

EMERGING CONSCIOUSNESS AND RESISTANCE : READING DALIT SHORT STORIES IN TRANSLATION

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Caste system has prevailed in India for a number of centuries together. The “subjugated”, “oppressed”, “untouchable”, “underprivileged” and similar terms in different languages like *chura*, *chamar*, *harijan* connote not only the manner of addressing the lower classes by the uppercastes, but they are derogatory words that explain the condition of people belonging to lower castes. The term “Dalit” represents the condition of such people more appropriately. Since Dalits, in the present strive towards an affirmation of their identity, they tend to identify with their own caste in order to highlight the age-old exploitation and seek a respectable acceptance of it amongst the other sections of society. (xviii “Introduction”, *Joothan*) The term *Dalit* is self-explanatory as it is derived from *dal*, an Indian lentil that is ground firmly to eat. As suggested by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in an Introduction to Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*:

...Dalit is a story of collective struggle for centuries. The term *Dalit* forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root *dal*, which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth, and it has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grains and lentils. Its metaphoric usage, still as a verb, is evident in descriptions of warfare and the vanquishing of enemies. (xviii Introduction *Joothan*)

Dalit is a sociological experience and the term is a political construct. *Dalit* movements have regarded literature as a methodology, a means of expression that has enabled them to share their experience with the non-dalit world. This serves two functions, one, the muted voices are heard, these voices are not whispers but loud shouts audible to the deaf ears of people belonging to upper castes and to other dominant groups. Two, Dalit literature is a conscious effort to awaken the slumberous generations of dalits themselves, who have lived in ignorance for a long time. Therefore, it becomes a means of creating awareness amongst the dominant and the oppressed groups who have remained silent for centuries. The real impetus evolved with the legacies of Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatama Phule. Dr. Ambedkar traced the origin of untouchability as a clash of two religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly when Hinduism asserted to be supreme and sort the supremacy through caste division. He says:

It was born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded the history of India and the study of which is so woefully neglected by students of Indian history.

(Ambedkar, “The Untouchables”)

The *Dalit* resistance took shape as a movement only after 1960’s, when already writers Baburao Bhagul, Bandhu Madhav,

Shankar Rao Kharat were writing. The Dalit youths were also inspired by the Black Panthers engaged in the struggle for liberation of the Afro-American slaves in the United States. An organization called Dalit Panthers was founded by a group of young Marathi activists who wrote about the experience of the Dalits. By this time, the term Dalit came into prominence. It was widely accepted by the Dalits. In 1992, A.C. Lal in his opening address to Dalit Solidarity Conference at Nagpur expressed his sentiments about the term Dalit. He calls it “a beautiful word” as:

...it transcends narrow, national and sectarian frontiers....because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations, and groanings of the entire cosmos. (Lal, Dalit Solidarity, xiii)

Therefore, Dalit experience is an experience of suffering and pain. It is the pain of separation, of being socially segregated. It needs to be understood as an experience of being an outcast, “the other”, the discriminated, the minority and socially isolated. This pain is a social pain inflicted through the cultural practices and religious norms which are strong factors that have led to discrimination of people. Dalit literature becomes a means of expression and resistance that serves to warn the upper castes. The fight of the Dalit is not with people alone but with certain institutions, such as religion, educational standards, cultural norms, that have participated largely in shaping up the mind set of society in its entirety. The term “Dalit Literature” can into existence only after 1958 conference. Arjun Dangle provides a complete account of how the term came into existence and about the category it catered to as follows:

...the 1958 conference discussed Dalit literature in detail and passed the following resolution: ‘Resolution No. 5—that the literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as “Dalit Literature” and realising its cultural importance, the universities and literary organisations should give it its proper place. (qtd in Dangle *Introduction* xxviii)

Thus, Dalit Literature had a definite purpose. Dangle also explains that Dalit Literature has a specific purpose, a movement to bring about change. He says that “...it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them; instead there is new thinking and a new point of view.”(Dangle, *Corpse*. vii-viii)

The objective of this paper is to study three short stories by different Marathi writers and to substantiate how Dalit Literature stands out as a literature of resistance than only as an expression of pain. The three short stories are *The Poisoned Bread* by Bandhumadhav, *Explosion* by Yogiraj Waghmare and *Promotion* by Arjun Dangle.

Bandhumadhav, a Marathi short story writer of the 1940’s - 50’s, also a Buddhist convert from a *Mahar*. His story *The Poisoned Bread* is about a phase beginning with an awakening amongst the Dalits and about the reaction of the upper castes against such an awakening. The upper castes took this to be a threat to their authority. The story raises a number of questions which were crucial to Dalit consciousness; at the same time, attempts have been made to resolve those conflicts that often led to confusion amongst the youth. It is interesting to know that the story reaches a resolution towards the

conclusion and, in a way, the resolving points in the story pave way for the youth that often acts as a guideline.

The story is about a small boy who visits his village and accompanies his grandfather, twelve years back, to Bapu Patil, a village landowner in order to work for him and beg for a larger share of *jowar*. But his expectations are not met due to the fact that the narrator argues with the landowner on the pretext of the status and position of the Mahar's in society when Patil humiliates him. Patil was irritated with the Dalit movements and their demands for equality. He retorts because of his own insecurity and the threat to his power in society. The very sight of the lower-caste Mahar's was considered to be unfortunate and when Patil tells Yetalya this, he replies meekly submitting to Patil as his obedient slave, "I am your begging Mahar and feel proud to be so." Patil retorts to this sarcastically as:

Don't give me that line , you're no longer the Mahar- Mangs of the good old days, to beg for your share of the corn. You are now Harijans! You've even started claiming equality, so I was told , eating and drinking with us at the city hotels. (Poisoned, 1)

The term "*Harijan*", meaning "Children of God", was designated to the untouchable by Mahatma Gandhi, who wanted to remove the blight of untouchables from India during the freedom struggle. Ironically, *harijan*'s have been denied entry in the temples, and the caste division was enforced by religious elitists where Brahmanism was the top most in the hierarchy. The term *harijan* seems to be controversial also because of two reasons, one, religion had no place for the lower castes and two , the term gives the untouchables an elevated status of divinity, which is an antithesis to their factual

position in the society. Perhaps, *harijan* for Gandhi fulfilled a political function which was required for a country already divided in several segments, to stand united in order to participate in the struggle for freedom. The acceptance of the untouchable as human beings remained a never ending struggle. The misconceptions that God created religion and thus the caste system became an important claim for the people of the upper caste. When Yetalya says that he is certainly not one of those challenging the order of God, he represents the older generations who have been victimized for centuries together. Towards the end of the story , his notions about submitting obediently to the social order change, when he is prepared to understand and accept the insidious political motives behind the legal reform concerning the land-rights. His transformation is evident in the sudden sense of dignity that he seems to have attained while conversing with his grandson.

The conflict in the story arises with the narrators aggressive reply to Patil. The narrator represents the new force and the voice of the new generation that is more aware of its own self-respect and dignity. The narrator retorts aggressively to Patil's remarks expressing his anger:

I could take it no more. I felt my cheeks burning. But I quelled my temper and, cutting Bapu Patil short in the middle of his fiery tirade, burst out, 'Patil , will you kindly tell me what you meant when you accused us of forgetting religion, abandoning our caste and of polluting the god? And if religion can't tolerate one human being treating another simply as a human being, what's the use of such an inhumane religion? And if our mere touch pollutes the gods, why were the

Mahars and Mangs created at all? And who, may I know, who indeed, created them? And would you please tell me the name of the god whom the Mahars and Mangs can claim as their own? (Poisoned, 2)

The narrator challenges the religious claims about the position of groups, when Patil alludes to Chokamela's position, who was a poet during Bhakti period. The narrator questions Patil "What's this "position" you're talking about, Patil? And whose position?" (Poisoned, 3) To this Patil delineates an order of hierarchy stating it in the descending order starting from the Brahmin, Maratha, fisherman, weaver, Mahar-Mang, Dhor and Cobbler. The narrator professes that everyone was equal and there was hardly any difference between anyone. This seems to have been influenced by the Buddhist's doctrine of religion. Dr. Ambedkar in his essay "Buddha or Karl Marx" spells out the Buddhist doctrine of equality in religion as he emphasizes that "14. All human beings are equal./15. Worth and not birth is the measure of man./16. What is important is high ideals and not noble birth." (7) This incident raises a debate around issues about religion and the function of religion particularly in context of Hinduism which professes caste divisions.

The grandfather and the grandson work for the whole day tilling the soil, but Patil doesn't pay them anything in return. The grandfather collects the stale bread crumbs lying near the pen which the cows had refused to eat. On their way back home, the grandson and grandfather share the experience of exploitation met by the Dalits at the hand of the landowners. The grandfather expresses his feelings as:

...will the Mahars and Mangs never be happy? What a humiliating life we live! Do you think I feel happy about

being oppressed by the landlords and the rest of the villagers? I too want to retaliate and have a good fight for the humiliation and injustice they have been piling upon us....I am helpless! I see no end to this suffering. (Poisoned, 5)

To this Mhadeva replies that the hereditary land-rights have restricted the Mahars from doing independent business since they've been fed on the charity of others all their life. He asks "What achievement can we boast of? All that comes from begging is more begging?" (Poisoned, 5). The only solution that Mhadeva suggests is to get rid of the hereditary holding by abandoning it. The question that arises from this assertion is that if Mahars abandon the land-right then how would they survive. To this Mhadeva explains that Mahars should:

...stop begging under the pretext that we are getting our rightful share of corn. And instead of enslaving ourselves from the land-bondage and learn to live independently, with a sense of pride.(Poisoned, 6)

The grandfather Yetalya is convinced with the words of his grandson. He took out a few crumbs from his sack and threw them towards the dogs near his house, when his wife comes out gathers all those crumbs and prepares *dulli* with them. The entire family feeds on the *dulli* prepared with the crumbs. The grandfather falls sick due to the food poisoning caused by the stale crumbs. The grandfather succumbed to his health and died. But, the turning point in the story is the message that he gives to his grandson. He says that:

...never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the

Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man...(Poisoned, 7)

These words serve as a warning and a message to the new generations of the Mahar community. This is a moment of “Dalit Consciousness” (Limbale 32) that is “the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus.”(Limbale, 32) Interestingly, the discourse in the story gives rise to the debate that is most relevant to the social and the legal system that has influenced the life of the Dalits and the underprivileged for centuries together. The land-rights for the Mahars have failed to contribute to the growth of the Mahars rather it has strengthened the position of the landowners. The land-right has only weakened the position of the Mahars, who have become like the bonded laborers providing a life time service to the land owners.

The title “The Poisoned Bread” is about , the stale bread that is symbolic of the poisonous caste division which has poisoned the society slowly. The story begins as a recall, this recall is remembering the unforgettable past. The memory is not an accidental remembrance of the past but is a conscious recall of a period that repeats itself like a cycle every year since twelve years. The incident took place at the time of harvest. Harvesting signifies a time of action when the yield is ready and the job of winnowing and treading out the corn at the threshing floor. Metaphorically, the grandfather is threshed out and the grandson is the newly formed corn, the yield from the field , that is ripe and ready for consumption. Similarly so, the grandfather’s life is the cost he pays for the betterment of the new generations. The only thing that is comforting in the story is that the

grandfather dies as a self awakened and a consciously aware man , not as an ignorant, subservient servant of the landlord.

This story brings out the problems of uneducated old villagers, particularly the grandfather who sees hope in future and advises his grandson to acquire education and defeat the age-old caste system. But the problem seems to be more serious than what it appears on the surface. In another story, “Explosion” by Yogiraj Waghmare (1970s) highlights the problems of educated lower castes. Yogiraj Waghmare has been an activist and one of the pioneers who participated in Dalit Literary movements. He wrote major works around 1970’s. His story is about the struggle of the educated Dalits for employment. Where on one hand, there is a hope that education might be a solution to all problems, on the other education has added up more frustration on the pretext of caste division, unemployment and poverty. Shetiba was a young matriculate who had been in search of a job for past three years but his efforts resulted into a naught. The story is about helplessness of Shetiba and his father Sheku who were living in dire poverty. Despite all resistance, Sheku provided education to his son. He explains that:

...When no other child from the Mahar community was sent to school, I sent Shetiba....It’s three years since Shetiba did his matriculation, yet he is without work. He’s been desperately looking for a job, without success. (Explosion, 20)

On a particular day, Sheku waited for Shetiba’s return to the village from the city, where he had gone for an interview. Shetiba was a well dressed boy who exhibited the civility of educated people. The father declines his son’s comparison with the cowherds and announces

proudly that he is a smart boy clad in white shirt and trousers. Shekhu's insecurity about the son is not out of a filial care alone, but is based on a number of untoward instances towards the lower castes. The setting of the story pronounces a very dark and gloomy atmosphere of the evening that has fallen. This is synonymous to the utter distress and disappointment that the Shekhu and his son are going through in their life. They had been living in utter poverty and had no recluse. Their only hope was Shetiba's job but nothing seemed to settle down for them. The story is accompanied with gaps of silence and speech that depicts the uncomfortable and distressful thoughts, feeling of dejection and inability to communicate and express on part of Shetiba about his repeated failure to get a job. Everybody in the family expects Shetiba to speak until his father could not bear the silence any longer and asked him if the work was done? The silence had been haunting Sheku and had won the curiosity and anxiety of the entire family:

When she served Shetiba his dinner, all the children sat around his *thali* and began to eat. No one spoke. The calm silence was occasionally broken by the clamouring of the kids. Sheku could not bear the silence. What had come out of Shetiba's visit to the factory at Dhoki? Did he get the job? So many questions crowded his mind. Questions that Shetiba alone could answer. But Shetiba was silent. Sheku could not figure out what had happened. He longed for Shetiba to speak. He was yearning to hear the outcome of the visit. (Explosion 18)

Even his wife Pami who had cuddled in a corner in the darkness was uncomfortable that her husband would not speak and the children

too were quite. Then Shetiba replied "No". (Explosion 18) The tune of the negation that is "no" was like ripples being created in the silence. The family was living through dire poverty as the wife consumed the left over morsels of her children and water for dinner. Thus depicting how women were doubly marginalised on the caste level and also on the basis of gender.

Sheku also explains that they were going through a bad time and at times they had to go without food for two days at a stretch. Shetiba's education had given a sudden hope to the family though the aspirations were not big enough to be accomplished. Sheku expected his son to get any job if not "as a clerk, school teacher, *talati or gramsevak*, he would get a job as a peon..." (Explosion 19). The day before he had gone to be interviewed for a post of a watchman. Outside the Dhoki factory lorries were being loaded with dregs from the machine and molasses. Shetiba couldn't bear the sight and felt sick. He read a sign board stating "Wanted coolies to carry molasses" (Explosion 19). Shetiba moved away from that sight. But now Sheku was determined to meet the village men and ask for his share of scavenging which he had let go years back. He explained about his pitiful condition to the villagers and begged for his right of scavenging. Shetiba was bewildered and protested to this. That night he felt sick and passed away, leaving behind the grieving father, mother, his wife and children who were already wrung by poverty. Before his death he had told his mother that he agreed to do any kind of work, he was even ready to carry molasses.

The story focuses on the fact that even education could not bring in a change for the people of lower classes and lower castes. Rather it aggravated the situation for Shetiba who was more hopeful and expected a change in the

social conditions around him. Contrary to any change, Shetiba's condition is worsened and he had to finally lose his life. The story describes the surroundings, condition and difficult situations faced by the Dalits. Though there are no voices of resistance but the story is educative enough for a readership that is completely detached from the reality of the lower castes. The story also depicts the depletion of nation and brings shame to such a nation which has such incongruities within it. It seems true that the idea of freedom catered to a particular section of society and neglected as well as excluded the majority of masses. Such a perception from the Dalit's position, questions the whole idea of formation of nation and its development. With this the politics of exclusion gets highlighted, aspects of state-formation where the malnourished, the sick, the unemployed, the poor and the lower castes remain unattended. The bare bodies and hungry stomach of Shetiba's children, and other members of the family announce the failure of the entire system be it cultural, social, religious or political. Shetiba's death anticipates the downfall of the nation as younger generation perish leaving the older and the children in unmeetable circumstances. Shetiba's plight is the plight of the entire community. Failing to get any decent job the choices left for him are either scavenging or loading moleasses. The suffering inflicted on the family is an age-old suffering which the generations have experienced. Therefore, the depiction of suffering in Dalit Literature is a collective representation than that of an individual's subjective experience. Limbale explains:

It is not the pain of any one person, nor is it of just one day—it is the anguish of many thousands of people, experienced over thousands of years.

Therefore, it is expressed collectively. The anguish of Dalit Literature is not that of an individual but of the entire outcast society. This is the reason why it has assumed a social character. (31)

In the story there is a hope that education will be a recourse to all problems but the struggle doesn't stop here. Arjun Dangle's "Promotion" brings out the complexity of the problem. Arjun Dangle, a founder member of militant Dalit youth organization. His contribution to Dalit Literature is remarkable. He won the Maharashtra State Award in 1978. *Promotion* is about the humiliation and discrimination met by an educated and successful Dalit on pretext of reservation for his caste. The story revolves around Waghmare who has been promoted to a post of Assistant Purchase Officer in the Purchase Department of Railway. Waghmare superseded Godbole who was older to him in age. Waghmare's promotion was due to 33% reservation policy, due to this Godbole did not respect him:

'Does Godbole respect you?'

'He doesn't. And I suppose it's quite natural that he should resent the fact that I've been promoted to the post of Assistant Purchase Officer, though I'm junior to him.'

'Listen, it's only now that we are being promoted to the 'Saheb' positions in this 33% category. But remember these other people have enjoyed the privilege of being 100% reserved category for centuries. Doesn't that mean anything to you?'

(Promotion 23)

This was a conversation between Awale and Waghmare. Waghmare always relied on Awale whenever reservation related issues disturbed him. Awale was also an activist and an active

participant in the Backward Class Worker's Association. He inquires why Waghmare didn't attend the association's meetings? Waghmare ignores the query and returns back to his work. Towards the evening, Waghmare leaves to go home from his office. He intentionally misses the 5.05 pm local train as Awale traveled in that train. He was very noisy and spoke loudly while traveling. Though he was entitled to a first class, Awale chose to travel in the second class with his friends from backward classes. Waghmare also remembers how his friend Gaekwad greeted him loudly calling out "Jai Bheem", at which he was watched closely by his co-passengers. That day Waghmare took a 5.15pm train in order to avoid all passengers.

Waghmare has risen to a position where he didn't want to be identified with people of his class and caste. He felt that since he was promoted he should behave like the sophisticated elitist class equivalent to his status. While returning back home, he remembered that he wanted to see a movie on Marathi channel. On reaching home, some poor relatives, who resided in nearby slums came to watch the movie. Waghmare objects there intervention again in the colony and their house. When his wife informs about how her aunt had helped them in their bad days he ignores that completely. The conflict intensifies the most when his son returns home with a hurt on his knee. He explains that he was pushed by his friend Pramod's grandmother for drinking water from his water pot. Waghmare is left stunned and shell shocked. The picture of social discrimination unfolds itself in front of him breaking down the world of expectations aroused by his promotion. He asks his son why he was pushed by Pramod's grandmother. He says:

'D'you know that Pramod, who has a super Ganpati? His Grandma pushed me.'

'Why? Did you beat him?'

'No. We were playing and I drank water from his water pot.'

Waghmare's mind is filled with the image of Godbole. His newly sprung wings of promotion fall off and a mere mortal named Pandurang Satwa Waghmare crashes helplessly into the abyss below.'

(Promotion, 26)

Grandmother's act of pushing Waghmare's son depicts that the subaltern status of the Dalit remains irrespective of profession, status, shift into urban locations or even education. The differences between the upper Hindu castes and the lower castes push the Dalits in the periphery as Pramod's grandmother is the owner of "Super Ganpati" that becomes an iconic representation of the power held by the upper castes who remain in the centre and push the dalits to the margins. At the same time, notions of Hindu purity against that of dalit image as polluting, dirty and impure function in more civilized, urbanised places and amongst the educated classes. In this connection Alok Mukherjee explains how the notion of purity of the Upper castes works against the impurity of the lower caste Dalits, who are primary sources without which Hindu purity cannot be maintained:

The work of the Dalits is essential for maintaining the upper caste Hindu's purity. If they did not clean latrines, skin dead animals, and remove the carcasses, the social life of the upper caste will be unclean, polluted and diseased. And yet, just as these are revolting activities, so is the Dalit an object of revulsion, precisely for doing

them, even though it is the upper caste Hindu who forces Dalits into carrying them out. Dalits enable the purity of the upper caste society and become impure in the process. (Limbale, *Aesthetics*,3)

The view that Dalit marginality was functional only in the villages as was evident in the first two stories “Poisoned Bread” and “Explosion” gets contradicted in this story which raises a very serious question that if education also fails considerably in uplifting the status of the Dalits , then what is it that would bring in the reform in the society. The complex mind set of the Indian Upper castes have ruled out any possibility of reform for the lower castes and therefore, the differences and the division prevail in several forms.

Dalit literature evolves as a methodology that aims clearly at social reform. The socio-political conflict works in layers through cultural, traditional and religious roles in undermining the position of the lower castes in India. The exclusion of the Dalits from the main streams does not function on the social level alone but also in literary spheres. The post-colonial theory fails to acknowledge the prevalence of Dalit studies and seems to have completely ignored this important literary genre. That is evident enough of the political motivations that control the literariness of the texts. Raj Shekhar Patteti gives a detailed account of how *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin tend to exclude Dalit literature and Movement. He examines this context with Indian Sanskrit criticism and explores that in *Natyashastra* by Bharata too regional dialectics of India find no place. He quotes:

The alternative concepts of criticism which exist in almost all the regional

dialectics of India find no place in their assessment of Indian literary scenario. The essence of Indianness that lies in Dalit aesthetics , Dalit concepts and the indigenous terms are absent to the complete extent. The authors [of *The Empire Writes back*] only express their inability to assess what is written in different languages of India....The authors’ intention of debunking the Dalit aesthetics and literature is evident in the pretext of alleging that multi-dimensionality of India is hard to decipher. (Patteti, 21-22)

The politics of exclusion affirms the central and the peripheral positions, only to strengthen the awareness towards self-consciousness of the marginalized or the excluded. Dalit literature as a category or a sub-genre of literature has grown as a major stream of thought from such exclusions.

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