Research Paper Literature

Premchand's Eternal Contribution to Dalit Literature

Ms. Shruti Jain | guest and Adhoc Assistant Professor , Delhi University Delhi

Mr. Anuj Kushwaha | guest and Adhoc Assistant Professor , Delhi University Delhi

ABSTRACT

Even before the term 'Dalit Literature' came to be in use in 1958, we had been blessed with a pioneer who helped us understand how our land of non violence is periodically jarred by exclusion, discrimination and exploitation of Dalits or untouchables. This paper charts the eternal contribution of Premchand to the Dalit Literature.

KEYWORDS | Premchand, Dalit Literature, Godaan, George Orwell, Shooting an Elephant

PAPER

'Satyameva Jayate' – Truth alone triumphs, these words embellish our national emblem, however the question is what is our truth as Indians? Is it the paradox that on even being the world's largest democracy, India is an abode of perennial caste system?

The following words taken from Munshi Premchand's *Godaan* narrate an encounter between a chamar and a Brahmin:

तुम हमें बाँभन नहीं बना सकते, मुदा हम तुम्हें चमार बना सकते हैं। हमें बाँभन बना दो, हमारी सारी बरिादरी

बनने को तैयार है। जब यह समरथ नहीं है, तो फरि तुम भी चमार बनो। हमारे साथ खाओ, पिओ, हमारे साथ

उठो-बैठो। हमारी इज़्जत लेते हो, तो अपना धरम हमें दो।

English Translation:

You can't make Brahmans out of us but we can make chamars out of you. If you're willing

to make us Brahmans, our whole community is agreeable. As long as that's not possible,

then become chamars. Eat with us, drink with us and live with us. If you're going to take

away our honour, theh give us your caste.

In a rage, these words were hurled by Harkhu, a chamar at Datadin, the village Brahman. Harkhu, Siliya's father brings his fellow chamars to defile Matadin by putting a bone in his mouth. Matadin is the vegetarian Brahman son of Datadin who in the garb of love exploits Siliya. On once being questioned by Siliya for his unexpected callousness towards her Matadin dismisses her as a mere labour. However, it is the indecency of their relationship which forces Harkhu to take the bold step. Through this incident we see that unlike others Premchand not only presents the Indian reality where half of the population have been the victim of casteist discrimination for ages and continue to suffer innumerable indignities on account of their caste but also gives as a subaltern perspective where the Dalit can debunk, question, critique, resist and reject the idea of received truths be it ideological or historical. In fact it is only through these glitches which break an ongoing traditional relationship between the exclusive castes and the excluded castes, that one can uncover the ideological quilt that hides such atrocities. Harkhu's act of negation did exactly the same which makes the reader understand of, at least, the shiftings beneath the Brahmin- Dalit binary opposition. Harkhu negates and reject the ideological supremacy of the upper caste, and point to the fallacies about the Dalit by one, pointing 'difference' from the dominant group and hence their individuality and existence. Second, by showing how the compartments of Brahmans and Dalits can flow into each other, Harkhu re-conceptualizes his 'difference' to be an artificial construct and not 'natural' as has been theorized by the dominant group.

Premchand never glued a message onto a piece of fiction rather he documented Dalit's history, poverty, helplessness, the way difference was enforced on them and its psychosocial outcome in their own words and language. We think that by not letting the reader know the usual message at the end of the novel, reader gets more than just receiving the simple message (that one should not mistreat the lower caste people, that Dalit should be considered the part of social-egalitarian society and should be given equal rights and so on). In fact, any implied reader probably must be knowing the normality of the situation that binds Brahmin and Dalit and make it seem coherent. This binding that is shown in the novel channels a proper dialectic of caste. The situation reminds the one of George Orwell's essay 'Shooting An Elephant' where the narrator (who is 'sub-divisional police officer'[5] representing colonial power) describes the abominable task of killing an elephant which was more of living up to the expectations of colonized Burmans since the narrator was a colonial representative himself. The irony is that the narrator kept wondering 'whether any of the others grasped that [he] had done it (the act of killing the elephant) solely to avoid looking a fool.'[6] Precisely this is the point, the key to understand the logic behind the glitches between Brahmins and Dalits in Godaan. Whenever any insurgent act by Dalit appears in the novel, it leaves with the impression on the reader that the system at the hands of Brahmins is becoming unmanageable. The equations of power are shifting (in the sense that questions are asked like you can't make Brahmans out of us but we can make chamars out of you and so on).The power of Premchand's language is such that one becomes a part of the story without remaining an indifferent bystander.

Ghisu and Madhav in "The Shroud" did not oppose the caste system or declare themselves outside the Hindu fold yet desired for a better place within the caste hierarchy.

Madhav looked heavenward again and said, 'She'll go to heaven, Dada, she'll be a queen in heaven.'

Ghisu stood up and as though bathing in waves of bliss he

said, 'Yes, son, she'll go to heaven. She didn't torment anybody, she didn't oppress anybody. At the moment she died she fulfilled the deepest wish of all our lives. If she doesn't go to heaven then will those big fat people go who rob the poor with both hands and swim in the Ganges and offer holy water in the temples to wash away their sins?'[7]

The dialogue articulates many of those silences which have oppressed Dalits for a long time. However, Premchand has to be appreciated further because he not only locates the Dalit within realistic situations but does not even shy away from exploring their fractures. Yet these voices are articulated by Premchand in a way that they transcend the domain of history. Apart from just oppression of villagers and farmers, another aspect of looking into the story is that of an ambiguity over whether the act of Ghisu and Madhav can be considered subalternic at all for they defied the usual subalternic traits of being oppressed. By challenging the ideological framework of elite class, both Ghisu and Madhav remain out of the vicious circle of exploitation (for example, landlord simply hurls two rupees at them without even a single word of consolation since they are of no use to him). Another problem is that of treatment of Madhav's wife 'Budhiya'. The problem can be analysed in two ways: firstly, that the elite ideology is responsible for the condition of Madhav and Ghisu and ultimately for the situation of Budhiya because since they defied the elite ideology and remained at the outskirts but Budhiya was not. Her sex did not allow her to go out of that ideology and hence she succumbed. Secondly, (it is also the extension of the first) that the impossibility of defying the elite remained with Budhiya because she had to fight against two impediments, her sex and her class, for which she was totally dependent on Ghisu and Madhav. The indifference of Ghisu and Madhav proved fatal for her. Such ambiguities make it difficult to take simply one side.

They enable the reader to assess past through a subjective cast of mind and realities that determine the lives of Dalits. This is how a parallel between history and fiction is set up, where the reader through the fiction takes a plunge into the real life world and makes her horizon of knowledge prepared for enhancing the 'horizon of expectation'[8].

Caught within the double bind of asserting autonomy and desiring acceptance they could neither became completely autonomous or be accepted by the upper castes. The upper castes continued to look down upon them.

If Ghisu and Madhav struggle between their developed intellectual insight and their lack of moral strength to sustain it, Halku takes a firm decision out of the flux of the values in the world in which he lives. When rebuked by Munni,

'Do you think you're going to sleep all day? You come out here and had a fine time

while the whole field was being flattened!'

…

Halku sought an excuse. 'I nearly died and just managed to get through the night and you

worry about your crop. I had such a pain in my belly that I can't describe it.'

…

They continue to stare at the ruined field. Munni's face was shadowed with grief but Halku was content.

Munni said, 'Now you'll have to hire yourself out to earn some money to pay of the rent and taxes.'

With a contended smile Halku said, 'But I won't have to sleep nights out here in the cold.'[9]

As we have seen through this dialogue from "January Night", Premchand makes the best use of the restricted canvas to show how Dalit self image somewhere evolves through their own struggles for self-respect and equality. At the beginning, the story reveals victimization of a farmer at the hands of his landlord. The extreme poverty of Dalit households makes the Dalit farmer an instrument of landlord's abuses. He had to choose between the insults of the landlord or the cold of the chilly January nights. Halku chooses cold chilly nights and by doing so he hints at the beginnings of a consciousness in him. But it is his guised decision in the end of being a paid labour which asserts that the Dalit self image has to change from one of helplessness to critical interrogation of their subjectivity. Premchand dug out Dalit self as courageous and brave enough to bolster its self- respect.

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