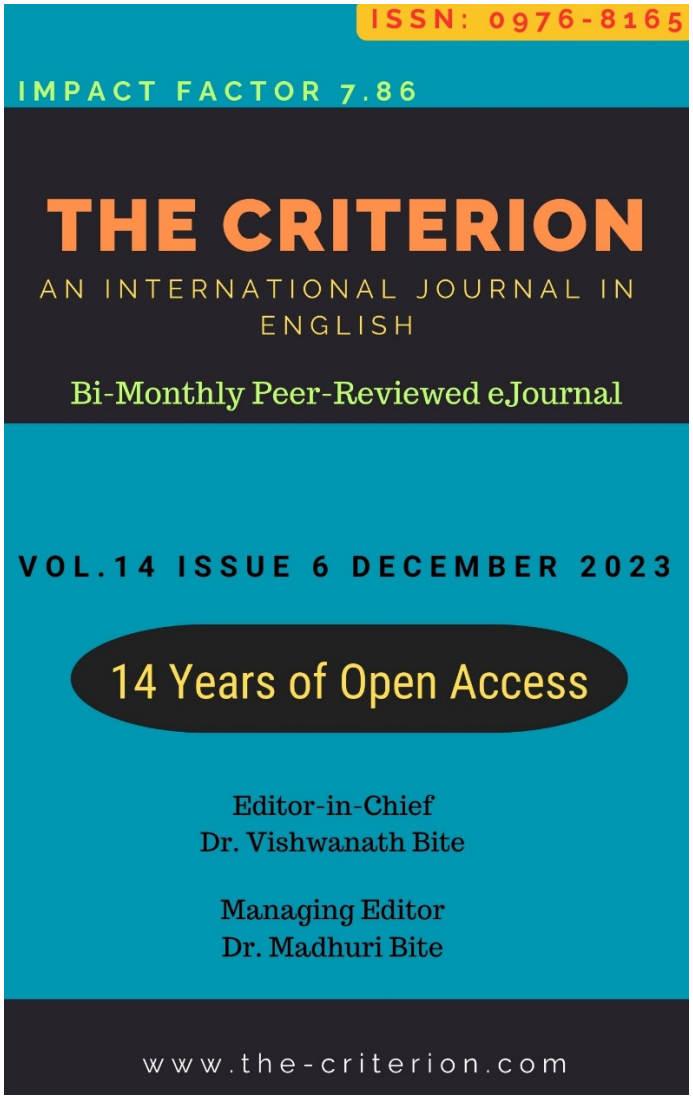

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Ratan Kumar Sambharia's *Thunderstorm: Dalit Stories*: The Changing Representation of Dalits in Dalit Fiction

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Abstract:

The village occupies a crucial space in the plot setting in Dalit narratives. It is fraught with poverty, caste-based discrimination and communal polarisation. Ratan Kumar Sambharia sets his stories in villages to highlight the disintegration and the fissures and fractures in rural Indian society. In the twenty-first century, Dalit literature is evolving in terms of the portrayal of Dalit characters and narrative structure. Dalit writers are using innovative plots, strategic narrative tools and experimental narration to etch the lived experiences of Dalits. Ratan Kumar Sambharia's short story collection *Thunderstorm: Dalit Stories* uses interior monologue, fresh imagery, language inflexions, local dialect, poetic justice, and open endings as narrative tools to highlight the plight of millions of Dalits in contemporary times. However, what separates Sambharia from other Dalit writers is the emphasis he gives to love over hate and hope over disdain in his fiction.

Keywords: Dalit fiction, rural, anonymity of city, social mobility, marginalised, role reversal.

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world of smart cities, villages that form an integral part of the Indian subcontinent and by extension the concerns of those who reside in them have taken a backseat in debates and discourses. Primarily since the liberalisation-induced rapid urbanisation of the 1990s, the village as a subject in mainstream Indian English literature has relegated to the margins. However, in the twenty-first century, according to the Economic Survey of India (2021 data), 65% of the Indian population still resides in rural areas. However, this fact does not help to establish the rural narrative in the mainstream discourse. Amidst the glitz and glamour of modernization, the Indian village becomes a microcosm for understanding the problems that plague Indian society at large. The relevance of the village as a central setting

cannot be undermined in the face of growing capitalism, globalisation and transnationalism. The village becomes an epicentre of concern for Dalits and thereby of Dalit literature, when most Dalits reside in rural areas. Ratan Kumar Sambharia takes cognizance of this fact by creating a world that he was intimately familiar with; born as he was in Bharawas village in the Rewari district of Haryana and lived and worked in Rajasthan for 35 years. All of Sambharia's short stories in the collection *Thunderstorm: Dalit Stories* are set in rural north India, save one.

Conventionally, villages in the works of mainstream anglophone Indian writers are romanticised as places of idyllic bliss, a place of serenity far from the hustle of the city. In the works of realist writers like Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand, even if the rural was not the ideal, it lacked the perspective of a Dalit's lived experience. Paul Cloke writes:

> The rural stands, both as a significant imaginative space, connected with all kinds of cultural meanings ranging from the idyllic to the oppressive and as a material object of lifestyle desire for some people- a place to move to, farm in, visit for a vacation, encounter different forms of nature and generally practice alternatives to the city. (Cloke 18)

In varying degrees of representation, the rural as a setting is deployed to connote purely aesthetic, geographical, social, economic or existential meaning. The village/country as the subject in the mainstream literary narrative is outside space, lying on the fringes, spatially vis-a-vis the city. Just like a scenic landscape in a beautiful painting, the Indian village as a geographical space is relegated to the secondary position of acting as a backdrop to the main plot. The village occupies a place in the distant memory of the protagonist as a place of humble beginnings, a place of remote affiliation to the present self. The countryside, at best, is seen as a binary of the city, as a physical expression of what is not modern. It is seen as a place that will eventually modernise, resulting from the outcome of the green revolution or through rapid urbanization. This agro-based development or urbanization would assimilate the village as a geographical entity in the domain of the urban space. Such a homogeneous understanding does not do justice to the equally relevant idea of the rural as a social space.

To ignore the provincial is to undermine the aspirations, problems and concerns of countless subalterns. To deny space to the rural is to deny agency to the marginalised sections of the society to tell their stories, an alternative perspective from below. Dalit literature does not represent an idealised and romanticised view of the villages. For the Dalit residing in a village, the rural is a territory marred by caste-based inequality and violence and a deep-rooted patriarchal structure. Joel Cabalion and Delphine Thivet write that in Rural Studies "the rural

as a site as well as an object/category of study in itself is dynamic and may in fact, capture very well the complex realities of Indian society over time and space" (Joel and Thivet 1). The village is the focal point in Dalit literature and is crucial for understanding the social, economic and political underpinnings that shape our contemporary society. It is a magnifying glass through which the harsh lived reality of the Dalit characters is revealed. The integrated nexus of caste, class and gender in Dalit literature maps the challenges, progression, evolution and trajectory of Indian society.

Casteism in Country

Smith sharply observes that "a geographical space abstracted from societies are philosophical amputee… we do not live act and work in space so much as by living acting and working we produce space" (qtd. in Halfacree 45). In Dalit literature, the village occupies a performative space and is not merely a geographical locale. For Dalits, the village is a site of abject poverty. Their primary concerns are related to livestock, land and caste issues. Born and brought up in rural Haryana, Sambharia draws from his personal experiences to paint images of provincial life that are universal in their appeal because they represent the condition of millions of Dalits living in villages of India. Not much seems to have changed in Indian villages, even in the twenty-first century. In the village, Rameshwar spat in the water pitcher of Phulwa, Dalpat had to deal with old Dan Singh, who tried to bribe the SHO, Pania, a poor Dalit father, was offered a monetary compromise after his daughter was raped by the landlord Jasveer's son, poor Mangla was hounded by Lambardar's goons, Minkhu and Malli had to brave famine for four years and lose their bull Surdas, the corrupt inspector tries to pin a murder on innocent Daryav, a Dalit. The village is a place where discrimination, injustice, oppression and humiliation are routinely practiced against Dalits.

Language and Narrative devices

Rawness and rusticity are the hallmarks of conventional Dalit literature that represents the concerns of Dalits residing in rural areas. Sambharia's stories are replete with rural inflexions and local dialects that provide authenticity to the narratives. The economy of language is his strongest suit. Sambharia's subtlety speaks volumes about his literary prowess. Words like *churma, gakda, surma, chaubara, tasla, khat-pidhi, bes* which are routinely used in villages are frequently used in the stories to give a rich flavour of rural north India. The conscious decision to use local words as substitutes for elaborate descriptive passages provides credibility to the lived experiences of a Dalit writer that are reflected in his fiction. When

Phulwa shows her mixture grinder to Rameshwar, she says "Even churma becomes as finely powdered as surma in this" (Sambharia 6). The comparison of *churma*, a sweet dish commonly prepared in rural households, with *surma* (kohl) connects with the reader familiar with rural India. The tactile and olfactory quality of the imagery not only adds to the rusticity of the story but also stimulates and satiates the literary sensibilities of the reader. Even the similes used by the author represent the world that he is immediately familiar with. In another instance, when Rameshwar is left in awe of the cooking stove at Phulwa's house, his "mouth was agape, like the opening of a weaver bird's nest" (6). Another metaphor used by the author is that of the earthen pot, a familiar everyday object in rural households. Looking at the water supply tap in Phulwa's kitchen, both Rameshwar and Phulwa are taken down memory lane to the incident that occurred in the village. The flashback concerns the incident when Rameshwar spat in Phulwa's pitcher when she pleaded to take water from the well meant for the upper castes. Both Rameshwar and Phulwa vividly recall the incident, and "it was as if two hands had simultaneously gone into Time's earthen pot" (7). However, tables have turned now. Rameshwar is still drawing water from the village well whereas Phulwa has a round-the-clock water supply. All the material prosperity and comfort of Phulwa's family had been possible because of the modernisation and rapid urbanisation of India.

The Potential of City

Jodhka highlights that "the fragmentation of the village is not necessarily negative per se nor antithetical to the process of democratisation at the local level. For instance, the distancing of local Dalits from their traditional agrarian economy has helped to a certain extent to weaken the traditional hierarchical structures and to allow the raising of new claims over resources that were commonly in control of upper dominant caste groups in the village" (qtd. in Cabalion and Thivet 3). In Dalit literature, the meanings of rurality are deconstructed and negotiated. Sambharia uses the city to reflect on the possibilities and aspirations that open up for Dalits in urban India. Urban India becomes an escape from the repeated onslaught of caste-based violence, subjugation and discrimination meted out on Dalits.

The relative anonymity of the city provides relief to Dalits as they are away from the village which serves as the stronghold of casteism. The preferential treatment and reverence that is bestowed on the upper caste zamindar like Rameshwar in the village is not displayed in the city. Rameshwar becomes insignificant in the city as the narrator points out that "back home, Rameshwar had been someone of consequence. He could have set fire to dry grass with a single exhalation of his breath. But after coming to the city, he had become anonymous, a

nobody" (Sambharia 2). While trying to locate Pandit Mataprasad's house, Rameshwar finds it difficult to digest the fact that no one in the city knew of Panditji's existence. He is appalled and perplexed that while no one knew about Panditji's existence, everyone knew where low caste Phulwa's son Radhamohan resided.

The emancipatory potential of the city is best reflected in the short story "Phulwa." The heterogeneity of the city space makes it possible for the upward social mobility of the Dalit family. The promises that city life offers can be best summed up in the words of Phulwa when she explains to Rameshwar that "our village has thirty-six castes. In the city… there are only two castes-the rich and the poor" (Sambharia 11). The city gives a chance to Dalits to escape the onslaught of casteism. It provides a level playing field for the ones willing to work hard, unlike the village that becomes a site of oppression and debt trap for Phulwa's family. In the village, Phulwa's husband had died trying to tame Zamindar's bullock and she had "inherited her husband's legacy of serfdom and debt, just as moneylenders inherit the business from their forefathers and landowners inherit the land" (4). In the city, the hard work of Dalits reaps fruit as Phulwa now possesses a marble-floored mansion which is well furnished with a cane table and chairs on the veranda, an ostentatious dining table, granite centre table, and a fridge that is loaded with fruits. The luxurious lifestyle that Phulwa is able to maintain becomes possible in the city where caste rules do not curtail Dalit people from fully utilising their potential and realising their dreams.

However, Rameshwar, the village landlord cannot shed his caste-based prejudice and hatred for Phulwa as "pride in his superior caste overwhelmed him and he began to burn with envy" (Sambharia 4). Rameshwar could not fathom that someone who had tended to his cattle in the village could rise in the social station above him. The throbbing pain that Rameshwar feels when Phulwa proudly displays her dining table feels like "someone had jabbed him with a needle. At home, they simply spread a chatai on the floor for guests" (5). Rameshwar was burning with rage at Phulwa's fortune and "wanted to scratch her eyes out" (7). Finally envy got the better of him and he intentionally "stubbed the bidi out on the carpet" (7). The incident reveals the casteist nature of Indian society that cannot digest that Dalits can rise if granted equal opportunities.

In the city, role reversal in the social positions of the upper and lower castes takes place. Traditionally, in the village, the lower caste people with humbled faces beg and try to please the upper caste, who hold power over various resources and institutions. Rameshwar is enraged and feels that he "would rather drown in his own spit" (Sambharia 12) than seek help from Phulwa's son to get a job recommendation for his son. The status quo of upper caste supremacy

and lower caste supposed inferiority is disturbed in the city. Further, the proximity and bond that Phulwa, a low caste and Pandit Mataprasad's widow Parti share deeply disturbs Rameshwar.

However, cities are not egalitarian isolated islands sans any form of discrimination. Caste operates subtly in the urban areas, as is seen when Dalit characters get shamed whenever they try to "overstep" the caste boundaries marked for them. When Rameshwar cannot take the improved social position of Phulwa anymore, he blurts out in front of Parti: "Even if Phulwa turns into gold, her caste will remain the same. I did not even drink water at her place. I would rather die than betray my principles" (Sambharia 17). Rameshwar is unable to shake off his casteist mentality. Thus, the city is not an ideal location which is free from discrimination. Caste plays out in subtle ways in the city.

Changing Voice of Dalit Protagonist

One of the innovative narrative strategies deployed by Sambharia is the use of interior monologue by his Dalit characters. The inner monologues are used like "asides" in theatre and represent the true feelings of any character, something that is known to the audience apart from the speaker. The primary goal of these monologues is to reflect the suppressed angst, inner turmoil and unexpressed feelings of the Dalit protagonist. It is pertinent to point out that when the story was published in 2003 and to date, Dalits cannot dare to talk back to the upper caste without repercussions. Therefore, what the Dalit characters cannot say openly to the upper caste is said via interior monologues. Sambharia gives agency to the Dalit protagonists and they serve as "agents of change and sentinels of human dignity in their struggle for equality" (Bhasin, *Thunderstorm* xi). Unlike in mainstream Indian literature, Sambharia's Dalit characters do not seek sympathy from the upper castes. On Sambharia's characterisation of Dalits, Mridul Bhasin writes that they "do not seek alms, cringe or cry. It is rather their bravery and fortitude that defines them" (239). They persevere in the face of odds, be it famine, destituteness or systemic oppression. For them, their dignity is more important than anything else.

The times and circumstances for Dalits have changed. They do not face discrimination at the same levels and of the same intensity that they faced in the past. However, their condition has not improved to a desirable level where they are treated equally as fellow human beings by the upper castes. They cannot openly and outrightly defy the upper caste people, especially in the villages where markers of the caste system are more prominent and clearly defined.

Therefore, in keeping with his gritty realism, Sambharia uses interior monologue as a narrative tool to depict the innermost turmoil being experienced by the Dalit characters when they are oppressed. Circumstances force them to remain mute and subservient. They fear inviting the wrath of the upper caste protagonist if they speak their mind. The titular story "Thunderstorm" is peppered with interior monologues. When the upper caste landlord Parmesh Singh and his son Bakhtawar barge into the house of the Dalit couple Daryav and his wife Sheron late at night, Daryav is still trying to come to terms with his loss, i.e., the demise of his father. He assumes that someone has come to offer condolences, but the upper caste father-son duo is least bothered about Daryav's loss. They are planning to make Daryav a scapegoat for the murder committed by Bakhtawar. Sheron, being a Dalit woman, is doubly marginalised owing to her caste and gender. The narrator uses interior monologue to express her pent-up feelings:

> anger welled up within her. To hell with social niceties, she fumed inwardly. What do these people think? That we are sheep?... They might be landowners in their own homes, but we, too, earn our living honestly by the sweat of our brow. Are they no better than beasts that they don't even bother to express their condolences over my father-in-law's recent death? (Sambharia 111)

The best Sheron can do is express her anger inwardly. She cannot dare talk back to her master in real life without facing dire consequences. Thus, the repressed feelings of pain, agony and angst of Dalit characters come forth only in the innermost recesses of their mind, never on their lips.

Masquerading Caste

The short story titled "Bes" lays open the sham of the caste system. The ease with which the Dalit protagonist masquerades and passes off as an upper-caste Rajput woman, throws light on the hollowness of the supposed superiority or inferiority of the different castes of Indian society. The story concerns the events of the fateful night when Agani, a young tribal woman is able to protect her honour from the evil intentions of two tribal men, Harji and Marji. What comes to her rescue is not a man's valour or kindness but her grit and determination. She dresses up in the attire that is worn by the upper caste Rajput women and it acts as a shield for her because the tribal men do not dare to molest an upper caste woman. They are well aware of the consequences that they will have to face for daring to lay their eyes on a Rajput woman. Harji warns Marji, "She is some Rajput's wife. Look at her clothes- the lehenga, the kurti kanchali and the chundri. You are heading for death yourself and you're bent on taking me

along as well!" (Sambharia 229) In fact, Harji and Marji who had a while ago tried to assault Agani physically become her protectors and land a series of blows on the truck cleaner who had tried to molest her. The narrator writes: "In deference to what they assumed to be Agani's high caste, Harji and Marji were respect personified. They covered her protectively with the blanket so as to ensure that not even her toes were visible" (231). After discovering her true identity, both Harji and Margi "marvelled at the magical act she had performed" (237). Though Agani's honour was saved, the reader is left wondering what might have befallen her had her tribal status been discovered sooner by the men who tried to molest her.

Poetic Justice

Commenting on Sambharia's collection, Mridul Bhasin expresses that "his stories negate the tradition of exploitation and initiate courageous and brave beginnings" (Bhasin, *Thunderstorm* 239). All stories in the collection are indeed marred by tragedy, which is a de facto reality of a Dalit's life in our contemporary society. Sambharia originally wrote the stories in the early twenty-first century when Dalits faced discrimination much more rampantly than they do now. For a Dalit to openly defy or outrightly call out an upper caste was much more unthinkable then than it is now. Therefore, Sambharia's revolt is limited to poetic justice that he accords to his characters in the absence of legal justice. The endings of the stories may seem contrived at times, but it is done intentionally by the author. In his quest for an ideal and more equitable world, Sambharia gives utopian endings to stories like "Terms and Conditions", "Thunderstorm" and "The Buffalo." Jasveer's son rapes Panaram's daughter. In the absence of justice, Panaram had discarded food and water. He feels that "law courts and cases are like festering wounds for the poor" (Sambharia 62). Therefore, he does not even try to take a legal course of action. He realises how the upper caste controls power at all levels of society. Jasveer's disregard for Panaram's family is apparent when he offers money and is prepared to grant some land to Pania to let the case against his son slide. He tries to do everything in his power to persuade Panaram not to lodge a police complaint against his son. He fails to see that nothing can restore the honour of Panaram's daughter. He lacks empathy for Panaram and dismisses his son's criminal act by saying that "the boy's a mere child… such mistakes are but inevitable" (Sambharia 60) and that it was just an unlucky day. He is unperturbed by the pain his son's actions have caused Panaram's family but is deeply worried about the dishonour the case will bring to his reputation. The extremity of Jasveer's heartlessness and inhumanity is revealed when Pania expresses his family's intention to commit suicide in the face of their trying circumstances. What concerns Jasveer is that he "will have to bear responsibility both

for rape and the murder of an entire Harijan family" (Sambharia 63) and that it would "tarnish *his* unblemished image beyond redemption" (63). Ironically, Jasveer does not seek to redeem himself or his son for the sins they commit on the people belonging to the Dalit community.

The story is aptly titled "Terms and Conditions." The ending is an eye-opener for the upper caste landlord Jasveer Singh and the reader. When offered a compromise by Jasveer, Pania lays bare his terms and conditions to let go of the case of his daughter's rape. Pania dares to challenge the entire upper caste community when he declares "It is my honour that is at stake. What is deemed honorable for you should be deemed honorable for me as well. Here are my terms and conditions: I want your daughter to spend a night with my son" (Sambharia 64). The audacity of such a proposal may seem questionable and derogatory to the upper caste Jasveer and the reader, but it shows the double standards of society. Sambharia's spokesperson Pania does not wish to insult Jasveer's daughter. However, the terms offered by him were meant to enrage Jasveer and for once make him feel the pain and agony that he had been undergoing since the day his daughter was raped. He wants to make Jasveer realise not to try "to weigh a poor man's dignity, and his meagre resources on the same scale" (62). However, Jasveer is mortified after hearing such daring words from a low caste's mouth, and he shoots him. Soon, after killing Pania, Jasveer has a heart attack and he too dies. Pania becomes a martyr as he avenges his daughter by daring to stand up against an upper-caste person. Thus, Dalit characters are granted dignity in death that they were denied in life by the author. For Pania, a Dalit, it was not possible to directly confront and seek revenge from the upper caste Jasveer or to hope for justice from the legal system owing to the prevalence of systemic corruption. Sambharia serves poetic justice when Pania becomes instrumental in Jasveer's death. He stands against his oppressor and brings down the caste system that grants immunity to the upper castes for their misdemeanour and inhumanity and strictly penalises the lower castes for the slightest encroachments.

Similarly, in the story "The Buffalo," the Lambardar and his henchmen try to take Mangla's buffalo, whom he had raised lovingly. Justice becomes inaccessible for Mangla, as Dalit orphan. Various power structures of society connive together to maintain the hegemony of the upper caste. The Lambardar comes with his goons to intimidate Mangla. The disregard for the rule of law and justice stems from the impunity available to Lambardar because his son is a police officer. Mangla and the buffalo dotted on each other. The animal goes berserk on seeing his master "hanging like Christ on the cross" (Sambharia 82). Justice is delivered using the animal. The buffalo lifts Lambardar with its horns and tosses him over the boundary wall.

Thus, Sambharia uses the animal to deliver justice. In real life, the poor Dalit people are helpless in the face of oppression that they face from the powerful upper caste communities.

A Beacon of Hope

One of the essential features of Sambharia's stories is their hopefulness. Mridul Bhasin, the translator of the collection, writes that "although the universality of human experience that emerges through the narratives is underscored by justifiable anger and carries tragic overtones, they resonate, ultimately, with hope" (Bhasin x). Inherently the lived experiences of Dalits are marred by tragedy which in turn is reflected in the creative expression of the Dalit writers. However, Sambharia does not restrict the scope of his narrative by painting a picture of pain. The protagonists in his stories transgress their painful past and look towards a hopeful future that reflects the principles of democracy and equality. Phulwa's upward social mobility with all the ostentatious material prosperity, the justice that is brought to Dalpat by the legal system, the poetic justice served by the deaths of the landlord Jasveer and the Lambardar, the protection of Suti and Agani's honour offer a beacon of hope to the Dalits fighting for equality and dignity. All stories give a message of the hopeful future of the Dalit community. In the bleakest stories, there is a glimmer of love, hope, faith and dignity for the Dalits.

Love over Lathi

Sambharia's story "Lathi" gives a strong message of preference for "love over *lathi*". Suraj Yengde, in his book *Caste Matters*, writes:

> The primacy of Dalitness emerges in its innate capacity to cultivate self-love in the bareness of apathy and tragedy. The audacity to hope while locked in darkness testifies to the existence of Dalit love… By loving the Other and embracing the ignorant for his lack of empathy, the Dalit community has shown how to deep-love and efface the malice that hides beneath. (Yengde 45-46)

For Yengde, the power to forgive the 'Other' is an essential element of Dalit love. Sambharia propagates the message of Dalit love in his story "Lathi". The story carries Sambharia's message of communal harmony and love. It reveals the apprehensions that people practicing different religions have about each other. These are further fuelled by politicians with vested interests. The story deals with the paranoid Muslim couple Chand Mohammad Mirasi and his wife, Salma, who fear for their life from their Hindu neighbour Harman Lal. The story depicts how disharmony created among different religious communities can impact a peaceful society. The Muslim couple gets worked up and starts overthinking that their

neighbour Harman Chacha is bent on killing them with his Lathi. Salma gets hysterical and delusional and cries inconsolably, forgetting all the daughterly affection that Harman had showered on her when she came as a newlywed bride. Fear overtakes Chand's mind as he forgets that it was Harman Chacha who had saved his grandfather and father during the communal riots of 1947. In an attempt to defend his family from the purported attack by Harman Lal, Chand becomes neurotic and clutches a wooden plank so tightly that blood starts flowing from his hand. It turns out that Harman was tapping the lathi to poke the snake to come out from the hole in the common boundary wall of their houses. Chand's eyes become moist, seeing the care and concern displayed by Harman Chacha when he reveals that "I decided not to wake you up, as you had come back tired from a hard day's work" (Sambharia 191). Thus, Sambharia advocates for a more equitable society. For it to materialise he advocates for refrain from violence.

Conclusion

Thus, Ratan Kumar Sambharia's innovative narratives have heralded a new wave in the progression of Dalit literature. His stories surpass the inherent tragedy reflected in conventional Dalit literature by deploying strategic narrative tools innovatively but without undermining the primary purpose of Dalit literature. Surely but steadily, Dalit literature is progressing where it is not constrained and limited by the often-repeated journalistic accounts of oppression and discrimination. Sambharia's fiction provides impetus to the changing Dalit narrative in contemporary times. His strong defiant Dalit characters do not seek upper caste validation but dare to defy discriminatory norms defined by them.

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