

Subaltern voices in writings from Odisha: Akhila Naik's 'Bheda' as a representative Dalit novel.

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Abstract

Dalits are the marginalized people who have suffered at the hands of the people of the higher strata of society for centuries. They have been struggling hard to fight against the injustices done to them. They are exploited socially, economically and psychologically. However Dalit consciousness has developed in them due to spread of education and literature which has taken up this issue to provide social justice to the suppressed and marginalized people. Subaltern now can speak and assert their rights through literature. The scheduled castes in Odisha constitute 17.13% of total population of the state. Their lot is not different from the rest part of the country. Rather they have been more victimized due to lack of proper education. Very few writers have pleaded for the upliftment of these depressed classes. Akhil Naik is a Dalit writer who himself belongs to this community and he inspires people to be strong and struggle for their identity. This paper will present his novel *Bheda*, the first Dalit novel of Odisha, as a representative Dalit novel.

Key words: Dalit, marginalized, strata, Subaltern, consciousness, victimized, upliftment

Subaltern Discourse in India developed in the seventies of the last century is the result of the post-colonial theories. As a cultural and historical intervening theory; it demonstrates a renewed interest in the placement of subaltern subjects in history and literature. In India, the 'subaltern' which initially designated tribals and Dalits was expanded in later decades to encompass women and other weaker section in the society. Today it is used collectively to denote people who are marginalized and exploited by the dominant castes and classes. The general study of 'subaltern' refers to three outstanding thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. They have explained the term by contributing immensely to literature.

The term 'subaltern' has been defined by different scholars. Julian Wolfreys defines the term subaltern as: 'It contains the groups that are marginalized, oppressed and exploited on the cultural, political, social and religious grounds. "Subaltern literature therefore, is the aesthetic representations of the voices of the marginalized and exploited people. It is unlike Marxist literature. It does not talk about class struggle between rich and poor. It talks about the struggle between castes and is written by the lower caste and marginalized. According to Rahul Pungaliya, a lecturer at the Abasaheb Garware college, Authentic subaltern literature will be written by those who have suffered the marginalization. It can be studied by all but can be created by the subaltern class itself". The works by the outsiders like Maheswata

Devi, Sara Joseph, Kumaran Asan, M.R. Anand and Premchand are not regarded as subaltern literature.

The term 'subaltern' and Dalit are often used as synonymous in general but the term Dalit is much popularized and it has a vast connotation. 'Dalit literature' has contributed a lot to the subaltern literature of India. It is a part of broader social and political movement that seeks to rectify the caste based discriminations and inequalities. Being inspired by the philosophy of Jyotiba phule and B.R. Ambedkar, the literary movement is closely interlinked with social and political movements for the freedom and equality of the lower castes and untouchables.

According to Sharan kumar Limbale, "Dalit literature is the literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief." Although the term Dalit literature was used first at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit sahitya sangha' in 1958, Dalit literature had not prospered in India till 1992. With the publication of Arjun Dangle's 'Poisoned Bread' Dalit literature in both regional language and English emerged as a new promising literature. Now we have several collections of Dalit writings. The most widely read writings of Dalit literature available in English translations are : Bama's Karukku and Sangati, Sharan kumar Lambale's the Outside: A Dalit's life, Baby kamble's 'Our Existence and I mayam Beast of Burden, Urmila Pawar's the Weave of my life. Prominent dalit writers of India are: Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagule, Rabising, Rabising, Basudeb Sunani, Nandoo Dharsal, Dutta Bhagat, Laxman Mane and Sudhakar.

Dalit writing in English from Odisha

In Odisha, although there are a few Dalit writers writing in Odia, their works have not been translated into English. The Odia Dalit writers raised voices against injustice done to them in and around 1970s and 1980s not in an organized way but through their writings. Bichitranda Nayak is known as the pioneer in Odia Dalit writings for the collection of Odia poem 'Anirbana'(Liberation). He was followed by Jagannath Malik, Kruhsnachandra Behera, Gobind chandra Seth and Ramachandra Sethi. In panchasakha Age of Odia literature, Balaram Das, Jagannath Das and other poets wrote against caste discrimination and exploitation of upper castes. Balaram Das's Laxmi Puran was a very popular text that advocated for the equality and emancipation of downtrodden and untouchables.

Now, many writers such as Basudev Sunani, Samir Ranjan, Sanjaya Bag, Gopinath Bag and Akhila Naik and other Odia writers are writing against the exploitation of upper castes. But no Dalit writing except Akhila Naik's 'Bheda', a novel on caste discrimination and atrocity has been translated to English. Late Akhila Naik, a lecturer of odia literature at Government college Bhawanipatna, wrote a novel called 'Bheda' in 2008 which drew attention of readers and critics for its real portrayal of Dalit life and characters of Kalahandi District of Odisha. The novel has been translated to English by Professor Rajkumar of Delhi university and it has been published by Oxford University Press. The book 'Bheda' has got its distinction as the first Odia Dalit Novel that has been translated into English.

The presentation of the Dalit's voice by the author in a unique way is very commendable. The substance of the stories, characters and events are real though presented in a fictional form. The novel is a direct attack on caste system, culture and tradition, administrative

system, exploitation of educated untouchables on illiterate untouchables, fundamentalists of Hinduism and biased media.

‘Bheda’ is a moving account of the suffering, torture, exploitation of the oppressed dalits who have no voice against the upper caste domination and oppression. The mentality of the upper castes to subjugate the dalits for ever has been exposed in the novel. The paper will highlight the major aspects of the novel to justify it as a representative Dalit novel.

Sharan Kumar Lambe talks of Dalit literature and explains that the aesthetic of Dalit literature rests on: first the artist’s social commitment, second, the life affirming values present in the artistic creation and third, the ability to write the reader’s consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity (2010:120) Akhila Naik’s Bheda has successfully treated all the three aspects of Dalit literature. ‘Bheda has been divided into seven chapters and each chapter focuses light on a character. The seven important characters have been presented in an innovative way in the novel. The author does not imitate the traditional storytelling methods, although in some places he uses the flashback technique. The plot construction is also experimental and new to the novel craft. The novel is distinct in many respects. In addition to the main theme of exploitation of lower castes, it deals with other issues like gender issues, corruption, superstitions, ecological awareness, selfishness of human beings and misuse of media. All these themes need to be discussed separately to highlight the distinctiveness of the novel.

The story: Bheda in Odia means the sense of difference. But the title may be interpreted in different ways. Another meaning may be seed/ secret of the discontentment between upper and lower castes. It may also denote to ‘penetration’ to the root of all evils in the hierarchical society. It is a realistic novel of atrocities and oppression on Dalits by upper caste people. The story is from Beheda locality of Kalahandi District. It speaks the plight of the Dom community living in Beheda and nearby villages. The Doms are living in a separate pada (hamlet) in each village. They are not allowed to share the common properties with the villagers. The upper caste people dominate them in all walks of life. Even an educated man a head master Dina Mastre of local school is humiliated by Brahmins like Banabihari Tripathy and School Sub Inspector Mr Panda. He is abused as corrupt for no faults of him. He is accused of amassing Mid-Day Meal of the children. He has to tolerate it as he cannot protest in the fear that he will be harassed by officials during his retirement. He knows that upper caste people are very powerful.

Lalatendu Duria popularly known as Laltu is the protagonist of the novel. He is the son of Dinamastre. Since his childhood, he is against the humiliation of scheduled castes people. He has seen the discrimination in the school. The Dom students are not allowed to sit with the savarna students. They cannot drink water from the same pitcher in the school. He reacts to such discrimination. The labourers in the rice mill of Semi Seth, the marwadi are ill paid and they cannot claim their dues. Banabihari Tripathy, and Semi Seth, the antagonists sell the woods from forest and become rich. Laltu, the social activist and journalist oppose such illegal cutting of jungle by forming a jungle protection committee. Semi Seth’s labourers are on strike and his tractors are seized by the lower caste people, which irked Banabihari Tripathy, and Semi Seth resulting in confrontation. The upper caste people wanted to teach a lesson to Laltu and his friends. They attacked the Harijan Padas and set them to fire. They were beaten and threatened to be killed. Many were injured and many houses of the poor people were burnt. Laltu still wanted to fight and filed cases against the culprits. But he found

that the administrative machinery was controlled by upper caste and it was difficult to get justice. However, he is unlike Bakha of Untouchables. He is not cowed down and he is not helpless. He is determined to give justice, equality, freedom and honour to his people.

Caste discrimination

‘Bheda’ presents the oppression and atrocities on the Dalit by the upper caste people, a theme of the Dalit literature. Dinamastre, although a respectable dalit headmaster has been tortured and offended by the Brahmins Baya Tripathy and S I mr. Panda. He has been alleged that he has tried to grab money from the mid day meal scheme. The headmaster has been a prey to the conspiracy made by the advocate and S I who are Brahmins.

‘Laltu’ his son has also been tortured mentally and physically. As a student he sits with the untouchables. He is not allowed to sit with the touchable. When he wishes to host the Saraswati Puja by paying twenty five rupees, he is denied because he belongs to dom caste.

“Even if you give twenty five rupees instead of fifteen, you cannot be the host for the puja. Sit down, Mishra Sir ridiculed him,(p.85)“ If we human being do not touch water from the doms, how can Goddess Saraswati eat food offered by them(p.85).

This discrimination humiliated and tortured Laltu:

Semi Seth, the marwadi of Beheda village is in trouble due to Laltu and Kartik’s opposition. The labourers of the mill are on strike for three days. Something is to be done for running of the mill and Laltu the root cause of all evils to be suppressed at any cost.

Semi Seth says, “ I will never let Laltu, that dom boy. That mother fucker is the leader of this drama and has been after me for the last five years. If I don’t push a dhawra twig into his anus, I am not Pawan Agrawal’s son.....(p.50)

The attitude of the upper caste people toward the downtrodden is very antagonistic. The following passage of the novel shows the hatred of the upper castes.

“Till yesterday we watched you removing the carcasses of cattle and eating carrion. During wedding and ceremony you beat the dhol and nishan and eat rice seated on dunghills ... Today because you have two paisas you can afford to have two meals, or you are able to read two letters, does it mean you have become Brahmins? ‘.... A pig is always a pig. It cannot be a cow.(p.58)

Baya advocate, Semi Seth, the representatives of the top layer of the hierarchy are intolerant to the dalits.. As the youngest son of Bibhisan Gaunthia has been beaten for his misbehaviour, the Telis, Gouda and Brahmins have been revengeful. They attack ‘dompada’ of Beheda village and burn the houses and shops of doms. Several dom people have been injured as a result of the caste war. ‘Muna,’ an innocent dom has been attacked. He cries and narrates the story before Laltu.

Muna narrates the threatening of the caste people. :

.....” Next time if your horse fucking Dom women even step inside the temple gate, I will force a crowbar in to her vagina and pour salt and chili into it.”(p.65)

The dompada is burnt and smashed. The people are homeless. Laltu goes to Bhawanipatna for help. The S P of Bhawanipatna is 'samudi' of Baya Advocate and SP is a Brahmin. Santosh Panda, the district correspondent is also a Brahmin. They don't listen to Laltu. Santosh Panda who used to support Laltu always, is also side lined. No one listens to the plight of the victims. The whole system of administration and society is dominated by the Brahmin and other upper caste people. All conspire to subjugate the dalit for ever.

Dalit consciousness and Indomitable Dalit Voice

"Bheda" presents the protagonist who never succumbs to the desire, exploitation and suppression of the upper caste. Education has made him and his friend aware of the caste discrimination. They resist the cruel oppression and discrimination and fight for justice, equality and freedom. Dina mastre, Mastrani, Muna and some other dalits are although educated, they are submissive to some extent. But Laltu and Kartik never bow down before the so called messiah of upper caste. Laltu has no respect for Hinduism, a symbol of exploitation and subjugation. He knows the conspiracy behind the caste system, Hindu mythology and Manu Smriti.

To Laltu, Hindu gods and goddesses are not their own because they demand offering and they discriminate people. Mastrani, the mother of Laltu is brahmanised and she observes 'bratas' like 'Manabasa' and Sabitri brata and she goes every day to Mahadev temple, where she stands in a corner and everything is done by the priest whereas the fat wife of Semi Seth goes inside the temple and worships god. Isn't it discrimination? Do their gods and goddess like Thutimali demand any thing? Do they discriminate?

Majhi Babu says: why? Have all the gods and goddesses of the village died? They have been with us for ages... Do you think that Mahadev is greater than our Thakurani?.....The more you study, the more foolish you are. (p.77)

Majhi Babu again says: 'I'm not saying that Mahadev is not a god. I want to ask whether he is our god or the god of Brahmins and Marwadis? (p.77)

'Laltu' is reactive since his childhood. He cannot tolerate injustice done to him or his kith and kin. When he was denied to host the Saraswati puja paying twenty five rupees in place of fifteen, he reacted. He cried and tore the photo of Saraswati.

It seems you won't eat Prasad from my hand. If so, eat my spit, eat my singhan' (p.86)

Protest against corruption and Subjugation

The protagonist is against corruption and subjugation. The BDO Paramananda Bag who belongs to his own community exploits the community people by deducting rupees two hundred from the old age pensioners. He reacts, "Saala, he is taking pity on me because he belongs to our community. And Chemini Aai? Which caste does she belong to? Why did the Saala eat away her pension money?" (p 36). He thrashed BDO and was jailed for thirteen days. But he did not beg excuse to BDO in spite of his father's advice. The BDO later on returned the deducted amount to the beneficiaries. He also lost his job because of pressure.

Laltu is not afraid of Baya advocate or Semi Seth. He seizes the tractor of the advocate loaded with the planks although he knows that Baya can go to any extent to take revenge

upon him and his community. Baya advocate sent Pangnia Budha to threaten Laltu. Dinamastre and Mastrani advised him to release the tractor. But Laltu is defiant and determined. He says his mother,

“ Are you afraid of Baya’s foot licking dog that came to bark? smiled Laltu. Do you think I will die vomiting blood if he plays black magic?”(p 47)

This shows the fearlessness and daring nature of Laitu.

The dompada of Beheda is set fire. Listening the news he ventures to go all alone to the affected people. He hospitalizes the injured in Dharamgarh and goes to Bhawanipatna to mobilize support for his community. Santosh Panda, the district correspondent of the Hastakshep and a supporter is now reluctant to support due to some reasons. Of course he is worried as there is a case registered in the name of Laltu. In spite of the unfavorable situation, he does not bend down before the corrupt system. A communal riot was the result. He was arrested, still he fought for the rights, freedom, equality and justice for the community.

Exposition of double standard relation

The novel exposes the selfish nature of upper caste people. Relation is sacrificed for the economic gains. Lochan Hati, Gountia of Firozpur had good relation with the forester Sachikanta Tripathy, father of Banabihari Tripathy, the mad pleader. Both of them were calling Mita (friend) to each other. Once there was draught in Firozpur and Gountia had to pay the revenue. He had no money to pay. When Sachikant came he requested him to lend some money. Sachikant assured to comeback with money before scheduled day of the deposit of revenue to king. But he did not turn up. When he came to Firozpur, he became Gountia as he deposited the revenue. It was an act of betrayal to a friend. He was not satisfied with that only. He wanted to grab the remaining land with the ousted Gountia also through others. Lochan Hati succumbed to the conspiracy. Such selfish relations have been described and criticised in the novel.

Autobiographical elements

The novel has autobiographical elements. The story teller and his family members, kith and kin are characters of the novel. The novelist claims the story as true and he is closely associated with the characters. The story teller in his note confesses:

... But the incidents described the novel had lived in my blood for many years. No incident in the novel is either imaginary or exaggerated. I have witnessed and experienced all of them myself. I know all the characters quite well intimately.(p x).

The father of the author was a respectable teacher of Beheda locality. He may be identified as Dinamastre. Laltu, the son who is an atheist and a champion of the cause of Dalits may be the author himself and the locality he describes is his native village which is adjacent to Beheda. The journalist Santosh Panda might be one of his friends who always supported him. The religious mastrani, the wife of Dinamastre appears to be the mother of the novelist. The author has experienced discrimination in his own life. He has seen the suffering and subjugation of his people. The presence of the author and his people has made this novel a realistic one.

Ecological Awareness

The scheduled caste people are very closely associated with nature. Their gods and goddesses live in jungle. They depend on forest for their day to day living. They get pains when Sahajkhole jungle is looted and destroyed by Semi Seth. They decide to save the forest from deforestation. The tractors of Seth are seized by the Forest Protection Committee. This gives a clear message to the society to save environment.

Challenge to Feudalism and capitalism

Bheda challenges the feudal and capitalist society. There must be equal rights of all human beings on the means of production. Every individual should be given the basic minimum needs. The means of production should not be concentrated in a few hands like Semi Seth and Banabihari Tripathy. The protagonist declares that the bourgeois will one day be defeated at the hands of proletariat.

Conclusion

Bheda is a dalit novel in all respects. The main aims of Dalit literature are achieved through this novel. It focuses on the spread of brotherhood, messages of Dr Ambedkar regarding equality and freedom, Lord Buddha's atheism and rejection of soul, social change, elimination of Varna and caste system and abolition of Feudalism and Capitalism for a new casteless and free society. The novel arouses downtrodden to be united to fight against the tyranny of the upper castes. It creates awareness and consciousness among the Dalits and inspires not to bend down before the deep rooted conspiracy of subjugation. The paper will conclude with the author's note of Bheda.

The author declares: "Bheda delves deep into Dalit subjectivity by experimenting with the new social realism. As the first Odia Dalit novel it deals with the theme of caste in contemporary Odia society and exposes its stereotypical caste mindedness. Such a treatment of caste in Odia literature is rare."(p xiv)

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