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## Resistance and Dalit Drama: A Select Study of Dalit Dramas in Translation.

**Dr. Soumya Kanti Mandal**

Assistant Professor (W.B.E.S)

Department of English

S.B.S. Government College, Hili

Dakshin Dinajpur, West Bengal

It's a matter of great regret that Indian society is still largely dominated by the evil practice of caste discrimination. Here human beings are revered in respect of their caste instead of their potentiality of being a human being. The Dalits, literary meaning of which 'ground', 'crushed', are also the former 'untouchables', who have been suppressed, depressed and exploited by the caste-Hindus politically, psychologically and socially alike for ages. The term means 'ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally' (Zelliot 267). The state has not undergone any significant change still now. This very age of science and technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has hardly made any significant change in our society. A cursory look at the various daily newspapers reporting on atrocities on Dalit will suffice to establish this contention.

For centuries these untouchables were kept ostracised and neglected. They were denied of any basic thing necessary for living. Since they were 'untouchables', their touch was considered to be polluting. They were forced to live outside the village. They had to eat the leftover of the caste Hindus above them in the *varna* system which classifies Indian society into four divisions-Brahmin (the priestly caste) Kshatriya (the rulers and administrators), Vaishya (merchant) and Shudra (serving caste who serve all the above three). The untouchables were not in this four-fold division. Hence, they were called, *Panchama*, the fifth-varna. The ancient Sanskrit texts had imposed certain rules and restrictions on them which forced them to live a life of abject poverty and hence, had to depend on caste-Hindus. They were denied education. They had no access to the wells, temples and schools (Kumar "Perspective" 129-30). In a word, the lives of the untouchables were like a living hell.

These Dalits, the formerly 'untouchables' got their courage to fight against these Brahminical hegemonic laws when the Dalit leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and others fought for their rights, liberties and equalities. In 1972, The Dalit Panther Movement was organized in Maharashtra taking its inspiration from The Black Panther Movement in America. It was one of the watershed marks of the Dalit Movement. Later on, the Dalit writers started writing their own stories by themselves through an alternative mode. In is not that Dalits were not portrayed in mainstream literature. There was a lack of true and authentic representations in the writings of the mainstream writers who used to write about the Dalits. Dalit issues were systemically excluded from the mainstream literature. These writings are termed by D.N. Nagraj, one of the eminent Dalit writers as, 'emotionalistic' (61) literatures. 'The established literature in India', Baburao Bagul, one of the prominent Dalit writers and activists, believes, 'is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit Literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation' (294). Thus, emerged Dalit literature, and within a very short period, it spread its wings in the different parts of the country. The term 'Dalit has also been continuously evolving itself. The term Dalit, 'a value-loaded term, is qualitatively different and underlies the strong assertion' (Pai xxxii).

Since then, Dalit writers from various parts of India have been depicting their traumatic experiences through various literary genres of Dalit literature to resister an alternative script. To define Dalit literature, Sharankumar Limbale, one of the prominent Marathi Dalit writers, states, 'Dalit literature is precisely that literature which articulately portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief (31)'. It is very clear from the definition that Dalit literature is the literature which springs out from the very core of Dalit experiences, the staple of which is heartfelt agonies and deprivation; it is the literature penned by the Dalits to assert their human dignity and selfhood against the onslaught of the Brahminical hegemony. It defies the so-called Hindu social structure which is based on the Varna system. It also nullifies the inhuman and crude system that has been imposed on the Dalits for time immemorial. In this respect, Dalit literature has become a literature of protest. It is a literature of revolt against the unequal social order and it desperately tries to bring about a drastic change in our society which will be reigned by equality, liberty and fraternity.

Due to limited space, it is not possible here to give an overview of Dalit literature in general. The primary foci of this paper, therefore, will be on Dalit drama in particular. There is no denying the fact that Dalit drama as a literary genre is a neglected field. A cursory look at the recent publication of research articles on Dalit drama in Indian academia is a pointer to this contention. It is true that Dalit drama, like all other genres of Dalit studies, is very rich in regional languages like Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Malayalam, Bengali, Hindi, Gujrati etc. Still, Dalit drama is struggling to make its presence felt in the wider arena perhaps, due to the lack of enough translation. Translation studies undoubtedly have taken Dalit literature to a new height. A Plethora of Dalit Poetry, fiction, short stories, autobiographies and essays have been continuously translated from the regional languages into English for global attention which were hitherto neglected and often been criticized by the mainstream discourse. In comparison, as has been mentioned at the outset, we have a very limited number of Dalit dramas which are translated into English from their mother languages in the whole range of Dalit writing. Datta Bhagat from Maharashtra; K. A Gunasekaran and Jeeva from Tamil Nadu; A. Shantakumar from Kerala; Boyi Bhimanna from Andhra Pradesh and Achintya Biswas from West Bengal are some of the significant names in the field of Dalit dramas whose plays are translated from their source language into English. However, for this paper, I have selected primarily three dramas from three different languages, all translated into English. These are *Portrait of Ambedkar* by Achintya Biswas from West Bengal, *The Farmhand* by Boyi Bhimanna from Andhra Pradesh and *Touch* by K.A Gunasekaran from Tamil Nadu. All three texts taken up for the discussions have been published by Oxford University Press and have been included in three different anthologies. For the study these three texts will be analysed to highlight how much these Dalit writers are successful in expressing their thematic experience through the medium of drama. The paper will also try to focus in which way these texts act as the social protest by exposing the hollowness of social dogmas, prejudices and evils of caste system in India. The study will critically examine the element of 'dalitness' in these select texts. Dalit literature is a literature of protest against the social injustices. Dalit drama, I believe, acts similarly. So, one of the significant ends of the paper is to show how these select texts act as the social archive by representing Dalit lives and the issues related to the Dalits in true and authentic manner.

### **Bengali Dalit Drama: *Portrait of Ambedkar* by Achintya Biswas**

As far as Bengali Dalit literature is concerned, the Dalit literary movement started much later than the other provinces of India. There are various reasons behind it. Due to the paucity of space, I am not going into this matter in detail. However, the Dalit literary movement in Bengal started during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century though it started in Maharashtra started in the 1970s itself. Despite that, Bengal has been a very productive land for Dalit literature.

Any discussion in Bengali Dalit Literature will be incomplete without mentioning one of the significant phenomena- 'Matua Sahitya' which started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the spiritual teachings of Harichand Thakur (1812-78) and expanded through the revolutionary ideas of his son, Guruchand Thakur. Guruchand Thakur built the first school for the *Namasudra*, one of the lower-caste communities in Bengal. The emergence of these little magazine is one of the significant aspects in the development of the Dalit literary movement in Bengal. These magazines, called as 'Little Magazines' have spearheaded the Dalit literary movements in Bengal. There are more than 100 such little magazines started from 1912 to till date.

In Bengal too Dalit dramas are less in numbers. And Dalit drama as a literary genre, has a fresh arrival in Bengal too. The predominance of other genres like poetry, short fiction, novels, and autobiographies in Bangla is much more discernible. However, in recent years, Dalit dramas have been gaining ground in various parts

of India. Bengal is not the exception to that dictum. Significant Dalit dramatists from Bengal are Nakul Mallik, Amal Mandal, Achintya Biswas, Manju Bala, Bimalendu Hwalder, Namita Das and many more. But Bengali drama has a very smooth go in the hand of Raju Das who has dedicated his whole life for the betterment of Dalit drama in Bengal. Raju das's *Mahamanab Guruchand Thakur* (Gruruchand Thakur the Great), *Ami Chuni Kotal Bolchi* (Chuni Kotal Speaking), *Kala Kanun* (Evil Justice), *Bancher Moto Banchte Chai* (Want to Live Meaningfully), *Natak Holeo Sotti* (True Even Though it is a Drama) are some of the most revolutionary dramas of Raju Das where he has exposed the latent hypocrisy of caste-ridden society of Bengal. *Takshak* is a collection of fifteen plays by Harshabardhan Choudhury, one of the significant writers of Bengali Dalit drama. Manju Bala's *Sahitya Silpo* (Art in Literature) raises some of the most baffling questions that are frequently discussed and debated in Dalit literary discourse-What exactly is/are Dalit literature/s? What is the theme of Dalit Literature? Who are qualified to be called as Dalit Writers? Who are the readers of Dalit literature? Her revolutionary play *Uttoron* (Emancipation) is a significant contribution in this genre. It has been recently translated into English by Nalini Gupta and it is in press awaiting publication.

The present play under discussion, *Portrait of Ambedkar* (Ambedkar Chhabi) is a play by Achintya Biswas. Biswas 'may well be described as the pioneer of modern Bengali Dalit drama in terms of theme, technique, stagecraft and experimentation' (Basu et al.67). The other significant plays of Achintya Biswas written in Bengali include-*Pariparshik Chap* (External Pressure), *Nandigram* (Nandigram), *Iswarer Mrittu* (The Death of God) and *Swapne Labdho Bharatbarsha* (India Under Illusionary Dream). These plays are all staged and they have got huge responses from the audience.

As the title of the play *Portrait of Ambedkar* suggests, it is about a portrait of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, one of the most influential Dalit leaders, a messiah and the intellectual patron of the Dalit youths across the nation, who have sacrificed his entire life for fighting against the caste-based discrimination meted out to the Dalits by the caste-Hindus. Though short in length and having only three characters, the play raises some of the prominent questions embedded in the psyche of *bhadralok* Bengali. The crux of the story runs thus:

Parimal, a Dalit teacher wants to celebrate Dr. Ambedkar's birthday with his family. That's why he is searching for a photograph of Ambedkar. A political leader, upholding Marxist ideology, appears to him to invite for another programme on the same day. Parimal and Mrinal, then engage in a heated argument regarding the current position of caste and class in Bengal. The protagonist, Parimal argues that in Bengal the Leftist politics have failed to eradicate caste from Bengal, despite their tall-talks and fire-breathing speeches when they came to power in Bengal. However, Mrinal, countering Parimal states vehemently states that, 'In West Bengal, there is NO SUCH DISCRIMINATION' (Biswas 69). He further reiterates that class is the only enemy of Bengal instead of caste. The following excerpt sums up their arguments:

MRINAL: I don't know what you mean by the word 'Dalit'. However, I understand that you aim at caste-based discrimination by using the word. In West Bengal, there is NO SUCH DISCRIMINATION.

PARIMAL: you mean there is no such barrier here; even economic disparity and cultural barriers have also been abolished?

MRINAL: Yes, to a large extent.

PARIMAL: Recent events do not support your claims. The suicide of Chuni Kotal, planned attacks on Padmaja Mandi to force her to discontinue her studies, the inability of Jayasri mandal to pursue the honours course.... Such events will not prove that there is no casteism in West Bengal.

MRINAL: Look, the problem is basically economic. The difference between two men is not one of caste, creed or colour; but it lies in economic disparity as Marx envisaged. All inequalities will cease to exist when this economic disparity is gone (69).

As we have noticed from the above discussions there is a common contention in West Bengal that there is no caste-discrimination as Mrinal strongly believes. Class, instead of caste, creed and colour, determines one's identity in Bengal. Parimal also challenges the proper implementation of the reservation policy in West Bengal compared to the other states of India which Mrinal vehemently opposes. The protagonist, however, further stresses the need for a casteless society. The play ends with the same argument of Mrinal where he proudly states that the common masses are with their party due to their tremendous achievement in the land reformation bill. The caste question, Mrinal emphasises, has completely died after that. The view that Bengal is free from caste discrimination is a baseless argument. The matrimonial sites in the leading newspapers highlighting the

importance of caste are a pointer to the fact. In fact, there is a massive misconception regarding the prevalence of caste-discrimination in Bengal. Yes, it is true that, the issue of untouchability is not so prominent here. But that does not guarantee that Bengal is free from caste discrimination. Rather, caste here plays in psychological level.

### Telugu Dalit Drama: *The Farmhand* by Boyi Bhimanna

Much before the emergence of Dalit literature in general, Dalit plays as a form of folk tale emerged in Andhra Pradesh. Then came the written plays. The written plays were very powerful because they were written down by the Dalit writers after hearing the stories from their ancestors. They used to go for the stage performances that ran all night. (Purushottam et al 170). As has been already stated, Dalit drama in Andhra Pradesh (Undivided) appeared on the stage much before it emerged in other states of India.

Boyi Bhamana is a significant name as far as Dalit drama in Telugu is concerned. His plays capture the atrocities that were meted out to the Dalits by the caste Hindus for a long time. Significant plays that deal with Dalit issues are *Paleru*, *Cooli Raja*, *Raagavaashistam*, *Munivahanudu* and *Nirbhaya*. These plays are instrumental in exposing the explicit Dalit concerns prevalent in our society in general and in Telugu society in particular. Generally, the themes of these dramas are- untouchability, conflict between Dalit and Brahmin marriage, denial of temple entry for the Dalits, etc.

The present play under discussion is an excerpt from *Paleru* which is included in *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*. The play is translated from Telugu into English by Kaki Madhava Rao as *The Farmhand*. Dalits have been segregated and ostracized in many ways. They were denied education until very recently. The present play very minutely depicts this aspect of segregation, no denying, one of the meanest of all.

A Dalit farmhand namely Venkanna works under a Brahmin landlord Kuber Rao. Venkanna's father Pullayya also works under the same landlord. Kuber Rao staunchly believes that studying and singing is a heinous crime for Dalits. It is, to him, only fall under the purview of the case of Hindus like him. Naturally, he cannot digest the fact that Venkanna is attending Night school. He calls for Pullayya as if to justify Venkanna's commitment to a 'great sin' for showing the audacity to read and write and, thereby, to be a successful man in a caste-ridden society. The following conversation between the Brahmin and the Dalit clearly shows the scale of the unjust and unequal society that exist all over the country in general:

KUBER RAO: Is it not a sin if people of your caste and class go to school?

PULLAYYA: It is a great sin. Neither my grandfather nor my father, nor me, nor my son...

KUBER RAO: Hold on. It is all right up to you. But your son has destroyed all your good traditions.

PULLAYYA: No sir. I swear, my son will never do that.

Kuber Rao mocks the stupidity of Pullayya, as he was unaware of the fact and sarcastically remarks:

KUBER RAO: Does he want to stop working as my farmhand?

PULLAYYA: (Beating his breast) Oh my God!

KUBER RAO: He does not do an iota of work. He sings and reads all the time. Better that you make out of my service. Educate him and make him a collector. Now get lost! (172)

Now, furious, and utterly determined to teach his son a hard lesson, Pullayya takes a sick and starts beating him black and blue. Venkanna, unable to bear the unbearable beating, reluctantly vows that he will never read and write and also promises not to go to school any more. Upakari, an Upper-caste teacher, arrives at this point and tries to make Pullayya understand the importance of education for a Dalit like Venkanna. He also tries to make Pullayya grasp the politics behind keeping the Dalits uneducated by the caste Hindus for generations. He also proposes Pullayya to hand over Venkanna to him so that he can make Venkanna a great man. However, Pullayya, a victim of being systematically brainwashed for generations, fail to understand him altogether. Moreover, Pullayya charges Upakari for ruining the children of the Dalits by educating them. There is a large gap between Upakari's definition of a successful man and that of Pullayya's. Pullayya ardently believes that becoming a successful farmhand is the only way of success. Reading and writing is an anathema to them.

Upakari, literally meaning of which is someone who always helps others, upholds the views of Ambedkar and other Dalit thinkers and activists who envisaged that education should be the first step towards liberation from this stigmatized hell called caste discrimination. The following conversation clearly illustrates the argument:

UPAKARI: You are a farmhand. Do you want your child to become a farmhand? You do not want him to advance any further?

PULLAYYA: Yes. Do what you like. I will not send my son to school.

UPAKARI: Oh my God!

PULLAYYA: There is no place for education in my family. My landlord said that it would do us no good. My grandfather broke his legs and died while trying to learn the alphabet. My father lost his teeth while trying to sing (174).

The drama shows with luminous clarity that the dream of having a caste-less society is still a distant dream. The hope is that persons like Upakari, despite being a caste-Hindu, '...exert every nerve to spread the light of education' (174). The play also tries to show that to create a just and equal society Dalits have to unite. Only then a caste-less society can be dreamt of.

## Dalit Drama in Tamil

### *Touch* by K.A Gunasekaran

This is one of the groundbreaking texts as far as the Dalit plays in India in general and in Tamil Nadu is concerned. The play is written originally in Tamil titled *Thodu*. It has been translated by Ravi Sankar as *Touch*. Drama in ancient Tamil Society was not a distinct literary form as it was intertwined with the tradition of song, dance and other ritualistic performances. (Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan (160). Tamil theatre evolved in Tamil incorporating the folk songs of Tamil traditions and cultures. Dalit theatre in Tamil too, developed through the response to the development, incorporating the folk traditions and fusing them with the aspects of the 'invisible theatre', 'theatre of violence' and 'native theatre'. (160).

*Touch* by Gunasekaran, in lieu of the custom, is such a theatrical performance which demonstrates the underlying psyche of caste atrocities in Indian Society in general and, in Tamil Society in particular. Significantly enough the author has not given any definite name to the characters that points to the universal appeal of the play. They are addressed as Woman, Actor 1, Actor 2, the farmer and Man. The title of the play itself suggests the very theme of the play. It is rather a performance rich in cultural heritage, and various dance forms with the accompaniment of various songs and background music.

When the play opens, we see a woman wailing before the audience over the panic-stricken situation she is in. Later, as the play progresses, the cause of her 'mental anguish' (Gunasekaran 163) is quite discernable. The woman stresses that she has no peace of mind because 'real owners of this land' (163) i.e. the Dalits, have no peace of mind. Historically the Dalits, the real owners of the land, 'have been swept aside in another direction' (164) by the dominant Caste Hindus. The background music of the play is used by the playwright with absolute dexterity.

The stage is now taken over by the four other actors who are unnamed as have been mentioned earlier. As the play moves forward, we see that these actors are quarrelling among themselves over an issue. They are bragging about their ancestors for having mastered the art of Cilambattam, a form of martial arts, popular in the villages of Tamil Nadu. These four actors, representing the untouchable Dalits, enact a performance based on a popular folk tale which is being told through generations.

The crux of the story runs thus: An upper caste farmer while tilling his land feels the scorching sun unbearable and collapses on the field. A Dalit man, after seeing it panics and reaches out for help from the other, since his touch will pollute the upper caste man. But having found no one to help the farmer, he, with much hesitation, helps the farmer to get his senses back, providing him with the water from the earthen pot and comforting the farmer's head on his lap. But the farmer having gained his consciousness and after knowing in whose lap his head is laid, moves away abruptly in utter rage. He kicks the man who gave him water and saved him! The following lines are their conversation as follow:

FARMER: Why did you touch me?

Are you allowed to touch me?

Why did you touch me?

MAN: Ayya, you had a fit and fell unconscious. I thought you might die...

FARMER: So, what if I died? Why did you touch me? (166).

The above excerpt from the play points to the deep-rooted system of caste where death is desirable for a caste Hindu than being touched by a Dalit like the Man, in the play. Touching of an Untouchable is so pernicious that the touch contaminates everything he/she touches. Thus, when the farmer, in a rage, tries to throw anything on the man, even consciously, avoids the earthen pot and the plough which are touched by the man, and hence are contaminated. The farmer further wails in pathetic accents:

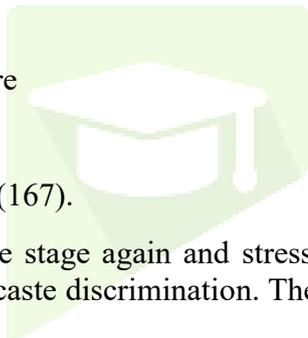
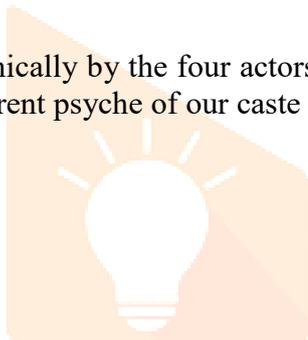
FARMER: How can I show my face to the villagers now? They will mock me for being polluted Why did you touch me? Don't stand here. Go away! (166).

Then, the farmer throws a fistful of mud to the low-caste man as it is free from the contaminated touch of the man.

The following lines spoken comically by the four actors in a chorus keeping the earthen pot centered on the stage speak volumes to the inherent psyche of our caste system:

In the fourfold system  
We are not humans  
Worse than dogs we are  
We don't live here

Outcastes we are  
We have no relations here  
Outcastes we are  
We have no rights here. (167).



Now the woman appears on the stage again and stresses unity as the ultimate way to get away from this inhuman and brutal practice of caste discrimination. The play ends with a rhetorical question asked by Actor 1:

Touch a goat

Touch a cow

Touch a dog

Why, touch even a pig

But can you touch another human? (168).

Thus, Dalit drama as a literary genera of Dalit studies has become one of the potential modes of resistance. The future of Dait drama is very bright. As I have already mentioned more and more translation is needed so that the richness of Dalit drama becomes more visible and widely recognized.

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