

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 10 Issue 4 August 2024

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132



Countering the Hegemonic Discourse in *Bhimayana* and *A Gardner in the Wasteland* Lakhwinder Dhull

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Abstract

The birth and growth of caste system in India is often associated with the mythical view as endorsed by religious texts, epics and some hegemonic critical theories but the mythologized view that Dalits are unintelligent, uncreative, unclean and weak is interrogated and subverted by Dalit narratives, upholding the creed of humanism and rejecting the existence of reincarnation, rebirth, *karma* theory and scriptures. The new literature not only serves as a counter discourse to interrogate the hegemonic, elitist and exclusionary face of modern Indian literature but also aims to create space for the downtrodden in mainstream literary spaces. The graphic narrative *Bhimayana* interrogates Hindu social order that deprives Dalits of natural and human rights in the name of purity and social sanctity. The novel raises the common man with uncommon attributes to the status of *Dalit* hero, rejecting the manipulated or mythological view of heroism. *Gardener in the Wasteland* satirizes the hidden and hideous face of indigenous sectarianism concealed beneath the Indian mythology. The text not only foregrounds the continuity of the oppressive system but also gives a space to crusading and dissenting voices that expose the mythical view. The novel critiques hegemonic accounts of history and mythology, showing how mythology and history are appropriated to uphold the system of exploitation and submission. The traditional Gond art tuned with the form of modern graphic novels visualizes the social reality from a new perspective.

Keywords

New Literature, Counter discourse, Social Stratification, Humanism, Digna Art.

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The genesis and growth of caste system in India is often associated with the religious texts, though some hegemonic theories are also understood to be endorsing the caste system. *Manusmriti* provides a mythologized view of the birth of cast hierarchy: *Brahman* is born out of head, *Kshatriya* out of the arms, *Vaishya* out of the abdomen and *Shudra* out of the feet. Placed at the lowest pedestal of caste hierarchy, they were considered suitable for the lowest kind of menial jobs like sweeping streets, removing animal carcasses and waste, and for this association they were considered polluted or diseased part of Hindu society and deprived of human rights and natural needs. *Vedas*, including *Dharma Shastra* supports the theory that divides society into two parts--upper and lower-- on the basis of their conduct and deeds, the latter is ostracized and outcast for his/her (so-called) unrighteous and unethical deeds. The epic *Mahabharata* makes difference between humans on the basis of behavioural model, associating *Brahman* with truth, austerity and purity, *Kshatriya* with anger and boldness; *Vaishya* with pleasures and cattle rearing and *Shudra* with violence, covetousness and impurity. The unjust hierarchical order can also be ascribed to the theory of colour that assigns white colour to *Brahman*, red to *Kshatriya*, yellow to *Vaishya* and black to *Shudra*. Dalits have suffered substantially in all walks of life.

The traditional Hindu social order arbitrarily excluded Dalits from almost all spheres of human life, considering them unintelligent, uncreative, unclean and weak. They were deprived of property and fundamental rights, and were not allowed to get education, wear ornaments or good clothes, take water from public wells, enter temples, take food with other castes, etc., pronouncing that God created this hierarchy so that they may not rebel against the unjust social system. Likewise, they faced exclusion from the mainstream literature in that their experience and struggle were either neglected or misrepresented. In the mainstream Indian literary history, Dalit literature has not been considered as cultural and critical production. It is

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the exclusionary and casteist character of modern Indian literature that laid foundation for the emergence of Dalit literature as a counter discourse.

In the wake of socio-cultural and political changes, the word 'Dalit' comes to be identified as a symbol of change and revolution, upholding the creed of humanism but rejecting the existence of God, reincarnation, rebirth, *karma* theory and scriptures. This change demonstrates the revolutionary ideology of the oppressed ones who seek liberty, dignity and freedom from the unjust and oppressive system. These cherished values come to characterize the Dalit Literature, recognizing the centrality of human beings and simultaneously debunking the system that pushes them to the margins. Dalit writers have developed a new kind of literature, rather revolutionary one, different from the mainstream canonical literature which is largely based on the value system and canons preached and propagated by upper caste Hindus.

Imbued with new thinking and revolutionary zeal, Dalit literature not only serves as a counter discourse to interrogate the hegemonic, elitist and exclusionary modern Indian literature but also aims to create space for the downtrodden in literary spaces of national/international importance, offering them opportunities to realize their potentialities. Indian Graphic novels *Bhimayana* (2011), based on the life experiences of B.R. Ambedkar and *A Gardner in the Wasteland* (2011) based on Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873) not only serve to strip away the mask of caste-based oppression, exposing the historical and mythological manipulation imposed upon Indian society but also foreground the Dalit Voices for freedom from the historical bondage to lead a dignified life. These narratives subvert the stereotypical view that Dalits are unintelligent, uncreative, impure and lazy.

Bhimayana chronicles the life and legacy of Dr Ambedkar to foreground not only the hardships and sufferings that Dalits suffered in the past and present times but also underline their struggle to get unshackled from the system of denial and deprivation, debasement and despotism. Primarily based on the experiences of Ambedkar and newspaper clippings, the narrative images the mal-treatment as meted out to Dalits in the past as well as present times. The narrative can be understood as an incisive critique of Hindu social order that deprives Dalits of natural and human rights in the name of purity and social sanctity. Besides, the text also charts a sustained struggle and protest of Ambedkar against the tyrannical caste system in order to build a modern egalitarian and secular society. Juxtaposition of experiences of Ambedkar in the Pre-independence period with that of Dalits in the post-independence days authenticates the continuity of the caste-based system of segregation and exclusion. Ambedkar observes the life of Dalits: "They are born impure, and they are impure while they live, they die the death of impure, and they gave birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability affixed to them. It is a case of permanent hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse" (Ambedkar, *The Untouchables* 21).

The title *Bhimayana*, though seems to be in the harmony with *Ramayana*, constitutes a counter-discourse, presenting a Dalit worldview or an alternative epic of heroism which is either ignored or subdued in the hegemonic discourses. The former produces a visual account of the exclusion of Dalits from the dignified human life whereas the latter presents the exile of Hindu mythical god, Rama from a royal life. *Ramayana* elevates the royal persona, Rama to the position of a Hindu deity, rejecting the cult of hero or superhero as upheld in the traditional literature and comics whereas *Bhimayana* raises the common man with uncommon attributes to the status of *Dalit* hero, rejecting the cult or definition of hero as projected in Hindu scriptures. The novel also provides an alternative definition of the hero, rejecting the

manipulated or mythological view of heroism. *Bhimayana* deconstructs the binary opposition of high and low; pure and impure; refined and raw, and touchable and untouchable, putting Bhima on an equal footing with Rama in terms of mind and modesty. In a way, the novel, thus, subverts “the common sensical nationalist narrative of what constitutes an epic” (Oza 353). The Gond art is employed not only to celebrate Bhim’s crusade against caste system but also to revive the gasping tribal art form.

The narrative employs the ancient *digna art* of the Gond tribal community, one of the largest tribal groups in South Asia with a huge population consists of a *Pradhan* community. The (new) tribal art-form is employed to highlight the social issues, rejecting the conventional art-form which is used in comics and graphic narratives. The traditional Gond art tuned with the form of modern graphic novels visualizes the social reality from a new perspective. Instead of confining their art to the frame, the artists leave the boxes open: “We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is khulla (open) where there’s space for all to breathe” (*Bhimayana* 102). The new art form, a fine blend of traditional Gond art and modern drawing, provides a new worldview, constructing and conveying a sense of rhythmic movement that underscores the need for social harmony. The way the traditional art-form with new forms of self-respect and rebelliousness connects the past to the present offers “the possibility of bringing marginal structures to the centre” (Nagaraj 151). The new art form seeks freedom from the traditional styles, addressing the experiences of Dalits. “The new is dealt with through a deliberate choice of the antique” (Freitag 367).

The democratic approach of the art lies in the way the same colour is used to delineate different characters irrespective of their socio-cultural backgrounds. The same colour as used for each image not only reinforces the view that all people are equal in irrespective of the caste, class, colour and creed but also rejects the traditional view that uphold social hierarchy based on irrational footing. As a counter discourse, the text “challenges the dominant narrative and provides an alternative perspective that is grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and a sense of being that the ‘ecosystem people” (Guha & Gadgil 3) sharing with the greater cosmic reality beyond the western concept of ‘human,’ The imaginative incorporation of Gondian art in the narrative can be understood as a required freedom from the overriding logo-centric narratives as set and supported by the Western World.

A Gardener in the Wasteland chronicles the life of social reformer Jotiba Phule along with his wife, Savitri Bai Phule who fought against the oppressive caste system in Indian society. Alike *Bhimayana*, both *Gulamgiri* and *A Gardener in Waste Land* deal with the same theme of permanence of social myths in Indian society but differ in the ways and modes these myths are described apart from the way Phule worked towards the upliftment and education of *Sudras* and *Atisudras*. This graphic narrative attempts to uncover in a satirical way the hidden and hideous face of indigenous sectarianism concealed behind the façade of Indian mythology. It not only foregrounds the continuity of the oppressive, inhuman system but also gives a space to crusading and dissenting voices that expose the mythical view that tries to justify the cast-hierarchy along the occupation, not according to merits and capabilities.

A Gardener in the Wasteland critiques hegemonic accounts of history and mythology, showing how mythology and history are appropriated to uphold the system of exploitation and submission. The narrative critiques the myth about the origin of Aryans as described in *Manusmriti* which is still making inroads into our life. The novel visualizes even the most violent and ugliest happenings of the caste-based discrimination but the gardening or

education as a symbol of fertility or new seed is used as a metaphor to counter and contain the weeds of barrenness of wasteland and sectarianism. Phule denounces rather deconstructs the dominant and sectarian discourses that not only consider the upper classes as the purest and supreme part of the *Varna* system but also equips them with a divine authority to rule over the lower classes.

In *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, Savitri Bai “ahead of her times” (17) sought and strived to change her world through education though married at the age of eighteen. In no way she was less than Laxmi Bai and Sarojini Naidu. She has emerged a role model for the coming generations, promoting the norm of social “equality among human beings and rational thought ((17) and rejecting the religious rituals. Crossing the confinement of hearth and home, she assumes a new role while retaining the traditional one. She is presented as a warrior for undertaking the dual role of a housewife in the private domain and a teacher in the public space to contribute to the common cause that is education of the deprived ones.

Phule shows how Hindu scriptures glorify the ten *avatars* of Vishnu, endowing them with divine attributes, though they were the early barbarian invaders, according to Phule, and how India’s original inhabitants are depicted as *asuras*. The narrative digs at the obscurantism of organized religion, giving counter-argument against the *Vedic* depiction of early Indian history through ‘Aryan-centric’ mythology. There is no reasoning behind the unscientific and absurd myths as perpetuated through Hindu scriptures. Phule reveals the reality of the *Sudras* and *Adsuras*, presenting an alternative view of the *avatars* of Vishnu. Each *avatar* is shown as an Aryan chieftain who deceitfully defeats a worthy, native king, for example, *Vamana* waged war against Bali, a non-Brahmin, and destroyed the benevolently ruled kingdom.

A Gardener in the Wasteland exposes the reality of the myths as perpetuated and propagated through mainstream as well as popular literature and culture, referring to the European scholars who state that Aryans are not “rightful inheritors” (31) of India because they “came to India from outside” (31), rather they are kin to Europeans as “interlopers” (31) In order to retain their (pseudo) divine character, a particular class/caste “fabricated absurd myths in their *Vedas* and passed them off as history” (33), projecting the view that these sacred books were written by God. These myths were used to oppress the Dalits, reducing them to a state of ignorance. In the mainstream history/historical account, they are depicted as warriors endowed with divine attributes but the stories are other way round. To devise and maintain their hold on the native people, they “devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste and the code of cruel and inhuman laws” (75) whereas *Sudras* were condemned with “supreme hatred and contempt” (75) besides “their shadow was deemed a pollution” (75).

Another myth that invited the ire of the artists is that a Brahman is “The lord of the universe and equal to God himself. He is to be worshipped, served and respected by all. He cannot be slain, not even by a king. He cannot give any advice to Sudra. He can co-habit even with Sudra’s lawful wife. He cannot be taxed” (77). On the other hand, many laws were created for *Sudras* to serve the upper castes. “A brahman may compel a man of the servile class to perform servile duty because such a man was created by the Almighty only for the purpose of serving brahmans” (78). Though he is released from his master, he is “not released from a state of servitude” (78). These myths are still used to deceive the gullible but hardworking and poor Dalits through “their incantations and rituals” (80). Baliraja, a great champion of downtrodden and a lover of the truth, preached to millions of followers across the world that “God had given us the true and holy knowledge and had granted to everyone equal right to it” (81).

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Jotiba saw “Hinduism as fundamentally premised on inequality and on exploitation of the lower castes by higher castes, of women by men” (103), rejecting it as a basis for freedom and nationalism and emphasizing the need for real education. Phule was not against any religion or Hinduism as such but against the ills in religion and ones who appropriated religion for narrow, vested interests, He differed from the *Brahmos* and *Parrthana Samajji* reformers as partners in social revolution, opposing the sacred thread and rejecting *gayatri mantra* that they would use to get united along caste lines. He also differed from the reformers from upper castes who were in favour of divide between *sudras* and *ati-sudras* so as to keep them obedient. In “Afterword” of the book, Srividya Natrajan rightly comments, “Phule was interested in building a belief system that could be viable foundations for liberal, democratic, equitable society” (129). Both of these social reformers had stood by their demands of equality like a strong pillar so as to secure social justice for Dalits. They fought to free Dalits from the cultural stigma and worked tirelessly to provide them with a respected place for living and proper platform for voicing their resistance.

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