

Journey of Resilience and Social Transformation: Resonant Voice of Dalits in the Select Works of Rajarao and Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

Dalit literature has emerged as a potent literary movement to challenge 'skewed' societal norms and confront deep rooted prejudices coupled with caste-based discrimination. The Dalit literature genre is replete with tales of unspeakable atrocities, untouchability, social exclusion and denial of most basic human rights. It also proffers Dalit writers a platform to articulate their oppressed voices and dismantle the dominant narrative which has gained ascendancy over many millennia. Present research article is an attempt to examine select works of Rajarao and Rohinton Mistry for Dalit concerns and explore their responses and resilience in the face of age old prejudices and unjust laws.

Keywords: Begar, Chaturvarna, Ideological State Apparatus, Resilience, Social exclusion, Subaltern.

Introduction

Etymologically, the term 'Dalit' originates from the Sanskrit root 'Dal' that means numerous things in specific contexts. In the sphere of social sciences, it signifies 'oppressed' and 'downtrodden' which translates itself as an apt and befitting phrase to demonstrate the disadvantaged and compromised identity of a community/ethnic group; it is also evocative of the egregious antipathy and hostility of the privileged groups which constitute the very core of this social stigma. Prof. Mukherjee ascribes the usage of this term to the two great Dalit stalwarts-Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar whose impassioned writings and speeches in late 19th Century and early decades of 20th Century respectively, had a visceral effect on the readers and the audience alike. Prof. Mukherjee views the term 'Dalit' also as a metaphor appropriated in the field of warfare to imply a vanquished subject or enemy (Introduction *Joothan* xii).

Stemming from the depth of marginalisation and social exclusion, Dalit literature offers profound insights into the age old social injustice by foregrounding the aspirations and resilience of community through thousands of years. It not only supplies the writers an opportunity to recount their pain and anguish, but also fulfills a much larger social objective by inspiring the Dalit youths to foster a sense of pride and self-esteem. Besides, it helps them reclaim their history and embrace their identity without any shame, embarrassment or social stigma. More importantly, it sensitizes the readers in general about the ordeals and agonized experiences of Dalit society, thereby aiding to shape a more inclusive social structure.

The stigma attached to the fourth varna 'Shudra' or 'Avarna' is historically problematized and several Indian as well as foreign philosophers, Bhakti poets and social reformers, thinkers preached, enlightened or insinuated, from time to time, at the ills of Caste system and espoused the cause of social integration, unity and fraternity. The perspective of other side was only made available when some writers either Dalits themselves or those who empathized with their hapless brethren started spelling out their travails from the second half of 19th century onwards. The pioneers in this field were predominantly Marathi writers who galvanized the other Dalit writers in to action and inspired them to articulate their oppressed and unheard voices. Furthermore, it has ignited a discourse so glaring and unsettling yet saddled firmly on the premise of holding human dignity and values that the government, law makers, rationalists and people in general have begun clamouring for social reformation and change.

It often becomes daunting in a Dalit writing or criticism related thereto to desist from using 'divisionary' terms- such as Upper caste, lower caste, Brahmin, elite class or Non-Dalit etc. As Jasbir Jain points out, "The objection that the marginalized categories have to upper class writing is that theirs is an imagined reality and the perspective is somewhat different" (17).

The aim of the present research article is to investigate the select novels of Rohinton Mistry and Rajarao and explore the socio-political milieu which envelops as well stifles more often than not, the Dalit community and their legitimate aspirations.

Dalit Literature: Dalit vs Non-Dalit writers

It is interesting to note that both texts that are the subject of our exploration have been authored by non-Dalit writers. Questions may be raised about the authenticity of their account of Dalit life which they have not experienced first hand; But what readers can surmise from such works are the concerns of sensible non-Dalits who can feel and speak for their fellow beings. The whole idea that Dalit discourse envelops is not the depiction of Dalit's tribulations alone but also the sensitization of non-Dalits as it would necessitate the contribution of all sections to form a more inclusive Indian society in future.

Dwelling upon the question if a non-Dalit could contribute to Dalit literature, Baildon has attributed to theoretical and moralistic objections flagged by the non-Dalits to the practice of untouchability. Juxtaposing it with Dalit autobiographies, she observes that such writings give 'theoretical information' and also employ literary devices which are not feasible in Dalit auto biographies. Besides it allows non-Dalits to engage with the Dalit themes of "despair, hopelessness and utter degradation in a new light" (104). Such endeavors also aim at social awareness and present psychological struggles with details which the fictional Dalit characters confront in their quotidian existence. Thus Dalit autobiographies and fictional and non-fictional works penned by non-Dalits should not be viewed as something mutually-exclusive but rather as complementary to each other, both underscoring the need for reforms and foregrounding the basic principles of human dignity and justice.

Inviolable Varna/Caste Structure

In the novel *A Fine Balance* the villagers' primary concern about preserving the existing 'God-ordained' social order lest some natural calamity should strike the village, seems preposterous and puerile. The birth of double headed calf in the nearby village, spell of drought or flood despite commissioning "correct Puja" were construed as alarming aberrations brought upon the village by those who do not abide by the duties ordained for their caste in the book of Codes '*Manusmriti*'. As the villagers lament, "Something was wrong, the Law of Manu had been subverted" (100). The 'pandits' enjoined the villagers to be more vigilant in adhering to Dharma and 'mind' their place as per their caste in order to sail unharmed through the 'Darkness of Kaliyug'. The priests warn, "If there were more transgressions- if the order was polluted- then there was no telling that calamity might befall the Universe" (101).

It is also worth noting that several institutions, holy books and also the writings of many mainstream writers work as 'Ideological State Apparatus' as Gramsci would put it- apparently naturalizing the oppression and age old atrocities and persuading Dalits to accept their fate as 'natural' and 'God ordained' as cited in the sacred books.

The concept of 'Chaturvarna' is so deeply embedded in the minds of people especially upper caste Hindus that they are loath to let their privileges be withdrawn. The four Varna system sanctioned by religious texts helped them retain their hegemonic status in the society. It is therefore backed by the upper varnas/castes to uphold their privileged position by pushing the Shudras/Avarnas in the darkness of abysmal depths forever. Mahatma Gandhi, the great crusader against this injustice wrote several articles in books and newspapers battling against the practice of untouchability and gross injustice. He, however could not shed his religious trappings while articulating his views on Chaturvarna system. He writes in *Harijan*, "What I mean is, one born a scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger... For a scavenger is as worthy of his hire as a lawyer or your president. That according to me is Hinduism" (6 March 1937 edition).

Gandhiji even goes to the extent of equating it with universal laws of gravitation. He believed that four Varna system is as universal as laws of nature and can be considered as an "antithesis" of all competitions in the world (xx). What he fails to observe is the scourge of casteism and stigma of untouchability-both emanating from the same source- the occupations thrust upon a man on birth. It not only divests an individual of his inviolable human rights, but is also against the spirit of 'natural justice'.

To challenge the social order and circumvent the perpetuity of tyranny, Dukhi decides to send both his sons to train as tailors. The 'presumptuous' act of Dukhi is not taken kindly by the bigoted minds of the men in power. Similarly Narayan's defiance at entertaining the sweeper at his shop without any shred of bias raises many eyebrows. It is this attempt at redemption which costs Dukhi's family their lives, property and dignity.

Ambedkar found Mahatma's defence of Varna/caste system egregiously outrageous. His impassioned retort impugned the very logic behind Chaturvarna system which Gandhiji held dear. Ambedkar further asks Gandhiji why did he choose to pursue law instead of following his ancestral occupation if caste ordained callings were so important. (In a Reply to the Mahatma by Dr. Ambedkar).

Unjust Laws and Ordinances

Rajarao one of the triumvirate of English novelists in India, is an eminent writer known for his Indian sensibility, unique writing style- reflecting Indian ethos, culture and the tradition of story telling. Rajarao in the Preface of his magnum opus *Kanthapura* foregrounds the Indianness as the hallmark of all Indian writings in English. His vehement

advocacy for enthusing the Indian spirit and Indian temperament into the English writings engendered a literary movement of its kind. It has also inspired many Indian writers to articulate their experiences without the trappings of pseudo-British or pseudo-American writing styles.

In his much-acclaimed work *Kanthapura* which was published in 1938, *Rao* portrays the rural life in an imaginary South Indian village 'Kanthapura'. He very lucidly paints a realistic picture of a typical Indian village whose traditional and orthodox way of life is ripped asunder in the face of Gandhian philosophy during the Indian freedom struggle.

In his fictional landscape, *Rajaroo* paints a tad different picture of 'Sudras' and pariahs subsisting on the fringes of the village. Sudras in *Kanthapura* are depicted as a social group like others such as potters, weavers, Brahmins having their separate quarters and street; in fact the man who commands a great respect in *Kanthapura*- 'his words are a law' or 'he is a tiger'- such phrases used for *Patel Range Gowda*, a man coming from 'Sudra' community. There are no visible signs of untouchability or oppression of *Rajaroo's* 'sudra' community. But when it comes to pariah community that stays outside the village gate or the coolies employed in *Skeffington Coffee Estate* the reality is as unsettling and heart-rending as we witnessed in *Mistry's* fictional village in *A Fine Balance*. Intermixing or visiting Pariahs' houses by 'our' *Moorthy* is considered an anathema, an aberration to the existing norms which could not only pollute *Moorthy* but also has the potential to subvert the 'inviolable' social order per se.

The pariahs in the novel are depicted as expendables, ones devoid of any personal emotions and aspirations. *Bade Khan* on his first visit to *Skeffington* estate "chooses a pariah among the lovely ones, and she brought along her clay pots and her mats and her brooms and he gave her a very warmfulbed" (27). Caste based conduct becomes such an established norm that the populace can not think anything beyond it. Here one is instinctively drawn towards communist thinker *Gramsci* and his concept of 'Ideological State Apparatus' wherein the entire institutional machinery works towards making the tools of exploitation appear natural. Scriptures, Brahmins, puranas, old educational framework all persuaded the people about the immutability of caste laws and also issued decrees and injunctions against any such violations. Caste based occupation becomes a norm to be stringently adhered to circumvent 'pollution'. Any transgression invites the divine wrath and even might even quicken 'the end of the world'. Gandhian philosophy which permeates and pervades *Kanthapura* attack these caste laws. *Moorthy's* visits to 'unclean' quarters of pariahs perplexes the villagers. *Achakka* remarks, "I heard he went to Pariah quarters...he is one of those Gandhi-men, who say there is neither caste nor clan nor family, and yet they pray like us and they live like us" (19). There is also a sense of apprehension and restlessness among the villagers towards Gandhian teachings. They believe that Gandhi has also allowed intermixing of castes through inter-caste marriages. As *Achakka* vents out her misgivings, "Only they (Gandhi followers) say...(that) a Brahmin marry a pariah and a pariah a Brahmin...Well, well let them say it, how does it affect us? We shall be dead before the world is polluted" (19).

Free distribution of spinning wheels among the villagers is not received kindly by them. It befuddles them as weaving is considered an exclusive domain of weaver community. *Nanamma* expresses her discomfiture, "Brahmins do not spin, do they? My son, we have weavers in the village" (29). With the social changes in the air, conservative section of the society feels as if their religion, caste or the very existence is in the danger of obliteration. *Bhatta's* dismay at the prospect of opening temple doors to pariahs symbolises the dogmatic paradigm of upper castes and is an ample testimony of the oppression and stigmatisation of Dalit community per se. *Bhatta* spells out his foreboding, "They will one day put themselves in the place of Brahmins and begin to teach vedas. I heard only the other day that in the *Mysore Sanskrit College* some Pariahs sought admission" (43).

The religious leaders who should act as the 'conscience keeper' of the society are portrayed as rabble-rousers and ones who foment disharmony and disaffection between the different communities. *Swami* in *Kanthapura* has his spectral presence felt throughout and guides the actions of *Bhatta* and his ilk. *Gandhi* is castigated as a villain bringing about a disorder and anarchy in the existing social order. *Swami* feels that *Mahatma* is "making too much of these carcass-eating pariahs" and Dalits are referred to as "dirt-gobbling curs" ((57). The Brahmins in the novel have a disconcerting feeling as if their lives are hanging in a balance and the entire Brahmin community runs the danger of getting excommunicated or outcasted by *Swami*. It weighs heavy on the minds of the conservative Brahmins and they would do anything obsequiously to appease their religious leader *Swami*.

Phule cites many instances of such unjust laws and ordinances decreed by Upper caste Hindus in his famous work *Gulamgiri* (1873). These 'cruel and inhuman laws' are so egregiously bad that they fail to appeal except to those who are "blind and self interested". *Phule* writes, "Their main objective in fabricating these falsehoods was to dupe the minds of ignorant and to rivet firmly on them the chains of perpetual bondage and slavery" (9).

Likewise, *Ambedkar* emphatically denounces the stratification of society based upon the occupations. He considers it "positively pernicious" and inimical to the economic well being of the nation. He further attributes much of the evil of unemployment to the prevalent system of caste in India as it forces a person "to starve" instead of choosing a profession as per his aptitude and predilection. *Ambedkar* is also dismissive of "caste genealogies" as they engender caste rivalries; Some upper castes boast of noble origins and castigate others as ignoble or despicable creatures (19).

In his another book *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Ambedkar holds Sacred texts of Hindus responsible for spreading enmity and communal disharmony. He attributes writings of these 'holy' scriptures to Brahmins or other upper caste Hindus who apparently favoured their castes/communities and incorporated lopsided and discriminatory provisions for the lower castes/varnas (54). The inordinate emphasis on adherence to religious decrees in quotidian realm has proved divisionary and counterproductive.

Restrictions on Movements in Public Spaces

The other issue which reverberates through the narrative is the restriction on free movement of Dalits. They have prohibitory decrees issued against their community barring them from access to public wells, places of worship, playgrounds and other common areas. Violation of any kind was punishable by disproportionate penalty in the form of torture, public humiliation, excommunication and even threat of rape. In the novel "*A Fine Balance*, Dukhi learns by heart of many penalties prescribed for Dalits in case of commission and omissions of different acts.

Ambedkar also cites example of Sonar community whose attempts at wearing folded dhotis and saying namaskar resembled Brahmin's way of dressing and conduct. Brahmins through Peshwas and later through East India Company got prohibitory order issued against Sonars. There were also severe restrictions on the movements of Dalits in common public spaces such as Village wells, places of worship, community pond etc. Ambedkar laments on the pitiable conditions of Dalits in Poona state in his undelivered speech "Annihilation of Caste" He dwells on the restriction enjoined upon Dalits from using public streets when some upper caste was using it as it might pollute the person from a Dalit's shadow. They were also required to wear a black thread as a means to alert others about their low caste. In Poona, they were ordered to carry a pot hung around their neck and a broom stuck to their waist to circumvent any pollution of land or a person by Dalit's trodden 'dust' or his spit.

Intimidation and Torture: Begar and Bonded Labour

'Begar' a term used historically to signify forced labour foisted upon people living on the fringes of society, without any wages or remuneration. To counter this unjust and discriminatory practice, Ambedkar presented an Amendment bill in Bombay Legislative Assembly in 1928. He had witnessed first hand his Mahar Community being often put on Begar works. Besides taking on the practice of Begar, he also spearheaded Temple entry movement and ignited the hopes of many for a just and fair treatment in the society. Ambedkar is also credited with introducing Minimum Wages Bill in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1946 ensuring that all Indians irrespective of caste, race or gender receive their legitimate wages for their labour. Our Constituent Assembly was quick to discern the age old practice of Begar and it incorporated the Article 23 in Indian Constitution making Begar a punishable offence.

'Bonded Labour' an offshoot of Begar system forces a person to be under obligation of work for a landlord or a rich person for a fixed period of time, whether willingly or otherwise with very low wages. Along with Begar, forced labour system can be considered as blatant exploitation of labour force, obliterating in one stroke, their legitimate aspirations to move up on the social ladder and prosper.

A Fine Balance is full of such instances where Dalits were being considered as private property and treated likewise. Dalits in the village depended primarily on the dead cattle of upper castes as the village did not have a slaughterhouse. Some villagers would even compel Dalits to buy their dying animals. Their occupation required them to skin the carcass and tan the hide to ensure its durability and long life. Working long hours in the tannery would often give bad smell to their skin. To force Dalits into perennial servility, the tactic of intimidation was unabashedly used and we find multiple instances enumerated by Mistry in his novel. The punishment for any demeanor would seldom commensurate with the act of violation. Bhola's wife left hand fingers chopped on the mere suspicion of theft, Chhagan losing his hand 'at the wrist', Dosu getting whipped for getting too close to the public well, Buddhu's wife was tonsured for refusing to go to field with Zamindar's son and also paraded naked-are just a few examples of skewed justice system prevalent in Indian villages.

Ishwar may be considered as the most representative case of Dalit's fate- the scar on his face is a trope signifying the disfigured Indian society in urgent need of redemption and reformation from within or without. The ascetic resignation and fortitude with which Ishwar bears his fate alludes to Dalit Community in general, acquiescing to their fate without any protest or revolt. He is also an embodiment of resilience, forbearance and tenacity of Dalit Community per se who despite confronting all trials and tribulations move forward and thrive

Conclusion

In a discourse pivoted on class conflicts and socio-cultural exclusion, one invariably meditates upon the moot question 'Can subaltern speak?' and if they do 'Would their articulations be loud enough to send ripples through the corridors of power?' Dalit literature has emerged as an appropriate response to Spivak's question. Also sometimes it takes a loud noise to 'make the deaf hear' as put in by great freedom fighter Sardar Bhagat Singh during Assembly case hearing. In both the novels under investigation we observe Dalits- Sudras or Pariahs exhibiting incredible spirit of fortitude and

saintly endurance throughout the narratives. Their extraordinary resilience in the face of distress and atrocities is phenomenal and rare. Both novels written decades apart encapsulate the saga of the same oppression and stigma, confronted by Dalits in their day to day struggles for dignity and existence.

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