

Vacuuming the Dalit Identity: Upper-caste Writers and the Bubble of Representation in Indian Novels

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ABSTRACT

The novels by upper-caste writers under the garb of genuine and heartfelt representation of the oppressed classes has often led to the negation of the Dalit identity with a discourse of pity, sympathy and sacrifice under the lieu of furthering the Dalit cause. Self-sacrifice and death become large symbols around which these writers build their stories as they continue to portray them giving up their lives, denying any chances of dynamism in their characters. This paper aims to analyse Choma's Drums by Shivaram Karanth and Untouchable by Mulk Raj, with references to other works, through the lens of close reading, in order to gauge the authenticity of their portraiture and the sincerity of the depiction of the Dalit lives and experience which has grounded the discourse around Dalit representation in elements of pity, giving off the impression of appropriation and what Sambashiva Rao called "a tactical trick," where Brahmins would put themselves in a position to represent a Dalit character without critiquing the system, and portraying themselves as allies, and confining the discourse to "compassion" and "sorrow." The paper endeavours to critique and problematize such representations which take the discourse back by years instead of advancing it.

KEYWORDS: *Vaccumization, dynamism, identity, appropriation, caste politics*

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“Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” The effect of this statement made by James Baldwin regarding the African-Americans is far-reaching, and it applies to the oppressed in many ways, especially to those who have been under a state of oppression for centuries, and are denied a way out. Often, the oppressed find a noble soul amongst the oppressor, who is ready to champion their cause for freedom and equality, and thus, spring forth those with their hearts in supposedly the right place but without the ability to introspect and self-reflect. Thus, we have the upper-caste writers, the self-proclaimed champions of the cause of the marginalized and downtrodden, ready to put their own experiences to good use. The problem arises when these writers equate their own experiences, points of views, and perspectives to those of the oppressed castes, and offer insights as outsiders without the lived experience of the said communities. Such an exercise comes at the cost of the voices of the people that should be heard, instead of those who have the agenda and access to the platform to exploit this newfound space which is supposedly about the autonomy and freedom of those on the other end of the spectrum.

The genre of Dalit literature has witnessed the rise of such writers who in the name of championing the Dalit cause, have only managed to damage the very cause they claim to stand up for. The works of the upper-caste writers, written under the guise of sincere and earnest representation of the destitute classes has, in turn, often led to the negation of Dalit fluidity, identity, and the lack of dynamism of a defeated depiction while using an approach of containment and enclosure to keep the characters within a discourse of misguided pity, sympathy, and sacrifice. As the Dalit writer Arjun Dangle has claimed, “Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality” (Mukherjee 1), drawing attention to the rebellious nature of this particular literature along with an attitude which questions the general presumptions about the Dalits, and responds negatively to them, something which the Dalit characters in the novels written by upper-caste writers fail to do.

My aim is to analyse such dialogues and narratives by upper-caste writers which, with an aim to explore the Dalit identity and discourse, end up exploiting it, and enslaving it in a vacuum devoid of any possibility of real progress and freedom, producing one dimensional Dalit characters who deliberately lack actual substance to

make them stand out, or stand up for themselves. My paper will focus on *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, and *Choma's Drum* by Shivaram Karanth, along with references to similar texts to gauge how these writers, quite unaware of their background and privilege, launch a crusade that jeopardizes the very cause they claim to be fighting for, and where they confine the existence of the Dalits to a discourse marked by "sympathy" and "compassion."

The rise of the Dalit movement ensured that the Dalits became a presence which could be seen and heard throughout the country with a distinct voice of their own, a lifelong ambition of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. This visibility soon granted them enough space to carve out a few holes in the centre to push the boundaries that had been keeping them at bay. According to Prof Raj Kumar, "Dalits started to become speaking subjects" (5). Even though Brahmanical literature was failing at diminishing the presence of the Dalits, it still tried to keep them backed into a corner "and thus protect the purity of its space" (Mukherjee 8). The upper caste writers sought to uphold the power structure of dominance and cultivated multiple popularized depictions of the Dalits as people without self-respect, and pride, the creation of which involved no actual Dalit voice. Alok Mukherjee emphasizes how someone like Gayatri Spivak helps in further marginalization of the oppressed by basing her

Entire exploration of the life experiences of Adivasis or aboriginal communities, another group that has been kept outside the boundaries of the village, on the writings of the upper caste Bengali writer, Mahasweta Devi, several of whose works Spivak has translated into English. She makes no use of any writing by Dalits or Adivasis themselves in her theorizing on subalternity. (Mukherjee 8-9)

In *Untouchable Fictions*, Toral Jatin Gajarawala maintains that, "Dalit literature is characterized as a literature of protest and historical revisionism, typically with an emphasis on the documentation of the violence, oppression, and structural inequality engendered by casteism" (1), focusing on the concept of Dalit *chetna* or consciousness which is a marker by which most texts in the genre of Dalit literature are judged, which usually includes an anti-caste and class attitude along with an affinity for political and social revisionism leading to equality and acceptance. E.M. Forster, in his preface to *Untouchable*, claims that there is only one kind of writer who can bring such a novel to

fruition, that being an Indian with a view of an outsider like Anand, as an Untouchable “would have been involved in indignation and self-pity” (Anand 6). Forster’s claim stems from the misguided assumption that those are the only emotions an Untouchable is bound to display, and wilfully ignores how Anand does exactly the same through his work, affording Bakha, a sweeper, no voice, or chance to express original thought or emotions that are not bound in self-pity, or sacrifice. Forster believes that the upper-caste Anand is in an ideal position to write about the Dalit character because as a child he played with the children of sweepers. Therefore, he completely ignores the lived experience of those sweepers and their sons, an experience which Anand lacks. While he goes back to his upper-caste life full of comfort, the sweeper goes back to sweeping. The lived experience, and the Dalit *chetna* which is a crucial component of any text related to Dalit literature, becomes a glaring hole in the text as it produces one-dimensional characters pitying themselves, their caste, and conditions. The necessary detachment that Forster attributes to Anand is misleading as it detaches him from the subject matter. Anand eyes them from the perspective of one who perennially remains on the outside, and that detachment reaches his character as well, the character who remains detached from any individual thought, or any idea of resistance, revolt, revision, or protest which both Dangle and Gajarawala assert as the most necessary aspect of Dalit literature. One is tempted to ask where the burden that should come with something inherently political like “Dalitness” is, and what should be the prerogative of any political literature? The answer is in the preface itself, emphasizing the detachment, and the view from the outside, as it does not let an upper-caste writer like Anand introspect his own privilege, and freedom to pose in-depth questions to the caste system or afford political agency to someone who has always been viewed as an Other. As Anupama Rao notes, “Dalit emancipation was predicated on the existential, political, and ethical reordering of Indian society, but it also presupposed the imagination of the Dalit as a specific kind of political subject” (26). This is where writers like Karanth and Anand have failed, where they treat their characters not as people whose existence demands political autonomy, but as subjects bound to this inequality without a way out, or without the ability to resist such a system and stand against it. The representation or the attempt of a realistic portrayal becomes merely performative. It also embraces, and propagates the stereotypes of the Dalits being a community of

submissive slaves without a voice, and agency of their own, and certainly without a voice that they can raise. They give in to self-pity and countless sacrifices, and at all times recognize their condition as Untouchables bound to their ruinous fate. As Andrew Stracuzzi notes, "...What good is this recognition if there is no possibility of it being overcome? This self-affirmation has damaging consequences because it implies that Bahka is becoming comfortable with its implications" (Stracuzzi) drawing attention to the fact that wherever Anand does let Bakha speak his mind, or have defiant thought, it is always done in a way where he comes back to his silence, owing to his state as an Untouchable who will never be in a position to be on the offensive side. Thus, the claim of true or pure representation fails with Anand where he misses the ambition, and inherent politics of the meaning of being a Dalit, and builds a narrative that falls flat when it comes to furthering the discourse by shooting the very subject it is meant to liberate.

The translator's note attached to *Choma's Drum* keeps bringing back the conversation of the authentic portrayal by Karanth, and how he has etched a story of true tragedy from the beginning to the end, full of sacrifice, sympathy and death as Choma's "ambition to be a farmer, to till a piece of land as his own, lends him from one tragedy to another till he inevitably meets his doom" (Karanth 4). One must ask why in the hands of an upper-caste writer is there such an end for a Dalit in bonded labour. "Inevitable," and full of tragedy when the tale is supposed to start a conversation regarding the representation and the unjustness of the caste system. Choma's introduction in the text is preceded by the beats of his drum which is used throughout the novel as an instrument for him to express his emotions. Since, the conditions of his society has silenced him, and he must take refuge in the voice of an object to give speech to his emotions. Both Anand and Karanth equate freedom and voice of their respective characters to that of a machine or an object. Anand begins his novel with the lamentation of the drainage system, and ends it with the hopes of a flush system flushing away the prejudice of the caste system making the lives of the Untouchables better as they would not have to deal with cleaning toilets. The book, from the very outset, is based on the analogy of the drainage system sweeping away the venom of discrimination. In a bid to appeal to modernity, Anand forgets that modernity does not necessitate modern thinking. A change in machinery does not entail a change in the

caste system or the fact that those being replaced by a flush toilet will still be engaged in sweeping and cleaning. This refuge of Anand, backed by Forster, is infested with lofty idealism and sense of highbrow philosophy to engage with the subject matter more seriously, and consider the repercussions of the advocacy of Gandhian ideals as a form of modernist salvation which will rid people of their pride, prejudice and privilege. The same can be said about the symbolism in Karanth where he does not foresee the repercussions in affording an inanimate object a voice instead of Choma which stifles his situation, and circumstances more as the novelist focuses on dramatizing the situation to bring out sympathy and pity rather than giving the character a backbone to stand and resist, thus, refusing to acknowledge the unique space Dalit characters should occupy in the political sphere. Barbara Goddard problematized this and insisted that “as literatures of resistance, these texts oppose the conventions of Indian literatures which have either ignored the Dalit or portrayed them in a discourse of pity, as victims needing saviours” (3).

The portrayal of pity and victimization is a recurring trend within the upper-caste corpus of Dalit literature where we often see the novel ending with the death of the leading Dalit character under unsurmountable circumstances, be it Karanth’s *Choma’s Drum*, Thakazhi’s *Chemmeen*, Unnava Lakshmi Narayana’s *Malapalli*, or Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things*. The advent of modernity, the emergence of newer forms of resistance, or the emergence of Dr Ambedkar, and the Dalit Panthers have not been able to diminish this portraiture of bleakness, gloom, and pity in which the Dalit discourse has been contained in the works by upper-caste writers. This appropriation of the space of Dalit lives and literature has been called “a tactical, brahminical trick” by Sambashiva Rao in *Hatred in the Belly*, where upper-caste writers would put themselves in a position where they can present a Dalit character without critiquing the system, and yet show themselves as sympathizers and allies, all the while putting down the characters they mean to uplift (S. Rao 45). *Choma’s Drum* too ends with the death of the untouchable protagonist, unable to stand up for himself in a society where he feels down. Self-sacrifice becomes a symbol around which the upper-caste writers have built their stories where they cannot envisage a life beyond struggle and sacrifice for the oppressed, almost as if their imagination cannot fathom the possibility of a certain dynamism in a Dalit protagonist who would rather confront and resist the atrocities

than giving in and die. It also betrays an element of condescension on their part as they believe that the only thing a downtrodden or an outcast can do is sacrifice themselves in order to be noticed. *Choma's Drum* fails in its inability to hold the caste system accountable for the loss of lives and families, as its portraiture only paints a picture of the uppermost layer of the problem. What was needed, was an attempt to go to the very roots of the evil, and abolishing the caste system altogether which is accountable for numerous deaths. One can only hold on to objects and beaten desires because humanity has already deserted them, as Karanth's protagonist. Rather than choosing a different religion, Bakha still holds on to a religion which has only caused him pain, even his prayers are unanswered. This lofty idealism in the times of despair and lost causes is misplaced, both by the writer and the character, as the writer believes it to be a noble cause without inspecting the inherent hypocrisy of the religion and what it stands for, and finally showcasing how the only escape from this degradation is the sweet release of death. Choma dies while beating his drum, a vocal output in a society which has silenced him, as life has beaten him down in an act which signifies him beating his luck, his caste. The unjust social environment of the country, the political and social inability whose objective is to maintain the status quo, where all he can do is to live his life with an inanimate object that will not raise any objections to the touch of the Untouchable, dying without resisting the evils of the caste system, without any revolutionary fervour and any political agency.

This maintenance of the status quo leads us directly to the question of authentic, pure and faithful representation claimed by the Brahmins and upper-caste writers against the representation of Dalits by Dalit writers themselves and how and where they differ. Baburao Bagul remains a towering figure when analysing these differences. Unlike the Gandhian ideals followed by upper-caste writers in their approach, and treatment of the Dalit subject, Bagul was inspired by Dr Ambedkar who helped in bringing out his smouldering contempt for the caste system which had oppressed his community for decades. Characters in Bagul do not mince words or emotions, and are given an outburst of expression rather than a silent acceptance or mute disbelief like Bakha and Choma. This is succinctly put forth by Limbale when he insists that, "If pleasure-giving literature arouses joy and sympathy in people, revolutionary literature awakens consciousness of self-respect" (119). In the titular story of his collection *When*

I Hid My Caste, Bagul tackles the caste question head on instead of beating around the bush like the performative upper-caste writers whose social due comes across as mere pandering instead of true alliance, or concern, where the protagonist, with mounting aspirations like any other being is eventually brought to his knees amidst the busy city life because of his inferior caste status. In one of the concluding lines of the story, after having been physically beaten by caste Hindus, and discovering his true caste, Masthur, the protagonist claims, “When was I beaten by them? It was Manu who thrashed me” (Bagul 107), referring to the religious text *Manusmriti* which popularized the caste hierarchy. The protagonist refuses to acknowledge the physical hands that beat him because his entire caste had already been beaten by the ideology perpetrated by the caste system of his country. This beating was not so much as physical as it was epistemic, based on societal knowledge and information that has been the bane of the downtrodden and the oppressed as they are broken down by a social system which refuses to let them rise based on arbitrary hierarchies formed centuries ago. This is where one recognizes that the ideal scenarios of Anand, where modernity and machinery try to do away with regressive thinking, fall flat. As the assumption of being a superior caste possesses too much power to be let go of so easily. Hence, characters like Choma with their voiceless drumming do not do justice either to the Dalit cause, or the representation of those who, following the steps of Ambedkar, have started resisting and revolting. There is a recognition and fight in Bagul which leads to the biting critique of the caste system, and Hindu religion in general, not felt anywhere in the tame idealism and modernity of Anand or the subdued symbolism of Karanth, or the unnecessary romanticism of Thakazhi. As Shanta Gokhle makes clear in her introduction to Bagul’s collection, “Bagul’s stories enforce this foundation of revolt, pain and dissent with verbs that act like a physical force and qualifiers that carry violence,” (Bagul 7) which bring out the emotions of the supposed voiceless who rage against the machine, giving them not only a voice but also expression based on thinking, resisting, revolting and acting, instead of accepting or kneeling down to the system.

This expression of revolting and acting stems directly from Ambedkar’s appeal to educate, agitate and organize, leading to literature by Dalits adopting, “vidroha (revolt), vedana (pain) and nakar (dissent)” (Bagul 7), the prime example of which were writers like Bagul and Namdeo Dhasal with works rooted in a declaration of revolt,

anger, and political and social dissent missing in the works of the upper-caste writers, an attitude which is summed up by Dangle when he asserts that “Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change” (5). It is also surprising that the works that claim to uplift the oppressed and educate the privileged about their plight, see no mention of Ambedkar who had already launched his crusade for the betterment of the Dalits long before either *Untouchable* or *Choma’s Drum* came out. The absence of Ambedkar is followed by a dearth in political activism, and a lack of engagement with regards to education with both the writers deploying their novel as a mirror instead of a reflective canvas, writing the novel in a bubble where the complete ignorance of the existence of the Ambedkarite thought, and the lack of education, the ignorance regarding the caste system, almost seems to be on purpose as an attempt to draw out the supposedly Gandhian influence they seem to have, a case much more evident in Anand who even showed an earlier draft of his novel to Gandhi and made changes following his advice (Nasta 151). The clear absence of stress on literacy, as well as Ambedkar is not only ignorant but also does a disservice to the discourse by denying it the opportunity to appreciate its real champion and spreading awareness about the causes that can help in the growth of Dalits. Giving Gandhi a voice over Ambedkar also throws light on how they can barely touch the surface of the problems like caste, class, land and value of human labour, but cannot insist on doing away with the problems altogether, lest they injure sensitive sensibilities, as Gandhian ideology was merely against untouchability, and not against the varna system and caste hierarchies.

The lack of awareness regarding education and literacy, and turning a blind eye towards movements advocating the emancipation of the Dalits, regularly led to upper-caste writers continually creating characters who are bodily able, like Bakha or Roy’s Velutha, focusing much more on their physique than their intellectual capabilities, showcasing physical strength but mental frailty, thus highlighting an inherent bias and flaw in their characterization of the Dalits who are incapable of any mental prowess, and building a stereotype around their personality, the shackles of which bind them still. Do upper-caste writers continue portraying them as inevitable failures bound to be submissive in front of the caste system? As I must, once again, bring attention to what Anupama Rao notes, “Dalit emancipation was predicated on the existential, political, and ethical reordering of Indian society, but it also presupposed the imagination of the

Dalit as a specific kind of political subject” (24), a sentiment which is a clear and stark omission from the writings of the upper-caste writers who refuse to acknowledge this position of the Dalits as this specific subject and continue treating them based on stereotypes created around the general idea of the poor and the downtrodden, focusing much more on the class difference than the caste. This is made into a comfortable position by the Gandhian ideals of sacrifice, and his sole focus on untouchability and pandering to the Dalit community by coining the term *harijans*, or the children of God. This has not only refused to hold the system accountable but has also affirmed the existence, and creation of such a system that still undermines the marginalized people under the garb of progressiveness and modernity. This has inevitably led to the caste-Hindus appropriating the spaces of Dalit discourse due to their privileges, creating a bubble not just around their own characterization of the Dalits, but also around the space where the voices of the Dalits themselves are stifled to let in a writer of reputation, and higher social standing (Like Arundhati Roy’s introduction to *Annihilation of Caste*, which she then turned into a Gandhi-Ambedkar debate). Thus, came about the construction of the incapable, and poor Dalits with no mind of their own, relying on the mercy of the privileged upper-castes as they mutter away their mute rebellions and choose the path of least resistance and die at the confrontation with the first sign of inconvenience. This vacuuming of the Dalit identity and discourse which produces one-dimensional, single-minded characters contained within the discourse of pity and suffering are, once again, is enabled by the ideology of Manu.

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