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SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN DALIT WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary society is founded on the ideals of liberty, equality and justice yet Dalits have always remained on the periphery. As socially and culturally ostracized community, they were deliberately silenced and their tales of woe and oppression had remained unheard for a long time but fight for social justice brought about positive transformation in collective social-cultural consciousness. Cultural discourses accommodated marginalized voices and Dalit writings provided discursive space for negotiating social concerns. This article attempts to explore how far social consciousness is articulated through Dalit writings by analyzing a simple story, *The Storeyed House* by Waman Hoval, a Marathi writer. The story centers round Bayaji, a Buddhist convert, and all the events in the story follow a linear pattern-to begin with: Bayaji's return to homeland which marks Dalit's protestation movements, his meeting with high caste people revealing how low caste people are offended and ill-treated, his attempt to overcome constraints of spatial limitations gets thwarted by socially privileged communities, finally his victimization and the resolution and efforts of next generation to continue struggle for emancipation.

Key words: Social consciousness, Dalit emancipation, victimization.

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"Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it. That is its implied value. The nature of this literature consists in are billion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits-in the past and even at present-in the framework of varna system. A feeling of rebellion is invariably accompanied by an extreme psychological commitment. As Dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary", says Sarat chandra Mukthibodh in his essay, "What is Dalit Literature?"(Trans. by Anil . Kulkarni. . . " Poisoned Bread' 'p 270)

Though caste consciousness is the subject matter of Dalit literature, new paradigms for thinking about gender and social differences are emerging out of transformations in social life. Almost all writers express their experiences and concerns and all literary discourses articulate the whole range of emotions-pain, humiliation, resentment, anger, resistance. Such writings have always opened up discursive space for negotiating issues of

untouch ability and oppression. Dalit literature is the space where a community can prove themselves, assert their self, express their identity and expose social truth. Most of the literature produced by Dalit authors are part of their struggle against caste discrimination. Their writings are rooted in their cultural-material world and employ innovative strategies in both form and content, challenging, at the same time enriching existing literature. Any attempt to explore and analyze those literary outpourings, characterized by a kind of new Dalit aesthetic will enable us to re-situate Dalit literature, as literature.

Dalit literature in Maharashtra emerged out of the literary movements which grew out of conversions of Dalits, especially, 'Mahars' to Buddhism. Hence this conversion unlike other conversions is remarkable in literature. Marathi Dalit writings of Dalit as well as non-Dalit writers have Buddhist influences in their works. A large number of Dalits who had to undergo opprobrium of public abuse, having to live without self-respect embraced Buddhism which marked a new era in their lives since it gave them new socio-religious and political identity. Though caste consciousness and social differences are subjects of Dalit writings there are other lot many similarities-issues of gender and the question of human dignity. The subjugation of Dalits by the privileged in the name of religion and tradition is delineated in such writings.

Waman Hoval is a well-known Marathi Dalit writer who has focused on the quandaries of Dalits in his stories. His stories are marked for the rustic style and terse dialogues. His major concern has been common men and women, victims of social injustice. His collection of stories include *Yelkot* and *Varasdar*.

His short story *The Storeyed House* (TSH) translated by M. D. Hatkanagalekar explores the world of Dalit experiences, Dalit's struggle for equality, their attempt to uphold their dignity in spite of all sufferings. *The Storeyed House* has contributed much to the dynamics of Dalit emancipation. The story poignantly expresses the rages and pathos of Dalit persona caught in the grim social reality of Indian culture.

Bayaji, the protagonist of the story is a victim of the atrocities of caste based social stratification. Dalit's resistance to forces that challenge their rights and claim for equality and justice result in their victimization. Nevertheless, the oppressed are engaged in perpetual fight to put an end to this discrimination. The hero, Bayaji, a hard working laborer returns to his native land to spend his post retirement life. The story begins with his journey back to his home town by the State Transport bus. The bus, before reaching destination, stands still like an obstinate bull and all the passengers get down to push the bus. When the bus gains initial momentum, starts again and gradually takes on speed. The journey of the Dalit people from the state of systematized oppression and injustice and their struggle against all odds of caste and discrimination and their struggle to cross the boundaries of socio-economic inequalities have been a slow movement like the movement of the bus itself. But protestations for social justice led by a motley crowd of peasants, activists, thinkers gave the initial momentum, energized such movements and post-independence era showed a kind of positive transformation in social sphere, empowering Dalits, with political justice by way of constitutional devices. Nevertheless their economic backwardness needs to be addressed.

On his way home Bayaji encounters Bhujabaan upper castewho is annoyed at Bayaji's greetings. He wants Bayaji to maintain a subservient code of conduct. Injustice and inhumanity of one native community over another is exposed in the meeting between the two. He intimidates Bayaji with a warning that he cannot claim equal status with upper caste people, with his newly acquired Buddhist identity. In an emotional turmoil Bayaji feels the urge to knock him down with the box on his head but controls himself. The despotization of upper caste and passive resistance of the marginalized lower caste people are inherent in Indian social sphere.

Bayaji resided in the untouchables 'settlement namely Buddha Vihar. He was given a traditional welcome on his arrival by the members of his family. Bayaji and his family are a contended lot. But the need to expand their physical space necessitated Bayaji to think of a storeyed house. He little knew that his requirement would invite the wrath of caste people. 'After being intimidated by upper caste people he had to rework on his former plan. He went in for a concealed storeyedhouse. "The conventional three-portioned house was taken up. Work was resumed and the walls rose rapidly. The middle portion was a little elevated and a smallfirststoreyfixed up there with wooden flooring. This part could be reached by stairs rising from the kitchen. No one could guess from the outside that there was a first storey to the house. Bayaji had to make the best of things." (Poisoned Bread,p 180)

Bayaji's attempt to evade congestion of limited physical space is misinterpreted as claim for equality. On completion of the construction of house a traditional house warming ceremony was planned and a *pandal* was erected in front of the house.

All the invited guests and devotional singers rendered a festive mood to the ceremony. But Kondiba Patil, Bhujaba and companions were filled with jealousy, "They eyed one another as if to say, 'This untouchable worm has got a swollen head. He needs proper handling.' "(Poisoned Bread,p 181-182) When it was two o' clock in the morning the program gathered momentum and the house reverberated with devotional songs on Lord Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar. The song, 'Take to heart the sweet advice of Bhimaraya and bow down to Buddha for the emancipation of the whole world. I fly to the refuge of lord Buddha, I fly to the refuge of the Faith; I fly to the refuge of the Faithful. ' "(Poisoned Bread,p 182) filled the place with joy, then the 'undreamt of incident' occurred. Bayaji's house caught fire from all sides. He ran around frantically crying 'My house, my storeyed house! It's on fire. My enemy has taken revenge on me. . "(Poisoned Bread,p 182) He climbed up, pulled the pictures of Buddha and Babasaheb from the wall and hurled them down. As he was about to come down the stairs it crumbled down in flames and he couldn't come out of the burning house. He was trapped in the soaring flames and he wailed, 'My house, my house' (Poisoned Bread,p 182) these words have the effects of a mantra, denoting Dalit empowerment.

In the end of the story we can expect Bayaji's son's, the succeeding generation, will take up the fight against discrimination with much more vigor and strength. They are ready to build a regular two storeyed house, not one with concealed first floor. They don't indulge themselves in customary mourning, but rise up to give voice to forgotten tales of oppression. The village officer's statement that Bayaji's death was due to petrol flare-up, carries in it a kind of ironical strength which reiterates the hegemonic attitude of privileged social positions. The ritual of victimization will provide the moral terrain for the next generation of the oppressed to annihilate caste based discrimination and thereby redefine their identities. The extend of cultural ostracism, physical repression and social stigma which Bayaji bears upon him are shared by all the individuals of Dalit community. The emergence of this new storeyed house - space for living – will be structured on egalitarianism. *The Storeyed House* is much more genuine in the depiction of Dalit life, in powerfully representing Dalit hood than any other creative writings.

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