Radicalisation of Narration in Dalit Fiction: An Analysis of Selected Works

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> In this country, the air one breathes has caste.
> The water one drinks has caste.
> The field canal that flows and the land that yields harvest have caste.
> The school, the temple and the village square have caste.
> The food one eats, the house one lives in and the clothes one wears have caste.
> The word one speaks has caste.
> Literature and culture have caste.
>
> — G. Kalyan Rao, *Untouchable Spring*

Dalit[1] literature is a body of texts that portrays the plight of the "lower" castes in India. It is marked as a literature of protest, re-envisioning history by documenting the violence, oppression and systemic exploitation. The history and roots of Dalit literature are still in the process of being written and negotiated. Hardly a product of three and a half decades, the corpus of Dalit literature is no longer limited to the Hindi belt[2] but it has spread itself throughout the Indian mainland. Besides poetry and autobiographies, novels, short fiction and literary criticism have been added to the growing corpus. Sharankumar Limbale defines Dalit literature as "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a *Dalit consciousness*" (Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* 19) (emphasis mine). He further adds the uniqueness of Dalit literature lies in the fact that it is born from "the womb of untouchability" (Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* 29). The yardstick for measuring the authenticity of such works has been the implicit "Dalit Chetna." Laura Brueck sees this as a strategy for Dalit critical analysis, a kind of "test" by which Dalit critics can judge the "dalitness" of any work of literature, "whether written by a Dalit or non-Dalit" (Brueck). As Priyamvada Gopal says, "the privileged texts and reading protocols of postcolonial studies tend to be antihumanist and hostile to systemic analysis" and hence I argue for the need to redefine and reinforce the aesthetics of Dalit literature (9). I have chosen *Kusumabale* (2015), *Hindu* (2010)and *Untouchable Spring* (2010) as my focus of study as these three novels represent regional, linguistic and Spatio-temporal diversity to polemically critique the caste system. Also, the novel strategies of the texts, employed to

evoke a world beyond caste, provides an impetus to focus on these three fictional works. All three novels incorporate oral storytelling strategies and motifs that draw on the oral traditions and culture of the specific community.

Radicalisation of form and narrative

The novel as a form can be seen to manage social guilt, articulate the outrage and potential radicalism in a conservative generic form. This has been tweaked and culturally appropriated to create a new genre of Dalit novels. The very form of the novel has been hybridised through the usage of mythic and folkloric tales to create a new genre. Eleanor Zelliot explores how the "materialist considerations of caste have been key to literary production as well, highlighting the gap between the actual texts of Dalit literature and what passes as 'theoretical' commentary in the metropolitan academy" (79). She cites certain indigenous writings like *lawani* (ballads), *powada* (panegyric poetry) and *tamasha* (folk dramas) which have lent their techniques and "radical newness"[3] to hybridise the form of Dalit novel in the world of literature. The resultant cross-breeding of Dalit fiction produces experimental writing which violates the conventions of mainstream literature and is "one of the engines of literary change and renewal" (Bray et al. 1–2). This radicalization of narration can be viewed as a political project, whereby it aims to stir the dalit consciousness creating a new dalit movement through its political challenge.

The said novels in this essay are united by shifting narrative perspectives, fragmented non-linear fractured narration and multiple protagonists. Key events such as the murder of Tatya Kamble in *Hindu* and Channa in *Kusumabale* are narrated more than once from different perspectives in order to "destabilise the narrative and provide a complex account of character's motivations and conflicting perceptions" (Thiara 260). While postmodernist aesthetics aim to destabilise the concept of truth, Dalit fictions portray the ugly picture of the sociopolitical landscape of India marred by hierarchies of caste, class and gender.

The novel, *Hindu*, traces the developments of the Ambedkarite movement and ideologies within a single village. Limbale drives forward the politics of collectivity while simultaneously providing an internal critique presenting a mirror to the disenchanted and disunified Dalit movement. Dalit literature is often inhabited by either courageous or suffering protagonists. But the presence of Milind Kamble as a discreet corrupted Dalit narrator is rare to find in Dalit literature: "I should become a witness, make Tatya Kamble's murderers wear handcuffs… But why did I feel so scared... I was a parasitic plant attached to the movement… People come to me with all sorts of requests, I do their work and take their money" (Limbale, *Hindu* 21).

Ambedkarite Buddhism has been integrated into the narrative as a medium of emancipation for the dalits. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had embraced Buddhism as its philosophy of rationalism, morality and justice resonated with him. As Christopher Queen has suggested, "This religion enabled him to exercise individual choice based on reason and historical consciousness" (Roy Chowdhury n.p). In a strongly worded compelling speech, Ambedkar had urged the Dalits in the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference in 1936 to convert. He implored, "Forgetting human treatment, convert yourselves. Convert for getting organised. Convert for becoming strong. Convert for securing equality. Convert for getting liberty. Convert so that your domestic life should be happy" (Ambedkar).

In *Hindu*, the involvement of Tatya Kamble in Ambedkar *jalsa* to persuade Dalits to convert into Buddhism irked the upper castes. This performance of *jalsa* is crucial to understand the narrative of *Hindu*. *Jalsa* involves singing, staging plays or presenting monologues in harmony with musical instruments made by Dalits. Satyashodhaki *jalsas* were celebrated for their vehement attacks on Brahmins and the Brahmanical tradition. It is a radically changed form of *tamasha*. The *tamasha* was historically performed by Dalits especially the *Mahars* in Maharashtra. This caste-based occupation killed the Dalit aspiration to lead a life beyond caste. Ambedkar altered this culture. In the *jalsa*, the structure of the *tamasha* was radically reorganised as verses and dialogues became the central point of the performance which began with a salutation not to Ganesha but to Babasaheb (Rege 17). The *jalsa* performances in the novel, which are allegorical stories about the dangers of being seduced and betrayed by enemies of the Dalit movement, politicise the Mahar audience.

Tatya Kamble and the other Mahars refused to perform the traditional duties assigned to them by their caste identity and performed allegorical *jalsas* to impart the significance of Ambedkarite movement. This highlights the emerging self-consciousness among the Dalits and details the long trajectory that the Dalit movements and campaigns have travelled. Tatya Kamble acts as a fictional counterpart of Ambedkar who tries to recuperate the past to arouse the Dalit self-consciousness. The *jalsa* form employed by Tatya Kamble as a piece of art is comparable to the author's artistic piece, the novel, in revamping the cultural ethos of the Dalits. The jalsaic procession employed by Tatya Kamble has a far-flung repercussion on the Dalit but the exploiters of the society feel it to their core. Tatya has an emphatic effect on Sonali, wife of the murderer Prabhakar Kavale.

> "Prabhakar Kavale came up on the roof and burst out angrily at Sonali: 'Watching the Mahars dance, are you a Mahar too?'... To Sonali, the sound of Tatya Kamble's speech felt like an erupting volcano. For the first time in her life, Sonali had heard such a blunt

> critique of the Hindu religion. Its other face was made visible to her today" (Limbale, *Hindu* 49-51).

Besides the use of *jalsa* to arouse the Dalit consciousness, the hallucinating denouement of the distressed Milind physically turning into a eunuch and the co-texting of the narrative voices are all "transepistemic devices that surpass the socio-historical agenda of the novel" ("Into that Heaven of Freedom").

Untouchable Spring is an English translation of Telugu literary work *Antarani Vasantam* published in the year 2000. It is significant for its critique of literary historiography. It contests several prevailing tendencies of literature such as the privileging of the written modes over the oral modes, the prosodic poetry over the song. This is done by the use of orality and by critiquing the accepted standards. Intergenerational memory is an important trope used for preservation of indigenous art forms.

G. Kalyana Rao is quite clear in his intentions. He has set out to write the story of oppression of Dalits through the family saga and he has adopted the fictional mode to construct the narrative. He wants to highlight the oppression and injustice of the caste-riled traditional society with its social and economic disparities. The novel also questions the authenticity of written histories providing an alternate history for the Dalits. Kalyan Rao has pitched his story as the portrait of an artist of one of the forebears, Yellanna, who reaches out for emancipation through art and imagination. He seems to comprehend the possibilities of emancipation through art, concomitant with spiritual underpinnings. Dalits became singers, musicians, composers and lyricists to forget their hunger and pain momentarily. Yellanna, a folklorist and natural stage performer in the novel used to drag the tune along with him with utmost perfection which was considered natural. *Veedhi Bagotam* (a street play) is a great representation of the combination of song, music, dance and expression of Dalits in rural areas. In fact, "it is only in folk art that there are purity and integrity. There is frankness and naturalness. That's why it is still alive even though it has been thrown out and castaway" (Kalyan Rao 101).

The rich description of cultural practices and folklore may force a reader to consider this text as an ethnographic fiction but the strategic implementation of these cultural tropes makes the text a significant part of protest literature. It functions as a poetic celebration of Dalits as individuals and as a community and insists that their dignity, wealth of artistic talent, and beauty are the creative seeds of an equal, flourishing, and just society. The presence of seven generations contributing to the novel's large cast of significant characters, "abrupt changes of narrative tone and style and quick intercut between frame narration and the main narrative" produce a challenging experience for the reader (Thiara 262).

The novel opens with an unnamed narrator. After Reuben's death, an elderly Ruth passes the notes on to it. This complex narrative structure criticises the linear narrative conventions of both novels and historical writing. It further demonstrates the lacunae embedded in "individualist notions of memory to capture collective Dalit history" (Ibid.).

Untouchable Spring postulates Dalit performative art forms such as the street theatre *Veedhi Bagotam* and *Urumula* dance as privileged sites of resistance. The narrative is frequently interrupted by footnotes that confront the lack of historical documentation of Dalit oral folk art in Indian scholarship. Rao criticises scholars who have been unable to see the beginnings of Telugu drama in *Veedhi Bagotam*. There are many critical works on Telugu drama. . . . [T]here will not be any mention of *veedhina katams*, street plays… it may be truer to say [scholars and critics] did not have the inclination to notice them (Ibid., 268).

This revisionist novel restores the lost ethnographic and anthropological heritage of the Malas and Madigas, as well as acts as a "historiographical Ur text" for the lost art forms of the Dalits (Bose 996). It acts as an allohistory to the marginalized verses and folk art which had been shadowed under the canonical Brahmanical art form because in India "caste is more important than art" (Kalyan Rao 41).

Untouchable Spring makes a cultural statement by permeating the Mala past with the Christian present. The performance of *Veedhi Bagotham* and *Chenchunatakam* shows the disintegration of the hierarchical spatial demarcation between the stage and the audience. Once relegated to the margins as the audience, the Malas now occupy the centre stage as performers/artists. These performances are reworked in the pages of Kalyan Rao as they are passed as cultural inheritance via Yellana's songs. This fluidity and lack of structure both of the novel as well as the songs in it ensures their cultural vitality thus propagating the permanence of the art.

The unstructured folk drama and folk songs proffer their defiance of rules to the formal logic of Sanskrit drama and versification just as the language of the *dvipada*[4] unleashes "semantic violence" on the tradition of sophisticated versification (Bose 996). In an attempt to canonise the marginalised art, Rao highlights the *dvipadas* crafted by the potter Pedakoteswarudu. It is a natural literary work which rejected the proscriptions of the pundits. *Basavapuranam* and *Veerasaiva* literature are crafted in *dvipada*. The *dvipada* transgresses semantic limitations and grammatical boundaries of formal prosody and rhyme. It is unpurified unlike scholarly language. This stands in parallel to Rao's conception of the novel form with its fractured narration leading to the creation

of a Dalit epic. Rao's text thus acts as a research document exploring and recovering verse forms, songs, dances and performative texts expelled to the margins of the established canonised Brahminical literary tradition.

Ruth does not simply recollect and transmit the social struggles of her ancestors but of the whole Untouchable community. And it is through Ruth that Rao presents the exploited and marginalised communities. Rao's version of alternative history is also seen in Vemana's[5] verses and Yellana's songs as they engage with contemporary political issues such as land grabbing, irrigation and organisation of labour structures.

The presence of the imaginary Yennela Pitta/bird invokes the cultural vitality of the Malas. Rao presents a rich amalgamation of mythological narratives and ancestral tales, folklore and local legends. The Hindu myths found in the Vedas and Purana are re-examined to correct their prejudiced nature and transferred to the world of the Malas. The creation of Malas and Madigas through the death of *Kamadhenu* has been propagated through *Jamba Puranam*. Urmula Chinappa and Naganna both show how the *Vedanta* is tainted with caste prejudices and are not the word of God but rather the word of God as interpreted by the Brahmin Pundits, as appropriated by the upper castes to offer a divine justification for social structuring and stigmatisation.

In Naganna's retelling and revisionary parable, it was not Bhagirath but the Urumula people who brought down Ganga to the earth and thus they became the carrier of life, the founders of agriculture and the first cultivators. Thus, the history of human civilisation is intertwined with the history of the Malas (Kalyan Rao 91). The potter Pedakoteswarudu is another artist who wishes to transfer Yellana's songs into writing but this attempt is foiled by the upper caste who waylay Pedakoteswarudu, snatch his papers and burn them. This act of burning the papers resonates the Brahmanical censorship of literature born outside of the temples. Thus, another death is caused in the attempt to continue the Dalit literary tradition.

The validation of the Dalit experience and critique of upper-caste behaviour is read by many Dalit critics as motivated by a desire to instil a combative "Dalit consciousness" in Dalit readers (Brueck, *Writing Resistance* 10–15). Kalyana Rao's novel does this most overtly when it represents Dalit resistance to oppression and Dalit art as part of a long and proud history.

Devanoora Mahadeva had created an uproar in the literary world with almost redefining the idea of the novel itself with the publication of *Kusumabale,* which is nothing like the usual realist novel one may come across. When we analyze caste in the literary imagination, *Kusumabale* stands out with its use of magic realism in magically capturing the Dalit spirit with linguistic creativity.

Kusumabale presents the need for a new cultural politics to address the caste system through folk narratives. The novel in Kannada is dedicated to the memory of ancestor Male Maadeshwara, the central figure of a well-known oral epic highly revered by Dalits and other lower castes in Karnataka and not to Ambedkar or Phule.

Mahadeva radicalised the narrative by adopting a unique technique of mixing folklore and social reality and also breaking up of a linear narrative. This novel presents a vibrant tapestry of the human condition and Dalit exploitation. Mahadeva's novel is rooted in the folk traditions and influenced by the egalitarian *Vachana* movement of twelfth century Karnataka initiated by Basava to eradicate discrimination on the basis of caste and gender. Mahadeva's language of narration and the language in which the story takes place is the same. It is written in a dialect spoken in parts of Nanjangudu and Chamarajanagar district thus questioning the hegemony of Mysurian Kannada in Karnataka.

The structure of the novel resembles a traditional folk narrative. Dr. Govindray Nayak, a Kannada critic, remarked that the novel's unique style and narrative technique, probably not seen thus far, insisted on the need to overhaul the existing canonical critical tool to dissect the text (qtd. in Shanbhag xxii). Mahadeva breaks the mould of European realism and calls it *kathakava* or narrative verse, dissolving the difference between prose and verse.

With a non-linear narrative structure and very few actions directly occurring in the text, the tone of the novel is more reflexive and meditative. It breaks the dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed. Mahadeva employs a diegetic mode of narration with multiple narrating voices populating the text. Animate as well as inanimate characters speak out their lives. Fabular elements are noticed through the characters of *Jothammas* (the lamp spirits), bedstead, the personified worry and fate as they strengthen the narrative structure.

Engaging with *Kusumable* requires a certain sensibility as it tries to build a new world and a worldview which was totally alien to the Kannada reading public. Channa's murder is revealed at the beginning of the text but the diegetic narrator employs folkloric retellings and not the realistic portrayal of what happened to him. This fractured narration does not provide any easy way of reading this text. But perhaps it also reminds us of the oppressed communities (the Holeyas here) whose voices are robbed or fractured by the elite, upper-caste modes of narration.

Recent studies by critics like Laura Brueck and Toral Jatin Gajarawala have established that Dalit writers have not accepted realism in its Western form but have instead critically engaged with this mode of writing. Gajarawala argues that Dalit literature forms part of the lineage of social realism but that

Dalit writers revise the history of realism on how it has failed to represent the marginalized characters thus creating the genre of neo-social realism (129-164).

The form of Kusumabale is a challenge to realism. The novel begins with a congregation of *Jothammas* at a time when "stone melts in the water". *Jothammas* belong to different castes from headman's house to Brahmans to fisherman to untouchables, showing multiple viewpoints. An articulate *Jothamma* from the Untouchable Street curbs the authoritarian voice of headman's house *Jothamma* setting the tone of the novel. An innate sense of justice is perceived in their conversation. At the end of the novel, one of the spirits (of the fisherman house) enters the body of Kuriyah making him speak the truth.

The critic Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi mentions in an article "The Elusive Peacock: Devanoora Mahadeva and Dalit Imagination" (2013), that "if mainstream Dalits engaged with realism and straightforward storytelling and documentation in an aesthetic manner, Mahadeva complicates that creative project by re-imagining realism itself" (MCPH Community). The life of untouchables and other lower castes–in a total sense–has always remained outside the patterns of realism. Realism can be said to transform history into fiction. In fact, the realist novel is even seen as a fictional strategy to appropriate a form of history. A cot here narrates its life storytelling the decadence of the family to which it belongs. Similarly, a home lamp assumes the form of a human being and comments upon the events of the day. So, realist novels somehow restrict the scope of the narrative. Mahadeva uses such irrational structures to throw light on Dalit realism[6] and sensibility.

The politics of Dalit poetics

Any political project employs a particular kind of language. The texts considered here can be seen as subversive narrations possessing a distinctive form and voice. While the linkage between aesthetics and politics in Dalit literature is readily apparent, the dynamic between the two remains a controversial topic amongst writers and scholars of Dalit literature. According to Sharankumar Limbale, Dalit writers value analyses of their work that proceed "from a sociological perspective focused on social values [rather] than on beauty. An exclusively aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature will disregard the Dalit writers' fundamental role and hence is not acceptable to Dalit writers" (Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics* 19).

Bearing the politics of Dalit activism in mind, other critics have argued that aesthetics does not necessarily have to be high-level cogitation to productively contribute to emancipatory struggles for Dalits and other oppressed groups. Toral Gajarawala, for instance, suggests that Dalit literature critiques

scholarly and popular norms of Indian literary production and consumption. The rejection of the "wide-angle lens" that forms the social-realist, "objective" predisposition of canonical novelists such as, Premchand can facilitate the Dalit literary perspective to "differ in significant ways from savarna readings of the historical, as well as from the more Westernized conceptions of history that circulate in postcolonial fiction" (Gajarawala 171-72). In addition, Nicole Thiara argues that the formal experimentalism of Bama's *Sangati*, Limbale's *Hindu*, and G. Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring* articulates a politically valuable "aesthetics of empowerment" (258). Specifically, Thiara finds that these texts deploy "fragmented" and polyphonic narrative techniques to posit the "communal legacy" of Dalit cultures against the fraught political conditions of caste oppression at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Major publishing houses often do not enable the marginalised voices to be heard in their initial prints[7]. Therefore, many Dalit literary texts do not need to conform to the genre conventions and narrow concerns of mainstream publishing allowing them to experiment with the form and content. Limbale does not celebrate the experimental quality of Dalit literature. Dalit literary texts are frequently approached as outpourings of social pain and anger whose authenticity is manifested in a certain rawness and "artlessness" (Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic* 108). It is highly ironic when he himself deploys creative narrative strategies to restructure the novel: use of Ambedkari *jalsas* and newspaper reportage in fiction being the most common.

As Ranciere suggests, there is politics in aesthetics and aesthetics in the political, making the invisible visible, and the inaudible, audible. "Art is political and politics artistic because both are practices of contesting the historical transcendental factors that delimit the social and ascribe to individuals as a particular mode of subjectivity" (Tanke 6). Art, therefore, has the possibility to institute equality.

The tradition of ancient India didn't have anything for the Dalits that they could own proudly and thus they have to look at their own culture to develop myths and reject religious texts to create their separate culture and thus they created their own poetry, folk songs and musical instruments to satisfy their cultural needs and aspirations. Over the last few decades, Dalit writing has further unfolded in the line of revolt with a direct call for complete transmutation of the social order. The politics of identity has attained newer dimensions with the proliferation of published material in writing as well as a wider spread of consciousness among the urban populace about history, memory and representation:

> The past three decades particularly has seen a flourishing of popular

> Dalit literature, pamphlets and booklets, which have emerged as a critical resource for deeper insights into Dalit politics and identity. Dalits themselves are disentangling received knowledge from the apparatus of control. This literature brings fresh hope, as it is believed that now Dalits are in charge of their own images and narratives, witness to and participants in their own experience. They are rescuing Dalit culture from degeneration and stereotypes and bringing in a new Dalit aesthetic. They are not the "Other" and are themselves articulating critical questions of choice and difference (Gupta 1739).

Transcription and Recovery

Dalit fiction is a product of radical protest laying bare the structural inequality. It is a process of transcription and recovery. The involvement of self-reflexivity overcomes the ideological and aesthetic constraints of realism. The difference of power and the absence of public space for Dalits have led to increased identity assertion by Dalits (here, by wielding the pen), and collective action has increased political consciousness among Dalit communities, amongst other developments such as the assertion of equality. The cultural assertions made by Dalit communities in the post-Ambedkar period have increased the level of consciousness among the Dalit community, leading them to gain both social and political upliftment. The expression of Dalit identity through modern narrative poses a political challenge to the oppressor. Pramod K. Nayar claims this "radicalisation of narrative form epitomises a radicalisation of the political unconscious" (366). The newer narrative strategies challenge the bourgeois aesthetics of upper caste writers in India.

To say in Eva-Maria Hardtmann's words, "(the) subaltern counter publics…signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of the subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (88). She further states that the Indian public sphere has historically remained Brahmanical and hegemonic in side lining and invisibilising the Dalits from the public sphere, leading to a complete absence of Dalits from mainstream media or the public sphere. The Dalits have asserted their identity to form a counter-public, challenging this hegemonic suppression (Ibid., 3).

In his influential work *The Flaming Feet* (2011), Dalit critic D. R. Nagaraj argues for a reassessment of folk art as both a form of subaltern art and a resource for contemporary Dalit art and literature: "Folk epics… are necessarily the creation of subaltern communities [that] are never canonized in the history and theories of Indian literature" (190). Nagaraj in his seminal work and Kalyan Rao in *Untouchable Spring* argue for a de-hierarchisation of Indian literature

that enables Dalit literature to find a legitimate space within Indian literature. Such a legitimation would also facilitate an appreciation of the way Dalit fictions incorporate innovative mixes of genres and traditional forms that challenge the aesthetics of mainstream literature.

The contribution of modern Dalit literature is to retrieve the human figure by reconfiguring modernity which the discussed writers have ably justified in their works. In this sense, Dalit literature is anti-establishment and it is capable of shaping a new India. A definitive way of enhancing the self-respect of humiliated communities like the Dalits is to revitalise their cultural forms and this has been appropriately done by Dalit writers.

Endnotes

1. The term Dalit means ground down and broken to pieces in Marathi and is a pseudonym that Dalits adopted in the twentieth century. See Rao.
2. This includes the states of Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.
3. Toral Jatin Gajarawala argues that "[t]here is no doubt that Dalit literature is infused with a radical newness and is quite literally unlike anything lettered before" (198).
4. *Dvipada*: couplets in Telugu poetry.
5. Vemana practised a mutiny in semantic terms by writing verses which challenged all kinds of rigidity and orthodoxy; his poetry was almost a social document of his times as it engaged with religion and contemporary politics. The Pundits frowned upon such versification and dubbed it uncouth and unsophisticated lacking formal polish.
6. On the concept of Dalit realism, see Gajarawala 16–23.
7. See Satyanarayana and Tharu, Introduction, No Alphabet pp. 25–27.

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