

ADDRESSING LAMENTATION AND PREDICAMENT: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECT DALIT PERSONAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract: The proposition of the paper is to spotlight and foreground the lamentation and the predicament of Dalit writers who conditionally and perennially experience the caste question and the caste problem time and again in the given space and time. Dalit writers express the lamentation which is the inherent element of predicament with a deep sense of disappointment, with a deep sense of despair, with a deep sense of disenchantment, with a deep sense of loss, with a deep sense of hopelessness, with a deep sense of distress, with a deep sense of forlornness and with a deep sense of dejection which are all outcomes of the phenomenon of caste. The lamentation of Dalit writers comes out due to caste practices and caste consciousness that prevail among upper caste communities at various levels. To speak literally caste is our shadow that does not leave us so easily, whichever direction we go caste follows. Dalit writers are the first hand victims of caste system as they try to bring change in the society through their writings. They inscribe the kind of casteism which they have confronted over time and again in their writings by lamenting over the caste ridden society of India. Dalit writers' lamentation is in fact a reflection of disgust and hostility over casteism in India which is inexorable and inevitable. The paper seeks to study critically how Dalit personal narratives carry the nostalgia of pain and suffering which are symbolically represented as lamentation and predicament at large.

Keywords: Casteism, Dalit writers, India, Lamentation, Predicament.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit personal narratives like *Gulamgiri* (1873) which translates into English as *Slavery* by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, *Ambedkar: Autobiographical notes* (1935) by Dr B.R Ambedkar, *Untouchable: An Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951) by Hazari, *Upara* (1980) by Laxman Mane, *Antasphot* (1981) by Kumud Pawde, *Uchalya* (1987) by Laxman Gaikwad, *Karukku* (1992) by Bama, *Outcaste: Akarmashi* (2003) by Sharankumar Limbale, and *Vadu* (2005) by Gunasekharan not only speaks of lamentation, predicament but also solidarity which is the most inherent characteristics of Dalit personal writings. Lamentation is the expression of grief and sorrow for the loss of something. But lamentation in the context of Dalits life is expressing grief and sorrow for the loss of rights, loss of identity, loss of freedom, loss of self-respect, loss of justice, loss of equality, loss of fraternity and loss of human existence. Over all it is lamenting for the loss of socio-cultural, historical and political values and significance.

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To lament means to purify and cleanse our mind and body. It is an emotional purification of one's feelings and thoughts. There is a reason for Dalit writers to lament and get purifying and cleansing of emotions of discrimination, exploitation, hatred, violence, humiliation which only possible through shedding tears from the heart. Lamentation of dalit writers symbolize and denote the element of catharsis and purgation by which they want to get purified and cleansed from the notion of caste discrimination and caste oppression. It is the caste ridden society that makes dalit writers to lament vehemently upon the existing system and practices that continuously have been exploiting the Dalits who only can lament for getting purified and cleansed of caste discrimination and humiliations.

Gulamgiri is a personal thought on mental slavery contributed by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule written in 1873 depicts how downtrodden and depressed masses were treated as slaves based on religious texts. "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chain."¹ said by political Philosopher Rousseau. In addition, another philosopher Jean Paul Sartre had expressed "Man is condemned to be Free."² Another acclaimed Greek poet Homer rightly says "The day that reduces a man to slavery takes from him the half of his virtue."³ Jyotirao Phule vociferously expresses his lamentation for considering and treating depressed and downtrodden masses as slaves for many ages. He strongly critiques the Hindu religious texts as baseless, groundless and illogical for framing the human society as rich and poor, master and slave, high and low, literate and illiterate. He laments that the reason for mental slavery of depressed and downtrodden masses is Religious texts which treated them as untouchables, outsider, poor, outcaste, slaves and thieves:

The depressed and down-trodden masses in India were freed from the physical (bodily) slavery of the Bhats as a result of the advent of the British raj here. But we are sorry to state that the benevolent British Government have not addressed themselves to the important task of providing education to the said masses. That is why the Shudras continue to be ignorant, and hence, their 'mental slavery' regarding the spurious religious tracts of the Bhats continues unabated.⁴

The first Dalit writer to be lamented over casteism in India was Dr. B.R Ambedkar who was humiliated and ill-retreated by the high caste Hindus, when he went for a house search to stay and work in Baroda as military secretary to maharaja of Baroda. He was humiliated and ill-retreated on caste lines by his staff colleagues in the office. Dr. B.R Ambedkar expresses his lamentation over casteism apparently with a deep sense of helplessness and anguish, "Tired, hungry and fagged out, he sat under a tree and burst into tears."⁵ This had made Dr. B.R Ambedkar to go for sleepless nights during his stay at Baroda province. He was frustrated over casteism prevailing in India based on the principles of inequality and injustice.

Untouchable: An Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste (1951) by Hazari, chronicles the pains and sufferings undergone by Hazari himself. It mostly laments

over the practices of untochability. Hazari hails from poor untouchable family and he reminiscences how even a baby of his community suffers and feels the pain of untouchability from the day it is born. His lamentation was endless and limitless over the untouchability which is given by the caste system itself. He sums up, “the child of an untouchable is a father before he is a child.”⁶ It seems that the practice of untochability has ruined the family of Hazari whose children died of hunger and poverty due to untouchability. His lamentation touches the sky almost:

Though I was treated with great respect in my community, when I went into the shopping center of the town, I was still the same untouchable who must give way to those of higher caste. The shopkeepers still threw the goods I bought into either my basket or the piece of cloth that I might carry for that purpose, and, when they heard that I could read and write, they were horrified. To them, it was abhorrent that untouchables should become Christians or refuse to work as sweepers, or that sweepers’ children should learn to read and write and, above all, that they should read books like *the Ramayana* and actually know much of the *Koran* by heart.⁷

Upara by Laxman Mane, a Marathi Dalit writer written originally in Marathi (1980) and got translated into English in (1997). The word *Upara* stands for outsider which is originally taken from Marathi. Laxman Mane laments over the pains and sufferings undergone by the Kaikadi community. It brings the problem of existence whether to be or not be for the Kaikadi community who are considered as outsider of socio-cultural-political area of Indian society. They are made to live the life of aliener, life of outsider, life of foreigner, life of stranger; totally Kaikadi community had a bitter experience of exploitation, suppression, oppression and marginalization. Laxman Mane, allegedly express the lamentation over the unjust treatment given to his Kaikadi community who are branded as outsider of the society wherein he says “They have no house, no land, no village and no farm but ‘moving from place to another place for generations, loading their hearth and home on the backs of donkeys.”⁸ At one moment Laxman also remembers ‘in Khopoli, our huts erected on a plain by the side of a road... Our hut was in the open. At night, a kerosene lamp without a glass cover was lit...I grew in this hut like a small plant growing on the dunghill.”⁹

Kumud Pawde, a Marathi Dalit writer, feminist and activist cum a very well versed scholar in Sanskrit expresses her lamentation over casteism in India evidently with a deep sense of pessimism and melancholia in “The Story of My Sanskrit” which is an extract from her autobiography *Antasphot: Outburst* (1981) “Although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then, I remember an expression I heard somewhere: what comes by birth, but can’t be cast off by dying that is caste.”¹⁰ In this country respect and honour is given to a person based on his/her caste and the social status to which he/she belongs to. Though Kumud Pawde was well versed in Sanskrit she couldn’t find a good job that suited her

credentials. She was refused to be admitted as a teacher in Sanskrit because of her caste. Learning of Sanskrit and teaching of Sanskrit was a curse upon Dalits; upper castes treated it as a sin. Strict imposition of punishment was meted out to lower castes who wished to learn Sanskrit. Even then, Dalit women are well learned and educated, they are denied of respect and honour. This shows disillusionment on the part of dalit women as they do not get what they truly deserve. Such cases can be traced even today in Indian towns and cities which are caste conscious rather than human conscious.

Uchalya by a Marathi dalit writer Laxman Gaikwad written in (1987) is another significant dalit personal writing which mostly documents and chronicles the pain and the grief of a particular community whose lives were considered as homeless, identitiless, landless, uncivilized, criminals and barbarians which symbolically embodies the lamentation by the author over the loss of identity, loss of rights, loss of land, loss of home, loss of socio-cultural and political relations and identity in India. Laxman Gaikwad laments allegedly for branding his community members as thieves, puppets and rogues and criminals:

“... My name is Laxman Gaikwad... I was born in a vagabond family with no home, no land to plough, not even a caste to call our own. I told folks that I am from Ghanegao as I was born there and grew up during my early years. My childhood was spent in a bird-nest-like hut. To enter it, one had to bend their knees. My grandmother Narasabai ran the household. Her husband, my grandfather, Lingappa, had no job and had to report to the local police station twice a day. He once had a flourishing practice. He would go to far way towns, pick pockets, steal shopping bags and come home by night. He was a famous thief of his time in this part of the country. His name was well known even in Nizaam’s kingdom.”¹¹

Bama, a Tamil Dalit feminist writer laments allegedly with a deep sense of loss and distress in *Sangati* (1994) “If you are born into this world, it is best you were born man. Born as a woman, what good do we get? We only toil in the field and at home.”¹² Bama tries to predict the fate and destiny of a Dalit girl. That too, if she is born in a low caste community she will be subjected to all kinds of humiliation and discrimination. She also envisions that being born as a Dalit girl has no significance and value in this casteist society. Another prominent and well known Tamil Dalit feminist cum politician P. Sivakami laments apparently with a deep sense of despair and desperation in her novel *Taming of Women* (2012) “Keeping a girl child in the house is having a fire in the belly.”¹³ This reflects how Dalit women suffer in the name of caste that virtually has dalit women’s life at stake. Furthermore, it manifests a sense of impending doom.

Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi Dalit writer, critic and activist laments over the casteism in India apparently with a deep sense of desolation and dispiritedness.

He rightly remarks in *The Outcaste* (2003) “Man lost himself under this huge tree of caste, I faced the problem of finding a house in a new town and my caste followed me like an enemy. I could not get a single room. Every town and person was caste conscious. This casteism has dehumanized everyone.”¹⁴ These are the words came from the mouth of every dalit women and men once they step out the caste follows them like a shadow. Limbale’s lamentation over the caste touches the sky in *Hindu: a novel* (2007) in which he alleges that:

Every Hindu is conscious about his/her caste and religion. Why do you stay in a religion that does not allow you to enter the temple? Why do you stay in a religion that does not allow you to take water? Why do you stay in a religion that does not treat you as human?¹⁵

M. S. S. Pandian proposes caste in two different modes of representation; “one talks of caste by other means and the other talks of caste on its ‘own terms’. One attempts to build a Hindu nation and another is for building a secular nation”¹⁶ So, in this regard caste bears a negative and positive impact on the society. Talks of caste by other means will have a negative impact on the society which totally exploits, brings chaos and disorder with total disillusionment. Other mode talks on its own terms has a positive impact which looks for the total transformation of society by holding on to democratic values and principles. In this regard, we have both Mahatma Phule and Dr B.R Ambedkar as perfect figures of truth seekers and truth establishers who upheld democratic values and underlined the historical caste based exploitation and fought relentlessly towards the annihilation of caste in order to build a secular nation based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

It can be argued that a child in the womb of a low caste woman already experiences caste discrimination as if the destiny has been written on the forehead to be born as slaves, prostitutes, thieves and untouchables. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani a renowned Dalit poetess and writer lament presumably with a deep sense of disheartenment and forlornness in her poem *Prohibited History*. “Even as I was taking shape in my mother womb, I was labeled as untouchable and the stamp of low-caste preceded my birth”¹⁷ In another version of her writing can be traced lamentation in “Dalit women writing in Telugu” Swaroopa Rani laments over the prevalence of casteism in India. She laments seemingly with a deep sense of gloomy and wretchedness in *Dalituralu*, a poem “I am dragged here and there, under some one’s buttocks a seating plank, someone or other drags me along by a nose rope to make me dance.”¹⁸ In another similar expression “The day I was born, I bore the imprint of an unchaste woman thrown into the drainage of traditions and dustbins of customs. I became forbidden one.”¹⁹ Caste is a bane and ruination for dalit women. Therefore, before a child of dalit woman comes into this world, the fate and destiny of caste is incorporated in the psyche of the child which becomes part of her daily life as she grows physically and psychologically.

Caste haunts Dalit woman right from her day of birth to till her day of death. She hears from upper caste woman telling her daughter “Don’t touch her. Be careful! Stay away from her. And don’t play with her. Or I won’t let you into the house again”²⁰ For a Dalit girl, childhood becomes a burden full of miseries, hardships and sufferings. She has to carry her caste and womanhood, the moment she enters the street. Disgust and hostility is instilled in the minds of upper caste girls and boys in the name of caste at an early age. This notion of hostility is carried from generation to generation. This has become a vicious cycle. This burden makes dalit women think differently; her perspectives on world differ because of the social location into which she is pushed. Kumud Pawde tells of her experience of caste during her childhood in *Antasphot* (1981) “So even at a young age, this emotion of disgust taught me to think. It inspired me to be introspective. At an age which was meant for playing and skipping around, these thoughts would rouse me to fury.”²¹

Gunashekarana, a Tamil Dalit writer and prominent folklorist and theatre personality laments evidently with a deep sense of disillusionment and affliction in his autobiography *Vadu* (2005) “Whichever village you enter, the first question that is asked is, what caste do you belong to and in our country, village is caste, caste is village?”²² Bama, a Tamil Dalit feminist writer and activist laments seemingly with a deep sense of pain and grief in *Karukku* (1992), “Wherever you go, whatever you have studied, it seems that this caste will not leave you that easily.”²³ P. Sivakami, an eminent and leading dalit feminist writer cum politician laments presumably over caste with a deep sense of agony and despair in *Grip of Change* (1989) “Where are you from? What is your caste? And your name?”²⁴ “Caste will persist till you and I die in fact, caste will be around for generations yet to come. We can’t ignore it.”²⁵ Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, a Telugu dalit writer also laments over casteism in India evidently in her *Mankena Flower* with the sense of disenchantment and brokenness “I am a distressed *palpitta*, caught in the thorny bush in whichever direction I move the thorns will prick me alone, these are not today’s thorns, these are the chains of slavery layered around me from ages”²⁶ (283).

G. Kalyan Rao, a Telugu Dalit writer and activist laments over the casteism in India apparently with a deep sense of dejection and depression in his *Untouchable Spring* (2000) a novel in which the character Ruth lamented whenever she remembered the scenes of Casteism:

In this country the air one breathes has caste.

The water one drinks has caste.

The field canal that flows and the land that yields harvest have caste.

The school, the temple and the village square have caste.

The food one eats the house one lives in and the clothes one wears have caste.

The word one speaks has caste

Literature and culture have caste.
 The state has caste, its law has caste.
 Justice and the court have caste.
 The corpse and the cemetery have caste.
 God has caste. Devil has caste.²⁷

CONCLUSION

It seems that the whole universe is filled with the notion of caste. The moving and unmoving objects possess the caste. Celestial and terrestrial possess the caste. Therefore, caste is permeated in the space and the time. Caste is a spatio-temporal notion distributed by the men of upper caste which exists in time and space forever. It moves with the time and space and gains significance intensively in given time and space. Dalit writer's lamentation over the casteism in India is one of the significant methods for arguing a change in the caste ridden society by expressing the holistic vision of Dalit writers' sense of grief, pain, disillusionment, dispiritedness and disenchantment on behalf of his/her community. Dalits are repeatedly reminded of caste that virtually disfigures their image of self-respect. These are the expressions of different Dalit men and women writers who have been facing caste in their day to day lives. Caste follows like a shadow from different directions that can't be avoided. Caste practices in the contemporary scenario have transformed from physical level to the psychological level which bears its brunt extensively on the lives of Dalit

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