

# Indian Dalit Literature: Alienation and Loss in Dalit experience of Modernity

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## **Abstract**

The term 'Dalit' is synonymous with poor, exploited, oppressed and needy people. In every civilized society, there are some types of inequalities that lead to social discrimination. And in India, it comes in the garb of Casteism'. The dalits are deprived of their fundamental rights of education, possession of assets and right to equality. Thus Dalit Literature emerges to voice for all those oppressed, exploited and marginalized communities who endured this social inequality and exploitation for so long. The major concern of Dalit Literature is the emancipation of Dalits from this ageless bondage of slavery. Dalits use their writings as a weapon to vent out their anger against the social hierarchy which is responsible for their degradation. Indian Dalit literature, which can be traced back to a corpus of writings from Maharashtra in the 1960s, refers to literature of the oppressed, usually associated with a diverse group of people historically considered the lowest among the Indian population and known as "untouchables." This Dalit consciousness and self-realization about their identity has been centrally focused in various vibrant and multifarious creative writings and is also widely applauded in the works of Mahasweta Devi, Bama, Arjun Dangle, D. Gopi, Ajay Navaria and in many more. The anguish represented by the Dalit writers is not that of an individual but of the whole outcast society. The primary concern of present paper is to show how Dalit writers shatter the silence surrounding the unheard exploitation of Dalits in our country in their writings. And how Dalit Literature has become a vehicle of explosion of these muffled voices. The paper makes an attempt to comprehend the vision and voice of the Dalits and their journey from voiceless and passive objects of history to self-conscious subject. It also focusses on Dalit experience of modernity as shown in Navaria's short stories.

**Keywords:** Self-realization, Identity, Exploitation, Caste, Subaltern

## **Introduction**

### **Dalit**

Etymologically, the word "Dalit" is derived from Sanskrit word "Dalita" - means "oppressed." In Indian socio-cultural context, they were untouchables and below Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. The untouchables were referred as "Chandala" or "Avarna" in ancient period. The words "Untouchable" or "Harijan" was used by Narasimha Mehta and Mahatma Gandhi during 20th century. The word "Exterior Castes" is used by the famous historian J.H. Hutton at international level for these untouchables. "Dalit," a word that refers "ground" collects under its umbrella numerous groups that move at the margins. This is a self-chosen word derived from the Sanskrit and Marathi word for ground down, broken, that is oppressed. It is used to indicate that untouchability

is imposed by others, not a result of inherent pollution. It is also used to include all the deprived and oppressed of India.

Though clannish elements were visible as early in the 11th century, actual Dalit Literary Movement started in the 1960s in Marathi literature and later on infiltrated to Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Tamil and Hindi literature. Dalit writers initiated a realistic, experience-based and authentic literature which threatened the upper class hegemony in society. The anger, sorrow and the indomitable will and hope of Dalit protagonists were offered in a tongue which was often vulgar. The Dalit writers of different states in India share a collective relationship to a common cause, a common identity, and a common political stance.

"Dalit literature" is a slippery term that is regularly applied to wildly diverse notions of what constitutes both "Dalit" and "literature." In their 1973 Dalit Panther Manifesto, the Dalit Panthers famously defined the meaning of Dalit broadly: "Who is a Dalit? Members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion". Dalit Literature is at once the expression of "Dalit consciousness" about identity (both individual and communal), human rights and human dignity, and the community, as well as the discursive supplement to a ground-level sociopolitical movement that seeks redress for historically persistent oppression and social justice in the present. While its origins are often deemed to be coterminous with the movement dating back to the reformist campaigns in several parts of India during the 19th century, contemporary researchers have found precursors to both the Dalit consciousness and literary expressions in poets and thinkers of earlier eras, such as the saint-poets in the Punjab. Dalit literature's later development has also run alongside political movements such as the Indian freedom struggle, even as B. R. Ambedkar's campaign on behalf of what were then called the "depressed classes" intersected, sometimes fractiously, with the Indian National Congress, Mahatma Gandhi, and others in the struggle. Ambedkar's own voluminous writings and speeches, tracts of various social and reformer organizations, debates, and letters also stimulated the literary. Hindi Dalit writer Kusum Meghval takes a less inclusive and more traditional stance in her book, *Hindi Upantyd Sommerh Dalit Varg* (Dalit class in Hindi Novels): "The use of Dalit class has been accepted for those traditionally thought of as Shudras in India. Dalit society consists of those castes who exist on a base level and who have been persecuted for centuries."

Similarly, the term literature has been applied variously to include Dalit renderings of traditional genres such as poetry, autobiography, short and long fiction, and drama, and it is frequently extended as far as political tracts, histories. For example, critic Digish Mehta describes Dalit literature as "writing contributed by members of the Dalit class, bearing witness in authentic terms to their experiences of deprivation." Although Dalit writing can be traced centuries back in Indian history, it received its impetus in the 20th century, especially in the form of a separate identity as 'marginal literature' or Dalit literature—the term becoming a category for the Dalit rhetoric after its maiden usage in the 1958 Dalit Conference, Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Society. Dalit is a modern terminology, labelled by the community itself after the dawn of the literary movement of the 1950s-60s and the

rise of the Dalit Panthers, although it is also believed that Ambedkar had coined the word in his writings in *Bahishkrut Bharat* in 1928. Earlier attributed the names of untouchable or harijan, the Dalit identity took a new shape with their increased literary voice. The first significant example of Dalit writing in English translation appeared in Orient Longman's anthology of the literature of the Dalit Panthers, *Poisoned Bread* (Dangle 1992). He defines Dalit literature as: "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.

Owing largely to the contributions of the undisputed representative of Dalit identity Dr. B.R Ambedkar, Dalit literature began its journey with the defining and redefining of Ambedkarite thoughts, instituting their own literary aesthetics— a combination of reality marked strikingly through flavors of creativity. However, Dalit voice has also been brought to national importance by many non-Dalit writers who have taken utmost pain as well as pleasure to reconstruct Dalit experiences. Dalit literature thrives in Indian languages, and in multiple forms, although oral narratives and stories that are popular in gatherings and meetings remain largely uncollected. New forms such as the graphic novel have energized the field in recent years. The construction of the nationalist historiography of India has been overwhelmingly dominated by the mainstream literature, overshadowing the echoes of the unheard voices that have struggled for decades to create a space of knowledge of their own. Profoundly affected by marginality, the Dalit community in India has long stood the test of time in creating its own sphere of representation in the national literary discourse.

Recent scholarship in the expansive new field of Dalit studies has also made important contributions to our understanding of the role of Dalit activism and public culture in modern Indian history and contemporary society. The overwhelming majority of Dalit narratives that have been translated to English are autobiographies or life narratives. Similarly, much of the recent scholarship that has dealt with Dalit-authored narratives has privileged the genre of autobiography. Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) suggests that the sociological and activist import of Dalit testimonies lies in the fact that the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle" (13).

Though life narratives constitute an important category in Dalit literature, and a significant political claim for ownership of the power of expression, they are by no means the only, or even the majority of literary texts that Dalit writers produce. It is a field rich with short fiction, novels, poetry, and drama, all of which beg for analysis that goes beyond a salutary celebration of the authenticity of the voice of the oppressed. Departing from the focus on autobiography, this paper offers a literary analysis of the aesthetics, politics, and varied discourses of identity that constitute contemporary Hindi Dalit short stories, including the conscious formal decisions that Dalit writers make in the shape of their plots, the style of their characters' speech, and the language of their literary embellishments.

In her introduction to her English translation of Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003), for example, Arun Prabha Mukherjee argues that "a literary critic, reared in an educational system that taught a canon of literature focused solely on the privileged sections of society, whether of India or the West, must tread cautiously in this new territory, using the benchmarks provided by Dalit literary theory and continuously on guard against those kinds of formalist analyses that privilege form over content".

Dalit literary theory itself is too often dismissive, perhaps willfully so, of the diversity and complexity of the literary strategies employed by Dalit authors across a range of regional, linguistic, class, and gender identity positions. This arises from a strategic critical campaign, I think, to protect the boundaries of Dalit literature from dissimulation into multiple, individual authorial approaches that, when differentiated and divided, lose their unified political impact.

Sharankumar Limbale, for example, offers little scope for analysis of Dalit narratives as purposefully constructed literary texts when he writes in his book. 'Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature', that "the reality of Dalit literature is distinct, and so is the language of this reality. It is the uncouth-impolite language of Dalits. It is the spoken language of Dalits. This language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar. Standard language has a class. Dalit writers have rejected the class of this standard language. Dalit writers have rejected (the) validation of standard language by the cultured classes because it is arrogant."

While the Dalit critical imperative thus contain and differentiate Dalit writing from mainstream writing (that has always excluded Dalit voices, even while purporting to represent their reality) is understandable and even laudable, it does a disservice to the continued growth and development of important new Dalit literary voices across various Indian languages. The Hindi literary works review clearly show that a simplistic interpretation of the difference of Dalit writing from more mainstream or elite categories of literature is not at all reflective of the nuanced, complex, and diverse literary reality of contemporary Dalit writing in India. I argue that modern Dalit literature in fact exhibits a nuanced treatment of literary language and an intentional approach to narrative form that not only deserves close critical attention but that also allows for a more careful understanding of the interstices of Dalit activism, "consciousness," and literary expression. The "resistance of these texts is thus not in the rejection of those conventions labeled by Limbale as pretentious" but rather their strategic and self-conscious adaptation, and it is important that we pay attention to these adaptations if we are to understand the full range of innovative narrative styles of resistance developed in Dalit writing.

While the Dalit literary movement has had an important socio-political and literary impact in various Indian linguistic regions, there has been little sustained scholarly attempt to situate this writing within modern and contemporary critical frameworks. Existing scholarship on Dalit literature tends to stress this writing's difference from more mainstream Indian writing by emphasizing its characteristics of resistance, anger, and caustic realism, simplistically assuming the univocality of the Dalit literary voice.

The regular participation of several Dalit writers at the Jaipur Literature Festival since 2010, including two Hindi authors-Omprakash Valmiki and Ajay Navaria-suggests the rapidly rising profile of Dalit literature

across India and transnationally. In her report on the discussions of Dalit writing at the prominent annual lit-fest for the English language news magazine Tehelka in 2010. Journalist Trisha Gupta writes that "newer work by Ajay Navaria and P. Sivakami alongside Valmiki and Gaikwad showed that Dalit writing-while still clinging to the power of rhetoric-is ready, too, to embrace a variety of literary aesthetics." Dalit authors wield diverse aesthetic and stylistic tools in the construction of political consciousness. I focus on the popular genre of the short story for two principal reasons, First, I want to acknowledge both the long history and enduring popularity of the short story in both Dalit literature and modern Hindi literature in general. Second, narratives as tightly configured as short stories offer clear evidence of the ways in which Dalit writers manipulate and create distinct narrative styles.

For the majority of Dalit writers, the specific demands of this consciousness are what define Dalit literature as distinct from narratives written from outside" or "inauthentic" perspectives that claim to represent Dalit subjectivity. Most Dalit writers agree that there is a fundamental difference between the ways Dalit characters often become objectified and aestheticized in the roles of sympathetic objects in non-Dalit writing, and the agentive and transformative roles as subjects they are committed to shaping for themselves in their own literature. In S. Anand's *Touchable Tales*, a collection of interviews with writers, publishers, and critics of Dalit literature, Marathi author Narendra Jhadav compares the difference between Dalit literature and the empathetic writing about Dalits by non-Dalits as "the difference between a mother's love and a wet nurse's love." More stridently, Tamil Dalit writer Sivkami explains, "I hold that non-Dalit writers emerge as self-styled autocrats passing adverse judg. ments on Dalit life, or that they use Dalits as toys to tickle a few strange nerves of their readers. -

In a classic example, the character of Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (originally published in 1935) is severely limited by his own small intelligence in understanding the full extent of his social marginalization, suggesting that untouchables are incapable of becoming agents of their own emancipation because they cannot intellectually identify the systemic sources of their own oppression, mired as they are in the "experience" of untouchability. More than sixty years later, in her international bestseller, *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy aestheticizes the untouchable character Velutha, endowing him with a body made "beautiful" (rather than broken) by his labor: "As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labor had shaped him... Had given him his strength, his supple grace. This beauty and simplicity ("His white, sudden smile... his only luggage") attracts the high caste Ammu to Velutha, after which his emergent revolutionary politics as a member of the Communist Party in Kerala are domesticated by their transgressive sexual relationship. Described by L. Chris Fox as a martyrology of the abject," the novel's anti-caste politics are expressed through the traumatic horror of witnessing the violent destruction of Velutha's beautiful body by the beatings of the police. Yet this is a politics that denies Velutha agency outside of remaining a martyr, a symbolic locus around which other (nonDalit) agents for social change can focus their empathy.

Turning to a Hindi example, a clear distinction can be seen between the narrative approaches of Premchand (in his story *Dudh ka Dam*, or "The Price of Milk," originally published in 1934) and Dalit author and critic Omprakash Valmiki (in his autobiography. Joothan, 1997). Premchand's story is about a little "sweeper" boy, Mangal, who grows up sickly, as his mother is the wet nurse for the baby of an upper-caste family, and is eventually orphaned around age five. Mangal subsequently grows up and, as Premchand points out, becomes healthy and robust by eating the discarded food scraps (juthan) of this same upper-caste boy who was raised on Mangal's mother's milk. Although he is aware of the irony and the injustice that have defined his unfortunate life "There was no lack of food, but yes, it still made him feel bad when the food was dropped down from above into his clay bowls. Everybody else ate from fine plates, and yet there were only clay bowls for him!", Mangal nevertheless submits himself to his fate with the companionship of an abused stray dog that Premchand uses as a heavy-handed allegory for the desperate plight and ultimate helplessness of the untouchables. At the end of the story, though Mangal has vowed to starve rather than eat these scraps, he changes his mind and returns to grovel at the door of his "benefactors." As Premchand writes, when Mangal once again begs for and receives the juthan, "Mangal looked at (the servant who brought him the scraps) with eyes filled with deep gratitude."

While Premchand evokes Mangal's situation as a source of empathy and the recognition of, and possibly outrage at, injustice in his story, Valmiki alternatively sees his mother's angry denial of her own humiliation as the revolutionary spark that defines (and consequently titles) his life's journey out of the mental slavery of untouchability. As Shashi Bhushan Updhyay explains in an apologia of the treatment of untouchability in Premchand's works, "The child and the dog have become one, the human and the animal have been united in the great fraternity of discrimination and deprivation. But Debjani Ganguly points out that Valmiki's autobiography and other Dalit narratives alternatively develop the possibility of personhood" for Dalit subjects. She writes, "Dalit life narratives in late modern India play a critical role in enabling the untouchable castes to imagine a coherent community of oppressed individuals, honed in the hellfire of caste persecution and emerging as 'persons in their own right in the process.'"

Premchand's story also figures prominently in a short story by Delhi based Dalit Ajay Navaria, "Uttar katha" (translated in a recent collection as "Hello Premchand!"). Navaria's story retells the story of young Mangal, referencing and re-writing the fates of several of Premchand's Dalit characters from his stories that feature them. In this savvy and literarily reflective story-within-a-story, an editor meets the specters of Premchand and Ambedkar and types a story meant as a "responding story" (uttar katha) to Premchand's "Price of Milk." This story does in fiction what so many Dalit authors-including Navaria-do in their critical writings. That is, it intervenes in a modern literary history of upper-caste writing about Dalits that treats them with sympathy but relegates them to positions of compliance. The Premchand look-alike "responds to a single line quoted from "The Price of Milk", "Whatever else may change in this world, Bhangis will always remain Bhangis. But in this new story, a Bhangi does not in fact remain so; instead, he is educated, leaves his village, becomes a government

official, and returns to his village triumphant and looking for love. This is a story enriched by its insight into the power of Dalit writers to change the very literary landscape Dalit characters have typically inhabited. It is the stance of the literary critic, fictionalized.

In Navaria's literal re-visioning of Premchand's story, the orphan boy Mangal is buoyed by both his mother's dream that he transcend his supposed fate as a Bhangi and "will only do work that brings him respect." as well as a community of relatives and teachers and well-wishers who encourage his education, landing him finally in the role of a government official. Telling cameo appearances are made as well by a host of characters from Premchand's other famous narratives that explicitly address the issue of caste, including Ghisu and Madhav from "The Shroud" ("Kafan", 1936), Halku from January Night" ("Pūs ki Rāt", 1930), Gangi and Jokhu from "The Thakur's Well" ("Thakur ka kuām", 1932), and Ghasiram from "Deliverance" ("Sadgati", 1931). All of these characters face a completely different treatment in Navaria's story than they did in Premchand's stories. Unsympathetic upper-caste characters in Premchand's stories become champions of Dalits in Navaria's rendition. Dalit characters consigned to death or a hopeless existence in Premchand's stories are resurrected, educated, and politicized in "Hello, Premchand!"

At the end of Navaria's story, Mangal is on his way back to his village, returning triumphantly as a respected government official to the place where his mother once shoveled shit. The story is set in a peculiar frame in which a young editor meets the specters of both Premchand and Ambedkar who give him these rejoinders (uttar katha) to the narratives of pity and condescension and fetishization that have dominated literary representations of Dalits from Premchand to Roy. Navaria's story is a critical appraisal of the treatment of caste in modern Indian literature, a literal re-writing of literary history and rethinking of literary possibility as well as a recasting of the supposed inevitability of caste identities in modern India.

In Premchand's story, Mangal and the stray dog are presented as one and the same, whipped into submission and cast aside. But Navaria's and other Dalit narratives alternatively develop the possibility of personhood" for Dalit subjects. And therein lies the difference in most Dalit writing. Charging that non-Dalit writers, however sympathetic, use the Dalit character as an object of empathic connection and subsequently locate the impetus for social change outside of that Dalit object, Dalit writers instead seek to Invest their characters with subjectivity and the power to resist, rebel, and change. This is Dalit consciousness.

My beloved kid Piloo hanging upside down-it was a terrifying sight. Kaka had flayed his hide. In just a short while my leaping-jumping Piloo had been reduced to a pile of meat. Soon customers would buy his meat from the shop. Someone would buy his testicles, someone his head, and someone else his trotters. Some poor tanner's wife would buy his entrails to satisfy his alcoholic husband's desire and to fill her hungry children's stomachs. No one would remember my bounding Piloo, my sweet kid goat.

This vivid description of the butchering of a kid goat through a child's eyes, and the growing awareness in this young boy's consciousness of the gulf of meaning between the boisterous antics of a cuddly kid goat and

the sum of its (body) parts in the meat market, comes from the story "Sacrifice" ("Bali") by Delhi-based Dalit author Ajay Navaria. In his participation in the killing and dismembering of his beloved kid, the boy undergoes his first experience of alienation, a narrative theme prevalent throughout Navaria's fictional narratives. This traumatic moment is the beginning of a distancing of the protagonist from the traditional occupation of his family (butchering), and eventually a physical distancing from his family's village and a social and psychological distancing from their ways of thinking and identifying themselves in society. The emotion of this passage underscores a salient theme: the emotional toll that this alienation (from home, family, and traditional belief systems and social practices) takes on the protagonist, who remains as scarred by this separation as he is liberated from the strictures of his "old" caste identity

Navaria's stories do indeed exhibit allegiance to the stylistics of Dalit consciousness, particularly in his transparent sermons about the injustices meted out to Dalits in feudal village society or about the gender equality among Dalit communities versus the cruel patriarchy of Brahminical society. Navaria's characters are true, rounded characters, rather than archetypal stand-ins representing an entire community, and they often undergo emotional and psychological transformations in the course of the narrative. Navaria's stories address the crisis of identity that befalls middle-class Dalits who have achieved a relative level of professional and material status in the modern Indian city. His characters are educated and politicized, comfortable speaking in the modern vernacular of the urban Indian, steeped in Ambedkarite religious and social theory, and patrons of the institutions of capitalist modernization, such as fast-food restaurants and mobile phone dealers. An ideological impulse is behind all of Navaria's writing, a clarity of vision that shapes his short fiction and sets it at the forefront of contemporary Hindi literature. His resistant spirit draws the reader in his strident critique of casteist social hierarchies and the clear-eyed perception of the violence these social hierarchies inflict on family relationships and individual psyches, Navaria stands alone in contemporary Hindi literature for his analytical, sensitive narrative treatment of the modern urban Dalit male. Despite being himself a modern, educated, urban Dalit male, Navaria does not intend his stories to be interpreted as autobiographical, although they are clearly informed by his own experiences and experiments in self-understanding.

Navaria's richly imagined prose proves that literary aesthetics is central to contemporary Hindi Dalit literary production. We look to his stories to understand how Dalit authors wield aesthetic and stylistic tools in the construction of political consciousness. In his own self-analysis, Navaria aligns himself with a tradition of fearless writers who express their dreams and convictions even in the face of social approbation. He writes in his introduction to his first published book, the short story collection *Pat Katha s and Other Stories*:

My stories are the creative works of my dreams. For your convenience you can call them stories, but to understand them fully, you can think of them as dreams. Can such dreams be dreamed in Indian culture and society and not be understood as anti-social and anti-religious? Should an author quit dreaming in fear of religious decrees or fatwas? Should he give it up? I have chosen courage for myself from our tradition of fearlessness.



He suggests that his stories are like "bridges," passageways to new terrains of consciousness that he invites readers to cross with him. He does not force them, however, and leaves his more strident political messages for nonliterary realms:

A story for me is a bridge between the private and the public. The author crosses this bridge and invites others to come across it themselves as well. This minimal activism could irritate some, but on an artistic level a more activist stance than this would be the death of the work for me. The integrity of a work should not be compromised, maybe this is why I chose other areas for stronger social critique. Navaria's purposeful complication of ideas of heroism, innocence, enlightenment, progress, and the like that are increasingly understood as normative.

The paper focuses on the three short stories of Ajay Navaria namely 'Subcontinent' ('Upmahadvip', 2004), 'Sacrifice' ('Bali', 2004) and 'Eternal Law' ('Es Dhamm Sanantano', 2003). The stories are unique in their theoretical considerations of alienation, as well as the physical and figurative distance between rural and urban Indian spaces. Furthermore, they evince conventions of literary modernism in order to effect a reconsideration of the promise of modernity and the secular foundations of the nation-state to deliver Dalits from marginalization. Navaria's texts are characterized by structural innovation, including obfuscating language that creates a sense of alienation, as well as regular constructions of flashbacks, sequences of both narrative and traumatic memory, and liminal temporalities.

Navaria's stories can be read as narratives of alienation, accounts of complex negotiations with the modern, and meditations on the widening gap between urban and rural spaces and their attendant social and political ideologies in the Indian subcontinent. Navaria's stories make it clear that the transition from village to city, from feudal caste hierarchies to the pseudo-equality of a secular modernity, is fraught with conflict. Significantly, this conflict is domestic and personal; it is manifested in intergenerational divisions, misunderstandings, and aggression, or with a pervasive sense of alienation from oneself, one's community, and one's environment. These stories are not cautionary tales about the dangers of leaving family, home, and tradition for a stake in the promise of casteless, classless, undifferentiated, and universal" subject hood of the modern nation-state, but rather are introspective meditations on the losses of self and community that necessarily come with doing so.

Dalits produce literature that discusses the reality of caste-based oppression, thereby disallowing comfortable, "modern" conceptions of the caste-free, class-free, secular nation of universal citizen-subjects in modern, independent, democratic India. This leads Aditya Nigam (2000) to argue that Dalits are waging a critique of modernity. Nigam writes,

...the dalit has emerged-not merely as the object whose history 'we' secular historians and scholars can now write, but as the subject who writes her own history. It is this emergence of the dalit as the subject-object of another history-one that falls outside the reckoning of secular/nationalist historians that we must now deal with.

Navaria's treatment of alienation is different from that which characterizes most other Dalit literature, however, Navaria's characters are alienated from themselves: from their past, their origins, and their family and often even their present. His stories explore alienation within the Dalit character who, by all appearances, has achieved the ideal of a modern casteless identity. This kind of alienation is, as Frederic Jameson has suggested, a common feature of the "late capitalist culture critique... the expression of a pathos inherent in the traditional romantic diatribe against 'modernity' and its ills".

Modernity for Dalits in the colonial period meant new opportunities for advancement through increased access to education as well as professional development in the British army, while in the last generation or two, institutionalized systems of reservations and affirmative action have allowed a minority of Dalits to establish a middle-class population in Indian urban centers, increased political participation, and facilitated a wider dissemination of the rhetoric of self-awareness and community liberation. Phule and Ambedkar embraced modernity as the route to emancipation for Dalits, and the post-Ambedkar generation of Dalit writers and politicians have stayed true to this pro-modernity ideology, citing education, secularization, and political participation as the most promising avenues for Dalit advancement.

### **Dalit bodies in urban spaces**

Navaria manipulates the trope of alienation in his short fiction, bending it to serve multiple uses. He may not be the first Dalit writer to do so, but he does employ formal strategies in extraordinarily novel ways that heighten the impact of the alienation theme.

Navaria's stories suggest that the entry of the narrative subject into the modern does not lead to a dissolution of the body, but rather a state of alienation from it, and from the extended bodies of one's family and community. The "modern" in Navaria's fiction can be replaced here by the term urban, as the city is, in all of his stories, representative of social, political, educational and economic opportunity. The modernity of the educated, urban Dalit is signified in additional ways, with references to technology, equitable gender roles in the domestic sphere, and the use of English words embedded in Hindi prose. Publisher and journalist S. Anand has suggested that the selective use of English vocabulary by Dalit authors is "symbolic of all things modern," and the access of Navaria's Dalit characters to mobile phones, cars, and other forms of technology represent not only a level of middle-class economic status but also a conversant relationship with the tools and toys of modern civilization. But Navaria's characters do not have a comfortable relationship with their middle-class positioning within modern, urban spaces and all their technological and professional accoutrements, and this unease creates alienation. Navaria's characters go through the motions of modern, secular life, but they are not entirely comfortable in it. Their disquiet emerges in a kind of suspension of control and awareness of the physical body, or an alienation of the mind from the physical self. This does not, perhaps, qualify as a full-blown critique of modernity, but it does offer a rather more complicated look at its promise of an unmarked subjectivity unmediated by caste, class, or religious identity.

Gopal Guru (2004) has pointed out that while Gandhi called for the preservation of the idealized village society, Ambedkar encouraged Dalits to go to the city to work, to escape the feudal backwardness of the village and gain representation in India's march toward modern nationhood. But Guru suggests that with the inequitable distribution of material wealth, only the higher classes decide who has access to the modern and who does not, and Dalits continue to be relegated to the margins of modern society. The characters in these stories and poems are at the bottom of caste and class urban hierarchies, living in slums, and struggling daily for survival.

Playwright Vijay Tendulkar evoked the nature of the Dalit body in the urban space as it exists in Dhasal's groundbreaking poetry collection *Golpitha*.

This is the world of days or nights; of empty or half-full stomachs; of the pain of death; of tomorrow's worries; of men's bodies in which shame and sensitivity have been burned out; of overflowing gutters; of a sick young body, knees curled to belly against the cold of death, next to the gutter; of the jobless; of beggars; of pickpockets...

The conflicts of the educated, middle-class Dalit in an urban space are indeed the focus of much of Navaria's fiction, particularly his short story "Subcontinent." These characters have a much less tortured relationship with the urban experience, having benefited from the institutionalized avenues of social advancement such as reserved seats in education and government sectors, and yet they retain a subject position that is still at a remove from full citizenship. This story demonstrates Navaria's particular strategies in presenting alienation, including flashbacks, detailed description of setting, and constructions of liminality.

Navaria's stories, in their focus on the urban, educated Dalit individual, rather than the rural community, represent this shift toward multiple perspectives. Again, the contemporary Hindi Dalit literary counterpublic sphere is characterized by its multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and narrative forms. To cite Nigam once more, "If we listen attentively to the voices from within, we can hear precisely their refusal-despite heavy investments in the modern-to be willing parts of the two great artifacts of our modernity, namely, secularism and the nation.... belonging as it does to this instance of crisis, both in the manner and the moment of the emergence of the new Dalit assertion direct(s) us to read it as a critique of modernity."

In conclusion, a detailed consideration of three of Ajay Navaria's short stories-'Subcontinent', 'Sacrifice', and 'Eternal Law' has clarified the themes and aesthetics of contemporary Hindi Dalit literature. In his employment of memory that is both traumatic and nostalgic, experimental constructions of language that often purposefully obfuscate the meaning of the text and distance the reader from the characters, and narrative details of disquiet to create a pervading sense of alienation, Navaria has challenged the aesthetic exigencies established by the predominant architects of the Hindi Dalit literary counterpublic.

Further, Navaria's fictions participate in a contemporary critique of modernity, not merely in their existence (Nigam), or simply as a means by which Navaria is inserting his "Dalit voice" into public discourse. Rather, the crises of identity and alienation of Navaria's characters point to a recognition of the impossibility of universal

subject hood-no "secular society" is truly secular-as well as acknowledge the personal and collective losses of self and community that are inevitable when we strive for an identification with the modern. Considering the critique, or perhaps complication, of modernity implicit in the collected literary strategies and thematic approaches in Navaria's three stories, we may consider them collectively as representing a kind of literary modernism. According to Monroe, "Modernism, as a strategy of alienation from modernity, alerts us to the arbitrariness of society's "arrangements," heightens our sense of sacrifice, and awakens us to the costs of seeing ourselves and our world in one way and not another." Navaria's stories alert us to personal challenges that arise, almost like a side effect, from embracing the opportunities for betterment, including education, political awareness, and material consumption. His focus is not society as a whole, but rather those elite Dalit protagonists who choose to re-envision their lives, who have the wherewithal to leave one world and make space for themselves in another.

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