



Cultural resilience in Dalit literature: An analytical approach

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Abstract

Varna system, that led the caste practice in India, has brought in a structure of the society, which includes an intricate ordering of social groups that focused on the ritual, purity and divided society in sectarian classes. The main objective of division of caste system is to fulfill the tasks of one's life, safeguard the cleanliness of the caste and hence specific tasks were assigned to the Varna citizens. The paper tries to explore the advent of the caste system and the division of the Indian society into sectarian groups and classes. It also cites divergent illustrations from the works of few Dalit and non-Dalit writers. Thus, Dalit literature shows dramatic accounts of social political experiences of Dalit community in the caste based society of India. It traces the conditions of the Indian social factors that surround the Dalits and their interactions with Dalits and non-Dalits. The writers like Mulk raj Anand, Raja rao, Mahasweta Devi, Bama and Sivakami concentrated on the theme of protest literature and few works of these writers have been brought out to support the discussion. The paper designates the caste system in India with reference to the works of above mentioned writers' through the journey of oppressed from quest for identity to social equality through their literature.

Keywords: Varna system, division, Dalit and identity

Introduction

Varna system, that led the caste practice in India, has brought in a structure of the society, which includes an intricate ordering of social groups that focused on the ritual, purity and divided society in sectarian classes. The caste system dates back to 1300 BC and has years of histories to be mentioned. The word caste comes from the Portuguese word 'Casta' means breed or race. The prominent Varna caste in India are Bhramins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. It was in Purusha Suktam of Rig Veda, the segregation of people was witness and it was believed that the division was done in order to fulfill one's responsibility in the society. The actual propose of division is to ensure the prosperity of the society they lived in and it was also believed that the soul travels from one Varna to other based on the effectiveness in their responsibilities. The dissection of people emerged from different parts of the primordial being, Brahmins from head, Kshatriyas from arms and Vaishyas from thigh and shudraas from feet. Hence, this had a great reflection in their responsibilities. Brahmins (mouth and head) took up the responsibility of teaching Vedas and Upanishads, Kshatriyas (arm) saved the country from rivals, Vaishyas (thigh) were traders and Shudras (feet) were laborers and service providers. People started to withdraw their Varna responsibilities gradually as they considered their duties to be superior. Brahmins no longer brought out their wisdom to educate people instead they began to segregate people on the grounds of caste and creed. Similarly, The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas started to show their superiority over Shudras as they were taking up the job of cleaning. Later, this division of caste was subdivided into Dwijas and Ekajas. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas come under Dwijas and Shudras comes under Ekajas. This sort of division is referred in Panchama and subsequently the profession of the person was determined by the birth of a person. The directions for recognition, consecration and sacramental are given by caste system. In the context of Hindu society, the Ekajas are always associated with the

occupations related to impurity such as scavenging, removal of waste, engaged in activities that are considered contagious and segregated.

The features of the caste system are harsh because it has forbidden the fundamental rights of lower caste people. Hence, Dalits are considered filthy and their dwellings are kept apart from the higher Varna communities settlements. They are prohibited to utilize the public water bodies, enter temples and the houses of upper caste people. In certain regions of India, they are made to stand at a distance from the temple to worship and in most of the States, the untouchables are not allowed to enter the village shops. The attitude towards the lower caste is so severe that even the contact with their shadows is considered polluted. For any reason, if an upper caste happens to have contact with the untouchable, they have to undergo a formal religious ceremony to get purified. On the other hand, the Harijans are asked to quit their life, beaten up and murdered. The most depraved exercise of untouchability was that the Dalits are compelled to tie an earthen pot around their neck to avoid them polluting the land by spitting. Another evil practice was that they were compelled to tie a broom behind them to erase their foot prints before others could notice them walking. The people are differentiated as ritually pure and impure based on the drudgeries and hence the upper caste people impulsively believed that the houses get polluted if Dalit people enter and to purify it one of the members of the upper caste sprinkle diluted cow dung. Another cruel treatment is said to be "the second tumbler" or "the double tumbler system" at the tea stalls.

The Dalits are destined to do all sorts of work to upper caste people. They dig graves, dispose of dead animals, and remove human waste by hand. Most of the Dalit victims are landless agricultural labourers, who went for daily wages with an empty stomach, reached home with no electricity, water, and they lived in the place, which was separated from the city or village. The curse of being untouchable continues day after day and they serve as servants for generations to

the upper caste families. Caste domination is one of the reasons for their landlessness. Hence, they entirely depend on the upper caste to meet their livelihood. Holding this reason, most of the landlords take advantage over the Dalit victims and this made the rural Dalits to accept the hardships.

Depiction of caste scourge in Untouchable

Untouchability is strengthened by state distribution of resources and facilities; separate facilities are provided for separate caste-based neighborhoods. Dalits often receive the poorer of the two, if they receive any at all. In many villages, the state administration installs electricity, sanitation facilities, and water pumps in the upper-caste section, but neglects to do the same in the neighboring, segregated Dalit area. Basic amenities such as water taps and wells are also segregated, and medical facilities and the better, thatched-roof houses exist exclusively in the upper-caste colony. As revealed by the case study below on the earthquake in Gujarat, these same practices hold true even in times of great natural disaster.

Mulk Raj Anand, casteism is an age-old lie made by the powerful and wicked in society to uphold discrimination. His prime concern as a social critic is to remove caste system as it damages social cohesion by giving certain sections of society an unfair advantage over others permanently. Casteism is contagious like Covid and it toxins and abolishes the self-esteem of bloke. The subjects that textured in Untouchable are class, sexual category, class mistreatment and religious discrimination. Anand himself believes that in India, caste system is a powerful one that gave rights to a few people according to their identity. Untouchable noticeably portrays this trend of the national movement by using the Dalits as a vehicle for political, social and religious reform. In this way, the novel represents the patriotic history of the country and has a vast impact on both the National Movement and the Indian English literature.

Through Untouchable, Mulk Raj Anand draws our attention to a number of questionable duties and social ways of the Hindu society of the thirties, particularly the caste system. It makes us aware of the various problems of the untouchables who are ill-treated, starving and subjugated by the upper sections of our society. This traditional social system made Anand's integrity paint the vile picture of caste-ridden society, having been divided since olden times on caste lines. The novel remains an effective document of importance even today in view of recent mayhems being committed on Harijans by high caste Hindus. Untouchability, the social evil, is shown with its deep roots. In other words, it imitates the inherent biases, the cruelty and the unkindness with which men impose on human beings who are still non-entities in the eyes of the society. The novel itself is the vivid society of how low caste system anguished the life of the outcasts in India in every sphere of their life. A person of a downtrodden class couldn't walk in the road when a man of high class would come on the same road. To draw water from the tube-well an untouchable had to wait till other people of upper caste finish taking water. All these pictures are luminously portrayed in the novel Bakha faces a lot of disgrace in his daily life. Wherever he goes, he is received with the words, defiled and polluted. Anand has endeavored an illusory portrayal of experiences of this brutalizing communal evil, which results in solitude,

loss of individuality and rootlessness. With a pungent vision into untouchability and a touching demonstration of its various features, Anand has engraved out for himself a place in the temple of recognition. Anand's treatment of untouchability explores some fine ethical and realistic features of human life. Caste and national barriers have no implication for him and he regards all mankind as one.

Domination of Dalit explained in the novel Karukku

In Karukku, Bama exhibits the degrading position of Dalits that forced them to accept and follow the inhuman conducts and codes levied on them by the upper castes. Until age 10, Bama never heard of discrimination. The writer recounts an incident that divulges the humiliation of Dalits in this caste-ridden Indian society. She finds an old man from her street carrying a packet of snack tied to a sting in an unusual. Looking at the behaviour of the old man she could only laugh. She keenly watches the situation and also notes what the old man does. At last, he hands over the snack to a man, who is a Naicker. She could not control her laughter, looking at the way the old man carrying the packet of snacks, goes home, describes the same to her brother and in contrast, he is shocked to listen. Later, he makes her understand that it is a sort of discrimination of Dalits by upper caste people. After this incident, Bama discerns the literal meaning of discrimination for the first time in her life, realizes the societal status that places her community at the bottom of social hierarchy and fathoms the injustice approaches of dominant class over Dalits through the upper caste phobia.

Bama reconnoiters the vital role played by religion in discriminating the downtrodden people and articulates her agony and despondency towards the exploitation of Dalits in the name of God and religion. It is the practice of the Dalit community to get converted to various religions to escape oppression. Most of the Dalits believed in proselytizing and turned towards Christianity believing that this will enable their children to receive free education and a day's meal. The children in their streets wander bare-bottomed, wear pants that usually slip down and it hardly covers their private parts. The moment it strikes twelve they run off to the Church with empty plates

Bama's deplorable plight as a Dalit Christian woman contradicts the hyperbolic view of Hinduism as caste-centric and the faith in Christianity is truly based on equality and love. Bama reveals the sarcasm of pious life of Christianity and condemns nuns, who offend the Dalits based on their caste. Bama was not brave to retort the nuns and the nunnery being a laywoman, Bama bemoans, "The convent too was a well-endowed one and the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There sew to be no connection between God and the suffering poor. Neither the prayer that were said morning and night, nor the daily pusai, showed any evidence of that connection" (Bama Karukku 106).

Most of the Dalits in rural areas lived in separate colonies that are located at the outer skirts of the city or village. The novel begins with the explanation of the geographical description of the Paraya village, explains how discrimination starts from a geographical description and queries the distribution of land, which is based on caste discrimination. Just at the entrance of the village, the terminus is located. Beyond this there is a small stream, only if there is rain, the stream will be full of water, if not it will be a stinking barren field and to the left of this stream,

there are ten to twenty houses known as Odapatti. All and sundry belonging to the Dalit sub-castes dwell in this area. The Maravar (Palm climbers) live in the foremost part. On the right side, the residences of the Koravar and Chakkilyar are located. Most of the Koravars make cradles and Chakkilyars mend shoes for their livelihood. Kusavars live some distance away. Followed by Pallars' settlement, Parayars' dwelling is located adjacent to Kusavars Street. Without any connection to the Dalits' dwelling, the streets of Naicker, Thevar, Aasaari, Chettiyar, and Nadar are located on the other side of the village. Beyond that, there are the Naicker sweet shops, and a small settlement has been given to Udayars.

The upper caste has everything within their locality, and they never turn towards Paraya streets for any reason. But the Parayars have to go to their streets to do menial jobs. We could notice that both Sivakami and Bama mention geographical discrimination and exploitation in the works. Not only the writers chosen for research state this but most of the writers of Dalit literature highlight the same. The Dalit children have to go to the upper caste dwelling to attend school. At school, people would speak ill about Dalit community if something goes wrong, they immediately point out the Dalit children without any hesitation, a teacher in the school says, "it must be one of the Cheri children who did it" (Bama, Karukku 8).

About three – quarters of children in the school are from Pallar and Parayar community. Everyone from upper caste considers Harijan children's as contemptible and never hesitate to use them for cheap labours. They are made to carry water for the teacher's abode, and they have to do the entire skivvies that are required in the school. Bama shares her experience of being accused of stealing a coconut from the tree by her teachers. Every day after school, the narrator used to play with the classmates near the big neem tree in front of the school. Once, they decided to climb up the coconut and challenged themselves to touch the coconut at the top of the tree. It was easy for the children to run and reach the tip and touch the coconut easily, as coconut tree was slantwise. Few touched the coconut and some out of excitement twisted the coconut after touching the tree top. When it was the narrator's turn, she attempted to reach the coconut, unfortunately, the coconut fell. Looking at that, the children who were playing with her ran off in different directions. She was caught by the headmaster and accused of stealing the coconut from the tree. The next day, she was rebuked in the open assembly before everyone. One of the nuns in the school advised her to meet the Priest in the church and receive a permission letter from him to continue her studies. She met the Priest and explained everything to him. Listening to all these, the Priest gave a letter stating, 'After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it' (Bama Karukku 19). The tears started welling up in her eyes, and she wept. She took that to the headmaster of the school. He taunted her using bad words and permitted her in the classroom. When she entered the classroom, everyone looked at her as an accused because of which she wanted to shrink herself.

Bama also narrates a vivid account of the torture perpetrated by the nun upon the Dalit children in schools. During eighth grade, she goes to the neighbouring school to do her higher studies. She is surprised to see Dalit children wearing torn clothes and treated desperately in the school. The Warden of her hostel could not accept the low caste people and she

scolds them using abusive language. She states, 'These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat' (Bama Karukku 19). When they return to the school after the holidays, she says, 'Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home ---- just skin and bone!' (Bama 19), which was embarrassing. When the narrator was returning home for holidays, a Naicker woman sat near her in the bus. The Naicker women spoke to her and asked about her street. When Bama replied, she stood up and went aside, as Bama puts it,

How is it that people consider it too gross even to sit next to when travelling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows and pain. Is there never to be any relief? It doesn't seem to matter whether people are educated or not. They all go about being filled with caste hatred. Why, even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminated according to caste. And in my heart, I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am. (Bama, Karukku 27)

After her schooling, she went to college, the narrator thought that there may not be any discrimination in the college, as it is a place for education and education alone. Once she entered the college, a lecturer asked the Dalit community students to stand up. The narrator and a girl stood up. There was a commotion among the students and from then on they stamped them as untouchables. The teacher told them to attend the individual coaching organized mainly for the scheduled caste students. The narrator immediately denied stating that she didn't want any such special classes and she sat down.

Situation of downtrodden in the Grip of Changes and Author's notes

Sivakami highlights the separation of Dalit people's dwelling from the higher caste people in the beginning of the novel. The water tanks, educational institutions, important offices and Panchayat trees are situated near the upper caste dwelling. Thus, the Dalits are confined to Cheri (slum), which is located at the margins of the village. As a custom of Hinduism, Dalits are asked to dwell in the outskirts of the city. Though the village and Cheri are almost joined, few tamarind trees separated the dwelling of the upper and the lower caste people in Puliur village. Caste system is alive in the village, which can be witnessed through the confinement of Cheri (ghetto) that is located at the margin. The vivid picture of this confined area visibly shows the isolation based on social marginalization. The exploitation of Dalit community is expressed by the character of Kathamuthu, a Dalit leader, one of the main characters in the novel. He reveals the manner in which untouchables meet insults frequently and unveils the evil of untouchability by exposing the humiliations and degradations faced by the lower caste people. He recalls how the harijans were not allowed to wear sandals before the upper caste men. Moreover, they have to get down from their bicycles and push the vehicle, when they enter the upper caste street, as Kathamuthu says,

"I still remember Kathamuthu continued that I was the first one to wear sandals and walk on the upper caste street. In those days, our men had to get off their bicycles as soon as

they entered that street and walk the length pushing the vehicle” (Sivakami *The Grip of Change* 67).

Kathamuthu adds another incident to show the humiliations of Dalits. Few upper caste men attended the wedding celebration of Chandran, son of Kathamuthu’s brother. The President of the village union, a lawyer and a jewellery shop owner also attended the wedding. When they were asked to partake, they openly refused because it was a Dalit wedding. A Priest was called to conduct the marriage rituals and when a little girl was about to touch the Priest, Kathamuthu chased the girl and said, “Don’t fall on the Iyer” (Sivakami *The Grip of Change* 118). Though he is not a real Brahmin but belongs to upper caste, he was given due respect by the Dalit leader.

The division among the people and the strict grip of religious scriptures were condemned severely by Sivakami. The marginalization of the Dalit is obvious in the religious sphere and hence the writer questions the liberty of choosing a God and juxtaposes the naive spontaneous longing of devotion on the part of Dalits. She is quite meticulous in reprimanding the religious obsession and pretense in following the Hindu customs. The Sanskrit deities were not allowed to be worshipped by the Dalits as the vegetarian deities are meant only for upper-caste men and hence the marginalized people preferred Goddess Mariyamman. One of researchers highlights the statement as follows, “In Puliur village, Goddess Mariamma, is worshipped by the Dalits, based on Dumont, Mariyamman is the guardian of thousands of villager” (Philips 27). It is only during the Mariyamman festival that the whole Cheri wears the festive look. During this festive season, they eat and drink to the heart as the Cheri is geographically separated from the upper caste dwelling. Paraya could enjoy their favourite food that includes pork and liquor. On the last day of the festival, those who could afford it consumed mutton and those who could not afford it ate beef. However, spicy fried pork and arrack are the festive favourites.

The upper caste never comes to the dwelling of the lower caste. When the work has to be extracted from the Dalits, the landlords force them to come to their dwelling to do menial jobs. Sivakami discusses the financial crisis that every Dalit bump into under various situations in the novel and attempts to distinguish the wage of the labourers in Puliur and Athur, as she illustrates,

I am coming to the point. In Athur as well as the surrounding village, a labourer gets five to six rupees for planting paddy. And that's only from eight in the morning to one in the afternoon. But here, labourers begin as early as seven in the morning and work till evening falls. They get only three rupees. (Sivakami *The Grip of Change* 68)

The labourers of Puliur village sometimes demand wages as they are aware of economic discrimination. The landowners fix very less wages for the hard labours because of which most of the Dalit men refuse to go and work in the field. The consequence is that the upper caste men fire the huts of the Dalits and call the farmhands from other streets hence, by hook or crook, the Udaiyars and Reddiyars overpower them. The author articulates the issues of caste oppression and social inequality that put the downtrodden people to hard labour and treat them with harshness. They work from morning till evening only to fill their stomach for a day.

Later, in the novel, Sivakami shows an illustration of political marginality through the Dalit leader. When

Kathamuthu has been chosen as a member of legislative assembly, the village officer snubbed to provide him a seat. The officer carped about considering Kathamuthu, a Dalit, equal to him.

The novel depicts the exploitation of Dalits by the upper caste people at any level in the educational institutions. When the novelist was studying in the school, an educational inspector was to pay a visit. As she was the school pupil leader, her Headmistress asked her to borrow a half-saree from one of her friends and wear that during the visit. The Headmistress called a girl named Shenbaga and instructed her to lend a half saree to the narrator. The girl admitted and took the narrator home. Shenbaga’s father (Nadar) stopped her at the gate and made her stand out for some time. Only Shenbaga went in the house and returned immediately with a reply, “My mother says we can’t lend you a dhavani. You belong to the Paraya caste....What shall I do?” (Sivakami *The Author’s Notes* 161) The narrator felt that she was insulted desperately and she could only run home to yell at her mother for their inability. Similarly in the novel *Karukku*, Bama also shares her experience for being humiliated for her outfit in the college. During the final year, all the students were invited for the farewell party. Her classmates were very particular about adorning them for the function. The economic status of almost all Dalits is miserable. Hence, the narrator was in the same status and could not afford to buy a new silk saree to adorn her during the party. Bama agonized, “as for me, I didn’t have a single decent sari to my name. I didn’t know what to do” (Bama *Karukku* 76). She adds, there was no money to throw away on a sari. So I hid in the bathroom until the party was over” (Bama *Karukku* 76). Owing to the poor economic status, Bama confined herself in the bathroom and groaned. On another occasion, Sivakami attended the puberty celebration of Chandrika, an upper caste girl. All the others were asked to partake in a common room and the food was given to the narrator in isolation as she belongs to lower caste. Sivakami illustrates another painful incident, which stimulates our sympathy towards the sufferer. Most of the students in the school are Harijans, who were offended often. One such girl was Pachaiamma, she was made to act in a drama during the annual meet. Out of fear, she misused a word and the teachers in the drama committee furiously stated as follows, “Lower caste students should not be given roles in school plays” (Sivakami, *The Author’s Notes* 163). The upper caste always identified the Dalit people only by their identity. Sivakami observes that the Tamil term ‘Eley’ (hey) is only addressed to Dalits. She illustrates the same through the abuses of Udayar's wife Kamalam to a twelve-year-old boy from Cheri, who works as labourer in her house and it has become a daily routine for her to abuse the boy. Kamalam exceeds all casteism, always condemns him and even reduces the daily due of leftover. She always calls him Paraya and throws broom on him. The Dalits work in the farms of the upper caste to look after their daily needs tolerating these caste discriminations. Dalits are subjected to subjugation irrespective of their ages as they are supposed to live at the mercy of the upper caste. Sivakami skillfully describes the cruel form of repression by focusing on the real-time experiences. The communal fights between the upper caste Udayar and the lower caste Parayar are exposed in the novel by the writer. The Udayars are always aggressive over the Parayars, they often set fire to the huts of Dalits and they cook up to the police as if it is an

accident. Most of the time, the Udayars provoke the communal fights and exhibit their superiority through their political strength. Eventhough the farmhands are innocent, they are punished for their communal identity. The violence against the community is rendered by Sivakami as follows, The fire raced outwards from Kannama's Hut, greedy to Devour the rest of the neighbourhood people who were eating, ran out of their homes, abandoning their food. Everyone who could snatch up containers, whether of aluminium or clay and rushed to the public well... had the wind-blown in any direction; the Cheri would have gone up in flames. (Sivakami *The Grip of Change* 60)

The research analyzed the sensitive topic called caste discrimination and its effect on the sufferers. The study speaks out and unveils the worst form of discrimination of Dalit community under various circumstances, who are made to lose human dignity due to their caste identity. Various shocking reports of discrimination of the Dalit community were discussed taking up certain incidents mentioned in the novels of the writers. The study has also compared the status of Dalit community at present and their status in this caste-dominated society. The research explains the main purpose of the introduction of the caste system, its generation and also analysed the manner in which this social goodness caused harm to society.

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