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Dalit Writings

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Dalit Writings

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Unit - II: 2. Sivakami, P. <i>The Grip of Change</i> , and author's notes. trans. P. Sivakami, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2016.	Pages 36–64
Unit - III: 3. Limbale, Sharankumar. 'White Paper', <i>Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature</i> . ed. Arjun Dangle, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992. 4. Parmar, Jayant. 'The last will of a Dalit poet', <i>Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins</i> . eds. Tapan Basu, Indranil Acharya, A. Mangai, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017. 5. Navaria, Ajay. 'New Custom', <i>The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Studies</i> . trans. Laura Brueck, eds. K. Sathyanarayana, Susie Tharu, New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013. 6. Kumar, Sanjay. 'Black Ink', <i>Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins</i> . trans. Raj Kumar, eds. Tapan Basu, Indranil Acharya, A. Mangai, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.	Pages 65–104

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Joothan Omprakash Valmiki

P.K. Satapathy

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1.1 Learning Objectives

After going through this lesson, you will be able to:

- ◆ Understand the importance of Dalit literature as a cultural record of the history of Dalit oppression and suffering.
- ◆ Understand how Dalit writers use literature as one of the tools for raising Dalit consciousness and asserting Dalit identity.
- ◆ Appreciate the importance of finding a 'voice' for marginal communities.
- ◆ Appreciate *Joothan* not just as a powerful expression of Dalit pain and suffering but also as an attempt to find a way out of it.



- ◆ Engage critically with the use of autobiography as a preferred form of Dalit aesthetic practice.
- ◆ Gain an insight into the circumstances and suffering that Valmiki endured because of his caste.
- ◆ Engage with the issue of caste and its various socio-economic and political dimensions.
- ◆ Understand how literature helps us in making sense of the world around us and helps us question it as well.

1.2 Introduction

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is an autobiographical account of his growing up years as an untouchable, in a village in Uttar Pradesh in the newly independent India of the 1950's. It also covers the years spent as a student at Dehradun, and as an adult serving in the Ordnance factories in various parts of India. *Joothan*, as I hope you all know, literally means left over food from a meal. In another sense it also means polluted or unfit for consumption by another person. The Dalits have been forced, under various circumstances, to eat 'Joothan' for their subsistence. Thus, the title of the book *Joothan* conveys the pain and humiliation faced by the author and his community, a community that has remained at the bottom of the social ladder for centuries. The community has been treated like 'joothan', to be used and thrown away in the dustbins by the upper castes. Valmiki's account of his life, is an account of the heroic struggle by a Dalit boy from the sweeper caste (*Bhangi, Chuhra*) against impossible odds to get an education and find an identity.

Omprakash Valmiki is an important figure in the Dalit movement in India. His own struggle made him realize that the condition of the Dalits can only change through revolutionary transformation of society and the human consciousness. Under the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Valmiki and other Dalit writers have tried to build up a critical Dalit consciousness in their writings that allows for pride, self-respect, and a vision of the future. Valmiki and others felt the need for a separate Dalit consciousness or 'Dalit Chetna' because Indian literature had, more or less, ignored the Dalit voice. Often the Dalits were portrayed as victims of an unjust social system in need of saviours and the sympathy of the higher castes. Valmiki and other Dalit writers felt that, even a writer like Premchand, had failed the Dalits. Though Premchand is extremely sympathetic to the Dalits, he failed to give them a voice or agency. The Dalits in his stories, as you must have noticed in "Sadgati", suffer but hardly ever protest. In other words, Valmiki and others felt that Premchand lacked the Dalit consciousness. His story "Kafan" on the other hand is considered as anti-Dalit because the Dalits in the story Ghisu and Madhav,



are presented as lazy, insensitive drunkards. It is in this context that the contribution of Valmiki and other Dalit writers assumes importance.

1.3 Omprakash Valmiki

You will be studying the autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki in this lesson. Hence, you may not need an exhaustive biographical note here. So, we will try and give a short biographical sketch to help you on your way. Valmiki was born on June 30, 1950, into the Valmiki community, that is located at the lowest strata in the Indian caste system. Born into a Dalit family in the Barla village of Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh, Valmiki experienced the harsh realities of caste discrimination from a young age. Despite the severe social and economic barriers, Valmiki pursued his education with determination. He completed his schooling under challenging conditions and went on to earn a diploma in Mechanical Engineering from the Government Industrial Training Institute. While working at the Ordnance Factory Chandrapur, Maharashtra, Valmiki started his journey as a writer. He went on to become an influential Indian Dalit writer, poet, and social activist known for his poignant contributions to Dalit literature. His literary works highlight the systemic oppression of Dalits and aim to bring about social change. His major works include: *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997): An autobiography, *Sadiyon Ka Santap (The Agony of Centuries)* (1989): A collection of poems, *Safai Devata (The God of Cleaning)* (2008): A narrative focusing on the lives of sanitation workers from the Valmiki community, and "*Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra*" (*The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*) (2001): A critical examination of Dalit literature.

Valmiki was a strong advocate for Dalit rights, using his writing to expose caste injustices and promote social equality. His works, particularly *Joothan*, are essential readings in the discourse on caste and social justice in India and have been translated into several languages. Omprakash Valmiki's life and work continue to inspire and mobilize efforts towards achieving social justice and eradicating caste-based discrimination in India. Valmiki, after battling stomach cancer for a while, passed away on November 17, 2013, leaving behind a legacy of courage, resilience, and profound literary contributions.

1.4 Dalit Literature

The most obvious questions that come to our minds when we are asked to deal with Dalit literature as a specific kind of writing are; What is Dalit literature? What is its history? What are the specific features of this literature? In this section, we shall try to answer



these questions as best as possible. However, before we delve into those issues, we need to take a closer look at the term ‘Dalit’ itself.

1.4.1 The term ‘Dalit’

The term “Dalit” is not only a complex word in terms of its history and evolution in India but is also a highly contested word as well. It has its origins in the Sanskrit word ‘dalita’, which means ‘broken,’ ‘downtrodden,’ or ‘oppressed.’ It was used historically to describe the state of being crushed or broken down. However, it wasn’t used to describe the untouchables before the 20th century. Untouchables belonged to the category of *Shudras* under the caste system. There is no consensus between scholars regarding the origin of the caste system as we see it today. As for the idea that the Varna system of the Vedas is the origin of caste, there are arguments on both sides. Hence, we will skirt that issue here and those of you who wish to explore the subject in greater detail can make use of the reading list provided at the end of the lesson. It will suffice, for the purposes of this lesson, to note that caste has been a problematic area within the Hindu fold. It was at the very center of marginalization and oppression of the untouchables, so much so that substantial sections of upper caste Hindus refused to see the untouchables as Hindus. During the colonial times the colonial administration, generally, referred to the untouchables as the ‘Depressed Classes’. They also adopted the term ‘Scheduled Castes’ to refer to a list of untouchable castes in their official records. Our Constitution also uses the term ‘Scheduled caste’ to denote people who are socially marginalized and oppressed but with a fair degree of flexibility with regard to who can be included or deleted from the list.

As far as the word “Dalit” is concerned, there is some consensus that it was Jyotirao Phule, the great social reformer, who first used the word. But the word gained traction only after Dr. Ambedkar started using it as an identity marker. In his struggle within the Congress to secure a separate electorate for the untouchables he had refused to call the untouchables *Harijans*. This was the term which Mahatma Gandhi preferred, to refer to the untouchables. By calling them *Harijans* Gandhi believed that he was bringing them within the Hindu social order and paving the way for social reform from within the fold. Ambedkar found it difficult to agree with this formulation. The differences between Ambedkar and Gandhi mirrors the struggle between caste Hindus and Dalits regarding the status of the untouchables in Indian society. Ambedkar believed that Gandhi was doing a great disservice to the untouchables by bringing them under the Hindu fold and putting them under the mercy and good sense of the caste Hindus to escape the humiliation and the oppression that they are subjected to. He, on the other hand, was of the view that caste was a political and not social issue and it needed to be fought at a political level. Thus, he used the term “Dalit” to give the untouchables a separate political identity outside the Hindu fold.



After Independence, the Constitution of India drafted with Ambedkar's significant input, provided legal safeguards against discrimination and untouchability. However, social reforms were slow to follow. The term, however, did not find much currency after independence. With the safeguards in place, the term "Dalit" did not find much political traction. But that is not to suggest that the untouchables had come to terms with their oppression. Resistance to oppression and discrimination continued to be staged and there was a surge in Dalit literature in the latter half of 20th century, where Dalit writers expressed their experiences of oppression and resilience. However, it was only in the 1970s that the term came back into use as a term of resistance with renewed vigour. The Dalit Panthers, inspired by the Black Panther movement in the United States, emerged in Maharashtra. They adopted "Dalit" as a powerful term of identity and resistance, challenging caste-based discrimination and advocating social justice. Since then, the word "Dalit" has become a talisman for all oppressed people, to be worn with pride and self-belief. Today, Dalit identity and assertion has become an integral part of Indian political landscape. And this is equally reflected in the growing academic interest in Dalit studies that examines the historical, social, and cultural dimensions of the Dalit experience. This unit is one such attempt.

1.4.2 What is Dalit Literature?

Dalit literature, we can say, is a genre of Indian literature that articulates the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Dalits, historically marginalized communities in India subjected to systemic caste-based discrimination. This literary form emerged as a tool for social and political resistance, aiming to challenge the oppressive structures of the caste system and assert the dignity and rights of Dalits. Literary representation of Dalits can be traced to epics like Mahabharata, some Buddhist scriptures, Bhakti poetry, and works of saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, and others. Some of them even highlighted the themes of social inequality and criticized caste hierarchy and laid the groundwork for later Dalit literary expressions. However, they can't be classified as Dalit Literature. We have discussed how even a writer like Premchand, with his acute sense of unease with prevailing socio-cultural and economic inequalities, is not counted as a Dalit writer. In fact, the very sympathy that Premchand displays in his writings works against him. He stands accused of lacking 'Dalit Chetna'. So then, what is 'Dalit Chetna' and how is it central to Dalit literature?

Check Your Progress

- I. How did the term "Dalit" become an identity marker?
- II. What is Dalit Literature?



1.4.2.1 ‘Dalit Chetna’ and Dalit Literature

“**Dalit Chetna**” is a term that translates to “Dalit consciousness” or “Dalit awareness”. In simple terms, it refers to the collective awakening and awareness among Dalit communities about their social, political, and economic rights. This consciousness aims to challenge and dismantle the historical and systemic oppression faced by Dalits within Indian society. Struggle and emancipation are two of its key ideas. So, any literature that privileges in its representational practice, Dalit agency and their relentless struggle for emancipation could be characterized as Dalit Literature. Valmiki himself talks about “Dalit Chetna” in his book *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundarya Shastra*. This emancipatory ideology is rooted in Ambedkar’s thought. Some of the key features of “Dalit Chetna” are:

- i) It is heavily influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s vision and recognizes the primacy of freedom and independence.
- ii) It rejects caste system, casteism, communalism and all hierarchies of language and privilege.
- iii) It rejects Brahminism, feudalism and all notions of supremacy.
- iv) It rejects traditional theories of aesthetics as elitist and motivated.

So, when we look at the history of Dalit Literature as a literature that embodies “Dalit Chetna”, we realise that it is of recent origin. It is not difficult to imagine the absence of a literature of their own when we consider the fact that the untouchables were denied access to education of any kind in the traditional Hindu social system. And if someone like Ekalavya manages to acquire some skills by just observing from a distance, then, as we all know the story, he is asked to make a sacrifice that effectively nullifies the skill acquired. Consequently, the experiences of Dalits are expressed through oral traditions, including folk songs, stories, and poetry. These oral narratives become the repositories of their collective experiences and preserve their cultural traditions. A major breakthrough came with the publication of Jyotirao Phule’s *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) in 1873. It effectively challenged Brahminical dominance through a reinterpretation of Indian history and mythology. And by the 1950’s several Dalit writers were beginning to make a mark. Writers like Daya Pawar and Namdeo Dhasal were among the first to bring Dalit experiences into the literary mainstream. Their early writings reflected the raw and revolutionary spirit that would define Dalit literature in later decades. However, it was not easy to be a Dalit writer at this time. The challenges were many. Dalit literature in the 1950s was often marginalized and not widely recognized by the mainstream literary establishment. Further, Dalit writers faced significant barriers in getting their works published and distributed. There was a lack of dedicated platforms and publishers willing to support Dalit literature.



However, in the latter half of the 20th century, Dalit literature came of age and displayed a remarkable sense of maturity. It reflected the growing assertiveness and consciousness of Dalit communities in India. This period was marked by a rich diversity of voices, genres, and themes that brought Dalit experiences to the forefront of Indian literature and fostered greater awareness and solidarity. This is the period when autobiographies emerged as a powerful medium for expressing personal and collective experiences of caste-based oppression. Some of the notable autobiographies to emerge in this period include Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (1984), and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986). These works provided raw and unflinching accounts of the authors' struggles and resilience. This period also saw the rise of Dalit women writers who highlighted the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression. Their writings brought new dimensions to Dalit literature. Writers like Bama (author of *Karukku* in 1992), Urmila Pawar (author of *Aaydan* in 2003), and Kumud Pawde (author of *Antasphot* in 1981) made significant contributions, focusing on the dual marginalization faced by Dalit women. Dalit writings continued to grow and proliferate in the last few decades and made a space for itself, within the literary and academic establishments.

1.4.2.2 Distinctive features of Dalit Literature and Dalit Aesthetics

Dalit literature, as we have discussed earlier, emerged out of a struggle against oppression and suffering. It expresses the pain and suffering of the Dalits and at the same time encapsulates their desire to be free from it. It also, of necessity, must address the issue of subject-hood and identity. So, it is imperative that the voice of that experience is authentic and not derivative or second hand. Thus, Dalits believe that the only a Dalit voice can articulate an authentic Dalit experience. It is almost impossible for anyone who hasn't experienced the pain and suffering that the Dalits experience to articulate that experience imaginatively. That being the case, the mainstream literary aesthetics with its emphasis on form, decorum, order and refinement, doesn't seem equipped to serve the Dalit purpose. It is but natural for the Dalit writers to work out a literary aesthetics of their own. And that is what they did. Consequently, Dalit critics as well as writers have focused their attention on an alternative aesthetics of Dalit literature. They begin by examining the location and socio-political stance of the existing literature in relation to Dalits. The focus is on writing that includes Dalit characters, description of Dalit life and experience so that the Dalit is accorded a subject position. In other words, the attempt is to have the Dalit writing rather than being written about. Space doesn't permit us to discuss this issue in detail here. So, we will just list out a few distinctive features and those who wish to study further may use the reading list provided at the end of the lesson. Some of the key features are:



- I. Dalit literature is characterized by its stark realism and authenticity. It portrays the brutal realities of caste discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion faced by them. The narratives are often raw and unembellished, reflecting the harshness of the lived experiences.
- II. Use of autobiography as a preferred form of representation because autobiographies provide personal accounts of the authors' experiences with caste oppression. These autobiographies, such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku*, offer powerful insights into their daily lives and struggles.
- III. Resistance is a central theme in Dalit literature. The works often serve as a form of protest against the caste system and the socio-economic injustices it perpetuates. Dalit literature aims to raise awareness and inspire collective action against caste-based discrimination.
- IV. Dalit writers frequently critique the caste system that is rooted in Hindu religious practices and texts. They challenge the moral and ethical justifications of caste hierarchy and question the legitimacy of religious doctrines that perpetuate discrimination.
- V. The language of Dalit literature is often direct, unpretentious, and sometimes colloquial, reflecting the speech patterns of marginalized communities. This stylistic choice serves to make the literature accessible to a broader audience and underscores its authenticity.
- VI. Dalit literature often explores the intersections of caste with other social categories such as gender, class, and religion. For instance, Bama's *Karukku* addresses both caste and gender discrimination, highlighting the compounded marginalization faced by Dalit women.
- VII. A sense of community and collective identity is a recurring theme. Dalit literature emphasizes solidarity among marginalized groups and the importance of community support in the fight against oppression.
- VIII. Despite the focus on suffering and oppression, Dalit literature also conveys themes of hope and empowerment. It celebrates the resilience, strength, and agency of Dalits in their struggle for justice and equality.

Check Your Progress

- I. What is Dalit Chetna and what are its distinctive features?
- II. Dalit literature was born of pain and suffering. But is representation of pain and suffering of the untouchables enough to classify any writing as Dalit writing?
- III. What are the distinctive features of Dalit writing?



1.4.3 *Dalit* Autobiography and Joothan

One of the objectives of this paper is to introduce you to various kinds of writings dealing with, roughly, the same Dalit issues so that you can gain some insight into how various literary forms lend themselves to the representational objectives of *Dalit* writers and in the process gain a comparative estimate of the suitability of each form for representing the *Dalit* suffering and pain. So, this paper has a novel, an autobiography, short stories and a poem. We are concerned here with the autobiography. I would recommend that you read the introduction to the text *Joothan* (Valmiki xi-xliii) by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in some detail. It contains an excellent discussion on *Dalit* Literature and specifically *Joothan* as an autobiography.

As we all know, autobiography is a kind of writing in which the author writes about his/her own life. As a literary genre it has some well-established features that most of the autobiographical writings adhere to. For instance, it uses a first-person narrative that follows a chronological order in presenting the author's earliest memories to the present or a specific point in time. The story is based on the author's personal experiences of significant events, emotions, thoughts, and insights and also includes the author's reflection on these events and experiences. Usually, it narrates the personal growth and development of the author and provides the reader an insight into the events and experiences that have shaped the author during this journey. The autobiography also provides detailed background information on the socio-cultural, and historical time that the author grew up in and the various ways they left their mark on his life. Autobiographies would, typically, include various conflicts or challenges faced by the author and how they were resolved or managed. The focus, however, is on significant events and milestones in the author's life, such as childhood experiences, education, career, relationships, achievements, and failures. The authors often resort to introspection and analysis, examining their own motivations, behaviours, and the outcomes of their decisions. The language of the autobiography is personal, intimate, descriptive, often anecdotal, and sometimes reflective as well. All these elements combine to provide readers an intimate and detailed portrait of the author's life, thoughts, and experiences.

Now, when we look at Dalit autobiography, we see that a lot of the elements that one finds in autobiographies in mainstream literature are conspicuously absent. That is not to say that the Dalit autobiography is an entirely different literary genre. The truth is that Dalit writers use autobiography for a specific purpose and have modified the traditions to suit their purpose. For instance, Valmiki uses autobiography not just to narrate a life and record the pain and suffering but also to raise Dalit consciousness. His choice of genre is quite deliberate. But why the autobiography? Autobiography, as you know, is



a conscious literary genre that deals with the varied dimensions of the personality of the subject. The author, in this form, can convey a sense of not just his whole life but also a sense of what it was like to have lived it at several stages. In other words, the author can present a lived experience from his own point of view. He can combine biographical facts and experiences from his point of view and at the same time is 'true to life' as well. If you recall our discussion of Dalit Chetna in section 1.2.2.1, you will recall that one of the major objectives of this movement is to present the lived experiences of the Dalit from a Dalit point of view. In other words, the focus is on presenting an authentic Dalit experience from a Dalit subject position. Autobiography then, becomes the most appropriate genre to present Dalit consciousness.

In his preface to *Joothan*, Valmiki writes, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations." (Valmiki vii) So, this experience had to be shared. The motivation is clear and then he starts writing. But writing about lived experience is also a form of reliving those experiences that gave him so much pain in the first place. "Once again, I had to relive all those miseries, torments, neglects, admonitions. I suffered a deep mental anguish while writing this book. How terribly painful was this unravelling of myself, layer upon layer. Some people find this stuff unbelievable and exaggerated." (Valmiki viii) Why would an author go through this ordeal of living through the pain and suffering twice over if the purpose is only to narrate a life? Obviously, there is greater purpose involved. This purpose is what differentiates Dalit autobiography from others. The Dalit writer is not only striving to present his own history but also trying to structure it in such a way that it invites other Dalits to take a close hard look at their own history and if possible, try and change it. So, what seems like an unstructured and episodic outpouring of pain and suffering is a strategy to arouse the desire for freedom, equality, justice, and escape from the condition that the Dalits find themselves in. When we read *Joothan*, we find that Valmiki, while describing humiliating experiences from his childhood, constantly interrogates the social hierarchies that are at the root of their suffering. These questions are rhetorical at one level and yet at another level they are directed at the readers. The questions about obsolete and unjust social practices lay bare the contradictions of the dominant social order. For instance, the question about upper caste Hindus having no issues in touching animals and yet finding it polluting to touch Dalits is a sharp attack on caste hierarchy. Valmiki also tries to rope the reader in to amplifying the questions to a level where answering them becomes inevitable. Dalit autobiography, thus, is not just a record of Dalit life but also an interrogation of existing social evils. It is also meant to be an inspiration for the future generations to learn from and carry on the struggle.



Quite evidently Dalit literature is written for the people with the intention of triggering social change. But to achieve that, the experience recounted must look and feel authentic. It must serve as a testimony to the suffering and pain. And that, in this context, means that only a Dalit can write about the Dalit experience. But then if the experience is too unique and personal in nature then it may not have a resonance with the intended reader. So, the Dalit autobiography is centered around experiences that are essentially social in nature and must be articulated as such. When we read *Joothan* we will notice that Valmiki employs an episodic structure and doesn't follow a strict chronological sequence. This is typical of Dalit autobiography. Episodes in Valmiki are essentially memory flashes that while being personal also involve the community. For instance, the beating and abuse that Valmiki receives from Master Kaliram is not exclusive to him. It is an experience that all his friends from the community share. While pain and suffering constitute an important part of these autobiographies, they are equally about resistance and about finding a voice. Hence these autobiographies are also full of episodes where there is push back and assertion. Two small but significant incidents from *Joothan* will make this clear. The first one is Valmiki's father's determined fight to secure an education for his son. This is the incident that shapes the course of Valmiki's life. It demonstrates that however weak you may be, if you stand and fight you may be able to change the circumstances that you are in. The second one is the rejection of Joothan by his mother at Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's house. She asserts her dignity at the risk of starvation. Valmiki describes his mother's demeanour in this scene, by taking recourse to the traditional Hindu mythological figure of Goddess Durga. Though, it is not common for Dalit writers, opposed as they are to Hindu mythology for being anti-Dalit, he does so because there is nothing in his own culture that could adequately describe the emotion.

Dalit autobiography aspires to the status of truth, as a lived experience. So, it adopts real names, refers to real places, real incidents, and broadly tries to be as 'unimaginative' as possible. They have faced criticism for being mere documentaries rather than literature on account of this commitment to realism. But this is regarded as a strength rather than a weakness. Similarly, these autobiographies avoid ornamental language and prefer the coarser language for being more authentic and closer to their lived experience. They reject the fake pastoralism of the mainstream writers who portray an idyllic village life as a lie and present the village with all its muck, ugliness and social oppression. At the same time the Dalit writer does not shirk his obligation to be self-critical where necessary. We find Valmiki criticizing the unscientific and superstitious practices of his own community and refusing to participate in them. And finally, while there are many sections that recount the pain and pathos there are many others that foreground resistance and hope. The overall



tone of *Joothan* is mildly ironic. Valmiki's *Joothan* created a landmark in *Dalit* autobiography. It is now considered as an important document of *Dalit* history.

Check Your Progress

- I. What is an autobiography and what are its distinctive features?
- II. Why did Dalit writers prefer writing autobiographies?
- III. How is a Dalit autobiography different from other autobiographies?

1.5 *Joothan*: A Short Critical Summary

Joothan is an autobiography with a difference. In our earlier discussion we have pointed out how Dalit autobiography has a specific purpose as well as design. The story of the individual also becomes the story of the community that he belongs to. While narrating the story of his struggles, pain, and suffering, he also narrates a collective experience. This is a significant departure from the accepted literary practice of the day. Moreover, when the objective is not just to render a subject visible, but also to make that subjecthood possible in the first place, the narrative strategy must adopt newer ways of representation. For Valmiki, the choice was very clear. For him the polished language of literary autobiography and careful construction of events in a linear sequential fashion, from discovery to discovery, would not suffice. He had to foreground the raw lived experiences to shake the readers, both his own people as well as the people who had thus far denied them subjecthood, out of their complacency. So, what we find in *Joothan* is a series of memory flashes that triggers several associated emotions and forces the reader to reevaluate his/her own long held assumptions about the *Dalits*. Hence writing a summary of the autobiography would not just be impractical but would also be a fruitless exercise. Valmiki complicates the task for us, perhaps deliberately so, by refusing to give the autobiography a formal structure with regular chapters. So, for the sake of convenience, we will divide the book into three parts. These three parts are to be treated only as a working arrangement and not as watertight compartments. Please do keep in mind that there are quite a few overlaps both chronologically and thematically. The three parts may be characterized as: i) Dalit life and everyday violence. This section would cover Valmiki's early life to adolescence. ii) From pain to resistance. This section would cover Valmiki's life as a young man in college iii) Dalit consciousness and assertion. This section would cover Valmiki's life as a young adult as well as life as a Dalit writer and activist asserting his identity.



1.5.1 Dalit Life and Everyday Violence

The way we have split the book up into workable sections based on a loose thematic unity makes the sections uneven in length. The first section is quite lengthy because it contains numerous incidents about the humiliation and pain that the author as well as the community was subjected to. It also contains the seeds of resistance that will flower later in the narrative. So, my advice would be to read the section in detail in the original text and use this summary more as a critical recounting. Without wasting any more time, let us quickly go through the first part of the autobiography.

The first thing that we notice in this section is the oppressive and overarching preponderance of caste in the physical as well as the psychological space occupied by the Chuhras in the village as a matrix of their social existence. The first part, very quickly, paints the sub-human living conditions of the Chuhras in the village. The Chuhras, Valmiki's own caste, lived across the pond, which acted as a natural barrier between the upper caste quarters and the untouchables. It demarcates not just the physical space occupied by the upper and the lower castes, but the two different worlds of existence. The Chuhras exist among filth and deprivation. The description of the gives us a sense of the utter deprivation faced by the untouchable community. There is an all-pervading stink, and one could see pigs, dogs and children roaming around in the narrow streets of this. In short, the Chuhras lived in a physical and social space devoid of human dignity, obviously as a consequence of the caste system. What is even more problematic is that the only identity they seem to have, is their caste identity.

"They did not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called 'Oe Chuhre'. If the person were younger or the same age, then 'Abey Chuhre' was used. Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away." (Valmiki 2)

The social and psychological deprivation is compounded by economic deprivation as well. Though every member of the Valmiki household works it is difficult for them to arrange for two decent meals in a day. This economic deprivation is also a consequence of the caste order. The Chuhras do all kinds of works for the Tagas (upper caste people) and often without pay because they dare not refuse. Due to their lowly social position, they are often abused by the upper castes and made to work for free. It is within this sub-human context that Valmiki's struggle for an education begins. The government schools, though officially open for the untouchables, refuse admission to them. It is a generous Sevak Ram Masihi, a Christian, who takes in Valmiki into his open-air school where Valmiki learns his



alphabets. But after a tiff with Sevak Ram, Valmiki's father took him to the Basic Primary school and after much begging and cajoling, Master Har Phool Singh allows Valmiki into the school. It is important to remember that all this is happening many years after India attained independence and equality was enshrined in our constitution. The practice of untouchability is a social evil that had its roots in the very timber of our social system and couldn't be just eradicated with the enactment of laws. And it is very much a feature of this school that Valmiki is admitted to. The untouchables, there are two more of them in Valmiki's class, are made to sit away from the others. What is heartening though is that the three untouchable children, though from different castes, develop a bond of solidarity.

The school is, as described in these passages, a cruel and heartless place where the Dalit boys are subjected to violence and humiliation by teachers and fellow students on a daily basis. Despite the humiliation by fellow students as well as the teachers the three of them persist and continue in the school. However, it gets worse with the appointment of a new Headmaster Kaliram. They are openly abused in the classroom by the teachers and often beaten up as well. Valmiki takes the opportunity to hit back at critics who accuse him of using abusive words in his writings by highlighting the fact that the Brahmin teachers in their school use swear words on a regular basis. This is a very effective reply to the critics who frown upon the use of swear words in Valmiki's stories. He points out that when swear words are used in real life by people who are supposed to know Brahma (Brahmins) then it is legitimate to portray that reality in creative writing as a true depiction of lived experience.

The experiences of humiliation and violence at the school leave a lasting impression on the young Valmiki. For instance, the image of the guru (teacher) that Valmiki would remember throughout his life is that of a man who would swear about mothers and sisters and who would sexually abuse young boys. "Whenever someone starts talking about a great guru, I remember those teachers who used to swear about mothers and sisters. They used to fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them." (Valmiki 4) However, Valmiki's narrative is not all about pain and humiliation. It is also about a child who is being shaped by the circumstances around him and at the same time learning that he is not completely helpless. In a series of incidents Valmiki demonstrates that the Dalits indeed have agency and can give a new direction to their lives if they assume responsibility.

Valmiki describes a few decisive moments that shaped his life. These are the moments when the Dalit refuses to lie down and suffer. The first such assertion happens when his father discovers Valmiki sweeping the school compound. The Headmaster Kaliram orders the frail boy to sweep the school compound day after day. Valmiki suffers this indignity



for three days. On the fourth day his father discovered him with a broom in his hand sweeping the school compound. The school, for the father, represents the only possibility of improving caste. As a symbol of this aspiration, he fondly calls Omprakash ‘Munshiji’. So, it infuriates him to see his son with a broom instead of books. In a decisive gesture, he snatches the broom from his son’s hands and throws it away. Instead of quietly suffering the indignity, he confronts the headmaster. “Pitaji snatched the broom from my hand and threw it away. His eyes were blazing.... He began to scream, ‘Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?’” (Valmiki 6) The courage and fortitude shown by his father is indeed remarkable. Expectedly Valmiki is thrown out of the school. But his father does not give up easily. He promised the headmaster that Valmiki would indeed study in the same school and that he will ensure that more untouchables would follow Valmiki to the school. With dogged determination Valmiki’s father, with the help of the village Pradhan ‘Chaudhri Saheb’, manages to send him back to school thus ensuring that his own son as well as others are not denied education in the village school because of their caste.

Joothan, is a self-conscious Dalit literary text. Valmiki’s use of autobiography helps him occupy a vantage subject position from which he presents a Dalit’s lived experience. The ‘true to life’ format of the autobiography not only helps him lay bare the brutality inherent in the caste system but also helps him critique the contradictions within his own community. So, we find his narrative peppered with incidents from his own as well as his community’s life. It is also full of numerous reflections on prevalent social practices. The episodic nature of this autobiography, though distracting to some readers, serves him well in achieving his objective. We will do well to keep this factor in mind while reading this autobiography.

The second incident that has a great impact on Valmiki’s life is an incident that revolves around the title of the book, *Joothan*. We discussed the title and its significance at some length in an earlier section. Weddings of high caste Tagas are something that the Chuhars look forward to because of the promise of large quantities of joothan. This joothan is very useful in tiding over the hard times during the rains when there is no work available. “These dried up pooris were very useful during the hard days of the rainy season.” (Valmiki 9) The memory of Joothan is very painful for Valmiki. He writes, “When I think about all those things today, thorns begin to prick my heart. What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan. And yet no one had any grudges. Or shame. Or repentance.” (Valmiki 10) For Valmiki, accepting joothan is nothing but participating in one’s own degradation. But as a child, Valmiki hardly understood the deeper significance of joothan. It leads him to question only



the unfairness of it all. This memory is triggered by the visit of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's grandson to his house much later in life. It is at the wedding of Tyagi's daughter that he saw what his frail mother was capable of. On asking for proper food for the children, Sukhdev Singh asks her to be satisfied with the joothan that she was receiving for her labour. She rejects the offer with a courage of conviction rarely displayed by a Chuhra woman. "That night the Mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes. It was the first time I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, 'Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning'.... After that day Ma never went back to his door. And after this incident she had also stopped taking their joothan." (Valmiki 11). The rejection of joothan is not just a refusal to be treated like joothan but also an assertion of her individual as well as collective humanity. The reference to Hindu epics and deities is sometimes deliberate and at times forced due to lack of better Dalit metaphors. These issues are discussed in the section on Dalit autobiography.

Valmiki recollects the courage of his elder brother who singlehandedly drove a wild boar out of the village while the Tagas, lacking courage, were watching the spectacle from their rooftops. Yet, such a courageous man succumbs to fever due to lack of medical facilities. The progressive social practices of the community come to the fore in the description of widow remarriage. While the mainstream Hindu society frowned upon widow remarriage, the same was an accepted practice amongst the Chuhras. After his brother Sukhbir's death, his widow is married off to the younger brother Jasbir. The narrative is not all about pain and suffering. It also has sections that recount the love and care that Valmiki received from close family members. One such incident involves his Bhabhi. Valmiki's further study, after the primary education, is put on hold due to lack of funds and this upsets Valmiki no end who ends up crying in front of his mother. His Bhabhi gives up her anklet, the only piece of jewellery she has, to fund his further studies. This incident also highlights the importance placed on education as a means of emancipation. Valmiki's Pitaji always thought of education as a means of improving caste. "Pitaji had a different mindset. He wanted me to get an education. He had only one thing on his mind; improving the caste." (Valmiki 59) The father's belief that education can help Valmiki improve his caste is revealed in the incident involving the ritual of "Salaam". This is another degrading ritual that the lower caste people had to follow, where the Groom went to the houses of the upper caste where the mother-in-law worked, to pay his respects. After coming back from one such "Salaam", an angry Valmiki was sitting all by himself when his father drops in. On enquiry, Valmiki explains the cause of his unhappiness. After giving Valmiki a patient hearing he has no difficulty in agreeing with his son. "Pitaji was listening to me quietly. 'Munshiji, sending you to school has been a success... I, too,



have understood your point... We will break this custom’.” (Valmiki 32) And, true to his words, he did break the custom. Valmiki writes, “It may seem a like a simple matter, but whether it is the bride or the bride groom, this custom creates an inferiority complex in them on the very first day of their marriage.”(Valmiki 33) Subsequently, Valmiki wrote a story on the subject.

However, getting admission to Inter College Barla was not the end of pain and suffering. The college is dominated by the Tyagis. While the pain and humiliation continue unabated, the possibilities of resistance were also opening up. We can see in the narrative a growing consciousness in the author as well as the Dalits about their own oppression as well as a nascent willingness to stand up to this injustice. This is beautifully described by Valmiki where he juxtaposes an incident from his own experience with that of one taken from the Mahabharata. The rainy season is an especially bad time for the Chuhars. Their living quarters are converted into a virtual cesspool and food is hard to come by. During one such rainy season the family is on the verge of starvation. Valmiki’s father tries getting some grain from Swaga Pradhan who asks him to indenture one of his sons in exchange for grain. But his mother manages to get some rice and there is much joy. The rice is boiled, and the starch water is tempered, and all the children loved this drink. “This mar or rice water was as good as milk to us.” (Valmiki 22) Valmiki contrasts this with a lesson on Dronacharya in the class where the teacher narrates with tears in his eyes the act of Dronacharya feeding his son flour dissolved in water. This, for the teacher, represented the height of poverty and suffering. Valmiki stands up and asks the teacher, “So Aswatthama was given flour mixed with water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?” (Valmiki 23) This question, as expected, shakes up the class as well as the teacher and the episode comes to an end with disastrous consequences for the author. He writes, “That epic is still etched on my back.... this epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality is inscribed not just on my back but on each nerve of my brain.” (Valmiki 23)

Valmiki’s style of writing is quite raw, and it privileges personal experience over abstractions. This is a feature that sets Dalit autobiography apart. By presenting the vulnerable Dalit subject in front of an upper caste man in a position of authority, Valmiki is able to bracket the traumatic experiences that Dalits go through scarring them for life. For instance, when Valmiki presents the atrocities of the upper caste teachers, he presents it in terms of Eklavya/ Dronacharya matrix. But he alters the entire dynamics by portraying the teacher as a biased self-serving teacher and foregrounding the caste dynamics of that encounter. When his father calls Kaliram a progeny of Dronacharya it



indicates the father's ability to see through the mist of the upper caste epic and recognize Dronacharya for what he is. However, Valmiki doesn't allow self-pity to creep into his writing. Many of these personal experiences are passed through a sieve of critical reflection. It allows Valmiki to avoid the trap of evading responsibility. He is critical of the superstitions of his community and detests animal sacrifice. "When anybody got sick in the basti, instead of treating them with medicine, people tried things like getting rid of evil spirits..." (Valmiki 40) And again, "My opinion about all these things being a fraud had been further strengthened. Who knows how many people these bhagats had killed.... Even then people's faith in these gods and bhagats did not diminish." (Valmiki 43) While taking pains to set up his and his community's identity in contra-distinction to the Hindu practices, Valmiki doesn't flinch from recognizing that his own community is also mired in these obsolete practices.

Valmiki experiences a few more traumatic events during this period that lays bare the contradictions of the oppressive caste system. One of these involves the practice of skinning and disposal of dead cattle and animals. While the upper caste enjoys the benefits of owning cattle, the disposal of dead animals is the responsibility of the Chuhars. And on top of that it is mostly unpaid work. Young Valmiki is forced to get involved in one such instance of skinning and disposing of a dead animal that leaves him in a pitiable state. "Ma burst out crying when she saw the state I was in.... Bhabhi said to my mother, 'Don't make him do that work.... We can bear hunger...Don't drag him in this dirt. 'Those words of Bhabhi shine like a light in the darkness for me to this day. I have come out of that dirt, but millions are living that horrible life even today'" (Valmiki 36) These passages describing the horror of skinning and disposing off a dead animal followed by the kindness of his own people as well as other people around him lifts the mood and provides a perfect counterpoint to the cruelty that pervades Valmiki's life.

Experiences of violence, degradation, and humiliation in everyday life shapes Valmiki's literary sensibilities and he starts questioning the possibility of Dalit subjecthood in mainstream literary practice. Dalit literature is often interrogative because the Dalit writers experience the vast chasm that exists between the idealized world of an untainted and undifferentiated quaint village life and the life of deprivation and violence that they themselves live through. Valmiki expresses his disillusionment with mainstream Hindi literature after describing an incident where the policemen beat up innocent Dalit men for refusing to work without wages. He writes, "This farce had gone on for an hour. All the ten men who had been beaten up were groaning with pain.... The poem by Maithili Sharan Gupta that we had been taught at school, "'Ah, how wonderful is this village life'... each word of the poem had proved to be artificial and a lie... Perhaps the seeds of Dalit poetry were germinating



inside, preparing to sprout at the right time. It was experiences like these that had made me write the poem ‘Thakur ka Kuan’.” (Valmiki 39)

However, all these sufferings and gloom is punctuated by occasional breaks of happiness and hope. Valmiki’s successful completion of high school is one such event. The entire village wears a festive look and even a high caste Tyagi visits Valmiki to congratulate him. This holds a special significance for Valmiki not just because it is a personal victory against almost insurmountable odds but because it opens up the possibility of breaking down caste barriers. Chamanlal Tyagi not only visits Valmiki’s home but also invites him over for lunch and treats him like an equal. As a parting gift he gives Valmiki a copy of the *Ramcharitmanas*. Valmiki’s success at studies sets off a chain reaction and the community, as a collective, begins to appreciate the importance of education. That is not to say that Valmiki’s or for that matter the community’s troubles are over. But we do see a change in the attitude of Valmiki as well as the community as a whole. The first section comes to an end with Valmiki moving up to class eleven.

Check Your Progress IV

- I. How does Valmiki use the geography of the village to paint not just the physical space occupied by the upper and the lower castes, but the two different worlds of existence?
- II. How does Valmiki demonstrate that the Dalits indeed have agency and can give a new direction to their lives if they assume responsibility?
- III. Point out a few important incidents that reinforce the idea that the personal experiences of the writer also represent the Dalit experience as a community.
- IV. What techniques does Valmiki use to weave together a realistic tale of pain, suffering, and resistance?
- V. Describe two key moments in Valmiki’s childhood that changed the course of his life?
- VI. Why is education important for Valmiki’s father and what does Valmiki’s success at studies mean for the community?

1.5.2 From Pain to Resistance

The second section, literally, begins with a failure. We will come to that a little later. Valmiki recollects his visit to Muzaffarnagar along with his father. While looking at the books in the roadside book stall his father picks up the Gita and buys it for him. Coming back home Valmiki reads a few pages of the book to his father who is ecstatic because he, perhaps,



believed that the very act of reading the celebrated Hindu religious text is itself emancipatory and that his caste has improved. While his father is happy with such a seemingly symbolic act, the young Valmiki is far from convinced. The more he reads the more it troubles him. We need to remember that Valmiki is still just a young boy and, as he himself admits, he isn't intellectually ready to grasp the exposition of Karma. But some of the things that he understands and the things that troubles him gives rise to a new consciousness. Valmiki's mind is now full of questions. For instance, while reading the Gita, he is able to grasp the fact that Krishna is persuading Arjuna to kill his kith and kin and that he is supposed to act without desiring a reward. But Valmiki finds that "After every chapter in this book of knowledge, there was an addendum, which narrated the tale of rewards one could hope for upon reading and reflecting on that chapter. That is, the believers were being corrupted with rewards in total contradiction of the philosophy professed in the Gita." (Valmiki 62) But there is no one to answer his questions. The teachers and fellow students dismiss him with caste slurs, "Look at this Chuhre ka, pretending to be a Brahmin." (Valmiki 62) On the other hand, "There was no one in our basti who could answer my questions. There was no dearth of those who got drunk and went around shouting and thrashing people. In such an atmosphere, searching for answers to philosophical conundrums was asking to bring down the stars from the sky." (Valmiki 62) We should note the ironic tone in these passages.

However, a failure sets Valmiki on a new course away from the village and towards Dehradun. He had decided to study science in class eleven. Though he is fairly good at all the subjects, circumstances and an especially vindictive Chemistry teacher ensure that he fails in the lab tests in Chemistry. Valmiki is staring at an uncertain future when his brother comes to his rescue. "When I recounted my sad tale to Jasbir, he said, 'Come on, let this village go to hell. Come to Dehradun and study there.'" (Valmiki 66) Valmiki, as a young boy, felt the oppressive presence of caste in all spheres of village life. While his father believes that education could improve his caste, Valmiki's own experience did not point to any such possibilities. He tried his best to improve his position in life by studying hard under very trying circumstances and yet his caste comes in the way and an upper caste teacher shatters his hopes by ensuring that Valmiki fails in his exam. Under these circumstances, the move to Dehradun is, first of all, a chance to get away from the filth and suffering of Barla. It is also an opportunity find an identity other than the caste identity that he is born with. But "...the bitter memories of Barla have left a permanent impression on me. Their bitter taste is still lurking in some corner of my mind and comes to the fore at the slightest provocation." (Valmiki 66)

Valmiki lands up at his Mama's place in Indresh Nagar, in Dehradun. His brother Jasbir lives nearby. Indresh Nagar is located alongside the Khadri Mohalla near Saharanpur



chowk, across an open sewer that runs near it. Valmiki finds out that Indresh Nagar isn't very different from Barla except that it is in a city. "Indresh Nagar was mostly settled by the Bhangis who worked as sweepers or cleaners, and Jatias, who made and repaired shoes. Bangis now liked to call themselves Valmiki, and Jatias preferred to be called Jatavs. The two castes lived in separate areas.... Poverty and illiteracy were the ancestral legacy of both. They all lived a constricted, deprived life in little cubbyholes. Only a few got to eat two proper meals a day." (Valmiki 68) It is within this setting that Valmiki resumes his studies. Taunts and insults are not new to Valmiki, so when many of his classmates taunt his country bumpkin looks it doesn't bother him much. However, Valmiki did not experience any physical violence from upper caste students except once. But that episode came to an end due to the intervention of Bahadur Singh Thappa. But Indresh Nagar isn't free of its own skirmishes. "Although Indresh Nagar seemed well knit to outsiders, internally it was divided in two. The relations between the Valmiki and the Jatavs were tense. They would often get into brawls and beat each other up." (Valmiki 70-71)

Valmiki becomes friends with Hemlal, a Jatav, and this friendship opens up a different vista altogether. The Jatavs run a library, set up with Government funds, in Indresh Nagar. Valmiki spends a lot of time in the library reading books by Gandhi. One day Hemlal puts a book in Valmiki's hands and asks him to read it. The book is, *Dr. Ambedkar: A Biography* by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu. This chance encounter with Dr. Ambedkar changes Valmiki's life in a fundamental way. Valmiki had read about almost all the important figures of the Independence movement and yet had never heard of Dr. Ambedkar. The Tyagi Inter College at Barla did not stock any books either by Dr. Ambedkar or about him. Once he starts reading about Dr. Ambedkar a whole new world opens up. "But the further I went into the book, I felt as though a new chapter about life was being unfurled before me. A chapter about which I had known nothing. Dr. Ambedkar's life-long struggle had shaken me up.... My stone-like silence had suddenly begun to melt." (Valmiki 72) The scars of his suffering and helplessness in Barla had robbed Valmiki of his voice. As a young boy he did have questions but did not know where to look for the answers. He starts finding answers to his questions in the writings of Dr. Ambedkar. "My reading of these books had awakened my consciousness. These books had given voice to my muteness. It was during this time in my life when an anti-establishment consciousness became strong in me." (Valmiki 72) It is here that the contradiction between Gandhi's approach and Ambedkar's approach to caste slowly becomes clear to him. He now understands that Gandhi's approach to caste was essentially an accommodative approach. By calling the untouchables *Harijans* (the children of God) he had only managed to disarm them and made it possible for caste Hindus to claim a majority. Ironically, the upper caste Hindus saw Gandhi as their enemy because they believed that Gandhi had made the *Harijans* bold and disrespectful.



Unlike Gandhi who believed in improving the lives of the untouchables through social and spiritual reform, Ambedkar saw caste as a political issue that needed a political solution. Valmiki regards the Poona Pact as a setback to both Ambedkar and Dalit assertion. Though we cannot go into a long discussion of the Poona Pact here in this lesson, we will touch upon the fundamental issues to get a sense of Valmiki's disappointment with the pact. After the second Round Table Conference, the British Government decided in 1932 to grant separate electorates to the 'depressed classes' or the scheduled castes. But Mahatma Gandhi opposed the separate electorate provisions for the scheduled castes tooth and nail. He was determined not to allow a statutory separation of scheduled castes from the Hindu fold. Ambedkar, on the other hand, was adamant about having a separate electorate because he considered it as a legitimate political demand. When it came to an impasse, Gandhi went on an indefinite hunger strike forcing Ambedkar to comprise and give up the demand for a separate electorate. For those of you who wish to delve deeper into the Poona Pact, a few useful links have been provided at the end of the lesson.

The new ideas that Valmiki comes across give him not just a new vocabulary to express himself but also a sense of purpose. Valmiki starts using Dalit as an independent identity marker as opposed to Harijan. "I was also beginning to realize that the education imparted in schools and colleges did not make us secular but turned us into narrow-minded, fundamentalist Hindus. The deeper I was getting into this literature, the more articulate my rage became." (Valmiki 72) Please note that the fear and going into a shell that marks his childhood is slowly transformed into rage now. He would no longer be satisfied sitting quietly and reflecting on the misfortune of being born untouchable. He now has the courage to get into debates with friends, participate in protests and other such activities. Ironically, as he becomes more and more active politically, the opposition at home to his activities grows stronger. Valmiki's uncle is quick to convey his unhappiness. The disputes between uncle and nephew become more frequent. Jasbir is of very little help either. "He had only one thing to say, 'You have come here to study...Stop getting involved in these useless things'." (Valmiki 73) The idea that education is an end in itself, and that students should stay away from political protests is a conservative idea. Dr. Ambedkar had a radically different idea about education. His slogan, 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' clearly demonstrates his belief that caste issues cannot be resolved by the Gandhian method of reforming the caste system from within. Ambedkar believed that Dalit rights must be secured by completely rejecting the caste system and for that to happen Dalits need to educate their future generations, agitate for their rights in a democratic way, and organize the Dalits to recognize their own strength and maintain unity. Valmiki internalized this principle. "I felt that my involvement in these protests was an essential part of my education. But for uncle and Jasbir, it was a waste of time." (Valmiki 73)



Valmiki ignores his uncle's directions even though each such disobedience is followed by long lectures on how he should not waste his time. But one incident brings this simmering tension to a flash point and his stay and studies at Dehradun is jeopardized. Valmiki decides to join in the election campaign of Premchand who was contesting for the Roorkee seat in the provincial elections, without either taking his uncle's permission or informing him. When he is leaving for Roorkee, his uncle passes on a message through Jasbir asking Valmiki to go back to his village instead of coming back to Dehradun. It is crisis time once again. But undeterred, Valmiki leaves for Roorkee. He informs his father about the incident and once again Pitaji comes to his rescue. On meeting Valmiki at Roorkee, he tells his son, "You do whatever you think is right. I am an illiterate boor. Just don't bring any shame on me." (Valmiki 74) The father's trust in his son is quite touching and tells us something about the strength of character of the man. For Valmiki, the election campaign is a valuable experience. "The canvassing provided me with the opportunity to see the lives of people at close range. I heard their stories of deprivation. Most of them did not understand the true meaning of democracy and the value of one's vote... But then, had independence truly reached them?" (Valmiki 75)

After this incident, things settle down a little bit and Valmiki gets back to his studies and, of course, to his daily struggle to somehow survive on the meagre resources that the family had. He takes up sundry jobs, including a stint tutoring children to make ends meet. The lack of money is a constant source of worry, especially when whatever little Janesar earned is mostly spent paying back the debt, that the family incurred during the marriage of the daughter. So, when the possibility of getting a job after undergoing a training course at Ordnance factory comes up, Valmiki is quick to grab the opportunity. The training programme is open to boys with a high school diploma. He clears the tests and is selected for training at Ordnance Factory Dehradun. Valmiki's formal education comes to an end with his joining the Ordnance factory as an apprentice. The reason for grabbing this job eagerly is not just to become financially independent. This job also represents an escape from his ancestral past in the sense that, he would no longer be required to work as a bhangi anymore. His father is delighted to learn that Valmiki would be working at a government factory. "I had written to Pitaji...He was delighted. He kept saying repeatedly, "At last you have escaped 'caste'. But what he didn't know till the date he died is that 'caste' follows one right up to one's death." (Valmiki 77-78)

Valmiki's financial condition did improve quite a bit with the monthly stipend of one hundred and seven rupees. He settles down to the daily routine of leaving home at 7 in the morning and returning at 5.30 in the evening. There is peace at home for some time. But the peace is broken one day when Valmiki gives a lift on his bicycle to a girl,



Kamala, who is running late for her class at the ITI. Kamala is their landlord, Girvar's daughter. This harmless incident becomes the cause of much suffering for Valmiki. He is humiliated by his uncle and others in the family. This unreasonable humiliation makes Valmiki restless to escape once again. In the meanwhile, he is witness to a buffalo sacrifice in Dehradun during Dussehra. He feels revulsion at the sight. Though animal sacrifice is quite common in the entire area, Valmiki is uncomfortable with the idea. Reflecting on that incident he writes, "In the light of contemporary perspective on animal sacrifice, how do such rituals supposedly promote religious exaltation? That too in Uttarakhand, called the land of gods? For me, animal sacrifice is a symbol of a terribly inhumane and violent mindset." (Valmiki 81) You must have noticed by now that this autobiography is not a simple retelling of a person's life. Autobiography is used here to tell the story of a life, a community, and at the same time to critique social practices and social contradictions. In doing so the author is constantly setting up a narrative space distinctly separate from the mainstream. Valmiki finishes his year-long training at the Ordnance Factory and clears a test to receive further training at Ordnance Factory training institute, Khamaria, Jabalpur. Valmiki goes to his village to inform his parents. His father, as usual, is very happy. His advice to his son is, "... 'The further you go the more you will get to see the world'." Though illiterate, Valmiki's father displays the depth of his native wisdom with these words. Valmiki bids goodbye to Dehradun and leaves for a new destination and new possibilities.

Check Your Progress V

- I. Why does Valmiki feel that Indresh Nagar in Dehradun wasn't very different from Barla except that it is in a city?
- II. Valmiki is introduced to the writings of Dr. Ambedkar at Dehradun. How does it affect his thinking?
- III. Why is Valmiki's uncle unhappy with his involvement in various political activities?
- IV. What is Valmiki's views on animal sacrifice and other such religious traditions?

1.5.3 Dalit Consciousness and Assertion

The training institute at Jabalpur is a completely new experience for Valmiki. He travels to Jabalpur along with a close friend, Vijay Bahadur, and some other friends from the Ordnance Factory, Dehradun. The hostel at the training institute has students from all over the country and the atmosphere is relaxed and friendly. For the first time in his life, Valmiki did not have to worry about his board and lodging. Though the tight schedule kept the students occupied through the day, the evening came alive with all kinds of activities. But even a place like



this has its hierarchies. The student mess is run by a mess committee and often there are disputes over food. In these disputes, the seniors would have their way. Sometimes there were fights about half cooked food and rotis would be thrown around. Valmiki and Vijay Bahadur have a different perspective on the value of roti and Vijay Bahadur gets furious whenever he sees this waste. “When Vijay Bahadur saw someone throwing away the rotis he would get furious. ‘You ass! You don’t know the value of this roti! How much labour has been put in the field to grow it...Do you know?’...Really, who else but a farmer can know the cost of roti?” (Valmiki 83)

Valmiki’s two years at this institute pass off smoothly so far as the caste issue is concerned. Not many people, except for a few from the north Indian states, know what caste he belonged to. On the professional as well as the personal front, these are two very productive years. Valmiki works hard at his studies. His intellectual journey takes a new turn with his encounter with European thinkers and writers like Karl Marx, Maxim Gorky, and Anton Chekov on the one hand and Indian writers like Rishi Masoom Raza and Rajendra Yadav. He starts staging plays in the Institute’s auditorium. He also begins to write poetry and short one-act plays for the stage. Overall, Jabalpur proves to be a transformative experience. “Jabalpur changed me. My speech patterns changed. I made many friends who were deeply interested in contemporary issues and constantly argued about them. I took part in seminars and cultural functions. I became involved in Jabalpur’s literary life. I also began to develop my own views on literature. I was more attracted to social realism than to aesthetics and formalist types of writings.” (Valmiki 85) As you can see, the small reticent boy of Barla has travelled a long way from the mental prison of his early life and is now trying to find his own voice. Finding voice, for a Dalit, is to take control of his life. It takes not just extraordinary effort and persistence but also the willingness to stand up for one’s beliefs to get there. Valmiki is learning to stand up for what he believes is right. And once he is able to do that, he will find his voice. This journey is, in that sense, a journey of discovery.

Valmiki moves on from Jabalpur to narrate his experiences in the big and cosmopolitan world of Bombay, now Mumbai. Valmiki is selected for draftsman training at Ordnance Factory Training Institute, Bombay. It is time for him to move to Bombay. But moving to Bombay is a tough decision to take, because it means postponement of job prospects, after finishing the training at Jabalpur. A job would improve the financial condition of the family and that is very attractive. However, he is persuaded by Mr. Thomas, a senior lecturer at the institute, to take the plunge. Though the further two and half year’s training would improve his employability many folds, there is the immediate problem of finding the money to take up the offer. Valmiki acknowledges the help rendered by Mr. Thomas and



Yashpal Kalia, a senior trainee, who give him a hundred rupees each, to reach Bombay. After reaching Bombay he finds that the trainee hostel at the institute is an even livelier place than the hostel at Jabalpur. Apart from facilities like indoor games, and a swimming pool, this hostel has a well-stocked library. Apart from a host of European writers, Valmiki now gets to read the complete works of Tagore and Kalidasa. Valmiki befriends Sudama Patil who is, like himself, a connoisseur of literature and theatre. This is a time when he gets to see Marathi plays like *Khamosh*, *Adalat Jari Hai*, etc. by Vijay Tendulkar. The exposure to Marathi theatre did two things for Valmiki; a) it encouraged him to organize a drama group and stage plays at various venues and b) introduced him to the progressive world of Marathi Dalit writing. All these experiences and exposure to literary works by famous authors provide Valmiki the inspiration to get into some serious writing on Dalit issues. However, the immediate provocation to write comes from an incident that happens in Poona. It was the Ganwai brothers incident. The blinding of the brothers by some upper caste men for resisting injustice created much tension in the Bombay/Poona area. But the issue is suppressed by the local police. The Dalit Panthers were actively trying to secure justice for the brothers. But nothing much happened. However, the issue is picked up by Jayprakash Narayan and following that protests breakout all over Maharashtra. Valmiki decides to write on the continuing oppression of the Dalits. All these years of suffering and struggle has prepared Valmiki for this moment. Taking the blinding of the Ganwai brothers as the starting point he writes an essay on the problems of Dalits, and it is published in the Bombay edition of *Navbharat Times*. The essay, as expected, creates controversy. The Shiv Sena supporters at the Institute complain to the principal. Though he is let off with just a warning, the matter isn't over. The attitude of fellow students towards Valmiki changes. Identifying with the Dalits it seems is a crime in the eyes of these students. It becomes increasingly apparent that the smooth time that Valmiki enjoyed at the institute until now is due to the fact that many of the students did not know Valmiki's caste. So, once again caste raises its ugly head. Later on, in the narrative Valmiki shows us the real face of the apparently liberal middle class. In the meanwhile, the pressure on Valmiki to get married gets stronger and stronger. He is able to ward off the pressure and continues to spend his time watching theatre and getting to know Marathi Dalit literature. He finds inspiration in the words of people like Daya Pawar, Baburao Bagul, Namdev Dhasal, and many others. The exposure to this literature makes him rethink his assumptions about what literature is. He and Sudama Patil are joined by a few others in this quest. "...this new world of literature was filling us with a new consciousness.... We spent long hours debating life's serious problems. We joined all those activities that accelerated social transformation... Youth had a different connotation in the hostel, and we did not fit into it because useless things like literature had deranged our brains." (Valmiki 92)



Valmiki is introduced to Vinayak Sadashiv Kulkarni, who is considerably older than him, by Ramesh. Kulkarni was an important figure in the cultural world of Ambernath. He has a daughter, Savita, who is the same age as Valmiki. The association becomes very close for a strange reason. Kulkarni is a Maharashtrian brahmin, but he is very fond of eating meat and fish. It is impossible to cook non-vegetarian food in his own kitchen. So, he drops in at the hostel to eat meat regularly at Sunday lunch. Though it inflated Valmiki and Patil's mess bill, they could not turn him away. In return, they got to spend their evenings at Kulkarni's house. With time, he develops special feelings for Savita, and it is the same with her as well. However, it makes him apprehensive because he comes from a Dalit family with conservative values. His relationship with the family reaches a level where he is invited to the very exclusive Marathi brahmin ritual of bathing the male members of the family on the auspicious occasion of Chaturdashi. On the auspicious day, Mrs. Kulkarni gives him the ritual bath. Though he feels good, he is assailed by fear. After all, he is from the untouchable *Chuhra* caste.

He is apprehensive that sooner or later the Kulkarnis will discover his caste with unpleasant consequences. To make matters worse, he witnesses something disturbing at the Kulkarni house. On a visit to Kulkarni house, he observes that Professor Kamble is served tea, unlike everyone else, in a separate cup. On enquiring, he finds out that Maharashtrian brahmins don't allow *Mahars*, an untouchable caste, to touch their utensils. Hence, Professor Kamble, despite his education and social standing, is served tea in a special cup kept for him. Interestingly, Professor Kamble doesn't seem to mind.

Valmiki is shaken by this incident. He believed that the farther he got away from Barla the farther he would have moved away from the tyranny of caste. But he finds that caste is as much entrenched in the educated elite in a metropolitan city like Bombay as it is in the illiterate people of Barla. Kulkarni, ironically, holds Dr. Ambedkar in high regard and supports Dalit movements. He also learns that the Kulkarnis are not aware of his caste. His world is turned topsy turvy with this new development. "My inner torment was not hidden from Patil, who tried to talk me out of it. 'The entire value system of the Brahmins is based on lies and deception...'. I did not crave for love and respect gained on the basis of a lie. I remained mired in turmoil." (Valmiki 96) He gathers the courage to reveal his caste identity to Savita. The result is disastrous. Determined to clear things up, Valmiki meets Savita at Upkar restaurant at the Ambernath train station. After a bit of dilly dallying, he demands an explanation from Savita about serving tea to Professor Kamble in a separate cup. To his horror, Savita not only defended the discrimination but also justified it in terms of tradition. She considered scheduled caste people as uncultured and dirty. And when he tells her that he belongs to the scheduled caste Savita is shocked



and entreats him not to reveal this to her father. That is the end of their relationship. “We never met again. After some days I was transferred to Chandrapur, Maharashtra. I left without visiting them. Suddenly all links had snapped.” (Valmiki 99)

It must be becoming clear by now why Dalit writers use autobiography as their preferred literary form. The advantage of narrating from direct felt experience gives their writing an immediacy that is not available in the essay or the novel. It also allows them to present Dalit subjects and their perspective on the same set of circumstances where they are often presented as objects of pity and sympathy by the mainstream writers. Though the move to Chandrapur happens under not so amiable circumstances, it would prove to be a fertile ground for Valmiki to hone and refine his sensibilities and consciousness. The people of Chandrapur were generally traditional in their thinking but there were a few Hindi and Urdu poets that he got to know here. Interestingly, he quickly slips in the information about his marriage at the beginning of this section. He would discuss the marriage later in the narrative. Valmiki’s journey as a creative writer and an activist begins in earnest at Chandrapur. His theatre group, Meghdoot Natya formed in 1974, is well known by now for their stage performances and street plays. This was also the time of JP movement, and winds of change were blowing all over the country. During this time he also finds some success and recognition as a poet with his poems getting published in *Navbharat*, *Yughran*, *Nai Dunia*, etc. But the more he immersed himself in the Dalit issues the farther his friends kept moving away from him. This is not surprising because, for most of them, education and work was meant for individual progress and in their eyes, Valmiki was wasting his talent in getting involved with Dalit issues. Little did they realize that for him this was the most fulfilling time of his life thus far. He writes, “It was during my Chandrapur days that I absorbed the strongest currents of the Dalit movement. It was in this part of the country that I came across the marvellous glow of Dalit consciousness. The self-fulfilment that I experienced in connecting with the Dalit movement, was a truly unique experience for me.” (Valmiki 100)

Valmiki, in his narrative, now turns to his struggles within the family once again and this time he breaks another long-held tradition. Valmiki travels to Barla to visit his ailing mother. Once he is there, he learns that Jasbir has found a match for him and it was expected that, as is the tradition, he would get married to the girl so selected. This is unthinkable for him. He could not possibly get married to a girl he had not even seen. His protests fall on deaf ears. He returns back to Chandrapur depressed and lonely. Jasbir made his life even more difficult by writing letters regularly and constantly reminding him of his duties. “He repeatedly told me that I was playing with his honour. How dare I flout the rules of our caste, our community? Education did not mean that one should stop



obeying the hallowed customs of our people.” (Valmiki 102) This is a decisive moment for Valmiki. If he wished to bring about social change, it had to begin at home. So, he decides to chart a new course away from the received tradition. For Valmiki, tradition could not be allowed to become a stagnant pool. It must reinvent itself like a river in its journey. He goes to Dehradun and, to the dismay of everyone, fixes up his own marriage with Chanda, Swarnalata Bhabhi’s sister. He even refuses to worship the pig, a long-held family tradition, before marriage. There is much anger and heartburn in the family, but eventually, everyone, including his Pitaji, accepts Chanda as the daughter-in-law. The only thing Valmiki regrets in this entire episode is losing a longtime friend like Hemlal. Back at Chandrapur, Valmiki, with the help of some friends, finally settles down in a two-room flat allotted to him.

The time spent at Chandrapur turns out to be quite productive for Valmiki. There is some amount of stability in his personal life and now he is able to devote more time to his writings and activism. “I had always dreamt of carrying out social work among the Dalits and during my time in Chandrapur I was able to put my plans into practice.” (Valmiki 105) On the writing front Valmiki describes his attempts at various kinds of writing and on the activism front he describes his involvement with various Dalit movements. Both things happen simultaneously, each enriching the other. Two important events, the Dalit Panther rally of 1978 and the anti-reservation protests in Gujarat draws Valmiki further into Dalit activism. The Dalit Panther’s rally is taken out in support of the demand to change the name of Marathwada University to Dr. Ambedkar University. This is a mobilization based on identity and it draws large crowds. But the Savarnas protest against the bill. The old fault lines open up and there is rioting and unrest all over Marathwada. Finally, the bill is withdrawn. The Dalits, however, continued to keep the issue alive. Valmiki witnessed this Dalit assertion movement from very close quarters. The Gujarat anti-reservation movement started by the Savarnas, on the other hand, creates much hatred against Dalits. Valmiki writes, “Their poison began to make inroads in Maharashtra as well. The incidents of harassment of Dalits in governmental and semi-governmental workplaces had gone up.... An atmosphere of overwhelming fear and terror had been created...” (Valmiki 108) He joined up with others to push back. But while the administration did not take any action against the Savarnas, they were quick to call Dalit representatives and question them. The chasm between the Dalits and non -Dalits increased.

Valmiki is quick to criticize the Savarnas for their casteist attitude, but at the same time he is willing to look at the contradictions within the Dalit communities as well. He noticed that Dalits remained a divided house because Dr. Ambedkar’s message had not truly reached the masses. “Although they talked outwardly of forgetting the differences between



Mahars, Mangs, Chamars, and Mehatars, internally they were caught in the clutches of these beliefs...Babasaheb had converted to Buddhism. Mahars had converted along with him. But there were lots of families who were still tied to the Hindu gods and goddesses.” (Valmiki 109) He further writes, “The internal contradictions of the Dalit movement have weakened it, and the consequences have been felt at the political level too.” (Valmiki 109) The consequences of such differences are that some Dalits end up serving Savarna interests to earn favour from them. Valmiki also noticed that the Savarna members of Meghdoot Natya Sanstha that they had established in the Ordnance factory stayed away from Ambedkar birth anniversary celebrations and reappeared during Ganesh Chaturthi or Shivaji Jayanti. All these things combined to convince Valmiki more and more that he couldn’t possibly find areas of convergence with the Savarnas.

In the meanwhile, he learns of his mother’s death. And after some time, his Pitaji, who wasn’t keeping well, passes away too. Valmiki, apart from expressing regrets over his absence at the funeral, doesn’t dwell too much on this personal loss. “I hadn’t been granted the privilege to carry Ma’s and Pitaji’s biers. He whom they had struggled so hard to make something of had become so distanced from them. It is a grief that I hide deep inside my heart.” (Valmiki 111) This is one of the rare instances where Valmiki has allowed the reader a passing glimpse into his innermost feelings. He quickly moves on to his literary journey. He refers to a magazine named *Nirnayak Bhim* that was published from Kanpur by R Kamal. The magazine provided an outlet for Dalit writers like him. Valmiki himself published regularly in this magazine. At this time Valmiki’s activities were moving beyond Maharashtra. But the more he gets involved in the Dalit movement, the more isolated he becomes. This seems to be the pattern in his life thus far. However, it does not detract him from either his beliefs or his activities. He describes an incident which inspired him to write a poem titled, ‘Vidrup Chehra’ (Crooked Face). This poem is inspired by an incident that happened in Malkapur where students, under the instructions of a brahmin teacher, tore off the lesson on Dr. Ambedkar from a class seven textbook. The incident led to outrage. Rallies and protests are held all over Vidarbha region. Valmiki also addresses a few of these rallies. Following this incident, he and his associates begin opening schools and organize many programmes in Sumthana, a village close to the Ordnance factory. He also participates in Buddhist writers’ conferences where he links up with other Dalit writers like Jyoti Langevar, Bhimsen Dete, Bhagwan Thag, and others. This is a period of intense literary activity for Valmiki, and he keeps meeting many writers, intellectuals, artists and singers from all parts of Maharashtra. He even gets to meet Dr. Gangadhar Pantavne, fondly called Guruji, the famous editor of *Asmitadarsh*. This magazine gave an impetus to Marathi Dalit literature. Hence, Valmiki feels honoured when Dr. Pantavne translated Valmiki’s poems into Marathi.



Valmiki also gets a chance to observe the police from close quarters through a chance meeting with Kureishi at a poetry reading session. Kureishi oversaw the Ordnance Factory police station. He was a connoisseur of literature and in due course they became good friends. Around the same time a new commandant takes charge of the DSC and he also happened to be from Muzaffarnagar. Kureishi believes that army people don't pay attention to caste. So, he forces a reticent Valmiki to meet the commandant and to the horror of both, the commandant enquires about Valmiki's caste and the visit ends on a bitter note. This incident, incidentally, brings out the extent to which caste prejudices have permeated every recess of our society and institutions. This is a reality that cannot be wished away. Valmiki also gets to observe the high handedness of the police and the systemic corruption that plagues the system. Valmiki ends the Chandrapur section of his story by recounting his relative success at the theatre. He wins the best actor and best director award several times. He also refers to his extensive reading on Buddhism, and his attempt at short story writing. One of his stories, 'Jungle ki Rani', based on Adivasi life is accepted for publication by the reputed magazine *Sarika*. This is a joyous occasion for Valmiki. But that ends in disappointment because the story is never published by them and *Sarika* itself closes down later. It is Rajendra Yadev and the magazine *Hans* that published Valmiki's stories later. A new project was starting in Ordnance Factory Dehradun and Valmiki is transferred to this new project. He leaves Chandrapur after serving there for thirteen years.

The return to Dehradun marks a kind of circularity in Valmiki's life. He wanted to get away from Dehradun to escape his caste that seemed to follow him wherever he went, despite his best efforts to cast it away through education. But did he succeed in improving his caste as his father would often put it? Apparently not. All through his training at various Ordnance factories, and subsequently as a government servant, he is made aware of his caste status by all and sundry, including the educated elite of a metropolitan city like Bombay. He experiences caste-based discrimination in interpersonal relationships, in Institutional settings, and even within the Government set up. It is quite logical for Valmiki to be convinced that Ambedkar's views on caste is the correct view and that caste cannot be eradicated either through education or social reform. It must be defeated politically. At the heart of this conviction is the issue of identity. The surnames we carry are our first identity markers and it is well nigh impossible to get rid of that identity without an outright rejection of the same. But this is easier said than done. The resistance to change, ironically, emanates not just from the upper caste but also from within the Dalits themselves. They have internalized their own inferiority so much so that they actively seek to avoid confrontation by either hiding their identities or by conforming to the dominant social mores. The educated Dalits face this crisis of identity daily not just within the larger society but also within their communities, and worse still, within their own families.



Not surprisingly, Valmiki reserves the concluding section of his autobiography for a discussion on the issue of identity and his own experiences regarding the same. He writes, “THE LAST PART OF MY NAME, which is also called the surname, had landed me in a lot of dire situations because of its function as a marker of caste.” (Valmiki 124) If you remember, this is a surname Valmiki adopted in Dehradun when he was there as a student. What he considered then as an assertion of his Dalit identity did prove troublesome later in life. He becomes the butt of jokes and the object of derision and insult due to this surname. And yet he persists with it. While some people consider this assertion as a brave decision, others consider it foolish. Even his wife is not happy with his surname. Maharashtra did throw up some unexpected situations. Many people mistook Valmiki to be a brahmin and became friends with him. However, the moment they realise that he wasn’t one, the whole situation changes, and the relationship ends unceremoniously. It would be inaccurate to say that this contradiction did not affect him. It did. But more than Valmiki, it bothers his family more. “Not only outsiders, my own family had begun to be bothered by my surname. Pitajji, of course, was an exception. Despite being illiterate, he could think differently from the others.... He didn’t know for the longest time that I used ‘Valmiki’ as my last name. He was pleased when he found out. His eyes had gleamed with pleasure....” (Valmiki 125) So, of all the people, it is the illiterate father who understood intuitively the importance of Dalit assertion. On the other hand, his wife, Chanda, is not comfortable with the surname. “If we had a child, I would definitely have made you change your surname.” (Valmiki 126) Even his friend Dinesh Manav, published one of his poems in the magazine, *Mahodika*, that he edits, without giving out his surname.

Valmiki is not alone in this strange situation where the surname becomes a millstone for the bearer. This is a problem, observes Valmiki, that afflicts the educated Dalits. Each one tries to solve this identity crisis in his/her way. Most of them use the family gotra as the surname to evade caste markers. “For instance, ‘Chinaliye’ has become ‘Chandril’ or ‘Chanchal’, and ‘Saude’ has been changed to ‘Saudai’ or ‘Sood’ My mother’s gotra is ‘Kesle’, which some people have changed to ‘Keswal’. They find that the easy way out. Behind all such acts is the anguish of identity crisis, which has come about as a reaction to the blatant inhumanity of casteism.... They find it easier to run away from the problem. But the truth is that change won’t come about through running away. It will come about through struggle and engagement.” (Valmiki 126-127) This, in essence, is the essential Dalit consciousness that Valmiki talks about in this autobiography. This is the message that he wants to pass on to Dalit writers, intellectuals, and activists. He laments that his own relatives have caused him much anguish because it is easier fighting the world outside than fighting with one’s own. He is made to feel like an outcast during the marriage of his own niece because he refused to hide his Dalit identity. He



continues to face discrimination at seminars, conferences, and even in his office. Being a Dalit somehow lessens his value in all senses of the term. A Dalit is always considered inferior, less intelligent, and less efficient not by virtue of any independent yardstick but by his caste. The solution, Valmiki feels, lies in the struggle in consciousness because it is only a change in consciousness that can usher in revolutionary changes.

Valmiki argues that caste is a matter of chance and yet that chance determines a person's destiny. This is not something that meets any standard of fairness. Nation building suffers when we oppress our own people in the name of caste and justify the same by taking recourse to scriptures that promote feudal values at the expense of fairness and justice. Valmiki writes, "Savarnas kept hitting the weak and the helpless. Kept burning homes. Kept insulting women and raping them. To drown in self-praise and turn away from the truth, to not learn from history, what sort of a nation-building is being dreamt of?" (Valmiki 134) Valmiki concludes his autobiography with a series of rhetorical questions. These questions are sharp and hard hitting; "...Why Savarnas hate Dalits and Shudras so much?", "The Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits?", "Why is my caste my only identity?" (Valmiki 134) The answers are not easy. Valmiki provides an answer, "Because in their eyes, I am only an SC, the one who stands outside the door." (Valmiki 134) This is, according to Valmiki, the truth. The Dalit remains an outsider despite the progress that the country has made since independence. He is the Savarnas "Other". The impurity of the Dalit and the Shudra defines and gives meaning to the purity of the Savarna. Valmiki leaves the reader with these questions to ponder on.

Check Your Progress VI

- I. How did Jabalpur change Valmiki?
- II. How is the experience at training institute at Bombay different from the training institute at Jabalpur?
- III. Describe some of the significant experiences of Valmiki at Bombay.
- IV. Caste seems to pursue Valmiki wherever Valmiki went. Which incident in Bombay demonstrates that education and the cosmopolitan atmosphere hasn't been able to eradicate the evils of caste even in the elites of our society?
- V. How important was Chandrapur to Valmiki's growth as a writer and an activist?
- VI. Valmiki's return to Dehradun is the culmination of a circular journey. What significant changes do you observe in Valmiki in this journey?
- VII. Valmiki ends the narrative with a reflection on his surname. Do you think it was courageous on the part of Valmiki to persist with a surname that worked as an identity marker?



1.6 Summing Up

Joothan, a self-conscious Dalit literary text, makes a powerful statement against the oppressive caste system still prevalent in most parts of India. Valmiki's use of autobiography helps him to occupy a vantage subject position from which he presents a Dalit's lived experience. The 'true to life' format of the autobiography helps him lay bare the brutality inherent in the caste system, which consequently becomes a powerful argument in favour of dismantling this undesirable form of social organization. At the same time, Valmiki's own struggles and success acts as motivation for others to struggle and achieve their goals. *Joothan* symbolizes the struggle for dignity and basic human rights, and demonstrates that a revolutionary transformation of society is not just desirable but possible as well.

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- ◆ Satyanarayana, K. 2017. *The political and aesthetic significance of contemporary Dalit literature*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417718378>



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*The Grip of Change and Author's Notes***P. Sivakami****Akansha Goswami****Structure****Section-1**

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Section-1

1. Learning Objectives

After reading this lesson, you will be able to do the following:

- ◆ Explore the historical and cultural context of the novel, highlighting the impact of caste-based discrimination on individuals and communities in Indian society.
- ◆ Analyse the themes of caste, gender, and societal transformation portrayed in the novel.
- ◆ Evaluate the character development and narrative techniques employed by the author to convey the experiences of marginalised individuals in rural India.
- ◆ Examine the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression as depicted in the novel.
- ◆ Understand “Gowri: Author’s Notes” as a self-reflexive, metafictional analysis of the story.

2. Introduction

The Novel: *The Grip of Change*, (*Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*) is the first novel written by a Dalit woman in Tamil. The novel was first published in 1989 with twenty-five chapters. Ten years later, Sivakami added a sequel to the story, with another seventeen chapters, and two readings in the appendix. The first part is called “Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change”, followed by a second “Gowri: Author’s Notes”. Further, in 2005, she translated the book into English and published the whole book in 2006. Hence, the readers need to understand Sivakami as a young Dalit woman author who has written her first Tamil novel, as a critic who has deconstructed her own work, and as a translator.

In the preface, she explains how she wrote the novel as a twenty-six-year-old girl. She found her expressions in the novel “limited to that of a seventeen-year-old girl” (vii). She writes the second part after ten years, in a third-person narrative voice. She claims that “*The Grip of Change* is a process of understanding the dynamics of caste and the ‘woman’ who was inextricably involved in the process” (vii). The preface serves as a window into the thoughts of the author. It explains her idea of being a Dalit woman, which she thinks is decided by birth. She justifies her act of revisiting and writing a commentary and calls it “the need of the hour and the requirement of the future” (vii).

Book-one “The Grip of Change” begins with a gripping narrative voice that is distinguished by its genuine sincerity and touching resonance. Readers can easily become completely lost in the world of rural Dalit communities because of P. Sivakami’s careful



attention to detail, vivid descriptions, and evocative imagery, The narrative voice skilfully conveys the nuanced details of daily life, the joys and sorrows of familial relationships to the harsh realities of caste-based oppression, by blending poetic prose with colloquial language. Readers are drawn into the lives of characters like Kathamuthu and Thangam with empathy and compassion. Sivakami creates a strong sense of place and atmosphere.

“Gowri: Author’s Notes”, the second section of the novel is a crucial component of the book since it offers a metafictional¹ analysis of the story and its larger social ramifications. This section offers a critical analysis of the ideas, people, and situations that are portrayed in part one of the story. It is like an epilogue to part one. Sivakami, directly interacts with her readers in “Gowri: Author’s Notes” and attempts to explain or defend particular narrative decisions, character portrayals, or thematic explorations. The significance of marginalised voices in literature and society is also emphasised in this section and is indicative of Sivakami’s dedication to elevating the voices of Dalit women. She contests prevailing narratives that marginalise Dalit experiences. Through her candid reflections and critical analysis, Sivakami empowers readers to confront systemic injustices and advocate for social change.

P. Sivakami included two readings by female critics as an appendix to her novel to offer additional perspectives and interpretations of her work. Sivakami hopes that including these readings will help the reader better understand the themes, characters, and societal issues explored in her novel. These readings provide feminist perspectives on caste dynamics, gender-based violence, and societal oppression, which are consistent with the novel’s exploration of these issues. They critically examine the narrative, highlighting its strengths, weaknesses, and implications for feminist discourse. Sivakami’s decision to include readings by female critics demonstrates her commitment to promoting diverse voices and perspectives in literary criticism. By highlighting the analyses of other female scholars, she not only recognises their scholarly contributions but also underscores the importance of women’s voices in shaping literary interpretation and discourse.

Socio-political Context: To understand the significance of P. Sivakami’s novel, it must be contextualised within the Tamil Nadu socio-political environment at the time of its initial publication in 1989. The period coincided with a growing awareness among Dalits about their political agency and rights. The year 1989 saw intense activism within the Dalit community. For example, events such as the Bodi riots in Tirunelveli, which

1. Metafiction is a fiction that questions the distinction between reality and fiction by calling attention to its own narrative structure and manufactured illusions. It’s an introspective writing style that critically considers language, literary form, and narrative structure. The distinction between fact and fiction is frequently blurred in metafiction, and the characters are conscious that they are living in a work of fiction.



resulted in the loss of many lives. At the same time, organisations such as the Schedule Caste Liberation Movement (SCALM) and the Dalit Panthers were at the forefront. They publicly advocated for social justice and equity through rallies and protests. Against this backdrop of increased caste consciousness and activism, Sivakami's novel emerged as a moving testament of the aspirations and struggles of the marginalised Dalit community. Its reception as a "unanimous expression of the youth of this oppressed community- eager and waiting for change" (Kandasamy, 193), highlights its connection with the trend of the period.

The novel's publication sparked a wide range of discussions and debates about caste dynamics and the pursuit of social justice in Tamil Nadu. Its thematic concerns resonated with Dalit communities' aspirations for greater empowerment and substantial representation in politics. While the narrative does not directly address party politics, the influence of political forces is evident in its depiction of societal structures and the actions of the characters.

The novel becomes more important as it is about the most vulnerable category in the caste hierarchy i.e. women. Sivakami writes from a feminist point of view with complete honesty and without glamorising sexuality. Meena Kandasamy writes that Sivakami criticises the Dalit movement and exposes the cruel face of Dalit patriarchy and still does not become a caste traitor because she attempts to find solutions (195). The novel delves into the complexities of inter-caste sexual relations. It sheds light on the power dynamics that govern such interactions and the devastating consequences for those caught in their midst.

In the preface to the novel the author claims to explore "the inexhaustible mysteries of caste" (Sivakami vii). The realism in the novel starts with the domestic life of Kathamuthu and continues to describe the fragile caste harmony in Tamil Nadu. Sivakami writes that "Nothing in the novel was untrue. But the novel was false, she felt..." (196) She humanises the hardships of oppressed people. She writes the story about characters like Kathamuthu, Thangam, and Gowri allowing readers to identify with their circumstances and push for change. She creates a story that is both insightful and emotionally poignant through painstaking research and an acute eye for detail. It leaves an enduring impression on readers.

3. About the Author

P. Sivakami is a pioneering figure in Tamil literature and social activism. She has spent her life advocating for Dalit women's rights and combating caste discrimination in Indian



society. She was born in 1957 in Perambalur, Tamil Nadu. Her father, M. Palanimuthu, was an independent MLA. She holds graduate and postgraduate degrees in History. Sivakami's journey from a postgraduate in History to a prominent IAS officer reflects her multifaceted engagement with social issues. It shows her commitment to effecting meaningful change.

Despite achieving success in the IAS exams and securing a prestigious position, Sivakami remained steadfast in her belief that writing was her true calling. She continued to pursue her passion for literature alongside her administrative responsibilities. She realised the power of storytelling as a tool for social awareness and empowerment. Sivakami made the bold decision to take voluntary retirement from the government in 2008, after 28 years of service, to devote her full time to writing and activism.

The Grip of Change is her debut novel and establishes her as the first Dalit woman to write a full-length novel in Tamil. Sivakami's writing sheds light on the intersecting oppressions experienced by Dalit women, bravely challenging patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies.

In addition to her literary contributions, Sivakami has been active in grassroots activism and advocacy. As editor of the monthly Dalit literary journal "Pudhiya Kodangi", she gave a platform to marginalised voices. She addresses the issues affecting Dalits and other backward castes in Tamil Nadu. Sivakami's advocacy includes land rights and empowerment for Dalit women. She also shows her leadership in the Dalit Land Rights Movement and the organisation of large-scale public conferences on women and politics.

Sivakami's writing style is defined by a bold, unapologetic voice that questions blindly accepted norms and perceptions. Her work has received critical acclaim for its fresh perspective and self-critical examination of societal issues. Her critically acclaimed novels include *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women*. These novels have pushed the boundaries of Dalit and feminist literature, sparking important conversations and inspiring social change.

A year after retiring, she contested for Lok Sabha from Kanyakumari, representing the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). However, she lost the election. In 2009, she founded Samuga Samathuva Padai, a political party inspired by Dalit icon Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's principles.

Sivakami's remarkable journey from acclaimed writer to bureaucrat and to activist demonstrates her unwavering commitment to social justice as also, her belief in literature's transformative power as a tool for empowerment and social change.



Check Your Progress

- ◆ What is the main theme of The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami?
- ◆ Who are the main characters in the novel, and what challenges do they face?
- ◆ How does Sivakami use storytelling to address social issues like caste discrimination and gender inequality?
- ◆ Why is Sivakami's novel considered significant in Tamil literature?
- ◆ How does Sivakami's background influence her writing in "The Grip of Change"?
- ◆ What motivated Sivakami to translate her novel into English in 2006?

4. Dalit Literature

Dalit literature is often referred to as the literature of the oppressed. It emerges from the experiences and narratives of India's marginalised caste people. The term 'Dalit' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dal,' which means 'broken' or "oppressed." It refers to those who have historically been marginalised and oppressed by the rigid caste hierarchy that is deeply rooted in Indian culture and societal norms. Social reformers such as Jotiba Phule used it, and B.R. Ambedkar popularised it by advocating for the oppressed. This term gained new importance in the 1970s because of cultural, political and social resurgence. It resulted in the emergence of Dalit literature.

Dalit Literature became an effective medium for articulating struggles, and also resistance to various types of exploitation and discrimination. It covers topics such as caste-based oppression, gender violence, and socioeconomic marginalisation. It is concerned with confronting and challenging the caste, class, and gender hierarchies that have perpetuated systemic injustices and inequalities in India for centuries. Through its narratives, it exposes the lived realities of Dalit people, who face intersecting caste and gender oppressions. Dalit women are the lowest in the caste hierarchy.

The hierarchical caste system, founded on ideas of purity and pollution, divides people into rigid social categories, perpetuating systemic inequalities. Brahmins, at the top of the caste hierarchy, wield religious and social authority, whereas Dalits, at the bottom, face untold oppression and exploitation as "untouchables."

Dalit literature's primary goal is to raise social consciousness and solidarity among marginalised communities. Also, it empowers Dalits to challenge and dismantle the oppressive structures that maintain caste hierarchies. Dalit literature aims to create a just and equitable society by amplifying the oppressed voices and experiences.



Notable works in Dalit literature have provided profound insight into Dalits' lived experiences. Works such as Jotiba Phule's *Gulamgiri* and B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* laid the groundwork for a literary discourse that emphasises the struggles for dignity, justice, and freedom. Omprakash Valmiki, Daya Pawar, and Urmila Pawar have also made significant contributions through their autobiographical works. They have offered vivid portrayals of the harsh realities of caste discrimination and untouchability. These texts challenged the dominance of Brahmanical orthodoxy and articulated a radical vision for social transformation.

In Tamil Nadu, Dalit literature developed in unique ways influenced by historical context, and cultural and social conditions. The development of Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu dates back to the late nineteenth century when educated Parayars challenged Brahminical hegemony. Dalit intellectuals raised Adi Dravidas' consciousness through journals and intellectual endeavours. In 1940's Periyar started the Dravidian movement with the aim of ending the dominance of Brahmins, as also the caste and gender inequality in Tamil Nadu. Influenced by communism in the 1940s, writers such as Daniel Selvaraj and Poomani highlighted economic struggles in Tamil Dalit literature.

In recent years, Dalit women writers have emerged as literary trailblazers, providing nuanced perspectives on gender, caste, and intersectional oppression. Works such as *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami and *Karukku* by Bama Faustina have received critical acclaim for their harrowing depictions of Dalit women's lives. These stories delve into the complexities of caste-based patriarchy and the intersections of gender and caste violence. It provides the feminist point of view to question the caste-based power struggles.

Dalit literature is more than just a literary movement; it is a social and political statement, an assertion of identity. It is a call to action in the face of centuries of systemic oppressive practices. Dalit writing is actually a powerful tool of social resistance, challenging the status quo and advocating for political and economic empowerment. It raises the voices of those who have been silenced by caste-based discrimination, shedding light on their lived experiences, and exposing the deep inequalities perpetuated by the caste system.

Check Your Progress

- ◆ What is the focus of Dalit literature?
- ◆ How does Dalit literature confront societal injustices?
- ◆ What are some common themes in Dalit literature?
- ◆ How does the caste system perpetuate inequalities in India?
- ◆ Who are some key figures in Dalit literature, and what is their contribution?
- ◆ How has Dalit literature evolved over time, in Tamil Nadu?



5. Summary

Note: The summary of the novel is given in two parts corresponding to the two books; Book One: “Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change” and Book Two- “Gowri: The Author’s Notes”

5.1 Book 1: “Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change”

Chapter 1 - The narrative begins when Kathamuthu, finds a woman, Thangam, outside his home, who has been severely beaten and abused. Despite his initial irritation, perhaps stemming from the fact that he had just woken up, Kathamuthu takes control of the situation, instructing his family to care for the woman’s wounds and arranging for medical assistance. Thangam describes how upper-caste men assaulted her, sparking a discussion about caste dynamics and gender-based violence. Kathamuthu dictates a petition on Thangam’s behalf, but his crude remarks and manipulation of her story expose his own prejudices and power dynamics in the community. Meanwhile, his daughter who writes the petition, Gowri, watches the situation with a mix of fear and discomfort.

Chapter 2 - Kathamuthu is frustrated with household chores and an unclean toilet. He gives the responsibility of transporting Thangam to the hospital to Subramani at 7 a.m. Meanwhile, his daughter Gowri sympathises with Thangam’s plight and reflects on social injustices. Kathamuthu’s bath leads to water spillage. Not bothered, he chants mantras to seduce the Devi, something he learned from a Brahmin lawyer. Remembering Thangam’s well-being, he makes sure she’s fed before leaving for court.

Chapter 3 - Kathamuthu, is a respected Dalit leader who resides in the town-Athur, not too far from the village, Puliur. He invites both admiration and criticism as a result of his outspoken nature and perceived arrogance. Tensions rise between his two wives, Nagamani and Kanagavalli. His relationship with Naicker, a jeweller, is characterised by dependence and occasional clashes over caste. Still, Kathamuthu’s local influence is invaluable as he deals with bureaucratic difficulties, as evidenced by his recent visit to the police station regarding Thangam’s case. Despite challenges, Kathamuthu’s assertiveness and strategic manipulation allow him to achieve his goals and leave a lasting mark on those around him.

Chapter 4 - Puliur village, surrounded by tamarind trees, is divided into two sections: village and Cheri. Cheri, is a segregated part of the village where the Dalits live, and is akin to a ghetto. Thangam’s assault causes tension, resulting in a village meeting. Kathamuthu’s intervention provides Thangam with protection and legal assistance. Meanwhile, police are questioning Thangam’s sister-in-law Valliammai’s family about Thangam’s assault. The police investigation uncovers caste dynamics and familial tensions. Paranjothi



Udayar is concerned about his reputation after being involved in the assault. Thangam's encounter with Paranjothi Udayar reveals power dynamics and caste biases. Despite her protests, Thangam is targeted, highlighting societal injustices.

Chapter 5 - As the investigation unfolds in Puliur, a small group gathers on Kathamuthu's verandah for an impromptu meeting. Kathamuthu, who is not prone to overindulgence, becomes talkative after consuming a moderate amount of arrack. He uses his knowledge of ancient texts and historical figures to captivate his audience, which is mostly made up of uneducated labourers and farmers. Any dissent is met with vehement rebuttals, often belittling the person. Gowri, Kathamuthu's daughter, watches from a distance, curious about the target of Kathamuthu's verbal jabs. The evening is perfumed with jasmine as Kathamuthu reclines against the wall, while others sit around. Their gathering at Kathamuthu's house is spontaneous, as they follow him home from the village. Requests for favours are made, and Kathamuthu responds with frustration.

Chapter 6 - In the village of Puliur, the police arrive at Paranjothi Udayar's house, where he greets them and offers refreshments. Paranjothi Udayar in his defence states that he is being framed on charges of caste-based abuse and assault by Thangam. His brother Perumal convinces him to file a counter-complaint against Thangam for theft. Despite his hesitation, Paranjothi Udayar gives in to pressure, and thus asserts his dominance over Thangam.

Kathamuthu learns about Paranjothi Udayar's plan to file a false complaint against Thangam and sends Subramani to warn Thangam's family. Despite Arunachalam's objections, Kathamuthu takes funds from him to assist Subramani in his mission. As the night unfolds, Kathamuthu's resourcefulness and compassion shine through, offering a glimmer of hope amidst the turmoil in the village.

Chapter 7 - Subramani arrives in Puliur at midnight and decides to stay at the Mariamman temple. He calls Pichappillai, who reveals that the Paranjothi Udayar intends to plant money in Thangam's hut as evidence of theft. Pichappillai is upset and requests that Subramani wake up Kathan, Chinnasamy, and Rasendran from the Mariamman temple. Subramani then takes five young men to guard Thangam's home. As the first rooster crows, Pichappillai notices two shrouded figures approaching the school. His shouts alert them and they vanish into the streets.

Chapter 8 - Arumuga Padayachi and Saminatha Padayachi rush into Paranjothi Udayar's cow shed to hide from assailants. Perumal and Kamalam, Paranjothi Udayar's brothers, are chased away before they can gather evidence against Thangam. Paranjothi Udayar, unable to sleep, spies on Ramalinga Reddiyar's cow shed and confronts him in an attempt to rally the upper castes. A crowd gathers outside Reddiyar's home to discuss the attack



on the Padayachis and the need for labour to plant seedlings. Despite their differences, they agree to hire workers from neighbouring villages, even considering recruiting the Chakkiliyars. Santha bids them farewell, highlighting the complex power dynamics at play.

Chapter 9 - Villagers find young men stationed outside Thangam's hut, protecting her home from harm. They are angry with the Udayars for mistreating Thangam and attempting to frame her as a thief. Despite the warnings, they are determined to protect her. The men prevent upper-caste street labourers from hiring workers. Tensions rise among the Parayar women, who demand fair wages and recognition for their labour. Pichappillai, the community leader, tries to diffuse the situation. Despite the turmoil, preparations for the upcoming Mariamman festival continue, with concerns about the festival's smooth operation as villagers deal with caste-based oppression and economic exploitation.

Chapter 10 - Rumours spread that upper caste men were chased out of the Cheri when they attempted to hire workers. The villagers, motivated by deep-seated caste prejudices, turn against the Cheri people. Small farmers reluctantly comply with village restrictions, directing their frustrations at the Parayars. Wealthy upper-caste men attempt to entice workers from nearby villages, but they only succeed in escalating caste tensions, ensuring a conflict. The mistreatment of bonded labourer, as well as tensions between Lalitha, a Padayachi widow's daughter, and Elangovan, a lower caste bank peon, highlight the village's deep-rooted prejudices and social tensions.

Check Your Progress

- ◆ What is the novelist's main point of exploration in the novel's preface?
- ◆ How does Kathamuthu deal with the woman who was severely beaten and abused in Chapter 1?
- ◆ How does Kathamuthu respond to Thangam's assault in Chapter 4?
- ◆ How does Kathamuthu's intervention affect the events in Puliur in Chapter 6?
- ◆ What are the main tensions and conflicts in Puliur, as described in Chapter 10?

Chapter 11 - The protection around Thangam's hut remains intact for the third day, as the Cheri residents are off work for two days. Kannamma, also known as "crazy Kannamma," struggles with her failing vision and daily challenges in the Cheri. As she prepares dinner, she realises there is no water, her son has not returned, and the children are asleep. She wakes them up with the promise of peanut candy and takes them to a nearby shop. Along the way, she sees a man staring at them and curses her. She goes to the shop to buy peanut balls but loses her purse. She curses the old woman who runs the shop and imagines her demise. Kannamma, desperate for water, approaches the women at the well



for assistance, but they turn her away. The struggle for basic necessities reflects the harsh realities of life in the Cheri, where even something as simple as buying peanut balls becomes a humiliating experience.

Chapter 12 - Kannamma waits by a well for water, but a fire engulfs her hut, destroying it and leaving families homeless. Caste divisions create tension, with some advocating retaliation and others urging caution. Kathamuthu arrives to assess the situation and provide practical solutions. He discusses compensation and future work arrangements before leading the group to a tamarind tree for more discussion. The community is divided on how to respond, with some calling for retaliation and others urging caution.

Chapter 13 - The tahsildar and inspector meet with upper-caste men to investigate recent clashes and house fires. Kathamuthu, Pichappillai, and Sellamuthu prepare to speak, but Kathamuthu prevents them from sitting on the floor. Representatives from both sides speak uninterrupted. Kathamuthu accuses upper castes of setting fire to the Cheri over their refusal to work, but Paranjothi Udayar denies this. Tensions rise as Kathamuthu seeks compensation and higher wages. Rasendran attempts to speak out, but is silenced and humiliated by Pichappillai. The residents of Cheri watch silently as Rasendran retreats into the crowd, tears welling up in his eyes. Sargunam, sympathetic to his situation, follows him.

Chapter 14 - Sargunam, Rasendran's cousin, comes to Puliur during the Mariamman festival. She's in tenth grade and lives with her uncle's family because Rasendran's house feels unsafe. Rasendran guards Thangam's house, making it difficult for her to visit him. She tries to see him every day, even helping Arputham clean cow dung to get closer to Rasendran. When she finally meets Rasendran, she is too shy to look at him directly, but she is delighted when he waves at her while holding the flowers she dropped. Later, she wants to console him following Kathamuthu's accusations, but she leaves when he asks, promising to wait for him at home.

Chapter 15 - During a discussion among the upper caste men and the tahsildar, Rasendran arrives and the panchayat convenes. Kathamuthu narrates an incident of a Harijan child being mistreated, emphasizing unity among all people. The tahsildar then asks Paranjothi for his opinion, and they agree to compensate the affected families. Later, Kathamuthu informs Pichappillai and Sellamuthy about a future panchayat meeting. Arunachala Reddiyar expresses displeasure over increased wages, but Paranjothi reassures him of making the workers compensate with more work. Plans to generate funds through other means are discussed, including auctioning a banyan tree. The discussion ends, and work resumes with the promise of higher wages. Construction of new huts begins, and preparations for the festival commence, bringing relief from the tension of caste conflict. Relief efforts, including government aid and Red Cross assistance, are distributed among the affected



families. Despite some concerns and emotions, the village starts to move forward from the recent troubles.

Chapter 16 - Thangam attends a panchayat meeting, feeling ashamed and overwhelmed by her troubles. Kathamuthu leads the meeting, urging Paranjothi to take responsibility for Thangam's condition. Paranjothi agrees to compensate her, eventually settling on giving her ten thousand rupees. Thangam tearfully accepts the money. Later, Kathamuthu talks to Thangam about her plans for the money, suggesting she buy a milch animal and save the rest. Thangam expresses her desire for land and independence.

Chapter 17 - Puliur Cheri hosts a vibrant festival with families preparing special meals and hosting guests. The streets are filled with activity, music, dance, and feasting. Various types of meat are enjoyed, with a communal pig roast being a highlight. Despite the festivities, caste discrimination and economic hardship persist, especially for youth like Rasendran. The festival ends, and life returns to its usual rhythm, marked by both joys and sorrows. Despite some improvements, social injustice and economic inequality loom over the village's future.

Chapter 18 - Thangam, is pursuing a land dispute case with her husband's family, in the court and faces challenges in her new life. She finds solace working on Kathamuthu's land and gradually adjusts to her new life, despite memories of abuse in Puliur. Her relationship with Kathamuthu's wives changes, and she earns their acceptance. Later, Kathamuthu takes advantage of Thangam's when she is in an inebriated state, initiating sexual relation, and complicating the household dynamics. Thangam wins her court case and gains control of her land, but her decision to stay with Kathamuthu suggests a complex mix of resignation, dependency, and security.

Chapter 19 - The brothers Kathamuthu and Kalimuthu are in a dispute over the ownership of the house. Kalimuthu demands half of the house and claims significant financial contributions, while Kathamuthu emphasizes the sacrifices made by him for their mother's welfare and the hospitality Kalimuthu received upon his return from Malaysia. Kathamuthu dismisses Kalimuthu's claims of financial support at various points in time, accusing him of lying and exaggerating his contributions.

Chapter 20 - The property division between Kathamuthu and Kalimuthu is settled, with Kalimuthu receiving a mud house and a portion of the land. However, his physical condition and inability to work the land undermine his position. His son Chandran's entry into the rice mill reveals the working conditions and the emerging labour movement. The formation of a union among workers reflects growing dissatisfaction with exploitation and a desire for improved working conditions.

**Check Your Progress**

- ◆ How does Chapter 11's struggle for basic necessities like water and food reflect the harsh realities of life in the Cheri?
- ◆ What role does Kathamuthu play in dealing with the aftermath of the fire that destroys Kannamma's hut in chapter 12?
- ◆ How do tensions between upper-caste men and Cheri residents escalate during the tahsildar and inspector's meeting in Chapter 13?
- ◆ How does Thangam's exchange with Kathamuthu about compensation in Chapter 16 reflect her desire for independence?

Chapter 21 - Lalitha is a padayachi, an upper caste woman, and is torn between and her desire to marry Elangovan, a parayar(Dalit), and her mother's strong disapproval of her choice. One rainy day, to prevent her from meeting Elangovan, Lalitha's mother physically attacks her, causing her to have convulsions. One day, in a fit of anger, Lalitha refers to Elangovan's caste disparagingly, after which he stops taking the bus to Athur to avoid meeting her, and instead buys a bicycle to get to work. Lalitha apologises to Elangovan and discovers that Sabapathy, a young man from her own caste, is closely associated with him. They realise that their separation has brought them closer together, and they vow to combat caste prejudice in their village.

Chapter 22 - It is now two years since Kalimuthu's death and Chandran devotes himself increasingly to the union activities, expanding its reach to neighbouring villages. He observes the complexities of caste and class divisions within unions, as well as the emergence of new caste-influenced leaders. Chandran's popularity grows as he navigates the complexities of caste and class divisions and promotes democratic relationships within the union. Despite Kathamuthu's efforts to maintain control, Chandran's power grew, gaining support from workers and other influential figures. Chandran's leadership was like a nurturing banana tree, promoting growth and inclusivity among his associates.

Chapter 23 - On the day of Chandran's wedding, Kathamuthu arrives in Cheri to build the marriage pandal. However, he discovers that it has already been erected in front of Chandran's house. Chandran's relatives, union members, and guests have gathered for the wedding. Pushpam, the bride, arrives at the temple house adorned with turmeric and flowers. Despite some disagreements and tension, the wedding follows traditional rituals and blessings. A confrontation occurs when a young man insists on reading a greeting, causing tension between Kathamuthu and union members. Chandran intervenes to keep the peace, and the wedding feast is enjoyed by everyone. Kathamuthu, is shaken by the



incident as he has to come to terms with the fact that Chandran has now replaced him as a figure of authority.

Chapter 24 - At Nallasivam Padayachi's house in Athur, there is a heated debate about whether caste should take precedence over union affiliation. Nallasivam, a respected teacher, believes that the Vanniyar community deserves more support than the Harijans. Tensions rise as some Vanniyars resent the perceived advantages of lower castes, particularly in terms of employment and reservations. Nallasivam and his supporters are passionate about reclaiming their rightful place, which they think is being usurped by the Harijans. Nallasivam criticises his opponents within Vanniyar community and accuses them of living in a fantasy world that is disconnected from the realities of the Vanniyar community.

Chapter 25 - The debate at Nallasivam's house is resolved by placing caste identity above union brotherhood, resulting in caste based divisions in the trade unions. Kathamuthu, a political aspirant, feels marginalised and disillusioned. Gowri and Sekaran, both question societal norms and advocate for women's liberation. Sekaran, having outgrown his father's authority, criticises Kathamuthu's political ambitions. Gowri remains unaffected, focusing on her own goals and the beauty of life. She represents resilience and the ability to grow in the face of change.

Check Your Progress

- ◆ In Chapter 22, what role does Chandran play in expanding the union's reach while also navigating caste and class divisions within it?
- ◆ How does Kathamuthu's confrontation with union members at Chandran's wedding in Chapter 23 represent tensions between traditional authority and emerging leadership?
- ◆ What are the arguments presented during the caste versus union affiliation debate at Nallasivam's house in Chapter 24, and how do they relate to broader societal changes?
- ◆ How do Gowri and Sekaran challenge societal norms and advocate for change in Chapter 25?



The Grip of Change and Author's Notes

P. Sivakami

Akansha Goswami

Section-2

In the previous section we have dealt with Book-1 of *The Grip of Change and Author's Notes* called "Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change". In this section we will deal with Book-2, "Gowri: Author's Notes".

5.2 Book Two - "Gowri: Author's Notes"

◆ Memory and Process of Writing

In "Gowri: Author's Notes", the novelist reflects deeply on the criticisms and questions surrounding her novel *The Grip of Change* (1989). The narrator takes a reflective journey to revisit her hometown and confront the transformations it has undergone. She questions her own writing, criticizing its shortcomings and justifying her artistic choices. The narrator observes discrepancies between the novel's fictionalized world and reality. She questions the fluidity of memory and the selective nature of storytelling. "Gowri: Author's Notes" serves as a meta-narrative, inviting readers to question the nature of storytelling and its role in shaping personal and societal narratives. Through introspection and self-critique, the narrator strives for a more nuanced and truthful representation in her work.

Gowri from "The Grip of Change" revisits her town. She is now 31 years old and tries to find out more about the author of the novel. It is ironic that "Gowri: Author's Notes" differentiates between Gowri and the narrator but both share the same past that is described in Book-1 of the story. The boundary between Sivakami the author of Book-1, and Gowri a character from the novel, who is now revisiting the story, is very blurry. Her journey is filled with observations and internal musings, framed by interactions with her family and memories of the past.

She questions why certain elements from reality are missing or altered in the novel. Observing that the house looks different from the one described in the novel, she reflects on the many discrepancies between reality and the novel. The narrator notices these changes, emphasizing the fluidity of memory and reality. She comments, "There were posters on the compound wall, there was no jasmine creeper with branches curling and intertwining (131)."



She wonders why the author chose to write about only two siblings in the novel when she had twelve siblings. This raises questions about selective memory and the choices writers make when fictionalizing real life. The narrator also reflects on the accuracy of her portrayal of her father and other family members. She observes that her father, in the novel, doesn't show respect to elders, unlike in real life. This leads her to question her narrative choices and why she depicted her father differently.

The narrator delves into her past through memories and personal reflections, comparing them with the present reality. She acknowledges more gaps and inconsistencies between her recollections and actual events or settings. Her conversations with family members like her mother, brother, and Periappa, provide insights into her past and the people she wrote about. This offers a more nuanced understanding of her narrative choices, especially, her meeting with her Perriappa. She explains how she might have a prejudice against Kalimuthu because he accused her of stealing money in her childhood. She also talks about her Periamma who is a concubine of an upper caste man.

Gowri questions why the sexual assault of women is shown through the caste lens in part one. She critically examines her motivations as a writer, considering how personal biases, selective memory, and societal influences shaped her work. She notes that she has omitted the story of her mother and mad brother and focused on caste conflicts. She realizes that her experiences and societal issues influenced her storytelling.

The narrator considers how the community's view of caste affects her, as a person and as an author. She recalls an incident in college where she was insulted based on caste during a contest, highlighting persistent caste prejudices. She remembers, "One of the contestants had walked away after calling her a 'Scheduled caste bitch'. The contest had nothing to do with the caste system (140)." It seems like she is trying to justify why her novel depicts caste-related atrocities.

The narrator's journey through her past and present highlights the complexity of memory, identity, and the process of writing. She navigates through her questions with a blend of nostalgia, critical self-reflection, and an understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics that influenced her work. She accepts that memories are imperfect and that writing involves subjective interpretation, recognizing that her novel blends truth and imagination, shaped by her perspectives and experiences.

◆ Writing and Criticism

In chapter four, the novelist finds herself entangled in a vivid, surreal experience as she sleeps in her room. She goes out to buy vegetables in the market and a man follows her. She runs and crashes into a telephone pole. Through various obstacles, including railway



tracks, she comes back home. Her room now resembles a dark labyrinth reminiscent of Sinbad's adventures, filled with doors that close one after another. As she approaches the last door, she encounters a cat-eyed man, and upon waking, finds herself in her single-room apartment.

A stranger enters her home, exuding a pungent mixture of scents: punugu, javvadu, and zarda. Addressing her familiarly as "Pappa", he claims to have been her father's close confidant, who had helped him during difficult times. The stranger's casual intrusion and patronizing tone nauseate her. He advises her to abandon her writing and pursue a more conventional, lucrative career. Frustrated and annoyed, she demands to know the purpose of his visit. After an uncomfortable exchange, he leaves, muttering to himself. The visit leaves her feeling violated and anxious. The criticism stings, echoing the dismissive attitudes she has faced from others who do not value her work as a writer. His patronizing tone and unwelcome advice feel like an intrusion, shaking her confidence and stirring a deep-seated anxiety.

She struggles to reclaim her sense of peace, reflecting on her effort to escape her father and the oppressive influence of her family. Her memories take her back to a time when she and her father were walking home from a visit. During this walk, she questioned him about his drinking habits, which triggered his anger. He compares her to a temple cow, criticizes her for being arrogant and threatens to punish her. This memory, filled with her father's harsh words and actions, resurfaces vividly, causing old emotional wounds to bleed anew. This is her justification for having portrayed her father in an poor light in the novel.

Check Your Progress

- ◆ What main themes does the author address in "Gowri: Author's Notes"?
- ◆ How does the narrator's journey to her hometown influence her introspection in "Gowri: Author's Notes"?
- ◆ What differences does the narrator notice between the fictional world of her novel and reality?
- ◆ How does the narrator's visit to her hometown influence her perception of her past and narrative choices?
- ◆ How does the narrator question the fluidity of memory and the selective nature of storytelling?

◆ Subjective writing as Rebellion

Seeking relief, she decides to have an oil bath, a ritual that brings back more memories of her childhood. She recalls the days of Deepavali when her father would bathe her,



pouring warm water and massaging her scalp with shikakai and arappu to clean her hair. Despite his later harshness, she remembers these moments of tender care and love. These memories remind her of the shift in their relationship as more children arrived, demanding her father's time and attention, which marked the beginning of familial confusion and emotional turmoil. Despite the negative aspects of her past, she acknowledges the complexity of her father's character and the love that once existed between them. She feels guilty for her inability to portray this aspect of her father in the novel. To her, her writing feels like a rebellious act against a father who sees it as a waste of her education and potential.

The author remembers a moment from her childhood when she had slapped her stepbrother for wetting her report card. Her father's harsh interrogation and her defiant response highlight the strained father-daughter relationship. This moment exemplifies the underlying tension and her father's authoritarian nature, which later influences her writing. The father's verbal abuse stems from his frustration, financial struggles, and attempts to maintain control. But he also works hard to pay for her college education and takes pride in her education.

The novelist achieves a form of revenge through her work, reducing her father to a foul mouthed, dominating opportunist, an act that provides her with a sense of control and vindication. Yet, she grapples with the ethical implications of her portrayal. She is now deeply conscious that her representation of Kathamuthu as an opportunist and widow exploiter, is perhaps not a fair reflection of reality, but is a distortion influenced by her subconscious biases. She critiques herself for potentially misrepresenting caste dynamics and reducing complex social issues to personal vendettas.

◆ Author's Motivation, Bias, and Guilt

Her reflections extend to a broader critique of societal and literary expectations. She acknowledges that her subconscious mind may have influenced her narrative choices. She accepts her portraying the upper castes with undue respect while depicting the lower castes with a lack of dignity. This revelation leads her to question the authenticity of her work and the true motivations behind her writing. She is challenged to reconcile her desire to expose social injustices with the need for a more nuanced and equitable portrayal of all characters.

The "Author's Notes" urges her to examine her motivations, confront her biases, and strive for a more balanced and truthful representation in her writing, acknowledging that the full truth is multifaceted and often elusive. She raises several critical questions about the nature of storytelling, societal norms, and personal integrity. In one particular incident, she explains how her Periappa can tell fictional tales without the worry of answering anybody.



Her introspection leads to an exploration of the authenticity and intent behind her writing. She questions herself if she had assessed her characters with value-based judgments, or with what she believed were personal experiences. She questions the role of creativity in understanding and portraying social realities. She ponders whether creativity begins with a difference of opinion and if it is possible to live without the constraints of societal expectations. This is exemplified in her reflection on her own aspirations not to become like her father and her subsequent realization that both, her role and her father's role were shaped by the same societal pressures.

◆ Metafiction

“Gowri: Author's Notes” serves as a metafiction that questions the purpose and process of storytelling. The novelist struggles with the demands of creating a coherent narrative while staying true to the complexities of real life. She concludes with a resigned acknowledgment of the ongoing struggle between narrative compulsion and the desire to reveal the true essence of societal issues: “The novelist had erased the full stop and continued. The character Nallasivam emerged, narrating his own story. The novelist was just a mute witness.”(177) This indicates her acceptance of the fluid and often uncontrollable nature of storytelling.

She poses questions about leadership among the Scheduled Castes and emphasizes the need for revolutionary leaders. She critiques the existing leadership, represented by characters like Kathamuthu and Nallasivam, who are portrayed as self-centred and hindering progress. The author suggests that unity between Dalits and Vanniyars could lead to a powerful movement, though she acknowledges this idea as simplistic arithmetic. She writes how her friend, who she meets at a rally, advises her to create honest, revolutionary youth within the communities. This leads her to adjust her novel's ending.

In part one, she suggests inter-caste marriage and unity against casteism. Now she admits that her initial solutions may have been naive and overly simplistic. She reflects on the decade since the novel's completion, pondering whether her predictions and solutions have come to fruition.

She critiques her approach, questioning whether her narrative truly addresses the complexities of caste and class. She acknowledges that while her novel attempts to depict the oppression of women and the multifaceted nature of caste, it may have deviated from social realities.

She questions the role of writing in constructing language and representing life. She debates whether her narrative truly captures the lived experiences and aesthetics of her characters' lives, or if it falls short by adhering to traditional literary forms. “Gowri: Author's



Notes” ends with a request for introspection and a deeper grasp of the complexities in the lives she depicts in her novel.

She emphasizes the need to thoroughly examine personal biases and assumptions when crafting stories. She aims to create a more authentic and nuanced portrayal of rural life and caste dynamics by challenging conventional literary norms and delving deeper into the complexities of her characters’ lives. She reflects on the importance of challenging societal norms and conventions to accurately represent the diverse experiences of individuals. She emphasizes the need for writers to continually interrogate their own biases and assumptions to create more authentic and inclusive narratives. The author’s introspective analysis of her work highlights the importance of challenging established norms and pushing boundaries in literature. By questioning the limitations of her perspective and exploring new ways of storytelling, she encourages readers to engage with narratives that more accurately reflect the diverse realities of rural life and caste dynamics.

Check Your Progress

- ◆ How does “Gowri: Author’s Notes” blur the line between Sivakami, the author, and Gowri, the character?
- ◆ What personal biases and motivations does the narrator explore in her portrayal of her father and family members?
- ◆ How does the narrator justify the use of caste-related themes in her novel?
- ◆ What role does self-criticism play in the narrator’s introspection about her writing process?
- ◆ How does the narrator balance her artistic choices with the need for more accurate representation in her work?

6. Characters

- ◆ **Kathamuthu:** The novel’s protagonist, Kathamuthu, is a Dalit man navigating the complexities of caste-based oppression while striving for social change. He is portrayed as a flawed character who struggles with patriarchal norms and his own ambitions. But ultimately strives to challenge injustice in his community. He was once the president of the panchayat union and later tried to become an MLA.
- ◆ **Thangam:** A Dalit widow who is sexually exploited by an upper-caste man, as also Kathamuthu, later in the novel. She embodies the plight of Dalit women in rural India. Despite her trauma, she shows resilience and adaptability as she works to reclaim her agency and self-esteem.



- ◆ **Gowri:** Kathamuthu's daughter, she is portrayed as a motivated and intelligent young woman. She faces discrimination and struggles with her identity as she pursues an education. She serves as a critic of her father's actions and the patriarchal structures within their community.
- ◆ **Nagamani:** Kathamuthu's second wife. She is an upper-caste widow and is portrayed as a victim of patriarchal norms. She is forced to accept her role in a polygamous marriage. Despite her pain, she demonstrates compassion and resilience in her attempts to navigate her difficult situation.
- ◆ **Kamalam:** The wife of an upper-caste landlord Paranjothi Udayar. Kamalam is portrayed as manipulative and cruel. She organises Thangam's assault as a form of revenge. She represents the continuation of caste-based oppression by those in positions of authority.
- ◆ **Subramani:** A Dalit community supporter, Subramani works with Kathamuthu to seek justice for Thangam. He represents the unemployed youth who prefer a job over farm labour.
- ◆ **Chandran:** He is Kathamuthu's nephew. He is a community activist who promotes workers' rights and political awareness. He emphasises the possibility of social transformation in the face of entrenched power dynamics. He embodies hope for a better future in the midst of societal upheaval.
- ◆ **Paranjothi Udayar:** He is an upper-caste landlord who possesses power and influence over the Dalit community, exemplifying the caste system's oppressive forces. He seeks to maintain his privileged status at the expense of marginalised individuals such as Thangam.
- ◆ **Kanagavalli:** She is Kathamuthu's first wife. She represents the traditional roles and expectations placed on women in a patriarchal society. She is unhappy with her husband's behaviour and the dynamics of their polygamous marriage.
- ◆ **Grandma Kannamma:** She is an elderly member of the community. She accidentally starts the fire. She is known for her foul mouth and paranoia.
- ◆ **Kalimuthu:** He is the brother of Kathamuthu. He returns to the village from Malaysia, after his Thai wife's death. He is known for his flamboyant style in the community.
- ◆ **Naicker:** He has a jewellery shop in front of the police station. He often quarrels with Kathamuthu but maintains a friendly relationship with him because of his skills.
- ◆ **Pichappillai:** He is a respected elder of the Cheri community. He is the son of Kathamuthu.
- ◆ **Sargunam:** A cousin of Rasendran who visits during the Mariamman festival.



- ◆ **Rasendran:** A young man who guards Thangam's house and later intervenes in discussions about compensation.
- ◆ **Lalitha:** Daughter of a Padayachi widow, Mangalavati. She is torn between familial expectations and her desire for independence and love.
- ◆ **Elangovan:** A lower caste bank peon, involved in a relationship with Lalitha, facing societal prejudices.
- ◆ **Pushpam:** The bride at Chandran's wedding, who arrives adorned with turmeric and flowers.
- ◆ **Nallasivam Padayachi:** A respected teacher involved in debates about caste and union affiliation.
- ◆ **Chinnakannu Annan:** The novelist's childhood idol, with whom she discusses her father's actions and familial tensions.
- ◆ **Parvati Menon and Vani:** They are other participants with Gowri in V. P. Chinthan's SFI movement.
- ◆ **Athai:** In Tamil, Athai means father's sister. It can also refer to either an older or younger sister.

7. Analysis

7.1 Significant Changes from Book- One to Book- Two:

Several significant changes occur as the author transitions from part one to part two of "The Grip of Change" and "Gowri: Author's Notes". The focus shifts from Gowri and broader societal issues to the author's introspective journey, which critically examines the differences between her fictional world and reality. In Book One, the narrative presents characters and events with less overt self-criticism, whereas in Book Two, the author examines her narrative choices, biases, and the accuracy of her portrayals, particularly those involving her father and class dynamics. Part two focuses on the fluidity and selective nature of memory, as opposed to part one's more straightforward fictionalization of events.

The thematic focus also shifts: part one focuses on caste conflicts and societal issues, while part two delves into the author's personal and psychological experiences, including her motivations and biases. Part One portrays characters more simply, often through the lens of the author's biases, whereas Part Two provides a more nuanced understanding, acknowledging the author's subjective interpretation and the multifaceted nature of individuals. The narrative style shifts from traditional storytelling to meta-narrative, which



examines the storytelling process and its ethical implications. Part two emphasizes the author's emotional and existential turmoil, particularly her internal conflicts and anxieties.

Finally, while part one depicts relationships through their societal and cultural implications, part two focuses on the author's personal relationships, particularly her complex and conflicting relationship with her father, which adds emotional depth to her narratives. These changes reflect the author's maturation, as she shifts from a straightforward narrative to a more reflective and self-aware examination of her work and personal life.

7.2 Dalit Patriarchy

P. Sivakami presents an unfiltered portrayal of Dalit patriarchy, revealing the intricate power dynamics that exist within the community. This realism allows readers to confront the complexities of caste-based oppression and gender inequality without romanticising or idealising.

The protagonist, Kathamuthu, is one example of this unedited representation. Despite facing marginalisation as a Dalit, Kathamuthu maintains patriarchal norms within his family. He has control over his wives and manipulates Thangam. Kathamuthu's actions demonstrate how patriarchy operates within marginalised communities, reinforcing power dynamics. Thangam's experience highlights the systematic exploitation faced by Dalit women, illustrating the intricate layers of oppression they navigate. Kathamuthu's daughter is a critique of his actions and continuously reminds the readers about his pathetic personal life.

The novel shows the plight of widows in the patriarchal society but with a clear difference in their caste-based treatment in society. Nagamani and Thangam are both widows without children. However, Nagamani is upper-caste and gets the second-wife status in Kathamuthu's house. The upper-caste widow can marry a lower-caste man. On the other hand, lower-caste Thangam can only be a concubine or beaten to death if she threatens the position of an upper-caste or same-caste, wife.

Everyone in the society is aware of the harassment of unprotected widows but no one raises their voice either in the upper caste or in the lower caste. Thangam is beaten by four men in her own street but no one cares. Nagamani also has to accept her fate and live with Kathamuthu. Feeling proud he says, "I'm living with this woman who doesn't belong to our community. She's upper caste. She was a struggling widow, so I provided her a safe haven...Upper caste men may fancy you, but they'll not marry you." (10)

Meena Kandasamy, in her essay "And One Shall Live in Two..." that "In *the Grip of Change*, a novel of critical realism, Gowri views her father... with an attitude of contempt"



(194). She also writes that P Sivakami has shown the “unedited side of Dalit Patriarchy” (194). The significance of the novel elevates because it talks about the “most vulnerable members of the Dalit community- its women” (194).

C. S. Lakshmi, known as Ambai for writing a feminist monologue *Crossing the River*, writes that after reading P. Sivakami’s novel she has many questions about caste and gender. In her essay “Once Upon a Time There was a Novel”, she writes,

Why does sexual power work differently for women and men of different castes? Why is it that the lower caste woman is raped by the upper caste man, but the lower caste man always sexually satiates the upper caste woman? Is Gowri the child Sivakami? (199)

7.3 Body-centricity and Sexuality

The theme of body-centricity is central to *The Grip of Change*, which demonstrates how physicality profoundly shapes individual lives and societal structures in the Dalit community. P. Sivakami uses vivid descriptions and evocative imagery to transport readers into the characters’ visceral experiences, emphasising the importance of the body in shaping their reality.

For example, Thangam’s physical pain as a result of her brutal victimisation by upper-caste perpetrators exemplifies the violence inflicted on Dalit women’s bodies. Kathamuthu’s strenuous physical labour emphasises the unbreakable link between physical exertion and social status in rural Dalit societies. The novel also investigates the role of bodily adornment, such as Gowri’s use of kohl, kumkum, and flowers in reclaiming agency and asserting identity in the face of systemic marginalisation.

Meena Kandasamy asserts that “Thangam’s body bears testimony to the difficulties faced by Dalit women” (194). Sivakami avoids glamorising sexuality in the novel, instead focusing on depicting the complexities of caste and class structures that oppress marginalised people, particularly women at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Furthermore, the novel explores various aspects of sexuality through the characters’ perspectives, including instances of sexual violence, coercion, and agency. Sivakami emphasises how sexuality interacts with caste and gender hierarchies, exacerbating vulnerabilities and perpetuating cycles of exploitation.

The novel examines patriarchal norms and expectations to shed light on how sexuality intersects with dominance and control structures. Despite these obstacles, the novel depicts moments of tenacity and resistance in which characters assert their sexual autonomy and challenge oppressive norms.



The novel emphasises the need for feminist viewpoints within the Dalit movement. It calls for a need to address the unique difficulties faced by Dalit women. The novel demands a fight for Dalit women's rights and empowerment in the community and in society at large through the experiences of the characters.

7.4 Caste and Modernity

In *The Grip of Change*, the theme of modernity intersects with the prevalent caste system. It provides a nuanced examination of societal transformation and entrenched hierarchies. P. Sivakami expertly navigates the tension between traditional values and modern aspirations, particularly in rural Dalit communities. Through the characters' experiences, the novel investigates the impact of modernization on caste dynamics. It reveals both its potential for liberation and its ability to reinforce existing power structures.

For instance, Kathamuthu's ambitions to become a politician represent a desire for social change and upward mobility, but his actions frequently support inequality based on caste. In a similar vein, Gowri's introduction of educational and scholarship opportunities challenges conventional ideas of caste-based limitations. It offers education as a route to empowerment and social mobility. However, the fact that patriarchal norms and caste discrimination still exist highlights how little modernity has been able to do, to eradicate deeply ingrained social hierarchies. The book highlights the difficulties of social change in rural India by showing modernity as a two-edged sword that can both challenge and uphold caste-based oppression.

Kathamuthu often narrates the past and present of the caste system in his society. He visits the police station and softly threatens the inspector that if he does not take action against the upper castes then he is going to face consequences for discrimination. Another time in the novel, when the Tehsildar tries to negotiate between Harijans and Kudiyanavars, he gives a long speech about how "they have been like fathers and sons of the same family" (67). His speech also highlights the changes going on in modern India where he can "wear sandals and walk on the upper caste street" (67).

It is important to notice his remark about the education and jobs for the lower caste people. Sivakami often writes about the education and career opportunities, the laws, and the government aid available for Dalits. However, in the second part of the novel, she reminds the reader about the unchanged and evolved caste-based discrimination. Kathamuthu says "Those days are gone. Our children are attending school. The lucky ones get government jobs. A few men have started their own business. But even in these changed times, atrocities occur in villages like Puliur" (67).



P. Sivakami clearly describes the modern version of caste and class problems in India. She talks about it in chapter fourteen of part two. She writes how “caste and class are almost the same” (180). She also calls for an action where the “lower caste should shatter their particular identities and identify themselves as one class... if the struggle is centred on the Dalits, class and caste equality will be attained” (180).

Hence, despite advances in education and opportunities, patriarchal norms and caste discrimination persist, emphasising the difficulties of social change in rural India. The novel emphasises the ongoing struggle against caste-based oppression, as well as the importance of working together to achieve meaningful change.

Check Your Progress

- ◆ How does P. Sivakami present the portrayal of Dalit patriarchy in “The Grip of Change”?
- ◆ Discuss the character of Kathamuthu and his role in reinforcing patriarchal norms within the Dalit community.
- ◆ Compare and contrast the treatment of widows Nagamani and Thangam in the novel, highlighting the differences based on their caste.
- ◆ What commentary does Meena Kandasamy provide on P. Sivakami’s portrayal of Dalit patriarchy in her essay?
- ◆ Explore the theme of body-centricity and its significance in “The Grip of Change,” providing examples from the text.
- ◆ What does the novel reveal about the difficulties of social change, and how does it address the intersection of caste and modernity in rural India?

7.5 Critics Observations in Appendix

There are two significant readings provided for the readers at the end of the novel. Sivakami aims to provide an external outlook on her work that she has written, deconstructed and later translated. In the first essay, Meena Kandasamy’s critical analysis of Sivakami’s novel, *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum* (The Grip of Change) provides an in-depth understanding of Tamil Nadu’s socio-political landscape in the early twentieth century, with a focus on the Dalit movement and Dalit women’s struggles. Kandasamy applauds Sivakami’s candid depiction of Dalit patriarchy, body-centric struggles, and feminist exploration of inter-caste sexual relationships. However, she questions Sivakami’s motivations, as well as the limitations of her self-translation and author’s notes. Kandasamy’s analysis adds to



the larger discussion of literature, activism, and the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression in Tamil Nadu.

C.S. Lakshmi's essay looks into Sivakami's novel and its sequel, focusing on the process of creation and deconstruction in literature. She recognises the difficulty of dismantling one's own creation, but praises Sivakami for taking the risk. Lakshmi appreciates the author's skilful depiction of caste dynamics, political power struggles, and daily life. She raises concerns about gender and caste dynamics, particularly the asymmetry of sexual power and exploitation. In the sequel, Lakshmi observes a transformative process in which deconstruction gives way to creation, enhancing the original text's meaning while preserving its integrity.

C.S. Lakshmi and Meena Kandasamy's critical readings of the novel help the reader understand Sivakami's work. Kandasamy's analysis contextualises Sivakami's narrative, whereas Lakshmi's essay focuses on the author's portrayal of caste dynamics and power struggles. Both critical readings help to advance discussions about literature, activism, and the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression.

7.6 Sivakami as a Translator

Sivakami's translation of her Tamil text into English is an important step towards bridging linguistic and cultural gaps while preserving the authenticity and integrity of her story. By leaving certain Tamil words and phrases untranslated, she preserves their cultural specificity and linguistic richness. This approach not only improves readers' comprehension but also invites them to immerse themselves in the linguistic and cultural landscape of her writing.

However, Sivakami's decision to selectively translate certain elements while including a comprehensive glossary for others raises concerns about accessibility and inclusivity. While the glossary is an excellent resource for readers unfamiliar with Tamil culture, it may present difficulties for those who prefer a more seamless reading experience.

Furthermore, relying on a glossary may unintentionally reinforce linguistic hierarchies, favouring English-speaking readers over those more familiar with Tamil. Despite these limitations, Sivakami's translation of her own text demonstrates her commitment to accessibility and cultural exchange. By preserving the integrity of her narrative and giving readers the tools they need to navigate its cultural nuances, she invites them into a world that is both familiar and foreign, challenging them to engage with themes of identity, power, and belonging in new and meaningful ways.



Check Your Progress

- ◆ What are the key points in Meena Kandasamy's critical analysis of Sivakami's novel "Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum" (The Grip of Change)?
- ◆ How does Meena Kandasamy add to the conversation about literature, activism, and the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression in Tamil Nadu?
- ◆ What aspects of Sivakami's work does C.S. Lakshmi highlight in her essay?
- ◆ How does C.S. Lakshmi describe the transformative process portrayed in Sivakami's sequel?
- ◆ How do Meena Kandasamy and C.S. Lakshmi's critical readings help readers understand Sivakami's work and contribute to discussions about literature, activism, and caste and gender oppression?

8. Summing Up

The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami stands as a powerful testament to the intersection of caste, gender, and societal transformation in rural India. Through her unflinching portrayal of Dalit patriarchy, Sivakami exposes the complexities of power dynamics within oppressed communities, particularly for Dalit women. The novel's exploration of body-centricity and sexuality sheds light on the violence and exploitation faced by marginalised individuals, while also highlighting moments of resilience and resistance.

Sivakami deftly navigates the theme of caste and modernity, revealing both the potential for liberation and the persistent challenges of entrenched hierarchies. The novel's structure, language, and style contribute to its emotional resonance and thematic depth, inviting readers to engage deeply with the characters' struggles and triumphs.

Analyses of Sivakami's work in the appendix shed light on her work, emphasising the importance of Dalit activism and feminist exploration in the early twentieth century. They also talk about Sivakami's translation process, the transformation of caste dynamics, and political power struggles. Sivakami's translation bridges linguistic and cultural divides, allowing readers to fully immerse themselves in the story's depth. However, the inclusion of a comprehensive glossary raises issues of accessibility and inclusivity. Ultimately, *The Grip of Change* serves as a potent example of literature's ability to challenge social injustices and inspire meaningful change. The novel sets P. Sivakami's legacy as a pioneering voice in Dalit and feminist literature.



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‘White Paper’

From: *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*

Sharankumar Limbale

Anju Gurawa

Structure

1. Learning Objectives
2. Introduction
 - 2.1 Socio-political background of Dalit literature
 - 2.2 About the Author, Sharankumar Limbale
3. ‘White Paper’ - Sharankumar Limbale
 - 3.1 Critical Overview of ‘White Paper’
 - 3.2 Detailed Analysis
4. Conclusion
5. Works Cited and Further Readings

1. Learning Objectives

After going through this lesson, you will be able to:

- ◆ Understand the historical and social context of caste discrimination in India
- ◆ Analyze the poet’s assertion of Dalit identity and human rights
- ◆ Examine the poet’s vision of the transformative power of Dalit resistance
- ◆ Appreciate the literary and social significance of Dalit literature
- ◆ Analyze how ‘White Paper’ embodies the spirit and themes of the Dalit literary movement through its depiction of caste oppression, assertion of Dalit identity and rights, and its vision of social transformation



2. Introduction

2.1 Socio-political Background of Dalit Literature

In “‘Poisoned bread’: protest in Dalit short stories”, Shalini Ramachandran explores the historical and socio-political factors that contributed to the rise of Dalit literature in Maharashtra during the late 1960s and 1970s. She argues that increased political consciousness and access to literacy among Maharashtrian Dalits, especially those from the Mahar sub-caste, were crucial in the development of this literary movement. Ramachandran highlights that the Mahars’ migration from villages to cities in search of employment provided their children with greater access to education, which later served as a catalyst for political mobilization led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Mahar Dalit himself. The term “Dalit,” meaning “ground” or “reduced to pieces,” was adopted by the writers as a self-chosen name of political and cultural identity, emphasizing the ongoing oppression of untouchables in Indian society.

In the ‘Introduction’ to the anthology *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, Dalit scholar Arjun Dangle reflects on his involvement in the Dalit literary, social, cultural, and political movements. Dangle characterizes Dalit literature as being marked by “revolt and negativism,” stemming from the struggles of a marginalized community. While acknowledging various theories about the origin of Dalit literature, Dangle asserts that Dr. Ambedkar was the true pioneer of this movement.

Dangle emphasizes the significance of Dalit literature as a means of expressing the struggles and aspirations of a marginalized community and challenging dominant narratives. He highlights Dr. Ambedkar’s pivotal role in inspiring the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra, instilling a sense of self-respect and awareness among the Dalits.

Dangle traces the origin of the term “Dalit literature” to the first Dalit literary conference in 1958 and discusses the significant developments in Marathi literature during the 1960s. He particularly emphasizes the impact of Baburao Bagul’s short stories in propelling the Dalit literary movement forward and inspiring Dalit writers to express their unique experiences and perspectives.

In the 1970s, a new generation of young writers emerged, and Dalit critics began theorizing about the role Dalit literature. Influenced by the Black movement and literature in the United States, young writers established the Dalit Panthers political movement in Bombay in 1972, marking a significant moment where creative writers became politically active. Dangle stresses that Dalit literature is not simply literature but is associated with a movement to bring about change. He highlights the unique nature of Dalit literature, characterized by new thinking and a fresh perspective.



The poem ‘White Paper’ is from the anthology *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, edited by Arjun Dangle. It also has critical essays that provide insight into the theoretical foundation of Dalit literature, as also the similarities between the Black movement and literature in the United States and the Dalit movement and its literature in India.

Check Your Progress

1. When and where did Dalit literature emerge in India?
2. Who played a crucial role in inspiring the Dalit literary movement?
3. What are the main characteristics of Dalit literature?
4. Which political movement, established in 1972, marked a significant moment for Dalit writers?

2.2 About the Author, Sharankumar Limbale

Sharankumar Limbale, a prominent Marathi language author, poet, and literary critic, was born on June 1, 1956. He has made significant contributions to the field of Dalit literature, with more than 40 books to his credit. His most notable work, the autobiography “Akkar-mashi” (1984), has been widely translated into several Indian languages and English, with the English version titled “The Outcaste” published by Oxford University Press.

Limbale’s ideological and political philosophy is deeply rooted in his experiences as a Dalit and his commitment to the social upliftment of the Dalit community. In his essay “Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature,” he argues that Dalit literature, being a revolutionary form of literature, does not adhere to traditional principles of aesthetics. He criticizes the emphasis on pleasure in Marathi Savarna literature, while pain is often associated with Dalit literature.

Limbale challenges the notion that Dalit literature is inferior because it evokes feelings of pain, suffering, and anger, asserting that these emotions are inherent to Dalit literature, as it serves as a social document of rebellion designed for the social upliftment of Dalits. He proposes a new set of aesthetic criteria for Dalit literature based on the artist’s social commitment, life-affirming values present in the artistic creation, and the ability to raise readers’ consciousness of fundamental values such as equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity.

Limbale strongly opposes the cultural dictatorship that seeks to impose dominant literary standards on Dalit writing, arguing that it is a form of exclusion and marginalization. He emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and engaging with the challenges and



questions posed by Dalit literary and critical writings, as failing to do so perpetuates a hegemonic discourse that excludes the realities and experiences of a significant portion of the country's population.

In his critique of the dismissal of Dalit literature as “artless”, Limbale questions why the portrayal of “extraordinary pain” cannot be considered a literary standard, just as literature providing “extraordinary pleasure” is deemed beautiful and valuable. He stresses the importance of understanding the meaning and true portrayal of Dalit lives, which adds literary value to Dalit literature, rather than focusing solely on form and technique.

Sharankumar Limbale's ideological and political philosophy, as reflected in his literary works and critical essays, is a powerful voice in the fight against caste-based discrimination and the marginalization of Dalit experiences in Indian literature and society. His contributions have played a significant role in shaping the discourse surrounding Dalit literature and have paved the way for a more inclusive and socially conscious approach to literary criticism and appreciation.

Check Your Progress

1. What is Limbale's position regarding the relationship between Dalit literature and traditional aesthetic principles?
2. What is the new aesthetic criteria for Dalit literature proposed by Limbale?
3. How does Limbale's ideological and political philosophy contribute to the fight against caste-based discrimination in Indian literature and society?

3. 'White Paper' - Sharankumar Limbale

3.1 Critical Overview of 'White Paper'

“White Paper” is a powerful poem that expresses the pain, oppression, and ultimate assertion of Dalit rights in the face of deeply entrenched caste discrimination in Indian society. The poem, voices the collective anguish and anger of the Dalit community who have suffered centuries of untouchability, social exclusion, and violence at the hands of the upper castes.

The title “White Paper” is symbolic, representing the poet's declaration of the truth of Dalit experience and his manifesto of revolt against the caste system. The poem begins with the poet rejecting the worldly comforts and status markers prized by the upper castes, representing a refusal to buy into the discriminatory value system and social structure of caste Hindus. The poet movingly conveys that Dalits do not desire superior status or revenge, but simply the recognition of their basic human dignity and rights.



Limbale powerfully conveys how the very breath and speech of Dalits shakes the foundations of orthodox Hindu traditions and scriptures which are built on caste discrimination. The upper castes’ violent reaction arises from their fear of ‘pollution’ by Dalits, exposing the inhumanity of their beliefs. However, the poet asserts that his words cannot be destroyed as they have the eternal force of the “sun in the east,” signifying how the rising consciousness and voices of Dalits can no longer be suppressed.

The poet warns the upper castes that the demand for Dalit rights will spread like an epidemic, a “contagious caste riot” across the nation. Though the upper castes have tried to quarantine this like a disease, the struggle for equality cannot be contained and will permeate every town and individual. Limbale prophetically states that these discriminatory traditions and laws will be uprooted and burned by the force of the Dalit movement.

The poem ends on a defiant, revolutionary note as the poet declares that Dalit rights will rise inevitably like the sun, an unstoppable social dawn that the upper castes cannot deny or block out. This represents the surge of hope and determination in the Dalit freedom struggle against the caste system.

Throughout the poem, Limbale subverts the imagery used to stigmatize Dalits, recasting them as symbols of righteous revolution. The poem derives its power from both its searing, authentic depiction of caste oppression and its stirring vision of social transformation through Dalit uprising. Limbale uses various poetic devices such as repetition, metaphors, personification, and powerful sensory imagery to convey the volcanic social change the Dalit movement heralds.

“White Paper” remains a landmark poem that voices the revolutionary consciousness of the Dalit community while exposing the cruelty of the caste system. It is both an indictment of a long history of injustice and a clarion call for the dawn of human rights, crystallizing the essence of the Dalit resistance movement.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Sharankumar Limbale’s poem “White Paper” express about the Dalit community’s experience?
2. What does the poet reject, and what do Dalits demand, in the poem?
3. How does Limbale convey the impact of the rising consciousness and voices of Dalits on orthodox Hindu traditions?
4. What literary techniques does Limbale employ in “White Paper,” and how does the poem contribute to Dalit resistance literature?



3.2 Detailed Analysis

Lines 1-9:

“I do not ask
for the sun and the moon from your sky,
Your farm, your land, your high houses or your mansions I do not ask for gods, rituals,
castes or sects,
Or even for your mother, sisters or daughters. I ask for
My rights as a man”

Analysis: The poet begins by rejecting all the privileges and status symbols cherished by the upper castes, from celestial bodies to property to religious and familial ties. This represents a refusal to participate in or accept the discriminatory value system and hierarchy of caste. By stating “I ask for/My rights as a man”, the poet conveys that Dalits do not desire revenge or superiority, but simply recognition of their basic human dignity and equality.

Check Your Progress

1. What privileges and status symbols does the poet reject in the first nine lines of the poem?
2. What does a Dalit seek by asking for “rights as a man”?
3. How does the poet’s rejection of the caste system’s privileges and status symbols convey the injustice faced by Dalits?

Lines 10-15:

“Each breath from my
lungs Sets off a violent
trembling In your texts and
traditions, Your hells and
heavens Fearing
pollution.”

Analysis: The poet powerfully asserts how the very existence and expression of Dalits shakes the foundations of orthodox Hindu scriptures and traditions that are built on caste discrimination. The upper castes react with paranoid fear of ‘pollution’ by Dalits, exposing the inhumanity of their beliefs. Limbale captures how the caste system dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressors.



Check Your Progress

1. How does the existence and expression of Dalits affect orthodox Hindu scriptures and traditions?
2. What does the upper castes’ fear of “pollution” by Dalits expose about their beliefs?
3. In what way does the poet suggest that the caste system dehumanizes both the oppressed and oppressors?

Lines 16-19:

“Your arms leapt together
To burn and raze our
dwellings. You’ll beat me,
break me,
Loot and burn my habitation.”

Analysis: The poet describes the physical violence and destruction unleashed by upper castes on Dalit homes and bodies, in an effort to crush their spirit and keep them ‘in their place’. The verbs “burn”, “raze”, “beat”, “break” and “loot” vividly convey the viciousness of caste atrocities on Dalits.

Check Your Progress

1. What kind of violence and destruction do the upper castes unleash on Dalit homes and bodies?
2. What do the verbs “burn”, “raze”, “beat”, “break” and “loot” convey about the nature of caste atrocities on Dalits?
3. What is the purpose behind the upper castes’ violent actions against Dalits?

Lines 20-28:

“But my friend,
How will you scorch my words? Planted like the sun in the east? My rights: contagious
caste riots
Flaring from town to town, man to man. That’s what my rights are -
Sealed off, outcast, road-blocked, exiled.”

Analysis: The poet defiantly asserts that even if his physical being is broken, his words and spirit cannot be destroyed as they have the undying, regenerative force of the rising



sun. He prophesies that the demand for Dalit rights will spread like a revolutionary epidemic or wildfire across the nation, permeating every individual and settlement. Though the upper castes have tried to ‘quarantine’ Dalits through social ostracization, ghettoization and denial of free movement, their struggle for emancipation cannot be suppressed.

Check Your Progress

1. What does the poet assert about his words and spirit, and what do they symbolize?
2. How is the demand for Dalit rights prophesied to spread across the nation, despite attempts at suppression?
3. What imagery does the poet use to describe the unstoppable nature of the Dalit struggle for rights?

Lines 29-35:

“I want my rights, give me my rights!

Will you deny this incendiary state of things? I’ll consign your lawless laws to flames.

My friends, my rights are rising like the sun. Will you deny this sunrise?”

Analysis: The poet ends with an explosive proclamation of Dalit rights and forewarning of revolutionary struggle. He subverts the imagery of ‘flames’ used to burn down Dalit settlements and uses it to depict the annihilation of unjust laws and customs through Dalit uprising. Comparing Dalit rights to an inevitably rising sun, the poet asserts that this social dawn cannot be stopped, however much the upper castes try to suppress or deny it. The poem ends on an emphatic note “Will you deny this sunrise?”, thereby asserting the inevitability of the Dalits reclaiming their dignity and rights.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the poet subvert the imagery of ‘flames’ in the context of Dalit uprising?
2. What does the comparison of Dalit rights to a rising sun signify?
3. How does the poem end?



4. Conclusion

Our reading of the poem 'White Paper', has helped us in gaining a deeper understanding of the historical injustice of the caste system, the demands and consciousness of the Dalit movement, and the power of Dalit literature as a form of social protest and change. In our analysis we have seen how the poem—

- ◆ Powerfully expresses the centuries-old struggle of Dalits against the oppressive caste system and untouchability.
- ◆ Voices the pain, anger, and resistance of Dalits who have been denied basic human rights and dignity.
- ◆ Exposes the caste prejudice which is deeply rooted in, and perpetuated through Hindu scriptures, traditions, and social customs.
- ◆ Asserts Dalit identity and human rights by rejecting the discriminatory caste system and demanding recognition of Dalits' fundamental rights as human beings.
- ◆ Uses vivid metaphors and imagery to convey the transformative power of Dalit resistance, comparing it to an unstoppable force like a wildfire or an epidemic.
- ◆ Envisages the inevitable destruction of caste discrimination through the rising Dalit movement, likening it to an inexorable sunrise.

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‘The Last Will of a Dalit Poet’

Jayant Parmar

Ashwarya Samkaria

Structure

1. Learning Objectives
2. Introduction
 - 2.1 About the Author
 - 2.2 About Dalit Literature
3. The Poem
 - 3.1 Critical Summary
4. Critical Analysis
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6. References

1. Learning Objectives

After going through this study material, you will be able to:

- ◆ Analyze the historical and cultural framing of Dalit poetry
- ◆ Understand the aesthetics of Dalit poetry
- ◆ Comprehend the salient features of Parmar’s poetry
- ◆ Discuss the major themes of the poem
- ◆ Critically summarise the poem
- ◆ Write a comprehensive textual analysis of the poem

2. Introduction

‘The Last Will of a Dalit Poet’ is a poem written by the Sahitya Akademi Award winning bilingual Dalit poet Jayant Parmar (b. 1954) who writes in Urdu and Gujarati. This poem is part of the edited collection titled *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the*



Margins (2016) edited by Tapan Basu, Indranil Acharya, and A. Mangai and published by Oxford University Press.

Hailing from a marginalised community, Parmar's personal experiences of ostracisation, oppression, and resistance are reflected in his poetic renditions. He not only expresses the anguish experienced by the Dalit community but also seeks to express radical resistance through his poetic expression. In the poem 'The Last Will of a Dalit Poet', it is through the figure of the Dalit poet that Parmar primarily focuses on two concerns. Firstly, it recounts the difficult experiential realities encountered by a Dalit poet who faces social ostracisation due to casteism and secondly, it articulates the Dalit poet's radical resistance by positing self-assertion of a celebratory Dalit identity. Speaking through oppression and resistance, the focus on a newly-acquired identity of a '*dalit* poet' (emphasis in original) points towards a future premised upon self-recognition, pride, and socially valued existence.

Discrimination based on birth eventually leading to the arrangement of social groups in terms of a hierarchy is peculiar to caste-bound India. Caste is an outcome of hierarchal operations at work at the social, cultural, and material realm, all of which work in tandem to construct caste within the ambit of what Ambedkar termed as 'graded inequality'. Brahmins rigidified the caste system by practicing untouchability, proliferating endogamy to avoid inter-caste marriages, and adhering to codified caste laws mentioned in the text *Manusmriti*, thereby seeking religious justification to inscribe casteism as a lived social reality.

The untouchables or 'the polluted people' suffer social stigma and ostracisation due to the Brahminical order which ordains them as members belonging to a socially "untouchable" group. Initiating reform against such socially repressive practices, nineteenth century saw many reform movements such as Satyashodak Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Brahmo Samaj and efforts of individuals such as Pandita Ramabai, Jotiba Phule, Periyar, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who challenged the Brahminical caste order.

The Dalit question then is primarily an anti-caste imagination seeking radical social transformation by understanding the issue of mainstream social stratification of people. As Ambedkar argues, "caste System is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers*. Civilised society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilised society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments." (1989, 47, emphasis in original) Thus, a Dalit's struggle is a fight for basic fundamental rights and human dignity.

The prescribed poem in our syllabus primarily maps the trajectory of a Dalit's experiential journey from being labelled as a downtrodden member of the society to the point of asserting his own identity as a proud Dalit. Thus, the poem's thematic focus is on the issue of a Dalit's self-representation within the ambit of socially sanctioned exclusion of



Dalits due to the Brahminical caste system. It is by deploying the trope of a Dalit poet that Parmar in the final stanza emphasises upon not only the Dalit's sense of self, but one that makes him proud of being a Dalit. While the poem decidedly focuses on the identity of a Dalit poet, Parmar as a poet also "presents a multi-dimensional perspective of the various aspects of human life concomitant with its varied complexions and complexities. Life continues through a process of diverse actions and reactions" (Basu, et al., 2016, 15). The poem navigates the pitfalls of casteism and takes the figure of the Dalit poet to a point from where the journey of self-representation begins. Thus, it is through the voice of the Dalit poet himself that the poem engages with the politics of representation.

Check Your Progress

1. What do you understand by the term 'Dalit'?
2. How is caste a social category? Elaborate.
3. What is the thematic thrust of Parmar's poem?

2.1 About the Author

Jayant Parmar (b. 1954) was born in the Indian state of Gujarat in Ahmedabad to a Hindu family. Apart from speaking in his native tongue Gujarati, he also picked up the Urdu language quite early on in his life. Having lived in the Muslim-dominated walled city of Ahmedabad, Parmar developed a fondness for the Urdu language. He taught himself Urdu with the help of a language learning guide. He recollects, "I bought a copy of *Urdu Script Teacher* from the roadside market and I found Urdu the most effective medium of my creative expression, very soon I discovered that my feelings flowed as smoothly in Urdu as in Gujarati. I also tried my hand at Urdu calligraphy." (qtd. in Basu et al., 2010, 14-15). Thus, as a bilingual poet, he ended up expressing himself in both the languages but Urdu continued to remain his first love. His writings address the paucity of Dalit voices in Urdu literature, thereby emerging as the first Dalit voice of Urdu literature.

Drawing from his personal experiences of having faced caste-based oppression, Parmar's poetry captures not only the atrocities committed by people belonging to the upper caste but also the voice of a Dalit consciousness. A close perusal of Parmar's writings brings to light the fact that speaking from the subject position of a Dalit poet, his laconic poems "question established truths, as he cannot ingest the fiendish attitude of the society" (Kidwai, 2014, 80). Quite early in his life, he faced a discriminatory incident which left an indelible imprint upon the mind of young Parmar. While learning how to paint miniature paintings for a frame-maker, he realised that the frame-maker had a separate pot of colours for him because he belonged to an untouchable caste. Parmar chose



to quit the classes but this incident disturbed him deeply and left an everlasting imprint on him. Articulating resistance by way of using language, “[h]e has set Dalit poetry in motion in Urdu and... unfailingly makes it clear that his poetry is not being written for astral beings. His poems touch the subject of affliction and also turn attention to a savage impulse that exists beneath all human actions, the pervasiveness of exploitation of have-nots” (Kidwai, 2014, 80).

His works have been translated into many languages such as English, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Bengali, Kashmiri, Nepali, Telugu, and Slovenian.

Notable Works

He has to his credit Dalit poetry in Urdu in collections such as *Aur* (And, 1999), *Pencil Aur Doosri Nazmein* (Pencil and other poems, 2006) and *Manind* (Similar, 2007).

Accolades

Parmar has won the 2008 Sahitya Akademi Award in Urdu for his collection ‘Pencil Aur Doosri Nazmein’ (2006). He has also received many other accolades such as Bhasha Bharati Samman (2006), Gururaj Urdu Sahitya Akademi Award (2008, 2006, 2001), Kumar Pashi Award (2001), and Bharti Dalit Sahitya Akademi, Madhya Pradesh (2002).

2.2 About Dalit Literature

Etymologically, the word ‘Dalit’ is an old Marathi word which translates as “ground”, “broken”, or “reduced to pieces”. The word ‘Dalit’ is now widely used in place of the word ‘untouchable’ and literally it stands to denote “downtrodden” or “beaten down”. In order to secure justice, dignity, and equality for the socially marginalised, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), one of India’s foremost revolutionary thinkers, worked tirelessly to improve the social, political, legal, and economic condition of the historically subjugated peoples of India designated under the Hindu caste system as “outcastes”. The Dalits still suffer the social stigma of untouchability even though constitutionally, discrimination based on caste is an offence under the law.

The domain of literature has emerged as a pertinent archive encapsulating and communicating the lived experiences of Dalits. Borne out of an activist position, such a literature “has arisen from cultural conflict”, (Kumar, 2010, 147) between the upper caste Hindus and their suppression of the lower caste and the marginalised. Dalit literature (or literature of the oppressed) functions as a voice articulating resistance against the marginalisation, suppression, and widespread discrimination of Dalits and the atrocities that are meted out to them. Arjun Dangle, Marathi writer, editor, activist, and founder member of the 1970s



Dalit youth organization the ‘Dalit Panthers’ points out that “Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change... at the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them; instead there is new thinking and a new point of view.” (1992, viii). Translation of Dalit poetry from Marathi into English took place with the pertinent publication of *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot, and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992) edited by Arjun Dangle.

Keeping Dalit literature’s revolutionary zeal in mind, it becomes evident that the purpose of such a literature is not solely directed at delighting the reader. Since Dalit poetry deals with angst and anguish of the Dalit community and focuses on the denial of their basic human rights, it primarily becomes an articulation of political expression and its thematic thrust is premised upon transforming the lived realities and the condition of the Dalits in society. Proponents of Dalit literature advocate that their literature narrates stories of harsh lived realities and brutal experiences of systemic discrimination. Thus, Dalit literature’s primary focus is not to address the reader as an aesthete but to articulate resistance. It offers a razor-sharp critique of the mainstream understanding of aesthetic as something which is pleasurable. The focal point of narration is not to “tend towards the study of beauty and form with the intention of generating pleasure” (Das, 2017, 20). Parmar’s poetics resist the universalising tendencies of savarna aesthetics by replacing it “with one that is material and social” (Limbale, 21). Since Dalit stories are “life-affirming literature”, an exclusive analysis of the text in terms of a purely aesthetic criticism negates the thematic thrust of these narratives which focus on the social atrocities that make up their lived experiences. Thus, Parmar’s poem outlines his commitment to archiving a Dalit consciousness.

Dalit Aesthetics

For the Dalit poet, language becomes a mode of resistance. Kidwai points out that “Jayant [Parmar] deliberately rejects orthodox poetic restrictions and also assiduously uses words normally taken to be non-literary words. His pidgin language makes a distinct departure from the traditional poetics....” (2001, 31). Speaking from a subject position of a minority, Parmar’s poetic imagination is deeply political. His poems work as a social archiving of atrocities meted against the Dalits. His “diction is not a common feature in Urdu poetry, it is his distinct style that defies the conventional poetry of rhyme and deliberately avoids verbosity and an ostentatious display of words” (Ahsan, 2024). Using his words sparingly, Parmar still succeeds in painting a vivid canvas with his words. His oeuvre of poetry “has set ‘Dalit poetry’ in motion in Urdu as he can’t stomach the fiendish attitude of society.



He conjures up feelings of aversion and detestation. His poems are characterised by the use of colloquial diction and are also filled with the voices of oration, arguing and exhorting” (Kidwai, 2001, 30).

Noted Dalit scholar Sharankumar Limbale outlines the following three premises which define the aesthetics of Dalit literature: “First, the artists’ social commitment; second, the life affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the reader’s consciousness of fundamental values like equality, justice and fraternity” (2004, 120). He sets the following as the standards for evaluating Dalit literature: “Artists must be motivated by their experience. Artists must socialize their experiences. Artists’ experiences must have the strength to cross provincial boundaries. Artists’ experiences must seem relevant to all time” (ibid.). Parmar’s poem fulfils the above-stated considerations and posits an aesthetic that is contextually aligned with the socio-political reality of a Dalit consciousness.

Interestingly, “[a] marked feature of Jayant Parmar is that he is the only Urdu poet, whose poetic creations are charged with the creative approach of a painter” (Narang, 2009, 61). The prescribed poem in our syllabus paints a vivid imagery of not just oppression but the becoming of a Dalit poet. Thus, his poetic brush strokes embody social relevance since his is a subaltern voice speaking from a location which is twice-oppressed. Post-Independence Urdu poetry’s “refreshing vocabulary not only exalts the power of spoken and unspoken words but also makes it fully alive to shifts in culture and ideology” (Kidwai, 2001, 20).

Dalit Resistance

Dalit literature is primarily a literature of protest. It is a form of resistance through which they express their voice for basic human rights. The impetus is towards questioning their marginality, to end discrimination, and fight for social change and justice. It offers a counter discourse to the dominant upper caste narrative and contests the labelling of the Dalit as a polluting untouchable. Moreover, Dalit literature and its language also posits self-assertion.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the hallmark of Dalit literature?
2. Why is Dalit poetry relevant?
3. How is Jayant Parmar’s personal history relevant to the poem?
4. How is Dalit aesthetics different from Savarna aesthetics?
5. What is peculiar about Jayant Parmar’s poetic style?



3. The Poem

‘The Last Will of a Dalit Poet’

(Translated from Urdu by Baidar Bakht)

A Dalit poet

Leaves several things behind:

A paper dripping wet with blood,

A black sun

On the night’s head,

A river of blood,

A lantern of his ancestors.

He never assaults you with

Symbols,

Metaphors

Or personalities.

A heavy burden on a donkey’s back,

He himself a wounded shadow.

He has no existence.

There is little difference

Between him and a broken cup.

He, who makes images with cow-dung

Has at least the sense to know

That in the hour glass,

In the smell of exiled earth,

In the sunflower of rebellions,

In the spear of the pen and the ink,

Art lives forever.

But now,

He is looking for his existence.



He is looking for himself.

He is proud to call himself

A *dalit* poet.

3.1 Critical Summary

'A Dalit poet... A lantern of his ancestors.'

Parmar speaks of how a Dalit poet leaves a lot behind in order to forge ahead. 'A paper dripping wet with blood', is emblematic of a literary archiving of violent Dalit atrocities which are smeared with bloodshed. The life experienced by a Dalit which is enveloped in darkness, is captured by the image, 'A black sun / On the night's head', signifying the absence light. By attributing darkness to the biggest illuminating star (the sun), Parmar heightens the darkness that often envelops a Dalit's life. The interplay of light and darkness at the textual level signifies the binary that exists at the extratextual level wherein the Dalit continues to face systemic violence and prejudice, thereby denying opportunities for growth and advancement. Parmar further writes that among other things, what a Dalit poet leaves behind is 'A river of blood', which is symbolic of the atrocities, discrimination, and hardships that is a part and parcel of a Dalit's life in a society which justifies casteism and practices oppressive violence. This bloodied river holds within its contours the perennial flow of historical violence that has been meted out to the Dalit community. Parmar ends the first stanza by stating how the act of recounting the life of a Dalit (here, a Dalit poet) is not a testament of a single individual life, but of an entire community. Thus, Dalit narratives are also known as testimonies as they retell lived experiences. This collective memory is expressed in the phrase 'A lantern of his ancestors' which carries within it, lingering traces of a past history populated with acts of extremities of pain, hurt, and discrimination faced by the Dalit community. The juxtaposition between a lack of social agency which comprises the life of a Dalit, with the yearning for a self-assertion to state the last will of a Dalit poet heightens the lived social reality of a Dalit in the Hindu Savarna society, and the social transformation which is essential to set right the historical wrongs.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Parmar use images and metaphors to elaborate upon the Dalit experience?
2. Why is a Dalit experience not singular but collective?
3. Why does the poem emphasise upon 'leaving'? What is to be left behind?

**‘He never assaults... and a broken cup.’**

Parmar goes on to state that a Dalit poet does not assault the other person’s senses with symbols, metaphors, and or personalities. The word ‘assault’ which carries a violent and destructive impulse is not used by the poet to articulate physical violence. Instead, the poet focuses on how textual, and literary devices, are never transformed by the Dalit poet into utterances that seem like a vitriolic attack. However, it is significant to point out that Dalit poetry or writing, by way of constantly resisting casteist slurs is densely populated with incidents that recount violence, physical coercion, and suppression. Yet, a close perusal of the same brings to light the fact that though Dalit writing in the face of oppression inevitably focuses on acts of assault, Dalit writing in itself hinges upon establishing equitable relations in society and voicing the need for social transformation. If a Dalit poet’s words seem like an assault akin to a physical attack, it is crucial for the reader to understand that these are not assaults but articulations that make evident the normalised discriminatory practices that inhere the socio-cultural fabric of a caste-based social structure.

It is at this point that the poetic voice directly addresses someone. This ‘you’ could stand not only for the reader but also for any non-Dalit person. By creating a direct contrast between a Dalit poet and the other ‘you’, the poet makes it evident that the poet’s attempt at encapsulating the Dalit experience is not only different in its expression but also directed towards an intended reader.

Parmar further describes the downtrodden state of a Dalit poet who is recounting the experiences of his own journey and that of his brethren community. The comparison of a Dalit poet to a ‘heavy burden on a donkey’s back’ implies not only the oppression that the donkey suffers, but also the burden that the donkey carries of the collective memory of oppression suffered by the Dalits. Identifying himself as ‘a wounded shadow’, the poet states that as a Dalit poet he is speaking from a place of ‘no existence’ and is akin to a shadow that lurks in darkness. It is important to note the recurring imagery of darkness and desolation that runs through the poem.

The poem states that, he who is himself shattered due to social ills, will not inflict symbolic meanings upon you and traumatise you. The poet further opines that because a Dalit poet occupies the location of an absent presence that is not registered, his presence is akin to a ‘wounded shadow’. The poet extends this lack of recognition by heightening the state of brokenness by way of establishing a comparison between the Dalit poet and a broken cup. By equating himself with an inanimate object and negating any difference between a human (here, a Dalit poet) and an object (broken cup), Parmar sheds lights on



the act of dehumanisation that is apparent in caste-based discrimination of individuals and communities. The poet makes an incisive remark upon social operations at work which objectify Dalits by dehumanising their subjective self and by rendering them as people with no social existence, relevance, and importance.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Parmar use metaphors to heighten the Dalit experience?
2. Elaborate upon the notion of 'violence' vis-a-vis Parmar's poetic expression.
3. What social position does a Dalit occupy?

He, who makes... Art lives forever.

Parmar now explores the intersection of the socio-material existence of a Dalit's life and the liberating radical power of art. A crucial aspect of a Dalit's life is the close proximity to the natural world. However, it is the practice of environmental casteism which entail a denial of access to natural resources that leaves them on the fringes. Democratisation of natural resources is an important aspect of transformative social justice. Yet, it is the Dalits who are discriminated against, and are employed to carry out menial tasks such as disposal of natural excreta, cleaning of drain pipes, and manual scavenging to name a few.

Parmar co-mingles natural imagery with caste prejudice and rebellion. The Dalit worker who 'makes images with cow-dung' is equally aware that the passage of time which is measured in the hour glass, records a Dalit's struggle against social ostracisation and exile. The phrase 'in the sunflower of rebellions' carries within it a sense of revolutionary zeal. By way of an oxymoron, the poet yokes together two contrary images- one of a flower which stands for delicateness and the other of rebellion, which stands for resisting oppression. Like the sunflower, the Dalit poet must turn towards the sun, towards light, in order to bloom and sing songs of rebellion.

For Parmar, artistic expression is a social document and has dual objectives: 1) to capture the sense of tortured time, pain, atrocities, personal anguish, collective agony, and resistance, and 2) to use 'the pen and the ink' as a weapon (here, the spear) in order to articulate a self-definition of a Dalit. Although at present, a Dalit poet/writer has to live with the reality of not being accorded much recognition, nonetheless 'Art lives forever', and Dalit literature will one day find its rightful place among great literatures. Parmar stresses upon the importance of art by highlighting how it holds within its contours the ability to archive, acknowledge, and thus, radically represent the lived realities of a Dalit.



Furthermore, while the phrase encapsulates an attribute of timelessness to artistic expression as having the power to transcend time and space; Dalit artistic expression complicates such a simplistic understanding of art for aesthetic pleasure alone. It challenges mainstream Brahminical definition of the aesthetic as embodying universalising tendencies of pleasure and beauty. Thus, art pertaining to Dalit literature lives forever as it decidedly focuses on fighting for human rights, raising the reader's consciousness regarding basic fundamental concerns such as equality and justice, and voicing resistance against dominant Savarna casteist practices.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Parmar highlight the practice of environmental casteism?
2. Is there a shift in the poet's tone in this stanza?
3. What is the function of Dalit literature?
4. What role does art play with respect to the Dalit discourse?

1. But now... A dalit poet.

In the final stanza of the poem, Parmar writes that the Dalit poet is now searching for his existence and for his own self. This last stanza heightens the crisis of identity. Years of generational trauma and collective social exclusion which constantly negated a Dalit's existence finds a semblance of balance and restoration towards the end of the poem. However, in the final lines of the last stanza, the Dalit poet posits that his own identity gives him satisfaction and pride. From a history of bloodshed, the poet has succeeded to move on to embark upon a journey which recognises the Dalit self as an identity which is complete for him.

Looking at the poem as a whole, the overarching concern is not to merely write about a Dalit poet coming into existence; instead, the endeavour is to bring into existence, a processual body of writings of/on the Dalit experience.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is the notion of self-representation significant in terms of the Dalit discourse?
2. How does the last stanza differ from the earlier stanzas?
3. How does Parmar identify a Dalit poet in the last stanza?
4. How does the Dalit poet engage with a history of oppression?
5. What is the purpose of this poem?



4. Critical Analysis

Title

The title ‘The Last Will of the Dalit Poet’ encapsulates the yearning for an acknowledgment of the Dalit poet’s voice, choice, agentic capacity, and self-expression. Though the title archives the will of ‘a’ Dalit ‘poet’, it must be kept in mind that the literary articulation of a Dalit poet exceeds a singular identity/voice and records instead, the voice of a collective. Eminent Urdu critic Gopichand Narang poignantly observes that “Urdu is the cultural language of minority, but Jayant Parmar’s predicament represents a minority within minority. In other words, this marginalized voice is subaltern within subaltern” (2009, 68). Indeed, the title encapsulates the last will of an anguished Dalit poet, which the pain of caste marginalisation and social injustice, has failed to actualise. It is only towards the end of poem that Parmar as a poet-painter records the yearning of a Dalit (through the figure of the poet) for the basic fundamental right of living a life of dignity and pride. It is both the poetic persona within the poem and Parmar as a poet-painter himself who finally emerge as representational voices of a community undoing years of internalisation of caste prejudice.

Social Concerns: Untouchability and Self-Representation

Parmar’s poetry is impregnated with social concerns as it explores concerns related to caste liberation. If suffering the stigma of untouchability is an important locus of Dalit literature, Parmar’s poetic vision is not only a testament to the trials and tribulations of the Dalit community; but also of reclaiming the Dalit identity. It records how caste identity functions in terms of hierarchical segregation, and explicitly states how caste oppression denies the Dalit equal opportunities in society.

It is interesting to note that Parmar dovetails the poetic expression with the theme of self-representation by beginning the poem with the phrase ‘A Dalit poet’. By stating at the outset a clearly defined identity (a Dalit poet), Parmar ascribes the Dalit poet with a centrality that is socially denied. Interestingly, the poem begins and ends with the same phrase - ‘A Dalit poet’. However, the ending phrase stresses upon the Dalit-ness of the poet. Ending the poem with the phrase ‘A *dalit* poem’ (italics in original), iterates a sense of identity, assertion, and pride in the same category which in the hands of mainstream Savarna discourse is reserved only for atrocious subjugation. The poem ends on a note where it represents the normative downtrodden identity of a crumbled Dalit self into an active and agentic individual. In the end lies the beginning of an identity which is not represented in terms of a brahminical construction that *lends* the Dalit an identity, but as



an identity which has a will of its own. It is an act of reclamation of a Dalit self. If the Dalit is made to occupy the periphery/outskirts/margins of geographical spatial locations; the Dalit poet begins from the end to find a centred self-identity that s/he is proud of.

The poem articulates resistance by shaping up and defining the identity of a Dalit poet in a tortured social fabric that insists upon shaping their lives in terms of constant oppression and negation. Thus, the poem emerges not only as a literary piece of protest, resistance, and defiance. It also performs the function of an affirmation of life and poetic articulation. Moreover, the constant theme that runs through the course of the poem is of a Dalit poetic self which is constantly negotiating social ills.

5. Summing Up

The poem collects experiences of pain, suffering, humiliation, anger and is an expression of a Dalit worldview. Through a deep-felt subjective anguish, Jayant Parmar “does not wear his sufferings lightly and peels away layers of ignominy of untouchability accumulated over years in an idiom that is direct and completely devoid of rhetorical flourish” (Kidwai, 2014, 78). His poem is an expression of Dalit anguish stemming from a subjective position. If the presiding concern of Parmar’s poetry is image-making, his word strokes holds within their contours a collective resistance which brings to the surface, a clarion call for self-representation and self-determination.

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III(5)

‘New Custom’ Ajay Navaria

Anju Gurawa

Structure

1. Learning Objectives
2. Introduction
 - 2.1 About the Author
3. ‘New Custom’
 - 3.1 Detailed Summary
 - 3.2 Critical Analysis
4. References

1. Learning Objectives

This lesson will enable you to:

- ◆ Critically analyse the short story ‘New Custom’ (Naya Kaayada)
- ◆ Situate the text in the context of Dalit oppression as also Dalit emancipation
- ◆ Explore the binary of purity and pollution within the caste hierarchy
- ◆ Understand the positive change in caste dynamics in the urban areas
- ◆ Understand symbolic resistance as an emancipating force

2. Introduction

2.1 About the Author

Ajay Navaria, (1972-) is a significant figure in Hindi literature, well-known for his focus on Dalit narratives. Educated in literature and social sciences, he is a Professor at the Department of Hindi, Jamia Milia Islamia. His notable works include two short story collections *Patkatha aur Anya Kahaniyan* (2006) and *Yes Sir* (2008), and a novel *Udhar Ke Log* (2008). These writings effectively capture the challenges and aspirations of marginalized communities, dealing with universal themes such as identity, resistance and caste-based



oppression. Navaria's ability to portray his characters beyond their social conditions has made him a pivotal voice in literature that addresses caste and cultural identities.

His works have been translated into multiple languages, extending their influence and sparking important conversations about inclusivity in literature. In an interview with G. Sampath in *The Hindu*, dated 02 November 2018, Navaria says, "The idea behind 'Dalit literature' as a separate category is simple: it is about Dalit writers trying to break the hegemony of the upper castes over the literary mainstream. They are saying, if you don't give us entry into your power structure, we will set up a parallel power structure of our own." This belief drives his writing, aiming to challenge societal norms and promote a more equitable discourse in literature, highlighting not just the struggles but also the resilience of the Dalit community.

The short story 'New Custom' prescribed for your reading is from *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013), a collection of seven of his short stories, translated into English by Laura Brueck. This story is based on Navaria's own experience at a tea stall in a village of Rajasthan.

3. 'New Custom'

3.1 Detailed Summary

The protagonist of the story is an educated urban Dalit, who arrives from the city by a bus, to attend a wedding in the village. Although it is past nine in the morning it is still dark and foggy. He notices a naked man lying on the road in a distance, and also becomes aware of a foul smell of rotting flesh in the air. He has a strong urge to cover his ears with his muffler, to protect himself from the cold wind, but resists it, as he is averse to being mocked as "Hey Bihari! Oye Bihari!" (45) He is very conscious not only of his appearance, but also of cleanliness and hygiene, which sometimes results in unpleasantness with his wife, who thinks that he is obsessed with it.

His attention is drawn by a shopkeeper of a tea stall who addresses him as "Darbar". The tea stall is very dirty, and the "blackened tea pot" rivals the shabby, unkempt shop keeper's "fat filthy feet" (46) and "rotten teeth stained black with paan masala." (47) Despite his aversion to unhygienic, dirty places, upon being addressed as Darbar, he stops at the tea stall and orders tea. Evidently, it is because he is pleased by the honorific used by the shop keeper. The shop keeper's attitude is one of extreme servility, and when the man asks him the reason for being addressed by a title reserved for the upper caste Thakurs, he replies, "Oh, that's easy, darbar. Seeing your coat and pants, and your commanding presence, anyone would know." (47) this reply takes the man back to the conversation he had with his father the previous night. The man, who is a Professor at a



famous university in the city, had acquired a “special kind of pride and refinement” (46), and sincerely believes that “money changes everything” (48); that economic prosperity ensures protection from caste discrimination. He is warned by his father that things have not changed in the village, “Still, be careful, everything is just as it was there... the change that money has wrought is the change you see on rocks in a riverbed.” (48)

The protagonist, at this point is mistaken that, as in the city, in the villages too, caste identity has no bearing on the daily life of Dalits, especially for those like him who have risen in social rank. Sitting at the tea stall, his attention is drawn to the two playful puppies, one plump and white, the other skinny and brown. He observes that the skinny brown one is the more dominant one. The puppies bring into focus the rigid social hierarchies that are absent in the animal world.

The shopkeeper Banwari Saini, when told by the man that he is there for a wedding, thinks he is a guest at the wedding of Dharam Singhji’s daughter, an upper-caste Thakur. The shopkeeper mentions, “Believe me, when his elder daughter was married, I slogged real hard...I was young then. I even gave five cots and eight copper pots for the wedding party’s stay...my whole family slept on the ground for five days.” He adds, “You have to maintain the rules and customs of the village.” (50) He is however puzzled as to how this news did not reach him.

But when it’s revealed that the man is actually attending the wedding of Dharma Harijan’s son, a Dalit, the shopkeeper’s behaviour changes drastically. This reveals how caste still governs social respect and interactions in the village. The man feels betrayed and angry by how quickly the shop keeper’s attitude changes from deference to rudeness and condescension. Matters come to a head when the man is asked to wash the glass he has used. He is expected to follow a humiliating old custom; washing his own glass because by touching it he has polluted it, and those higher in caste than the Dalits (in this case, the shop keeper who is a saini) will not clean/wash the cup used by a Dalit.

Refusing to accept this degrading custom, the man breaks the glass in a bold act of defiance. This act, isn’t just a rejection of the deeply oppressive and humiliating practice, but also marks the start of a ‘New Custom’. His act of defiance is a strong protest against the dehumanizing caste system which strips the Dalits of basic human dignity and respect. He refuses to be humiliated for who he is, the shards of broken glass a message to the shop keeper and the others supporting him, that he rejects the identity imposed upon him. Money, appearance, education and social standing become meaningless when the caste system rears its ugly head. Through this narrative, Navaria not only critiques caste-based discrimination but also shows how individual actions can challenge and change repressive traditions.



Check Your Progress

1. What is the significance of the protagonist's clothing in the story "New Custom" by Ajay Navaria?
2. How does the shopkeeper's treatment of the protagonist change when he learns about the protagonist's caste?
3. What does the act of breaking the glass symbolize in the story?
4. What is the significance of the puppies?
5. In what way does the man differ from his father, in the assessment of Dalit status?

3.2 Critical Analysis

Ajay Navaria's "New Custom" narrates the story of a Dalit man who experiences the harsh realities of caste discrimination in India. Initially, he is mistaken for an upper caste and treated with respect. His urban attire, confident demeanor, "tall stature and broad frame" make the shop keeper assume that he must be a Thakur. However, the situation changes dramatically when his identity as a Dalit is revealed. Instantly, the respect turns to humiliation combined with threats of violence, as indicated by a shopkeeper's hostile declaration, "He's going to get thrashed. The bastard's exposed." (51) This shift underscores how caste-based oppression is often based on perceptions and how easily respect can be withdrawn once a person's Dalit status is known. When the man asks why he is being forced into washing the glass, the shopkeeper shouts, "Why?! This is the custom of the village. A rise in status does not put an end to custom." (51) To impress the bystanders and clinch the matter in his favour, he asks, "Should I serve you tea now in a Harijan glass?" (510) This exchange highlights how a Dalit cannot escape caste despite his social status.

In the city, the protagonist is protected by the law, as also anonymity of city life, which shield him from direct discrimination. This anonymity highlights the contrast between urban settings, where caste may seem less visible, and rural areas, where caste identities are more prominently enforced. The story uses this setting of a village to explore the idea that while cities offer a facade of equality, true acceptance and change are more complex. It illustrates that despite appearances, the struggle against caste discrimination and the demand for genuine equality is ongoing and full of difficult challenges.

This physical uncleanliness of the shop keeper and his stall is thematically important because the notion of purity in the caste system does not operate on the basis of physical uncleanliness. It is based on the inviolable location of birth. If one is born in the Dalit caste, then s/he is considered polluted, unclean and inferior by birth. The man's father is



right after all, “...the change that money has wrought is the change you see on rocks in a riverbed.” 48 This reinforces the idea that despite the protagonist’s success and wealth, he cannot escape the deeply entrenched caste system in the village.

The man’s strong desire for cleanliness represents an inner struggle with his caste identity and the expectations that society puts on him because of it. It also represents the wish of Dalits to be accepted and to move up in the strict hierarchy of Hindu society. M.N. Srinivas refers to this phenomenon as “Sanskritization.” Through Sanskritization people from lower castes try to improve their social status by adopting the customs, rituals, and way of life of higher castes, especially the twice-born (Brahmin) caste. In “New Custom,” the main character’s focus on cleanliness can be seen as an attempt at Sanskritization. By adopting Brahmin standards of hygiene, he tries to create a new identity that separates him from typical caste-based perceptions. So, while the main character’s obsession with cleanliness might seem like a personal choice, it actually represents a larger struggle for Dalits to be accepted and to challenge the rigid caste system.

The man in the story is also very particular about his attire and his over-all appearance. He will bear the biting cold wind, but will not wrap his muffler around his ears. This self-presentation, in the wider context of Dalit liberation movements, serves as a strong counter-narrative to the long-standing rules that have tried to control and degrade Dalit bodies through strict dress codes.

The protagonist’s act of shattering the glass at the end underscores the importance of individual resistance against caste prejudices. This act of rebellion serves as a metaphor for the breaking of the shackles of oppression and the assertion of one’s dignity in the face of discrimination. This powerful moment of defiance serves as a call for change, urging a shift from oppressive customs to a ‘New Custom’ of equality and respect for all, regardless of caste.

“New Custom” subtly hints at the potential of education and economic empowerment to do away with the entrenched patterns of discrimination. The protagonist’s ability to purchase the glass and his defiant act of breaking it symbolize the growing agency and resistance among the Dalit community, as they strive to challenge the oppressive social norms and assert their rights. This change in Dalit identity, has been made possible by reservation policies and various other proactive policies and legal reforms by successive governments, marking an important shift in India’s social and economic landscape. ‘New Custom’ while it reflects on the socio-economic changes that have allowed some Dalits to rise in social status, also critically examines the limitations and challenges that accompany this transition.



Check Your Progress

1. "A rise in status does not put an end to custom." Explain this statement in the context of the story
2. Briefly explain how the protagonist's obsession with cleanliness and hygiene is an attempt at sanskritization.
3. Explain the concepts of purity and pollution with reference to the caste system.
4. Why is the protagonist's act of breaking the glass at the end of the story important?

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* All references to the text are from this edition.



‘Black Ink’ Sanjaya Kumar Bag

Bharat Choudhary

Structure

1. Learning Objectives
2. Introduction
3. About the Author
4. Detailed Summary and Analysis
 - 4.1 The Speeches Gandhiji Made and My Budhadada Who Could Not Understand Them
 - 4.2 The Nine-Layered Sacred Thread, Ma Brundabati and Good Deeds of Previous Births
 - 4.3 Once Again Krishna Touched the Donkey’s Feet: The Honest Businessman
 - 4.4 Snacks and Tea, Liquor and the Great Democracy
 - 4.5 India Shining and The ‘Bald Head’ of Gandhiji Moving Around at Midnight
5. Summing Up
6. Glossary
7. References

1. Learning Objectives

This lesson will enable you to:

- ◆ Critically summarise the story with emphasis on the manner in which the electoral process is undermined time and again
- ◆ Study and analyse the oppressive, discriminatory practice of caste system in Indian society
- ◆ Take a critical look at the concepts of democracy, nation, equality, class and caste hierarchy, as represented in the story



2. Introduction

‘Black Ink’ (Kalasyahi) is an Odia short story by Sanjaya Kumar Bag, translated into English by Raj Kumar and included in the collection of short stories titled, *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins* (2017), edited by Basu, Acharya, and Mangai. This collection brings to the foreground Dalit writings from various Indian languages. It helps the readers to explore the history of Dalit literature, its salient features and concerns, and the sensibilities required for its appreciation. Through the very encounter of reading Dalit stories, the text makes the reader reflect on his/her own prejudices, and question the comfortable stereotypes which enforce a Brahminic perception of caste.

‘Black Ink’ is a satire which throws light on the electoral practice in India and the Dalit community. Post-independence India adopted the principle of universal adult franchise, whereby every citizen, regardless of their caste, class and status has a right to vote. This story shows how the right to vote turns out to be a futile exercise not only for Dalits and tribals, but also for a large number of illiterate and underprivileged people. The story is narrated with a constant reference to Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation. The symbolic presence of the Mahatma in the story serves as a constant reminder as to how his vision of India is shattered time and again, by the leaders of independent India.

The original Odia title of the story ‘Kalasyahi’, refers to the indelible black ink used in elections to mark a voter. By presenting the scene of election procedure in rural India, it focuses on the struggle of the underprivileged sections of our society; their struggle for independence from the oppressive social norms and practices, imposed and reinforced by people belonging to the privileged upper castes and class.

3. About the Author

Sanjaya Kumar Bag was born in 1976. A creative writer in Odia, he has also worked on Odia folklore, and culture, as well as Dalit literature. He earned his Doctorate degree from the University of Delhi on folklore studies and currently teaches at the Eastern Regional Language Centre, Bhubaneswar. As a creative writer, he has published two anthologies of short stories *Barnabodha O Madhubabunka Katha* in 2009, and *Birrangdevi Ebang Jhinjoli Dnagar Talara Katha* in 2017. His research work includes *Paschima Odishara Paramparika Krida: Eka Lokatattwitika Adhyayana* in 2008, *Lokadhara: Sarjanasheela Jibanadharara Adyayana* in 2012, and *Odishara Lokakreeda* in 2017. His stories have been translated and published in Hindi, English, and Assamese.



Bag's observations and experiences of his childhood as a Dalit, have been major contributing factors in his fiction and autobiographical work. In his own words, Bag has explained his background, the society he was raised in, his caste and about his father and grandfather who became a significant influence for his writings;

"I come from a great Indian village where caste is everything - it is not only a component of the community life, but also a decisive factor in economy, education, identity, politics and culture. My father was the younger son of a Gana, who worked as a village Chowkidar, next to Gauntia (the Jamindar), and was privileged to cultivate some amount of land. He had a keen interest in education and always considered learning as the greatest wealth of this world. As he read from the primer of the time, he tried to inspire me to read – to acquire knowledge. I offered a vivid description of this childhood event in my autobiographical story "Barnabodha O Madhubabunka Katha". My grandfather and his fellow workers could not even collect drinking water from the public pond or well. They had to wait for someone from the upper caste to pour it from a great height into their pot. My father had great faith in Ganatantra and education; he always believed that in educated and democratic India caste-based discrimination would not happen. So he was hopeful without understanding the factors responsible for the prevalence of Dalit Suffering even in this modern democratic nation." (Basu et al., eds. 35)

4. Detailed Summary and Analysis

4.1 The Speeches Gandhiji Made and My Budhadada Who Could Not Understand Them

The Narrator tells us that Mahatma Gandhi was present in his village on the day our country attained independence. A gathering was organized in the village's school where Gandhiji broke the news of the country's independence, achieved after a long, relentless struggle. The villagers had never heard such words and were unaware of the tri-colour flag and the national anthem. They asked Gandhiji, what the terms country and independence stood for. Gandhiji's speech about the end of kingship and the arrival of democracy and elections was beyond the villagers grasp. Later the Gauntia (Jamindar) explained Gandhiji's speech, to the villagers in simple language.

The Narrator's Budhadada could not attend the gathering as he was busy preparing the Gauntia's paddy field. He was obsessed with Gandhiji and wanted to see him but could not say no to the Gauntia. For common people, Gandhiji "was a Mahatma – a god in the form of a man. When he walked, a lotus bloomed under every step he took. The moment he blessed the poor, their sufferings disappeared. When he touched the sick, they were cured...Therefore the people, as a mark of respect, collected dust from his feet



and smeared it on their foreheads. ” (Basu et al., eds. 36) And so, Budhadada goes to the school at midnight and collects a little dust from the place where Gandhiji had sat, and smears it on his forehead.

Though British rule had ended, kingship continued, as the villagers were still under the rule of the Gauntia. There was a time, when the village did not have the Gauntia system. The Brahmin Gauntia was an outsider, installed in the village by the local king, enjoyed immense power, and looked like a god. No one dared to refuse his order. He had hundreds of acres of land, where the landless labourers and poor peasants worked without getting any wage. Like the others, Budhadada too worked for the Gauntia, otherwise, the Gauntia would take away the land he had given to Budhadada.

When elections were held in the country, the party workers in white khadi clothes came to the village and encouraged the villagers to cast their votes for their party. Budhadada was very happy to participate in the elections by casting his vote and getting the black ink (Kalasyahi) on his finger. With the hope that Gandhiji will come to the village, he encouraged others to vote as well. He was determined to meet Gandhiji this time. He eagerly waited for it but Gandhiji never came back.

Analysis

This section of the story juxtaposes the concept of freedom and independence against the lived reality of the villagers, which is one of bondage and slavery. In the village, caste discrimination and class distinction is a general practice, and the common poor villagers have no idea about concepts like country and independence which Gandhi had mentioned in his speech.

The Gauntia, who belongs to the Brahmin caste is a *Jamindar* who had acquired all the land in the village and exploited the poor and lower caste people by making them work for him without any wages. The narrator is laying bare the irony of an independent India, where a majority of the people who belong to the lower castes and impoverished class have no freedom and continue to be discriminated against, and exploited by the upper castes. The Gauntia was a Brahmin by caste and no one ever dared to question him. Even in independent India, he continued being the head of the village. Therefore, it is not surprising that, Budhadada is unable to understand how democracy has replaced kingship. On the one hand, the whole country is celebrating the end of British rule and slavery, and on the other, there is a huge section of the country’s population under the bondage of caste distinction and discrimination. Words like independence and democracy have no meaning for Dalits and other lower caste communities, as they are still being ruled and exploited by the upper caste people.



Elections, if held in the true spirit of democracy, can bring about true freedom for the villagers. For the first time, the lower caste and poor people get a chance to participate in deciding who gets to govern the nation and alter their condition. For centuries, they were treated as outcastes, and were unable to express or voice their opinion on social and political matters, but now they have been given an inalienable fundamental right to change their condition through the ballot. The ironical part in all this is that, although they are happy to become a part of the election process, they do not seem to understand the wider implications of what voting for a candidate or a particular political party actually means, and so, the idea that their vote has the power to bring about a change in their lives, simply escapes them. The act of casting a vote becomes a meaningless exercise, and ideas like independence, democracy and equality become hollow empty forms.

The myth-making around the figure of Gandhiji, shows us the gullible nature of the villagers, who do not question the truth-value of the myths surrounding the Mahatma. This affords an opportunity to men like the Gauntia to exploit this gullibility to maintain the power status-quo. At this point, it is worthwhile to note that the Gauntia himself, is surrounded by the myths of god-like power, and divine looks attributed to his Brahmin birth.

Check Your Progress

1. Budhadada could not meet Gandhiji, when the latter visited his village. Why? What does it tell you about the Gauntia?
2. Who was the 'Gauntia' of the village? What is his role in the village administration?

4.2 The Nine-Layered Sacred Thread, Ma Brundabati and Good Deeds of Previous Births

The Gauntia was the only one who sat next to Gandhiji, when he had come to the village. They had a long conversation on topics such as country, independence, and democracy. Gandhiji patted him by way of encouragement, impressed by his knowledge on such matters. This made the villagers respect the Gauntia even more. During elections, the Gauntia wore khadi clothes and simply ordered the villagers to vote for his representative. He was the head of the village and no one disobeyed him. People could not think of giving their votes to anyone else.

Budhadada narrates the incident, when the Gauntia had come to their neighbourhood. Everyone there was elated with his arrival. They equated it to the independence that Gandhiji had talked about because no upper caste man had ever come to their neighbourhood, especially the Gauntia. If ever he needed anyone, then he would send his *halia* with a message. This time Gauntia himself came to instruct the people about the voting. He told



people to cast their vote for a certain symbol and that it was Gandhiji’s message and not his. Everyone obeyed him without any question or second thought.

Then Gauntia took out his nine-layered sacred thread and asked everyone to touch it as a form of pledge. People were astonished and not able to believe their eyes that they are able to touch the sacred thread. Budhadada narrates this incident to the narrator by calling it the good deed of his past lives, that he was able to touch the sacred thread. For him, this was proof of democracy.

The Gauntia started to appear like Gandhiji. He interacted with the women of the locality as well, instructed them about democracy, voting process and whom to vote. He brought a *tulsi* plant along with him and asked everyone to take a vow in front of the plant to vote for his candidate. For the Dom community, this became a matter of extreme happiness. Women believed themselves to be fortunate that they can now worship *Ma Brundabati*. Everyone felt grateful towards the Gauntia for providing such blessings and voted for his candidate. They continued waiting for Gandhiji, hoping that he would come again during elections.

Analysis

This section makes a telling statement on the state of our democracy. Nothing much seems to have changed for the Dalits, as they do not question their status as outcastes and bonded labour. The hierarchical caste system is so firmly entrenched in their psyche, and so fully internalised as “normal” and God ordained, that an egalitarian social system wherein they are not considered as “polluted”, and hence inferior, is beyond their comprehension. They are so used to obeying orders, that they collectively vote for the Gauntia’s candidate. The state of their mental enslavement is such that, the arrival of the Gauntia in their segregated part of the village is equated to the arrival of independence and democracy. They feel blessed that a Brahmin for the first time has placed his foot in their area and graced it with his presence. The gullibility and ignorance of the Dalits is misused by people like Gauntia who manipulate the community in various ways. By asking the Dom people to touch his sacred thread, and bringing the *tulsi* plant into the Dom locality, he fools them into believing that their social status has improved. The reverence of the Dalits for the sacred thread worn by the Brahmins is akin to that for a God, and for the women Ma Brundabati has been installed in the form of the tulsi plant. The Doms do not realise that the sacred thread worn by the Brahmins, and the tulsi plant are symbols of privilege and exclusivity. For a community used to being treated as untouchables, the actions of the Gauntia seemed like a real change; sadly, they are unable to see these actions as mere tokenism, and that there is fundamentally no change whatsoever in their condition. Gaun-



tia is not raising any real issues for the betterment of the lower caste people but simply reinforcing their exploitation to get their votes in elections.

The white khadi clothes with a strong symbolic connotation to the Mahatma indicates how Gandhi's image is used by the Jamindar and party workers to influence the voters. Shiv Visvanathan in the article 'For Whom the Drums Beat' writes, "The slow erosion of faith in Gandhi from icon to token is what the narrative captures.... The erosion is every day and consolidated with every election. Elections capture the tokenism of democracy as Gandhi gives way to Gandhians, Congressmen in khadi, zamindars playing politicians." (Visvanathan para.9) The unscrupulousness of the dominant ruling castes and classes becomes evident here, as the name of the Mahatma and the symbolic white 'khadi' is being exploited for electoral gains. The 'waiting' for the Mahatma, at a metaphorical level, translates into waiting for the egalitarian society envisaged by the Mahatma.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Gauntia come to the Dom neighbourhood?
2. What was Gauntia's intention behind letting the Dalits touch his sacred thread? Was it an act of equality and inclusiveness?

4.3 Once Again Krishna Touched the Donkey's Feet: The Honest Businessman

The passage of time in the story is not made very explicit. However we can safely assume that we have moved ahead in time, as in the election described in this part of the story, Harisir's son, who is also the Gauntia's nephew, is contesting the elections. Harisir is the headmaster in the Middle English School. Following in his uncle's footsteps, Harisir's son also wears white khadi clothes and advocates the virtues of democracy and equality to the villagers. Once while making a speech in the Dom community neighbourhood, he asks for food. The Doms are shocked and reluctant to offer him food as he is a Brahmin, and for a Brahmin to partake food cooked and served by a Dalit is a sin. Harisir's son cites the example of Gandhiji, who had accepted food from Madhu who belonged to their community. Finally, with reluctance Harisir's son is given watered rice with roasted dried fish from Nari's house, who is a Dom. This creates a huge controversy in the village, especially by the upper castes as this threatens the caste hierarchy, and might dilute the boundaries that keep the Dalits confined to their place in the society, i.e. as outcastes. He is cursed by everyone in his family and prevented from entering the house. He defends himself by arguing that he could not bear the charges made by the opposition, that he and his family members deliberately kept the Doms in a state of ignorance. By eating



food from Dom people, his intention was to prove the opposition wrong. Gauntia supports his action and explains to his people, that winning the elections is more important and that Harisir’s son did the right thing. He cites from the Purana, and tells them that even Krishna had to touch a donkey’s feet in his time of need. Harisir’s son wins the elections.

People credit Gandhiji’s visit to their village for all the happenings. They wait for his next visit which never occurs. The Narrator’s Budhadada passes away, and his wish of meeting Gandhiji, remains unfulfilled.

Analysis

Harisir’s son’s true intention behind eating food from a Dalit’s house, is not to discard casteism or to promote equality among all castes. It is an election gimmick, done to promote his image as a liberal politician and eventually to win the elections. Nonetheless, the act in itself cannot be dismissed as an election stunt. Unwittingly, a caste prejudice (based on the purity/pollution binary) firmly entrenched for thousands of years, has been broken. Once broken, it gives rise to the possibility that it can be broken again and again, perhaps leading to the day when people finally understand that the concepts of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ are neither ‘natural’ nor ‘God-ordained’; but have been created by dominant classes, to perpetuate a deeply prejudiced, hierarchical social system, to subjugate and control the less privileged within the society.

This incident also highlights how the dominant class can change its narrative with the changing times, and create new innovative ways to retain their position within the society as law makers.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is it important for Harisir’s son to eat food from the Dom?
2. What is the relevance of ‘Krishna touching a donkey’s feet’ here?

4.4 Snacks and Tea, Liquor and the Great Democracy

On the day of the election, Nari who had given food to Harisir’s son, is seen standing at the corner of the school. She offers snacks and tea to the voters. She also gives them a ten rupee note and instructs them to cast their vote in favour of Harisir’s son.

The voting takes place at the school where Gandhiji had given his speech. People are happy for the unexpected bounty of snacks and money. They continue waiting for Gandhiji, hoping that he will come again during elections.



Analysis

This section introduces the readers to the corruption that is rampant during the elections. The sanctity of the vote is undermined by the manner in which the vote is commodified, and is openly bought and sold. The vote which was envisaged as a tool of empowerment for the marginalised sections of the nation, is rendered valueless and becomes a toy in the hands of the few rich and powerful people. Keeping the masses poor and ignorant suits them, as this helps them to reinforce the status-quo of the regressive caste and class distinctions.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the sanctity of the vote get undermined?

4.5 India Shining and The ‘Bald Head’ of Gandhiji Moving Around at Midnight

In this section, we move further ahead in time, and the reference to Vajpayee and the ‘India Shining’ slogan tells us that the year is 2004. This time the election was different. For some people the country was shining like silver, and for some others it was shining like a diamond. Everyone thought that India was not just shining but was also smiling. And that in future, India would continue to shine like the stars and smile Buddha’s eternal smile. Most people in the narrator’s village voted for Vajpayee’s party, and “when they cast their votes, it felt like there were smiling lotuses imprinted on their forefingers.” (Basu et al., eds. 43) Significantly, there were also a considerable number of people who did not think that India was either shining or smiling. To win over this lot, party workers in white khadi clothes started giving five hundred rupee notes with the party symbol drawn on Gandhiji’s forehead. The campaigners realized that the people were not accepting speeches on the nation’s progress and prosperity at its face value. Where earlier snacks, tea or liquor with a ten rupee note was enough to buy votes, now this was no longer the case. People had become ‘greedy’.

Sagadia Dadi who was around the same age as the narrator’s Budhadada, had a mild shock seeing the image of Gandhiji’s bald head on the notes, floating down in their *pada*. People gathered around him when he recovered. He tells everyone that the people running for elections and their supporters had magical charms, and that is how they controlled Gandhiji and sent his stamped bald heads to the villagers. He addresses the image of Gandhiji on the notes and says, “After meeting the Gauntia you left and never came back. We waited for you so long....Finally you have come as a ghost. Why did you come at midnight to trouble us? Let’s go. I’ll take you to the end of the village where the three roads meet, and bury your troubling spirit there for your final rehabilitation.” (Basu et al., eds. 44) Sagadia Dadi starts tearing up all the notes.



Analysis

We move to 2004, sixty six years after India's independence. Vajpayee, who was the prime minister of India from 1999-2004, is once again the prime ministerial candidate seeking another term in office. Along with the India 'shining' and 'smiling' campaign, Gandhiji finally, arrives in the village, as a picture on the 500 rupee currency note, that too as a bribe. Sagadia Dadi who belongs to Budhadada's generation, represents the innocent hope of people who once thought that the promises of equality and freedom would become a reality in their lives, and that this transformation would be brought about by Mahatma Gandhi and his followers. Gandhi's picture on the five hundred rupee note, suggests the end of that hope for Sagadia Dadi and others like him. The burial of the 'ghost' of Mahatma is the burial of Mahatma's vision for this country. The wait for the Mahatma has finally ended.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Sagadia Dadi tear the five hundred rupee notes?
2. What is the symbolic significance of 'waiting' for Gandhiji in the story?

5. Summing Up

'Black Ink' is a story of promise and betrayal, masterfully told with a strong undercurrent of irony. The innocent Dom Dalits, trapped for centuries in a social system which treats them as outcastes, exploited and oppressed, find a beacon of hope in the coming of the Mahatma to their village. When Gandhiji announces the end of kingship, they believe him. But over a period of time they come to realise that kingship continues in the form of the Gauntia system. Their faith in the Mahatma is such that they do not lose hope and continue to wait for him, election after election. The waiting for the Mahatma is symbolic, and suggests a waiting for a radical transformation of their condition. The ideas that Gandhi stood for, and his vision of India as an equal society, is subverted time and again by the rich, powerful upper caste politicians. Gandhi is reduced to a token, invoked at the time of elections in the form of khadi clothes and hollow speeches. The story ends with Sagadia Dadi tearing up the five hundred rupee notes with the picture of Gandhi, on whose forehead the party symbol is stamped. The story begins with "hope" and ends with the demise of that "hope".



6. Glossary

Kalasyahi	–	Black ink used to mark a voter's fore finger.
Jamindar	–	A feudal landlord
Ganatantra	–	Democracy.
Halia	–	Servant.
Ma Brundabati	–	Goddess Tulsi, Holy Basil which is considered a sacred plant in Hinduism.
Dom	–	People belonging to Dom caste in Odisha are Dalits and are traditionally drum beaters, weavers, and gramarakhi (chowkidars).
Purana	–	Sanskrit sacred writings on Hindu mythology.

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