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Crestfallen Class hues of Caste Hierarchy: Presented and Represented

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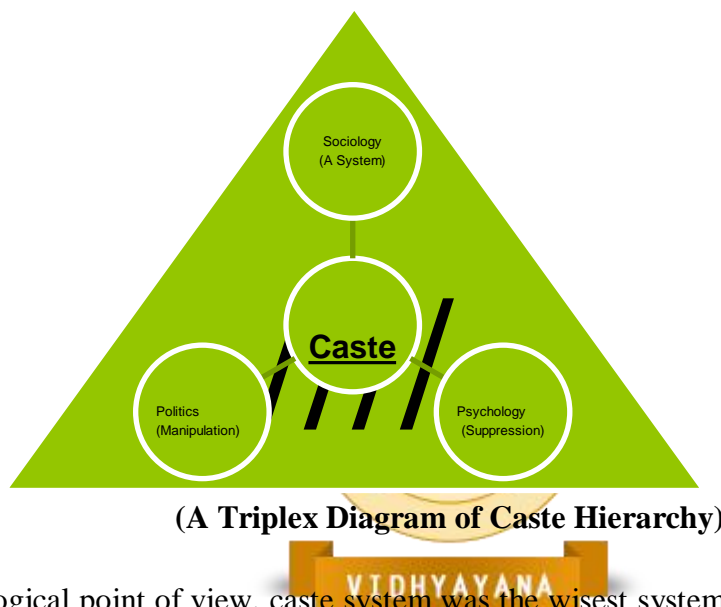


VIDHYAYANA



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The representation of ‘castes’ (it is better to use the plural form of the noun ‘caste’ because no single caste can be discussed without taking into consideration the inter-caste relationship) is not only an issue of communicating certain narratives about castes across languages under the umbrella culture of India but rather is the manifestation of castes organized as the social institutions into an assortment of cultural discourses. The modus operandi adopted for this paper is that of a triplex diagram consisting of three irrespective disciplines of science; Sociology, Psychology and Politics.



(A Triplex Diagram of Caste Hierarchy)

As from the sociological point of view, caste system was the wisest system of the bifurcation of intellectual and laborious work that was unfortunately misinterpreted as the best and the worst respectively. This sociological and so collective misinterpretation had resulted into the psychological suppression of the millions of untouchables for a longer period of time. Gradually after shifting from Social system to psychological repression, what is being manipulated to the notion of the ‘caste’ is politicization. Here our prime concern is neither to crystallize untouchables by advocating them nor to discuss the callousness of the upper castes. Hence, without passing any kind of value judgment on casteism, here we would attempt to inquire into the very nature of representation of castes and to seek whether what has been intended by representation of the castes is achieved or not from the three above mentioned perspectives.

Well, after discussing the methodological frame of the paper, we would directly switch over to two enigmatic terms ‘Presentation’ and ‘Representation’, enigmatic in the sense that it is very difficult to represent the notion of caste which has once already presented in the scriptures by taking a neutral stand.



VIDHYAYANA

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The first presentation of the caste based exploitation took place in the great Indian epic Mahabharata wherein Guru Drona first refused to teach Aklavya and then asked for his thumb. When we were in the school, we were told this story as a student's dedication to his teacher. Has any teacher dared to teach the same story as the Brahmin's humiliating task to a Dalit? Or shall we as a society having Brahmanical hierarchical order has ever allowed doing so? Another example the presentation is that of Karn when he is humiliate as the son of Soot, a member of the minor community. Here the question is not whether he was or was not the son of a Soot but how a minor community has been treated/presented by our religious scriptures? Answers of these questions are lying in the works of writers of the various time and genres. Our naming of untouchables the 'Wretched Ones' is because of their "presentation" by themselves not as the speaking subjects and as people without 'self-pride'; and their "representations" by others as objects of pity rather than authors of their own stories. Sometimes writers or poets end up discussing caste system as merely an Indian epical tale or resentment of Dalits by malign treatment by Savarans. Under the pretext of "representation", many a time it is only the misrepresentation that takes place, here by misrepresentation we mean misinterpretation or better to say "politicization" (as it is today). Because when one tries to represent something already presented, one is actually imposing the 'Purpose' for the representation, say for instance, what is involved in an authentic representation of the experiences of Dalit in literature? Doubtlessly, oppressed castes tend to remonstrate their revolutionary gusto, which is why in any given text on or about the caste, we never see two castes abreast with each other with equal social reputations.

The references of the texts translated into English on the issues of caste acquaint us with the contours of translation that is English translation, for the projection of the castes in Indian literatures. As what we call the implicit signalling of subaltern culture, however, seems to be primarily problematic in terms of translation. Since English, the target language does not possess any equivalent signification, the moment source language is rendered in it, and the very effect of the original mood is nullified and flattened. The English language can at the most, give class signals to the readers that can never appease the zeal of the original writer as the socio-cultural context cognate to the castes. Despite whatever drawbacks translation creates, there is no alternative but to use the standard variety of English with hope it would provide compensation by the other means of usage. That is how English translation has provided an opportunity to various colloquial Dalit literatures in guise of a uniform language which aptly gives a wider spectrum to Dalit literatures in larger national and international arena.

With this understanding, we would try to elucidate the given issue with reference to the triplex diagram as mentioned above corresponding to texts namely *Choma's Drum* originally by K. Shivaram Karanth and



VIDHYAYANA

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www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

translated in English by U. R. Kalkur and *Ak Karmashi* by Sharan Kumar Limbale translated in English as *The OutCaste*. The reason why we have selected prose to discuss the given topic is simply due to its massive appeal.

Applying the diagram, firstly I want to focus upon the text *Choma's Drum* that is the example of the sociological perspective. Shivaram Karanth's novel *Choma's Drum* appears conspicuously fresh and bold in this background. Choma, the protagonist of the story, belongs to the lowest of the untouchables, (the Holeya) who survives by scavenging on the left over food of the upper castes or the dead cattle. The novel is the record of Choma's struggle to get a piece of land on lease and live as any other dignified human being. Choma works as a labour in the coffee estate owned by his master Sankappayya. With great artistic skills, Karanth delineates how social factors cause suffering and frustration, and bring about the ultimate ruination of the whole family. His master Sankappayya sympathises with him and agrees to give him a piece of land on lease. However, Sankappayya's mother stands in the way. She asks her son, 'has anyone else leased a field to a Holeya (That is an untouchable)? If someone has, you may do the same. Don't be first to offer Brahminhood to an untouchable...' Here we have a new perspective of looking at the motif of the caste, Sankappayya personally has no caste or untouchable biases but only to satisfy his mother who is the personification of the orthodox society, hence he does not lease land to Choma. As a member of the upper caste reluctantly he has to succumb himself to his own caste's tradition of not leasing land to an untouchable. Moreover, by the words, "Has anyone else leased a field to a Holeya?" she suggests that Brahmins are in majority which gives another dimension to look at the caste where majority is exploiting the minority. (That is the untouchables.) It is not one upper caste but majority, had it been majority of Holeyas, the situation would have been the other way round, hadn't it? Poor Choma then bursts into tears when Sankappayya explains him, "Choma...what is the use of weeping over 'Fate, has reserved for you?"

Here, by the word 'Fate' Karanth implies fate offered to an untouchable by social norms of castes which is anticipated by Choma who further articulates, "When your 'fate' is unkind, what does it matter even if everything else is alright?" Once again "Fate" implies caste.

When it comes to change his religion, Choma seems rather rigid and does not get converted. Here the interesting point that should not escape from one's notice is the Hindu attitude towards "Converted" Christians. Despite the fact that Hinduism did not treat the Harijans with dignity, many leaders including many writers did not favour their conversion to Christianity. That is how Karanth's Choma remained the only sociological authentic representation of the untouchable for a long time in Kannada literature till the



VIDHYAYANA

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www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

writers from the untouchable caste started writing for themselves in the sixties.

Next to the sociological approach, for the psychological approach to the motif of the caste, we have chosen Sharan Kumar Limbale's autobiography *Akkarmashi* that is *The Outcaste* in English. The reason for selection of the genre of 'autobiography' is simply, as Alok Mukherjee puts it, 'these narratives seek to capture the authentic Dalit experience through a minute chronicling of the smallest detail of daily life in a language that as Limbale terms it, is crude, impure and uncivil.' For the psychological repression, one would like to quote Freud, "There is always a return of the repressed" we want to co-relate this Freudian notion with the motif of caste, though in different sense. Dalit minorities or untouchables had collectively experienced the psychological repression of being considered as outsiders which has now erupted as the 'Dalit Movement/s' in last four decades first in society and so in literature as well. The volcanic force found in the entire Dalit literature is the 'return' of the 'repressed' in psychological terminology. Besides this, our major concern is to explore into the nature of the mind-set of an oppressed created by the casteism.

The autobiography sharply reacts against the age-old concept of caste which symbolises inhuman classification of the people; one who exploits the marginalised of which Limbale becomes an innocent prey. To purge extremely painful trauma which has been stored in the each layer of his mind; conscious, subconscious and unconscious, he wrote his autobiography. Limbale in his autobiography discusses his childhood experiences of his school, family, upper castes, village and precisely with his own self-as grappling with his own psyche to understand the notion of casteism. For instance, from the very childhood he has developed his mind to look each and everything from the perspective of an untouchable. Once all the school children went for a picnic where at lunch time, they (untouchables) were ordered by their teacher who belonged to the upper caste, to sit under another tree aloof from the rest of the upper caste children. At that time he narrates the tree, 'even the tree we set under was tattered like us.'

That small picnic group is the microcosm of the society of the time wherein Mahar-Dalits are like aloof owls both physically and psychologically for upper castes people who have that debarring tendency, never to count Dalits as the part and parcel of the village, society or even as humans. This physical segregation signifies them as perceived 'Other' and Subaltern for Hindu upper castes.

Limbale's relentless search for some kind of identity which he can adhere to himself is the wonderful example of what we have been discussing over here. The caste system has rendered to him only physical and social signifiers with no signified, as he asks,



VIDHYAYANA

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My father and his forefather were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar, my mother's father and forefathers were Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar...Does this mean I am a Muslim as well?...How can I be a high caste when my mother is untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belong to the village and the other half is excommunicated, who am I?

Limbale in his childhood baffled with all such signifiers of identity like *Lingayat*, *Mahar*, *Muslim*, *Untouchable*, *high caste* etc which do not appease his psyche wherein anyone among them should be the signified and provide him the Name-the identity. This seems to be the admixture of both literary theories; classical Indian and contemporary western; one with its emphasis on the evocation of emotions and feelings (*Rasa*) and the other with its preoccupation with the unstable individual identity respectively.

Though realistically and convincingly, he narrates his life story and caste simultaneously he leaves us fumbling by projecting his own confused self as a self imposed exile. Throughout his psychological excursion from childhood, adolescence to the mature adult, he gradually gets remoter and remoter from his own caste. In his childhood he complains, and in his youth he remonstrates by propagating "*Jay Bhim*". But in his adulthood he seems to cut off himself from his own caste-roots. As he says at his collegiate time about Santamai, 'Whenever my college mates seem to approach me, I increased distance between me and Santamai. If Santamai were a plate I would have hidden her under my shirt.' One should note here, these are the words of an educated Dalit, which are suggestive of the fact that it is literacy that Limbale got, had it been education, his mind-set towards his own caste would have been positively different.

Here Santamai is the representative of the entire Mahar caste. The sari and blouse of the untouchable caste are torn somewhere that gives it gruesome look which is hated not only by the upper castes but also by the people of their own caste especially the educated ones. The only thing that Limbale's mind, as an oppressed, fails to understand is to patch these torn parts. Moreover, further Limbale when gets adult, he is psychologically converted as a Savarna who purposefully shuns other Mahars (Dalits-Untouchables) approaching him. As he mentions, he would prefer to alter his route. Besides, he now addresses people by 'Namaskara' instead of 'Jay Bhim'. At the end, he reaches to such an apex to gloss over his caste based identity. As he says, 'if someone greeted me with 'Jay Bhim', I felt like an outsider. I was worried that my caste would be revealed.' Now let us discuss the political dimension in both the respective texts. Somehow writers failed to contextualise the organic view of politics; as Karanth in his *Choma's Drum* has ended up discussing the political consciousness at family level and Limbale at individual level, and both at final



VIDHYAYANA

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An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

analysis at community level. A detailed and in-depth study leads us pondering on how these two texts succeeded in mobilising the fair-set modern binary oppositions such as superior/inferior, centre/periphery, mainstream/ marginalised etc. In the text 'Choma's Drum', writer constantly proves that the centre i.e. Landlord Sankappayya and periphery i.e. Choma's family are two different poles. The violation of this distance between poles apart is not attempted by Karanth that is what we may call the politicisation-misrepresentation of the caste. For instance Belli, Choma's daughter suggests her father,

To be farmer one has to be born Brahmin or a Banta, or a Gowda. Having born an accursed Holeyas, how is it possible for us to become farmers? What could even the landlord do? There are customs and "traditions" (added inverted commas) that have to be respected. If the landlord breaks them what will the people say of him? Leave the landlord aside. If you become a farmer will that not anger our community?

Surprisingly, another indifferent point that Karanth puts forward is that of the very acceptance of the taboos of casteism not only by the upper castes but also by Choma's family i.e. untouchables which explicitly connotes Karanth's political philosophy as according to which caste system is a socially well-formed system. He continuously implies that caste or religion is something congenital, we should bear it for life time whether willy-nilly without taking any liberty with it and even after our death, the style of our cremation would be decided by the caste or religion we belong to. Karanth seems to be of the opinion that we should continue with the oppressive mechanism of the casteism that is the perspective of an upper caste writer who believes in *status quo*. For example, at the end of the novel the youngest son of Choma is drowning in the river when a Brahmin boy watching the scene but does not rescue him and the boy gets drowned. Karanth gives justification that the Brahmin boy is afraid of being polluted by the touch of that untouchable however, one dares to say that the Brahmin boy was ready to save but it was Karanth himself who was not willing to save him. Why cannot we call it as the hidden politics of an upper caste writer or a writer of the Brahmanical literature? Moreover, throughout the novel Choma, the protagonist, is presented or rather represented as one who instead of opting for radical action, submits to Gandhiji's pacifism by Karanth.

Limbale, by his autobiography explicitly uses political consciousness as an instrumental tool to articulate their orientations, identity building processes, mobilisation strategies and other aspects of their Movement. However, shockingly dealing with all these notions, he goes to the extent of demanding "*Dalitstan*" which is apparently political. There is no doubt about the predicaments of Dalits in last thousand years yet to create



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a Dalitstan is not the way out to transcend the walls of casteism. As an educated person while reading *The Out Caste* the question that has really haunted me is, do we really want to witness history repeating itself, another partition? Well the expected answer from both upper caste and Dalits is 'No' because Limbale's demand is a political agenda that tries to manipulate 'Caste' as a divisive force. Thus, Sharan the narrator-protagonist of Limbale's 'The OutCaste' is presented with full of romanticization and glib defensiveness. At the same time he is represented as someone who is limited to an obsessive self-pitying narrator of the misery and wretchedness of a person who is the representative of a whole community, incapable of acting

Apart from this, we come to know that in the text *The Out Caste*, there is a strong element of exaggeration recurring throughout the text. Limbale has written this discourse in one of the dialects of Marathi language and not in the chest Marathi, which consequently hits our eyes and ears. For instance the affairs of heterosexuality, his own witnessing the love making between his mother and a Patil-an upper caste landlord, an event of father making his own daughter pregnant etc are rather exaggeration. These are the signified by the wretchedness of their internalization of the oppressive ideas of Hindu society. However, we must admit that this 'representationality', to use another of Limbale's term, makes the mimetic world of Dalit literature figurative and even to communicate Dalitness of an individual and so of the community at large such language is required.

After observing these perspectives, we would say that as a social system caste is represented as the theory ill-practiced discourse among the groups of people whereas psychologically it is between the two groups in at general level and two individuals at particular e.g. Choma and Sankappayya. But as a political agenda projected in texts like the two discussed over here is the use-*misuse* of caste by a single man or party as vote bank. Though initially we admitted that we would not pass any kind of value judgement but rather reluctantly we have to. When we observe all the evils of casteism, we are left with no options than to propose that caste system should be changed, modified or reorganised. Doubtlessly it is too tough task to think of such changes in a country like India, and yes it is a very long process, because caste is deeply rooted in our blood from thousands of years, however, we can initiate by manipulating literature as a healthy means. It is noteworthy here rather willy-nilly our Indian caste system is being replaced by the western "Class" system in urban India. So let us decide whether caste mechanism be in as a power mechanism or shall we merge up in class conscious society which too is as danger as the former one. Well this issue is open to be discussed by numbers of more papers, dissertations and even thesis.



VIDHYAYANA

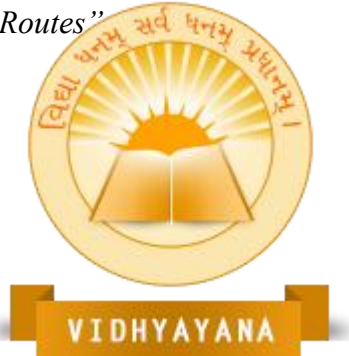
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VIDHYAYANA