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The Stepchild: Angaliyat by Joseph Macwan: A Dalit Novel

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Abstract:

The paper analyses how *Angaliyat*¹ is a cornerstone of Gujarati Literature. The Gujarati literati's reception of Dalit literature took a turn for the better after the last decade of the previous century. The novel revolves around the Vankar community which was considered untouchable in Gujarat. It exposed the structure of domination prevalent in central Gujarat. It also analyses how Macwan suffered oppression and exclusion since childhood and he faced it with new challenges in a society where forces of globalization are engulfing local communities along with their traditional culture and dialects. Macwan has directed his attention to the hollowness and infirmities of the social and economic system, together. To him, the question of identity is embedded in the social and cultural matrix and cannot be countered by paying exclusive attention to one at the cost of the other. Both the issues must be confronted together with unified struggle and on the basis of solidarity of all oppressed classes.

Keywords: Dalit, globalization, Oppression, exclusion, identity, Dialects, Solidarity

It is the first dalit novel set in rural Gujarat of the 1930s. In 1989, this novel received the Kendriya Sahitya Akademi Award. It was skillfully translated by Rita Kothari from Gujarati into English as *The Stepchild*, and published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in 2004. Inspired by the works and writings of Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar, the movement of Dalit Literature in India began from the Indian State of Maharashtra in the later half of the last century. It is now spread to the other parts of India like Gujarat, Karnataka, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Kerala. In the post-Ambedkar era of political activism, and new found awareness the term 'dalit' is stretched to its extremes to include all those downtrodden and depressed people who are historically victims of both caste and class exploitation. Armed with this interpretation, the proponents plead for the inclusion of Adivasis as they are the 'depressed' people who were defeated, dispossessed and driven out into jungles and hills by the invading Aryans, present – day Brahmins. The servile class of Shudra now well known as OBC (other Backward classes) was also exploited by upper castes and reduced to its present lowly social status in Hindu caste hierarchy. But the question what is Dalit literature is inevitable to define. When we examine the history of Untouchability, it becomes clear that it is originated in different times in different place in India. Dalit, a term which is being used today for the lower castes,

came into currency after the rise of Dalit Panthers movement in 1972 in Maharashtra. Gopal Guru says in this regard: “The deployment of the category Dalit has the logical insight that contains an element of negation and also the conjunction of categories from the same logical class... the category Dalit is historically arrived at, sociologically presented and discursively constituted”. (Guru, 76). Conceptually ‘Dalit’ has been defined in terms that are ostensibly less caste-based. Zelliott argues "Dalit implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy. (Zelliott, 267.) Rameshchandra Parmar, president of Gujarati Dalit Panther and editor defines: Dalit literature provides a platform for the formation of casteless and classless society. It is also necessary that it should also give expression to the exploitation and injustice of the world. (Mishra, 4). A very senior dalit poet, Dalpat Chauhan voices his opinion as thus: that which expresses sufferings of dalits, that which guides their aspirations, and that which has negation of god, revolt, unity and equality of man, new awareness is dalit literature. (Mishra, 4). Caste system is the most studied yet misunderstood problem in Gujarat and history. The dalit’s subaltern status is inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority. Hira Singh quotes: the roots of caste system are not embedded in human nature. Caste is not a natural but a socio- historical phenomenon...impurities of caste is not religious. (Singh, 258). Macwan tries to show in this Novel how this status is eternal and unalterable.

The inequality generated by the caste system is a recurring theme in Indian Literature, to which almost all major writers have responded seriously. The movement against caste oppression started by Jotiba Phule, who came from a low caste, was an embarrassment to the Brahmins. Tapan Basu rightly says: The criticism of the caste system by Dayananda, Gujarati Brahmin, or Vivekananda, Bengali Kayastha, inspired many writer as to create a public opinion which became more and more widespread with the passage of time.(Basu, 151). These leaders exploded the traditional belief with some success, that caste was an integral part of Hindu religion.

Before analyzing Angaliyat let us turn towards a quick outline of the literary and linguistic map of Gujarat with special emphasis on its writings. In the post-Gandhi era, that is, after the 1940s and 50s, Gujarati literature reverted to the nineteenth century task of enrichment to the point of making ‘standard/literary’ move miles away from the spoken word. Angaliyat is one of the few exceptional cases of bridging the spoken and the written word. This departure from the ‘official’ linguistic register is only one of the many leaps that Angaliyat made, but more of that later. Modern Gujarati as spoken and used in literature today is derived from Sanskrit through the intermediate stages of Saurseni Prakrit and Gaurjar Apabrahmsa. Like all major languages of northern and central India, Gujarati belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of languages. During the rule of the Gurjars, (probably a Shaka tribe which entered India in the fifth century AD and conquered west Rajasthan and most of present-day north Gujarat by the end of the sixth century), the land came to be known as Gurjarata or Gurjar Desha. The term ‘Gujarat’ emerged by the

tenth century. The period of Old Gujarati, beginning from the twelfth century, has many long narrative poems by Jain saints. (Macwan, -Xii). Shri Munshi says in this regard: The term Gujarat is used in two different senses: firstly, to denote the mainland between Mount Abu and the river Damanganga; and secondly, the much larger language field in which Gujarati is spoken. (Munshi, xi). When *Angaliyat* was published, Gujarat was passing through this critical phase of its social history. After the two violent anti-reservation agitations, one in 1981 and the second in 1985, the social divide between the savarna (caste Hindus) and avarna (Dalits and tribals) was almost complete. Since Dalits were the main targets during both the agitations, they felt deeply humiliated and victimized. The educated Dalits felt isolated and alienated. The more articulate among them became increasingly inward looking and their search for self-identity led them to deeper explorations of their own collective past. In this intense identity crisis, a new Dalit discourse was articulated. It incorporated Dalit history, Dalit sociology and above all, Dalit prose by Dalit writers. It is not a mere coincidence that in the three years between 1985 and 1987, we witness for the first time, two published doctoral theses on Dalit communities of Gujarat written by Dalit professors of sociology and history as well as two detailed studies on medieval Dalit saint poets of Gujarat by Dalit scholars. The first anthology of Dalit short stories was also published in 1987. *Angaliyat* focuses mainly on the Vankar community but the narrative develops around the structure of domination where the Patidar calls all the shots. Mohan Parmar, a Gujarati dalit writer, pioneered the Dalit movement of the late 90s revolting against all established mores to resist suppression perpetrated on the marginalized, submerged population and to lead social protest. Kishore Jadav writes: he revitalizes the language with new tempers, tones and tenors, and colloquialism exquisitely presenting his world of the anguished souls and their inscrutable longings with artistic brilliance. (Jadav, xxiv).

Like the Indian literature, Gujarati literature also is a result of contact with western literature and was greatly influenced by it. Tolstoy and Maupassant, Edgar Allen Poe and Chekhov and later, Somerset Maugham and Faulkner and many other masters were a source of inspiration for the Gujarati writings.

Sarala Jag Mohan a Gujarati critic writes: Apart from the western Masters, the Gujarati short story was also influenced by the works of Premchand and Tagore, both of whom were widely translated in that language. (Mohan, xxii).

With the appearance of short stories and novels, writers like Joseph Macwan, Dalpat Chauhan and Mohan Parmar projected rural culture through local dialects. The title of this novel *Angaliyat* carries within itself the age-old divide between the centre and periphery in the spheres of family and society in Gujarat. Originally a kinship term, the word *Angaliyat* stands for a stepchild who, following the mother's second marriage, comes to a new home holding her finger, *angali*. (Macwan, XXViii). The novel opens with two hardworking and simple Vankar friends who, motivated by a deep sense of dignity, confront Patidar youths when they make advances to a Vankar girl in the neighbouring village. This incident is followed by a series of conflicts with the

dominant community and ultimately both friends sacrifice their lives. Not only their families, but the entire Vankar was gets involved in the high drama, pain and suffering. A black sheep named Ramlo from within the Vankars who supports the oppressive Patidar offsets the clash between good and evil. Unfortunately self-respect comes with heavy price tags. On the occasion of Teeha's death, Master remarks with bitterness:

This is our Swaraj and this our ramrajya to which Bhavankaka responds by critiquing his own community: Don't blame the Swaraj Master, blame the human heart. Till Ram inhabits the human heart, Ramrajya will be a distant dream. And I feel the death of a single Valji and or a single Teeha cannot bring that rajya. Many more valjis and Teehas have to die like this. Our eyes will not open otherwise (Macwan, 229). In the beginning Teeha was a different man. Valji had always believed that one lived where one was born and while you lived, there was always suffering, to a greater or lesser extent. If you suffered, you didn't complain and in all cases, continued being loyal to the village. Teeha thought differently. Valji lost all hope of talking about anything else with Teeha. (Macwan, 10).

Teeha and Methi, and Valji and Kanku, fiercely oppose two oppressive social structures. One of them represented by landowning, aggressive and vicious patidar and Thakore village leaders and second by greedy and manipulative dalit caste leaders. Both Valji and Teeha are ultimately killed but to the end they refuse to submit. This transformation is achieved through the creation of two powerful couples, Teeha and Methi, who could not marry each other right through life, and Valji and Kanku who enjoy, though for a short time, an excellent married life. All of them fought vigorously against two oppressive social structures; one represented by landowning, aggressive and vicious Patidar and Thakor village leaders and the other by greedy and manipulative Dalit caste leaders. These two structures overlapped at many levels and as a result, Teeha and Methi and along with them Valji and Kanku were forced to face many battlefronts. Essentially very simple, hardworking and pious, Teeha took up the cudgels to defend Methi's honour in a nearby village. He not only challenges the mighty Patidar and Thakor communities but also humiliates them collectively. This is the beginning of the novel and also the beginning of a long ordeal, not only for Teeha but also for Methi, Valji and Kanku. Each of them passes through intense struggle, internal as well as external. (Macwan,xxvii).

The protagonist Teeha saves the honour of Methi, but none from her village, even from her own community, is ready to stand by Teeha. No one dared even to greet Teeha although he had rescued a young girl of the community from disgrace. Teeha was aware of this, in fact it filled him with contempt. Macwan writes: The entire mohalla consisted of eighty houses. If all of them stood united, the twenty-five families of the Patels would be powerless, but if they couldn't even dream of standing up for themselves, how were they to face the Patels? The money was with the Patels, they knew the ropes and the police were in their hands. They remained under control only because there were more Thakores than Patels. In fact, as far as money was

concerned, even the Thakores depended upon the Patels. In such circumstances to pick a fight with them was impractical and foolish. (Macwan, 18). In Chapter six Macwan writes how people in the village began to make inquiries about the injury on Teeha's head. It was commonly known that Teeha was not the sort who would unnecessarily pick a fight and that heightens their curiosity all the more Teeha and Vala were in an unenviable position- they could neither tell, nor endure. Nobody was likely to pat their backs, on the contrary, they would only be pulled up: 'Who asked you to be the guardians of strange girls dignity and invite misery on yourself? You have driven a wedge between those villages.' (P-31). On the one hand, Shilapaar was a large village. It had all the eighteen castes. The Patidars (Patels) ruled the roost. On the other hand, the distribution of things during the floods had shown the Patels of Ratnapaar in a poor light and evoked resentment. It was almost certain that Ranchhodji would be on the next local board. If this matter took a nasty turn and became known, it would ruin any such possibility and things could go completely awry.

In one of the incidents Teeha had taken up the cudgels before Valji could bring him round. A low-caste man publicly humiliating an upper-caste, a Patel no less! How could anyone allow this? The troublemaker's companions jumped off the parapet. Teeha assessed the situation. He took a few steps backwards and said, 'Listen fellows! I won't let this man off in one piece today; I say this to you all now. If anyone here wants to stop me, be prepared to lose an arm and a leg. If you are true sons of your mothers, I suggest you keep out of this. This bastard has to pay for his deeds!' (Macwan, 16). Thus Dalit life fiction constantly presents how upper castes rob the Dalits their dignity and bind them into perpetual subordination. It is rightly pointed out that they challenge the high polished narratives at many levels. Born as untouchables, sufferers and even then the reader demands well structured writings from them and it is no doubt that they are fully accomplished in their task and on the other hand they get an opportunity to assert their identities through their writings. In this way they have been breaking down an age-old barrier of silence. Although at the very end of every Dalit autobiography the narrator is unsettled and insecure about his social position yet the search is still going on to celebrate their self. It is very easy for mainstream accomplished writer to write an autobiography and find a sense of fulfillment at the end but very hard for an untouchable. Kanku 'remarries' her younger brother-in-law and Methi lives with Teeha under the same roof, neither of them enters into 'alliance' with them. For the sake of their sons they live as a family, but as they say, 'their chariots never touch the ground'. By showing Methi and Kanku as 'pure' women Macwan successfully challenges the age-old perceptions of higher castes which denigrate the practice of *naatru* or remarriage among 'backward' communities. At the end of the novel Teeha dies, the district court has issued the sales deed of Teeha's large house in the name of Ramla by Mania's selling it to him. Gokal tried to convince Ramla: 'Listen bhai, this is not good. How can we let you directly buy our ancestral house and humiliate us like that? You may take double or triple of what you have paid from me, but leave this house alone.' Ramla hit out arrogantly:

‘Get lost, you bloody angaliyat! How does it become your ancestral house? I have not bought it to sell it. It is to hold it over you and make you miserable.’ (Macwan, 234).

It reminds me Laxman Mane’s autobiography *Akkarmashi* where Sharn Kumar Limbale is often condemned as a branded illegitimate child. Limbale lived his entire life under the curse of not having ‘pure blood’. Because his mother had once been properly married, but her husband had left her and taken their two sons. Limbale was born with a dalit mother and a father who was the chief of a village. He belonged nowhere and no one would accept him. He had no identity, no home or place of belonging. He raises a question regarding his identity:

Why didn’t my mother abort me when I was a foetus? Why did she not strangle me as soon as I was born? We may be children born out of caste but does that mean we must be humiliated? What exactly is our fault? Why should a child suffer for the sin of its parents? (Limbale, 64).

The quest for identity is a prime mover in the struggle of Limbale and he understands that he cannot gain justice and freedom without struggle and mobilization. Limbale presents his mother and his relation in every realistic way and it is this detachment and ability to turn away from the personal that makes his autobiography, a disturbing tale of narrative.

Thus pain whether experienced as humiliation, as exclusion, or as actual physical violence, all serves a purpose to expose the contemporary occurrence of untouchability. For the mainstream writers, this pain exposes means something different altogether- shame, accusation, and hopefully an invitation for change. So Teeha’s sacrifices give a new dynamism to the struggle for assertion and search for identity among the Dalits. Teeha’s death motivates the other dalits to continue with the crusade.

Similarly, by showing Teeha’s and Valji’s resistance and assertion at the cost of their lives. Macwan reasserts the Dalit quest for identity and dignity. In an interesting and paradoxical way, the assertion of a Dalit identity takes place through physical valour in the men and through ‘purity’ as far as the women are concerned. However an adoption of these upper-caste categories also unwittingly pushes the novel into a symbolic Brahminic order. Dalit writings of post-80s are testaments of social confession. The shame that dalits have suffered seems to have lost its ethical edge. A dalit cannot be shameful, and if this is what he is condemned to, he has chosen to be shameless to put into shame those who have used this as an instrument of oppression. At many places Macwan, speaks out about things which any dalit of pre-1980s would have withheld for fear of being indecent. *Angaliyat* was undoubtedly a significant beginning. A century ago dalits in Gujarat struggled for a meaningful identity through reform from within. But now two dominant trends were visible-one challenging the authority of Brahminical textual tradition by focusing on significant contributions made by dalits in the past, and the other by not challenging the caste hierarchy directly but by claiming a higher place in it through writing new caste histories. Swaraj Basu says in this regard:

The search for new identity by dalits was very much an expression of protest against social discrimination and exploitation by upper castes. In the process of challenging the dominant tradition, history, literature and religion were used as modes of expression the voice of protest and as mediums of establishing a new identity for the socially marginalized groups. (Basu, 19).

Not only in Gujarati Dalit writings but in Tamil and Marathi too Dalit writers have made a significant impact on mainstream literature. This could be found in the stories of Sudhakar Khathak, J.B. Sanakya and Ravikumar. These writers have maintained a difference from the Dalit writings of other parts of India. As it distanced itself from the trend of producing autobiographies, it simultaneously moved in the direction of creative literature. Ravikumar Writes: such a body of literature, while identifying itself within Dalit Literature by their use of images and vocabulary, goes beyond the discourse of victimization.(Ravikumar, XXXII).

Mainstream Narratives are without any message but in Dalit Narratives the message for identity assertion percolates as Ghanshyam Shah Quotes:Let us admit that alongside agony and anger, there is in Dalit Literature an urge to overcome these obstacles through mass awakening and conscious rising. There is an appeal in their writings to become conscious of rights and demands. They want Dalits to become brave, shed their diffidence and inferiority complex. They want them to realize the duplicity and hollowness of the ruling ideas of hegemonic classes including Brahmins and their cultural Stratagems. (237).

When we compare the practice of caste in North Gujarat with the findings of scholars from other parts of India, we find a greater emphasis on separation, and that hierarchy operates on values of Economic power and urban residence rather than either Brahminical purity or Ksatriya Raj put landed power. Cort says: Gujarat is very different from many other regions of South Asia in basic matters such as concern for pollution, social etiquette, role of women, and the social location of Brahmins and Rajputs... and as a result practice of caste takes a distinctive shape.(Gupta, 100).There is no dearth of literature about the higher castes in Gujarat but most of the life experiences of the common people find no reflection at all. Suffering, want, pain, exploitation, social injustice- the marginalized Dalit community is continuously victimized by all these evils and yet it has a culture of its own, a unique tradition of living its own adventures and tales of courage. So in this way Macwan rejects the dominant cultural tradition, and the movement for dalit identity points towards the multiple discourses of tradition

Notes:

1. **Angaliyat**- child, accompanying its mother at the time of remarriage to her husband's home. A man's stepchild.
2. **Akkarmashi**—impure, incomplete, an illegitimate child

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