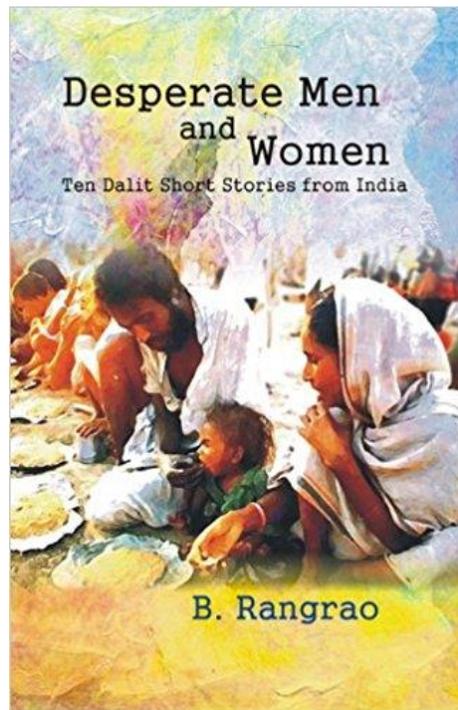


**Mapping the Dalit Consciousness:
An Analysis of B. Rangarao's *Desperate Men and Women***

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Abstract

The present research paper is an attempt to analyze the realms of Dalit consciousness and their attempts to oppose the subjugation meted upon them by the higher castes. The Dalit group or the caste also called “the Untouchables” have been oppressed and humiliated and, thus, subjected to marginalization in the society. With time, however, the Dalit section has tried to dismantle, though, not successfully, the social norms and tried to liberate themselves from the traumatic experiences of suffering. The short story collection of B. Rangarao reveals the sorry state of affairs

of the dalits of our society, the innumerable tortures meted upon them and their ways of resisting the atrocities.

Caste and Dalit Literature

The Dalit literature is a by-product of an evil caste system that has been prevailing in this country since time immemorial. It is a literature that arises as an outburst against casteism. The main aim of Dalit Literature is to delineate the social experiences of the marginalized community, thus voicing its concerns. It is primarily a social document, which deals with the people who had been socially and economically exploited in India for hundreds of years.

Etymologically, the word 'Dalit' is derived from Sanskrit word 'Dalit' meaning 'oppressed'. In Indian socio-cultural context they were untouchables and below *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya*. The term describes people or communities that have remained down-trodden or at the margins of society throughout India's long social history. Dalit is not a caste but a socio-economic category of discriminated people belonging to many castes and social groups, speaking many languages. Literature written by the members of the Dalit communities is described as Dalit literature. It is the literature of explicit social commitment and aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation.

Challenges the Status Quo

Dalit Literature challenges the status quo and questions the exclusion of the Dalit group from the main stream of society and culture. Baburao Bagul says "Dalit Sahitya is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit Sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is a historic necessity... Anguish, waiting, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit Sahitya. We need literature heroically full of life to create a new society. Expressions of Dalit sensibility through literary efforts is not a new phenomenon. Literature provides a voice to the dominated; exposing the reality, keeping the ugly and the painful intact, idealizing nothing.

The Stories

B. Rangarao's *Desperate Men and Women* is a collection of Dalit short stories depicting the evils of caste system and its maddening effects on the individuals. Set in the various Indian regions representing the nation as a whole, the stories evoke profound pathos and pleasure of acquaintance with desperate men and Women in India suffering from the pangs of untouchability. The Dalit short stories in this book raise the voices of desperate men and women who are the victims of the repressive social dominance. There are characters in the stories, who suffer mutely, while others break away from the traditional norms.

Childbirth

“Childbirth” is the story of Rakhma, a Dalit woman, who is pregnant and has a life that is full of suffering. Even though she is nine months pregnant and on the verge of delivery she could not stay at home as staying back would mean letting her family starve. Her husband did not have a sense of family obligation and spent most of the time doing nothing. Her children did not have the privilege to go to school, so they roamed in the village lanes and helped their mother occasionally.

Rakhma's agility and capacity to work even at the stage of pregnancy was amazing but she realizes that it was time for the childbirth. She leaves her works place and moved towards her home, only to find it deserted. She was all alone, wreathing with pain. She gave birth to a child without anyone beside her. After delivering off the baby, Rakhma could feel the hunger inside; but there was nothing to pacify the hunger. She had to get up in such a state and find food for herself. She walks up slowly and walks up to the grocery shop in the state of dizziness for this hunger would tear them apart. She reaches the grocery shop only to find no one in the shop. She picks up a handful of nuts and runs away to her baby who was lying all alone at the home. By the time, she reaches her home, she was totally exhausted and collapsed. She lay motionless in a pool of blood, unaware of her life and of the baby she had begotten. Full of sufferings her life comes to an end.

Farewell

The story “Farewell” is a vivid account of the trials and tribulations faced by a Dalit individual not only when he is alive but also after his death. The main character of the story is Lakhan, an untouchable, who garners courage to question the norms of the village and retaliate, only to find himself tortured and devoid of justice. Lakhan belongs to a well knit family comprising his old parents, his wife Jamuna and their two children. Lakhan’s parents had always been victims of the evils of caste systems and had been at the mercy of the elite high class. An epidemic in the village takes away the life of Lakhan’s father. Like a dutiful son, Lakhan made preparations for the last rites and extended consolation to others. The old man’s body was carried out of the home. As they took the main lane that led towards the graveyard, the village chief along with the other caste men stopped them midway. Lakhan was asked to divert his way as a temple that was being reconstructed was in the lane. The reason provided was: “if the dead body of an untouchable is carried through this lane, the goddess will disappear of it and must cast severe afflictions on the entire village” (28). The argument did not sound convincing to Lakhan. He was shocked at such a baseless argument. Unlike other people of his community Lakhan questions the statement made:

He belonged to this village as much as others did, and was concerned with the village welfare like all others. His father has served the village and offered his services to the goddess herself by cleaning the temple, looking after its premises and attending it as a night watchman when he was young. Everyone knows it. How can the mother goddess be so unkind as to get infuriated because his dead is carried through the lane where here temple is to be rebuilt/ she certainly knows the worth of the man- pure hearted servant of the people and a total devotee of the goddess herself (29).

Lakhan remembers that all the ancestors went to the graveyard by this lane and he reasons out that taking his father’s dead body by some other lane would certainly hurt his father and his father’s soul would not rest in peace. Lakhan, thus, decides to take his father’s dead body to the graveyard according to the original plan. Lakhan’s audacity is too much for the higher caste: “How dare you disobey the chief’s order?” one of the chief’s companions asked, “Are you bent on destroying the lives of us all?” (30). They ordered him to turn the direction and take some other lane to the graveyard. Lakhan defies the order and proceeds for the burial.

Lakhan's defiance only paves the way for a host of atrocities meted upon him and his family. Both his wife and he were denied work. The village chief had asserted his power. It was his personal ego and the sense of authority that was hurt by Lakhan's disobedience when he steered his father's funeral 'yatra' despite the chief's refusal. Lakhan and his family members were excommunicated for all purposes. People from the village were ordered to stop all forms of interaction and transactions with Lakhan's family. People from Lakhan's community were threatened with dire consequences if they failed to follow the order. So eventually they complied to the order.

Lakhan was well-aware of the chief's nature. But he was unwilling to accept the decree. The rebel in him was alive. He decides to meet the chief and beg for justice. He approaches the chief along with his wife and asks for mercy." Have mercy on my old mother and little children, who will die of hunger if you do not allow us freedom" (32). The chief's answer to Lakhan's plea is a direct indication of the plight of the Dalit population who are not even treated as human beings. "Freedom? The chief asked contemptuously, "which freedom do you talk about? You people never deserve freedom. You were born in perpetual slavery and will die in it always" (32). Lakhan pleaded but all his pleas go in vain. For the chief, Lakhan had committed a sin of taking away his father's dead body from the front of goddess temple despite being restricted. Lakhan is shocked. He questions: "How can that be a sin, sir?" enquired Lakhan. Was not my father a native of this village? Was he not a faithful servant of the people and of the goddess herself? How do you deny an honourable death to a man?" (33). Hearing Lakhan's words, the chief derides him: "Honourable death?" To an untouchable... An untouchable can never expect honour even in death. An untouchable is footwear whose place is determined by *shastras*. He will live in filth and die in filth, that's all" (33).

Lakhan was taken aback. He argued desperately that all are men /children of God and God's kindness reaches out to everyone equally. The chief lent a deaf ear to this and gave a lustful remark. "Your women are the only human beings amongst you, untouchables. Look at her she is so beautiful and worthy of as man's desire. She can set you free if you so desire" (33). This was too much for Lakhan. He lost his control and man- handled the chief. The chief's men beat Lakhan

brutally. Lakhan's resistance came to an end. Jamuna felt helpless. She took Lakhan by his arms. No one did sympathize with them. His own people did not turn up. The entire world had turned hostile. Their only resort was to leave the village that had nurtured them for years together.

And Quiet Flowed the Purnamai

“And Quiet Flowed the Purnamai” tells the story of suffering that is inflicted upon men/women of lower caste if they happen to fall in love with someone from the higher caste. The untouchables in the village were caste apart. They toiled the whole day and received a tiny share in return which was never enough to feed their kinsfolk who lived huddled together in hut like apartments. These castes did menial jobs in the village like cleaning courtyards, rearing their cattle, procured wood for cooking meals, lit pole lamps, ran with messages from village to village and, in the absence of doctors and medical facilities, the untouchable women supervised their childbirths. They performed their jobs with perfection but if, by chance, they failed in performing their duty, all they received was abuses and humiliation. They were oppressed for centuries and nothing could liberate them from the dehumanising social apathy. Even a natural site like the river, was divided. They were three separate *ghats* for three communities, the Brahmins, the Muslims, and the Untouchables.

The story reveals the aftermath of a girl when she dares to fall in love with an untouchable. Viru bhai belonged to the elite class of Patels. His young wife Lila was unsatisfied with her husband. She wanted to move out in the countryside and convinced her husband to give her the permission. Viru bhai granted her the permission.

On her sojourn to the countryside, Lila falls in love with Bijli's brother, Baiju, an untouchable. Lila's association with Baiju was a sin. But they went against the tradition and their love turned passionate. Soon their love affair becomes public and Viru bhai threatens to kill them. An entire mob was out to kill the two. But Baiju and Lila decided not to give in. They decided to swim across the river. The crowd pelted stone at them. All their efforts of saving themselves went in vain. Their dead bodies were carried away by the quiet flow of the river.

This story reminds us of Ammu and Velutha of *The God of Small Things* who met a similar fate for committing the sin of falling in love even though their castes did not match. The story brings to the fore the fact that even something as pure as love is guided by caste considerations. A Dalit is not allowed to express his feelings and if he does, all he gets in return is torture, suppression and sometimes death.

A Tale Told by a Scavenger

“A Tale Told by a Scavenger”, recounts the plight of a man Sukha Billu Bhangi, a cleaner. Sukha feels like a slave. He knows his position in the society/ an outcaste. He helps an insane woman, offers her a new life but all he receives is humiliation at the hands of people. Sukha goes against his parents, who warned him of the consequences. But Sukha sets aside all the objections raised by his parents and decides to have his own way. He was thrown out of the house and he was okay with the decision. ‘Mukta’ was a Brahmin woman and when people came to know of their liason, there was rage. The people shouted: “Here is the swine that defiled the sanctity of Brahmanism, the scavenger who polluted the woman of our caste”. Seven people grabbed him by the throat and showered punches on him. They beat him with sticks and continued thrashing him till he lost his consciousness. He regained consciousness, lying in excreta, faeces and urine.

The plight of the dalit caste is deplorable. Their acts of helpfulness is also looked down upon. Instead of showing gratitude to Sukha for helping the women, he was subjected to severe humiliation and physical torture. The fate of the dalit is such that they cannot retaliate to the immense torture they face. They are bound to bear it all in silence and so did Sukha.

Loneliness of an Ex-Soldier

“Loneliness of an Ex-Soldier” narrates the helplessness of an untouchable soldier Wasu. Wasu wants to work for the upliftment of the people of his caste. But all he can do is watch them in vain, the atrocities meted out on them.

Untouchability had rendered the “Mahar’s” as sub-humans. Poverty, ignorance and lack of wider social interactions had made them insensitive beasts, incapable of self-amelioration. Although a revolution had set in the Mahar’s, but their condition

still remained gross. There was a change in the general atmosphere in the village and it was unpalatable for the people of the higher caste. This had never happened before; therefore Wasu's return to the village was termed as calamity. The two communities in the village: the upper caste and the Mahars began to look askance on each other. (83)

The upper caste found it difficult to put up with the rapid changes developing in the low caste untouchable families. They found it difficult to digest the fact that a new phase of revolution has set in the lives of the erstwhile untouchables. So they decided to create problems for Wasu, who according to them was the pioneer of the positive changes in the Mahar's. To revenge upon Wasu the upper caste played a foul game with him. They created problems for his sister Sumi. Initially they beat up a cattle man, then killed a woman's goat and then got arrested some boys blaming them of mucking the Hanuman idol of the village. Wasu himself was puzzled over the series of events. The atrocities have shaken him from within. To add to this, the upper caste villagers did not shy away from torturing Wasu's personal world. They raped Sumi, Wasu's sister and killed her and left her dead near the river bank:

Sumi's dead body lay in the mud. Her clothes were torn and smeared with blood. There were scratches on her arms and below the neck. Wasu placed her head on his lap and wiped the face. He could not believe that Sumi was dead and talked to her as if she will respond. He began to wail as reality struck him. The torn clothes, scratches on the body and the blood- smeared thighs revealed that she was raped (88).

Wasu knew that the matter had to be reported to the police. He registered a complaint with the police with the hope of getting some justice but in vain. Wasu realized that the recent social changes in the village were unwelcome and the heinous act of rape and murder was a direct consequence of it. Wasu wanted to revenge the death of his sister. He wanted to punish the murderers, eliminate the killers. However, with the lack of any concrete evidence, he found himself helpless and without power. He knew any attack would only mean a leap in the darkness, a boomerang inviting self-destruction. Wasu waited hopelessly for the police to take some steps and

always received the routine reply of the investigation being on. Wasu had lost all hope. Tie passed by and the village celebrated Diwali. Only Wasu suffered in silence. “the soldier in him seemed to have been defeated” (90).

The story is a direct comment on the torture meted out on the untouchables and dalits if they dared to bring about any changes in the way they lived. The higher caste finds it impossible to accept betterment of the dalits. They suppress the dalits and can go to any extent to subjugate them and marginalize them. Such is the magnitude of their power and torture that they kill the fighting spirit within the dalits and render them helpless.

Confessions of a Graveyard Keeper

“Confessions of a Graveyard Keeper” is the story of Amarendra, the graveyard keeper. Amarendra narrates his story and his plight as a dalit. Amarendra belonged to a poor family. Amarendra and his family lived at the *Ganga ghats* for fifteen years where his father took up the job of attending the dead on the bank of the river *Ganga*. As a child whenever he was hungry, he would steal food left on the pyre by the mourners. He discovered that this was the easy way to pacify his hunger. The irony was that a living boy was fed on the food left for the dead ones...” (102). Amarendra’s father died unexpectedly of a snake bite. A poor dalit is as tortured at his death as during his life. The fate of Amarendra’s father was no exception.

His death had caused inconvenience to those who had hired him to attend to their dead. They hired another keeper who was asked to clear the place of my father’s dead body. He held my father by my leg, dragged him into the river, and pushed the body into the main stream. *Gangamai* engulfed him immediately, while we, my mother and me, tried to locate him on the surface of the water, with eyes running short of tears. (103)

There was no end to their problems. Amarendra’s mother was compelled to leave the Ghats for the sight of widows was considered inauspicious there, and widows were not allowed to operate in any capacity there. So they moved to a village called Rampur where they soon found themselves busy helping the mourners who would willingly pay them for the assistance rendered. An official

graveyard keeper of Rampur known as Anda Bhurji objected to their presence but soon gave in to his mother's youthful charm and allowed them space. When Anda Bhurji died, even he did not find a place in the graveyard because it was reserved for the high castes. When his relatives tried to bury him in a corner of a place, the efforts went in vein. His body was thrown in the Ganga. Anda Bhurji who had spent his life time in keeping the graveyard, took utmost care to maintain the place properly, was thrown out of it when dead. The Dalit's had no respite even when dead.

When Amarendra's mother died, the thought of taking her corpse away somewhere, and possibly throwing it in the muffled water of *Ganga* repelled him enormously. He decided to bury her within the graveyard itself. He along with his wife planned to bury his mother in the graveyard. They waited for the night fall and it was pitch dark they dug a pit and buried the mother. They made the spot plain avoiding the mound so that no one could suspect it of a grave. So what Amarendra could not do in the day light, he did in the dark? The night was his friend and it helped him give his mother a proper burial, which many other Dalits could not afford.

Dalit Life

The stories discussed above map the Dalit consciousness and reveal the true state of affairs in the life of a Dalit. The torture and subjugation meted out to the outcastes have been a part of their daily lives. The Dalit's have not been able to fight this successfully. They have raised their voices against the injustice perpetrated against them but they have failed to acquire justice for their community. The battle is still on.

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