

READNG DALIT IDENTITY THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS

BY

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of English

University of Delhi

Course Code:120302401

May 2022

Under the supervision of

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Declaration

I, Ronit Pretam hereby declare that the dissertation entitled
"Reading, Self Identity through Literary texts"

submitted in the Department of _____, University of Delhi, Delhi, India, for the award of the Degree of **Master of Arts**, is my original work, has not been submitted so far, in part or full for any other Degree or Diploma in any University/ Institution.

I accept that the omissions and commissions are all mine.

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Abstract:

The objective of this paper is to read Dalit identity through literary texts like Phanishwar Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal*, Munshi Premchand's *Sadgati*, John Christian's *Behar Proverbs* and Indu Prakash Pandey's *Regionalism in Hindi Novels*. To sustain and analyze it further the essay takes into account the study of Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind*, Kathryn Hansen's critical essay *Renu's Regionalism: Language and form*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Language and Socialism*, and *What Is Nativism? Creating Two Classes of Citizens* by Rachel Kleinfeld and John Dickas. The essay furthers into the domain of language and socialism as it attempts to explain how regional proverbs, sayings and quotations in Mithila, Bhojpuri and other dialects and vernaculars of Bihar as they appear in the literary texts inferiorises and marginalises the Dalits and in the process trivialises the upper castes too.

Key Words: Identity, Dalit, Regionalism, Language and Socialism

Research Questions:

1. If literary texts can shape the Dalit identity, how do they shape?
2. Can language apart from literary texts be an instrument to create Dalit Identity
3. How do the regional proverbs and sayings and phrases reflect the spirit and attitude of a region?
4. Can literary texts and the language used in them determine human affairs? How?
5. How does the concept of Nativism become a factor for Dalits or the "other"?
6. What markers constitute Dalit identity and can it be shaped by literary texts?

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the following people, without whom I would not have been able to

complete this research, and without whom I would not have made it through my master's degree! My supervisor Dr. Raj Kumar, for his enthusiasm for the project, for his support, encouragement and patience. And special thanks to Dr. Ira Raja for educing my interest in Dalit Literature. I would like to express my gratitude for the library staff for equipping me with all the germane resources concerning my research. My biggest thanks to my family for all the support they have shown me through this research, the culmination of two years of distance learning in the times of Corona.

Introduction: Identity has been integral to human civilization. It is something which homo-sapiens have been instinctively attributed to. Since the early history of the evolution of human beings till present, it has been a defining feature of our civilization. Identity based on different external associations common to a particular civilization at a particular phase of time necessitated its members to coexist. Further, different social, cultural, religious and ethnic cohorts and subdivisions appearing in a particular civilization led to different identity formations and this is how different identity groups associated themselves with distinctive markers of class, caste, language, ethnicity, religion, geography and other identity markers.

Identities come naturally and are created to distinguish and differentiate and thus has a potential to connect as well as divide and hence conflict becomes as natural as cohesion. Though identity is a construct, however unscientific and irrational it may be but it becomes a necessary evil as man is a social animal and cannot imagine its existence in isolation for a society to survive all its constituents must function well. When identity provides a set of social and economic privileges and rights to one denomination without assigning them due responsibilities and duties discontent and chaos is bound to set in.

Identity is determined by different markers and language is one of them. The paper examines how language in different forms like its proverbs, sayings, quotations and phrases

s used in the regional as well as Hindi literary texts like Phanishvar Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal*, Munshi Premchand's *Sadgati*, John Christian's *Behar Proverbs* and Indu Prakash Pandey's *Regionalism in Hindi Novels* determine the Dalit identity vis-à-vis the upper order of the caste hierarchy. The paper looks at the topic through the critical lens of essays like Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Renu's Regionalism: Language and form*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Language and Socialism*, and *What Is Nativism? Creating Two Classes of Citizens* by Rachel Kleinfeld and John Dickas.

Literature Review: Phanishwar Nath Renu himself provided the term "regional" for his first novel, *Maila Anchal* primarily known for writing Anchalik Upanyas or regional stories. Though he wrote many books in the Sanskritized version of Hindi, his characters resort to Maithili language occasionally which is the dominant language of Purnia. However, regional literature written in the vernaculars and regional writings in Hindi are different. *Maila Anchal* being a regional novel evokes the image of a particular place of India and portrays a lifelike portrayal of characters, culture, characteristic, geography and other particularities that creates a consciousness in the readers community about the very idiosyncrasies of characters, place and other aspects of the novel.

Maila Anchal is a cultural and an ideological concept of a Bharat free not only from colonial shackles but also from its own gender and caste prejudices deeply engrained in its culture. Marygunj, the village is rooted in caste, gender and wealth prejudices and represents the whole India. There are Kayasth, Rajputs, yadavas and Tatmas living in their Tolis. the novel combines both caste system as well as the regional language and hence provides scope for building on the existing knowledge of language and socialism. Political parties in India are rooted in politics and so is Marygunj. Apart from that the villagers and characters do engage in proverbial expression that provides insight enough to draw the conclusion that

language becomes a tool to reflect caste prejudices against one caste to the other.

Sadgati by Premchand is a heartrending and scathing account of exploitation of a Dalit who dies a neglected and unclaimed death and whose last respects too is not sufficient as being a chamar he does not deserve last respects with dignity and his corpse is dragged out of the village by the brahmin as nobody turns up to claim Dukhi's body and it meets an inhumane fate as dogs and vultures feed on his corpse. Casteist language is again hurled at Dukhi who bears all like a slave puts up with everything and ends up dying. Language too becomes a marker of sociology.

John Christian's *Behar Proverbs* is quite relevant for it provides proverbs, quotations and phrases in Mithila language the similar of which the regional ones we find in Phanishvar Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal*. As Francis Bacon has said that proverbs are the genius, wit and spirit of the nation. Similarly, the phrases and proverbs collected in the book and other similar ones occasionally appearing in *Maila Anchal* speak volumes about the social reality, Dalit apartheid and does reflect the degenerating attitude of the society in terms of caste discrimination and proves its relevance as a compilation of the conservative and rather orthodox beliefs of different castes and denominations. This is relevant from the vantage point that how a society disenfranchises and make humans particularly Dalits devoid of agency through humiliation and interiorization. The traditional sayings showcase wisdom too.

Indu Prakash Pandey's *Regionalism in Hindi Novels* traces the very noticeable beginning of the tradition of Regionalism in Hindi novels. He illustrates his points with examples from different novels that Hindi regional novels are the brainchild of the realistic attitude of writing reflecting the national spirit of freedom and socialist thinking. The book is significant also because they bring forth the fact of anchalik yatharthvad or regional realism. The book includes the study of the anchalik elements of books like *Maila Anchal*, *Bud aur*

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mudra by Amrit Lal Nagar, Adha Gaon by Rahi Masum Raza and Ganga Maiya by

Bhairav Prasad Gupta with regional elements as a common thread portraying characters of the upper and the lower castes pitted against each other.

Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* describes the introduction of English studies in India under British rule with a purpose for controlling it politically. This approach of the English abetted voluntary cultural assimilation on behalf of the colonized. Gauri Viswanathan ~~shows~~ shows how the literary text worked as a mirror of the ideal Englishman and became a veneer of exploitation that disguised the profiteering activities of the colonizing British government. She argues that the curricular study of English should not be taken any longer or be understood innocently or in a naïve way to the deeper contexts of imperialism, transnationalism, and globalization in which the curriculum first articulated its mission. "Masks of Conquest" demonstrates the transcontinental movements and derivations of English studies.

Through the mechanism of the circulation of demeaning proverbs about the Dalits the upper crust identity wanted to institutionalize the servility and marginalization of the outcastes in a systemic method putting the different colonized nationalities in a poor light. The servility and marginalization of the outcastes in a systemic method took place too at the hand of the neo-colonizers, the upper caste and their own countrymen. The proverbs served the creators and its user the most. It also proved a medium for the Dalits to vent off their angst, anxiety and resistance the same we have jocular and humorous proverbs and quotations about the Britishers.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* is as important an essay as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. This essay is what we can say about a language of one's own, about language and its constructive role in national culture, history, and identity. The

ook advocates linguistic decolonization of the Africans and urges them to have their own language. This should be equally applicable to the people belonging to the Dalit community because the language that is in common parlance had a monopoly over it, that of those who had easy access to writing, printing and other modes of language structures exercising power over the Dalits. Dalits too must have a language of their own through which they could have an independent identity. *Maila Anchal* illustrates this in its episode.

Kathryn Hansen's critical essay *Renu's Regionalism: Language and form* examines the kinship between language, culture, and other fictional form in the works of Phanishvarnath Renu, widely held as the creator of the regional novel in Hindi. His innovative contribution in the language of prose fiction and his novels have been the subjects of much debate among Hindi critics. Apart from this, Renu's experiments with language and the originality of his use of oral genres within the modern novel are apparent even to a Hindi reader unfamiliar with literary criticism. The Hindi critics for their part evidence little analytical skill in their discussions of Renu's regionalism. The regional elements unfold through localization of characters in its everyday reality of caste equations and language operations.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Language and Socialism* like *Decolonizing the Mind* is about politics in language, and more a socio-linguistic technicalities in the equation of interpellation and counter-interpellation by which speaking subjects are made. As Aristotle notes, insofar as humans are speaking animals, they are political animals too. Even the dominant ideology prevails, resistance is always feasible and structurally possible. Speakers of the world can unite in counter-interpellation the same way they can unite through their Dalit identity that encounters the dominating upper class. The speaking subjects are made to suit the narrative of the dominant class like Caliban is the creation of Prospero. The name "Caliban" to denote

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man of beastly nature. Nomenclature and the politics of Dalit identity and demonization go together and can be shattered by counter-interpellation as shown in *Maila Anchal*.

Rachel Kleinfeld and John Dickas *What Is Nativism? Creating Two Classes of Citizens* sheds light on what exactly is the concept of Nativism. Nativists believe that true national identity entails a particular racial, ethnic, or religious background. The same concept can also be related to in terms of caste as well. The otherization of the Dalits in their own land is something the idea of nativism deals with. It is also about who is a real and rightful and apt inheritor of the land called Bharat and who to be exiled. This can be seen in Premchand's *Sadgati*. For a character like Dukhi, the society has no place. However, circumstances in contemporary India are changing, we witness incidents of Dalit atrocities time and again. The State and its apathetic machinery and the sense of growing statelessness appears to them a mirage of an India that is celebrating its silver jubilee.

Main Body: Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, talks of such spaces as “the scraps, patches and rags of daily life” (Bhabha 209), the “unruly ‘time’ of national culture”, “the liminality of the nation” and “the margins of modernity” (Bhabha 211) which are unfortunately unrepresented. The women who are called the gendered other and the “other” like the lower castes and the marginalized groups are hitherto untouched after the postcolonial establishment in India. *Maila Anchal* and *Sadgati* abounds in episodes and characters who are left unnoticed even after the materialization of Indian independence.

Decolonization: Gender Reality, Dalits and Caste in *Maila Anchal*: India, a new nation and identity, “socialism”, “democracy”, and “secularism” remain mere hollow words. For centuries, common masses have been subjected to isolation and deprivation, and have been at the receiving end of the caste-ridden society. The higher classes imitating the colonizers have maltreated the others not as non-humans and beasts, only as the “other”, the “subaltern”, and

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“pieces of trembling humanity”. Even after freedom, they continue to be the poor strata of society. They share no space in this new nation called India.

Maila Anchal is a whole lot of a universe where different characters from different castes stay together and in conflict too. It has a gallery of about two hundred characters representing different strata, sections, groups and aspects of the social structure. They are Sumritdas, Larsingh Das, Chotan Babu, Sahdev Misir, Ramdas, Shanichara, Sunderlal, Sukhilal, Tilhara Chamar, Nakchhedha, Ramkishun, Soma Jat, Charittar, Rampal, etc. Lakshmi, an orphan who stays in a math becomes dasi of Mahanth Sevas. Phulia is an Adivasi and is sexually exploited by the same people who appropriate her Adivasi land. The subjugation of women continues.

The phallogocentric attitude of society is all set to pulverize the subjugated women at the behest of people like Sahadev Misir. These men stay in our memory because of their oppression, notoriety and exploitation. Phulia is obliged to share bed with Sahdev Misir simply because of the fact that he is economically capable of assisting her family as he is a railway employee. Rampiyariya accepts to be dasi of Ramdas as she needs to quench the fire of hunger. Besides them, so many other sexual relations have been depicted throughout the novel. Sahdev Misir believes that he has a birth right over Phulia of the Tantrima Toli. The lower-caste youth of Maryganj understand this phenomenon. “Arey ho budbak bamna, Arey ho budbak bamna, Chumma leve mein jat nahi re jaye” (Oh stupid Brahmin. Don’t you lose your caste when you kiss?)... As per sociologist Bernard Cohen’s study of the Shivnarayan sect, the Thakurs and the Chamars reached an agreement whereby the Thakurs were supposed to give up their lust for the Chamar woman.

Maryganj is splintered along lines of caste, gender and wealth. There are Kayasth tola, Yadav Toli, and Tatma Toli. Rajputs are in conflict with Kayasths. Caste matters

ore in social affairs. When the Mahant invites the entire village for a feast the differences along caste becomes obvious:

“The Brahmins have flatly refused to eat in a public feast unless separate arrangements for them are made. . . . The people from the Sepoy-quarter aren’t going to eat either. Hibaran Singh’s son came and told me that his people won’t eat in the same row with cowherds. . . . the Yadavs will say that they won’t eat in the same row as Dhanuks.” (*Maila Anchal* 22).

Dalit Identity and Regional Language in *Maila Anchal*: *Maila Anchal* being a regional novel illustrates several proverbial correspondences of the members of the village community that carry undertones as well as overtones of caste identity. This is how an upper caste member gets run down and resisted. And by virtue of the same proverbs and casteist remarks the upper caste invisibilises a lower caste member and flaunt his superiority. Renu uses many slangs, blessings but see the swear word *ghasiyāre ka baccha* he uses in another instance is Uncle Jotkhi who is a Brahman is said to be the only caste that poses greater wisdom and therefore commands huge respect. Undoubtedly, no one has a monopoly over wisdom and knowledge but this comment projects Brahmans to be wiser and intellectually superior to other castes:

Uncle Jotkhi is very happy these days. The villagers now salute him five times a day. That Uncle Jotkhi is a real mine of wisdom. "If there's any brilliance left in this dark Kali Yug, it's only in the Brahman." The science of astrology is no child's play. There's still some divine splendor left. "Even if gold lies in the mud, moss won't grow on it." Salutations, Uncle Jotkhi! (*Maila Anchal*, p. 262) Another example adores Kotherin Saheb:

"Dear brothers! All that the Kotherin Saheb said is true. But I am the most to blame. It's only because of me there's fighting going on in the village. I'm everybody's servant. I'm

o scholar. I haven't read the scriptures. I am a poor man, a fool. (Maila Anchal, p. 31).

Further, we also witness upper caste member has been put to ridicule because he has lowered himself by participating in a folk dance called vidapati:

Babhan nàchae teli tamāshā dekhae (If a Brahman would dance, even a man of the low caste of oil-presser would have fun at his cost)

Dalit Identity and Language in Sadgati: Dalit identity has been dominant and vocal in many texts but they have been crushed into submission too and in such cases the Dalit identity never came to the fore. Premchand's *Sadgati* is such a text that completely effaces the Dalit persona and the passive submission or death of Dukhi evokes pathos. Dukhi, the untouchable chamar goes to the local village priest Ghasiram in order to invite him to his abode for fixing an auspicious date and time for her daughter's marriage. Taking this as an opportunity, the cunning priest offers him to perform a series of rigorous tasks. Already feverous and hungry Dukhi, works without food and water and dies a pathetic death. Nobody claims his body and Ghasiram drags his body out of the village square and 'deliver' it amidst the carcass of the cattle, the place a Dalit belongs to. This is how he 'delivers' Dukhi.

Sadgati is one of the texts about Dalit precariousness, exploitation, segregation and a Dalit body that caught up in the Brahmanical pattern of tyranny does not find an escape. It is one of the stories for which Premchand has been levelled anti-Dalit and there are debates of *Possessive Exclusivism*. The exclusive focus on the submissiveness, exploitation and suffering of the Dalits on the part of the upper-caste writer that compels the Dalit critics to question the representation of Dalit question in their works.

Dalit Identity, Critical Essays, Language and Socialism: As we have already seen how the regional novel *Maila Anchal* and *Sadgati* Identify the discourse of the Dalit on literary plains, but language has its own mechanism and philosophy through which elicits an identify that of

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e Dalits. *Language and socialism* an essay by Jean-Jacques Lecercle with the theory of

Interpellation is an instrumental to understand the identity of the Dalits. Other essays

following this will put us in a better position to appreciate it.

Interpellation and Counter-interpellation Through Language: Voice, as a medium of communication is common to all animals but a communication that is confined to signals indicating cry and pain or pleasure, good or evil, justice and injustice only effects. Then for Aristotle speech is effect that leads to concept. Because it is the concept that makes things manifest. We sense subject and the object with the help of speech. If language is what creates concept and manifests the meaning and irrelevance, good and evil then it is obviously charged with politics. We do form a concept of justice that is the founding stone of politics and that is through speech. Language is then constitutive of politics. It becomes the vehicle of domination and also that of emancipation.

Althusser opines that language is ideology is language in a non-trivial way. The operation of ideology works through the vector of language in the process of subjectivation through interpellation. The concept of interpellation is the need to switch to another idiolect while communicating. A farmer's son communicating with an engineer will be interpellated by the sense of subjectivation and will behave that way. The opposite of which is counter-interpellation. This is what we can see in both the literary texts. Thus, Dalit identity or politics is not only something working through language on a superficial scale but rather there is a deep concept and mechanism through which not only humans but also language becomes battlefield.

Mask of Conquest and Decolonizing the Mind: *Masks of Conquest* and *Decolonizing the Mind* are almost antithetical to each other. Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* has the potential to make the readers understand the value of *Decolonizing the Mind*. The latter

high emphasizes that it is important to write in one's own language of one's own land else there are chances that while learning or speaking the language of the colonizer one becomes a vicarious facilitator of oneself being ruled by the outsider. This is what happened with the people of India. The English curriculum introduced by the English colonized the Indians more smoothly and helped them rule easily.

The essence of the Mask of Conquest is applicable to Dalits too. As the language used by the upper castes has the chances of creating a language as per their own vantage point and put the Dalits in the bad light and as something subordinate to themselves. It has to be understood by the Dalits to deconstruct the narrative created by the upper castes.

Nativism: Creating Two Classes of Citizens: The paper uses the term “nativist” to refer to a demographic group who endorses, advocates, or believes in a racially, religiously, or ethnically defined markers of nationhood. This leads to the deprivation of members that are considered “undesirable” groups and end up being the second-class citizens. From the nativist vantage point, the second-class citizenship is not entitled to participate equally in their democracy. They give their concerns less weight than other citizens and make their policy views less legitimate. The nativists justify providing them with inferior public services, and/or otherwise reduces their right to be treated the same as other citizens.

Conclusion: For an academic pursuit of Dalit literature and identity, and as a researcher it entails a wide array of identifiers to be acknowledged to appreciate the topical profundity. As an existing branch of knowledge entity, Dalit identity through books requires not only theoretical capital but also social, cultural, economic, and linguistic contexts and nuances. The books *Maila Anchal* and *Sadgati* stand up to the above-mentioned nuances and the critical essays appreciate these constituents of the Dalit identity. The essay Language and Socialism comingled with the regionalism of Phanishvar Nath Renu instrumentally tap on the

Dalit identity through texts as well as the regional level. Reading Dalit identity through literary texts as well as through language-based ones is akin to reading a text through praxis.

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