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Tormenting Experience through Ill-treatment and Mortification: A Study of Dalit Short Stories

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Abstract:

Dalit Literature is a Literature in which Dalits have depicted their pain. The purpose of giving a sad account of their life has never been to gain sympathy from the reader. Rather, they have given a very brave account of their struggle against heavy odds that fall in their life only for being a Dalit. In their struggle to rise in life they came across physical as well as mental persecution in their life because success and failure depended on the caste to which one belonged. They were suppressed and were not allowed to raise their voice against any discrimination and beastly treatment meted out to them. Their experiences with the people of upper caste are full of pain and expose the hypocrisy on the part of those who belong to upper castes.

Keywords: Dalit, trauma, humiliation, subversiveness, hypocrisy, experience, authority.

We have been celebrating Independence Day since 1947 and even after 73 years of independence, India is still beset with archaic caste mentality. It has been amply manifested a few days back in a school in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh where Dalit students were forced to sit in a segregate line during mid-day meal. Time and again such heinous caste discrimination is reported in the temples of learning across the nation. In the past too, students refused to eat food in a primary school in Ghaziabad district of Uttar Pradesh because mid-day meal cook happened to be a Dalit woman. In village Nangla Vair under the Bhojpur Police Station area,

school children refused to take mid-day meal. They objected to the meal to be served and prepared by a Dalit woman and left the school without taking it (Mishra 42). Recently, there were incidents of mob lynching where Dalit youths were prosecuted and tortured across the nation on one or the other pretext. This sort of caste-based untouchability is an age-old practice and almost universal feature of caste society of early and mediaeval civilized society even the age of progress, globalization and independence has not mitigated the age-old social evil. It is really disgusting as well as shocking that nothing has changed the mindset of society against the Dalits. It is equally awful that even school children are poisoned with bitter caste-based ideas and hatred is spread for Dalits. In doing all this it has become a tradition among upper caste groups to stigmatize those belonging to the lower castes. Such atmosphere that fosters hatred and ill-will for the fellow human beings extends a heart ricking message. We, in this age of science and technology, in the era of 21st century, boast of the world that has achieved unsurmountable knowledge but we still poison our children's mind with casteist and inhuman sentiments. Our children will, sadly, inherit false consciousness and ignorance owing to our positioned education. The students who displayed their caste-based hatred by refusing to eat mid-day meal are not to be blamed for. They mirror the behaviour of their elders as they are the product of their family socialization. They have been programmed to adopt the prejudice with respect to their food, social and commercial intercourse. And such prejudice has been embedded in their inner mind and consciousness.

It has been believed that all men are born equal. But the social reality is other way round—all men are not born equal. If all men are equal why, then, there is discrimination on the ground of caste, Colour and sex. Caste with its practices of casteism, untouchability and discrimination continue to infect and inflict upon the social order and human collectively. Starting from Ghurye (1994) Bougle (1971) to Dumont (1972) all have fundamentally defined caste system in terms of its attributes of hierarchy, separation, division, endogamy, pollution and purity. Such notions of pollution and purity have always acted to rate certain castes are 'pure' and the rest is impure. This dichotomy of purity-pollution continues to cast its malevolent shadow on the Dalits and deprive them of their dignified human existence. At different points of history such so-called impure castes have been designated as untouchables, *harijans depressed classes schedule castes* and Dalits. The point we are trying to make is that the caste system has always acted against a section of people of its fold, ostracized them, violated their human rights,

dehumanize their existence, discriminated them, segregated their location, deprived them of their dignity and robbed them of their basic freedom of progress. The caste system manifests itself as the worst form of hierarchy where virtually every caste has some above to grumble about and some below to growl at. Everybody is aware of the negative contribution made by the brahminical word to be the persistence and discrimination. (Mishra 43)

Some progressive writers and critics think that caste system has collapsed today owing to the policies of the government that ensure welfare of Dalits. But there is not an iota of truth in this. Had it been so, why then Dalits women are gang-raped even today? Why, then, Dalit youth is assaulted every other day? Why, then, there are dictates by the *Khap* panchayats to kill those who dare get married outside their caste? Unbelievable as it may appear, in Madurai, a 38-year-old Dalit woman was allegedly forced to drink excreta mixed with water in front of her husband and children after she spurned the advances of an upper caste villager in Keela Urppanur village in Thirumangalam block of Madurai district recently (Dabhi 33-46). Even today Dalits are facing gruesome violence and against them and social exclusion in the era of 21st century. It is not that they are being tortured and suppressed by the illiterates among the upper castes. Unfortunately, the perpetrators are the most literate and educated ones who throw the venom of untouchability every now and then. Dalits have, no doubt, raised their heads against the discrimination and oppression but still in rural India they have to pay the price for resistance. They have to face the worst kind of violence, sexual outrage against Dalit women and sabotage to their property. M.N. Srinivas aptly points out:

And I must tell you bluntly that if you are thinking that you can get rid of caste easily you are seriously mistaken. Caste is an institution of prodigious strength and it will take a lot of beating before it will die.... It is so powerful and progressive, and its appeals are so strong that the first step in the struggle is to have a precise measure of its strength. (Quoted in Mishra 45)

Dr. B R Ambedkar has rightly asserted in *Writing and Speeches* (Vol.5, 15) that untouchability is an indirect form of slavery.... It is enslavement without making the untouchables conscious of their enslavement.

In this paper stories from Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories* (Orient Blackswan 2018) are taken for detailed study. Limbale's stories, located in the larger narrative frame of the Dalit experience, open up a ruthless and harsh world conditioned and sanctioned by the caste system. They may have been based in India of the 1960s through the 1980s, as experienced by the author, as the book itself was first published in 1984. The setting ranges from feudal villages to modern cities; the characters range from bonded labourers to feudal lords and slum dwellers to middle classes, and their responses range from meek submission to violent revolt. Irrespective of their settings and situation, his stories expose the underbelly of an Indian society structured by illiteracy and superstition, exploitation and oppression, class, caste and gender violence, trickery and hypocrisy, duplicity and betrayal, dejection and oppression, class, caste and gender violence, trickery and hypocrisy, duplicity and betrayal, dejection and desperation. They present a kaleidoscopic account of Dalit lives in post-independence India. Almost all the stories have the Ambedkarite movement as a prominent backdrop, particularly its social culture dimension of conversion to Buddhism. The Buddhism identity the Mahahars of Maharashtra wore after 1956 certainly lent them a new confidence, and also brought them into conflict with the larger society that construed it as their defiance. If we take what is portrayed in contemporary India, one wonders how to assess the changes that the constitution of India, architected by Babasahab Ambedkar, has ushered.

Limbale handles every story with deftness and presents it with adequate creativity to produce a compact unified effect, as ordained by Poe's thesis on the short story the short story, it says, presents a single significant event or scene involving a limited number of characters who are revealed through an action or a dramatic situation. Its form encourages economy of setting, a concise narrative and the omission of a complex plot; character is disclosed in action and dramatic encounter, but is seldom fully developed. The short story is noted for its focused nature and shift narrative style with a pre-conceived ending, which may be abrupt and in collusive but never sans the desired impact. Because of its format, it demands both creativity and craft. Dalit literature may have discarded the ideological and normative structure of Marathi literature, but it still qualifies the universal criteria for each of its genres. Limbale impresses one in superbly handling his craft and displays ingenuity, compression and a touch of fantasy, which have been noted as the ingredients for successful short story writing. The stories in this chapter reflect varied experiences of Dalithood. These stories reflect experiences of the Dalits with upper

castes—the experiences that inflict violence, humiliation and suppression in one or the other way.

In these stories experiences of Dalits are depicted mostly in modern urban settings, attempting to characterize the intriguing nature of Brahmins, their hypocrisy, bias and cunningness. “The Weevil”, “Enlightenment”, “Sudha Dear”, and “Son-in-law of the Government”

In the first story, “The Weevil” (Limbale 1), Prof. Khanolkar is a reputable figure in Marathi literature. He is a teacher. The narrator is a student of Prof. Khanolkar who teaches him Marathi. The narrator holds him in high esteem for his teachings. He visits him in the evenings to seek his guidance in writing. He is treated to tea at Khanolkar’s home. He has faith in his teacher who will always help him despite being the fact that the narrator is a Dalit. On every visit of the narrator to Khanolkar’s house he narrates his life to him who listens to his narrative with patience and interests and encourages him:

No one values the experiences of us white-collared people any more. There was a time when people would jump on fiction. Nowadays they want reality. A lot of value is attached to Dalit memoirs. You don’t need to be a writer to write Dalit literature. Just write down your life experiences as they happened. People will enjoy it. If your book becomes well known, you will win big awards and fame, earn a lot of money. You’ve got the guts for it. (3)

The narrator is satisfied that his teacher is shaping him. He never suspects his teacher for his bias and hypocrisy. It is only because of his teacher that two of his short stories are published in the Sunday edition of *Dainik Kesari*. Khanolkar will read the narrator’s stories passionately and will make some suitable suggestions. In turn, the narrator will drudge for Khanolkar and his family. He explains, “Sir’s wife would send me out to buy vegetables. Sir would send me to the post office to drop off his mail. His daughter, Aparna would send me to the laundry. I would happily do all the household chores for him. The only thought in my mind was that one day my book would be published through Sir’s contacts” (4). The narrator has already decided to dedicate his book to his teacher.

How upper caste people treat the Dalit with hypocrisy is exposed clearly in the story. The narrator and his friends present an image of Babasaheb Ambedkar to Khanolkar on his retirement. However, the statuette is never seen at his house. The narrator grows angry. He thinks, “No matter how progressive a high-caste man may be, in his house he still swears by caste. The teeth he displays are different from the ones he eats with” (6). The experiences of the Dalits with Brahmins and other upper castes have always been intolerable. Their attitude has left deep scars on the psyche of the Dalits.

One day the narrator is dumbfounded when he visits a book release function of Khanolkar. He is told that Khanolkar has written a novel on Dalit life. It is in the function that Prof. Deshpande speaks about Khanolkar’s novel, “Khanolkar’s new novel is an excellent example of Dalit literature. The idea that only Dalits can write Dalit literature—this work of art disproves that” (7). Then Prof. Deshpande reads a passage from the novel that shakes the narrator to the core.

Sir, I am the son of a prostitute. She sold her body to pay for my education. We were happy when customers came to her, for that night we would have food to eat. Sir, why do only Dalit women become prostitute? (7)

The narrator suddenly grows numb. He has been cheated by none other than his own teacher—a Brahmin. The sentences in Khanolkar’s novels are his. He has given his story to Khanolkar so that he may read it and make some suggestions. How hypocritically he has said, “We’ll publish this somewhere good. We can give it for the next Diwali annual. Leave it with me. I’ll send it to the editor” (7). The narrator’s story is never published. Khanolkar has really deceived him by adopting his story into a novel by changing the names of the characters. The narrator understands how his teacher has worn a mask—a false face displaying love and care for the Dalit students. Dalits tendentiously look at Brahmins with respect as benign and progressive, but when it comes to observance of the caste code, they do not measure up to their expectations. (Teltumbde XXIV-V)

Thus, the story projects Brahmins as hypocritical, unethical and amoral, and Dalits, on the other hand, as gullible and innocent.

“Enlightenment” (Limbale 22) is another story of a Dalit experience with upper castes. Amar Bansode, narrator of the story is a poet who writes poems related to the lives of Dalits. He faces the typical Brahmin abhorrence and fear of any subversiveness which threatens the status quo, and thereby Brahmin power and prestige (Teltumbde XXV). The narrator presents his newly published copy of *Surya*, a collection of verse, to his teacher, Prof. Khanolkar, for his feedback. Two-facedness is hidden in his words. He says:

The book is very well produced. I will read it and write about it. And Amar, you must write a great deal. Read a lot. Don't get carried away by fame. You people have endured so much. You must speak out fiercely against inequality. But your literature must not contain hate and vengefulness. (23)

On the contrary Khanolkar never reads Amar's book. Neither does he write anything about it. His hypocrisy is exposed when Amar finds out that his copy was discarded as rubbish and lands it at a waste-paper depot. We see the trajectory followed by his newly published collection of poems, which he gives to Prof. Khanolkar for his feedback, on account of its purported obscenity, the book finally reaches a waste paper depot. This not only hurts the emotions of the narrator but also demeans him as a poet. It is universally true that the so-called upper castes never like any kind of subversion that challenges their supremacy.

This becomes obvious when Prof. Khanolkar introduces the narrator of the story as a “Dalit poet” and not as a ‘poet’. The narrator feels offended as his poetry is rejected on alleged obscenity. He retorts, “There is a conspiracy to curb new ideas by calling Dalit literature obscene. Licentiousness is on the rampage in Marathi literature. That is tolerated. You read it with relish. Why don't you say outright that what you don't like is the subversiveness in Dalit writing?” (26)

The rejection of the book is nothing but arrogance of upper caste people who cannot tolerate any kind of subversiveness, resistance and protest on the part of the Dalits.

“Sudha Dear” (Limbale 28) delineates a bitter experience of the protagonist with an upper caste professor who abuses his authority wrongly to belittle a Dalit professor. Avinash Swami, an upper caste professor, intrigues against the protagonist. He not only admonishes him before his students but also blames him to teach in a ‘casteist’ manner. He snubs the protagonist

for teaching Dalit literature to students and assigns that job to an upper caste teacher. Thus, protagonist is mortified and forced to give in. The hypocrisy of Prof. Avinash Swami is also exposed as he himself abuses his authority to indulge in sensual pleasure with his girl students who are “of an age suitable to be father and daughter” (30). It seems that those from upper caste have the authority to do what they like and Dalits are obliged to behave in a submissive way. Any deviation from the set path by Dalits is seen as subversiveness and liable to be dealt with strictly.

How Brahmins abuse their authority to exercise their cultural hegemony to humiliate and suppress the Dalits is expressed in “Son-in-Law of the Government” (Limbale 44). The story depicts how the Brahmin employees hold Lakshmi pujas and Satyanarayan pujas in office, in contravention of the secular code enshrined in the constitution. They thrust their supremacy in resisting the Dalit demand for celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti though it is secular.

The protagonist describes how upper caste employees try to impose their authority, “Every Thursday there would be a Lakshmi puja in our office. I didn’t like that. I raised an objection to the puja. They were all high caste. Everyone stood in opposition to me. I did not pay my contribution for the puja. The next day I brought a photograph of Dr. Ambedkar to office and wanted to put it up. Everyone opposed me. Deshpande said, ‘Ambedkar is not a national leader. You can’t put up his photograph’” (44). It is such disrespectful behaviour of those from upper castes that will never miss a chance to humiliate the Dalits on one pretext or the other. This type of bitter experience with upper caste is really intolerable as it hurts one’s emotions. It is seen that those who oppose the impertinent behaviour of upper caste people are either tortured or humiliated. Dinesh Kamble is also a Dalit employee in the office who is transferred from his place of posting as he is the only one who along with the protagonist opposes the authority and untoward behaviour of the upper caste colleagues.

It is really painful that the Dalits have to bow before the power of people from upper castes. Thus, Dalit experiences with upper caste are successfully and perfectly brought forward before the readers. These experiences are poignant and traumatic as the rich and powerful do not want to lose control over the Dalits as their servility is mostly required to establish their dominance and authority.

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