

Postcolonial Reading of Gabbliam: A Dalit Epic

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Abstract

This paper presents the postcolonial elements in the poem, Gabbilam by Gurram Jashuva, famously known as the ‘father of Dalit Literature in Telugu’. It is translated into English by Chinnaiah Jangam. Keeping in view the time period in which the text was written, the details about the Indian National movement and the aspirations of newly independent country are portrayed along with voicing the struggles of the downtrodden communities. The poem has dalit as a protagonist, reflecting the way how society treats his community and the hardship they go through in their life. The poet draws inspiration from Megaduta by Kalidasa and replaces the cloud as a messenger with bat to challenge and subvert the standards of classical literature. He uses classical epic traditional form to present the hypocritical and dehumanised society.

This paper highlights how the poet challenges the dominant power structure by creating counter-narrative to present the collective experiences and struggles of his community. Through code-switching, use of rhetorical devices and symbolism, the poet showcases the caste burden and asserts the identity of the dalit in the mainstream literature simultaneously. This paper also strives to relate the arguments of Spivak in her seminal work, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” about how the “voices of the marginalized sections of society” are unheard or silenced by the dominant. Hegel’s states that “ethical institutions within civil society cultivate a fundamental sense of order”. It is present in the core of the Hindu society until the recent times. Similarly, Gramsci talks about ethical political hegemony where the dominant holds the power not just through force but also through cultural and ideological leadership by making it appear like a legit natural order and the poem mirrors it in the narration of the protagonist.

Keywords: Dalit, dominant, downtrodden, hegemony, society, narration.

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism has been a prominent study in rethinking the colonial period and addressing the exploitation of the colonizers. The emergence of writers from the formally colonized nations raised the resistance to the literary canon. The binary based on race, class and gender was studied to understand the changed life of the decolonialised nations. They started to redefine their identities and make their voices heard loud and clear through their literary works. Similarly, the marginalised sections of the newly independent nations internalised the effects of postcolonialism and protested against the dominant hierarchical structure of their societies. This paper deals with a translated version of the popular poem, ‘Gaabilam’ written by a famous Telugu writer, Gurram Jashuva. This poem has a dalit as a protagonist who is oppressed in the name of karma and he questions the destitution and exploitation he faces. Dalit literature has become an emerging field of study cutting across all the languages and regions in the India. The translated texts from the vernacular languages into English has made them available for wide range of audience.

This paper focuses on the how the poet presented the experiences of the marginalised and oppressed people of his community and about the challenging dominant power structures. Through protagonist the poet asserts his voice and identity. He protests and rebels against the brutal society by creating a counter narrative to the dominant culture. The paper closely looks at the use of traditional forms of writing along with the indigenous lexicon to embrace the identity which was considered inferior by the dominant class. An attempt to understand how the poet criticises the religious scripts and questions the existence of the hierarchy.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonial literature characteristics are usually about slavery, suppression, exploitation, differences and rebellion. It deals with the transition phase of the formerly colonised countries shifting the perspectives from the colonised to the coloniser. Postcolonialism is not resisted to a particular discipline, it has a multidisciplinary approach which has social, economic, political, cultural, historical and psychological aspects. Postcolonial writers present how the societies and communities were marginalised and made to feel inferior and vulnerable. Through their works they strived to break free from the internalised suppression. Works like *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Black Skin White Masks* by Frantz Fanon, and *Orientalism* by Edward Said sparked the discourse about the postcolonialism and it entered the mainstream during 1970's. The influence of colonization over culture and societies has been the major theme of works written by the postcolonial writers. The emergence of resistance to follow the predominant caste system has begun at the same time in India. Dalit writers across the country started writing about their life and protesting the discrimination based on caste hierarchy. On the bright side, the spread of Christian missionaries and establishment of schools to provide primary education helped the downtrodden communities to get exposed to the ideas of freedom, liberty, solidarity and justice. However, they faced the inherited bias of the Hindu society. The internal colonization continued the dominance and exploitation of elite over the downtrodden communities in India until certain period. Though the egalitarian society still remained as a dream, progress to a certain extent is evident.

Dalit Aesthetics

The traditional literature in India was dominated by the aesthetics of Sanskrit literature. The canon of literature did not include the simple structure, local lexical symbols and ordinary themes. To be recognised as a part of mainstream literature, one had to follow the norms of traditional writing. Since culture, art and literature reflect the change in society, the sublimity of canon had come to question. It was the time when Dalit writers had started the Dalit Panther movement which was inspired by the various western movements and ideologies. This brought the works written by Dalit writers reflecting the naked truth about the injustices and struggles of Dalits. Gayatri Spivak talks about how the voices of marginalised sections of the society is unheard and misrepresented. Here, the Dalits being the marginalised community are enduring the pain of suppression. They were not considered or presented in the main stream literature. So, most of the Dalit writings are autobiographical in nature because they want to present themselves in the authentic form.

The means of learning and gaining knowledge was limited to the elite class and was denied access for the downtrodden. The doors of education are held open for Dalits since a few decades ago due to the colonization. The colonial education system made them to break free from the 'Brahminical dominance'. They were exposed to the ideas of justice, equality, rights and revolutions and it changed their perspective

towards their life. They started protesting against the exploitation of their community in the name of karma and it is reflected in the writing of Dalit writers. Some challenged the literary canon while others rejected it. They rejected the art for art's sake and propagated art for life's sake. According to some writers like N S Phadke, portraying the life of Dalits and their pain are not worthy of being read in form of novels. Limbale states that, "if extraordinary pleasure of reading is a part of canonical literature then why not the extraordinary pain? "so, presenting the life of Dalits in its raw form is the true essence has become part of Dalit literature.

The writers who followed the Savarna faithfully attempted to write about the life of Dalits but they were on a sympathetic note and saw them as the others. They could not present the intricate details of their lifestyle to reflect them in true form. The urge to protest against the injustice is not showcased by the writers of the mainstream literature. The need to voice their opinion and emotions created space for the Dalit writers to question the unequal treatment in the name of caste and karma. With local dialects and symbols, protagonist as a Dalit and simple structures of writing, the Dalit literature had carved its own niche.

Gaabilam

Presenting the Dalit as a protagonist in the dominance of Brahmanical works of traditional literature was quite a task during early 19th century for a writer from Dalit community. But Gurram Jashuva, a Telugu Dalit writer challenged the Savarna by replacing cloud as a messenger with a bat, which is neither a bird or animal reflecting the uncertain identity of Dalit. "He is considered as the father of Dalit literature in Telugu. He wrote using the Sanskrit meter in classical Telugu to prove himself an equal to Brahmin pandits." He is probably the first among the untouchables to write in the "epic tradition of Indian Poetry" to present the destitute state of the Dalits in the oppressive caste based society. He challenged the literary canon by using language of the commoner and using unusual symbols. "He subverts the classic Magaduta, and instead of using swans, parrots, peacocks, and clouds as messengers like the Savarnas, he send his message of suffering to the god Shiva." Jashuva wrote almost all his works in "thematically rooted in a historical context like the classical literary genre but with a conscious aim to highlight injustice and inequality."

Lot of works in Dalit literature are written in vernacular languages and they are presented to the wide range of audience by the translators. Translation of a work beyond just conveying the meaning is a rigorous task for any translator. Reflecting the same emotion with historical and social contest is as important as telling the story of the text. Translating a work with poetic meter dealing with a serious social issue is challenging and Chinnaiah Jangam made sure that the original emotion of the poet is not lost in translation. There were translator who attempted to translate but they merely conveyed the meaning but did not convey the philosophical depth of the original work.

Creating a counter Narrative

One of the major aspects of Dalit literature is creating a counter narrative. Counter narrative has been described as a technique of "telling the stories of those people who experiences are often misrepresented or untold." The mainstream traditional literature had laid emphasis on the form and technical devices. The Dalit literature focuses on the sharing emotions and questions the injustice through their narrative which is expressed not in the grand narrative literary devices but in local language. Jashua created a counter narrative by taking bat which is considered as bad omen as a messenger to carry his message to the god

Shiva. He overturns the Savarnas of the traditional literature and challenges the literary canon by taking the Dalit as a protagonist. Jangam mentions in the translator's note - "Jashuva followed classical poetic meter- not to succumb to the traditional Brahminical etiquette but to challenge and transform. Thus, every poem has a deep philosophical meaning that is incomparable." The poem begins with describing the state of untouchables. It describes how the

"Caste Hindus imposed many hardships upon him
Tried to destroy his caste tortured and squeezed his body
But he never rebelled against them
Instead, he stitched shoes to protect the feet of great
Upper caste heroes of the nation
And led life as a dutiful man
This country, Bharat is in his debt"

The protagonist continues to say that the untouchables feed the nation with their hard work but they have nothing to eat. He provokes the readers by stating that they were not even loved by God. He mocks the hypocrisy of the religion which lets people to feed animals but not the untouchables. He questions if God could not uplift his position in society, then how can a fellow human care about him. The protagonist sketches the life of an untouchable to present how he toils through out the day but the fruits of his hard work is snatched away from him. The protagonist welcomes the bat which was uninvited by gets surprised by its visit. He pours out his hearts content to the bat for it to empathise with him. He contrasts the elegance of temple with his impoverished house. He continues to mock the hypocritical society which could spend on unproductive customs but does not have heart to give anything to an untouchable.

Keeping in mind the time around which this text was written, Jashuva portrayed his patriotism by giving a poetic description about the historical places of the country. In the part 2 of the poem, he evokes strong emotions with imagery in the lines

"The tears of untouchables crystallize into clouds
And burn the country like thunderstorm". He guides the bat to reach Himalayas to meet god Shiva and tells it about the prominent places it would come across on its way. He specifically glorifies the Telugu state by telling about how this place was conquered and ruled by great kings and flourished during their rule with lot of riches. He also appreciates the rich cultural heritage and prosperity particularly during certain reigns. The poem is written in two parts with a preface to each part which gives particulars about the details of the poem. The part 1 being named as An Untouchable Odyssey and part 2 named as Meditation on Freedom, Jashua breakdown the journey of the bat. The part 1 being the guidance for the journey towards Himalayas and part 2 about the protagonist's worry about how the God responded to his message.

Asserting an Identity

The poem explicitly asserts the identity of an untouchable by taking him as a protagonist. Collective experiences of the community are presented while he was sharing his caste burden to the bat. Jashua begins the poem with the lines

"There are four cardinal directions in the universe
This untouchable has none to claim
He is the last son of Mother India"

He strives to present the social status of an untouchable. Their social, economic, cultural status were

wretched. He states how the identity was based on the community in which they were born and the protagonist “lives his life as a celibate” because he didn’t want to bring children in to “the world of despair”. The protagonist also asserts that he is “an untouchable who has no respect in the society” while he addresses the bat which enters his house. He also projects his economic state by saying that he has nothing to offer for bat. He also states that the bat can “not find any ray of hope or happiness” at his house. The protagonist lets out his anguish in the lines “Selfish people relish the fruits of my labor

And use **karma** theory to seal my mouth

What is **karma**?

Find out from the God Shiva

Reason for **Karma**’s hatred of me”

He exposes the hypocrisy of the oppressive caste system which exploits him and deprives him the dignity of life. He exalts how Ambedkar overcame struggles and established an identity and earned respect in society to prove that despite of coming from a community labelled as downtrodden, not worthy and capable of gaining knowledge, destined to serve for the upper caste, accomplished great heights.

Internal Colonialism

The systematically institutionalised exploitation and suppression is mirrored in the caste dominant nation. The economic exploitation of the colonizer is reflected in the lotting of the physical hard work of the lower caste communities. Hegel’s states that “ethical institutions within civil society cultivate a fundamental sense of order”. By this he means that the ethical institutions such as family, community and administration of justice provide a framework for “individual to develop a sense of duty, community, and respect for the universal good beyond their private interests.” In contrast, the caste oppressed society neither value the contribution of the downtrodden nor respect them as an individual. The protagonist projects the state of the untouchable in the lines,

“To cleanse the muck of untouchability that soils his head

Even the holiest Ganga has no compassion

His touch is considered polluting

If he handles the offerings

The trinity of Gods must starve”

The internal exploitation of the marginalised community replicates the colonizer. The hierarchical structure of offering the menial and dehumanising works is allotted to the people from the marginalised sections of society. According to Gramsci’s theory of Hegemony, the dominant class propagate its own beliefs, values and culture upon the entire society and exercises power by influencing how people understand their role in this world. So, the dominant class comes out as the accepted, legitimate leader and subordinate is made to think that it is best for them to accept this social order. Gramsci also suggested that a counter-hegemony is needed to challenge the social order and replace the consent of dominant with the consent of the masses. Jashuva portrays the similar propaganda through protagonist who tells about the status of Dalit in the Hindu society and wishes that the change would come. The first part presents the depressing situation of the community of the protagonist and the second part presents the hope for better future and an egalitarian society.

Conclusion

The study of works of Dalit writers has entered the mainstream literature and the discourse has become

quite popular in recent times. Most of the Dalit writers have written in their vernacular language and the translations made it available for wide range of audience. The efforts of translators to present the emotional, social, historical context along with literal translation is equally appreciated at par with the writers.

Jashua became most acclaimed writer in the Telugu literature in the early 20th century dealing the themes of social issues. competing with the fellow writers of his time was challenging because of his caste identity but he proved himself to be proficient to become a mainstream writer and entered the literary canon. The postcolonial theory revolves around the exploitation of the oppressed by the oppressor. The exploitation and dehumanising condition of the colonizers and the protest of the colonized is replicated in the Dalit studies.

The Dalit aesthetics created counter narratives to the dominant culture to present the authentic stories and share experiences of the Dalits. The “art for life’s sake” became a popular slogan in the Dalit Literature. The ignored local dialects, oral tradition and folk songs have challenged the mainstream literature entered the literary canon. Throughout the poem, the protagonist who is a Dalit asserts his identity and voices his struggles of barring the identity of an untouchable. The narrative presents the intense emotion of the speaker and it is full of rhetorical devices mocking the elite class which is enjoying the fruits of hard work of the downtrodden community.

This paper analysed the elements of the Dalit literature through the lenses of postcolonialism. The study of the counter narrative by subverting the classic literature and with the use of local dialects is presented. Through the poem the writer challenged the dominant power structures, asserted the identity, and presented the collective experiences of his community. He protested against the established conventions of writing by choosing Bat as the messenger to convey his message to the god Shiva. The close reading of the poem brought out how the poet criticizes the religious scripts which legitimises the caste based discrimination and about how he questions the social hierarchy.

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