he was a child, he was referred to as ‘*Chuhre Ka*’ (the offspring of a Chuhra). It ought to be noted here that such ways of addressing people are extremely inappropriate. However, Valmiki does not shy away from reproducing the pejorative and derogatory terms in this text, as he had encountered them in real life. Even in the English translation of the text the word ‘*chuhre ka*’ has been kept intact and its English translation ‘the offspring of a chuhra has not been used.

By doing this the translator has been able to accomplish what Valmiki had set out to do in the original text. By reproducing such pejorative terms in toto in the text, Valmiki is trying to disturb and at the same time sensitise the reader towards the brutalities of caste oppression. Here, Valmiki is seen upholding Limbale’s theory regarding the language of Dalit literature. Limbale (2004: 33) argues that: “The reality of Dalit literature is distinct, and so is the language of this reality. It is the uncouth-impolite language of Dalits. This language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar”. Since Dalit life comprises of a brutal and ‘uncouth’ experience of caste discrimination, hence, that experience can only be narrated in an ‘uncouth’ language, and not by adhering to the aesthetics of beauty and purity of the upper-caste writers. It was mentioned earlier in this chapter that when Dalit literature enters its final phase of assertion, Dalits no longer remain objects of pity and sympathy as portrayed by upper-caste writers, but they become self-owning subjects who are portrayed with sensitivity by politically conscious Dalit writers. In this text, Valmiki, as a conscious Dalit writer has ensured that his autobiography does not remain mired in tales of self-pity of the Dalits. Rather, as a conscious writer he ensures that while he resists caste discrimination through his writings, at the same time he also critiques the actions and flaws of Dalits where he deems it necessary. This can be seen in the autobiography where he talks about the practice among the Dalits in his village (including his family members) of accepting leftover food (*joothan*) from the marriage feasts of the upper-caste people, and then eating it for days with much joy and relish. As Valmiki looks back on those incidents, he comments about them with much disdain and anger. He says:

When I think of all those things today, thorns begin to prick my heart. What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just *joothan*.

And yet no one had any grudges. Or shame. Or repentance”. (Valmiki 1997 [2003]: 11)

The theory of trauma can be used to effectively explain these incidents and Valmiki’s reaction to it later in his life. Trauma is defined primarily as ‘destruction of the subjects and the self’ (Herman 1992: 51 cited in Nayar 2006: 83). However, the definition of trauma has now been extended to describe the suffering resulting from the trauma, overcoming it and then eventually surviving out of it (Nayar 2006: 84).

In this text when the Dalits happily accepted the *joothan* from the upper-caste people, they are undergoing trauma. Their daily experiences of humiliation and subordination has been so normalised that it has destroyed their selfhood, and hence they are unable to resist or even realise their subjugation. However, years later when Valmiki looks back at it and expresses his anger at how things were allowed to happen in past, he has overcome his trauma and survived it. Therefore, he has regained his sense of selfhood which is immensely hurt due to the pain that emanates from his memories of humiliation and subjugation. Thus, through his autobiography Valmiki is narrating his and his community's pain and at the same time performing an act of resistance by sharing his pain in the public domain.

It was stated earlier that a testimonio is a narration of personal as well as collective suffering. Valmiki narrates both in this text by narrating incidents of collective subjugation of Dalits, and thereby blurring the distinction between the 'I' and the 'We'. For instance, in the autobiography Valmiki narrates a moment when Dalit labourers refused to work for free for their upper-caste masters. As a 'punishment' for this act of rebellion they were beaten up by the police on the behest of the upper-caste villagers. This is a moment where all the Dalits were subjected to a common pain generated due to caste discrimination (Beth 2007: 552). Valmiki, who was an adolescent when the incident took place can relate to the pain of his fellow Dalits because he too was subjected to a similar pain when he was beaten up for refusing to clean his school playground and for daring to study despite being a Dalit. This connection between the individual Dalit member and the Dalit community has been portrayed throughout the text. In the autobiography, Valmiki mentions several times that he would be asked by his father to work hard so that he could improve the condition of the people of his caste. A connection between Valmiki's own success in life and the improvement of the lot of Dalits, is being made here (Beth 2007: 552). The position that Valmiki has attained in his life is owing to the successes of the socio-political movements waged by the Dalits. Likewise, the obstructions that he faces in his life- in school and later at his workplace is due to the limitations of the Dalit movement in those corresponding times (Beth 2007: 552). In the last section of the autobiography, Valmiki portrays the ubiquity of caste by showing how it operates in urban and secular spaces. Valmiki does this by narrating his experience of caste discrimination in an urban, metropolitan city like Mumbai. He is stunned when he finds out that his friend Sudama Patil is offered tea in a separate cup, because he is a Dalit, at the house of Mr. Vinayak Sadhasiv Kulkarni, a person known for his literary and cultural tastes, who would also occasionally stage plays at his neighbourhood. This incident forces Valmiki to ruminate that:

My village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. The situation was bad in Dehra Dun and in Uttar Pradesh in general at this time. When I saw well-educated people in a metropolitan city like Bombay indulging in such behavior, I felt a fountain of hot lava erupting within me. (Valmiki 1997 [2003]: 109 and 110)

By narrating the casteist behavior of a person with rich literary and cultural tastes, Valmiki successfully demonstrates that the literature and culture of Modern India has constantly otherised Dalits, and hence, a meaningful intervention in this regard can only be made when Dalits themselves carve out a literary space for themselves to narrate their stories. Finally, Valmiki is also left acknowledging a fatalistic realization that no matter what he does, wherever

he goes, he would never be able to abide by his father's advice of 'improving his caste'. This is because, the caste identity is ascribed at birth and no matter what they do, Dalits will be left to carry its burden all through their lives.

### **Using Myth as a Tale of Resistance: Reading Cho Dharman's *Koogai: The Owl***

In the introduction of this paper, it was stated that socialist realism is an important technique for literary writings that seek to espouse the Marxist theories of class conflict and the Marxist utopia of a classless society. In the context of narrative styles in Dalit writings, Dalit writers have not accepted the socialist realism style completely, rather, they have critically engaged with it (Brueck 2014, Gajarwala 2013 cited in Satyanarayana 2017: 10). The socialist realism mode of writing was adopted by several upper-caste Indian writers who were inspired by Marxism. The foremost among them is the famous Hindi writer Premchand who used this narrative medium to talk about 'peasants, workers, women and the lower castes' (Satyanarayana 2017: 11). However, this representative mode of writing has been critiqued by Dalit writers and critics for its focus on upper-caste characters, the portrayal of Dalits as mere victims and most importantly for refusing to engage with the question of caste in these writings (Gjarawala 2013: 189 cited in Satyanarayana 2017: 11).

Thus, the socialist realism mode was rejected by the Dalit writers for more innovative writing patterns. This rejection also appeared in a certain historical context. Socialist realism was encouraged mostly by the Communist regime of the Soviet Union. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union this mode of writing gradually lost its steam. During this time, Latin American writers were employing magic-realism as more innovative methods of narrating tales of oppression, suffering and resistance (Satyanarayana 2015). Thus, departing from the socialist realism style, Dalit writers began to portray assertive Dalit characters and critically engaged with the question of caste in their writings. They also 'improvised' and altered this mode of writing by incorporating local myths and folklores in their writings (Satyanarayana 2017: 11 and 14).

The novel *Koogai: The Owl* that is to be analysed here can be located within this tradition of Dalit writing. Texts such as *Koogai* also belong to a more mature phase of Dalit literature, where writers have moved beyond life narratives and autobiographies, and are making use of innovative narrative mediums to enunciate complex characters and are presenting a more complicated portrayal of caste and societal relations which have emerged due to the changing socio-economic conditions of India. In *Koogai* Dharman has used the mythical figure of *Koogai*, the owl god and has deployed it as a metaphor for the Dalit condition. Dharman states in the introductory essay of his novel:

The notes I made enabled me to shape *koogai* into a symbol of the Dalit condition. It's weird, almost-human face sets it apart from other birds. Come to think of it, one could say that a Dalit's life is in no way better than that of an owl. (Dharman 2005 [2015]: XI).

An owl is usually considered a bad omen and is driven away if it appears during the day. Therefore, it must lay low and can only come out in the night to hunt for its prey. Similarly, the Dalit is considered polluting whose touch and sometimes even the sight can render the upper-caste people impure. Therefore, just like the owl, Dalits' access to the 'open spaces' is

limited, and they are subjected to everybody else's scorn just like the owl is (Dharman 2005 [2015]: XI). The novel is written in the local Tamil dialect of the Karisal region of Tamil Nadu, a place to which the author belongs. The narrative of the story fuses dreams and fantasy with reality. The sections in the novel which are either dream sequences or expressions of fantasy are italicized.

To maintain some amount of authenticity towards the original text, its English translation has reproduced some of the grammatically incorrect words that are uttered by some of the characters in the novel. Such as: '*poliss*' (police), *poliss tayshun* (police station), *undrayer* (underwear) and *jameen* (zamindar). The tales of the Dalits narrated in this novel oscillates between resistance to caste oppression and oppression because of it, thereby, mirroring the life of *koogai*, the owl god which moves between a display of its prowess during the night and an absolute surrender during the day. In the beginning of the novel two Dalit men called Muthukkaruppan and Mookkan are flogged for daring to wear nice and new clothes and having their food while sitting on the bench of a hotel (instead of sitting on the floor). Their only way out of this predicament is when Seeni (a central character of the novel) can strike a compromise with the upper-caste people. Alongwith the depiction of these incidents of oppression, Dharman also presents certain instances of resistance by the Dalits which are worth mentioning here. For instance, the Pallars (a Dalit caste) refuse to dig the grave (their traditional occupation) when an upper-caste villager called Pandi Mama passes away. In another instance Seeni stands up to the zamindar refusing to work on his fields for free. Here of course, Seeni is aided by the fact that a progressive Brahmin character called Nataraja Iyer had distributed his land among the Dalits before migrating to the city. Thus, Seeni and the people of his community would like to work on their own fields and refuse to do the zamindar's work.

There are certain points in the novel where Dharman makes use of fantasy and in it uses *koogai* to save the characters from their predicaments. Through the employment of *koogai* as a *deus ex machina*, Dharman presents a utopian idea about the Dalit condition. In this Dalit utopia, the Dalits would be empowered to such an extent that they would be able to resist caste oppression and emancipate themselves out of it, without being subjected to repression because of it. This point can be better illustrated by mentioning a certain instance in the novel. A Dalit labourer called Ammaachi was given the task of looking after the goats of the zamindar. Since his wife was pregnant Ammaachi had given the responsibility to his son and went to find a midwife for her. He returned only to find that the goats had perished because they had consumed poisoned grass. Eager to save his son from the punishment of the zamindar, Ammaachi hid him in a sluice hole, and took the blows of the zamindar's men upon himself.

As the zamindar's men eventually approach the sluice hole (after Ammaachi tells them where he hid him unable to bear their torture), a divine intervention of *koogai* takes place which not only sets Ammaachi and his son free, but also brings the dead goats to life. Dharman presents this fantastic event in italicised font as following:

It was an owl-face. Eyes rolling, Lion-Mane glared back from within the sluice. The crowd backed off, turned and fled. From under the banyan came the sound of a great bleating. Everyone stared amazed at the sight of the sheep rising up and standing on their legs and bleating loudly... Ammaachi's son emerged from the hole like one who

has awoken from sleep. With his own hands, the Jameen untied Ammaachi's bonds. (Dharman 2005[2015]: 202).

In *Koogai* Dharman has painted a sociological picture of how society and societal relations transform over time. In the initial part of the novel, he depicts the persistence of caste in the villages. Towards the final part of the novel, Dharman shows the oncoming of modernity and change in economic relations which in turn also brings about change in people's livelihoods. Due to this, the Dalit characters presented in the novel are seen migrating from the village to the town for better job opportunities, and to escape the brutalities of caste. However, what emerges out of the novel is that with the onset of modernity, establishment of a democracy and capitalist modes of production, caste does not wither away, but merely changes its form and appears in a reified manner. Modernity and capitalism while opening up new avenues for Dalits, while at the same time previous forms of caste discrimination are either continued in different forms or they are aggravated (Nagaraj 2010: 96 and 97).

Thus, while Dalits are granted upward social mobility by being provided access to urban spaces and employment within the capitalist forms of economy. Even then, caste discrimination does not go away from their lives. In the end of the novel the zamindar no longer remains a feudal landlord who owns massive amounts of lands, since they have, all been redistributed to the landless because of the government's land redistribution programmes. Nonetheless, he continues to wield power over the Dalits and the lower castes, doing it now through the institutions of modernity and democracy. The son of the zamindar has become a politician who is readying to contest the upcoming elections. The novel ends with Peichi, (a strong woman character) delivering a monologue that aptly describes the never-ending predicament of Dalits:

In those days, in that backward place where we used to live, all we had in our hands were axes, shovels, sickles, a few boxes of palm straw to keep our rags and tatters... We tilled the land, we slogged on it, we wore ourselves out, and what did we have to show for it? Nothing but our own bare bones... So we left that old backward place and went to the town, to somehow survive. And now, what we held in our hands were iron basins to fill with heavy loads to carry on our heads... And now, what you held in your hands were match companies and ginning factories, medical shops and hospitals... You held in your hands all the contracts, in the world of trade and finance... So, from now on, all power will remain in your hands, and we'll hole up, and cringe and cower forever. Like owls... (Dharman 2005[2015]: 353 and 354).

### Conclusion

This paper has established that literary styles and trends emerge out of the corresponding discourses of respective periods. In that light, this chapter has analysed two texts by placing them within the context of the progress in the Dalit movement in India. However, the analysis of these texts also throws up certain issues pertaining to the articulation of the Dalit identity. For instance, in the beginning of the chapter a testimonio was defined as a piece of autobiographical writing where the autobiographer narrates his/her personal as well as the collective experience of the oppressed group to which he/she belongs.

In the context of *Joothan*, the collective ‘we’ emerges as an exclusively masculine Dalit identity. Dalit women who are doubly oppressed both due to their caste as well as their gender identity, make minimal appearances, where they do not appear as self-owning subjects, but, as individuals without any agency (Beth 2007: 562). Moreover, the Dalit identity is not as homogeneous as certain Dalit writers and theorists of Dalit literature would want it to be. *Joothan* peppers over a lot of intra-Dalit rivalry between various Dalit sub-castes such as Chamars and Bhangis, since a portrayal of this rivalry would be considered as antithetical to the Dalit cause (Beth 2007: 561).

Dharman however has not shied away from showing these intra-Dalit rivalries in *Koogai: The Owl*. In the novel one can see the tensions and conflicts that take place between the various Dalit castes such as Paraiyars, Pallars and Chakkiliyars. This conflict gets more intense when the Paraiyars get converted to Christianity to escape caste discrimination and then refuse to worship the owl god any longer. The portrayal of such a complex account of Dalit life can be better understood by considering how Dharman approaches Dalit literature and writing about Dalits. Dharman states:

Some term my writings as Dalit writings. By birth alone am I a Dalit, not by what I write. I am not drawn to any of the so-called Dalit writings. This is perhaps due to the fact that I’m a Dalit, and I’ve an acute understanding of Dalit society and culture. A great writer who can artistically portray Dalit narratives, Dalit distinctiveness, and Dalit social reality is yet to be born. I can only give it a try. (Venkatachalapathy 2015: xxxi)

Here, Dharman can be seen articulating the ‘politics vs aesthetics’ debate in Dalit literature. In this debate, there exists a conflict as to whether the purpose of Dalit literature should be to articulate the Dalit politics against caste discrimination, or should it focus on aesthetic aspects and adhere to it by truthfully depicting the situation of Dalits, including intra-Dalit rivalry (Muthukkaruppan 2017: 66). Here, Dharman is seen to be quite clearly taking a position with the latter side of the debate.

Thus, this paper leaves us with the questions of how does one theorise and resolve the problem of Dalit identity, and how we could theorise a Dalit identity considering all its inherent contradictions and conflicts. It might also be asked whether such a resolution is even required at all. This is because, most oppressed identity groups are engaged in an ongoing and continuous process of imagining and re-imagining their identities taking into account its inherent contradictions. This process of imagining and re-imagining is what ultimately allows it to make citizenship claims upon the State.

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