

Redefining Dalit Struggles: A Study of Redemption in Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild*

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Abstract

This paper explores Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild* as a pioneering work in Gujarati literature that brings Dalit struggles to the forefront, particularly the lived experiences of the Vankar community, historically marginalized as untouchables. The novel vividly portrays the everyday challenges faced by Dalits in a caste-stratified society, especially during the post-independence period. By juxtaposing the elite and Dalit communities, Macwan presents a critical analysis of systemic oppression and exclusion that Dalits endure from childhood. Beyond depicting suffering, the novel also delves into themes of identity, self-assertion, and resistance, redefining Dalit struggles within Gujarat's socio-cultural context. This study examines how this novel not only narrates the pain of caste-based discrimination but also serves as a testament to Dalit resilience and the quest for redemption, making it a significant contribution to Dalit literature.

Keywords: Vankar Community, Marginalized, Macwan, Caste, Discrimination

Dalit literature emerged in India after independence, shaped by the decentralization of power, postmodern ideology, post-colonialism, and the quest for identity. Rooted in the long-standing aspirations of marginalized communities, its development, particularly after the 1960s, reflects the evolving center-periphery dynamics. As an expression of the Dalit liberation movement, this literary tradition directly challenged the historical dominance of higher castes. Today, Dalit literature has established itself as a powerful and prestigious component of Indian English literature.

In societies plagued by injustice and oppression, marginalized groups resist discriminatory practices and assert their rights. Dalit literature serves as a medium for articulating these struggles, giving voice to the lived experiences of Dalits. The term *Dalit* originates from the word *dal*, meaning "to subdue," "to oppress," or "to break." Members of the Dalit community have endured systemic violence, including physical assault, sexual abuse, and

social humiliation at the hands of the elite. Their existence has been ensnared in a web of economic disparity, exploitation, untouchability, discrimination, and cruelty.

Dalit literature, written by Dalit authors, reflects the lived experiences of Dalits, emphasizing identity, oppression, and resistance. Its primary objective is to raise awareness within Dalit communities about their historical and systemic marginalization, particularly under the Varna Vyavastha, as outlined in the *Manusmriti*. Although caste was initially linked to karma, it later became hereditary, reinforcing rigid social hierarchies. Despite post-independence legal reforms, socio-economic inequalities persist, and Dalit literature serves as a counter-narrative to Brahminical discourse, highlighting themes of sorrow, suffering, and social exclusion.

Gujarati Dalit literature has played a crucial role in advocating for humanism and amplifying marginalized voices. As Neerav Patel aptly states, “I wish you to be not only my reader but also an empathizer; only then will my pain come to an end” (25). This literature serves as both an artistic and activist endeavor, though, as K.M. Sherrif notes, its engagement with postmodernism has been inconsistent.

Historically, untouchability has been deeply entrenched in Indian society, with the term *Dalit* gaining prominence through the Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra (1972). While caste oppression has been widely studied, it remains a complex issue in Gujarat. Joseph Macwan’s *The Stepchild* examines the inherited subaltern status of Dalits, portraying their struggles as both eternal and legitimized by religious authority..

Born in Kheda, Gujarat, Macwan, a Dalit convert to Christianity, personally endured caste-based atrocities. His ethnographic novels reflect the characters and struggles that shaped his life. As noted in *Asmita*, Dalit poetry, deeply rooted in lived experiences, resists orthodoxy and serves as a weapon against oppression.

Translator Rita Kothari highlights how Macwan became a guiding force for emerging Dalit writers in Gujarat. However, some critics argue that his works remained confined to personal experiences, limiting his broader impact on Dalit literature. Despite this debate, Macwan remains a symbol of both Dalit aspirations and disillusionments, leaving an indelible mark on Gujarati literary history.

Writers like Joseph Macwan and Dalpat Chauhan authentically depict rural Gujarat through local dialects, preserving its cultural essence. The title *Angaliyat* (translated as *The Stepchild*) itself symbolizes the deep-rooted divide between the center and periphery in Gujarat’s society. The term refers to a stepchild entering a new home while holding their mother’s hand, reflecting the marginalized status of Dalits.

Published by Oxford University Press in 2004, *The Stepchild* is recognized as India’s first Dalit novel written by a Dalit author. Its impact was so profound that renowned critic Uma Shankar Joshi remarked, “You haven’t popularized *Angaliyat*, but *Angaliyat* has popularized you” (78). Set in rural Gujarat of the 1930s, the novel revolves around the Vankar community, a world Macwan knew intimately through personal experience. Blending themes of love, humiliation, resistance, revenge, and mortality, the novel transcends fiction, serving as a

powerful testament to Dalit struggles against upper-caste oppression. It also explores themes of marginalization, injustice, and resistance, centering on the relationship between Teeho and Methi, which serves as a broader reflection of Dalit struggles. It presents an authentic portrayal of marginalized communities, including the Patel, Thakore, Harijan, Baraiya, and Vankar clans of Rathpur, Shilapur, and Kerdia.

Historically, the Vankars were weavers, but their caste status varied across India. In Gujarat, they were also responsible for disposing of cattle carcasses, a task typically assigned to Chamars elsewhere, as recorded in the 1901 Bombay Presidency Gazetteer under "Depressed Classes." Post-independence, Dalits faced two paths—Gandhian integration into Hindu society or Ambedkarite resistance for self-assertion. This ideological divide is reflected in the novel through Kunku, Methi, Teeha, and Valji, whose lives are shaped by oppression, failed aspirations, and the pursuit of dignity.

Macwan emphasizes the necessity of collective struggle for justice. The weaver community, represented by Teeho, Kunku, Bhavan Bhagat, and others, endures humiliation, exclusion, and violence, highlighting the persistence of untouchability. A defining moment occurs in Shilapur when Teeho reprimands Naniya, the upper-caste Maghji Patel's son, for humiliating Methi by drenching her with water. The gaze of upper-caste men upon her soaked body underscores the gendered dimension of caste oppression.

The novel further explores the brutal oppression of Dalits through the tragic fate of Teeha and Methi. When Methi is publicly humiliated, Teeha courageously confronts privileged upper-caste youths, only to be fatally assaulted. Seeking help from his own community, he is abandoned out of fear. His death, a symbol of resistance, exposes the government's failure to protect marginalized voices. Methi, grief-stricken, chooses to end her life, marking a poignant testament to love and despair. Their sacrifice, however, fuels the ongoing Dalit struggle for justice and identity. The novel also critiques internal divisions within the Dalit community, where self-serving individuals like Ramlo and Bhikhlo exacerbate their suffering. This disunity allows upper-caste groups to maintain dominance, reinforcing Dr. Ambedkar's call to "educate, unite, and agitate." The intertwined struggles against both external oppression and internal betrayal highlight the complexity of Dalit struggles, making unity an urgent necessity for resistance.

Macwan also sheds light on the double oppression of Dalit women, who endure both caste-based discrimination and patriarchal subjugation. Methi and Kunku, depicted as virtuous yet oppressed, navigate a society where remarriage among lower castes is stigmatized. Women like Methi face harassment from upper-caste men while suffering abuse within their own homes, as seen in her violent marriage to Chuhthia. The hypocrisy of caste purity is starkly illustrated in *Angaliyat*, where Jamni is accepted when exploited by an upper-caste man but labeled untouchable when she resists. Through Teeha, Valji, and Kunku's defiance, the author reveals by mentioning how Dalits, especially women, remain vulnerable to systemic violence. "Here, too, the creator's intention to render Tiha a hero can be apparent... nevertheless, due to "...his hero-like attitude, the work is drawn into the immensity of the class fight." In a very natural way, strategies, manoeuvres, and rivalry merged. As a result, Teeha's heroic behaviour in the work doesn't appear artificial" (Macwan 53).

Teeho, unable to tolerate the humiliation of a young girl, confronts a group of privileged youths, leading to a violent altercation. As the conflict escalates, Teeho sustains a severe head injury and, covered in blood, seeks help from his fellow weavers. However, paralyzed by fear, they refuse to assist him, as their small, long-oppressed community remains under the control of a politically and economically dominant elite. Like Valji, they have resigned themselves to a life of suffering, believing that their hardships can only fluctuate in intensity but never truly disappear. The consequences of the incident are severe—Dhulsang Thakore, the leader of Shilapur village, which is predominantly inhabited by Patel and Thakore communities, enforces a strict ban on Valji and Teeho entering the village. The weavers, resigned to their fate, feel powerless against their oppressors, comparing any attempt at retaliation to an impossible battle against a mighty predator in an endless sea. In this context, Teeho says: “To hell with water and crocodiles... people like us either become extinct or we suck up all their water itself... the British sun is still warm. Once Independence arrives, our days will be numbered” (Macwan 23).

The narrative captures the fear, hesitation, and disunity within the Dalit community, shaped by economic dependence on upper castes and centuries of subjugation. Despite protective measures, the older generation remains apprehensive, believing any resistance will only invite further violence. The reliance on upper-caste employers suppresses dissent, reinforcing systemic oppression. Macwan also highlights the neglect Dalits face in healthcare, where doctors and nurses hesitate to serve them. Dalit women suffer the most, often facing high mortality rates during childbirth due to inadequate medical attention. Through his firsthand experience, Macwan authentically portrays the struggles of the Vankar community, showing how oppression stems not only from upper castes but also from internalized fear and division.

The condition of Dalit women is even more dire than that of their male counterparts, as they endure both caste and gender-based violence. The novel effectively illustrates these struggles, using vernacular language to express the raw emotions and realities of Dalit life. Macwan's *Angaliyat* further contextualizes the Dalit fight for identity, capturing two major trends: the rejection of Brahminical traditions and the challenge to caste hierarchy. This movement symbolizes resistance against entrenched discrimination, making Dalit literature a crucial voice in the fight for justice. *The Stepchild* not only portrays the Vankar community's oppression but also serves as a symbol of redemption for all untouchable communities, urging them to reclaim their dignity and assert their rightful place in society.

At the novel it can be said that the novel is a dramatic illustration of the Dalit community's tenacity and hardships, highlighting the pervasive inequities of caste discrimination as well as the internal strife that impedes group resistance. In addition to bringing attention to the systematic exploitation of Dalits, Macwan's realistic depiction of oppressed life emphasizes the importance of solidarity, education, and tenacity in the struggle for justice and dignity. His story encourages future generations to carry on the fight for equality and self-determination by highlighting the fact that real redemption requires opposing both internal and external oppression.

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