

An overview of Pethavan (The Begetter) as a Dalit Literature

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Abstract

Dalit Literature is a body of texts produced by writers whose caste background used to be referred to as "Untouchable" or "Scheduled Caste" and whose writings engages with caste, caste discrimination and their life from a Dalit point of view. This literature is specifically written to present the typical social, cultural and historical aspects of the Dalit communities. Dalit Literature emerged in the 1960s in Marathi language and it soon appeared in Bangla, Hindi, Kannada, Punjabi, Sindhi and Tamil languages through narratives such as poem, short stories and autobiographies which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene.

The word "Dalit" mean "ground", "suppressed", "crushed" or "broken to pieces". The term Dalit is used as an adjective or noun to describe the people or communities that have remained down-trodden or at the margins of society throughout India's long Social and History. The famous 19th century social reformer and the protagonist of the interests of Dalits in Maharashtra, Jyotiba Phule first used this term in the context of the exploitation of the people who were conventionally called "Shudra" and "Outcaste". The term "Dalit" is not an indicative term but it refers to such people and communities that are historically and structurally suppressed and excluded from the mainstream of society. "Dalit" is not a caste but a socio-economic category of discriminated people belonging to many castes and social groups speaking many languages. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar used the term to give a new respectful and empowering identity to the so called "untouchable" castes in preference to the term "Harijan" (Children of God), which was found to be a patronizing word.

Introduction

Imayam, a standout amongst the most notable writers of the nation is a Teacher in Tamil Nadu. His works like *Koveru Kazhudaigal* (Beasts of Burden), *Arumugam* and *Pethavan* (The Begetter) have built up him as one of the noticeable writers of Dalit writing. In his conversation with Indian Cultural Forum, Imayam stated, “All other writings in Tamil are considered as literature. How can only my writing (writing by Dalits) be termed as Dalit Literature?”. According to Imayam, it does not require a similarity of caste or other societal constructs for one human to understand another human and he wants to make the present as well as future generation well aware of the conditions of society he is living in through language and literature.

The translator Pethavan, Gita Subramanian wrote in her note, “No amount of clever crafting can substitute the kind of passionate repugnance that Imayam feels against this barbaric of preserving caste purity through murder”. Pethavan *The Begetter* is a Dalit writing but the story revolves around the life of non-Dalit girl and her sufferings for falling in love with a Dalit boy who has achieved a socio-economic status through his education and job.

Plot Overview of Pethavan: The Begetter

The story takes place in Ulunthurpet, a village near Villupuram. It narrates one day life incidents of a family of Pazhani, the begetter of the novel’s title. The story starts in a Panchayat of dominant community accusing Pazhani’s daughter Bhakkiyam, for falling in love with a Dalit Sub- Inspector, Periyasami. In order to keep the honour of their communal power, the villagers demand Pazhani to kill his daughter immediately by poisoning or she will be gang raped and his farms and house will be set fire. However, Pazhani tries to oppose and get time to kill her daughter, which the villagers have not accepted. The villagers give him time of a

night to kill his daughter only after, he promises on camphor. Pazhani’s family is in trauma as they cannot over rule the verdict of village Panchayat and he could not kill her. So, on that night, he takes Bhakkiyam to bus stand and send her secretly to make her escape from the village and the following morning Pazhani is found dead. He killed himself instead of killing his own daughter. The novel ends abruptly without any future description of what happens after Pazhani’s death.

Hegemony

Hegemony is a form of domination which keeps supremacy of superior class that subjugates and controls lower class. Hegemony is a violence that operates and work in indirect ways. So, it can cause structural and cultural violence. In the novel Pethavan *The Begetter*, hegemony is one of the factors that victimize a family to be fallen as prey to violence.

Cultural and Structural Violence in Imayam’s Pethavan

Not every aspect of culture can cause violence, but there are some behaviours and practices which operates its power to get legitimization and at some extent cause violence. This cultural violence does not constitute its power most directly but causes violence indirectly. In the novel the author has truly portrayed the violence rooted in the name of culture. In Pethavan the village of dominant community could not tolerate the affair of Bhakkiyam. In order to part them, the villagers harm Periyasami and his family by beating them and setting fire on their farms. The structure of the violence not only destroys human body but also leaves its mark in the souls.

“You should pour pesticide down her throat and lock her in a room. However, much she screams or shouts, don’t open the door and don’t give her even a mouthful of water. In a short while the story will be over” said a

young woman who held a baby on her hip in the village panchayat. When Bhakkiyam tried to get away from their street, about twenty to thirty young men took off their dhotis and exposed themselves saying “This is what you are running after- how many do you want-take!”. And an old man in the village panchayat says that. “Her privates should be churned with a large truncheon”. These instances, shows that a woman getting exploited or dominated by men is considered as normal and the men have power over women. This power becomes a structure and causes violence.

Structural violence can be characterised as the intentional use of physical or psychological power to violate the basic needs. Here the structure that operates violence is hidden. Gaultang in his paper says, if a husband beats his wife, it becomes violence and if million husbands beats their wives it becomes a structure. It is a permanent state of violence as it is mostly accepted as the norms of the society which can be legitimized. It is understood as the outcome of hegemony between and within the society. In this novel one of the central characters, Pazhani belongs to upper dominant community. So, his villagers are not ready to let Bhakkiyam’s relationship with Periyasami grow. In this case, the villagers of dominant community wants to secure the pride of their community by asking the father to kill his own daughter. They demand Pazhani to kill Bhakkiyam as soon as possible. Killing a woman for falling in love with a Dalit man could be accepted as norms of their community. Here the community operates as a structure of the society and power operates as a tool to protect their community pride. So, an upper community woman falling in love with a Dalit man is considered as a legitimate thing. So,

she is sentenced to be killed. Hence this social structure which imposes its power on a woman and her family becomes violence. The lower community that represented by Periyasami and Pazhani’s family fall as victims of this structural violence. The Dalit Sub- Inspector’s parents and farms are exploited by the upper community villagers. “Twice we set fire to his house. In the dead of night, we freed the goats and the cows tethered in his house. We set fire to his cane fields. We have set up caste panchayats and had fined him five times. His parents have been tied up and beaten black and blue. It looks like it is going to lead a big caste war”. The structural violence produced and reproduced ideas of racism and leads to cultural violence. Hence structural and cultural violence get intertwined.

Conclusion

The pathetic status of Dalits is that they cannot escape their demanded- Dalit identity however they change their status based on their education and job. The Dalit- tag sticks to them and throughout their lives. The tag heralds them a scornful and demanding look from the so – called upper caste people in the society.

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