

Locating Ingenuity in the Portrayal of Dalit Consciousness Through the Marginal Life in¹ Premchand's *The Shroud*

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Abstract

Dalit writing accommodates the social and cultural practices of the ever-changing metaphors of 'Caste' in Contemporary India. It embraces the critical intimacy of the sociology of cultures, even sub-cultural and regional variants dealing with the hereditament of ache and humiliation, reconsidered for the readerly experience. This paper attempts to scrutinize the gray areas in portraying Dalits and their class consciousness by Premchand (1880-1936) in his short story 'The Shroud' (*Kafan*). This short story is a translated version of the source text 'Kafan'; there is a channel of significant discussion about the importance of communicating the voices and languages of the oppressed and those who are at the periphery. The issue of reception in the translation process is prevalent. Dalit literature has not remained untouched beyond the influence of globalization. Dalit writing revamps the mainstream sociological and cultural aesthetics, exploring the construction of the negated 'self' of a lived social community. Dalits were made imperceptible from mainstream art and literature. Sometimes they are presented merely as an object of ridicule, as Gheesu and Madhav are portrayed in the short story 'The Shroud' (*Kafan*). The characterization of Dalits by Premchand is not considered to be part of mainstream literature. It is truly dismal that a short story like 'The Shroud' is from the pen of a literary figure that cannot be justified or either classified in a class, who himself is a class apart. It is not obvious that always the subaltern cannot speak, though their sincere representation is often more accentuated in the regional dialects, rather than in Indian writings in English. Premchand is talking more about post-colonial exploitation rather than Dalit class consciousness.

¹ **Acknowledgment**

I would like to convey my gratitude to the following people without whose input this work might not have been possible: Dr. Ambalika Guha, Department of English Language and Literature, Adamas University; Dr. Jayati Gupta, Department of English Language and Literature, Adamas University; and Dr. Mukulika Duttagupta, Department of English Language and Literature, Adamas University.

Keywords: *Dalit consciousness, colonial exploitation, Dalit resistance, subaltern resistance*

1. Introduction

The English terminology ‘Dalit’ which has been derived from the Sanskrit term called ‘dalita’ means broken or scattered, sometimes called untouchable, and cursed (not crushed because to them their life itself is a burden filled with damnation and mere subjugation of being the inferior) is a denomination for people belonging to the lowest stratum castes in India. Dalits were excluded from the four-fold Varna Pratha of Hinduism and excluded from being a part of the newly introduced fifth varna named Panchama.

There have been words spent on the discussion on whether the subaltern can speak or whether their voice cannot be recovered without intervention from postcolonial elite narrators because their speech has no agency at all to convey their message Spivak. Thus, the elites are speaking on behalf of the subalterns creating a position of disempowerment for the subalterns and a concern of an identity crisis. The characters portrayed in the short story subvert dominant social customs and traditions to gain an advantage over the ruling class, forcing them to shell out money they would not otherwise have in ordinary circumstances. This glory of victory is eroded by the realization that the subaltern is also an exploiter of the woman in the family, who in life and death is used for sustaining the self-interest of the males of the family. The question is, can English literature truly illustrate the sufferings of the marginal or Dalit people? Subalterns existed way before the postcolonial intellectuals understood them as subalterns or barbaric peoples and felt the necessity to stand for them. It would be very naïve to assume that there were no issues of exertion, Dalit, minority, and tribal movements in the backdrop of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras.

The idea of a ‘Dalit consciousness’ is a centralized conception in both the creation as well as the evolution of Dalit literature. It is called the ‘Dalit Chetna,’ an experiential and political perspective made up of the firsthand knowledge of caste-based oppression and atrocity Nayar, along with the political goal of a liberating awakening that results from the exposure of this atrocity Nayar as central to the maintenance of caste hierarchies. This paper explores how much of this short story ‘The Shroud’ deals with the Dalit consciousness or whether it is diverging into another arena of colonial exploitation rather than focusing on the marginal Dalit life. It is tough to believe that the lower and oppressed caste people were in no position to vocalize their issues in the public forum, their narratives were intentionally getting blocked creating deviance between elite and subaltern individuals. The masses resist, rebel, and challenge not for any external body but for the sake of their own existential being to shape it into a new mold. On the other hand, the intellectual elite has nothing to do with shaping their reality, in fact, ‘the masses’ in the 20th Century according to Jean Baudrillard ‘are the leitmotif of every discourse, they are the obsession of every sociological project to carry out Baudrillard.

2. Literature Review

The issue of colonial exploitation was quite common during the colonial expansion and settler colonialism under the rule of Britishers (in India East India Company) and its mass practice among the people...which can trace while reading this short story. Everywhere there is a typical picture of exploitation between the marginalized people and the elites, or in-house male dominance and exploitation of the lady of the household.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay ‘The Politics of Translation,’ in the book “*Outside in the Teaching Machine*”, (1993) G.C. Spivak defines the relationship between the translator and the text as:

‘Translation is the most intimate act of reading...Unless the translator has earned the right to become an intimate reader, he/she cannot surrender to the text, and cannot respond to the special call of the text’.

A reader should approach the empirical sphere through a faculty of imagination. Translation is a bridge between two distinct worlds-one is that of the reader and the other is the world depicted within the sphere of the writing, here Dalit literature.

Pramod K. Nayar, in his essay ‘The Poetics of Postcolonial Atrocity: Dalit Life Writing, Testimonio, and Human Rights,’ (2011) delves into the aspectual connotations in the translations of Dalit writing. His view is that translation is confined to linguistics and means a ‘transfer between contexts.’ The translator helps bring the marginal sphere of the Dalits to the global stage Nayar.

Editors Harish Trivedi and Susan Bassnett, in their Introduction to Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice, underline the sentiments of Maria Tymoczko ([Ravi Kant Tiwari](#)) Tymoczko marks out that “in translation studies, a distinction is always made between whether to take an audience to a text or a text to an audience.” She also asserts that; by defamiliarizing the language the ‘reality of difference’ can be shown in front of the readers.

Afro-American theorist W. E. B. Du Bois underlines the fact that colonialism and its exploiting nature has a severe impact on the human bodies and minds, as well as on material conditions. Like Du Bois, Frantz Fanon raised an important question as: what is it like-what does it feel like to be the object of a racist stare? Waugh

Fanon in his book “Black Skin, White Masks” (1952) points out that under colonial conditions the objective realm of material oppression involves-indeed, operations inter-dependently with the subjective realm (of being made to feel inferior). Waugh

Premchand’s work ‘The Shroud’ begins with an undertone of a dark night setting delineating the exploited reality of a chamar family and their colonial gaze reversal towards the lady of the household who is thrashing in labor pain battling with a life-in-death situation. There is an alienated sense of double marginalization; one is due to colonial exploitation and another is due to being untouchable...which shows the absence of class consciousness among the people through their actions. Thus, this short story can be scrutinized in all aspects and critical intricacies.

3. Present Research

The topic of the present research is: “Locating Ingenuity in the Portrayal of Dalit Consciousness Through the Marginal Life in Premchand's The Shroud”.

This paper aims to investigate whether there has been a genuine attempt in the portrayal of Dalit consciousness or is there something different kind of aspects shown. There is a sign of exploitation displayed in the story; whether it is in language or in activities. This raises questions about the existence of Dalit consciousness in this short story. Thus, the research question is centered around the portrayal of Dalit consciousness.

4. Research Methodology

This research paper mostly uses secondary data as well as secondary resources to address the research question. The discussion on the portrayal of the Dalit consciousness has been derived from the existing literature on this topic and with the help of that information applying my own point of view on the research problem. The data involved in this research paper is qualitative as no facts and figures have been used in this analytical method. But there is scope for a quantitative method of collecting data. The

topic of the paper may demand qualitative data, as there is no need to supply numerical emphasis to generate a commentary on the topic concerning the short story that has been used while giving the discussion a shape. This research also exerts empirical and rational methods of data collection. Both can be seen in the discussion part of this research paper while navigating through the empirical observations throughout the whole short story on the issue, they are equally important since all the details have been collected from journals, and previously published works in this field. This research paper follows the deductive method as it has used existing theories to convey certain issues. Lastly, this research is also cross-sectional as it tries a critical observational approach without influencing the variables.

5. Discussion

This short story is a translated version of the source text 'Kafan'; there is a channel of significant discussion about the importance of communicating the voices and languages of the oppressed and those who are at the periphery. The issue of reception in the translation process is prevalent. Dalit literature has not remained untouched beyond the influence of globalization. Dalit writing revamps the mainstream sociological and cultural aesthetics, exploring the construction of the negated 'self' of a lived social community. Dalits were made imperceptible from mainstream art and literature. Sometimes they are presented merely as an object of ridicule, as Gheesu and Madhav are portrayed in the short story 'The Shroud' (Kafan). The idea of a 'Dalit consciousness' is a centralized conception in both the creation as well as the evolution of Dalit literature. It is called the 'Dalit Chetna,' an experiential and political perspective made up of the firsthand knowledge of caste-based oppression and atrocity Nayar, along with the political goal of a liberating awakening that results from the exposure of this atrocity Nayar as central to the maintenance of caste hierarchies.

According to Jacques Derrida's terminology 'logocentrism' (from Greek *logos*: 'word', 'sign' but in philosophy also: ultimate truth or logic) of Western culture-i.e., the general assumption that there is a realm of "truth" existing prior to and independent of its representation by linguistic signs (here the language of the Dalits or the subalterns).

During the 1980s Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit Guha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty were concerned to refocus colonial and also nationalist readings of Indian history in order to foreground previously marginalized sectors of society, in particular the peasantry Robert. Their term subaltern, which has an ultimate military connotation, is derived from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who used it to designate non-elite social classes and groupings like the proletariat. Spivak's contribution to the understanding of the subaltern state under colonialism(*subalternity*), was to expand its signification to include groups even more downgraded than these, and those who do not figure on the social scale at all: for example, tribals or unscheduled castes, untouchables, and, within all these groups, women Waugh.

Spivak locates her subaltern in 'sati' (*Hindu widow burnt on her husband's pyre*) and picks up the colonial debate on widow immolation to mark the widow's conspicuous absence as a subject in all the discussions and discourses surrounding the issue. This absence, according to her goes to prove that 'there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak'. Ania Loomba has pointed out that Spivak's sati cannot be said to stand for all Satis of colonial India, as there were few who survived to tell their tale of agony. Sati was a practice prevalent since the medieval days. But then why did Spivak choose to posit her sati in colonial India? Secondly, her discourse on Sati was derived from the colonial debates, with British governments' legislations on the one hand and the native patriarchal narratives on the other. Both choices were influenced by the fact that Gayatri Spivak was writing for and within the first world academy. If she

had ventured beyond the colonial debates to the documents and literature available in the vernacular media, it was not unlikely that her subaltern would have spoken. Postcolonial critics and intellectuals are often accused of not being able to listen to the natives or let their voices be heard Loomba.

Premchand begins his story in a depreciatory tone castigating the father and son for their slothful nature. They are described from the upper caste point of view and branded as useless fellows. The upper caste is to extract free or cheap labor out of the lower castes. If someone from the lower caste is slothful or shirker of work or shows defiance to authority, he is labeled as a useless or crooked fellow. His value in society is measured in terms of his utility to the dominant class. As Premchand puts it, 'And these two had earned a particularly bad name for themselves in the entire village. Ghisu was notorious for working for one day and taking three days off. Madhav was such a shirker that if he worked for half an hour, he would stop and smoke his pipe for an hour. So, the two of them seldom found work. If they had even a handful of grain in the house, they would swear off work. A couple of days' starvation would induce Ghisu to climb a tree and break some twigs for firewood, which Madhav would sell in the market. After this, the two would loiter about for as long as the money would last'. Looking at them from another point of view, Ghisu and his son were more intelligent than the rest of their kind.

'In a society where the lot of those who toiled day and night were little better than Ghisu's and where those who knew how to exploit the peasants were much richer, it is no wonder that Ghisu had such an outlook. One could say that Ghisu was more intelligent than the peasants, instead of joining the hordes of mindless toilers, he had gone over to the disreputable band of idle gossip, though he didn't have the will to follow the rules and regulations of diehard gossip. Anyhow, Ghisu for one was happy that despite his rags, at least he didn't have to put in the back-breaking labor that the peasants had to and no one could possibly take undue advantage of his simplicity and innocence. The story is a record also of the invisible violence inflicted by and the dehumanizing effect of poverty. While Madhav's wife, Budhia, was screaming and thrashing in pain, Ghisu and Madhav sat, inactive. They couldn't get medicine, nor a quack, for everything, needed money and they were neck deep in debt already. Yet, they knew, the society which refused them money now would help, if a child was born or Budhia died. So, they sat still waiting for either of the two to happen. After Budhia's death, they rushed to the Zamindar for help with Budhia's cremation. Notwithstanding his detestation, the Zamindar couldn't but offer him a sum of two rupees, because 'he knew it was not the right moment for giving vent to his anger or meeting out punishment'. The decorum of civility demanded that he helped a man in need of cremating his wife. The merchants and the moneylenders dared not refuse someone whom their Zamindar obliged. And Ghisu soon collected a tidy sum of five rupees negotiating the hypocrisies and sentiments of a society that gave precedence to social pretensions and values like kindness, sympathy, donation, etc. over sharing resources in the real sense. Ghisu knew, that society didn't care how they buried their women, they were offered money not out of sympathy, but because of social obligations. So, if Ghisu and his son were victims of economic deprivation, civil society would be a victim of social mores too which can be negotiated. So, when Madhav heckled Ghisu for not providing Budhia a shroud even, Ghisu assured him: "I tell you, she will get the shroud. Why don't you believe me?"

6. Conclusion

Even though Ghisu as a subaltern could resist the forces of exploitation, surprisingly and tragically Budhiya, the woman in the family, who had catapulted Ghisu and Madhav to a position of bargaining, even if for a day, had been left without a voice. She suffered silently her fate, her death. Yet she provided the locus on which the subaltern and the master, the exploited and the exploiter worked out their relations with each other. Ghisu and Madhav exploited Budhiya to earn the extra buck, even though it cost her life. We may say that economic deprivation had dehumanized both to an extent where human relations were meaningless to them. But that couldn't possibly act as a ruse for the exploitative relation between Ghisu/Madhav and Budhiya brought out explicitly in the following lines. 'Ever since his wife had entered their house, she had set up an order in their disordered lives and strived to stoke the bellies of these two shameless wretches. With her arrival, the father and the son had become more slothful than ever, and overconfident too, to boot' (46). This is significant as whatever precious little they worked to feed themselves before her arrival, had been stopped now; shifting the onus completely henceforth on Budhiya. And when she died, it was in her name that the money was raised, though consumed by the same people who exploited her while she was alive. Unlike the ruling class, they too were never short of justifications. "Yes, son, she'll certainly go to heaven. She never hurt a fly, never bothered a soul all her life. Even in her death, she managed to fulfill our dearest wish. If she goes to heaven, who will? These rich, fat slobs who fleece the poor and then, to wash away their sins, take a dip in the Ganga River or offer its holy water in the temples?". His privileged has always justified exploitation to serve his self-interests, be it the feudal expert or the patriarchal father. This is the nature of power and the logic of exploitation. Budhiya was crushed under the threesome forces of feudalism, patriarchy, and poverty. The manipulation that Ghisu worked to wrest whatever little from the ruling class was absent in the case of Budhiya.

Ghisu/Madhav could put up resistance, however manipulative, and survived. Budhiya gave her everything and was vanquished. This story though exemplifies subaltern resistance, it nevertheless raises some more questions whose answers are absent in it. Whom do we identify as the real subaltern? Why is their relationship not egalitarian? What will allow Budhiya to raise her voice against the exploitation she is subjected to? Which resistance is more urgent for a woman like Budhiya? Such questions need to be addressed to understand the multifariousness of subaltern exploitation and the complicity of peer groups in that racket.

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