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Crafting Dalit Consciousness in the Select Short Stories of Omprakash Valmiki

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Abstract:

This article encapsulates the dynamics of Dalit consciousness based on the close analysis of the three Dalit-translated short stories "Amma", "Where can Satish Go?" and "Eclipse" written by Omprakash Valmiki. At the theoretical frameworks of casteism, Dalit and upper caste feminism, Deconstruction, and subalternity, this research analyses cognitive revolution, politics of gender division, upper caste Dalit discourse, patriarchy, untouchability, sexuality, and resistance reflected in the stories above. In the narrative "Amma", a self-defiant and bold female Dalit character's struggles are disclosed with empathy and righteousness. She fights against upper caste sexual abuse and poverty which is a bar to the all-round development of the Dalit communal space. A revolutionary feeling for change is embraced in the text "Where Can Satish Go?". It negotiates revolutionary consciousness for the metamorphosis of the unprivileged and distressed Dalit life through the medium of education. In "Eclipse" it is argued that an upper-caste married woman who is oppressed by patriarchal hegemony can be identified as a Dalit. She involved herself in illicit sex with a Dalit man for pregnancy to safeguard herself from social inferiority in a gender-biased society. However, these three stories owed to Valmiki are successful as a medium to generate consciousness.

Keywords: Omprakash Valmiki, Short Stories, Dalit Consciousness, Feminism, Deconstruction.

1. Introduction:

Indian history witnesses the separation of human beings in varied ages and the caste system is one strong separating agent that isolates lower castes from upper castes based on the concepts of purity and pollution. Caste structure produces the untouchables who are today called Dalits. They have been subjugated, ostracised, oppressed, and marginalized under the direction of upper-caste hegemony for ages. Various ages experience the emergence of struggles and resistance against caste mechanisms due to Dalit consciousness. First, *Lokayata* (a group of rationalists) challenges the institution of caste in the sixth century BC. After that, Jainism and Buddhism interrogate Brahmanic orthodoxy. In the Middle Ages, the Bhakti movement was a "force that challenged the varna system and stratification of human society on the basis of caste" (Kumar 126). Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, and Swami Vivekananda advocated the theory of anti-caste scheme. Upper caste writers Rabindranath Tagore and Mahasweta Devi endeavored to make their readers aware of the



loathsome practice of untouchability and caste intolerance. However, Mahatma Gandhi's view concerning the caste system is controversial.

However, the lower caste Dr B. R Ambedkar dedicated his life to the upliftment of the Dalit communal space through his relentless heroic attempts to construct Dalit consciousness in the brains of the people irrespective of caste, class or creed. The current research explores limited areas regarding Dalit consciousness through the analytical framework of the three select Dalit short stories written by a Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki and translated into English from Hindi by Naresh K. Jain. The main objective of this work is to understand the Dalit consciousness in the translated short stories: "Amma", "Where Can Satish Go?", and "Eclipse".

2. Literature Review:

In the book, *Contextualizing Dalit Consciousness in Indian English Literature*, authored by Dr. Beena Agarwal and Dr. Neeta, multi-faceted meanings of Dalit consciousness are contextualized through the analysis of a few Dalit texts of both Dalit and non-Dalit writers. A researcher, Manvi Singh, in her thesis, *Narratives of Suffering and Resistance: Representation of Dalit Women Characters in Select Dalit and Non-Dalit writings* focuses on the anti-caste history of India, feminism, Indian Dalit feminism, and the representation of Dalit female characters in the writings of Dalit and non-Dalit writers.

3. Research Objectives:

The objectives of the research are as follows:

- (i) To decode the dynamics of Dalit consciousness represented in the select short stories of Omprakash Valmiki.
- (ii) To contextualize Dalit feminist resistance and the deconstruction theory in the short story "Amma."
- (iii) To uncover the pessimistic condition of Dalit life under the Indian caste hierarchy in the short story, "Where Can Satish Go?"
- (iv) To deconstruct the term Dalit by disclosing an upper caste woman's oppression in the society in a broader framework in "Eclipse."

4. Research Questions:

- (i) How does the short tale "Amma" address the challenges encountered by Dalit women, as well as the practice of untouchability?
- (ii) In the narrative "Where Can Satish Go?", how does antagonism from the upper caste function as a roadblock to Dalit upward mobility?



(ii) How is a high-caste woman in the narrative "Eclipse" oppressed like a Dalit in the society?

5. Research Methodology:

This study involves a qualitative analytical method. It endeavors to analyses very intensely the primary texts with the support of relevant data from the appropriate secondary sources like printed books and online sources. It seeks to examine the texts to unveil different Dalit issues and themes under the relevant theoretical frameworks of feminism, deconstruction, and the context of casteism. An interdisciplinary approach is also applied in the research.

6. Collection of Data:

Three short narratives, "Amma," "Where Can Satish Go?" and "Eclipse," constitute the key literary components from which the data for the current study is gathered. The author of these three stories is Omprakash Valmiki, a distinguished Dalit author. Furthermore, numerous academic and literary publications provide helpful and pertinent resources for comprehending various literary phenomena. Data for this article is obtained as well from online sources.

7. Understanding Dalit Consciousness in the Short Story, "Amma"

(i) Valmiki's Short story "Amma": A Saga of Dalit Woman's Life Struggle:

Omprakash Valmiki's 'Amma', is a short story translated into English by Naresh K. Jain. In the identical story, Shivcharan's mother is merely called Amma. 'Amma' means mother in English. Amma's husband is Sukuru. Dalit women work hard in the houses of high-caste families while their male counterparts do such low work as cleaners, sweepers in different sectors, skinning dead animals, etc. Amma engages herself daily in uninterrupted drudgery "with broom and canister in hand early morning" (Valmiki 180). Even at the age of seventy, she does not falter to "work at ten-fifteen houses before returning home" (Valmiki 182). After her mother-in-law got ailing and never came around, "the entire responsibility for work at home and outside" goes on her shoulders (Valmiki 183); thenceforth, she toils as a beast. Ironically, the opportunity to work in varied houses is the legacy her mother-in-law presents her.

(ii) Ambedkarite Consciousness in the Character Amma:

Ambedkarite consciousness exists in the mind of Amma. She doesn't want her children to do such filthy work like her and aspire to change their traditional professions. According to Dr. Ambedkar, "the division of Labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination" (Ambedkar 37). Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, advocates that "the caste is the division of labour, not the labourer" (Singh 77).



Professor Raj Kumar argues that “Gandhi’s belief in the *chaturvarna* system seems to be quite problematic for the downtrodden masses because instead of being liberated from the caste oppression they are further being enslaved to the feudal principles of life through system” (Kumar 135). The indigence of the Dalit folks constrains the upgradation of the economic status quo, mobility, iconoclastic character, academic learning, and psychic potentiality. In this context, Marathi Dalit poet and activist, Namdeo Dhasal’s poem, “Hunger” can be cited. In the poem, “Hunger”, Dhasal asserts that “There is not a single grain in our house today / Not a single clever brain in our house today” (82-83).

(iii) Depiction of Dalit Feminism in the Story, “Amma”:

Amma’s revolutionary spirit goes at its peak, when a high caste man, Vinod in Mrs. Chopra’s house strives to sexually assault her. But, she became capable of defending her purity by struggling with Vinod. The story, “Amma” is a burning example of a literary text where a Dalit woman fights against the upper caste patriarchal sexual violence. It deconstructs the traditional belief about the helplessness of Dalit women in terms of caste, class, and gender. Whereas the upper caste men “claim that Dalit men can never hope to protect their women, who are considered ‘easy prey’ by upper caste men”, Valmiki’s “Amma” speaks about a self-reliant, strong, courageous, and independent Dalit woman (Geetha 61).

Dalit women encounter more corporeal and psychological violence than upper caste women by patriarchal segment from both castes. As per Sharmila Rege, “the violent practices against women reveal definite variations by caste” (Rege 103). Professor Gopal Guru debates that “the question of rape cannot be grasped merely in terms of class, criminality, or as a psychological aberration or an illustration of male violence” and “The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against Dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude” (151).

(iv) Dalit Consciousness in the story “Amma”:

Valmiki’s ‘Amma’ “comes to us through an omniscient narrator and is principally told from the point of view of Amma” (Jain 19). At the outset of the story, Valmiki, “much like Henry Fielding” “addressing the reader directly” plans to “speak for all the Ammas” through a character, Amma (Jain 19). This story is “almost a mini-epic of Dalit womanhood” (Jain 20). According to Naresh K. Jain, the translator of the story, ‘Amma’, the pivotal character, Amma is a reminder of “the character of Mama in the African American dramatist, Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)” (20). In the present story, the projection of narrative technique, representation of a



female character, psychological awareness and reflection of social and economic structure creates a background for Dalit consciousness. According to Sharankumar Limbale, “Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration” for Dalit consciousness (Limbale 32); this mentality “makes slaves conscious of their slavery” (Limbale 32). Amma’s psyche is not at all free from such a mental phenomenon.

8. Understanding Dalit Consciousness in the Story, “Where Can Satish Go?”

(i) A Dalit Boy’s Aspiration for Upliftment through Gaining Education in the Story, “Where Can Satish Go?”:

In the story, “Where Can Satish Go?” Omprakash Valmiki attempts to unveil the pessimistic condition of Dalit life. The central character, Satish is a Dom who is resolved to emancipate himself from “the kind of life they are leading” (Valmiki 89). Primarily, his parents pressure him into working as a *safai karmachari* (a sanitation worker) in the municipality. But Satish is adamant about achieving education and tasting the blessing of employment. Dalits generally “work demeaning jobs, most notoriously as “manual scavengers” who clean the country’s ubiquitous dry latrines by hand” (Bob 7). Losing predilection for occupation is a sort of slavery and subordination. Consequently, Satish forsook home and resided at the house of Mrs. Pant as a tenant. Daily, he attended school and from there in the afternoon joined the bulb factory of Aijaz Sahib to work hard for his own maintenance.

(ii) Caste Prejudice in the Short Story, “Where Can Satish Go?”

Hearing Satish’s identity, Mrs. Pant “felt as though she was losing consciousness” (Valmiki 82). She said to her husband, “If I had known, I wouldn’t have permitted him even to enter the house. As he comes back, throw his things outside. His clothes have started giving off an offensive smell” (Valmiki 83). Severe caste prejudice is still ingrained in the minds of upper caste people like Mrs. Pant. India “passed numerous laws and constitutional amendments strengthening protections and expanding reservations for untouchables” (Bob 7). It is a depressing situation that “despite these policies, however, the majority of India’s untouchables continue to face significant disadvantages, discrimination, and violence” (Bob 7). The revelation of Satish’s caste to Mrs. Pant becomes the cause of catastrophe for Satish. Mrs. Pant’s “sympathy for Satish turns into rage, contempt and damaging ego” (Agarwal and Dr. Neeta 166). When Satish returned home late at night, he was driven away from Mrs. Pant’s home.

(iii) Disillusionment in the main character, Satish in the narrative, “Where Can Satish Go?”

However, Satish came to Aijaz Sahib “from such a long distance in the hope that he would at least find shelter for the night” (Valmiki 90). But, he had an epiphany that Aijaz’s heart was hollow and commercial; Aijaz simply declined to offer Satish shelter. Satish got “trapped in the flood of



darkness from all sides" (Valmiki 90). To come by education is nothing but a romantic dream for the necessitous Dalits in the caste-prejudiced ambience. While he was struggling to metamorphose his status, caste discrimination and the degeneration of humanity took him into the darkness of disillusionment and uncertainty.

(iv) Discourse on Urge for Change:

The story, "Where Can Satish Go?" shows how a Dalit's consciousness for change is shattered by the non-cooperation of caste biased and inhuman society. According to Naresh K. Jain "Dalit literature is not only literature of pain but also literature of change" (20). He continues that in Dalit literature "one finds not merely resentment" "but also an inner, articulated or unarticulated urge for change" (21). Through schooling, Satish hopes to improve his unhappy existence while his community has "got used to their problems so much that they have come to consider them to be their destiny" and a "feeling of inferiority has struck root inside them" (Valmiki 89). In the story, "A Hundred Pens" by Bengali Dalit writer, Kalyani Thakur Charal, a character says, "For thousands of years our people haven't been able to write –they're blind even though they have eyes. What others have written are taken to be true" (Charal 10).

9. Understanding Dalit Consciousness in the Story, "Eclipse"

(i) Deconstructing the term "Dalit":

The Dali Panthers activists deconstructed the term Dalit and "included any person who is oppressed by dominant force(s) in society. Therefore, tribal, upper-caste oppressed women, working class, labour class are added to Dalits" (Singh 90). As per the principles "codified in the 'shastras' or the instructional treatises of the Hindus which date back to the third century BCE" "women have been equated to the lower castes and definite restrictions have been placed on both" (Rege 113). In the story, "Eclipse" an upper-caste married woman can be treated as a Dalit as she is oppressed in the upper caste society for the inability to give birth a child.

(ii) Patriarchy in Upper caste:

But regarding pregnancy, there was no problem from the part of the woman but, there was a fault with her husband, Birampal. One day, she said to Birampal, "Even you hold me guilty . . . Let's go to a doctor in the city. I am told, doctors can tell who is at fault" (Valmiki 104). At that time, Birampal "gave her a resounding slap on her cheek" and cried with unholy words, "Saali, trying to lay blame on me! I shall cut you up in small pieces and bury them" (Valmiki 104). In the patriarchal society, women's freedom of speech is robbed, and they are blamed without any evidence. As per the *Manusmriti* (Hindu Law Book), "the realignment of castes and patriarchies is apparent in the



ideology of the pativrata (one who worships the husband and his kin without any grievances)" (as cited in Rege 113-1140).

(iii) Dalit Poverty and Sexuality:

There is a Dalit character, Rameswar who left his study to work in the fields of Chaudhri because of his needy father's illness. But, Chaudhri kept someone in his place and Rameswar became jobless. The members of Rameswar's family are starved struggling for some grains to quench their hunger. However, during a lunar eclipse, Rameswar went to the door of Chaudhri to beg. In order to have a son in return for grains, Biram's wife had a relationship with Rameswar there, disregarding her caste.

10. Conclusion:

Valmiki's stories "Amma," "Where can Satish Go?" and "Eclipse" shed light on the discourse on Dalit consciousness. Dalit is not confined to the lower caste, but it is identified in the upper caste as well. These three short stories can reply to renowned Indian literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Characters (Amma, Satish, Birampal's wife) in these stories go against the traditional hegemony and speak for themselves fearlessly. In the story "Amma," Amma's revolutionary spirit proves that the Dalits are no longer voiceless and that Dalit femininity is not weak and subordinate. The story "Where Can Satish Go?" points out the relentless aspiration for change from the systematic subordination of Dalits and the resistance of the upper caste. The fearless upper-caste woman is suppressed in the patriarchal societal scheme in the story "Eclipse," which breaks the order of society. Valmiki's three stories, 'Amma', "Where Can Satish Go?" and "Eclipse," challenge casteism. They are indeed the Dalit texts determined to augment Dalit consciousness.

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