



## Portrayal of Dalit Experiences in Short Stories of Dalpat Chauhan

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### Abstract

Dalit literature is a literature of resistance. The dalit individuals are victims of convention and caste-based discrimination. It raises questions on the status of our democratic set up. Through the stories of pain and anguish, it appeals to the readers to work for a more egalitarian society. This article is divided in five sections. The first section briefly explains the purpose of dalit literature. Section two connects the issues handled in this literature to our social set up. It expresses the need to strengthen our democratic ideals and be more inclusive. Section three explains some of the basic tenets of the dalit literature. Section four is an informative section and it talks about Dalpat Chauhan's contribution to Gujarati Dalit literature. In section five, three of his stories are analysed on basis of the objectives of dalit literature. It is evident that one of the major causes of distress for the dalits, is the norms of exclusion through which they are separated from the mainstream and forced to live a tragic life.

**Key words:** Dalit literature, marginalization, exclusion, caste system, pollution.

### 1. Introduction

Literature influences our lives and helps us become better human beings. For centuries some people had to live a subaltern existence due to the dictates of religion and tradition. As we enter the modern times, our society has seen many changes. With the adoption of a democratic form of government, it was thought that all the problems will be solved and everyone will be equal. However, some events that have happened in the public sphere have

forced to think about the success of our democracy. This article highlights the need to work on our democratic ideals and be more inclusive. This need is felt due to the realistic portrayal of the traumatic experiences in dalit literature. Writers from various parts of the country have written down their experiences in the form of memoirs, short stories, autobiographies and novels. This literature is realistic and comes from the pain, anger, resistance and sorrow experienced by the dalits. Due to translation of these texts they are

available in English and have got a global readership. Works of many accomplished regional writers are now available in English due to translation. Dalpat Chauhan is one such writer. He is a Gujarati writer who has contributed to the development of the Gujarati dalit literature. This paper is an attempt to study how Chauhan presents the agonies of the dalits in his stories.

## 2. Democracy

The world has seen a variety of forms of governments like Monarchy, Authoritarianism, Oligarchy, Theocracy etc. In Monarchy a king or a queen holds power. In an Authoritarian form of government a single person holds the power. More often force is used to rule the people. Oligarchy was a kind of government in which a small group of people who were influential held the power. In a Theocratic form of government the power is concentrated in the hands of religious leaders or groups. These governments leave no room for individual liberty, equality and freedom. The most modern form of government is Democracy. In this form of government the power rests in the hands of the people or their elected representatives. It gives value to individual liberty and also freedom. In a democratic country like India the citizens enjoy the rights of freedom of speech and expression, freedom to follow the religion of their choice, have right to vote, right to property and many such rights.

It is praised as the most ideal form of government. It is many more times better than the alternative forms of government listed above. However some limitations of democracy are to be overcome by our society in order that every single citizen of our democratic country enjoys its benefits. We come across cases where citizens from the marginalized communities have to face insulting treatment and discrimination. In her article '*Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*' Nancy Fraser expresses the need of a theory about the limits

of democracy in a capitalist society. In this article she takes up the idea of 'public sphere' used by Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. She proposes that the idea is conflated with many other things which lead to complications. Scholars like John Landes, Mary Ryan etc are referred according to whom the public sphere is characterized by exclusionary norms pertaining to gender and class. Also there are a variety of publics like the peasants public, the working class public etc and their relations are conflicting. She raises the question whether the public sphere is a tool of domination or a utopian ideal?

Taking reference from the above ideas expressed by Fraser we need to rethink about our own model of democracy and ask questions about its success and identify areas where effort should be taken to strengthen our democratic model. The public sphere in the Indian context comprises many publics like the peasants, the working classes and socially marginalised groups. Time and again news about the injustices done to these members of the society surface in the media and doubts are raised about the nature of our society. The residue of the caste system lingers in the minds of some people who hold the reins of power. Exclusionary norms are created and certain classes are kept marginalised forever. Literatures like Dalit literature, Feminist literature, Tribal literature etc portray the agony of the individuals who are overlooked and point to the need to pay attention to their issues. Dalit writers and activists like Namdeo Dhasal, Omprakash Valmiki, Baburao Bagul, Dalpat Chauhan and others through their writings have attempted to voice the pains and agonies of our Dalit brothers and sisters who are subjugated under the name of tradition and caste system. Their literatures are translated into English and they help to trace the commonality of patterns of marginalisation and exclusion. In this sense translation activity has played a major role in creating awareness on this extremely important social issue. This paper

has its primary focus as the short stories of Dalpat Chauhan.

### 3. Dalit Literature

This section reviews the meaning of the term 'dalit literature' and some of its major concerns. The Wikipedia explains the word 'Dalit' as a member of the lowest caste in the Indian caste system. The dalit individual was deprived of many social privileges. Their touch was considered to have a polluting effect. They were subjected to physical and emotional abuse. However in the modern times these practises have been minimized considerably. The Constitution of India grants equal status to every individual. They are getting educated and through their writings they are expressing the pain they underwent for centuries. A considerable body of literature has evolved in which the dalit individual is the centre of attention and their pain and suffering are presented. Broadly this corpus of literature can be referred to as 'Dalit literature'. The term 'Dalit Literature' was used by the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in its 1958 conference. It was resolved in this conference that literature by dalit authors and by other writers about dalits written in Marathi language should be termed as dalit literature.

Today it is not limited to Marathi language only. India is a multilingual country. Every state has its own language. The sufferings of the dalits are being written in various Indian languages. There is variation of experience but uniformity of pattern in this suffering. The activity of translation has given dalit literature a pan India readership. It has now become a part of Indian Literature. Its aim is to reform the caste based social system. It revolts against the customs which have isolated the dalit community for centuries and attempts to create a new social system free from untouchability and caste based distinctions.

It is a realistic writing. It differs significantly from the mainstream literature. The mainstream literature focuses on art for art's

sake. Dalit literature employs art for life sake. It follows a different aesthetics. The reader is left with a sense of pain and sorrow after reading about the lived experiences of dalit individuals. It has received criticism for use of simple language. Since it is a writing based on the lived experience of the dalits, it employs the language used by them in day to day conversations. Traditional literature has paid little attention to these disregarded subjects, but in dalit literature they are the centre of attention. It attempts to present the story of the subalterns through poetry, autobiographies, short stories and novels and familiarise the society about their experiences.

Many a critics have raised the question whether the literature written by non-dalit writers about dalits is regarded as dalit literature? Their main argument is that such writings are missing the 'dalit consciousness'. Laura Breck in her article '*Dalit Chetna in Dalit Literary Criticism*' discusses the concept. The term has diverse meanings. It may refer to political awareness as well as a sense of collective identity. Main stream writers like Premchand are criticized for conflating the problems of dalits with peasants and other labourers. Breuck suggests that it is being developed as a test to judge the dalitness of a literary text.

For the dalit writers, writing their story is an act of resistance. Initially they began by writing simple poetry. It received a lot of criticism. Later autobiography became their favourite genre as it gave space to portray their lived experiences. They could narrate how they survived the injustices. Short stories and novels too are gaining importance among writers as forms of expression. Dalit writers from all over India and almost all Indian languages are engaged in creating the corpus of dalit literature. The translation activity has been immensely helpful in making it available to readers all over the world. It helps understand how people were forced to live a subaltern existence. Omprakash Valmiki (Hindi), Urmila Pawar (Marathi),

Shyamal Kumar Pramanik (Bengal), Dalpat Chauhan (Gujarat) etc are writers from various Indian states who have contributed to dalit literature. Some of their works are available in translation. This article studies selected stories of Dalpat Chauhan for their presentations of the experiences of the dalit individuals.

#### 4. Dalpat Chauhan

Dalit literature and dalit activism are inseparable and Dalpat Chauhan is not an exception. He was related to organisations like Dalit Sangharsh Sangh who agitated for the rights of the dalits. He was also related to magazines like 'Kalo Suraj' (The Black Sun), 'Akrosh' (Outrage), and 'Sarvanam' (Pronoun) between the years 1979 to 1986. He has contributed greatly to the development of the Gujarati dalit literature, through his creative works. For him dalit literature is resistance literature, which gives voice to the humiliation and anger of dalits. On Chauhan's writings Hemang Ashwinikumar suggests:

*"To this end, he made it his life mission to interrogate historical, mythological and literary meta narratives and rewrite them from the standpoint of the invisibilized victims and silenced communities" (Pg.xx).*

His plays like 'Anaryavarta', 'Antim Dheya' and 'Patan ne Gondare' present an alternative reading of mythological and historical narratives. He has written novels like *Malak (Homeland)*, 1991; *Gidh (Vulture)*, 1991; *Bhalbhankhalun (Dawn)*, 2004 and short story collections like *Munjharo (Buffaloed)*, 2002 and *Dar (Fear)*, 2009. He has received awards from Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, Gujarati Sahitya Academy and also the prestigious Narsinh Mehta Award. The academia and literary cultures of world too should be aware of the writings of such a great writer. This article is an attempt to increase awareness about this great writer and the variety of dalit issues handled in his works. Constructing narratives about dalit lives and experiences is a way to reclaim what is lost in the exclusion process. In this article three of Chauhan's stories *Home*,

*Invasion* and *Touch of Snake* are analysed for their representation of the dalit experience.

#### 5. Analysis of the stories

The stories selected for analysis are from his collection 'Fear and Other Stories' (2023). They are translated in English by Hemang AshwinKumar. The stories are representative of individuals who face similar fate in society.

**5.1 Home-** is the story of the Pani and Kalu's aspirations to build a pucca home in the village. Their aspirations are shattered by the tyrants from the upper castes. The phenomenon of exclusion is evident in the traditional ways settlements are done in villages. There are specific streets belonging to specific communities. The novel *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao displays this kind of division among people based on their castes. So the character Moorthy invites wrath of the upper caste people for mixing with people considered as low born. The settlements in a village reveal the hierarchical order and the authoritarian nature of the village society. In such a society the dalits are permanently marginalised in various ways with exclusive identity markers to warn others of their dalitness.

The story opens with a dialogue between the husband and wife. Pani is angry that Kalu is not talking to the village authorities about their house. Kalu's reply is "... we are dhe.. and the village resents the idea of us having a pucca house..." (*Fear and Other Stories*, P.1). Kalu's frustrated reply reveals the upper caste communities resentment of a dalit owning a pucca house. No person belonging to the dhe community owns a pucca house in the village. The couple is emotional and sad as their efforts to build a house are being obstructed. Kalu tells pani that he has bribed hartanji and soon they will get a call from the village office. While dressing to go out Kalu has to tie a cloth of non woven fabric around his head which serves as an identity marker for his people and they have to wear it mandatorily. His friend Chaggan tries



to dissuade Kalu from the thought of erecting a house. He reminds of the consequences by narrating a similar incident. Ramo the potter, who had agreed to supply the bricks for his house, was burgled and nothing was left for him. He recounts the sudden catching of fire by Megho's shop who was preparing the doors for Kalu's house. Even Kalu's house is robbed twice. The miscreants are unknown, but everyone can guess who might have done it.

The dialogue between the two indicates that if any person who attempts to go against the wishes of the village upper caste people, then he has to suffer such mishaps and danger to life and property. Kalu is adamant on building the house. Kalu and Chagan are welcomed by sneers and insulting remarks from the feudal lords. After a lot of insults Pathuba the village head gives Kalu the permission to build a pucca house. Some of the lords murmur about conventions and village decorum but are silenced by Pathuba. Conditions are laid down for the construction of the house. He is not allowed to keep windows in the front direction, no niche for cupboards in the walls, simple doors and even the height, length and breadth of the house is fixed by them. Even the cart that will carry the bricks has to take a longer route from outside the village. Every time kalu has to take care that he does not touch the upper caste or they may get polluted. Later Kalu has to give five liquor bottles and his goat kid for the opium party of the village elders.

There are tears in the eyes of the couple while giving the goat kid as they loved it very much. That night fire was not lighted in Kalu's house. Everybody including the goat, slept hungry. A deep sense of sorrow fills them all. As soon as the house construction progresses everyone is happy. Even the other people in the street become happy seeing the construction. Kalu is again summoned in the village office and enquiries are made about the completion. He instinctively feels doubtful about the village lords. Kalu is worried but finally falls asleep. He dreams of himself being born as Lord Krishna.

In the dream the battle between Krishna and Kamsa continues. He later realizes it is Pathuba instead of Kamsa. Flames of fire come out from the demon's mouth. Kalu is woken up by calls from his neighbours. His house had caught fire. Gradually his dream house has turned to ashes.

The story reveals how it is sin for a lower caste person to even dream of owning a house. They have to tie an unwoven cloth round their head to indicate their status as dalits. They make every effort to appease the upper caste lords of the village. They are looted of their money and property under various pretexts. Their aspirations of building a house are turned to dust by the mischiefs of the village lords.

**5.2 The Invasion-** is a story which details the way the dalits are not allowed to hold property and are prohibited from using public amenities. The central character of this story is Natho. The other set of characters include the village headman and his supporters. There is a direct clash between Natho and the headman's gang. Natho was the only person in his family to own a government land. Though it was small but he now owned it. He is portrayed as a strong and stout person. He has worked as a labourer on the lands of the upper caste lords. He had a reputation of being a maverick. He had the built of a wrestler. He loved the hard work on the farms. He is dreaming of harvesting his millet crop. Natho encounters the village head and moves to one side of the road to let the person pass. The village people are unable to come to terms that the small piece of land belongs to Natho now. They purposefully refer it as a government wasteland. The village head's questions about the land and the crop disturb the peace of Natho. The head enquires about the readiness of the crop. Convention barred the untouchables from owning a piece of land in the village. Rules changed and new laws gave them right to hold land. Natho has got the government land, however the villagers are against it. The village didn't allow him to plough the land for three years. The villagers criticised the village head for his support of

Natho. He now wished his crop would burn. Liliyo his nephew complains to the head. He hatches a plan to destroy the crop.

That night cattle are let loose in Natho's farm. They feast on the millet crop. There is a violent abusive clash between Natho and Liliyo. The village head supports Liliyo and ignore Natho's complaint. The head tells him that the land is government land and hence the invasion of cows is justified. Natho warns them that village well is also on government land. Natho is moving to the village well now. All the villagers and the head are worried that he may pollute the well. They charge against Natho. Being an untouchable he is not allowed to use the village well. Natho too charges in retaliation and everybody is afraid. The story ends by the intervention of the police inspector, who threatens to shoot if his orders are not obeyed.

The story draws attention to the restrictions on the untouchables. They can't own land. When the upper castes are walking they have to stand at the side of the road. They can't use the village well. These restrictions are imposed by convention. They are followed since centuries. It causes the marginalization of the dalits.

**5.3 Touch of a snake-** is a tragic story of Viro the scavenger. A snake has bitten his son Shivalo. Their street i.e the scavenger street is in the midst of the forest far away from the main area of the village and amidst the dangers of the harmful creatures of the forest. The villagers are moving to the scene and expressing pity for the child. Their dialogue reveals that due to conventions they can't be allowed to put residence in the village. Also being born as a scavenger is a punishment of karma. Thus the exclusion of low castes due to conventions is one of the themes of this story.

Viro is praised for his qualities. He is a righteous and a hardworking person. The second character in this story is Mohan who is a kind of tantric who through his incantations and spells can cure the victim of snake bite. In the

past he has sucked the poison from the body of persons bitten by snake and they have survived. Mohan too comes to the scene, but the thought of entering a scavenger's courtyard holds him back. Viro and his wife helplessly appeal to Mohan to save their son. Viro requests Mohan to suck the poison from Shivalo's body. Mohan refuses and says he will suck the poison from the courtyard. The touch of the low born is considered as polluting and Mohan does not want to touch the body of Viro's son. Mohan is sucking the venom from a safe distance. In his grief Viro remembers how Mohan's cow had fallen in a well and he had entered the dangerous well to save the cow. That time Mohan had taken Shivalo in his hands to help Viro save his cow. Now when he needed Mohan's help the most he does not touch the child due to fear of pollution. In the end tragically the child passes away and Viro is left alone and grief stricken. In a fit of grief he spits on the ground and starts crying.

The story displays sheer inhumanity of the upper caste individuals like Mohan who allow such tragic things to happen but do not break the convention. There is a pun in the title of the story. The touch of the low caste individuals is dreaded as a snake bite by the upper caste individuals.

### Conclusions

The three stories discussed here present a realistic picture of problems faced by dalit individuals. The expectations of the characters in the stories are very basic. Kalu and Pani expect to have a home of their own. Natho expects to own the small strip of land and cultivate millets in it. Viro expects Mohan to cure his son from snake bite. They are obstructed by the exclusionary norms of society. Kalu and Pani's dream of owning a home is shattered. Natho's crop is destroyed. Viro's son dies. The dalit characters are left in despair and loss.

Equality remains a hollow concept if the society at large does not accept it. Laws remain only on paper if the people allow conventions to

dominate them. This is the achievement of dalit literature. It realistically portrays the impact of such inhumanity on our dalit brothers and sisters. It shakes the conscience of the readers and brings a change of heart in them.

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