

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-III June 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Articulating Marginalized Identities in the Works of Shailesh Matiyani

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Article History: Submitted-12/05/2023, Revised-26/06/2023, Accepted-27/06/2023, Published-30/06/2023.

Abstract:

The literary landscape of Uttarakhand is illuminated by several writers right from very famous poets like Sumitranandan Pant to contemporary poets like Leela Dhar Jagudi and Manglesh Dabral, prose writers like Vidya Sagar Nautiyal to Manohar Shyam Joshi. In their works, these writers have written about Uttarakhand: its peculiar geographical location, simple life, verdant hills, pure rivers, women's hard life, people's faith in God, economic inequality between the rich and the poor and so on. Besides this, discrimination on the basis of caste, gender or other factors experienced by marginalized individuals from various areas of society too finds echo in the works of many of these writers who have given a voice to the sufferings of marginalized people. Through their stories, novels and poetry, these authors have depicted the realities of marginalized people's lives. Shailesh Matiyani was one of the of the very prominent writers of Uttarakhand. In this paper I have analyzed some famous works of Shailesh Matiyani with prime focus on the theme of marginalization.

Keywords: Discrimination, Marginalization, Verdant Hills.

Rightly known as People's Writer or *Jankathakar*, Ramesh Singh Matiyani 'Shailesh' is one of the most prominent writers of Uttarakhand. He has depicted the struggles and the fighting spirit of the Indian lower and lower middle class in his works with great authenticity, because he himself belonged to this class. Pankaj Bisht, another well - known writer from Uttarakhand, pays tribute to Matiyani in these words:

. . . how intimate was his depiction of the displaced people from the villages in the urban slums and those compelled to live and die on the footpaths. You won't find this kind of intimacy in any other language. Matiyani's protagonists are beggars, pick pockets, lumpens, drop outs, marginalized characters. Fatedness- the lopsided policies of progress- they were its victims; and yet, their inner life was so full of humanism and faith. (qtd. in "Wikipedia" 3)

Matiyani was a voluminous writer who wrote more than thirty novels, seventeen collections of stories including his most famous stories such as “Ardhangini” (2008) and “Yada Kada” (1992), seven collections of folk tales, sixteen books for children, besides many other writings such as *Bhasa aur Desh* and *A Collection of Essays*. Matiyani was also the editor of *Vikalp* and *Jan Paksh*. In 1994, Kumaun University awarded him an honorary D Litt recognizing his rich contribution to literature.

Born on 14 October, 1931, in village Barechhina of Almora district, Matiyani’s childhood was spent amidst lots of struggles. Having lost his parents while he was barely twelve years old, he lived with his uncles. He could not continue his studies due to adverse family circumstances and had to work even in a slaughter house. Despite all such challenges, he passed his high school exams and migrated from his native place to Delhi in search of a job where he stayed at the house of the editor of *Amar Kahani* Acharya Om Prakash Gupta. Thereafter he went to Muzaffar Nagar and from there to Allahabad for some time. Then he moved to Bombay where for five - six years he had to face many tough challenges. After leading a nomadic life in Bombay, he returned to Almora. From Almora he went to Delhi and eventually settled in Allahabad and lived there for many years. The death of his younger son in 1992 was a tragic blow for Matiyani after which he lost his mental balance. In the last years of his life, Matiyani came to Haldwani. This great writer breathed his last in a state of insanity in Shahadara Hospital of Delhi.

In the year 2000, Matiyani was awarded ‘Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan Award’ for his contribution to Hindi literature. After his death, ‘Shailesh Matiyani Smriti Katha Puraskar’ was instituted in his memory by the Madhya Pradesh Government. Matiyani belonged to that school of writers who believe in art for life’s sake. For him, literature has a responsibility towards society, i.e., to voice the hardships of oppressed sections of society. The following sentence from his famous novel *Borivali Se Boribander Tak* clearly reflects his commitment to society as a writer who takes cudgels on behalf of the downtrodden, “. . . To write, or to be an author, is synonymous with an individual’s struggle to assert one’s ‘selfhood’ but when it is connected with others in a discerning manner, only then does an author become a ‘litterateur’ in the true sense” (my trans.).

Some of Matiyani works like short stories *Suhagini Tatha Anya Kahaniyan*, *Kanya Tatha Anya Kahaniyan*, *Shailesh Matiyani Ki Sampurna Kahaniyan* are known as remarkable works in Hindi literature. His short-story “Suhagini” throws light on the lives of many unsung

women of hill areas. This story is about a marginalized girl named Padmavati who sings very sweet music. However, she is not beautiful in appearance. Her brother tries to find a suitable match for her. At last, her brother forces her to marry a copper urn because it is a superstition among their community that if a girl is not married then the souls of her father and brother would keep wandering. Padmavati perforce agrees to marry the pot as it is a matter of social/religious beliefs. Therefore, Padmavati sacrifices herself before the superstitions of the society and her family.

Another story “Postman” refers to the forced migration of young Kumauni men who enlisted themselves in army simply due to poverty and unemployment in the area. In this story, Matiyani describes the reactions of Daya Ram the Postman to the various sad situations, plaintive songs of rural women living away from husbands and leading their life full of drudgery.

The very first novel by Matiyani *Borivalli Se Boribander Tak* (1959) is about the train journey of the two unemployed young men Virendra Singh and his friend, who come to Bombay to search a job. There Virendra meets a prostitute named Nur, who also had come to Bombay for some job but she was duped by her lover. On reaching Bombay her lover had pushed her into the prostitution trade. Nur narrates her horrible experiences to Virendra and his friend how her life has been ruined and henceforth she has to lead a marginalized life.

Matiyani’s novel *Kabutarkhana* was published in 1960. In the beginning of this novel, Shailesh Matiyani has written a picture of a broken wing pigeon’s inner yearning and outer guttural under the title “Two Words”. This is a mouth spoken story of Ganpat Rama, a pigeon like servant of mistresses of Mumbai. This story is a phenomenon that compels the mind to think”. This story revolves around its protagonist Ganpat whose mother is dead and he himself is ill with cholera. His sister moves to Mumbai to earn money for his treatment because there is no one in the village who is ready to help them. She sends 10 to 15 rupees every month to her brother. One day, when her brother recovers and comes to meet her in Mumbai. He reaches the address where Ganga lives in Mumbai at “Kabutarkhana”, a famous locality in Bhuleshwar where he gets to know that his sister is a prostitute in a brothel. Ganpat thinks: “Why did God make a woman so great that man could not pay off her love? When a woman falls, she becomes a goddess. When a man falls, he becomes a Chandaal” (21). Ganga sees her brother through the window and commits suicide before her brother reaches the second floor. “Ganga does not want to face her brother in this form and commits suicide” (22). This novel

shows the sacrifice of a girl and how she sells her own body for the treatment of her brother.

After Ganga's death, when Ganpat starts working for a rich man, the rich man's wife wants to have physical relations with him. Therefore, he runs away from this job and further explains the condition of Ramas or servants in this statement: "Sethaniya makes relation with the Rama (servants)...the condition of Rama people for Sethani is similar to the dog of English Mam" (23). These lines show the physical exploitation of servants. Ganpat observes during his job how rich, so - called elite people have sex with prostitutes and their wives have physical relations with their servants whom are addressed as Rama in this novel. The bad face and cruel reality of the elite class is shown in this novel. Ganpat while sitting in the park after leaving his job at Seth's house meets a masseuse who during their conversation tell Ganpat "Is there any life for poor boys? Stones have been put in the way of those who want to earn money by honesty. We don't even get dry bread after working hard..." (25). These lines show how minds of poor people and brings out the pain felt by them all the time.

Ganpat starts a new job in which his work is to carry wine boxes in the car. He starts to earn good money and one day he goes to the brothel with a friend. He is infatuated with a dancer named Kamla, who is a prostitute. A lot of time passes since this incident, then one day he finds the same prostitute who is suffering from the disease 'garmi' and she asks him for her help. He then remembers his sister Ganga and the sacrifices she made for him and with this motivated mind helps her. The situation of this prostitute is also the same as Ganga because she was also forced to accept prostitution as a profession because of her father's illness. Ganpat sends her to her village after her recovery.

In the words of Mariyani: "Economic inequality is the main reason for the exploitation of women. Due to this economic inequality women are sold in the market like toys, then they break and get mixed in the soil at last" (67). Women's exploitation is a serious problem and one of the root causes for this is economic inequality, due to which they are neglected in society.

Another novel by Matiyani *Aakash Kitna Anant Hai* (1979) is based on the life of a poor woman named Jaswanti. She is married to an alcoholic taxi driver in Delhi whose torture leads her to face many problems after marriage. Her husband ends up selling Jaswanti to an old man. She has to struggle against many odds to protect herself.

Koi Ajnabi Nahin (1966) by Shailesh Matiyani narrates the story of a village woman Rampyari who is exploited due to her poverty by a person of her own village Matadin Chaudhary. Matadin takes Rampyari to Delhi under the pretext of providing her a better life in

Delhi but on reaching there he exploits Rampyari badly forcing her to sleep with three other men. Rampyari's pain of displacement from her native village and her sense of marginalisation has been articulated very vividly in the novel.

The characters of Matiyani's stories belong to those strata of society where every passing moment calls for new struggles. Life is shown in all its ugliness and squalor. His stories depict the lives of the marginalized. Though such marginalized societies have existed in every age but the truth is that only authors like Matiyani saw them and depicted them in their works. In this connection the comment of J S Bisht in "Gadya Kosh" are worth quoting:

In the stories and novels of Matiyani the oppressed and marginalized sections of society find their struggles vividly reflected – these downtrodden sections of society belong to the rural region of Kumaun as well as to the small towns and big metropolitan cities like Bombay and Delhi. Matiyani is able to articulate the agony and pain of such marginalized persons with a deep insight mainly because he was endowed with the unique capability of depicting such struggles realistically. That's why on one hand he can write stories like "Biddhu Uncle", "Bhaya" which are based on urban life, on the other side he can also write with equal authenticity the stories like "Brahman", "Kapila", "Nabalig" which are based on the rural regions of Kumaun. (my trans.)

Many of Matiyani's stories are based on the lives of dalits in which mainly three types of characters can be seen: the first type is of those characters who seem to have surrendered before the atrocities of mainstream society, the second type is of those who are filled with indignation on account of the inhuman treatment meted out to them but ultimately, they too have to suppress their resentment and have to reconcile themselves with their fate. Finally, there are the third type of characters who challenge head on the unjust social system. To this category belongs the story 'Ahimsa' where the protagonist Jageshwar, a dalit, is a victim of the callous government system in which his wife dies due to the apathetic attitude of the doctors and other employees of the hospital which causes so much resentment in Jageshwar's heart that he murders the doctor who failed to save his wife's life. Similarly, in another story "Juloos" the dalits have been depicted as victims of the callous Indian Political System in which the worst sufferer is the widowed mother of a dalit character Budha Ram. Another story "Hara Hua" realistically portrays the prejudices of non – dalits towards the dalits in Hindu society.

Another novel *Gopuli Gafuran* is about an extremely beautiful woman whose husband

Ratan Singh works in army and has not returned home for many years. This story revolves around the sexual and social exploitation of Gopuli by the non – dalits such as Bheem Singh, Vikram Singh and others. Compelled by circumstances and poverty, Gopuli helplessly chooses to marry a Muslim man, who renames her as ‘Gafuran’. However, she has to leave her village just to save herself from the cruel eyes of her relatives. Despite all her efforts Gopuli (Gafuran) fails to establish her identity either as a Hindu or as a Muslim.

The exploitation and oppression of poor people is the main theme of these novels and the condition of marginalized people is similar in every novel, although their names are different but their struggle in life is the same. They suffered neglect and humiliation for being weak and helpless. The exploitation of poor people and the atrocities to hide their crime has been shown in the works of Matiyani.

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