

DALITS AND THE LITERATURE OF PROTEST: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Protest in all its variety and degree of intensity has been a buzzword in cultural studies all over the world. Naturally, literature is not an exception to it. Literature as a reflection of socio-politico-cultural milieu of the artist is definitely an area that enables to explore the life and times of a man who created it and his ideology in relation to various aspects of his life. That is why, this paper attempts to trace the aesthetics of protest in subaltern literature with special reference to 'The Branded', a brilliantly decoded life-story of a man who, along with hundreds of similar communities, was branded as a criminal by the socio-religio-political structure of India. Attempts are also made to see how the narrator develops his story as a paradigm to illustrate his concept of aesthetics and how it contradicts with the aesthetics of mainstream literature. The basic argument of this paper is to draw attention of the intelligentsia towards the new aesthetic principles underlying the literary output of the marginalized sections of the society and pass on a judgment on its aesthetic qualities.

Introduction:

Protest in all its variety and degree of intensity has been a buzzword in cultural studies including literature all over the world. Literature is definitely an area that facilitates to explore the life and times of its creator and his ideology. Being a sensitive

member of his society, writer's personality is definitely influenced by various socio-politico-religious institutions of his life. Naturally, all these influences are actively involved in the creation of his work. These socio-politico-religious institutions have been responsible for the unimaginable sufferings of many backward communities including women in the hierarchical structure of Indian society. This acute sense of exploitation has led these writers to express their sufferings in the form of literature. While creating their works, they have developed their own literary principles which govern their literary output. That is why, this paper attempts to trace the aesthetics of protest in subaltern literature with special reference to Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya*. Attempts are also made to perceive how the narrator develops his story as a paradigm to illustrate his concept of aesthetics and how it contradicts with the aesthetics of mainstream literature thereby enabling the researcher to draw attention of the intelligentsia towards the new aesthetic principles underlying the literary output of the marginalized sections of the society and pass on a judgment on its aesthetic qualities.

Uchalya is Laxman Gaikwad's Sahitya Academy Award winner autobiography written in Marathi. Afterwards it was translated into English by P.A. Kolharkar and published by Sahitya Academy with a title *The Branded*. It is a brilliantly decoded life-story of Laxman, a member of Uchalya community. Uchalya community was a notified criminal tribe as per the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. In addition, the members of this community have been deprived of equal social status by the peculiar socio-politico-religious structure of India, which forced them to lead a subhuman life. Any attempt on the part of these communities to raise their voice against such a humiliating treatment was vehemently suppressed by the upper castes. Consequently, the members of these oppressed communities were deprived of all the necessities like food, clothing, housing and education that were indispensable for leading a respectable human life.

The political independence of India from the British was looked upon

as the new dawn in the lives of all Indians including these Notified communities. It certainly brought few positive changes in the lives almost all backward communities. However, there was not much change in the lives of the previously ‘Notified’ tribes because the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act after independence. This Act allowed the police to check the movements of the members of the Nomadic communities and imprison them even without conducting proper trial. As a result, even after independence, these tribes were forced to face almost similar inhuman conditions in Indian society. They were commonly segregated and banned from full participation in Hindu socio-cultural life. They had no entry into the temple, school, garden or any other public place. It is surprising to know that even today there are many people who do not know much about the nomadic tribes and their plight in India. In this respect, Ruchira says:

“While the plight of the untouchables is fairly well known in most of the world, the “criminal” caste may come as a surprise to even some Indians. The indignity and danger associated with this peculiar social taxonomy is based not on legal grounds but merely the accident of birth and the ignorant bias of a long ago foreign occupier – the imperial British rule in India.”(Ruchira : 4 Feb. 2010)

Being the member of such a community, Laxman Gaikwad was forced to go through the first-hand experiences of ill-treatment at the hands of upper caste Hindus. Therefore his autobiography, *Uchalya*, faithfully unveils a factual and microscopic account of his sufferings not only as an individual but also as an unfortunate member of Uchalya community and focuses upon his relentless efforts to construct his self in the adverse circumstances. The incidents that cover Laxman’s life from early childhood up to his middle age are, of course, fascinating; however, the most fascinating aspect of his life-story

is the fact that it defies many of the aesthetic principles of traditional autobiographies and comes up with the rules of its own. In a way, this departure from the set aesthetic canons of mainstream autobiography, it seems, is the artistic protest of the autobiographer against the established familial, social, political, legal, literary and also the linguistic norms forced upon him and his community for centuries by the practitioners of the mainstream autobiography.

As per the so-called norms practiced in traditional Hindu society, it is expected that there should be close emotional ties among all the members of a family. The parents should look after the needs of their children and help them to grow into responsible human beings. Similarly, the children, too, have to fulfill their duties towards their parents. And as a responsible member of society, the writer should write only about such affectionate relations between parents and children. This norm is faithfully followed by the mainstream autobiographers as their works depict only those events from their lives in which all the members of the family are shown to be very much sincere and affectionate in their dealings with each other. However, this is not the case with Laxman Gaikwad.

A close analysis of *Uchalya* shows that there are various problematic issues in the relationship between the autobiographer and his parents about which he has frankly written in his work. Without shying away from such embarrassing incidents of his life, Laxman Gaikwad has very faithfully narrated them to his readers. Rather than glorifying his relations with his family like that of mainstream autobiographers, Laxman Gaikwad has rendered the realistic accounts of his familial relations. These relations become quite clear from the incident in which Laxman Gaikwad writes about how his father and brothers used to encourage him to drink wine at an early age, which can never be found happening in any of the upper-caste family in India. He writes about this incident in these words:

“Baba and Dada would offer me a glass of that brew. I would refuse it as its strong smell irritated my nostrils. They would say ‘Come Bapu, take it. It’s good for your cough.’ They would put the glass in my hand. ...After I had touched the feet of all, I would put the glass to my lips and drink in one long draught. Everyone would appreciatively commend my drinking: ‘Bravo! Bravo!’ Good people outside our community would say drinking was not good. But our house had its own ways. Everybody in our house drank liquor together. When I showed reluctance to take drinks, Dada said, ‘Drink, it’s good antidote against fever, cold.’ They forced me to drink.” (Gaikwad, 2009:P.69)

It is shocking to learn that Laxman used to drink wine when he was less than 8-9 years old and had stopped drinking by the time he reached in Standard IV. Such kind of vitiating atmosphere had devastating effects on Laxman’s tender mind. Such kind of behaviour on the part of his family members forced Laxman to rethink his relationship with them seriously.

Traditional aesthetics and its practitioners object to such filthy representation of the relationships among the members of a family because they believe that it would corrupt the minds of innocent readers and lead them to misbehave with their loved ones. It will further affect the moral health of the society. Hence, it should cease to exist in literature. It seems to be pretentious on the part of these followers as they forget that whatever is being portrayed by Laxman Gaikwad in his autobiography is the direct or indirect repercussion of their own vicious treatment of their victim. As the autobiographer has witnessed such social and familial filth around him since his early childhood, it would be an exercise in futility to expect nothing else but only the ‘sublime and noble’ from his pen.

Like his family members, Laxman’s community is also seen exploiting

him and unnecessarily creating hindrances in his development. Laxman Gaikwad tells the readers that his father had admitted him to school with the hope of uplifting his life. However, the members of his community did not like it. Therefore, they were seen threatening Laxman's father of dire consequences if he did not remove him from the school. It was so because they believed that the disease of cholera, which many children were suffering from, was the result of Laxman's schooling. They said that it had infuriated Goddess Yellamma. Referring to this incident, Laxman Gaikwad writes:

“Three-four weeks after I started going to school... children living nearby our hut were affected by loose motions and omitting. Our neighbours...began to quarrel with my parents... Martanda, since your bastard of a son has started going to school, diseases are visiting us... Has anybody from among our forefathers ever gone to school? If our children started going to school, our race would be doomed. Goddess Yellamma will be furious. Look, Martand, if your son continues to go to school, we shall call the Panchayat and ostracize you.” (2009:P.16-17)

Obviously, it was not Laxman's schooling but the unhygienic conditions of their surrounding which had brought the epidemic in the area. However, the people of his community tried to put its blame on Laxman's schooling. It was because of his teacher's timely interference that the members of his community allowed him to go to school; otherwise Laxman's schooling would have been discontinued causing irreparable damage to his intellectual growth.

Such kinds of incidents expose the quality of familial and community relations among the members of Uchalya community. However, it has to be taken into consideration that this inhuman behaviour amongst these people was definitely a result of the devilish treatment they received at the hands of their oppressors. Laxman Gaikwad

feels very sorry to think about the days of his childhood and early youth because of the sad memories of ruthless treatment he received at the hands of Savarnas of his village. Those callous incidents were so deeply implanted in his sensitive mind that even after so many years, those wounds were still bleeding. That is why he writes:

“I had to call this place my village because I was born here, but this village had forced me to starve and live a groveling, ignoble life. Even a Maratha child mocked, ‘Lachiman Tata crab-curry khata? If I happened to touch anybody’s vessel, he purged it in fire or touched a cow to wash away the taint of my touch. I had to speak with respect and humility with even a year-old child. This village had forced me to live a slave’s life. Nothing but humiliation had ever come my way.’” (2009:P.115)

These words of frustration were the natural outcome of Laxman’s experiences of unbearable pains which had resulted from the brutality of caste Hindus. Owing to such slavish life, Laxman did not wish to come back to his village.

The recurring incidents of oppression and their terrible effects on the lives of the members of his community had made Laxman Gaikwad think seriously about this issue. Though it seems that he was the silent observer of atrocities inflicted by the Savarnas on his people, his act of writing about those oppressive conditions itself was his dissent against the prevalent conditions of his life. Since his childhood, he had witnessed his people being victimized by the caste Hindus for no reason at all. This constant debauchery on the part of Savarnas had become an unavoidable reality in the lives of his people. Therefore, he has protested against the atrocities of the Savarnas through his autobiography. In this respect, It can be said that his life-story:

“pours forth revolt and discharges a burden of hatred and contempt accumulated since centuries, or even sometimes hurl abuses at and spits out back on high castes the venom that they had to swallow for ages.”

(Poitevin)

Since Uchalyas were not considered as an integral part of social and religious structure, they were subjected to various callous customs. But with the passage of time, the members of his community began to express their dissent against such inhuman and disgraceful practices. However, it was a Herculean task as the problem of religion with Laxman Gaikwad and his community was more complex compared to other backward communities. Though Uchalyas were Hindus, they were not allowed to practice Hinduism on equal footing by the caste Hindus. As the religious beliefs were deeply rooted in the minds of illiterate people of his community, it was difficult for the people like Laxman to break them. That is why, it is observed from Laxman Gaikwad’s autobiography that though sometimes he didn’t believe in some of the rituals of his religion, he had to observe them just for the sake of his community:

“I could not hurt the feelings of my relatives and the people at home by displaying my atheistic thoughts... All the things that Anna liked habituated to, were taken. They were: Bhajjas, Paan, Supari, tobacco, Bombil. Even liquor was taken in a bottle. It filled me with deep sorrow to see these proceedings. The liquor that killed Anna was being carried as an offering to propitiate and release his soul. They wanted to ply him with liquor even after his death... Anna’s soul would rest in peace only if I followed his habits diligently.” (Gaikwad, 2009:P.218-219)

This incident throws light on how the members of Uchalya community were following Hindu rites and rituals which were the basic causes of their sufferings.

However, with the passing of time, the young members of this community realized the hollowness of Hindu rites and rituals and so became ironical in their attitude towards it. They started to raise their doubts regarding various unexplainable riddles of Hinduism, leading sometimes to the conflict between the two generations. This change in the attitudes of Uchalyas towards religion and its biased principles is largely accounted for the phenomenal efforts of the social reformers. The noble efforts of these reformers towards the end of British rule opened the doors of education for all the underprivileged communities. These efforts were further accelerated after the independence of India. Education, being one of the most influential factors in the development of human beings, has played a very significant role in transforming the lives of Dalits in Indian subcontinent. Recognizing such an importance of education, Laxman Gaikwad has devoted many pages of his life-story to narrate his efforts in acquiring it. Guy Poitevin focuses on this aspect of Dalit autobiography, when he says:

“Dalit literature in general and autobiography in particular insists at length... upon the access to school and education as the essential way towards employment and social mobility in a modern urbanised setting, that is, allowing for an escape from the grip of traditional repressive systems.” (Poitevin)

Even though the educational institutions were made open to all; initially, the parents were not ready to send their children to school as it was propagated that if anybody dared to educate his children, he would be punished by the God. Consequently, the God-fearing people kept their children away from the schools. If somebody tried to send the children to school, the members of upper-caste Hindu community used to discourage them by creating numerous hindrances in their path. However, nowadays, they have determined to work hard to get education. Being aware of the power of education, Laxman Gaikwad has given long

accounts of his courageous efforts to avail of the facilities of education. He strongly believed that education alone can enable his people to cope with the challenges of the modern world.

Along with the illiteracy of the Uchalyas, the government and its agencies were also not concerned with the education of this community. While speaking about the shocking apathy of the government towards the Uchalya community, Laxman Gaikwad says:

“For generations my community was deprived of education. We had no luxuries and no essentials either like work, status, house, village, or even legal existence. Even now we are not a part of the Census, we simply don’t count. We were notified as criminals by the British. Our government de-notified us in 1952; but we have no place in the Constitution. We are outcastes among outcastes with nothing of our own.” (Gaikwad: 8 May 2008)

Laxman Gaikwad knew that education alone can transform the lives of his people. Therefore, he has written about the importance of education in his life-story thereby making the common people of his community aware of its value for uplifting their lives. The supporters of established classes knew it well that if the members of this oppressed community got education, they would become aware of their exploitation, ultimately leading to the dismantling of the oppressive system itself. That is why, it seems, mainstream critics tried to discourage the autobiographers like Laxman Gaikwad from writing their life-stories by designating them to be non-literary.

The birth-related social status is the peculiar characteristic feature of ancient Indian social structure which still functions powerfully all over the country. Until recently, Uchalyas were required to carry the pass from the concerned authority, if they wanted to

move from one place to another; otherwise the police used to arrest them immediately. The police used to take undue advantage of the illiteracy and helplessness of these people. During the search operation, the police used to take away all the valuables and other household belongings. No written documents of the seizure of valuables or the arrests were prepared which enabled them to exploit their victims financially. In *Uchalya*, the police officers are found involved in such corrupt practices. They are shown to be extracting money from their victims. Laxman Gaikwad writes:

“The police came to our hut, dragging him (Anna) with them. All the inmates of the hut were made to line up. The police whipped everybody. They thrashed the women and the children from our hut all over, wherever their hands led them... They snatched away her (mother’s) mangalsutra and another cheap necklace. The police alleged that everything in the house was stolen property and arrested Anna, Sambha, Dada. A policeman told my mother, ‘Bring two hundred rupees, then they will be released.’” (Gaikwad, 2009:15-16)

This incident clearly exposes the corrupt practices of the police force and their inhuman treatment of Uchalyas. As a result, these people are seen to be eternally afraid of the law and its enforcers.

A close reading of the descriptions of atrocities of police on Uchalyas given in the autobiography of Laxman Gaikwad makes it quite clear that police department was one of their powerful enemies. It can be said that because of the atrocities of police these communities were forced to indulge into criminal activities. The police used to create such pressing situations in the lives of these people that they had to partake in the criminal activities to come out of them. The effect of such exploitation on the minds of the members of this community was terrible. As the younger members were getting

educated, they were confused to find the contrasting pictures of the lives described in their text-books and the realities in their own lives.

However, the social activists and leaders of these communities have been expressing their disgust and anger against the government and its institutions of law and police by organizing violent and non-violent activities and other innovative techniques. One such technique is to write about their traumatizing experiences in various literary forms. Accordingly, *Uchalya* gives lively descriptions of various experiences of his life. It helps the readers to understand the inhuman conditions in the lives of his people and motivates them to change their attitude towards this most disadvantaged section of Indian society. While reading *Uchalya*, it should be taken into consideration that the writers like Laxman Gaikwad have been using literature as one of the means of social transformation. Literature for them is more a social than an aesthetic activity as it helps them to fulfill their aim of making the world aware of the socio-cultural realities of their lives and bring in some positive changes in them. Emphasizing this aspect of Dalit literature, Guy Poitevin says:

“The first essential characteristic feature of the Marathi dalit literature is that it is not originally and essentially a literary exercise. The practice of writing does not aim at achieving an aesthetic performance in literature as an art. It serves purposes of social intervention and accordingly carries strong militant connotations.” (Poitevin)

This attitude of these writers presents them more as social activists than literary artists. This is the reason why they do not follow the canons of mainstream literature for which literary scholars hesitate to call their works as literature. They tend to create social awareness among the readers through their literary works. They do not aim simply at entertaining the readers but expect them to capture the social evils prevailing

in the entire society. So, they disregard the traditional canons of mainstream literature which were popularly used by others. Thus the literature of these people is governed by its own aesthetic principles, which is the protest of these writers against the aesthetics of mainstream literature.

However the upper caste critics and scholars tried to discourage these writers by refusing to publish their works as most of the literary associations and publishing houses were controlled by them. Only those works were encouraged which were ideologically closer to them. These selected few were appreciated and given literary awards. This policy of the mainstream critics succeeded to some extent as some of the Dalit writers fell preys to these awards and started to write their literary works in such a way that they would not offend their patrons. In fact, these writers failed to understand the selfish motive of their patrons behind short-listing them for such awards.

So far as the expressive aspects of protest in *Uchalya* are concerned, it is seen that Laxman Gaikwad has not used the standard language of mainstream literature because it lacks the required strength and force to express the genuine life experiences of Uchalyas. He, therefore, prefers the combination of standard language and his dialect which helps him to create the desired effect on his readers. The study of his autobiography shows that there are a number of words and conversational expressions used by the autobiographer to make his experiences more authentic and energetic.

The unique aspect of the language of *Uchalya* is the use of words and expressions from the register of the thieves. Being a member of Uchalya, a criminal tribe, Laxman Gaikwad has used the vocabulary referring to the profession of stealing to give the favour of authenticity to his narrative. For example, the words like f[kLraXk eÙkk;k] eqÍy R;phaXk] frjXksaXk ,yXkkMíkk] etc. have been taken from the thief's register. Even the conversational expressions from the dialect enhance the natural taste of his

language. As Laxman Gaikwad is from the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, which falls on the border of Andhra Pradesh, there are also few words from Telugu language. For example, the words xqjank] larkeqpyj] dqDdy Åjsj] fulfUKIiqM] c@UrK] jaMyw] OgMh OgMh] eqMiw] eq\h] rXXkw] egyOkr] LkyXkw] dqdk] dkLkqy] rsyiqy] Vkdeq[k] etc. have been taken from Telugu.

The combination of standard Marathi language with various region and caste specific dialectal varieties of Marathi has not gone well with many scholars of mainstream literature. They are of the opinion that the language of Uchalyas is unbecoming for literature because of its use of many vocabulary items and conversational expressions directly taken from the dialect of Uchalyas. They are astonished at the use of such a ‘filthy’ language in literature. It seems that these critics are worried more of the fake health of society than the intolerable sufferings in the lives of Uchalyas. Some critics feel that over-emphasis on dialect in this autobiography has made it difficult to understand for the general readers. However, Laxman’s life experiences are so unique that they cannot be effectively narrated in standard language alone. His dialect and his life experiences are so closely linked with each other that any effort to separate them might damage the overall impact and spirit of his work. To overcome the problem of understanding the meanings of some of the words taken from his dialect, Laxman Gaikwad has given their meanings in the brackets immediately after that word. For example, f[kLraXk eÙkk;k ¼f£ls dkik;k½] eqÍy R;phaXk ¼xBqMs vk.kk;k½] frjXksaXk ,yXkkMíkk ¼cktkjkuh fQjk;k tk;kyk½] xqjank ¼futke ljdkjpk gsj½] frjxk;k ¼p@jh dj;k½] larkeqpyj ¼vkBoMíkkP;k cktkjr p@jh dj.kkjk½] dqye~ ¼dwG½] dqDdy Åjsj ¼i@fyl vu~ EgjkVs ekula½] fulfUKIiqM ¼fpdu p@iMa½] xqUuk ¼MqDdj½] Qanh ¼Mqdjh.k½] bjok ¼dkGht½] mMrk ¼£kj½ and many more similar words have been provided with their meanings in the brackets.

Laxman Gaikwad has also used various narrative techniques like the first person

narration, ellipsis, exposition, letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, conversations, inner thoughts of characters, including, flashback, and flash-forward to make his life story interesting. However, it has to be noted that Laxman Gaikwad's emphasis is on the events of his life rather than the use of narrative techniques. For him, telling his story itself was important as he considered his work to be a social rather than a literary product. Therefore, the literary devices have only the secondary place in his autobiography.

To conclude, it can be said that it was not possible for Laxman Gaikwad to keep his life-story away from the sufferings of Uchalya community as they formed the integral part of his own life. As the aesthetic principles of mainstream autobiography were quite inadequate to express those unique experiences of sufferings, he discarded them and evolved a new set of principles which enabled him to convey those experiences without losing their authenticity. This new set of literary principles can be regarded as his protest against the age-old aesthetic norms practiced by the mainstream literature.

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