

A Comparative Study of Caste Related Violence in Modern Indian Literature

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Violence affects all of us. So I asked myself – what is the structure of this subject, violence? What are the elements therein? How does violence configure in various genres of literature, how does literature respond to violence? What are the literary possibilities of literature of/on violence and what kind of exploration is to be made in the context?

The word 'violence' came in English language via Old French from Latin 'Violentia' which refers to behaviour involving physical force or power intended to harm, damage or kill someone, or oneself or a group or a community. According to sociologists and legal experts, the use of unfair exercise of power or force broadens the scope of our conventional understanding of violence to include those acts which results from power relationships such as neglect or acts of omission or more obvious violent acts. But it is also true that violence against women, children or elderly does not always result in injury or death. Psychologists argue that sometimes its consequences become important. The consequences can be latent and last for years in the unconscious realm of human mind causing psychological and social damage. Therefore, we should understand the implications of experience of violence from several perspectives. If we examine literature of violence, we will find that various manifestations of states of violence represented in literature include, injury,

death, fear, apprehension, dislocation, cruelty, depression, deprivation, painful projection, indifference and despondency.

Violence is inherent in humans. Social beings have a great ability to co-operate with each other for their welfare. At the same time they possess the instinct to harm or destroy one another. Violence is the filthiest and deeply rooted practice prevalent since time immemorial. It has different connotations i.e. historical, political, social, cultural, psychological, biological or domestic. Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Any action which is intended to destroy someone is terms as violence.

This paper will talk about caste related violence in Indian literature. This is known to us that the whole Hindu society lives in a caste hierarchy i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishaya and Shudra. It is an age-old practice but even today it has not lost its impact. Kancha Ilaiah in his book *Buffalo Nationalism* compares the conditions of Dalits with Buffalo. He say, "The situation of the Dalit Bahaujan masses is similar to that of black and beautiful buffalo that gives more milk-white milk at that – than the cows of India, has no sacred status in civil society and no legal protection in

constitution.” (Ilaiah-71) Many writers have tried to present this social order and the condition of the people who are at the lowest level of this hierarchy. I have taken examples of violence from Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (Punjab), Bama’s *Karukku* (Tamil Nadu) and Roman Basu’s *Outcast*.

Physical Violence

Writers have presented how Dalits have been humiliated and beaten in public. The shadow of a Dalit, his touch and speech considered impure. They have regarded as untouchable and guilty by birth. Untouchables are treated so badly that they are not considered as human. If their bodies even accidentally touch the high class people they have to suffer thrashing and abuses. Anand presents this picture of society very well in his novel *Untouchable*. *Untouchable* is a story of a boy named Bakha who is a sweeper. It describes an event full day in the life of Bakha; this particular day of his life in some respect is like many other days but it adds some more torments to his life. In the novel Bakha was enjoying his jalebis and absorbed in thoughts, accidentally he touched an upper caste Hindu Lalaji. Lalaji shouted at Bakha, “Dirty dog! You know you have defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and get washed-d-d... (40-41). Bakha suddenly realize what he has done, he joined his hands together in apology. He bends his forehead over them and mumbles something but Lalaji does not care for what Bakha say; he continuously abuses Bakha and then give him a slap on Bakha’s cheek. Anand says, “... And the tonga-wallah heard a sharp, clear slap right through the air. Bakha’s turban fell off and the jalebis were scattered in the dust” (43). There is another very moving scene in the novel, when Bakha brings a child to her

mother; an upper caste child was wounded in the head during a hockey match. Before the game, he in-fact noticed that the boy wants to join in, but the other players wouldn’t let him. And after the serious incident, when Bakha out of sympathy alone took the child to his mother, the mother grabs the child from Bakha, and she abuses him for having touched the child and thought Bakha have hit him. Bakha’s love of defenceless innocence becomes a cause for shame and insult.

Dalits are not allowed to drink water from same wells and attend the same temples. In Roman’s Basu’s *Outcast* a Dalit was beaten badly because he threw flowers at the altar of goddess Kali. Basu writes:

Mahanta was bleeding from the nose and mouth. His eyes were so swollen; he could hardly open them while the sub-inspector interrogated him... “Are you going to tell me why you went near the inner sanctum of the temple, or do I have to order the constable to pull your tongue out until I gate an answer? (3)

Sexual Violence

A Dalit not only have to face physical and verbal violence but sexual violence too. This can be considered as the second form of violence. Outcaste women outside their houses not only face social exploitation but sexual violence too. The upper caste men behave diplomatically with outcaste women. In public an upper caste men will refuse to eat food or drink water carried by an untouchable woman and if the body of an untouchable woman touches him in public they bathe but in private they do not hesitate to sexually violate them. Anand have presented this picture of Hindu society through Bakha’s sister Sohini. In the novel Pandit Kali Nath tries to molest

her and when Sohini screams, the Pandit comes out running and says, "Polluted, Polluted". Because Pandit was a caste Hindu no one listens to Sohini, instead of being beaten he receives sympathy of the crowd of worshippers in the temple.

This is not only the case of the fictitious character Sohini, but actually many of lower caste girls have been raped by upper castes, one can never forget the case of Phoolan Devi. The question arises here is, why mostly lower caste women have to face such situations? The possible answer can be, not only they are easy prey but it is a well planned strategy of subordination. Rape devastates women and it also installs shame and fear in the mind of their men folk, who feel helpless at their inability to protect them.

We think that education can bring change in society and can improve the conditions of Dalits but in schools or educational institutions and at work places people treat Dalits badly. Dalits considered 'unclean' that is why at work places mostly all the menial jobs are done by lower castes. In her novel *Karukku* Bama tells when she went to convent for her education she saw: "..... people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories. And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insulting about low caste people... They didn't even consider low caste... as human beings" (22-23).

Psychological / Emotional Violence

Lower castes are humiliated at public places by upper castes and such insult and humiliation can be considered as the psychological or emotional violence. In *Karukku* when Bama was traveling in a bus, a woman was sitting next to her. That woman asked Bama, to which street she is going to. When

Bama says, "The Cheri", which is lower castes place, that woman immediately gets up and moves to another seat. Bama says, "They'd prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or any other woman from Cheri. They'd be polluted apparently" (18).

Dalits always lives in a constant fear of being publicly humiliated. Even today people are afraid lest people should come to know about their caste. To escape the humiliation they hide their caste. Dalits have always been taught that they can not argue upper castes because they are our masters. For example in the novel *Untouchable* when Bakha tells his father how he was humiliated and beaten by the Lalaji in market, his father tell Bakha, "No, no my son, no... we can't do that, they are our superiors... they are our masters, we must respect them". And a similar incident is there in *Karukku*. Bama's grandmother says to her: "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this"? (14)

Teaching them to accept that they are lower caste and have to respect upper castes and bear sufferings and exploitation is also an act of violence. This teaching is not only given by upper castes to lower castes but also by lower castes to their kids or fellow beings.

This is assumed that the practice of untouchability is strongest in rural India but urban areas are not untouched by this. In urban areas Dalits may not face physical violence but they are tortured by psychological violence. Bama in *Karukku* have presented few thoughts of upper castes how they think about Dalits:

“There is nothing we can do for these creatures. And we shouldn’t do anything for them, because to do so would be like helping cobras.”

“Even if we do something for them, they will never make progress. Their natures are like that”.

“These days some people go about reasonably dressed. So you can’t even make out who they are, sometimes”.

“If they had to speak about something unpleasant or ugly, they tend to categorise it as Harijan”. (99-100)

To conclude this can be said that even after the efforts of leaders like Jyotirba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and after years of education the violence through system of caste discrimination persists today. At the end this can be said that in spite of the differences in structure and regional setting (*Untouchable* in Punjab, *Outcaste* in West Bengal and *Karukku* in Tamilnadu) all the three books have the same theme i.e. the plight of Dalits. This doesn’t make any difference to Dalits to which place they belong to North, South, East or West India, they can have diversity of traditions, culture and language but in diverse India with all the differences the fate of a Dalit is same.

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