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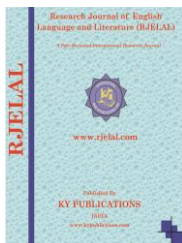
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DUKHI AND VELUTHA: A TALE OF TWO DALIT PROTAGONISTS

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ABSTRACT

Dalit writing portrays even what is beyond our naked eyes. In this sense Dalit literature presents an ultrasound image of Indian society. Most of Dalit writings particularly based on Lalit (non-Dalit) writers' speculation failed to justify the innermost agony of the people on the margin. Dalits' suffering can be portrayed to the point only through Dalit-conscious writings, adopting Ambedkarite ideology. The paper in question is a sincere attempt to compare and contrast the plight and predicament of the two Dalit protagonists--Dukhi and Velutha. One, from Premchand's Hindi short story *Sadgati* (Pursuit of Salvation), and the other, from Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). Both, being Dalit, are destined to embrace death, unnatural and premature. But resistance against Dalit oppression is undercurrent in both of the works. However, Lalitization of the entire socio-political system imposes a heavy barrier in the way of Dalits' assertion.

Keywords: Ultrasound image, Dalit protagonists, resistance, Lalitization, Dalit assertion

"When thinking of India, it is hard not to think of caste...Caste has been seen as omnipotent in Indian History... Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and it is seen today as the major threat to Indian modernity." -Nicolas B Dirks

That the need of Dalit literature was greatly felt by Dalit writers because the Lalit (Mainstream) literature has failed to take the whole Dalit concerns with socio-literary justification is absolutely true. No doubt, the latter has almost neglected the innermost agony and the very painful experience of the people occupying the lowest strata. But it is also true that Dalit writings based on Lalit (Caste Hindu) writer's speculation have compelled Dalit authors to present the scene in Dalit's perspective and to do Dalit-conscious writings based on self-experience or direct experience. Thus we find that Dalit literature is an essential supplement to Indian Literature.

Needless to mention that Dalit literature in diverse Indian languages with the inclusion of Marathi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Hindi, Oriya et al have come into being, creating a significantly independent place at the (inter)national level. But very painful to express that the representation of Dalit discourses in Indian English has been very rare. Given this, to our sheer pride, much less through English texts and much more through English translation works, Dalit literature on a par with Black literature and Subaltern literature happens to have attained a considerably prestigious apogee forming the integral part of the world literature.

Having been influenced by the Black Panther Movement in 1960s the Dalit Panther Party revolutionized Dalit concerns in Marathi, exercising its influences on almost all major Indian languages. With the humanitarian point of view there must be no confrontation between Lalit (Mainstream)

literature and Dalit literature. On the contrary, both must be treated as a united whole with no discrimination on any front. The categorization of literature is required to be taken with a view to enhancing its utility and potentiality, serving our socio-academic as well as socio-literary purposes. Premchand's view that "literature is a torchbearer to all the progressive movements in society" (Prasad, 21) is really very striking in the sense that it expresses all the social concerns in a wider circumference. Moreover, Arundhati Roy's opinion that "The secret of great stories is that they have no secrets" (TGOST, 229) reveals that literature, if written for life's sake as well as for a great cause, must depict the clear cut picture of society in its totality, maintaining no secrecy, exhibiting no reluctance, evading no reality. In this way, Dalit literature is also a progressive social movement that aims to inculcate in the worst sufferers the sense of dignity and the assertion for identity, empowering them to fight for their rights against socio-political hypocrisy.

This paper tends to explore and compare and contrast the plight of two Dalit protagonists--Dukhi and Velutha. One, from Premchand's short story *Sadgati* and the other, from Arundhati Roy's semi-autobiographical debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Both represent two different phases of India, pre-Independence India and post-Independence India respectively. Both are destined to meet an adverse fate. Even if circumstances are quite different, they both, being Dalits, have to embrace death, unnatural and premature, creating a low intensity upheaval in the existing social establishments. As a result, some changes with positive signals are in view of our society. The conditions of the majority of the most unfortunate lot who are none but Dalits and Mahadalits are badly required to be ameliorated. And it is possible only when all the "narrow walls" be demolished. It is the reason why Dr. Ambedkar reiterates to decaste and declass the society we live in. De facto, Lalitization of the whole of the socio-political system imposes a heavy barrier in the way of Dalits' liberation.

Sadgati, originally written in Hindi and later anonymously transcreated into English under the

title of '*Pursuit of Salvation*', a short story from the book **Munshi Premchand**, is a heart rending story that, demonstrating the ugliness of Brahminical culture of the then India, strikes a heavy blow on the heinous sophistication of Brahminism. The story revolves round Dukhi Chamar, the protagonist, who is a god-fearing person. Dukhi has firm faith in Pt. Ghasiram, a village priest whom he (Dukhi) thinks a man of god, a link to Heaven. Selfless service to the priest, as does Dukhi believe, is the only way to salvation. One day without having had any food, he leaves for Pt. Ghasiram's house for the purpose of getting known the auspicious days and dates for the solemnization of his daughter's marriage. As and when Dukhi gets at the Priest's, he is set to work. Dukhi is asked to hew a very old knotty Sheesham log. A hungry Dukhi, abiding by a ruthless Pt. Ghasiram's order, starts hacking the log. Dukhi tries and tries to splinter the log at the best of his attempt. Dukhi takes it for granted that the priest is meant for taking, not for being taken from. Chikhuri Gond, Dukhi's villager, suggests him to ask Pt. Ghasiram for food. At this, Dukhi replies: "How can I ask a Brahmin? One gives to them, one doesn't take from them." (Sadgati: 51) Then Chikhuri Gond remarks in utter despair: "Not even food in return for a day's work," (ibid)

Truly said, if food is not had at the time when strong hunger is felt, then it gets lost. The same happens to Dukhi. He suffers from the loss of appetite. Still he continues to work like a machine for nearly an hour. At last a crack appeared in the trunk and very soon it was cut into two bits. Dukhi somehow gets success in splintering the log into two pieces succumbing to over exertion. Here, "the knotty old log" symbolizes the diehard rigidity of the age old *vrnavyavastha* that gets affected with its (the log) turning into two pieces, supposedly giving the birth of two major ideological forces---Gandhian and Ambedkarite" (Thakur,151).

Dukhi's blind devotion and dedication to Pt. Ghasiram causes him to be an easy prey to priesthood or Brahminical hegemony. The plight and predicament of Shudras have been excruciatingly thought provoking from time immemorial. In this context Dr Ambedkar's quote from a Brahminical scripture: "The Shudras should never abandon his

master whatever the nature of degree of distress into which the latter may fall" (Who Were the Shudras, 143) must compel the 21st century society to ponder over the vicious circle of miserableness the untouchables are trapped in.

After the death of Dukhi Chamar, Pt. Ghasiram sends the message to the Chamars' ghetto to take the body. But no one turns up following the harsh warning by Chikhuri Gond, who frightens the people of his Dalit community in the name of the police. "The matter must be reported to the police tomorrow, Chikhuri advised, and warned them that if any one went to get the body, he would also be handed over to the police" (Sadgati, 53). Out of fear no Chamars dare to take the body. It is because for them the fear of the police was more powerful than the fear of losing a place in heaven. It shows that Chamars, who were Dalits and untouchables, silently protested the Brahminical domination in the then society. At last Pt. Ghasiram himself drags the body outside the village into the field. Out in the fields, the jackals and the vultures start collecting around Dukhi's carcass---a fitting reward for a life of devotion, service and faith in the form of a tanner's assumed salvation.

Ironically, Dukhi attains salvation, sparking a direct but silent protest against the inhuman attitude of priesthood. Mustering courage to gainsay the brahminical system during the pre-Independence India was not a cake walk in the then social circumstances. The story *Sadgati* exhibits that Premchand must have been under the ideological influence of Ambedkar too who was considered to be the epicentre of the Dalit movement that stresses the principle of freedom, fraternity and equality. Through the story Premchand reveals the clandestine oppressive attitude of the rotten Brahminical mentality still prevalent in our socio-political and religio-cultural precincts in some form or the other.

As for *The God of Small Things*, its narrative centres upon a love affair between Ammu, a high-caste woman and Velutha, an untouchable. The intense love between the two is nipped in the bud. The voices of Ammu and Velutha, the protagonist, end in their tragic deaths. There is no body to help Velutha in his crisis. The whole humanity happens to

turn against him. Velutha possesses multifarious qualities. He is a dexterous worker at the Paradise Pickles Factory. He is an avid swimmer as well. He is at home in all the machinery works of the factory. Moreover, he is at home in carpentry and mending radios, clocks, water pumps, and what not. He has also the expertise in plumbing and all the electrical gadgets. Mammachi, Ammu's mother, often says of Velutha that "If only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (TGOST, 75).

In the Pickles Factory, touchable as well as untouchable workers work together. Notwithstanding all his skillfulness, Velutha gets less than a touchable carpenter. Mammachi understands the meaning of the being of Velutha very well. So "To keep others happy and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan" (TGOST, 77). Velutha feels economically exploited in the factory. Velutha, being a Dalit, is not allowed into the Mammachi's house until needed. "Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended and installed)" (Ibid).

Almost everything goes on well in Ayenemem till the love affair between Velutha, an untouchable and Ammu, a touchable is disclosed by his father, Vellya Paapen, himself, who accidentally sees the two in the compromising condition with his naked eyes. Vellya Paapen thinks they both have made "unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happened. Vellya, out and out loyal to Mammachi, offers "to kill his son. To tear him limb from limb" (TGOST, 256). Arundhati Roy writes: "He (Vellya) was taken completely by surprise. Part of the taboo of being an Untouchable was expecting not to be touched. At least not in these circumstances. Of being blocked into a physically impregnable cocoon" (Ibid).

Of course, Velutha falls head over heels in love. He takes an exemplary step, mustering his courage, to love Ammu, a divorcee and mother of swarthy twins, Rahel and Estha. Notwithstanding his cognizance of the imminent consequences, he continues to make love to her. But their love affair does not last long. The caste pride nips it in the bud.

Velutha has to pay the cost of love in losing his life. The outcome of such an affair in the caste conscious society is hardly surprising. It was just to come off. But here, the most remarkable thing is that even without caring for his life, Velutha swims against the turbulent current of social hierarchy with his indomitable grittiness. No doubt, his love for Ammu is based on her pressing carnal demand. It is really flawless and heartfelt as well. Love knows no fair or foul outcome. Velutha has a sense of impending doom. So does Ammu have.

However, Velutha's bold step for love is a direct protest against the social establishment that does not allow lovebirds belonging to two different social statuses as well as two different castes, lower and higher, to exercise their human rights. It is true that a new societal change demands incessant struggle and sacrifice. But a meaningful and fruitful change seems to be a pipe dream in the present context.

Ambedkar, advocating for a casteless and classless society, rightly opines, "The strength of a society depends upon the presence of points of contact, possibilities of interaction between different groups called 'organic filaments' i.e. the elastic threads which help to bring the disintegrating elements together and to reunite them. There is no integrating force among the Hindus to contract the disintegration caused by caste" (Annihilation of Caste, 73). This might have been expressed targeting the caste deformities we find in the Hindu society. But it is equally true to every society in India whether it is Christian or Muslim or the other. "India is generally known as the classic land of castes and creeds. Caste is said to be in the air, and even Muslims and Christians have not escaped infection" (Majumdar, 195).

When Velutha, who remains totally unaware of what his father reveals to Mammachi concerning his affair with Ammu, appears before her, she humiliates him extremely inhumanly showing her intense anger. Mammachi spat into Velutha's face. "Thick spit. It spattered across his skin. His mouth and eyes" (TGOST, 284).

Baby Kochamma, taking the advantages of the existing circumstances, labels the charges of rape and abduction on Velutha. She brings a

complaint to the police against him. Kochamma informing the police, says that "a few days ago he (Velutha) had tried to force himself on her niece (Ammu), and kidnapped her children. Velutha comes to have already lost his place in the eyes of Baby Kochamma and the other family members. It is because Velutha was once seen in the communist party march. The procession surrounded the blue Plymouth being driven by Chakho to the Abhilash Talkies carrying Rahel, Estha, Ammu and Baby Kochamma. The protesters demand that they must not be humiliated calling their caste with their name. Rahel, Ammu's daughter, sees "Her most beloved friend Velutha. Velutha marching with a red flag. Velutha is seen "In a white shirt and mundu with angry veins in his neck" (TGOST, 71).

Apprehending his immediate arrest, Velutha first thinks to save himself somehow from the clutch of the police. Thinking so he meets Pillai, the party leader and asks him for help. But flatly ignoring a helpless Velutha's grievances, Pillai, a high caste Communist leader, instantly replies, "But Comrade, you should know that party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life" (TGOST, 287).

Eventually Velutha is arrested, badly battered and put behind the bars. Consequently, he succumbs to grave injuries just under the police custody. Ammu reaches the police station for his rescue but in vain. The Police do not think it feasible to probe into the matter. An innocent Velutha loses his life to the police who stand for "Politeness, Obedience, Loyalty, Innocence, Co-operation, and Efficiency. What an irony! Actually, Pillai sees in Velutha a rising radical future leader of the workers and untouchables. Pillai must have thought that if Velutha becomes the leader as the latter gains ground, the former might lose the ground to the people. What's more, having known that Velutha has been a communist party worker, the police inspector sends for Pillai to discuss the issue. The later flatly refuses to help Velutha. Comrade Pillai tells Inspector Thomas about his acquaintance with Velutha, but omits to mention that Velutha is a member of the communist party. Thus we find that the whole humanity is dead against Velutha. Really the whole system is blindly in favour of the

powerful. The powerless are small things. Only loss is destined to them. They are gods of small things. Even the constitutionally recognized or established bodies empower the men of power and weaken the powerless.

Frankly speaking, both Dukhi and Velutha meet the same tragic fate. Their lives are of little value. The loss of "small lives" hardly creates ripples. They get victimized by "structural violence" that is easily perceived in our society even now. In his book "Violence Reflections on a National Epidemic", James Gilligan defines structural violence as "The rates of death and disability suffered by those who occupy the bottom rungs of society, as contrasted with the relatively lower death rates experienced by those who are above them" (Gilligan: amazon.com).

As a matter of fact, death is the ultimate reward of love and devotion, blind faith and selfless dedication. Dukhi is a mute sufferer in the hand of brahminical dominance in Indian society. On the contrary, Velutha does not believe in the conventional setup of social life. The former is a fatalist whereas the latter, a political activist. One is dogmatic and superstitious while the other, dynamic and radical. Dukhi wades through the stinking stagnant water whereas Velutha swims against the turmoil tide. Only due to his blind reverence to Pandit Ghasiram, an illiterate Dukhi loses his life. It is said that illiteracy leads to the dense darkness of life and good education fills one's life with light of knowledge. Velutha is driven to end his life in making love to Ammu owing to which he is easily victimized in the pretext of honour or horror killing that is in vogue even today in India while Dukhi is victimized by his innocence as well as plain mindedness that causes him to garner his firm belief in the Brahminical system. Dukhi's bowine meekness arouses pathetic feelings but Velutha plays a trend setter inspiring his likes to fight for life. A high school pass out Velutha wants a tremendous social change. His death is life blood to the society he belongs to and a fountainhead of aspiration to the coming generation of his community. Rightly remarked, life takes on bright colour in sailing against the stormy wind.

In Sadgati, having been alarmed just after the pathetic death of Dukhi, Chikhuri Gond of his village defends the dignity of his own Dalit community against the adamant walls of Brahminical hegemony that is often termed "as intellectual goondaism". Moreover, the air of strong protest is underlying in "The God of Small Things" as well. A rebellious Velutha challenges the status quoism of the upper castes' dominance. In both of the works evil overpowers good, compelling us to bring about a substantial social change for the holistically humanistic approach to Dalit life.

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