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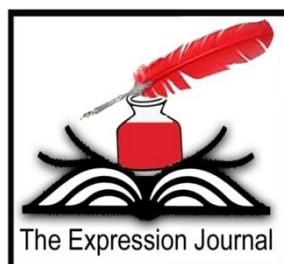


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The Polemics of Subjugation: A Study of Datta Bhagat's *Whirlpool*

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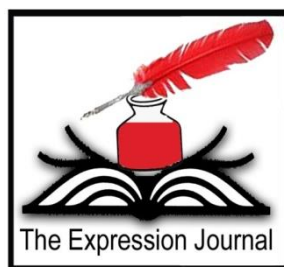
Abstract

Since time immemorial, mankind has witnessed the subjugation and marginalization of the subalterns at the hands of those who occupy the centre stage. Brute force and violence alone cannot continue this systemic subjugation, so what ensures that this cycle of oppression continues? This paper attempts to delve into the polemics of subjugation and understand how hierarchies are created and enforced. One way of doing this, is by reading Dalit literature. Dalit Literature can simply be defined as the literature of the Dalits, written by the Dalits. Datta Bhagat's *Avart* or *Whirlpool* is one of the seminal works of this genre. In his magnum opus, Bhagat not only sheds light on the systemic subjugation, social inequality and injustice that is meted out to the low caste people but also how narratives are manipulated to favour those in power. Even history is unreliable as it is an amalgamation of fact and fiction. The problem, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightly points out, is that even if the subalterns take a stand for themselves and recount their stories, the upper caste people deny them the platform to voice their sentiments and ideas. It is said that a chain is as strong as its weakest link. The democratic strength of a nation depends on the social and economic strength of all its citizens. Therefore, it is imperative to break this cycle of subjugation and rise above social evils like the caste system that restrict our progress.

Keywords

Datta Bhagat, *Whirlpool*, Subjugation, Injustice, Social Inequality, Dalit Literature, Oppression, History, Social Stratification.

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The Polemics of Subjugation: A Study of Datta Bhagat's *Whirlpool*

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The history of mankind is no stranger to the corrupt practices of subjugation and exploitation. The world has always been divided between the haves and the have-nots, between the aristocrats, bourgeoisie, and the proletariat. This division of society led to the marginalisation of the working class. In India, marginalisation is not only on the basis of the economic status of the people but also on the basis of caste. The upper caste people have, since time immemorial, suppressed and taken advantage of the lower caste people. The lower caste people were relegated to the periphery of the society and denied agency.

Social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, through their seminal works, *Gulamgiri* (1873) and "Annihilation of Caste" (1936) respectively, tried to create awareness regarding the plight of the lower caste people. They spoke out against the tyranny of the upper castes. Dr. BR Ambedkar contended that equality is the foundational tenet of a democracy and to bring about equality in the society, the government must work towards the upliftment of the lower castes. It was with the passage of time and due to the efforts of the social reformers that the lower caste people became aware of their rights and mustered courage to take a stand for themselves.

It was in the first Dalit Sahitya Sammelan held in Mumbai in the year 1958 that the term 'Dalit Literature' was adopted and championed by figures like Anna Bhau Sathe. In his inaugural speech at the Dalit Sahitya Sammelan, Anna Bhau Sathe said, "The old belief that the Earth rests on the head of Sheshnag is untrue. It finds its balance on the palms of toiling Dalits and workers." (Attri) He firmly believed that it was time for the Dalits to recount their experiences. Dalit literature is the literature of the oppressed, written by the oppressed. It comprises the lived experiences of people and proved to be revolutionary as, finally, the oppressed were voicing their thoughts and sharing their experiences. The subaltern was finally being heard.

Datta Bhagat, an Indian Marathi playwright, is a pioneering figure in the domain of Dalit theatre movement in Marathi. A professor of Marathi, at the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, Datta Bhagat, in his magnum opus *Avart* or *Whirlpool* (1978), has depicted the pitiful condition of the Dalits and the manipulations through which the upper caste people dominate the narrative. The said play, with its use of the traditional forms of *Dindi* and *Tamasha*, is an eye-opener as it talks about the cyclical oppression of the Dalits. Bhagat compares this cyclical oppression to a whirlpool

as caste is not a linear rhetorical relic, but a self-reproducing cycle; a social and temporal loop in which people are caught and trapped. This has been depicted in the play not only through the title but also through the characters of the stage manager and the jester in the play. In the beginning as well as at the end of the play, the audience witnesses the stage manager and the jester dancing in circles. They say, "We must not go backwards, we must not go forward, brother. We must weave in circles." (Deshpande 679) This shows that the characters also feel stuck. They are aware of the cycles of subjugation and tyranny. Translated from Marathi into English by Georg Nagies, Vimal Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot, *Avart* or *Whirlpool* drives home the point that those who are in power make sure that they remain in power by modifying the reality and depicting it in a way that is beneficial for them. Reality is often misconstrued, misrepresented, misreported and therefore misinterpreted.

History plays an important role in the polemics of subjugation. It is an amalgamation of facts and fiction. It is a record of the description of an event, and as Hayden White rightly points out in his 1973 book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in nineteenth Century Europe*, "we are free to conceive 'history' as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will." (433) White contends that historical writing is not objective. The historian, just like an author, paints a picture with words and beneath the collection of facts lies a latent poetic structure that renders literariness to historical writing. This latent poetic structure is responsible for blurring the boundaries between facts and fiction. The main argument of the book is that historical narratives by necessity need literary structures, and those literary structures are themselves arguments about the nature of history. *Metahistory* illustrates this through its case studies, showing not only that they come to very different conclusions, but that they reflect deeply held ethical, moral and political convictions far more than they reflect past events.

It would not be incorrect to state that history, more often than not, records events from the point of view of those in power, often pushing the subalterns to the margins, thereby denying them agency and silencing them. This systematic denial of recognition and representation is what makes us question the fundamental structure of the society. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of history is related to her theory of the 'Other.' She opines that historiography excavates the past. It is important to study history in order to decipher how the 'Other' was created by those who occupied important, influential and powerful positions in society. Spivak is aware that language, through the medium of narratives, aids in the fabrication of history. She contends that just as a world without bias is impossible, a historical record based solely on facts is also impossible. History --- a record of events that took place in the past, is supposed to be based on facts. Spivak contends that these 'facts' are not really 'facts.' They are narratives written by people who had the privilege of knowing language and the knack of articulation. Since the privileged people reported events and wrote narratives from their perspective, it is quite possible and probable that their observations were one-dimensional. Therefore, their records omit the perspective of the downtrodden or underprivileged section of the society. The downtrodden, denied the power, opportunity and means to create narratives, are therefore silenced. In her book *The Post-Colonial Critic*, Spivak addresses the subalterns and asks, "Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?" (62) In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak argues that even if the Subalterns try to overcome the problem of misrepresentation by speaking out and representing themselves, the privileged will not be willing to give them the centre stage. The question, as Spivak rightly points out, is not whether the subaltern can speak or not but rather can the subaltern be heard.

Datta Bhagat's *Whirlpool*, a one-act play, is set in the 1940s and tells the tale of a young Dalit man called Manohar and his family. Manohar, an educated youth, belongs to the Mahar caste and is a believer of Dr.BR Ambedkar's philosophy. Having been to cities like Mumbai and Pune, Manohar advocates equality and social justice. He rejects the notions of the supremacy of the upper castes and the submissiveness of the lower castes. He tries to create awareness about the falsity of age-old narratives and tries to bust myths.

The plot of the play revolves around a pilgrimage to Pandharpur. Manohar and his associates desire to enter the Vithoba temple at Pandharpur and worship the deity. This is opposed by not only the upper-caste people but also characters like Piraji, who belong to the lower caste. The reluctance of characters like Piraji to change with the changing times and rebel against the corrupt and oppressive practices of the upper castes is revealed in the play. Piraji, during his conversation with Manohar says, "But why? Why should we change?" (Deshpande 660) This proves that the older generations of the lower-caste people had internalised the roles that were forced upon them by the privileged castes and were reluctant to do anything to disrupt the hierarchy. Manohar tries to explain logically why their entering the temple would not defile the deity. He says,

"People say that you don't live cleanly and that you therefore contaminate them. That you eat fish and meat and that you will desecrate the deity. I instructed the children of all the nearby villages. They live cleanly. They don't eat fish and meat – therefore we are fit to go to the Hanuman temple." (Deshpande 660)

Manohar, while talking to upper caste characters like Mahadu, Kisan and Josi, argues that their entering the temple would not defile the deity as the same God resides in everyone. He further contends, "You're all talking about bodily impurity. But the soul is pure and shining. Bodily impurity originates from the body. Show me that religion that teaches that the body is born pure." (Deshpande 666) Logical though his arguments are, the upper-caste people are against Manohar's entering the temple to worship.

In order to prevent Manohar and his associates from entering the temple, Josi, the village astrologer, deceives them by telling them the wrong day. Tukaram, Manohar's father was shocked to see Sidnak who comes to summon Tukaram for being a part of the religious procession heading to Pandharpur on the behest of Thakur Maharaja. He says, "The Josi (astrologer) of our village said that today's lunar mansion is Tuesday. Therefore I was of the opinion that you will come on Sunday, but now you are two days early." (Deshpande 659) To which Sidnak replies, "The lunar mansion is not Tuesday's but Sunday's, and on Sunday we have to go to Narsi" (Deshpande 659) Gopala, another Dalit belonging to Mahar caste, assesses the situation and says, "It means that the Josi Maharaja has deceived us." (Deshpande 660)

Gradually, it is revealed that Tukaram's father was punished because he, despite being a Mahar, touched the feet of Cintaman Maharaja who passed away soon after due to cholera. On Candar Patel's orders, the Potraj informed the villagers that Mother Devi had come to him in a dream and demanded Tukaram's father as a sacrifice. Mahadu, an upper caste individual recounts this incident to two other upper-caste individuals, Kisan and Josi and says, "With array and pomp, striking up music, they all went to Tukaram's house. There Piraji tied his hands and his feet and threw the sinner into the deep well there" Deshpande (664). It is evident that none of the upper caste people regret the punishment meted out to Tukaram's father. In fact, they are prepared to stop Manohar and his comrades from entering the temple. The Josi boasts, "We've also made some preparations, haven't we, some preparations for going to the cremation ground." (Deshpande 664)

During the course of the play, some incidents of brutality, where violence is inflicted on the Mahar community even when they are right, are witnessed. The stage manager shares with the audience one such tale of injustice and cruelty. He says,

I heard the tale of what happened in Sonapur. The tale of the quarrel between Baji the goldsmith and Candar Patel... In the struggle of the two Tukya got caught up. Sonar claimed the embankment, the Patel was beside himself with rage. He seized Sonar's fields and wrought havoc on them. They summoned Tukya, he came, the village council was convened. "Speak in my favour" the Patel said to him, with threats... The superintendent came to the village. He summoned Tukya. The superintendent said: I'm taking an oath before God. To ensure the respectability of the law. Tukya spoke the truth. And favoured Sonar. Boiling with rage the Patel said that the Malhar's Baluta is finished. Nobody protected them, and they got beaten up. (Deshpande 662)

The jester then asked if Tukaram had called the Chief Sahab. To which, the stage manager replied, "The Chief Sahab scolded Candar Patel, trashed his servants (Patel's servants who conspired with him) and went the way he had come" (Deshpande 662). This clearly depicts the plight of Tukaram. Not only was he punished for speaking the truth, but was also let down by his own community as nobody came to his defence when he was being beaten up. This incident also highlights the inability of law to protect the underprivileged. It sheds light on the fact that the ground reality is very different from perceived reality. The law was unable to protect Tukaram as well. Justice was served, but only on paper. The fact that serving justice does not guarantee the actual implementation of justice is both, appalling as well as heart-wrenching. This was not an isolated incident but is one of the many incidents that the underprivileged section of the society had to go through from time to time.

It is distressing to note that violence, at the hands of the upper classes, had become a part of the lives of the lower caste people so much so that they internalised the insults and suffered the blows without resisting. Even one of the devotional songs that Maharaja sings bears testimony to the above stated fact. "Hari, Hari, what can we say now? How can we say it? Hey, We have the right only of leftovers" (Deshpande 668).

The jester also recounts the story of Sambuk which appears in the "Uttara Kanda" of the *Ramayana*. Sambuk was a Nisada (a low-caste man, an outcaste) who practised ascetic penance in a wood near Ayodha. He was beheaded by Lord Rama because a Brahman's young son had died and he approached Lord Rama as a young person's demise was considered unnatural during that age. It was believed that "The wrongful penance of this Sudra is at the root of this evil." Deshpande (671) Datta Bhagat does not comment on this further but leaves it on the reader/audience to question whether Ramrajya was really ideal. This story brings to mind the restrictions which were imposed on the low caste people. They did not even have the freedom to practise religion the way they wanted. Datta Bhagat uses this anecdote to highlight the fact that such restrictions continued till the 1940s as this play is set in the 1940s. The upper caste people of the Uranganv village take measures to prevent Manohar from entering the temple of Vithoba in Pandharpur, which is ironic as Vithoba is considered to be the deity of inclusivity.

Later in the play, Manohar and Tukaram file a case against the upper caste people as they physically abuse Manohar and Tukaram, gouged out Tukaram's eyes and killed Tukaram's father as well. Unfortunately for them, Piraji the prime witness in the case turns against them and lies. The lawyer therefore concludes by saying,

the testimony of this witness makes it utterly clear that Raybhan Patel did not harm Manohar Savai or Tukaram Savai, but that he rather closed the doors in order to avoid

a quarrel and to protect himself. In the course of that Tukaram lost his eyes out of his own carelessness and misfortune. But the complainants gave a false account before the court and falsely accused Raybhan Patel, therefore I request you to mete out punishment to them. (Deshpande 674)

Kisan, who was accused of tying Tukaram's father's limbs and throwing him in the well, was also let off because he simply denied the charges.

Manohar was crestfallen to see that the legal system of the country had failed him. Despite the fact that the social reformers were fighting for the rights of the underprivileged, the ground reality remained the same. In his defence, Manohar says,

To express the anguish of an age-old inheritance of suffering is the grave purport of my speech. I'm the world ruler of poverty...My hope and desires were crushed under the rock of tradition...Today, I'm standing at that turn of time where I will enter the temple. If you consider this sinful then I'm committing a sin, but I want that turning like a spinning top to come to an end...if I've incurred guilt, well, then, that's it. I'm a spinning top, a spinning top turning in circles on one spot. (Deshpande 676)

The metaphor of the spinning top is symbolic of the cyclical oppression that the Dalits have suffered at the hands of the upper caste people.

Although Tukaram and Manohar were the complainants, they were the ones who were punished as the witnesses turned hostile. The epitome of injustice is when they are asked to help dig a well in the village as a punishment but they end up getting wounded and losing their lives as, "Having ignited some sticks of explosives Kisanrav flees warning all get out, get away, get away from here. All run away. When Manohar and Tukaram try to come out of the well nobody helps them, but just then there is the sound of an explosion to be heard. The two of them fall down wounded." (Deshpande 678)

Datta Bhagat's *Avart* or *Whirlpool* forces us to consider the plight of the subalterns and makes us question the social stratification that exists in society. *Whirlpool* also sheds light on the inability of modern democratic and legal institutions to dismantle structural inequality in India. Tukaram and his son are progressive and want to do something to bring about a change in the society. They are reformers who want to dismantle social hierarchy but are unable to do so and become victims of the very system that they want to challenge. It is a disheartening tale of social injustice and oppression.

It is a fact, universally acknowledged that the hierarchies of caste and class have been responsible for the subjugation and marginalisation of the Dalits since the beginning of the caste system. To strengthen these hierarchies, not only the narratives but also history was manipulated. Even religious texts like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were twisted. Many scholars believe that Sambuk's tale was a later addition to the *Ramayana*. All this points towards the fact that the upper-caste people left no stone unturned to oppress the subalterns.

Equality is a basic human right which has been continually denied to the subalterns. A metamorphosis of the society is the need of the hour as the overall progress of a nation depends on the progress of all the sections of the society. In his final address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, Dr. BR Ambedkar famously stated, "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy" (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Speeches). Therefore, it is one of the goals of Dalit literature to spread awareness about social inequality and injustice and fight the social demons that plague our society.

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