



Dalit Men versus Upper Caste Women: Stories of Demeaning Experiences

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Abstract: Dalit Literature expresses Dalit pain so poignantly that one wonders if human being can hate fellow human beings in such a ghastly way. Dalit writers give words to the traumatic life of their brethren not to create sympathy in the heart of their reader. Rather, they have given a very brave account of their struggle against heavy odds that fall in their life only for being Dalits. In their struggle to rise in life they came across physical as well as mental persecution in their life because success and failure depended on the caste to which one belonged. They were suppressed and were not allowed to raise their voice against any discrimination and beastly treatment was meted out to them. In Dalit short stories their painful experiences with the people of upper caste expose the hypocrisy on the part of those who belong to upper castes. In the stories selected for detailed study reflect how Dalits go through various experiences that inflict violence, humiliation and suppression in one or the other ways. The women belonging to upper castes are depicted as insensitive, selfish, narcissist bodies that lure Dalit youth and become the cause of catastrophic devastation of the entire Dalit community.

Keywords: Dalit, trauma, humiliation, hypocrisy, experience, devastation.

The history of caste based discrimination is very old and it is ironic India is going to celebrate 75 years of independence; still the country is beset with archaic caste mentality. Even today this notorious element of casteism is deep rooted and manifested in day to day dealings. Even the temples of learning are not free from this stigma. There was news recently from one of the schools in Himachal Pradesh where days back in a school in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh where Dalit students were forced to sit apart from other students

during mid-day meal. This is not an isolate incident of such heinous crime against humanity. In the past too, students refused to eat food cooked by a Dalit in a primary school in Ghaziabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Likewise, in the village Nangla Vair under the Bhojpur Police Station area, school children refused to take mid-day meal. Their objection was that the meal to be served to them was cooked by a Dalit woman. So, the students left the school without eating food (Mishra 42). Of late, Dalit youth became victims of mob lynching, persecution and torture. This age old mind-set causing hatred and animosity leading to untouchability is an age old practice and has assumed almost a universal characteristic of caste society that is persisting right from the early and mediaeval civilized society. Unfortunately nothing has changed even in the age of progress and globalisation. It is matter of concern and shame for us that independence has failed to mitigated the age-old social evil. It is really disgusting as well as shocking that nothing has changed the mind-set of society against the Dalits. It has become a practice among upper caste groups to humiliate and ostracise those belonging to the lower castes. Such atmosphere that fosters hatred and ill-will for the fellow human beings extends a heart wrenching message. We, in this age of science and technology, in the era of 21st century, boast of the world that has achieved insurmountable knowledge but we still poison our children's mind with caste based inhuman sentimentalities. Our children will, sadly, inherit false consciousness and ignorance owing to our positioned education. The students who displayed their caste-based hatred by refusing to eat mid-day meal are not to be blamed for. They mirror the behaviour of their elders as they are the product of their family socialization. They have been programmed to adopt the prejudice with respect to their food, social and commercial intercourse. And such prejudice has been embedded in their inner mind and consciousness.

It has been believed that all men are born equal. But the social reality is other way round—all men are not born equal. If all men are equal why, then, there is discrimination on the ground of caste, colour and sex. Caste with its practices of casteism, untouchability and discrimination continues to infect and inflict upon the social order and human collectively. Starting from Ghurye (1994) Bougle (1971) to Dumont (1972) all have fundamentally defined caste system in terms of its attributes of hierarchy, separation, division, endogamy, pollution and purity. Such notions of pollution and purity have always acted to rate certain castes are 'pure' and the rest is impure. This dichotomy of purity-pollution continues to cast its malevolent shadow on the

Dalits and deprive them of their dignified human existence. At different points of history such so-called impure castes have been designated as untouchables, *harijans depressed classes schedule castes* and Dalits. The point we are trying to make is that the caste system has always acted against a section of people of its fold, ostracized them, violated their human rights, dehumanize their existence, discriminated them, segregated their location, deprived them of their dignity and robbed them of their basic freedom of progress. The caste system manifests itself as the worst form of hierarchy where virtually every caste has some above to grumble about and some below to growl at. Everybody is aware of the negative contribution made by the brahminical word to be the persistence and discrimination. (Mishra 43)

Liberal writers and critics opine that caste system has come to an end and has collapsed today owing to the progressive policies of the government that ensure welfare of all irrespective of caste, colour and gender. But crime against Dalits manifests the opposite. Had it been so, why then Dalits women are gang-raped even today? Why, then, Dalit youths are assaulted every other day? Why, then, there are dictates by the *Khap* panchayats to kill those who dare get married outside their caste? Unbelievable as it may appear, in Madurai, a 38-year old Dalit woman was allegedly forced to drink excreta mixed with water in front of her husband and children after she spurned the advances of an upper caste villager in Keela Urppanur village in Thirumangalam block of Madurai district recently (Dabhi 33-46). Even today Dalits are facing gruesome violence against them and social exclusion in the era of 21st century. It is not that they are being tortured and suppressed by the illiterates among the upper castes. Unfortunately, the perpetrators are the most literate and educated ones who throw the venom of untouchability every now and then. Dalits have, no doubt, raised their heads against the discrimination and oppression but still in rural India they have to pay the price for resistance. They have to face the worst kind of violence, sexual outrage against Dalit women and sabotage to their property. M.N. Srinivas aptly points out:

And I must tell you bluntly that if you are thinking that you can get rid of caste easily you are seriously mistaken. Caste is an institution of prodigious strength and it will take a lot of beating before it will die.... It is so powerful and progressive, and its appeals are so strong that the first step in the struggle is to have a precise measure of its strength. (Quoted in Mishra 45)

Dr. B R Ambedkar has rightly asserted in *Writing and Speeches* (Vol.5, 15) that untouchability is an indirect form of slavery.... It is enslavement without making the untouchables conscious of their enslavement.

In this paper stories from Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories* (Orient Blackswan 2018) are analysed in detail to find out how Dalits are target of humiliation and oppression. Limbale's stories, located in the larger narrative frame of the Dalit experience, open up a ruthless and harsh world conditioned and sanctioned by the caste system. They may have been based in India of the 1960s through the 1980s, as experienced by the author, as the book itself was first published in 1984. The setting range from feudal villages to modern cities; the characters range from bonded labourers to feudal lords and slum dwellers to middle classes, and their responses range from meek submission to violent revolt. Irrespective of their settings and situation, his stories expose the underbelly of on Indian society structured by illiteracy and superstition, exploitation and oppression, class, caste and gender violence, trickery and hypocrisy, duplicity and betrayal, dejection and oppression, class, caste and gender violence, trickery and hypocrisy, duplicity and betrayal, dejection and desperation. They present a kaleidoscopic account of Dalit lives in post-independence India. Almost all the stories have the Ambedkarite movement as a prominent back drop, particularly its social culture dimension of conversion to Buddhism. The Buddhism identity the Mahahars of Maharashtra wore after 1956 certainly lent them a new confidence, and also brought them into conflict with the larger society that construed it as their defiance. If we take what is portrayed in contemporary India, one wonders how to assess the changes that the constitution of India, architected by Babasahab Ambedkar, has ushered.

Limbale handles every story with deftness and presents it with commensurate creativity to produce a compact unified effect, as ordained by Poe's thesis on the short story (Lawrence 276-286). The short story, it says, present, a single significant event or scene involving a limited number of characters who are revealed through an action or a dramatic situation. Its form encourages economy of setting, a concise narrative and the omission of a complex plot; character is disclosed in action and dramatic encounter, but is seldom fully developed. The short story is noted for its focused nature and shift narrative style with a pre-conceived ending, which may be abrupt and in collusive but never sans the desired impact. Because of its format, it demands both creativity and craft. Dalit literature may have discarded the ideological and normative structure

of Marathi literature, but it still qualifies the universal criteria for each of its genres. Limbale impresses one in superbly handling his craft and displays ingenuity, compression and a touch of fantasy, which have been noted as the ingredients for successful short story writing. The stories in this chapter reflect varied experiences of Dalithood. These stories reflect how Dalits go through various experiences that inflict violence, humiliation and suppression in one or the other ways.

The stories that focus on Dalit trauma inflicted by the experiences with upper caste women are

“Madhavi”, “Sujata”, “Niloo”, “Sunita” and “Rajani” are stories that represent the Dalit experience with Brahmin or Upper-Caste women. All women in these stories belong to well off families. They are either in mutual love with or only loved by the protagonist. They are insensitive, selfish, narcissist bodies that lure Dalit youth and become the cause of catastrophic devastation of the entire Dalit community. Dr. Ambedkar suggested, “The real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste.” (Quoted in Mishra 46). However, the remedy does not work in our country owing to caste hegemony. If anybody tries to go for inter-caste marriage they are ostracized and even killed by staunch believers in casteism.

“Madhavi” (Limbale 55) is a poignant story of a Dalit protagonist who suffers for loving a girl from upper-caste. Madhavi, a Patil daughter, is in love with the protagonist who is a Dalit. This love relationship between a Patil girl and a Dalit becomes the cause of suffering to the whole Dalit colony. Dalits are not even allowed to build a pucca house that’s why protagonist’s building a pucca house becomes the cause of gruesome atrocity that flares the entire Dalit basti and takes a Dalit’s life. The scene is shown gruesome in the beginning of the story:

Fire that burns away the darkness. Fire stretching out, rising up. The naked dance of the mob. I with my heart in my mouth. People running helter-skelter. A scream that freezes the night. The covering darkness was alight. All my sheltering shadows were being destroyed. The mob was shouting the dreadful sound of physical belabouring was audible from somewhere, screams echoed wildly. (55)

The protagonist knows that Patils are angry because of his love with Madhavi. Shalan, Genu’s daughter was Madhavi’s friend. All three studied together. Since Shalan, a Dalit girl had been a witness to

Madhavi's love with the protagonist she has to bear the brunt of Patils' wrath. Her hut is turned to ashes and her father is thrashed so badly that he succumbs to the injuries. The protagonist's love proves a curse for the poor Dalits. It is before Genu dies that, soaked in blood, he warns the protagonist, "You shouldn't have got mixed up with the Patil's daughter. Hey, you'd already made enemies of the whole village by building that house. We've been flattened in the dust because of that." (57)

The protagonist remembers how Madhavi loved him very much. She was the cause of his joy and now same Madhavi becomes the cause of his sorrow. Now one can feel the trauma he is suffering from in the following words that the protagonist expresses so agonizingly:

I remembered Madhavi. She would not be tortured. I become restless. I became angry at the fact that we were outcastes. Madhavi, I thought, your world is different. We belong to the burning huts. Outside the villages, our endless agonies and rebellions have been ruthlessly denied. Our breath has gone through the agony of fire. A crushed sound comes out of our many calls for help. Madhavi, we, too, are living people. (59).

Genu's death represents deaths of many like him who sacrificed their lives for the injustice they are subject to. Genu's death evokes a very traumatic atmosphere, "The sound of the funeral drum could be heard. Now the old man Genu's final journey was about to begin. We were going to bury our wounds in the burial ground. How many sorrows, fallen victim to injustice, we had buried in the bosom of the earth! Our burial ground was the living record of our orphaned sorrows" (60). The stigma of untouchability-of being a Dalit is unbearable and so irksome that it leaves permanent scars on one's psyche. The severity of caste based stigma becomes more painful as the protagonist thinks that it is better to be a dog than to be a Dalit. He purportedly speaks to the dead Genu, "Genya, you died, you escaped this torture. Go be born as a dog, but don't be born from a Mahar's womb." (60)

Madhavi is taken to Delhi and married off to a man from her own caste. The protagonist marries Shalan. The protagonist fails to get his love for being a Dalit. Madhavi rejects him for his caste. He experiences a Traumatic defeat at the hands of Madhavi. Thus a Dalit loses his battle of love against casteism.

In "Sujata" (Limbale 62) the Dalit protagonist is in love with an upper-caste girl who stays in an adjacent bungalow. He imagines her occasional sightings at the window to be her response to him. He says'

“My whole life had been imprinted with memories of Sujata. I hid my own whole existence in thoughts of her. When I held her flowerlike cheeks in my palms, it was as if rain fell heavily throughout my body. I saw wringing wet mind. My eyes brimmed over with emotion. Those tears fell from the eyes and entered my whole body. Her footsteps began to take root in my every vein” (62). He imagines her occasional sightings at the window to be her response to him. But the real-relationship between them is marked by his mother and sister working as maids in her house. He says, “When I was small, I would go with my sister to Sujata’s house. My sister would scour the pots. I would help her. When my sister fell ill, my mother would go to wash the vessels. Sometime I would go” (62). The protagonist’s deep seated love for Sujata has little value for her. Why should she respond with equal love? He has no right to her because a Dalit has no right to love a girl from upper caste.

Very soon the hell is let loose on his basti. A garden will be made on the space where Dalits live. The municipal squad comes for demolition. The police atrocity is reported by the protagonist:

With the help of the police, municipal workers began to intrude into the huts. The police picked up one or two people and beat them up brutally.... Meera’s hut had been smashed down. Meera’s tears were crushed like flowers under the boots of the police. The huts were choked with emotion at Meera’s screams. People were being destroyed. The world of our households, built gathering piece by piece, was torn apart in every direction. (64)

People from hutment resist. But the poor and outcaste has no right even to resist. They are lathicharged. They become victims of tear gas. Their heads are broken. The policemen are seen on a spree to arrest one after another. All are crushed and their voices are suppressed. The people will get their garden on the debris of poor people’s huts. Sujata, too, will enjoy there. Sujata remains unperturbed through it all and goes on drying her hair as usual. She is moved little. She is proved insensitive. So is her love unmoved apathetic for the Dalit protagonist. To the protagonist the window that frames Sujata serves as a metaphor for the upper-caste world which now appears like a villain’s eye.

In “Niloo” (Limbale 68) the girl and the protagonist are shown as sportspersons in friendship. But the protagonist imagines it to be mutual love. Unfortunately, this love can never fructify because the protagonist is a Dalit. Whenever Niloo sees him going toward his hutment, she stops him from going in that direction

because she thinks, “Dirty people live in that place” (69). This hurts him much. He hates being a Dalit as it inflicts humiliation and scars to his psyche. He feels disappointed and dejected. He says, “When I went to set foot in my neighbourhood, it was as if my feet had rusted. She thought of this place as one for dirty people. I was disgusted at my neighbourhood” (69). He is right in saying that “Niloo was a cultural division.”

The day was very cruel when Niloo comes to know about his caste. But sadly, “Niloo had found me out, along with my caste (71). He has concealed his caste and the place where he lives. She cannot love an untouchable. He voices his pain, “My youth was beyond the pale. My touch was forbidden, untouchable” (71). Niloo is married to someone else. The protagonist questions, “What was lacking in me I was a man, too. But my wretchedness was my caste” (71). No doubt, their worlds are contrasted by the fact that his mother is a scavenger in Niloo’s colony. It is in the marriage procession of Niloo that a tragic incident takes place. His mother carries a gas lamp on her head in Niloo’s marriage procession. The gas lamp explodes and his mother dies a sad death. Nobody shows any sympathy for the Dalit woman as the procession continues with another Dalit woman replacing her. Niloo symbolises insensitivity and cleverness of the upper-caste world. She, like Sujata and Madhavi, represents all those who have no feeling for the Dalits.

“Sunita” (Limbale 73) is a harrowing story of orgy of torture and killings resulted from a love affair between upper-caste girl, Sunita and the Dalit protagonist. Sunita is the daughter of village deputy sarpanch. Both the protagonist and Sunita have easy relationship. They roam around at any hour. They watch film together. But the hell is let loose on the protagonist and the whole Dalit hutment the day somebody from the village notices both of them together. The news spreads like the fire of forest. Sunita’s father brings her home and belabours her saying, “You are walking around with a low-caste boy. Have we sent you there to study or to flirt? How will we show our face in society?” (74). Later the protagonist slips into Sunita’s house that infuriates her father more. The atmosphere in the village grows tense with single thought in the air, “Today one of our girls has lost caste, and if we keep quiet, then in the future they will deprive all our girls of their caste in front of our eyes. We must teach them a lesson today.” (74)

Soon a decision is taken by the assembly consisting of upper caste people. The colony of the protagonist is attacked by the mob. Houses are burnt down. The family of the protagonist starts getting smothered. They open the back door and run to save their lives. But the mob catches them one by one and

begins to butcher them. Five of his brothers are killed mercilessly for no fault of their own. Their fault has been that their brother loved a girl from the upper caste. The protagonist is left with nothing. The final conversation between the protagonist and Sunita discloses Sunita's arrogance and insensitivity. When one day he meets Sunita in the bus, he summons up courage and says to her, "This massacre took place on account of you." She replies, "I had no connection with it." And when he tries to make her realize that they had been in love, she replies heartlessly, "That was my mistake (77). One to this callousness and arrogance that emerged on account of hatred for the low-caste people, the protagonist finds "Sunita even crueller than the murderers" (78).

Likewise, "Rajni" (Limbale 79) is a story where caste is given importance over any feeling of love and friendship. Here the mother of the protagonist is a Brahmin whereas his father is a Mahar an outcaste. Though the mother is married off to a Mahar, she has consciously experienced the cultural abyss herself. So she is not ready to get her daughter married to a Maratha lecturer. As for Rajni, despite the protagonist's hopes of marriage, she declines, mainly citing the reason that her father was an orthodox Hindu.

All these women in Limbale's stories are insensitive and apathetic. Their portrayal is sans empathy. They are beautiful, mere objects of desire representing the pride and prestige of the upper caste community to which they belong. In each story, having a theme of love relationship a Dalit boy desiring to marry an upper-caste girl ends up in disaster not for his own self but to the entire Dalit community in the neighbourhood. It is due to this hegemony of caste that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar too stated in *Annihilation of caste* that 'caste' had made Hindu society sick. He rightly says that caste cannot and has not improved the race. Caste has however done one thing. It has completely disorganised and demoralised the Hindus. (40-41)

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