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From Subjugation to Silence: Exploring Dalit Voices in Selected Indian Short Stories

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Abstract:

Dalit writers of the first generation primarily depicted sufferings at the hands of the upper castes in their writings, primarily evoking pity from the readers. However, the next generation of Dalit writers wrote in provocative style, demanding for equality and social justice. Writers like Namdeo Dhasal even used abusive language to express anger; thus, later writers used literature as a tool to fight social injustice. The present paper examines how Dalit writers portrayed the material and psychological struggles of Dalit across urban slums, rural areas, and the emerging middle class. These stories highlight various themes such as poverty, identity crisis, gender discrimination and the aspiration for equality and dignity. The present-day Dalit writers are bold enough to criticize fellow Dalits for their prudishness. Thus, the paper explores diverse perspectives within Dalit literature.

Keywords: Dalit writings, protest literature, subjugation, isolation.

The literature of the first-generation Dalit writers is filled with pity. Their writings are primarily autobiographical, presenting their sufferings as the hands of the upper casts. Most of the plots of their stories are not fictitious; they truly went through the horrible experiences which the caste system inflicted upon them. Later writers changed the tone of their writings, demanding equality and respect from society. The present paper deals with the short stories by Dalit writers, who narrate the physical and mental conditions of the Dalits living in urban slums, those living in villages, and those who have risen to the middle class through special facilities for their caste. The stories selected for the analysis are originally written in Indian

languages, which are later translated into English by various translators. The stories selected for the paper are: “Explosion” by Yogiraj Waghmare, “The Poisoned Bread” by Badhumadhav, “Dalit Brahmin” by Sharankumar Limbale, “Queen of Black” by Jasumati Parmar and “Raw Wound” by Gogu Shyamala.

On the surface, one could find the protagonists in the stories struggling for survival at different levels. They are shown facing poverty, misery, brutality, and limitation. The writers utilize the form of short story to narrate how the protagonists in the stories wish to live honourably, with respect, and on terms of equality. They are caught in identity crisis, as they realize that they are outcasts in their own land.

The present-day Dalit writers like Limbale are even critical about fellow Dalits who look down upon their own folk much as the Brahmins do, and seek to distance themselves from their caste identity. Yet, it is also this class which believes that it is their responsibility to emancipate the Dalit masses from the chains of caste. Thus, the paper presents various attitudes towards Dalit writings. The present research is based on “content analysis”, which is defined by Stone, Dunphy, Smith and Oglive (1996) as “any research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within texts”¹ (Neuendorf, 2002). Content analysis helps to relate ideological perspectives to the texts. With the help of content analysis one can identify the deeper socio-political implications in the text as pointed out by the author.

Yogiraj Waghmare’s short story “Explosion” shows how a Dalit family regresses even after taking education; it challenges the rhetoric that education brings prosperity to one’s family. Waghmare’s short story “Explosion” presents shattered dreams of a father – Sheku, who gave education to his son Shetiba against all odds. Shetiba passed his matriculation when no other from the Mahar community (an oppressed caste) in the village was sent to school. Sheku hoped that his son would get a job one day and there would be enough to eat and cover their bare bodies. Sheku believed in Dr. Ambedkar’s thoughts on education! He agreed to the thought that education leads one to success, to good jobs and prosperous life. But the family’s dreams devastated as Shetiba was unable to find even a small job after completing his matriculation three years ago. The family expected him to be a clerk, schoolteacher, Talathi, Gram Sevak or even a peon. Shetiba with a steady income from his salary would alter the fate of the family, Sheku had thought. Even Shetiba wanted to give education to his younger siblings. He wanted to see them on respectable posts such as a

doctor, a lawyer, a district collector, and a teacher. Why could not Shetiba get a job is a big question. It is implied in the story that the upper caste people holding higher positions purposefully did not select Shetiba for a post out of envy. They do not want to see a Dalit family financially well off. Because financial freedom would lead Dalits break the chains of casts and finally claim their freedom. The irony in the story is that Sheku wants his son to do the traditional work meant for the Dalits – to do the scavenging. Sheku is, thus, caught in a trap: being educated, he does not want to do the age-old jobs meant for his caste, while at the same time, he is denied jobs in the current socio-political climate. Thus, the story presents the brutal reality that no matter how hard a Mahar or an oppressed community tries to rise in the social ladder, the upper castes will make sure that he does not climb even a single step on the ladder. They would stick to the status quo for their benefit.

Waghmare, through the story, communicates a sombre message: the upliftment of Dalits remains a seemingly insurmountable challenge. The story serves as a mirror to society, reflecting the persistent barriers and systemic biases that continue to hinder the progression of marginalized communities. In the face of such grim realities, “Explosion” compels readers to contemplate the disheartening obstacles that lie ahead on the path to social equality and justice, prompting us to critically examine our own roles in perpetuating or dismantling these barriers. Gopal Guru in his article “Dalits from Margin to Margin” rightly points out:

Dalits accept their marginalisation, particularly in two situations. In the first situation they find themselves helpless, frustrated, having lost faith in their ability to comprehend and then confront the marginalisation. In fact, they are forced to defend the marginalised position itself.²

Within the narrative, the predicament of Sheku’s family is poignantly characterized by their pronounced sense of helplessness and palpable frustration, which ultimately compels them to revert to their former vocation. This narrative development signifies a crucial juncture in the story, encapsulating the intricate interplay between the characters’ emotional states and their socioeconomic choices, while also serving as a lens through which readers can engage with the story’s overarching themes and socio-cultural commentary.

Bindu Madhav’s short story “The Poisoned Bread” shows an awkward but suppressed Dalit consciousness and presents dissenting voices against upper caste domination and exploitation. It highlights how education has empowered a new generation of Dalits to reclaim their legitimate space in a caste-ridden society that continues to diminish them. The

story presents revolutionary spirit in Dalits. In the story the author presents two attitudes of the leads towards the prevailing caste system; one is of Mhadeva's grandfather's – Yetalya's – attitude and the other is of Mhadeva's. Yetalya who has accepted the caste system does not want to resist it. He believes the status quo and the narrative that the casts are created by God and the lower casts should serve the upper casts! He tolerates Bapu Patil's – the landlord's – injustices and humiliation but Mhadeva, his grandson who lives in a city and has taken education challenges Patil on the concepts of God and religion and shows his rebellious nature. The author seems to point out that the new generation of the downtrodden will fight for their rights; Dalit identity is not one of slavishness but of reclaiming their rights as human beings.

Yetalya is submissive as he knows that he is landless and depends on Patil for survival. The upper castes owned the means of production and distribution hence they could treat Dalits inhumanly. Patil scolds Yetalya, a much older man than him, for trivial reasons and even threaten him to beat him if he does not follow his orders. Another upper cast character Tuka Magdoom supports Bapu Patil's views on Dalits. He, too, advocates physical violence against Dalits when Mhadeva argues with Patil about their current situation in society. Patil takes recourse to religion and states that even religion supports the caste system. Patil and Magdoom are jealous to see that Dalits are getting educated and are becoming aware of their rights. They want to follow the age-old caste system in which the upper casts get all the benefits.

Mahadeva has a solution to break the chains of slavery. He convinces Yetalya that unless they free themselves from the land bondage and learn to live independently they will always be humiliated. Yetalya, while on death bed, towards the end of the story, agrees to his grandson m Mhadeva and says, "Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars."³ Thus, the story unfolds the attitudes of the upper casts and lower casts towards the caste system and highlights importance of education for the lists.

One could notice the two opposite views presented in "Explosion" and "The Poisoned Bread". In "Explosion" the protagonist surrenders to the caste system, where as in "The Explosion", the central character challenges the prevalent social structure. These stories are not fictitious; as such events truly took place in society. The stories are autobiographical in nature projecting suffering and oppression endured by the Dalit community. At the heart of

these literary endeavours lies a resolute determination to unveil the inhuman conduct of the upper castes toward the Dalits. These stories expose the exploitation, discrimination, and violence inflicted upon Dalits. In their pursuit of domination, the upper castes frequently resort to the manipulation of religious doctrines, employing these scriptures as instruments to perpetuate their power and justify the caste-based oppression.

This manipulation of religion as a means of subjugation finds resonance with Louis Althusser's ground-breaking work, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus* (1970). Althusser contends, "The Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic."⁴ Althusser points out how dominant class of society use ideology like religion to maintain control over the oppressed. They reinforce the prevailing ideology as natural and beneficial while concealing their coercive aspects.

Dalit writers are now bold enough to criticize the fellow Dalits for their hypocrisy. Sharankumar Limbale's brilliant short story "Dalit Brahmin"⁵ exposes this hypocrisy. It shows how Dalits ultimately become 'Brahmin', that is, how their fighting spirit die away, how they feel ashamed of being Dalit and how they long for social recognition from the upper castes. Once they get a job, they aspire to live a middle-class life distancing themselves from the Dalits who are still illiterate and have not 'progressed'. A Dalit who has taken all the benefits from the government to secure a job on the basis of his caste, later looks down upon other Dalits for their backwardness, their language and their way of life. It is ironical that he, too, was like them before he got a job! He wants to climb the social ladder and wants to be seen as a respectable, educated and cultured person. But he is never accepted by the upper castes; they just show off that they do not believe in caste-based discrimination, they have progressive mindset and accept everyone into their homes regardless of their castes. The newly educated class of Dalits bears the responsibility of emancipating Dalit masses from the chains of caste, but these nouveau Dalits shy away from their responsibilities, opines Limbale.

"Dalit Brahmin" emerges as a compelling literary work that invites readers to confront the problem of Dalit identity and the complex journey of self-discovery and societal assimilation. Limbale's story narrates contemporary situation of Dalit community; it presents the consequences of their aspirations for social acceptance. Through a critical lens, the story

offers profound insights into the internal dynamics of a community grappling with the consequences of societal transformation and the enduring weight of caste-based prejudice.

The Indian Dalit New Woman does not submissively tolerate the injustices, but she rebels to save her honour.

After the independence, due to the spread of education and women's movements, Dalit women too started writing either in vernacular languages or in English. Indian women writers such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai and Meena Alexander by now have earned fame internationally and have become canonical writers in Indian literature. However Dalit women writers after independence through their short stories wrote about themselves, the dual oppression they go under and the injustices done to them by the society. Jasumati Parmar's short story "Queen of Black" (2012) presents different layers of exploitations of Dalits.

Mani – the protagonist of the story – faces hardships due to her lower caste status and due to her looks too! She is unable to find work as a maid in flats and bungalows of high-caste people; she does not find a job as a domestic help either in such houses because of her looks. She is a Dalit, and she is black hence the narrator says, "What their guests will say seeing her clean the floor of their drawing room, they thought! They must have a maid worthy of their caste status, fair in complexion and socially acceptable."⁶ Mani is thus left for 'hard work and drudgery'; she is to wash dirty diapers and bleeding rags. She also picks up rags, sort them out and sell them to godown-man. Mani is subjugated not only by the upper castes but by her husband also. Jivan also does not have a fixed job; he spends his days in playing cards and drinking occasionally. At the end of the story, he asks his wife to 'entertain' his friend, implying that the friend will pay for it and thus they could take their children to the fair. Unable to comply the family's needs, unable to earn money from anywhere, Jivan asks his wife to sleep with his friend so that they can fulfil the needs.

Thus, "Queen of Black" shows subjugation and social isolation of Dalits in society; social integration of Dalits could not be possible. Dalit women are exploited by the upper castes and also by their family.

Similarly Gogu Shyamala's short story "Raw Wound" presents how religion is manipulated to exploit Dalits. When Balappa stands against the village for his daughter for making her a 'jogini', the upper castes use every tact to subdue Balappa; they attack him, take away his land and hut but Balappa resists till the end and is determined to send his daughter

to school opposing the devilish practice of jogini. In “Raw Wound,” Shyamala masterfully unravels the intricate web of religious manipulation and caste-based exploitation. Describing Shyamala’s works, K Lalita writes, “Shyamala’s stories seem to inaugurate a new genre of little stories that speak of in feminist scholar Susie Tharu’s words, the world of the little subaltern traditions, as against that of the great traditions.”⁷

Through Balappa’s unyielding defiance, the narrative underscores the enduring power of human spirit in the face of systemic injustice. Shyamala’s storytelling serves as both a testament to the resilience of the Dalit community and a searing critique of the ideological apparatuses that perpetuate their suffering.

The short stories analysed in this paper serve as poignant literary representations which convey the persistent subjugation and social isolation endured by Dalits. These stories narrate grim experiences of the downtrodden. Dalits in India continue to struggle with systemic cruelty, exclusion, economic deprivation, sexual exploitation, and the regrettable phenomenon of social division within their own ranks. The selected stories are disheartening as they suggesting that, despite the acquisition of social and political rights in post-independence India, the plight of Dalits has seen little change. The aspiration for true social integration and equality for Dalits remains an elusive dream within the contemporary Indian social landscape.

One could also observe the unsettling reality of sexual exploitation faced by Dalit women. This deeply troubling facet of their lives underscores the vulnerability and victimization that Dalit women endure within the caste-based social structure, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive social reform.

The narratives also draw attention to a heartbreaking phenomenon—the reluctance of socially advanced Dalits to extend a helping hand to their less fortunate brothers and sisters. This intra-community division underscores the complex nature of social change and the lingering divisions that persist even within marginalized groups.

Conclusion:

The short stories selected for examination within this paper collectively serve as a literary critique of the contemporary social landscape in India. They portray an alarming reality in which Dalits experience subjugation and social isolation despite decades of attempt of socio-political change. These narratives implore readers to confront the urgent and

ongoing need for comprehensive societal reform, aiming to ultimately realize the unfulfilled promise of true social integration and equality for Dalits in the Indian context.

End notes and References:

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