
Subverting the Stereotypes: The Short Stories of Ratan Kumar Sambhariya

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ABSTRACT

Publication Info

Article history :

Received : 29-04-2024

Accepted : 02-05-2024

DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v20i1.7

Key words:

Dalit, subaltern, stereotypes, marginality, subvert.

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Dalit literature is a genre which focuses on the depiction of the reality of existence as Dalits in Indian society. Simultaneously it points out those conditions which are responsible for their suffering. In literature composed by Dalits and others who identify with them the stereotypes created by others are used. Dalits are shown as a class of victims. They consider their existential problems as their fate and take them for granted. The paper discusses the short stories of a living Dalit author Ratan Kumar Sambharia who creates such characters that subvert the image of Dalits as ones who accept subjugation. His characters rebel against the status quo and challenge the system which allows such injustices to be inflicted upon them. Sambharia's world is a world full of optimism and hope. Though his characters also suffer at the hands of dominant groups which have a command over the system of governance, there are characters which revolt and find means and ways to punish people responsible for the excesses. The paper also makes use of the concept of the subaltern and tries to apply the theoretical premises to Dalits in Indian society.

Dalit consciousness emerged as a social movement against the excesses of the Brahminical order laid down by such texts as *Manusmriti*, a text ascribed to a mythical King Manu who is said to have composed it sometime in 3500B.C. Some historians trace its origin to 6000 to 8000 B.C. also. It is considered as a canonical text by many. The division of Hindu society among *Varnas* is ascribed to the ideas as enshrined in the *Purush Sukta* verse of *Rig Veda*. D.N. Majumdar in his book *Races and Cultures of India* talks of the caste system as an entity that existed since antiquity. He states, "The caste system is believed, not without good reason, to have been of immemorial antiquity. Many read a kind of caste structure in the Rigveda, as the *Purusha – Sukta* in describing the origin of the four Varnas, supports this view. Though doubts exist about the status of *Purush – Sukta* being an integral part of *RigVeda*, it is certain that a functional division of society was known at the time of the Rig Veda." (Majumdar 279) The first chapter of the *Manusmriti*, or 'The Laws of Manu', depicts four social classes or varnas – *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, *Shudra* – and rules of interaction between them. In addition, it also lays out rules of conduct for people in the four stages of life, *ashramas* – *brahmacharya*, *grihsthashrama*, *vanprastha* and *sanyasa*. *Manusmriti* is considered to be one of the most authoritative texts in the Brahminical tradition which lays out social and civil laws and codes of conduct for people.

The Hindu society developed a hierarchical caste system which became rigid over the years and led to massive suppression and exploitation of people in the lowest step of social hierarchy. This community of people was given the title of Dalit or those who have been

trodden upon. They are the people who are suppressed because of the caste they are born in. Since they were devoid of material resources they formed a part of the proletariat or the subaltern class also. Ranajit Guha talks of subordination in the preface to his famous work *Subaltern Studies*. His notion of subaltern can well be applied to the state of Dalits in Indian society. He says, “subordination cannot be understood except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance, for subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up.” (Guha vii)

Some sociologists maintain that they were people who were not a part of the four *varnas* but were outcastes. Though several social reformers, and political leaders opposed this caste based subjection and the Constitution of India also treats them at par with other citizens they suffer discrimination in some measure even now. Jothi Bha Phule, Periyar, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and numerous other reformers took steps to stop this discrimination.

Several of the Saint poets of Bhakti Movement, philosophical schools like Shraman, Lokayat, Ajeevak, Charvak, Nastik, Sufis and the Bauls rejected the artificial division of society in castes. Poets in Bhakti Movement like Ramanand from Allahabad, Vallabhacharya of Varanasi Sur Das, the blind poet of Agra, Nam Dev and Tuka Ram in Maharashtra, Mira Bai in Rajasthan and her Guru Rai Das opposed the unequal caste system and professed humanitarian values. M. Dasan and Rajesh Karankal in the introduction to their book *Counter Cultural Discourse and Dalit Literature in India* relate Dalit consciousness to this movement. Referring the poets mentioned above they state, “All of them challenged the unequal caste system and the social stratification based on the caste system. They struck at the very roots of Brahminical orthodoxy by rejecting superstition and ritualism” (Dasan 3).

The practice of untouchability was described by Mahatma Gandhi as a blot on Hindu Society. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was so disgusted with this kind of hatred based on caste hierarchy that towards the later part of his life he embraced Buddhism. The movement against this kind of caste based discrimination developed most in Maharashtra and then in the states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Kerala and to some extent in Punjab. But Rajasthan remained untouched by it mainly because of the strong feudal tradition and also due to widespread poverty and illiteracy among those communities which fall in this category. In an article “Dalit Literature in Rajasthan: A Voice Lost in Wilderness” published earlier the author has talked about this phenomenon:

Due to the feudal dominance the Dalit movement did not emerge as a strong voice in Rajasthan. Those Dalit leaders who got elected to the Parliament, Legislative Assemblies and other bodies of local self government remained confined to their political association but did not care much to organize the Dalits as a movement. As a consequence unlike Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Kerala Dalit literature did not gain much ground in the state of Rajasthan (122).

This is a truth. Despite the fact that the state of Rajasthan even today stands second in the country in terms of atrocities against Dalits, there is no consciousness and unity among the Dalits to give birth to a movement. Therefore if one tries to list the writers who can be described as Dalit writers there are but a few names like Swami Gokul Das, Prof. Shyam Lal Jedia, Kusum Meghwal, Ratan Kumar Sambhariya, Bhanwar Meghwanshi etc. Of these Ratan Kumar Sambhariya has earned quite a name in the field of Hindi Literature. He has been awarded the highest literary award Meera Puraskar given by Rajasthan Sahitya Akadami

named after Meera Bai for his novel “Saamp” (The Snake) in the year 2023.

Ratan Kumar Sambharia was born in Bharawas village in the district of Rewari in Haryana. But he has been living in Rajasthan for more than forty years now. He is a progressive writer who has written in a good measure and his writings have been acclaimed across the country. Some of his well known works include *Samaaj ki Naak* (One Act Plays), *Baang aur Anya Laghukathayen*, *Hukam Ki Duggi*, *Kaal Tatha Anya Kahaniyan*, *Khet Tatha Anya Kahaniyan* (Short Stories), *Munshi Prem Chand Aur Dalit Samaj* (Criticism), *Dr. Ambedkar : Ek Prerak Jeevan* (Edited) and *Beema Natak*. His stories have been made into Radio – plays and one story has been made into a Tele - film.

Ratan Kumar Sambharia's distinction as a Dalit writer is that he does not portray his characters as victims of the caste system. Unlike other Dalit writers who claim to assert Dalit identity he tries to subvert the stereotypes created by the Brahminical order and rejects them with vehemence. No doubt he portrays the marginalized people who suffer from poverty, lack of resources and who are down trodden but among these people only he creates characters that have the confidence to fight against the suppressive Brahminical and feudal order. Commenting on the strength of his characters the author has said in one of his articles, “Sambharia's Dalit heroes are not pitiable, weak and miserable beings. They are good human beings - polite and obedient. But when it comes to their honour they are ready to take stand and fight back” (127).

Ratna Kumar Sambharia is an established author with a progressive outlook. He has a command over language and a style of his own. He is an author of robust optimism and defines it as a necessary characteristic of Dalit Literature. An author of more than a dozen books he has been honoured and awarded by several prestigious institutions and organizations. His attitude to Dalit Writings is inclusive and liberal.

One of his collections of short stories has been translated into English with the title *Thunderstorm* and has been published by Hachette India in 2015. It contains fifteen stories translated by Dr. Mridul Bhasin, a Fulbright scholar with a Ph.D in English Literature. She is an avid reader, scholar, translator and an acclaimed writer. The translation carries the spirit of the stories without flaw and maintains the flow of the narratives. In the note of the translator she talks of the plight of Dalits which she experiences while reading the texts she is translating. Her remarks as a translator have an important bearing on the nature of stories written by Ratan Kumar Sambharia. She says:

The process of translating the literature of the Dalits, among India's most oppressed classes, brings one face- to - face with the bitter realities of our society. With its caste – based divisions calculated to deny its poorer sections even their basic needs of food and shelter, while forcing them to toil in the fields and deal with chores deemed beneath the dignity of their supposed social superiors, generations of Dalit men, women and children had found themselves trapped in a perennial state of subjugation, enslaved by an exploitative social cycle of dire deprivation and demeaning labour. (ix)

The first story of the collection is titled “Phulwa” after the name of the protagonist. She is a Dalit woman. She lost her husband quite young. He was hit by an ox with its horns and had succumbed to the injuries. Despite her poverty, she focused on the education of her son. The local landlord who was proud of her ancestry and high place in social hierarchy inflicted insults on Phulwa. Dalits were not allowed to draw water from the well of the upper caste

Hindus and had to wait for some kind hearted person to arrive who would mercifully pour water in their pitcher. Once the local landlord's son had spitted on the pitcher of Phulwa. She had broken the pitcher and returned home weeping.

The story depicts the reversal that has taken place in the social order. The kshatriyas of one time, due to their orthodox views and false pride have lost their past glory and economic power while the Dalits who were serving them have reached a position of power by dint of their hard work and progressive outlook. Phulwa's son has become a superintendent of Police while the Zamindar's son Rameshwar is looking for a job for his son. In this pursuit he reaches the town where Phulwa lives in the bungalow of her son. Rameshwar had come to see Pdt. Mata Prasad. The whole day he searched for his residence but no body seemed to know Pundit Mata Prasad. However, people knew Phulwa's son very well and one gentleman drops him at Radhamohan's bungalow. Radhamohan was the name of Phulwa's son.

Rameshwar happens to visit the bungalow of Phulwa and feels envious at her good fortune. Phulwa is very happy and excited to see Rameshwar. She treats him well and introduces him to all the members of the family. She offers him water, sweets and snacks to eat. But the caste prejudice in Rameshwar's heart is so strong that he does not drink even a glass of water and forces Phulwa to tell the address of Pdt. Mata Prasad. Sambharia does not lose any chance of attacking such caste prejudices. Phulwa has a maid servant. Sambharia gives the name of "Kunwar" to this character, a name usually popular among the Rajput families. When Rameshwar looks at her he thinks that she should be the daughter – in – law of the family. But Phulwa explains, "No Rameshwarji, she is not my daughter-in-law, she is a maid. Kunwar is her name. We did not ask her what her caste is but the poor lady says that she is Rajput. There are thirty six castes in villages. In cities these are only two- the rich and the poor" (Sambharia 11). This information was too much for the prejudiced mind of Rameshwar. Sambharia describes his state of mind, "Rameshwar felt himself sinking deeper into a mire of shame and outrage; a woman from such a high caste working as a servant for a low – caste non-entity as Phulwa!" (11). Rameshwar decided to go to the house of Pdt. Mata Prasad despite Phulwa's repeated insistence to stay in her house. Finally she takes him along with him. Later his experience at the Pandit's house is also not happy. He is made to stay in a room where the pets of the family are taking rest. In the middle of the night Rameshwar stood up, collected his bag and moved out. The author says that he was walking towards the bungalow of Phulwa. Thus Sambharia makes very subtle remarks at this social transformation.

The last story of the collection however presents a different aspect. The title of the story is "Bes". This word is used to represent a dress traditionally worn by the women of the Rajput community. The protagonist of this story is a young Dalit girl who has got the job of a typist in a government school but is posted in a remote village. She is returning home for her engagement ceremony a few days hence and is travelling by a private bus. She got a "Bes" stitched for herself. When she tells her mother about it, her mother gets worried at the subversion of the traditional code which dictates that the supposedly lower caste's women cannot wear such dress. She says, "I had forbidden you to wear such clothes, daughter! she lamented. Only Rajput women wear them. I had warned you not to flout tradition. I had urged you to abide by the strictures laid down by our community" (225).

Agani, as the name suggests is a young lady who is well educated and bold enough to flout such age old caste - based strictures. She replies, "Ma, the rest of the world has progressed to travelling in space. And look at us, trapped by norms that dictate what we should or we should

not wear, depending on our place in caste hierarchy! I do not believe in such norms” (225).

She puts on that dress while travelling to her home. On the way the bus she is travelling in breaks down and she had to wait at the crossroad in utter darkness where all sorts of drunkards and mischievous characters hound her. It is her traditional outfit which saves her from their cruel clutches. Whether we like it or not caste is a cruel reality of Indian society and despite all constitutional provisions the mindset of the people has not changed. Particularly against Dalits and Muslims the prejudice is deep seated. Two drunkards Harji and Marji have an evil eye on her but as they go close and look at her they are frightened to find that she is wearing a dress worn traditionally worn by Rajputs, Harji makes a remark, “ She is not a tribal at all....She is some Rajput's wife. Look at her clothes – the lehenga, the kurti, kanchali and the chundri. You are heading for death yourself and you're bent on taking me along as well!” (229) the reaction of the hunter and the cleaner of a jeep is similar. When the driver of the jeep who is under the influence of liquor asks the cleaner to pick her up, he replies, “ She is a Rajput. I beg of you, don't force me to touch her. If I do, a curse will befall me” (236).

Sambharia shows the character Agani as an intelligent person who is enlightened and knows how to survive in such a difficult situation. Changing her dress becomes a survival strategy. However, the story also reveals the state of Indian society, particularly rural society, where the caste prejudices still dominate the mindset of the people. The story shows Sambharia's ability as a writer to enter into the inner recesses of the hearts of the characters. While describing the joy and excitement Agani was experiencing as she returns to her village, the author uses a vivid language. He narrates, “She was about twenty and of medium height and complexion – an average girl. She was quick to laugh and the smallest things drew chuckles from her. A perpetual smile hovered on her delicate lips like a fluttering butterfly. Her happy face radiated innocence” (223).

Another story titled “The Goat's Two Kids” depicts the cruel whimsical nature of the landlords in villages and the extent of heartlessness they exhibit when it comes to the treatment of the Dalits. Dalpat is a labourer who lives in a Kachcha house in a village. He has two sons. One is in Army while the other works in a factory. His son in the Army had sent him some money from which he bought a goat. The goat gave birth to two kids. Dalpat and Dharamkali, his wife, were very happy looking after the goat and the kids. The kids kept jumping and running around. Their playful actions made the old couple happy. Opposite the house of Dalpat on the other side of the road lived Thakur Dan Singh. His son Dharampal has been described by the author as “a squat, with a broad frame, his head juttet out, has a flat nose”.

One day the kids playfully crossed the road and entered the Haveli of Thakur Dan Singh. As if it was a big crime, the irresponsible son of the Thakur Dharampal killed the two kids, carried their corpses on his shoulder and threw them in the house of Dalpat. Dalpat was flabbergasted and did not know how to react. His wife Dharamkali started weeping and there was no end to her sorrow. Mustering all his courage Dalpat went to the haveli of the Thakur and tried to complain about the heinous crime of Dharampal. But the Thakur would not listen anything against his son and insulted Dalpat saying, “Me? Reprimand Dharampal? Why? Has he killed your buffaloes? You know we do not count dedh and bhedh – cobblers and goats- as living beings, right?” (Sambharia 23) This was like adding insult to injury. But Dalpat was helpless. He returned heart- broken to his house and sat distraught. He didn't know how to retaliate. Suddenly he heard the sound of footsteps. His friend Sharamchand was coming to meet him only.

Sharam Chand had a strong figure. He was educated up to ninth standard and had connections. Dalpat narrates the whole incident to him and how Dan Singh had insulted him. The last part of the narrative makes Sharamchand furious as it hurt his ego also. He takes Dalpat to the police station with him and asks the police officer to file a complaint against Dan Singh. But there also they meet the same treatment. The SHO threatens to beat them and asks them to run away. The character of police, the caste prejudices that prevail and the obstinacy that a common man has to face are all reflected in this story. Sharam Chand's brother –in-law Ramdulare was the President of the Safai Karmachari Union. He was a powerful leader. Sharam Chand takes Dalpat to him. After listening the whole story Ramdulare gets angry and decides to get justice for Dalpat. He telephones the Superintendent giving his introduction as a trade Union leader of Safai Karmacharis. The SP had also seen poverty in his past and could understand the plight of poor Dalpat. Also, he knew the power of the Union. He rang up the SHO and ordered him to present before him Dan Singh handcuffed. Although the SHO had taken bribe from Dan Singh but he could not disobey the SP. He goes to Dan Singh's Haveli and arrests him. The end of the story describes how the order reverses:

Shame and mortification welled up in the handcuffed Dan Singh's heart. He had never imagined that the honour and status he had inherited from his forefathers would be trampled in the dust like this. The whole village had witnessed his humiliating arrest. (Sambharia 35)

The honour and status have been based on the caste hierarchy and the wealth accumulated by the feudal class through exploitation of the toiling masses like Dalpat and his kin. It is right that he had inherited it since the present generation did not even earn the place they enjoy. Contrary the Dalits inherited a legacy of suppression and exploitation. If they have to progress they have to cross the obstacles placed by a society living with age old prejudices. Sambharia mentions two factors that can empower the Dalits- one is education and the other is organization. In the stories discussed above, these two factors come to the rescue of the characters threatened by the orthodox centers of power.

The title story of the book “Thunderstorm” is the story of a landless labourer living in a village at the border of the states of Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab. The states of Haryana and Punjab are known for rich agriculture farmers. There are local and migrant labourers who work on the farms of big landowners. The life of these people is full of suffering. Daryav is the name of the protagonist. He works on the fields of Parmesh Singh. Daryav's father Dilbagh had died a few days ago. Instead of consoling Daryav on his father's death, the landowner Parmesh Singh and his son Bakhtawar force him to go to their farm where a police officer is sitting and asking for some non-veg dish which they claim that Daryav prepares well. But this is a trap. One of the relatives Karanphool has been murdered a few days back and the two wanted to trap Daryav into it. For this purpose they bribed the police inspector who becomes a co-conspirator and hands over a pistol to Daryav asking him to fire a shot at the Babool tree in the field. Daryav had heard everything. He knew that he will be put in Jail for a crime he had not committed, his son will become fatherless and his wife Sheran will be forced to become somebody else's mistress. He suddenly takes a bold decision and instead of firing a shot at the tree shoots the police inspector. Parmesh Singh and bakhtawar singh run for their lives in the field but are shot at by the police outside.

Similar end of a story about Dalits is seen in a story titled “The Gun” written by the progressive writer Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. In that story also Dalits who are denied the right to

draw water from a well unite and rise in rebellion against the oppressive upper caste Hindus. Such ends are not realistic but do suggest the power of people who may unite one day and up turn the oppressive system.

Sambharia carries a liberal view as to who can be a Dalit writer. In the preface to one of his books he states, “Often this illusion is spread that a Dalit story can be written by a Dalit only. In fact, this can be ascribed to the narrow mentality of those driven solely by the motive of reservation. Just as a person born in a Dalit community can write a general story, in the same way a person born in a general community can write a Dalit story provided that story has a deep sensibility, pain for Dalits and a feeling of awakening (*Dalit Samaj ki kahaniyan* 9).

In the same book writing about the stylistic features of a Dalit story Sambharia states, “The language of a Dalit story is rooted in its own ground, has its own specialty and its limitation. The language should be colloquial; behavior should be sober and should have a regional touch. The abundance of 'Deshaj' (rustic) words cannot be denied in a Dalit story.

Dr. Mridul Bhasin, translator of the stories makes a very pertinent remark about the universal appeal of the stories of Ratan Kumar Sambharia:

What distinguishes his narratives is the gritty realism he brings to them and although his protagonists come from different regions, they speak the universal language of real people living in abject poverty, defined by a shared rural ethos and socio-historical experience. Their concerns revolve around issues of caste, land and livestock, on the one hand and of self respect and integrity on the other. In that, his stories are as global as they are regional, their protagonists universal even in their individual identities, for they are representative of oppressed humanity anywhere in the world, serving as agents of change and sentinels of human dignity in their struggle for equality. (x-xi)

The collection of stories written by Ratan Kumar Sambharia reveals several causes of the plight of the Dalits. Poverty, lack of education and lack of exposure to the administrative and judicial system of the country are mentioned. But the most important among these causes is the deep seated prejudice in the mind of people who call themselves 'upper caste'. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's famous speech titled *Annihilation of Caste* is an eye opener. This speech was written in 1936 to be delivered at a convention in Lahore organized by Hindu reformers. But on reviewing the written speech they found it 'too controversial' and withdrew the invitation. In that speech he had stated, “There cannot be a more degrading of social organization than the *Chaturvarnya*. It is the system that deadens paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity.” The stories of Ratan Kumar Sambharia hold a testimony to what Dr. Ambedkar had said.

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