



Caste identities in marginalized expressions-narratives in discourse

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Citation: Dr Charu Arya (2019). Caste identities in marginalized expressions-narratives in discourse, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 25(4) 810 -814

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v25i4.9211

In the modern global era, transcending boundaries have made identities relative. Usually, identities are built around national and socio-cultural registrations. However, the post-colonial global era, has created layers of diasporic identities that further created a parallel frame of new adopted identities. To begin with, one can argue that identity is usually channelised through major factors like birth and nationality. But further observation demands digging deep into finding various other forms of identities, like gender and caste.

These deeply rooted social practices are bringing in new socio-cultural parameters and the opportunity to understand how these practices create the 'Other' amongst the global formation of populations. Caste needs to be examined as a social work order practiced not only in India but in many other countries.

Caste is also practiced in African socio-cultural orders. One can compare the endogamic nature of the African castes to many other caste orders, as they followed similar rituals related to pollution and inter caste restrictions like many other caste orders.

Caste identities are also part of the socio- cultural identities in Japan and these are also based on the occupation. Untouchables are less in number in Japan, but these communities are oppressed on various levels. Mike Sunda writes, Burakumin (Hamlet people) the untouchable castes and Eta (abundance of filth) are in existence from the feudal era and most of these are into the profession of slaughter and sanitation.

This also opens a parallel re-examination of manufactured post-colonial 'Oriental' identity, term invented by Edward W. Said. He built this new identity for the people in the non-western world making them the 'Other' dividing them as East opposite to West. Moreover, there was balancing of this new found cultural shift through Said's insistence that Cultures are undergoing changes and these are processes. (Said)

As much as identity is pursued as a subject of research, it is also creating an opportunity to de-construct the old norms and replace them with new norms of other identity positions. Manufacturing identities are reflected well while being observed as evolving gradually. As Camus says, 'Building identity is a phenomenal process of repeated evolution.' Thus, manufacturing identities are reflected well while being observed well as evolving gradually.

Re-examining of the emerging identity markers in postcolonial theory and practice contextualize identities as native and global both. The post-colonial writings are not only bringing in the opportunity to assess the impact of various identity markers in these writings but these expressions are also trying to install new frames of expressions that are in consonance with new identities through literature in action. and practices contextualizing ethnic identities as native and global both.

The post-colonial writings are not only bringing in the opportunity to assess the impact of various voices in these writings but these expressions are also trying to challenge the new frames of expressions that are building new identities through literature in action.

It will not be impertinent to mention how these deep-rooted identities are unpacked and re packaged globally requiring re-examination to factor in the new challenges these identities are bringing in for a large number of diasporic populations.

In the recent years and with new legislation resulting in reformative laws, equal opportunities for people with different backgrounds are being provided by many countries. Castes and other identities are now being recognized at international platforms for affirmative actions.

these melting expressions of their trauma narrated in *The Outcaste*, *Karukku* and *Joothan* as lived realities. And how their stigma that has been part of their lives existed through the Hindu caste system and its deliberate arrangements. These caste narrations have revealed trauma of being born into a Dalit family in 'modern times?' through their decision of penning down their voices. Caste compresses and brings Dalits into state of constant suffering and forces them be non reactive towards their identities.

Many narratives are being born out of the Dalit experiences and their significance lies in the testimonio that they make for their lived experiences. When we read Limbale, we can connect with the kind of assault he can see his mother and other women of his family are going through. His childhood was very painful as he could see his mother sleeping with the upper caste man to arrange food for her children. It was not easy for him to

understand the underlying reasons for her behaviour, but when he grows to be a man, he could see that his mother as a Dalit woman was left by his father and now she has the responsibility of feeding her family and also her old mother. Masamai, Limbale's grandmother was a symbol of strength when Limbale was a child but as he grew, he could understand why she allowed her daughter to sleep with the upper caste man. His mother was vulnerable and an easy target as she was left by her husband. This seems to be a failure of Dalit patriarchy, who find themselves incapable of protecting their women.

Caste trauma and lack of unity in the community was the major reason for the suffering of the individual within a caste community. Dalit autobiographies are not only the individual expressions but being vocal about their personal expressions the writers find themselves to be the face of suffering of their communities. Dalit identity plays a major role in the suffering that is inflicted on them and voicing their trauma through these autobiographies becomes the representation of the trauma and suffering of their whole community. Limbale's struggle was to survive and try to find some place where he will not be a victim of caste-based harassment. His life was very traumatic as he saw a family filled with poverty and suffering from his childhood days. His struggle was the dual hatred that he had developed inside him, one was against the women of his family and the other women around him who handed over their bodies to the upper caste men for their own benefits and also the women who were regularly assaulted by the men around them. Another hatred that he talks about in his writing is his hatred within himself for being born as an outcaste and man who could be beaten, insulted and crushed on every situation.

Dr Ambedkar insisted that caste is made to create hatred for certain people. What has majorly divided people into different hierarchical sections of castes are the division of labour. And it was easy to divide people of certain castes on the basis of menial tasks they are forced to do. After getting education and learning the ideologies and description of caste division by Ambedkar and Phule, these writers developed understanding towards the reason for their continuous oppression. All of these Dalit writers Valmiki, Limbale, Bama or Baby Kamble have attacked the system of caste where they are forcefully deprived of certain basic rights, like right to education and right to food. No land, no job in the beginning, all of them struggled to survive as Dalit in the social system in India.

It was important to understand how Bama talks about her own helplessness towards the later stage of her life, where her education and being a Christian did not help her to come out of this trauma. She faced discrimination at every footstep in her life. She very strongly challenges the institution of Church that could not wash away her lower caste identity.

It was the birth of a child in the family of a dalit which will make him a dalit.

Limbale, in one of his lectures mentions that the religious impact has strengthened the conservative attitude of casteism. *Varna vyawastha* though is born of Hinduism, but none of the gods belong to Dalits. And hence, it was pertinent for Dalits to criticize Hinduism to end casteism.

Caste learnings were taught through enforced learnings. It is significant to understand why Bama has used *palmyra* leaf to describe the dual attack of caste. Caste practices dwell on the teaching and preaching done of both, lower castes and the upper castes.

These two autobiographies *Joothan* and *Karukku* were written in the modern times of Hindu society where it appeared that orthodox culture was breaking boundaries by giving space to education and modern thoughts. These two narrations work as established description about lived reality of interpersonal relations of caste and casteism.

Caste discrimination which was there in the age of Manu or may be before that, did not see much dilution of castes in centuries. Caste system based on occupation of individual, divided Hindu society into different castes. Everybody stayed into a particular caste because of the occupation one had. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra were the four major castes or *Varnas*. Sudras were further divided into Atisudras. This division worked in hierarchy. Brahmins who were said to be born from the head of God took care of work that involved mind and intellectuality. Kshatriyas born from arms took care of protection of human race. Vaishya born from waist were responsible for providing food and other requirements of people. Shudras born from feet of God were there to serve every other class from their body and mind and keep them clean. These castes which were part of the lowest *varna* faced discrimination in the hands of the castes which were above in the system of caste hierarchy. Oppression and discrimination against the lower castes was a common practice. The lower castes underwent a lot of oppression and had to face ill treatment worse than animals by the upper caste people. They were considered untouchables and were called dalits. Discrimination happened not only for food or water but it was done to the extent of not letting the shadow of untouchables fall on any upper caste person. Along with water and food, discrimination happened in almost everything where social contacts took place between upper and lower castes. Untouchable castes had to follow these norms set for them, no one could think of breaking them. And if any mistake happened in obeying these traditions, punishment was bound to be given in painful manner so that they should never have the courage to repeat their mistake. Punishment normally was not restricted to verbal abuse but went on to physical and mental torture of them and their families.

Shifting from one caste to another was not possible. Change of occupation never meant change of caste. Individual born in a particular caste stayed in that caste for his whole life. And this was same for his children.

This stigma of the lower caste people could not become public till the time they started speaking out. Dalit literature came into existence with these expressions. Stories, songs and short narrations further made way for autobiographies. And these autobiographies opened up the path to enter into the reality of traumatic experiences of Dalits.

Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku* and Limbale's *The Outcaste* are a few such autobiographies which have successfully brought in open the suffering of people of their castes and the pain which was never voiced.

Valmiki narrates his stigma of being born as a Dalit in Muzaffarnagar, UP, that was birth of distress in his life. He started suffering at a very early age and his childhood was one of the tales of poverty and humiliation. The woven discrimination of caste structure made his suffering reach to another stigmatic level. He was a frail boy who lived in a household where bread and butter were earned on daily basis. No income, no job security and no property. He describes his life to be more painful than the life of a pig. Here, he felt he and people of his caste were being forced to live the life of separation and were not allowed to be part of many social activities only because they belonged to the families of scavengers. These scavengers earned their bread by cleaning toilets of every household in the vicinity, could not get better paid than some stale food in exchange of their services.

World around them made them feel 'dirty', 'filthy', 'untouchable' and many more fearful conditions of human life, Dalits have always been looked down as people of margins. Dalits never got space within village or town, but always lived in the separate areas outside village or town. They were there to serve the upper castes and to clean their dirt in all the situations. Purity and impurity was a clear division of work and caste.

Suffering that they undergo and while their interaction or unavoidable dealing with the authoritative Castes and sections.

Valmiki and other boys were beaten badly when he tried to take water from the common pot kept outside classrooms. His agony further increased when his teacher forced him to clean school field instead of teaching him. 'Abey chuhre ke' or 'Chuhre ka' were the common used words for them. This was very distressing experience for Valmiki as a child, and things got worsened with his journey into adulthood. He somehow finished his studies.

And what Bama also believes, is that this title depicts her agony and suffering as a Dalit woman in a better way.

Lakshmi Holmstrom while translating it into English has tried to maintain the honesty of language, still many words in dialects may not be translated with the similar in depth expression of emotion, drawing reality in the world of Christians and their treatment of Dalits, especially a 'Dalit Christian' woman.

Bama has used the name of this leaf *Karukku* as title to the victimization and pain that Dalits get because of the oppression and discrimination they get from upper caste people. This sharpness of leaves is the symbolic cutting edges and the wounds inflicted imitating sharp edges of caste system that create wound in the life of victims coming from the oppressed section of the caste system. They are referred as 'sick people' in Tamil literatures.

Valmiki mentions this in his preface that while writing *Joothan*, he has deliberately avoided many insulting slurs and use of vocabulary by the upper caste people and his school teachers. And for that he simply says he can't even write those abuses and vocabulary here in his writing because it will be indecent for him to use and write such abusive language while writing this literary narration.

This leaves a strong mark on the reservation of the writer himself, where he finds himself handicapped when it comes to writing specific abusive words that he had to listen to as Dalit in his lived experience but finds it immoral to write it down.

Language of Bama has been full of local words used in her community and of literal usage, this directs towards two things- one is that the language that surrounds Dalits is not usually sophisticated and correct in manner of usage, it is usually dirty, filthy and language full of abusive words which is not true for the upper caste people. When they are in conversation or are addressing people from upper caste then they don't use abusive words to address someone. But when it comes to Dalits, this kind of abusive language is used across age groups and they are taught to be habitual of it. *Joothan* depicts it well, where, Valmiki describes that abusive way of addressing was something that he grew up with. He almost started feeling comfortable with this when he realized that even educated people like his teachers and headmasters are very comfortable while they use such abuses for all students who belong to Dalit castes.

Valmiki in his preface says that it is not possible for him to quote each and every word that he heard from upper caste people because for that he will have to cross the boundaries of modesty,

He has confessed that those abuses have made them feel comfortable as Dalits and it was compulsory for them to accept that way of addressing. For Valmiki, it was important to express and that he has earned enough education and has the tool of language in his to express and to break those barriers to raise questions for identities of Dalits.

It was not possible that Christianity meant a new road for those who got transformed their religion to move out of the curse of discrimination that they suffered as they were born into Dalit castes. Facing same treatment even in the Church and other activities made them realize that to change their religion just means

that they change their names but they cannot change their caste identities that they earn by being born into a particular caste.

Punishment inside the Church by nuns to the children initiated again an energy where Bama has very openly described it talks of the stigma involved in the treatment of Dalits out of Hindu caste structure. They are made to believe at this young age that they are only creatures, and even if they have copied dressing sense from the upper castes that doesn't mean that they can be allowed to enter house of any upper caste Christian. Once born Dalit remains Dalit.

These lived narrations raise questions. Demanding acceptance of their expression by the upper caste writers and readers. Denial to accept their narratives has been one of the main reasons for these expressions. In these major autobiographies Dalit writers do not write only for creating a new literature but they want the world to see images of oppression and victimization of Dalits by the upper castes and issues which are deliberately being avoided otherwise in the social scenario. Movement started by Ambedkar, has raised questions on the denial of truth by the oppressors who have participated in the oppression of Dalits and then have denied the truth. That is one of the reasons why Dalit writers have used their education as right to expression about the victimization of Dalits.

Equipped with education they both feel equipped enough to write their experiences. Their experience is not in isolation, as they talk about their suffering within the caste boundaries and represent traditional and accepted violence and trauma by the victims themselves.

This description of Dalits describes their frozen state when they could not melt norms of discrimination against them and were forced to deal with this behavior against them from the pages of caste histories. To make them understand that they have been born into Dalits and downtrodden and so it has already been decided that they have to live as weak and poor and oppressed and should not try to overcome these negatives. Bama has been very open while discussing these details of suffering that she herself went through. Her plight went on in many levels, first as a Dalit Child, then as a Dalit woman, then as a Dalit Nun and finally as a teacher. Never beginning days as a writer of *Karukku* was also one of the phases of her suffering as a writer. She was not allowed to visit her own village and her home as the anger inflicted by her autobiography was not acceptable to her own village people.

In an interview with Gita Hariharan, she said that this was a shocking reaction that came from her own community. Though she had expected that it is not going to be digested at all by the people from upper caste but what came from her own village people left her broken. Later, though her parents narrated the text to all villagers and finally they invited her and she was celebrated as a princess.

Further analyzing that why people from her own Dalit community were not happy that writers like Valmiki and Limbale who were part of Dalits have tried to give a radical voice to all their sufferings. It is likely that they felt that discrimination happening with them for many years cannot carry on like this anymore.

that is personal and is meant to happen with certain communities across religious caste system. It is all settled in uncomfortable corridors and Upper caste people do what they can enjoy doing and Dalits followed silently what came their way. By making it all public, Bama actually disturbed things that they had accepted. Dalits considered that they are born for this discrimination and they will always remain below the upper caste people. Sharing about what is happening in their communities is like interfering in their privacy. And this was not acceptable to Dalits.

For centuries this discrimination was happening and they believed that this is how whole society functions religiously. They were living with this inflicted suffering for years and never had the courage to speak it out to people outside their community. But now Dalit writers have been doing things that started opening doors for bringing out those stigmatic moments and trauma which was considered too personal and compulsory for all Dalits. The upper caste communities with their teachings have enforced social laws that made Dalits believe that their life cannot change with education, law or any other movement.

This was the established truth and stepping out of it would have pushed them all to further torture and discrimination which may not change for coming generations. This fear amongst Dalits was consisting of two things- inviting further oppression from upper caste people, secondly, to fall weak while encountering their own victimization.

Bama says it was triple discrimination, caste, class and gender. Though she had started learning this from her early age, things became strongly transparent when she moved out of Church. Now, it was the cruel world outside and further victimization was destined to happen.

Dalits culture is to love and live. They want to live but the social system didn't allow them to live. Everyone has a right to freedom, so, it is important that today also, our youth should keep a strong hold on their roots, must have confidence on their Dalit identities, educate themselves, unite and then agitate.

Running away from facing these obstacles of discrimination and loosing these battles for equality, is really heartbreaking and it also shows our weakness. We need to stay together, because upper caste people will not have any issue till the time we remain passive, they become aggressive only if we become active and ask for our basic human rights which have been already given to us by the Constitution.

These, references from her interview reveal that how important it is for Dalits to speak, narrate what they suffered and how they want to break barriers of caste system.

These narratives mark the identities of both Dalit writers being frozen for timeless understanding of these expressions. Not much has changed in villages and cities, education though has given permission to be well

dressed and work in the same office with upper castes, discrimination for food, water, reservation and atrocities against Dalits prevails still in large scale.

The lived realities of the two where their experiences are similarly painful is the core in both autobiographies. Valmiki too went through atrocities in the hands of upper caste Tyagi community in his childhood. He went through all those nightmares and suffered plight of being born in the family of *Chuhra*s. They lived in the atmosphere filled with dirt and stench surrounding them was something that had become part of their life. He could never forget how he stepped out of his home to go to school and could not walk without stepping on that filth. That filth and smell stayed with him in whole of his life.

Language and tone is decided by the upper caste treatment and is similar in both narrations. Where Bama listens to those insulting words from the mouth of the nuns in the Church, Valmiki gets them from his educated teachers. They both felt that education was the only mode of exiting this life of stigma as Dalit, but they came back post education to their own people. And this shows that their birth identities were so much controlling their writings that as Dalits stayed with them always and they both went back to their roots by writing about their own communities.

Bama says,

‘But Dalits have also understood that god is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated: and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion.’ (Bama.Pxvi)

How they both travel in similar stages of suffering and how their literary expressions together can be seen in their journey as Dalits and educated Dalits. Education and knowledge failed to break that barrier. Frozen identities are caste identities determined at the time of birth of individual. Valmiki and Bama both can feel the strength and established norms of Hindu caste system where oppressed, Dalits, considered as sick people are born to suffer the stigma that comes with a particular caste. They have challenged this strength by achieving pedestals of education and have set up new identities by moving into the role of writers in the literary world.

Dalit voices in these Dalit expressions have successfully not only tried to change their clothes and level of living a normal life but with the help of higher education they achieved levels to go beyond caste stigma and caste identities. The caste identities are dynamic now and are creating multiple opportunities for Dalit expressions.

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