

Constructing the Dalit self: Spatial identity in “A Storeyed House”

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Abstract:

The research paper aims at depicting the writer’s urge to voice and rebel the angst and struggle of Dalits to create and establish their existence. The short story depicts a life time struggle of Bayaji to earn his livelihood for his family members. The caste system in India is deeply rooted into the conscience of Indians. It is running actively for a number of centuries together. Since ages there are four varnas based on peoples' professions i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Shudras. The shudras were exploited, subjugated by the so called upper caste people. They were oppressed, subjugated and declared as 'Untouchables'. They were denied the basic rights of food, shelter, education and life of dignity. Thanks to the efforts of social reformists like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule who set the path for the 'downtrodden' to revolt for their basic rights of humanity. During the British Raj, the shudras / poor / wretched were called as 'Dalit'. Later the term was popularized by Dr. Ambedkar to voice their exploitation. The 'Dalit Movement' initiated to liberate them from the atrocities.

Key terms: Dalit, identity, caste system, B.R.Ambedkar ideology, existence etc.

Take a hammer to change the world-
So saying went Bhimrao!
Why is the elephant stuck sitting
In the mud of slavery?
Shake your body and come out,
Take a leap to the forefront!

(Take a Hammer to Change the World, Poisoned Bread 5)

The above stanza aptly relates to Waman Howal’s short story “The Storeyed House” translated into English by M.D. Hatkanagalekar. The protagonist of the story Bayaji and later his sons try to build a storeyed house to take a leap forward to the life of freedom by breaking the shackles of caste confinement. Building a house metaphorically refers to building an individual Dalit identity.

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However, the term was later used in derogatory way to demean / humiliate the lower castes. Arun Prabha Mukherjee in an Introduction to Om Prakash Valmiki's Joothan describes

"Dalit is a story of collective struggle for centuries. The term forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root 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."

(Introduction Joothan xviii)

Modern Marathi Dalit literature represents and voices exploitation of the lower castes. Marathi Dalit Literature translated into English plays a significant role in the reformation of the downtrodden as it has reached to the wider level of readers. The literature has broadened its wings in almost all possible genres. The golden age of modern Marathi Dalit Literature was from 1960s to the middle of 1980s. It seems Marathi Dalit Literature, is the first and foremost to rebel against the suppression of the downtrodden. There are many writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Baburao Bagul, Baby Kamble, Avinash Dolas, Yogendra Meshram, Arjun Dangle, Bhimrao Shirwale, Yogiraj Waghmare, Waman Howal, Shankarrao Kharat and many more paved the way for freedom of 'Dalits' through their remarkable writings. They are portraying Dalits' sentiments, pain, subjugation and exploitation. They aimed at creating a uniform platform for dalits to unite and seek their liberation. Their writings altered the canonized, middle-class and Brahminic Marathi Literature. Sharatchandra Muktibodh defines in his essay "What is Dalit Literature"

Dalit Literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it. That is its implied value. The nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits-in the past and even at present-in the framework of the Varna system"(Poisoned Bread 270)

The research paper aims at depicting the writer's urge to voice and rebel the angst and struggle of Dalits to create and establish their existence. The short story depicts a life time struggle of Bayaji to earn his livelihood for his family members.

The destruction of the house is a symbolic attack on Dalit selfhood. The burning is not merely an accident; it is a deliberate act of caste violence intended to reinforce the oppressive social order. The house, the ultimate symbol of Bayaji's dignity, mobility, and upward aspiration, is reduced to ashes, signifying the upper castes' fear of Dalit assertion. The fire becomes a metaphor for how caste society extinguishes the dreams of the oppressed when those dreams threaten its entrenched hierarchies. Caught in this horrific event, Bayaji's first concern is not his own safety but that of his children and grandchildren. In the chaos, the story describes: "He wrenched himself free from the flames and cried: 'My house, my house!'" (Poisoned Bread 183). This line captures two important layers of suffering—physical and existential. For Bayaji, the house is not just a structure; it is his lifelong hope, the material embodiment of his identity. When it burns, a part of him dies. Soon after, as the flames engulf the entire home, Bayaji's body collapses. Injured severely, he dies soon after the incident, leaving his family shattered. His death is not just personal tragedy—it stands as the symbolic martyrdom of countless Dalits whose aspirations are violently suppressed by the upper-caste-dominated social order.

The story powerfully illustrates that caste does not merely dictate social exclusion; it polices ambition. The construction of a storeyed house becomes a site of conflict because it challenges the caste hierarchy's unwritten laws that restrict Dalits to a position of permanent inferiority. Bayaji's sons—representing the next generation of Dalit consciousness—react with outrage. Their father's death ignites in them a collective awareness of both justice and defiance. The tension is palpable when the villagers gather around. The upper caste men, including Patil, attempt to feign sympathy and innocence. Patil says hypocritically:

“It’s very sad... Bayaji was a good man.” (184) But Bayaji’s sons know the truth. They shout: “Our father has been murdered. Burnt alive!” (184)

This scene marks a significant turning point in Dalit literature—the shift from suppression to assertion. The sons, unlike Bayaji, who walked on the tightrope of subservience and self-preservation, refuse to bow. Their direct accusation breaks the silence surrounding caste atrocities, challenging the village’s normalized system of suppression. Even as the wily Patil tries to deflect the blame, the younger generation refuses to be intimidated. This refusal symbolizes the emerging consciousness inspired by Ambedkarite ideology—a belief that Dalits must not merely endure injustice but resist it.

The story ends on a powerful note of resilience and assertion. After performing Bayaji’s last rites, the sons announce their united decision:

“We shall build the house again—a storeyed house!” (185) This final declaration transforms the narrative from despair to determination. It is an act of symbolic re-occupation of space, a refusal to surrender agency, and a rejection of caste superiority. The reconstruction of the house becomes an act of socio-political rebellion.

In Dalit literature, reclamation of physical space often represents reclamation of dignity, and here Howal uses the rebuilding of the house to assert Dalit selfhood. The decision reflects Ambedkar’s philosophy: “We must shape our lives with our own hands.”

Thus, even in death, Bayaji becomes a catalyst for his family’s empowerment. His dream does not die with him—it transforms into a collective mission. In caste-based societies, architecture itself becomes a marker of privilege and power. For a Dalit man to construct a storeyed house in a caste-dominated village is an act of symbolic rebellion—a visible declaration of equality. The upper caste’s fear stems from the fear of losing control of narrative, power, and territory. By setting the house ablaze, the upper castes try to “burn down” Bayaji’s symbolic ascent. This is the violence of the caste system enacted in both literal and figurative forms.

The sons represent the arrival of a new generation—fearless, assertive, and unwilling to submit. Their final declaration is a form of revolutionary Dalit assertion.

To conclude, Waman Howal’s “A Storyed House” is not merely a short story—it is a profound socio-political commentary on caste oppression and Dalit resilience. Through Bayaji’s journey, Howal exposes: the brutality of caste structures the psychological trauma of being forced into inferiority the cruelty inflicted upon those who dare to dream Yet, the story is equally a narrative of hope. Bayaji’s death becomes the spark for a collective awakening. His sons’ decision to rebuild the house—once again with two storeys—signals a new era of Dalit assertion. The ending resonates with the broader Dalit literary movement: the oppressed will rise, rebuild, and reclaim space even in the face of violence and death.

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7. Take a Hammer to Change the World, Poisoned Bread 5Anna Bhau Sathe Translated by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar