

The Aesthetics of Consciousness in Akhila Naik's *Bheda*

Dr. Pragati Jasrotia

Assistant Professor in English,
Centre for Distance and Online Education,
University of Jammu.
pragatijasrotia@gmail.com

Abstract:

Dalits, as subalterns, have historically been subjected to oppression by society or the savarnas. Dalits have always occupied a peripheral position in Indian society. Their experiences of oppression and discrimination have shaped both the social realities they navigate and the literary and cultural expressions through which they articulate these experiences. B.R. Ambedkar highlighted the structural and systemic nature of caste oppression, arguing that true emancipation requires political, social, and economic restructuring, alongside the assertion of self-respect and identity. While Mahatma Gandhi referred to Dalits as 'Harijans' to emphasise their dignity and call for social inclusion, his approach largely focused on moral reform and the benevolence of society. In contrast, Akhila Naik's *Bheda* portrays the inner world of a marginalised individual, showing how social hierarchies and exclusion shape consciousness and identity at a personal level. Against this ideological backdrop, Akhila Naik's *Bheda* offers a powerful representation of Dalit consciousness by portraying the inner world of a marginalised subject whose identity is shaped by caste violence, social exclusion, and political awakening. Drawing on Sharan kumar Limbale's ideas of socially-informed consciousness and the aesthetic value of experience through his work *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, this paper examines how *Bheda* transforms muted endurance and reflective interiority into a distinct literary aesthetic and What considerations should be kept in mind to interpret Dalit literature. As Limbale writes, "The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus.... Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness" (32). The study also considers the interpretive frameworks necessary to understand Dalit literature as both an artistic and socio-political expression.

Keywords: Dalits, Subalterns, Consciousness, Aesthetic.

Article History: Submitted-31/01/2026, Revised-19/02/2026, Accepted-21/02/2026, Published-28/02/2026.

Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Casteism is considered not just social but political and economic issue. Akhila Naik in *Bheda* has shown various dimensions to get awareness of the caste system deeply rooted in our society. *Bheda* was published in *Paschima* in 2008 in Odia language. *Bheda* is also the first Dalit novel in the Odia language. Later it was translated and published in English in 2017 by Raj Kumar, Professor, Department of English, University Of Delhi. As Prof. Raj Kumar writes in his introduction to the English version of *Bheda* that, “Akhila Naik’s *Bheda* is the first and only novel in the Odia which addresses the discourse of power in the public space. Here, for the first time, the subjects themselves--the Odia Dalits--have their own tales to tell in a realistic mode” (xiii-xiv). The concept of this type of aesthetic is given by Sharan Kumar Limbale in his path-breaking work *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, translated from the Marathi to English by Alok Mukherjee. Here Limbale concept of Aesthetics is used as framework. Limbale observes that, “It is a literature that is intended to make readers restless or angry. How can the aestheticism in discussions of beauty be reconciled with the ‘Dalit Consciousness’ in Dalit literature? This revolutionary consciousness is based on ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity, rather than pleasure. This is why it is important for Dalit critics to change the imaginary of beauty” (115).

Bheda means ‘difference’ that was present between the communities of different social strata in the background there is intersectionality of caste, gender, race, and class. The novel is set in the remote area of Kalahandi District of Odisha. The paper tends to present the caste atrocities on Doms (Dalits) by the upper-caste. As Akhila Naik explains in the Author’s note,

The place where upper class people lived was called Bhalpada (good *pada*). People of Bhalpada were called *Bhallok* (good people), and those of Dompada, *Domlok*. While the people of Bhalpada, the ‘good’ people, spoke *Bhalkatha* (good language), the people of

Dompada spoke in *Dom* language. In one sense, the meaning of the term Dom was ‘bad.’ But we were not at all ‘bad’ people. Why did people hate us, why didn’t they touch us, why were these restrictions for us to use the common wells and ponds. (ix)

The protagonist of *Bheda*, Laltu ((Lalatendu), belongs to the Dalit community who is portrayed as an agnostic. He reflects Ambedkarite ideology in the novel. As Limbale observes, “All Dalit writers are inspired by revolutionary Ambedkarite thought, and articulate life-affirming values in all their literary creations” (117). Laltu was aware of the atrocities by upper-class unlike his parents, Dinamastre and Mastrani. Laltu’s father is the only educated in their village and works as local school teacher. The relationship of Laltu and Dinamastre represents generational gap where his father was aware of the repercussions of resisting upper-class but Laltu is rebellious. Laltu shares a closer bond with his mother Mastrani as she supports him in his activism.

Mastrani like other women in her community does not have to work outside. She is a devoted woman who prioritizes her family before everything. People from her community respect her. “Even though she takes pride in Dalit culture she imitates upper-caste lifestyles by observing religious fasts and visiting Hindu temples.... Mastrani, by imitating..., thinks she will be accepted as one among them. But that she was mistaken she discovers later. Unlike Mastrani, Laltu is an agnostic. He criticizes his mother when she drags him to a temple” (*Introduction* xxxviii-xxxix). Laltu, strongly believes that education alone was not enough to free or uplift the lower castes. Dinamastre wants to raise his son in peace and with education. But Laltu felt that direct and active participation in politics is necessary to achieve real emancipation—social, political, and economic equality.

In one incident Dinamastre was humiliated by local sub inspector Panda Sir who suddenly entered the school and accused Dinamastre of robbery and theft of food meant of children. He also questioned the students about Dinamastre's surname, and when they were unable to answer, Panda Sir scolded him, " 'Students are unable to tell me you're your name. what kind of teaching are you imparting, O Mastre?' Dimanastre wanted to say something but could not. His ears began to burn. His head reeled. His face darkened. His eyes filled with tears" (3). Panda conspires with the antagonist from upper-class, Baya Advocate and his evil companion Semi Seth. They all humiliate Dinamastre because of Laltu's activism. Laltu, refusing to submit to upper-caste atrocities, had already become independent in thought and action. "Dinamstre was angry with Laltu but his son was no longer in his control" (9).

Laltu was conscious of the atrocities faced by members of his community, who are treated like animals. They are not even allowed to touch wells or enter the temples. As Limbale observes, "The literature of the exploited is primarily concerned with the search for freedom, and giving expression to it" (119). As a trailblazer, Laltu wants to change the mentality of his people which makes him rebel in everybody's eyes. He gathers local youth of his area and guards the interest of Dalits. They guard the local forest which the corrupt businessman tries to steal truckloads of wood.

Baya, known as "Baya the Mad Lawyer", is a pivotal character whose uncompromising pride and temperament shape both his personal life and the social dynamics of his village. Once a lawyer, Baya returned home after losing his practice, refusing to accept defeat, and devoted himself to overseeing his farm while immersing in reading and intellectual pursuits. His extreme temperament—marked by violent outbursts, rigid principles, and stubbornness—affects everyone

around him, from his family to the villagers. Baya's engagement with the shakha, a local cultural and religious gathering, reflects his desire to assert social and religious authority, showing how individual character can influence broader community life.

Bheda reveals a caste-based society where the idea of justice does not exist. As the introduction notes, "As we have seen Naik exposes the double-standards of Indian caste-based society....he has exposed the roles of various agencies of the Indian nation states....By doing so, he as a Dalit writer, urges his readers to at least reflect on them. This is what Dalit Aesthetics is all about"(x1). Here the concept of aesthetics means how resistance can also be aesthetics. Here, the concept of aesthetics does not refer to conventional beauty; rather, it signifies resistance and consciousness.

The atrocities committed by the upper-class illustrate the intersections of caste and violence. In chapter four where Muna, the tailor from the Dom community was badly thrashed by the people of upper-class. The upper-class people were angered when two girls from Muna's *pada* went to the temple. When they questioned this restriction, they were told by Shankar Gauntia, the village headman, that entry to the temple was banned for Doms. In retaliation, they burned Muna's shop, targeting him as well as the girls and their brothers, who had requested Shankar to allow them into the temple. Shankar also abused the girls with sexual slurs when they asked which *shastras* prohibited their entry. The girls' brother then punched Shankar. This incident occurred alongside the rice mill strike led by Laltu, which further infuriated the upper-class mob, leading them to attack Muna and set his shop on fire. The burning of Muna's shop is not an isolated act of cruelty but a warning against collective assertion. Muna later recounts his ordeal to Laltu,

The mob came and threatened me saying, “Is this your father’s property that you have set up a cabin here, you mother-fucker Dom? Get out, you motherfucker ... beat this mother... saala cut this sisterfucker into pieces....” Yelling, they dragged me out from the shop ... beat me black and blue with their fists, kicks, and sticks..! Muna choked. They would have slaughtered me Laltuda ... to save my life I ran towards our pada ...Muna began bawling, “They set fire to my shop..!” ...In the meantime many people from his pada had gathered in the verandah. There was pain, anger, and tear on every face. Laltu wiped his tears (66).

In *Bheda*, Akhila Naik critically examines how upper-caste economic power reveals its bullying nature when confronted by collective Dalit resistance. Through the character of Semi Seth, the novel exposes the hypocrisy of feudal generosity. Although Semi Seth repeatedly recalls his past compassion toward workers, he responds with rage when they demand legally sanctioned wages, accusing them of “shitting on the very leaf plates they eat off” (48). This reaction exposes his belief that labour should remain grateful and submissive, not assertive. Laltu, argue for the liberalization of the Hindu religion rather than cultural, socio-political, religious, and economic supremacy, through which caste Hindus such as Baya the Mad Lawyer and Semi Seth have taken control forests, schools, villages, and socio-political spaces.

The workers’ strike becomes a crucial moment of transformation from dependence to dignity. By rejecting bribery, the labourers convert an economic demand into a political assertion of rights. Semi Seth’s obsessive hostility toward Laltu which reveals deep upper-caste concern about Dalit leadership, especially when resistance takes the form of journalism and public critique. This anxiety is further reinforced through Semi Seth’s alliance with the communal

lawyer Baya, who mocks Ambedkar and the Constitution as illegitimate, exposing the ideological foundations of caste dominance. In contrast, Laltu's ethics highlight responsible journalism grounded in truth and responsibility. Together, these incidents demonstrate that upper-class hypocrisy in *Bheda* operates through authoritarianism and ideological distortion, while Dalit resistance emerges through action and ethical truth-telling. *Bheda* traces the formation of Laltu's political consciousness through a series of caste humiliations, moral choices, and confrontations with institutional power. Akhila Naik establishes the absolute social distance between Laltu, a Dom, and Baya, a Brahmin landlord-lawyer, stressing that any disagreement between them is structurally certain rather than personal. The detailed contrast between their families—land, education, wealth, and caste—discloses how hierarchy is standardised as destiny by the so-called Varna system.

Laltu's experience with Yuvaraj, the upper-caste boy marks his first direct encounter with caste violence. What begins as an innocent refusal to act as a messenger for vulgar desire intensifies into a collective assault on his family. This reveals that Dalit assertion is looked upon as an attack on upper-caste honour. The demand that Dinamastre pay for purification rituals and community feasts exposes how caste discipline is enforced economically as well as socially. Laltu's forced removal to Ashram School further demonstrates how caste fear covers-up as concern for safety. The institutional spaces meant for upliftment act as a place of punishment.

Laltu's transformation into a social activist is catalysed by his confrontation with corruption, particularly the incident in which he slaps the BDO for stealing pension money from an elderly widow. His imprisonment reveals the involvement of police, bureaucracy, and caste

society in suppressing rebellions which also includes his own father's internalized fear and withdrawal.

As president of the Jungle Suraksha Committee, Laltu's activism expands from individual protest to collective resistance. His refusal to release Baya's tractor loaded with illegally felled timber marks a decisive challenge to elite impunity. Unlike earlier figures who relied on fear, Laltu rejects compromise, insisting that justice requires confrontation: power must be named and resisted, even at personal cost. Through Laltu, Naik presents resistance not as heroism born overnight, but as a slow, painful process shaped by humiliation and injustice. Laltu embodies a structural threat to the capitalism represented by the upper-class.

In *Bheda*, Akhila Naik critiques upper-caste hypocrisy through the character of Santosh Panda, a newspaper reporter who claims to be a well-wisher of Laltu but fails him at a crucial moment. Ironically, it is the opportunistic journalist who turns Laltu into a public figure, exposing how media attention can both enable justice and distort motives. Laltu is falsely accused by upper-caste villagers of throwing a cow bone into the temple, sparking violence against the Dom community. Although Santosh initially listens to Laltu's explanation, he soon doubts him, revealing how easily upper-caste sympathy turns into suspicion. Laltu's rational questioning of religious imposition when he argues that "all gods and goddesses and the rituals relating to them are blind beliefs" (95)—exposes the fragility of Santosh's liberal self-image. While Santosh claims to be secular and progressive, he cannot tolerate a Dalit questioning Brahminical authority. This discomfort intensifies when Lalatendu asks a fundamental question of caste exclusion, "If we were Hindus, would there be prohibitions against Dom entry into temples?" (96). Rather than engaging with this logic, Santosh retreats into inherited caste beliefs,

silently reaffirming that “Brahmins... were superior in the caste hierarchy,” (97) a belief that contradicts his outward presentation of equality.

Santosh’s hypocrisy reaches its peak in his professional role as a journalist. Despite possessing factual information that contradicts the police version, he allows the newspaper *Hastakshep* to publish a false report stating, “A communal riot broke out after the bone of a cow was thrown into the Mahadev temple at Srirampur; fifteen people arrested including a reporter” (98). This act of distortion reveals how journalism, instead of speaking truth to power, becomes complicit in reinforcing caste hegemony. Santosh’s silence and compliance demonstrate that upper-caste hypocrisy often operates not through open hostility but through moral cowardice and institutional betrayal. The novel remains open-ended, leaving Laltu’s fate unresolved and highlighting the ongoing struggle against systemic oppression. Through Santosh Panda, Naik ultimately shows that the upper-class’s claim to liberalism is conditional; it survives only as long as the oppressed do not question religion, caste, or authority.

So, Literature or particularly Dalit literature has the power to question the moral and social concern prevalent in the prejudiced society. As Rajkumar in introduction of *Bheda* writes, “Thus, literature goes beyond being a historical record; it is an imaginative representation of human experience and, so long as it has the power to question our unthinking assumptions, it has contributed to the human cause. Dalit writers like Akhila Naik certainly belong to this school of thought (x1i). Akhila Naik demonstrates that aesthetics can emerge from struggle and social awareness, as seen through the experiences of Laltu and other characters. Limbale rightly notes, “That work of Dalit literature will be recognized as beautiful, and, therefore ‘good’, which causes the greatest awakening of Dalit consciousness in the reader” (117). This form of

aesthetics is rooted in life, social reality, and the lived experience of oppression. *Bheda* fulfils this criterion by compelling readers to confront the moral and social failures of a caste-ridden society. In doing so, it affirms Dalit literature as both an artistic practice and a revolutionary intervention.

Works Cited:

Fischer, Ernst. *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach*. Verso Books. 2010.

Kaushik, Martand. "In Conversation: The Uncharted Territories Covered by 'Bheda,' the First Dalit Odia Novel." *The Caravan*, 22 Sept. 2017, *The Caravan Magazine*, caravanmagazine.in/vantage/uncharted-territories-bheda-first-dalit-odia-novel.

Kumar, Vijay, and Binod Mishra. "Remapping Caste, Dalits, and Nature: Socio-Ecological Realism in *Bheda*." *Green Letters*, 15 Feb. 2024, doi:10.1080/14688417.2024.2307986.

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Blackswan, 2004.

Naik, Akhila. *Bheda*. Translated by Rajkumar, Oxford University Press, 2017.