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Managing Editor

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www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Dissent and Resistance in Dalit Literature: A Study of Om Prakash Valmiki's Selected Short Stories

Dr. Vinod K. Chopra

Lecturer in English,
GGSSS Hamirpur, (H.P.)
India 177 001

In Indian society caste system is still deep rooted even after more than sixty-five years of independence. Caste system in India is not only the age-old and depth oriented socio-cultural phenomenon but it has also been working, since time immemorial, as the symbol of Indian social system specifically characterised by hierarchical categories, despite its diversified odds and anxieties(Sarkar xi). Dalits or what they were known earlier as untouchables or *shudras* have been suffering in the name of caste system. Their life is marked with disgrace, humiliation, dishonour, suppression and discrimination as. Violence is wreaked physically and mentally on them in such a cruel manner that their whole identity is trampled underfoot. For centuries, they have undergone harrowing and traumatic experiences. Their survival, in the past, was possible at the behest of those belonging to upper castes, who otherwise, treated them not better than beasts. The wishes and dreams of dalits had been insignificant as they had no right to dream for the world of joy and progress. They were supposed to live for the upper-caste and die for them as well. Their voices have been throttled as they were not allowed to give vent to their aspirations for their whims and desires were seldom noticed. But along with their pain and sufferings there is also “awareness”—the desire to resist, to fight it out, to try to rise above it (Jain 16). With the passage of time there had been people in dalit community who realised the trauma and sufferings of their brethren and they decided to give voice to the worst kind of distress they were subject to, through literature.

Undoubtedly, dalit pain is unbearable. The humiliation and mental torture they suffered for centuries leaves one numb to feel amazingly how fellow human beings could be so callous and heartless. We can assume rationally as well as feelingly the miseries and disgrace dalit have been made to experience. One stands aghast to know how this downtrodden rung of the society was forced to put up with disgrace and ill-treatment with silence. The curse of untouchability in the caste system has maligned the spirit of interdependence of the various population groups with their diversified callings. The belief that a mere appearance of a specific group of people is enough to pollute some persons is disgusting. The former group is considered as the lowest of the low and the latter one is the highest in the rank of social order. There was a customary practice among the highest castes to avoid even the shadow of the people belonging to the lowest section of the society (Sarkar xiii). We can very easily comprehend their limitless pain only if we come across the literature which is replete with pain, miseries and anguish of dalits. Their afflictions are laid open so feelingly before the readers that make them feel the trauma of dalits.

Literature is considered as the mouth piece of a society in which it is written. So it is the power of words that empowered dalits to put their voice across so that people may understand the severity of the wrongs done to dalits. Words are used as weapons to express their trauma as well as anger against the embarrassment and ill-treatment meted out to them. It is in the dalit

literature that all dogmas and prejudices related to casteism and man-made barriers are attacked. Dalit literature stretches back to times before Kabir and Ravidas. Dr. Ambedkar, Swami Achhutanand, Adi Hindu Mahasabha, through their literary production articulated a community consciousness of dalit people. The book *Adi-Vansh ka Danka* authored by Swamiji has the central argument that untouchables were embodiments of racial purity that they were indeed the earliest inhabitants of *Bharatvarsha* and they did not discriminate amongst themselves as on the basis of birth, skin-colour or gender. Thus they hardly deserved to be looked down upon. Hindi dalit poetry was inaugurated with Swamiji's composition "Manusmriti Hamko Jala Rahi Hai" (*"Manusmariti is Burning Us"*):

*"Day in and day out,
this Manusmriti is burning us, burning us,
Not letting us climb up, it is degrading us, degrading us,
While Brahmins and Kshatriyas are allowed to rise and rise,
"Wear your old clothes," for us is advice. (Bechain 4).*

In 1946 Mahatma Gyandas 'Vivek Bhushan' published a book of poems under the title '*Bharat Ke Achhut*' (India's Untouchables). These poems give expression to dalit sufferings. The book of poems by Bihari Lal 'Harit', '*Azadi Ki Larai*' (The War of Independence), was published in 1947. It contains some of his most significant creation in one of which we find the lines:

*"The grandson toiled very hard to pay grandfather's debt,
The three rupees he had loaned,
Became for the Zamindar a seventy year asset." (Bechain).*

Literature since the time it has been written has tried its best to entertain the readers as well as it has shown a mirror to the society that is breeding the social evils like caste system. Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra avers that Dalit is not a caste, it is a symbol of change and revolution (Mishra). The aim of dalit writings is to bring about a change and revolution in a society where plight of dalits is brushed aside with apathy. Hence the main purpose of dalit writings is to ensure the benefits of India's independence that dalits too deserve as well. As the aboriginal population of India, dalits must be accorded due pride and status within the nation. They must be freed from the shackles of Varna and *Jati* and the hierarchies of the caste system.

Dalit writings have tried to throw away the heavy odds through struggle and dalit writings. The trauma of dalits is expressed so delicately and clearly in a much uncomplicated way that these writings become a tool of resistance. Through the dalit writings the authors have clearly exposed the irrationality of those who believe in the theory of caste system and untouchability. The degradation and horrendous misbehavior is resisted through these writings. Besides, dalit expectations are profoundly expressed that it is their plea that they should be treated as human beings. The stories discussed here that stand as a tool of resistance are, "The Hide of an Ox", "Amma," "Salaam," "The Web of Intrigue," "Where Can Satish Go?", "The Killing of a Cow", "Homeless", "Umbrella", "Twenty-five Fours and Hundred and Fifty" and "Eclipse".

Dalit literature is protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or community. Omprakash Valmiki knows the significance of education and he writes his stories according to a set formula to enforce a moral. Perhaps the most touching realisation of the need for education is expressed in "The Hide of an Ox" (Valmiki 4). In this story Kale and Bhoore are two dalit characters. They carry the dead animals out from the village for which they do not get even a single penny. Pandit Birij Mohan abuses Kale and Bhoore for coming late at the site

where the dead animal is lying. Though they do not refuse to do the job their heart aches with pain to see how they are being treated inhumanly. Valmiki also highlights in his autobiographical novel, *Joothan* that dalits for centuries have been forced to accept and eat joothan and the word encapsulate the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of India's social pyramid. So it was their poverty that led them to accept joothan. Worse than that sometimes they had to eat flesh of dead cattle and they did all petty and trivial jobs just for the survival in the absence of any respectable job. It is in this context that their deprived and depressed position in the society and the consequent trauma is poured down in the form of such poems as is composed by Arjun Dangle who gives a harrowing picture of their wretchedness in a poem entitled "Chhavni Hilti Hai," (The Cantonment has Begun to Shake):

*"We fought with crows,
Never even giving them the snot from
our noses.
As we dragged out the Upper Lane's
dead cattle.
Skinned it neatly
And shared the meat among ourselves,
They used to love us then.
We warred with jackals-dogs-
Vultures-kites
Because we at their share. (Abedi)*

Valmiki knows that education alone can fight against this prejudice. He is well aware of the fact that education can help them get rid of this dreadful and tortuous life. Bhoore also believes that education can improve the social condition of his son. So Bhoore and Kale decide to keep away their children from heinous activities. They believe that birth is not in one's control but through education one can improve his/her status. In *Joothan*, too, Valmiki asserts, "Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's cultural heritage, did they decide when they would be born?" (144). Feeling the same thing Bhoore wants to educate his Chhutku, he dreams as his son standing in the queue of students and memorising multiplication tables. Though resistance, here, is not a straight one both Kale and Bhoore indirectly long to move away from this dreadful life. Bhoore has already talked to the school master about the admission of Chhutku. He imagines that some day his son will also stand among those children learning multiplication tables. Uneducated Bhoore realises the importance of education that can empower every dalit to fight for their honour and status in the society where they live. Besides, education can help them get freedom from a life full of drudgery and menial jobs. It is this wish for education that even the writer of these stories Omprakash Valmiki reflects in his autobiography that despite heavy odds and so many obstacles in his way to get education he does not give in because his father wants to see his son educated.

Dalit literature is not only literature of pain but also literature of change and this change can be brought only through education. Evidence for this is widespread in the story "Amma" It is not a story of one woman but here Amma represents all dalit women. She has been performing the task of cleaning lavatories that is the dirtiest job assigned to a human being. Amma is helpless as there is no other work for her in sight as she is a dalit and people in their caste have to do all such trivial jobs. If her family is to survive she had to do all these cleanings and scavenging. In a way the author wants to resist the idea of doing such type of petty jobs that

are not fit for human beings. The following lines represent logically the condition of those children whose mothers' do the menial jobs to enable them to feed their Children:

*"Dark, dark slender body—this was my
mother.*

*Drudged in the woods for sticks from
morning on.*

*All we brothers, sitting, waiting,
watching for her.*

*And if she didn't sell the wood, all of us
slept hungry."*(Abedi)

Amma, knows that if she does not work, the whole family will sleep hungry.

Though Amma is quite old, she does not give up her job and work at least in 10-15 houses. Amma has to suffer a lot in her life but she does not want her children to suffer in the same way. She does not want to pass her job to her offspring. She decides to educate them properly. This is the only way through which their position can be improved as she tells her son Bisan, "Get a bit of education so that you may be a peon in an office if not a clerk. You will at least be free from this dirty work, which doesn't get you two square meals a day properly nor any respect" (189).

The resting of canister and broom against the wall symbolizes Amma's painful life. She rests these things before all so that her children might have a look at them and might feel the trauma and humiliation faced by a scavenger. She has, all along, wanted to liberate her children from this dirty life. She does not let her children touch the broom and ensure a decent life for them. Again resistance comes from Amma when Vinod, an illicit lover of Mrs. Chopra—the lady in whose house she works—tries to molest her, she complains to Mrs. Chopra, "Behanji, tell this bastard that not every woman is a slut." (185). Amma's eyes were glowing red and her body was shaking with anger. Here the author wants to convey how dalit women are subject to molestation only because they are powerless. Her resistance is symbolic of a message that if dalit women wish to protect their honour and chastity they are got to resist. Every dalit woman will always be molested, ill-treated, abducted and raped if they bear all the misbehaviour silently. Amma, here stands for all those who want to fight in the teeth against ill-treatment and suppression.

Dalit literature reveals the rigidity and narrow-mindedness of caste India. Salaam (Valmiki 37) is the story of Kamal and Harish, two friends. Kamal belongs to higher caste whereas Harish is a Chuhra. Harish is an educated boy. Salaam is a traditional custom which requires the bridegroom to go to the houses of their clients and receive clothes and utensils. Whenever Harish saw a bridegroom or a bride going from home to home he felt as if his self-respect is shattered into fragments. Harish resists against performing Salaam and says clearly, "Think whatever you like... I look upon this practice to be a conspiracy to crush our self-confidence. This ceremony of Salaam must be stopped" (49). This incident can be compared with *Joothan* in which Valmiki's mother overturns a basket full of joothan before Mr. Tyagi, client from upper caste, who humiliates her. This throwing of basket is one form of resistance against humiliation. Valmiki and his father observe all this and his father tells Valmiki that he should always do whatever her desires. Harish is also of the same view that wrong cannot be tolerated and this resistance has become the symbol of courage and determination.

Education has added wings to the consciousness of dalits in a way that they are able to realise how for centuries they have been wronged in the name of customs and evil practices. But

now they have started raising voice against such heinous practices that have degraded their life. On the other hand, their literature does convey a message to dalit community that they will never accomplish respectable status in society unless they resist against all the wrongs designed for them.

Despite government plans for the development of oppressed classes—through reservation and other such benefits— their achievements and upliftment in terms of equal status in society are hardly noticed. In “The Web of Intrigue” (Valmiki 212). R.B. belongs to dalit community who is dishonoured again and again because of the caste in which he is born. Since he enjoys the boon of reservation and by virtue of reservation his name is on the promotion list. When R.B. enters his office he says in English, “Good morning to everybody”, “Abe saalon at least someone of your could respond to my greeting.... Or have you all auctioned common courtesies also?” (169). It is with the help of education and high position in the office that R.B. is able to speak before the upper-caste people. R.B. says sarcastically, “If I am being promoted, I am not begging or seeking obligation from anyone... understand?”(169). R.B. is well aware of the fact that no one can change their caste but education may improve their status. The story, too, suits to such modern circumstances where dalits enjoy the advantage of reservation and get promoted to the higher positions in an office. However, people belonging to the upper-caste do not recognise their achievements as they are of the view that such promotions are not fair and are offered to dalits unduly on a platter. It is for this conception that they have always been despised. If we delve deep into the story we can conclude that reservation policy inflicts invisible violence on dalits as well. If honour is to be bestowed upon them, it can be done not with the help of reservation but with the help of fellow-feeling, love, solidarity and amity. Until or unless they are not seen as one with the upper caste, their status can never improve.

In “Where Can Satish Go?” (Valmiki 78) Satish is a dalit boy. He is living with Pant family as a tenant. Satish’s parents have forced him to do the same menial job as his father does but he wants to study and he leaves home without saying anything. Satish wants to convince his parents the benefits of education but being illiterate they are unable to understand anything. This incident may be related to Bama’s “We too Are Human Being” in which Annan tries to convince his sister, Bama that only education can improve their status. As they are born in a low-caste community, no one will give them honour and respect. But if they study and make progress, they can throw away these indignities. He asks his sister to learn all she can, “if you always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you and attach themselves to you.” (Bama 98) . Satish also realises that education is a tool that can improve dalits’ position and status in the society. It can bring honour to them. It is only through education that he can accomplish the desired goal and status. Somewhere in the deepest core of his heart he has a desire to fight for equality and the equal rank in society that he thinks he can achieve through education.

In “The Killing of a Cow” (Valmiki 64) an element of resistance is embodied through Sukka, a Dalit. He does all the menial jobs for Mukhiya ji. But when he gets married his behaviour undergoes a sudden change. Mukhiyaji wants to have sex with the beautiful wife of Sukka. When Mukhiyaji orders him to send his wife to the haveli, Sukka at once stopped his work and chewing over his words says, “She will not come to your haveli” (94), and when Mukhiyaji threatens him he again resists, “It’s when I work, Mukhiyaji, that you give me two handfuls of rice. She will not come to your haveli” (94). Though Sukka has to face severe punishment for this resistance but the truth is that he dare speak before Mukhiyaji. Admittedly it is true that in the past dalits had to submit to the mad desires of those who belonged to upper-caste and had been powerful like Mukhiyaji. They readily agreed to satisfy the whims of these

so called 'reputed' people. However, long winding path of struggle and life of drudgery have taught them a lesson to resist against what is not good and honourable to their spirit.

Dalit literature has done a lot to improve the position of dalits but nothing has changed for them for centuries. There is a deep rooted anger in their hearts. The beautiful poem, "The City" by Daya Pawar clearly presents the picture of their feelings:

*"On day someone dug up a twentieth
century city
And ends of this observation.
Here's an interesting inscription:
'This water tap is open to all castes and religions'
What could it have meant:
That this society was divided?
That some were high while others were low?
Well, all right, then this city deserved burning—
Why did they call it machine age?
Seems like the Stone Age in the twentieth century."*(Abedi)

The poem clearly laughs at the pseudo progress that failed to change the mindset of those who still live in the caste based superior world of their own.

In "Homeless", (Valmiki 196) Sukia and Mano are a dalit couple, working in a kiln, Sube Singh, the owner of the Kiln wants to have sex with Mano but the couple didn't yield. For centuries it has been a history that the working class, especially dalits and women, have been subjected to the sexual abuse committed by the employers. The stigma of penury and destitution was so intense that they had to capitulate. Their family honour was always at stake. However, some of them have resisted showing that they are not ready to allow the powerful one cast their evil designs so easily.

"Umbrella" (Valmiki 235) lays before us the desire of a poor boy to have an umbrella. Anyhow his father manages an umbrella for him. His joys know no bounds to receive that umbrella. But his dreams are all shattered when his teacher thoughtlessly, rather ruthlessly, breaks the umbrella while thrashing another boy at school. Though the boy does not resist directly, nonetheless, there is a prickly twinges in his heart that creates a spark of resistance in him as he says, "I felt a deep desire rise up in me and I came out of the assembly. Picking up my broken umbrella I swiftly went and threw it down before Master Ishwar-Chandra" (234). This incidence of throwing of the broken umbrella before the teacher symbolises the boy's resistance and opposition to the behaviour of his teacher who does not respect the feelings of an innocent child. The boy does not take home the broken umbrella symbolises deep anger against all those who give beastly treatment to dalits. This throwing of umbrella before the teacher embodies rejection of the teacher's rude behaviour. It is the excess of torture, ill-treatment and humiliation that has impelled the downtrodden to raise their voices against the wrongs done to them.

In "Twenty-five Fours are a Hundred and Fifty" (Valmiki 125) the author makes fun of those who pull the wool over the poor and downtrodden by exploiting them. First, the poor are given loan and then they are charged excessively. This element of deception and fraud is expressed plainly in this story. Sudeep is a dalit boy whose father sends him to school. While memorising multiplication tables he says twenty-five fours are hundred then his father interrupts him and tells him that twenty-five fours are hundred and fifty because the landlord has charged one-fifty for hundred. After getting education Sudeep is able to convince his father that twenty five fours are hundred not hundred and fifty. It is only through education that father is made to

realise that Chaudhari has been cheating him. A deep pain emerges in his heart and he wants to say: “May the Chaudhari rot ! ... There would be none left to give him water” (135). The father wants to resist only after his son makes him realise the treachery of the Chaudhary. It is not Sudeep’s father alone who is made to suffer and who is cheated. Numberless dalits had been forced to undergo such fraud in the hand of those who used to lend money to the poor.

After discussing all these stories we can say that dalit literature questions the mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explores the neglected aspect of life (Mishra 4). They are well aware of their status in society and know that they have to suffer humiliation in every walk of life. Then they realise the importance of words. They use words as weapons to express their pain and sufferings. The primary motive of dalit literature is the liberation of dalits (Mishra).

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and it is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows of those in lowest strata of society (Mukherjee13). The event of the development of dalit literature is not just a literary event. Therefore, this literature should not be viewed only from literary perspective. Unless this literary chain of events is seen from a sociological perspective against the entire background of the changes happening in society, its significance will not be grasped. (Mukherjee 14) It is the need of hour that we must study the socio-economic condition of dalit as that will enable us to make out the real meaning and significance of dalit literature. In present stories Valmiki’s fight is not against caste system or the society but he fights for the equality and humble relationship among dalits and high profile people.

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