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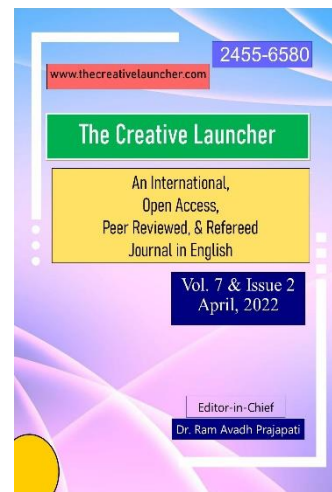
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Locating and Interrogating the Savarna Trace in Selected Marathi Dalit Short Stories

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Abstract

In the present time modern urban India denies the existence of caste prejudices and caste-based discriminations. Educated urban people talk of “caste” as concept which is centuries old and quite outdated. But how far it is true is a matter of question. Since even today when it comes to marriage, educated families look for boys or girls from the same caste, caste consciousness

always remain at the back of the mind of an educated youth while forming the friend circle, and caste discrimination becomes more prominent when the so called educated modern urban families do not allow their domestic help to use the same plates. Down the ages it has been observed that the Savarnas or the so-called upper caste people have always occupied the central position in the society and continuously shaped and dictated the fate of the Dalits leaving them no choice to construct their lives according to their own will and wish. Literature, however, has always been the mimetic platform which has inspired the common people to rethink, reevaluate and bring about reformative and revolutionary changes. The present paper attempts to hear those unheard voices of the Dalits who have long been oppressed by the upper caste people in this casteist Indian society. The present paper analyses two short stories written by two prolific Dalit writers namely Baburao Bagul and Sharankumar Limbale. Through a close reading of Bagul's "When I Hid My Caste" and Limbale's "The Dalit Brahmin", the present paper aims to identify and comprehend how instrumental and phenomenal is the trace of the upper caste in the lives of the Dalits and how this hegemonic savarna social system has caused the unbuilding of the identity which the Dalits have so ambitiously built equal to that of the Savarnas.

Keywords: Dalits, Untouchability, Identity Crisis, Resistance, Struggle, Identity Erasure, Casteism, Discrimination

"According to the ancient dharmashastras (religious texts) of the hindus, there were only four varnas (classes). The Brahmins were priests; the Kshatriyas, warriors; the Vaishyas, traders and the Shudras, skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers doing menial work. This hierarchy is primarily a class system and the development of a society based on class is a world-wide phenomenon."

- Arjun Dangle, "Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future"

Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar views that just like other countries of the world Indian Hindu society was also stratified on the basis of class. But the unique thing that happened in India was that these classes became closed compartments with the passage of time resulting in the development of castes which were accessible only by birth. This caste system received a sacred sanction in the Hindu religious texts scribed by the Brahmins who claimed there that the Brahmins originated from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriyas were born from his shoulders, Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras took birth from Brahma's feet. The Brahmins also asserted that this class division was divine and not man made and, hence, it was beyond any question. According to this division the Brahmins occupied the most superior position in the social order on the contrary the Shudras occupied the most inferior one. And as time passed the society together with religious support marked the as a varnas as untouchables and compelled them to live a life of social, cultural and psychological deprivation and slavery.

The Constitution of India, since the time of its inception, declares its inclination to become a society which is free of caste bias. Liberty, equality and fraternity are the principles

on which the independent India was established and the Constitution of India was also constituted with an ambition to safeguard its citizens from being endangered to any kind of inequity. Article 14 of Indian constitution provides Indian citizens with the right to equality before law and Article 17 puts an end to untouchability. However, Casteism or social division is nowhere overtly deprecated in Indian Constitution. In the last decade several instances have been found about people venting out their emancipation by determining a recognition for themselves by letting go of religion and caste. In the census of 2011 around 29 lakh Indians refused to state their religion and left the category of religion blank while filling up the form. In the year 2014, the High Court of Bombay directed to the state not to coerce any individual to mention his/her religion in any form or declaration against his/her will. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution talks of the liberty of practicing and spreading the religion of one's own. In a similar manner, in 2016, the Madras High Court proclaimed that when the parents of a child seeking admission for their child in a school are unwilling or unable to divulge their religion and caste, such people should not be pressurized. Very recently, in Kerala, during the 2017-18 academic year, more than one lakh school students who were admitted to classes 1-12 have not filled up the caste and religion columns. In February 2019, M.A. Sneha became the first woman to get a certificate of "no caste, no religion" from the Kerala government. These are instances which are hinting at a tide of alteration where the Indians are becoming more inclined towards self-actualization and aiming to form a more secular and liberal country. Though these incidents are quite satisfying and soul-stirring, this is an incomplete picture, since the other side of the story can be seen if we consider the condition of the non-savarnas. When one is born Dalit, abandoning one's caste often becomes impossible. Far too often the Savarna centric society does not allow it. It is often found Dalits are changing their surnames, converting to Buddhism, striving to achieve higher education yet not being able to dissociate one's self from the caste one is born into. The impossibility of parting with the Dalit caste is similar to the impossibility of parting with one's own shadow in this caste ridden Indian society. In this Brahmanism-centric society Dalits are continuously denied the status of a human being and have been relentlessly objectified and subjugated down the ages. Non-representation of the Dalits on a socio-political level have impacted in the invisibility for the non-Savarna Indians. Dr. Ambedkar rightly remarked, "rights are protected not by law but by social and moral conscience of society". Enforced invisibility clearly betrays why the Country's efforts to lift up the Asavarnas did not have the desired impact on their socio-economic condition.

"Dalit Literature" is a distinctive Indian literature where the Dalits, who have long been prevented from holding a pen for ages, have become the maker of their own tales. The short stories written by eminent Dalit writers not only portray those who have never been in the creative imagination of the upper caste writers but also give a wake-up call to the readers to redeem the reality of a caste ridden Indian society and make them aware how castiest attitudes still lingers in all walks of life with a firm grasp over the minds of people. Prolific Marathi Dalit writers like Baburao Bagul and Sharankumar Limbale in their short stories have exposed a vicious and callous society which is governed and authorized by casteist notions. Bagul's "When I Hid my Caste" and Limbale's "The Dalit Brahmin" chiefly focus on the more

complicated dynamics of casteism in post-independence urban India. These stories bring to light Baburao Bagul's Short story "When I Hid My Caste" is a soul stirring tale that betrays how a Dalit, who is very much an Indian citizen, is bound to conceal his caste in order to eschew the condition of being treated as an outsider in a castiest Indian society. The story initiates with a statement of exasperation: "When the difficulties visited upon me after I concealed my caste come to mind, memory ignites a furnace in my heart. My head begins to ache as if it is about to burst; in this luck- forsaken country, human beings should not be born as Dalits. If and when they are, they must bear such sorrow and such disrespect as would make death seem an easier option, making a cup of poison a Dalit's best friend."

The protagonist of the story is a Dalit man, named, Masthur. Initially in the story it is seen that Masthur feels very exhilarated after getting a job at Udhna Railway Station in Gujarat since he harbours the notion that financial prosperity results in social upliftment in urban India. However, the 'wonderworld of happiness' that Masthur dreams about soon turns out to be something else as soon as he reaches Udhna. The very first question that Masthur encounters at Udhna while looking for a rented room is; "...what is your caste?". He realizes even the apparently polished and so-called educated city people are ready to "eat mud with a caste brother" but are vehemently unwilling to have "a feast with someone of a lower caste" Initially Masthur is mistaken for a Brahmin or Kshatriya by Devji and Ranchhod, people who provide Masthur a rented room, since he spoke "chaste and elegant Gujarati" and his disposition was quite like that of an upper caste. Masthur, seeing this unexpected adverse condition even among urban people, tries his best to hide his Dalit identity with the purpose of saving his rented shelter under the veneer of his progressive talks which are actually very true to build an inclusive and caste bias free nation. He says; "You shouldn't speak that way in front of me, a new citizen of a new Bharat. We are all the creators of the new nation. There are no dhedas, no poor, no Brahmins." But in heart of hearts Masthur well realizes that these progressive talks are mere unrealized philosophies in a caste ridden society as he witnesses the affliction of Kashinath Sakpal in his work place whose primary sin is that he is a 'Mahar'. The groundlessness of casteism is further proved when Masthur, during the phase of maintaining his dual identity, wins the admiration of Ramcharan, a man belonging to an upper caste, with his poetic skills. Ramcharan is so much mesmerized by Masthur's command over poetry that he ends up hero-worshipping Masthur, giving him the place of a "guru" in the life of the former. This speaks volumes of the fact that any skill can be mastered by any person, no matter to what caste that person belongs. However, this false impression about Masthur's real caste does not last long. Masthur attends an invitation for dinner at Ramcharan's house where his Dalit caste gets revealed. Ramcharan who once considered Masthur as his 'guru' makes the latter a victim of caste based violence. And it is Kashiram, a fellow Dalit, who ultimately rescues Masthur from the monstrous atrocity of casteism. And when Kashinath insists Masthur to lodge a complain in the police station, the latter says; "When was I beaten by them? It was Manu who thrashed me.", which is a Scathing criticism against Manusmriti, the religious text which validated casteism. Though in Dr. Ambedkar's view "caste existed even before Manu who was merely an ardent supporter who canonized the institution, and not the originator of the system."

According to Dr. Ambedkar the malice of caste discrimination is more social than religious, in other words, casteism is a power politics which a handful of savarna people manipulate to satisfy their own selfish interest.

So far as “The Dalit Brahmin” by Sharankumar Limbale is concerned, its protagonist, unlike Masthur, does not hide his Dalit identity rather he tries to prove his elitism in Dalit social circles by adopting the habits and culture of the Savarnas. In this sense the protagonist of this story can be marked as what Suraj Yengde calls an “Elite Dalit” in his book *Caste Matters*. Yengde says; “The term Elite Dalit might sound misplaced, but in the quest to attain elitism among Dalits, there is a desire to claim upper class status. It is a desperate attempt to replicate upper caste classness in Dalit social circles.” The protagonist in this story is a writer who has got some recognition in the society and this has facilitated his friendship with four upper caste people. His upper caste friends often visit his home, a matter in which he takes great pride since it has raised his status in the “hutment colony” where the fellow Dalits call him ‘Bhaiyya’ admiringly and bow before him saying ‘Jai Bhim’. However, in spite of all respect and admiration that he gets in the Dalit colony, he decides to become a resident in a ‘white’ neighbourhood in order to ensure an upliftment in social status and a bright future for his children. And with this dream he starts relinquishing everything related to his Dalit culture as he says at point in the story; “To become a Dalit Brahmin was a true enlightenment, the true transformation. Learn to behave like Brahmins. Learn to speak like Brahmins. I was happy to become a Brahmin.” He even performs Satyanarayana puja at home not out of religious reverence but just for befitting him in the Ssavarna class. The protagonist likes to attend programs of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and betrays a very progressive and revolutionary attitude but feels ashamed to attend a Dalit protest march. However, what he gets to hear from one of his friends after attending a meeting at a Brahmin household shatters his long cherished false impression of having become a ‘Dalit Brahmin’. Dinesh, the protagonist’s friend, overtly tells him; “Do you know all the utensils that you have used were kept separate. All the cloths you used have been taken and given to the laundry.” These words of his friend flash the reality in front of the protagonist. He realizes that the Savarnas who exhibit themselves to be progressive and in favour of the upliftment of the Dalits are actually hypocrites and their generosity ‘shine forth for the world to see’. He perceives strongly that though he has ardently tried to become a ‘Dalit Brahmin’, the Brahmanical society will never accept him as one of their own, the shackles of caste will exist in every walk of life and his real identity will always be that of a ‘Dalit’. But in spite of all these negative circumstances which the protagonist of Limbale faces there lies a ray of possibility that though the Dalits are forcefully placed in a degraded state in a Savarna social system they have every merit of becoming an equal to a Savarna. As Laura Brucek in “Good Dalits and Bad Brahmins: Melodramatic Realism in Dalit Short Stories” has observed; ‘Melodramatic realism, serves as the chosen narrative mode for the Dalit writers to represent their subjectivity, rage against injustice, and ultimately, triumph in the awareness of the possibility of change.’

Thus, we see that though the situation of both the protagonists in these two short stories are different they have one factor in common which is the erasure of Dalit identity. Masthur

tries to suppress his Dalit identity under of fear of being oppressed for being a Dalit and Limbale's protagonist does it with the hope of being identified as a Brahmin. There is not an 'I' in their lives, the caste ridden Indian society has compelled them to abandon it. They are subjected to lead a double life. The instrumental Savarna trace always compels to build and unbuild their identities ultimately making them belong nowhere. As Yashica Dutt writes in her memoir, *Coming Out As Dalit*, "Hiding one aspect of your identity is like leading a double life. You don't feel like you belong anywhere. You create masks to wear in each of your lives, and switch artfully between the two. Eventually, the two blur together and you no longer remember who you were."

India in order to realise the concept of 'nation' in true sense of the term must be inclusive and enable the Dalits, who are very much the citizens of this country like the Savarnas, to live a full-fledged by keeping their Dalit identity intact. As philosopher Charles Taylor says, "a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves". This ostracization of the Dalits from the varna system not only confine them to a reduced mode of being but also gives birth to a kind of crippling self-hatred in them. This stifling social existence actually leads to the destruction of various talents which could have added to the glory of our nation. Various types of reservation, grants and subsidies will ultimately fail to deliver justice to the Dalits since the hierarchical social order which is vertical in nature needs to be altered at first in order to provide a horizontal and equal platform to all the citizens of the country including the Dalits. The Dalit movements which are striving day by day to achieve social justice and equality should be merged with the greater movement of social inclusion to make the society a transformative one. Hence, the inclusion of the asavarnas are indispensable on one hand for the protection of their rightful existence and on the other hand for the making of a true nation.

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