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Questioning ‘Dalits’ through the Lens of Ajay Navaria’s *Unclaimed Terrain*

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Abstract:

Dalit literature deals with the Dalits’ life and their experiences in the society which follows the hierarchical structure on the basis of caste. It also describes about the conditions and position of the Dalits with respect to their contemporary society. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the Dalits’ position in both rural and urban society as depicted in Ajay Navaria’s ‘Unclaimed Terrain’ (a collection of seven short stories, 2013). The prime focus of this paper is – how and why the Dalits, after so many constitutional provisions and safeguards are still not capable to claim their dignified position in the contemporary society.

Keywords: Hierarchical, Contemporary, Dalit, Provisions, Safeguards, Structure and Society

A society shapes its contemporaneity with the account of its past and is determined by the socio-cultural and historical forces. In present time the Indian social structure of Hindus is defined by the principles of hierarchy and holism that makes the society chiefly on the basis of caste. The untouchables, currently known as the Dalits or S.C. exist in the lowest position in the social hierarchy and are meant to serve the other higher castes. By defining ‘Dalits’ Arjun Dangle writes, “Dalits means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally in the name of religion and other factors”(Iiii). By the definition of Dangle it can be said that the term ‘Dalit’ precisely stands for the experiences of a social group that comes down from a century old hierarchical and hereditary system, which is unalterable because of sanctioning by the religion and affiliated with notion of people as polluted and untouchable.

The emergence of Dalit literature as a part of Dalit liberation movement (Dalit Panther movement, 1972) made the Dalits responsive towards their marginalized position in the society and now they are challenging the hegemony of the higher castes. Sharankumar Limbale in his most quoted text *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* writes:

By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit Literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus.(19)

Ajay Navaria is an esteemed name in the contemporary Dalit writings. He teaches in Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi and has penned two collections of short stories, *Patkathaur Anya Kahaniya* (2006) and *Yes Sir* (2008), and a novel, *Udharke Log* (2008). He has been also associated with the premier Hindi literary journal, *Hans*. His *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013), a collection of seven short stories translated from Hindi to English by Laura Bruke, is an exploration of experiences and social space of the Dalits in the context of present time rural and urban society.

Navaria through his collection of short stories, *Unclaimed Terrain* establishes the new trend in the representation of the Dalits in the field of Dalit writings. Dalit characters, in his stories, belong to the urban middle-class and have an independent position in the society (with their changed economic status) due to the constitutional safeguards, reservation policies and alteration in the traditional occupation of their belonging family. Some of the characters of his stories, like Narottam in *Yes Sir* is a Deputy General Manager, Mr. Siddhartha Nirmal in *Subcontinent* is a Marketing Manager, Subhash Kumar Paswan in *Tatoo* is an Under Secretary, Mangal Das in *Hello Premchand* is an IAS officer etc. are in an authoritative positions in the society, which signifies the different Dalit image dissociated with the past image of the Dalits and presents the initial outcomes of the Dalit movement in the form of transformation. In the very first story *Sacrifice* Navaria gives a key statement for the change from the oppressive past/history. He writes "To be born weak is a mistake, but to remain weak is a crime"(11).

Navaria describes about the changes not only in Dalit's life but in the conscious level too it has been changed. Through his Dalit characters, he has tried to show the new Dalit consciousness; the way they are aware of their rights, realizing the importance of education and economic independence. The very first spark is the edification which turned into the fire of transformed perception of the Dalits. Quoting Jyotirao Phule, Gail Omvedt writes about the importance of education for the Dalits as: "Without education knowledge is lost: without knowledge development is lost: without development wealth is lost: without wealth Shudras are ruined" (1890).(1)

In all the stories of Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain*, the importance of education is in prime focus. All the protagonists of stories are educated and claim for the space for themselves in the society. In the story *Hello Premchand*, mother (Mai) of Mangal took his promise to continue with his studies in her last breath of life because education is the only means which can alter the position of a Dalit from a disgrace to a respectable place in the society. In *Hello Premchand*, Navaria mentions through Mai's words to his son Mangal as: "Don't quit your studies...and don't ever take up this work... I don't want my son to have to carry piss and shit..." (134) further she says: "What use is work that denies you honour"(134).

When we critically examine Navaria's stories it is found that the new consciousness of the Dalits in the form of questioning of the prevailing caste's traditions in the society and understanding of the root cause of being a scum. Reading of Navaria's stories enables reader of

Navariato understand economic factors responsible for the pathetic condition and maltreatment of the Dalits than the other responsible factors (Social, Political and Cultural factors). It is the economic disparity that promotes other responsible factors to create inequality and differentiate a human being from another human being of the same flesh and blood which leads to the stratification of the society. In the story *Sacrifice* Avinash says to Kalu:

Brother, if this work is dirty, then why don't people treat thakurs as untouchable? Thakurs also hunt, eat meat. They even eat wild boar, deer and rabbit. We butcher to fill our stomachs, but they...does anyone treat them as untouchable? No, no the problem isn't with the profession, its poverty. They treat us as untouchable because we're poor. Brahmins and baniyas wouldn't dare act insolent to the thakurs. (25)

Navaria through his stories depicts the changing scenario with regard to the profession in urban society. In the present time, work is associated with money although it is nasty. Now, for money people of higher castes are doing those jobs which were earlier considered to be the menial job which labelled them impure, but today it has become business. At the same time, the Dalits who were traditionally known for their menial works are getting administrative jobs and are in authoritative positions. In the story *Yes Sir* Navaria mentions the conversation between Tiwari, a Peon to Narottam, a Dalit and Durgadas a Higher caste man as:

“Durga, you've got a decent job. What's the need for you to get into this pig-farming business? Kick such nasty work aside.” Tiwari had recovered.

“Arrey, panditji, don't say such inauspicious things. Pigs are our children, our fortune. It's because of them that we make a little profit. Don't people raise cows, buffalos, sheep, and goats? Raising our pigs is just the same. Work is work, how can it be dirty or lowly? Money doesn't smell, Chopra does the same work. It's just a difference in scale, there's no shame in that either.” (56)

Even at the end of the story Tiwari himself cleans the bathroom of Narottam by saying that “Doesn't the bathroom get blocked at our home ...? I'll just poke at it with a stick, and it will be settled” (63). Navaria has brought out the changed images of the Dalit in urban society who are economically stable and now enjoys all the luxurious facilities. In the story *Subcontinent*, Navaria writes about the position of a Dalit:

Here in the city, I am an executive in a big government enterprise. An officer Mr. Siddharth Nirmal, Marketing Manager. My wife works as a college lecturer. We have a house. My wife and I have a room, our daughter has a separate one, there is a sitting room for guests, and a study. When our daughter was sick, I called Doctor Punj, a Brahmin, to come to our house. He prescribed a good, expensive medicine, and she got better right away. She didn't die of cold, the way my aunt did. We have a car with an air-conditioner and a middle aged, Garhwali Brahmin

driver, Bhatt, who would never forget to bow and greet us when he opens the door. He has never neglected to rush and take my briefcase as I step out of the lift. Our daughter goes to an expensive convent school...And I called a Bengali music teacher whose name and number I found on the internet. He comes home twice a week to teach our daughter music. (99)

Another aspect of Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain* focuses on the area where the reformation is still needed in respect to the Dalits' position in the society. In his stories, he describes the rural society which is still caught in between the orthodoxal traditions which neglects the independent status of a Dalit. In rural scenario, the Dalits are still struggling for their identity as a human being and for their livelihood. The major factor which Navaria stresses upon is the economic condition of the Dalits in the rural society; they are not much educated to grab the opportunity or any job. Moreover it is the deprived circumstances of the Dalits which do not allow them to complete their education as they have to satisfy their hunger first, where hegemony of higher castes prevails in the society. In the story *Subcontinent*, Navaria describes the village setting and position of the Dalit in the rural society as:

Here is the village- our roots, our land. Where there is indignity, abuse, helplessness and weakness. Every moment, the fear of dishonour. Every second the feeling of big and small. There is no police station for us, no hospital, and no court. There's the village panchayat, but it is not ours. In the panchayat, there is no justice for us, no hearing. Only taunts. In the village, we have no fields. The land was no ours only the labor. The harvest was theirs, the field were theirs, the houses were theirs, the earth was theirs. We had just a hut. We had only salt, chilli, and bread to fill half a stomach, and water to fill the other half. But there was no well. We had no new clothes. We had no shoes.(98-99)

The above mentioned quote also justifies the title of Navaria's collection of the seven stories- *Unclaimed Terrain*. It clearly explains that a Dalit cannot claim for anything. A Dalit is one who does not own anything, even the earth belongs to the higher castes, which defines the Dalits as the slaves/servants to them for indefinite time. Navaria highlighted these conditions throughout his stories. If a Dalit is educated and well settled, he/she will be a Dalit and has the same traditional position in the rural society. The changed economic status of the Dalits does not differ from their traditional position in the rural scenario. A Dalit will be a Dalit and is identified by his/her inferiority and low position in the social stratification. The identity of a person is only associated with the caste of his/her belonging.

Coming to the next, Navaria, in the story *New Custom* well describes the mind-set of the people. When the protagonist, a professor, steps down from the bus, a road side tea seller calls him with the address of 'darbar' (darbar is a form of address, which is reserved for the thakurs and landlords of the region), the protagonist ask to tea seller that "how did you know...that... I am a darbar" (71), then the tea seller replied that it is your personality and attire which speaks of

your position. “Seeing your coat and pant, and your commanding presence, anyone would know”(71). But as the shopkeeper comes to know that the protagonist is going to a harijan’s place and belongs to the same caste, his polite and respectful attitude gets turn to distant and rude and ask him to wash his glass before putting it back. Navaria by describing the traditions and customs which are still prevailing in the society writes about the change of attitude of the shopkeeper as:

Three rupees. But brother, first wash the glass

Why?” The man felt as though a bucket of water had been dumped on him. His own voice seemed to come from the bottom of well.

Why!” This is the custom of the village.” The shopkeeper shouted for any by stander to hear. “A rise in the status does not put an end to custom.(77)

The next issue that Navaria has taken up in his stories is of Dalits who have risen above from the lower status to the higher status (similar to the higher castes) now started hiding their identity of their caste. The main cause of it is that the Dalits have not overcome from their inferior past and histories, which still make them, feel at disgraceful in spite of being in an authoritative position. In the story *Tattoo* Subhash Kumar, an undersecretary in the ministry, always tries to hide his old shoes, surname and a tattoo of ‘Namo Buddhaya, Jai Bhim’ in his arm at gym. His behaviour at gym is generally calm and makes no reply to anybody because he thinks “Being reserved is the greatest strength of all” (119). At the end of the story he accepts the reality of his belonging to a Dalit community and understands that it is unalterable in any way. Navaria writes:

Uff, these old and dicolored shoes can always be changed, but this tattoo? It has seeped, drop by little drop, into my consciousness and has permeated my entire being. Oh! This tattoo. (122)

Towards a conclusion it can be said that Navaria has described the different aspects of Dalits’ life, status, and unclaimed aspirations from those of the other Dalit writings. He brings forth the Dalits who are conscious but still suffering from the past notions of caste. He demands for the up gradation of the Dalits from the root level (rural society) and puts stress on the education and economic stability for them. He also highlighted the modern problem of the Dalits in urban middle-class society as they hide their identity and try to make them separate from their actual belonging because they think that revealing their caste will bring dishonour to them in their society. Thus the Dalits in every sphere are not in a position to claim something that belongs to them or something that is due to them. So, Navaria by his writings wants to claim a dignified place and recognition in the society for the Dalits who are nowhere in the social existence of the society and wants to establish an egalitarian society.

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