

Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)**Defiance, Quest for Equality and Democratic Impotence: An Analytical Study of Datta Bhagat's Play Whirlpool****Muhammad Anees¹, Sara Murad Ali², Aiman Haider²**

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Abstract: *This paper explores Datta Bhagat's Play Whirlpool (2000) as a work of Dalit minor literature that investigates the defiance manifested by the minor character towards the upper caste Hindus, their quest for equality and the democratic impotency of the India state. Using qualitative close reading method informed by Deleuze and Guattari's notion of minor literature and the caste critique of B.R. Ambedkar, supplemented by sociological insights from Max Weber and Robert Deliege, this study examines how Brahmanical myths, religious exclusion and the legal system sustains untouchability in India. Focusing on Manohar's various acts of defiance, the false criminalization of the minor characters and the fatal well-explosion at the end of the play; I argue Bhagat dramatizes collective agency and dissent or defiance among marginalized characters, while exploring democracy's impotence in India to eradicate the caste hierarchies. The play reveals how culture narratives and local power structures conspire to normalize subordination of the Dalit people even in the presence of formal democratic state institutions. By analyzing Whirlpool as a political and theatrical, this study contributes to scholarship on Dalit literature by highlighting how minor literature can transform the grievances of the individuals into collective discourse and by investigating the gap between democratic ideals and lived equalities in human society.*

Introduction

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, one is a French philosopher and the other is a French psychoanalyst, define minor literature by identifying some key characteristics of it. Political elements and collective value in a literary text are the two key characteristics that exist in every minor literary text. In their essay titles, *what is a Minor Literature?* They argue that everything about a minor literary piece of writing will always be political. They state that minor literature is different because it always exists in a narrow space and every individual matter is inserted into the political. They claim "The question of the individual becomes even more necessary, indispensable, magnified microscopically, because an entirely different story stirs within it. It is in this sense that the family triangle is connected to other commercial, economic, bureaucratic, and judicial triangles which determine its value" (Deleuze and Guattari 16). So,

minor literature will always have a political element to it. Every minor text will always be interpreted in context of its political value because every minor text has, primarily, some form of defiance or resistance within it, towards the narratives that are created by the dominant class. Another characteristic of minor literature is that it always has a collective value. Whatever an author, who writes about minorities, says already constitutes a collective effort and whatever he says and acts upon is always political in nature, whether other people agree or disagree with him (Deleuze and Guattari 17). Dalit literature falls under the rubric of minor literature because in all the literary works that are produced about Dalit community have a political element within it and a collective value. Datta Bhagat's play *Whirlpool* is considered to be one of the finest plays that are written in Dalit literature.

Prof. Datta Bhagat is one of the leading Marathi playwrights in Dalit literature. He is the leader of Dalit theatre movement in Marathi. His plays, majorly, deal with social, religious and political agitation in India. *Whirlpool* (Avarit) is his first play that brought him fame, recognition and laurel. In 2006, he was made president of prestigious All India Marathi Natya Sammelan. His plays offer a very profound understanding of the realities of the caste system in Indian society. They are elegies to the sufferings of the downtrodden. His plays took the Marathi theatre to the common masses with their themes related to marginalized section of the society. He has presented his plays in Tamasha form. Tamasha is a traditional form of Marathi theatre which assimilates singing and dancing tradition of Indian culture. His play, *Whirlpool*, was published in 1978 and it tells the story of a Dalit son, Manohar and his father, Tukaram. They are members of Mahar community, a community that is made of many lower-class groups. The story is about the day-to-day predicaments in their social, religious and personal lives that stem from caste system in Hindu religion and culture. The play is set in late 1940s India. The protagonist of the play Manohar, a young Dalit man, who has spent a lot of time in Bombay and Pune and is fascinated by Ambedkarite's thoughts, has returned to his village where he advocates and educates the young generation of the lower classes about equality and demands the entry of Dalits into the temple of Vithoba. The Brahmin Josis restricts and delays the entry of the Dalits into the temple for two days by citing the astrological reason of lunar mansion. Manohar and his family have been exploited and oppressed for three generations. Manohar is, by nature, a rebellious person and strives for equality and wants to demolish the discrimination that his family and community suffer due to the caste system. Manohar's father and grandfather were exploited under the false traditions of the Hindu religion. Manohar represents the modern educated man of Independent India. He firmly believes that Dalits can never be exploited, oppressed and maltreated any more now. Manohar demands the liberal ideals of equality and rejects the caste division system. He argues logically against the caste system, and he revolts against the Brahmins and their oppressive notions. He says: "It's better to live one day the life of a lion than to live a thousand days as a meek sheep, that's the message that was given to us" (Bhagat 667). Later in the play, when Manohar insists on entering the temple, he is tried in court on false charge of Ascetic Penance, which is assumed to be the reason for the death of the Brahmin's son by the village authority, an authority that is comprised of individuals belonging to the upper caste of society and has dominating influence on the matter. Manohar and his father are given the sentence of digging a well in the village, to satisfy the hideous rage of upper caste people. While digging the well, an explosive bomb is thrown down in the well by Kisan, a Brahmin. Manohar and Tukaram both cry for help but no one gives them a helping hand and thus, they die in the explosion while other people flee from the well.

In Indian society, the notion of untouchability stems from Hinduism. Hindu religion has the concept of "varnas" according to which people are divided into four varnas. In Bhagwat Gita, Lord Krishna, has divided Hindu society into four varnas, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras. Shudras

belong to the lowest class because they are assigned with those tasks that are considered impure in Hindu society. In his book, *Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, Max Weber claims that the poor and oppressed people in Hindu society accept their fate because they believe that by accepting their current social status, they will be rewarded in the next life (Weber 122). He argues that lower castes have internalized Brahmanical notions of rebirth and karma and they are “tamed by the Brahmanical theory” (Weber 130), so they never revolt against their state of eternal servitude.

Robert Deliege in his research paper titled, *The Myths of Origin of the Indian Untouchables*, blames the various myths that are created around the origin of untouchability. He argues that the poor economic and inferior statuses of the lower castes are often explained by the duties that are assigned to them by their myths and religion. The impurity that is associated with lower castes is often located in their permanent association with death rituals and organic pollution (Deliege 535). The role of myths is very significant in sustaining the caste system in India. Deliege has gathered various myths and has demonstrated that the lower castes present these myths as a matter of fact and through these myths the untouchables legitimize the inferior position of those people who deal with impure matters (Deliege 534). Deliege believes that this is the very reason they are willing to accept their subservient position in society. For instance, he mentions the myth of two brothers going to God for prayer, together. God asks them to remove the carcass of a dead cow. The elder brother answers that his younger brother will remove it, but then he understands and says that he himself will remove it. Since that day, the younger brother became Brahman, *paappaan*, and the elder brother, *Paraiyar*. All other castes have emerged from these two brothers (Deliege 536). This myth changes from region to region, sometimes God is there and sometimes not but it is always the elder brother who willingly takes on the duty of removing the carcass. Some critics believe that these myths are created by Brahmans for legitimizing the inferior position of the lower castes. Through religion, they have inculcated these myths in the minds of the people belonging to lower castes. Thus, the lower castes embrace their position of servitude as their destiny or fate.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was an Indian jurist, economist, social reformer and political leader who wrote a book titled, *The Annihilation of caste*. The book is an account of the belief that social reform must take precedence over religious and political reforms. He has provided numerous tyrannical instances of the upper-class Hindus. He himself was a Mahar, like Manohar and had lived the life of a lower caste individual, and this book was a revolt against the upper-class Hindus. The theme of resistance is a recurrent one in minor literature, or I would argue that every minor literary piece is a struggle against the system that oppresses the minorities. Ambedkar’s writing is a resistance towards the inequalities that lower castes endure due to the discriminatory attitude of the higher caste Hindus and because of this discrimination and oppression that Hindu religion allow, he converted to Buddhism. According to his intellect, Buddhism was the only religion that could sag him from the injustices of the society and offer him a life of equality, love and peace. He has immensely criticized the theory of Chaturvarnya, a theory that divides the followers of Hinduism into four classes based on their worth, a worth that depends on where a person is born. He posits that to make the chaturvarnya more attractive and to disarm opposition, the protagonists of chaturvarnya take great care to point out that their chaturvarnya is based not on birth but on guna (worth) (Ambedkar 222). He declares that it is an ideal to which he can never reconcile himself. While commenting on worth and equality, he says that it might be true that all men are not equal (in terms of efficiency) but nonetheless “one must accept equality as a general principle” (Ambedkar 220). He is against the labelling system and says that the labels like Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra are names which are associated with a definite notion in the

mind of every Hindu in Indian society, a notion of hierarchy that is solely predicated upon the birth of an individual.

Though India has been a democratic society, since its independence, still the caste system is very prevalent in it. Democracy, as a political system that believes in equality and advocates that all citizens are equal, yet it has failed to diminish the inequality that is perpetuated by the caste system in India. Democracy is only used as a tool by the upper caste Hindus to give the lower castes a sense of social and political equality but in reality, they remain victims of their discrimination, eternally. They are reminded of their rights and equal status when politicians need them during elections. It remains an impotent system that apparently promises equality but in truth does nothing significant for the lives of the lower castes in Indian society.

This paper intends to explore the defiance that the lower caste individuals show towards the upper caste Hindus and their ideals, their quest for equality and then how India as a democratic society has failed to counter the evil of the caste system.

Literature Review

Whirlpool is Datta Bhagat's first play that brought him prominence and established him as a prominent figure in Marathi theater. Though *Whirlpool* is considered one of his finest dramatic works, still I could not find sufficient intelligent research papers or articles. Among the two articles that I found on the play, one research article was titled, *deconstructing the Hindu Myth: Datta Bhagat's Whirlpool*, written by Rajkumar Karmveer Telgote. In his article, Telgote discusses how Hindu mythology plays a role in sustaining the caste systems in Indian society. He mentions various Hindu myths that justify the subservient position of the marginalized communities in India and legitimize it. He talks about the significance of R.B. Ambedkar as a leading figure in the struggle for the rights of the marginalized communities in India. He states that the first generation of lower caste people after B.R Ambedkar were inspired by the teachings of Ambedkar and based on his views about the caste system and Hindu religion, they, for the first time, questioned the Hindu religion and the myths that are created within it. He picks a few characters from the text and analyzes them, and then discusses how the lives of these characters are shaped and their fates are determined by Brahmanical myths.

Ranvirkar S.G, in his research article titled, *Disagreement, Pains and Sufferings in Datta Bhagat's Play Whirlpool* explores the various predicaments of the individuals that belong to the lower strata of Indian society. He argues that the literature of Dalit people is a literature of pain suffering. He discusses the issue of untouchability in Indian society and comments at length on the punishments that are pronounced by the upper caste Hindus on the lower caste Hindus for little to no offence. He gives multiple references from the play where the minor characters, characters that belong to the minority, are punished for those offenses that they have not even committed. He also draws many of his arguments in his research paper from the writings of R.B Ambedkar and suggests that the discrimination based on caste system is an utterly despicable idea and for Indian society to move forward, it has to eradicate the caste system.

Since the study could not find any good research paper written on the play, there is a broad gap for research. This paper aims to explore how minor characters in the play are resisting against the injustices and the prejudices of the upper caste Hindus, what are the ways through which these minor characters are seeking for social and religious equality, and does democracy has any effect on the caste system in Indian society.

Methodology

In this research article, the author has employed qualitative research method as a tool to conduct the research study, where a primary text is analyzed in the light of theoretical knowledge to prove an argument. The author has thoroughly read the limited research work available online on the primary text to find a research gap and have read a number of books and research articles to formulate a theoretically background for the main contention of this paper. The author has opted Bhagat's play *Whirlpool*, as a primary text and Weber, Deliege and B. R. Ambedkar's views on caste and other journal articles as secondary sources to put forward the existing literature on the topic under investigation to support the main argument that this paper is trying to make in this research paper. Excerpts from the primary texts have been analyzed in the context of the theories to examine how the minor characters are subjugated by the upper caste Hindus through myths and then how those subjugated bodies manifesting subversive performativity to challenge the prejudice and oppression of the upper caste Hindus.

Discussion

Every minority literature always has a political angle to it. Dalit literature especially is utterly political in nature because it gives voice to the marginalized and the voiceless in Indian society. It puts forward Dalit conscious in the mainstream literary trends and unveils the prejudices of all the ideologies and myths that are predicated solely on caste. Most importantly, it becomes a tool of resistance for Dalits, to question and dismiss the dominant discourse of the upper caste Hindus. It criticizes the very religion that gives birth to segregation based on birth and caste. Manohar, the protagonist of the play *Whirlpool*, is the embodiment of resistance towards the ideologies of the upper caste Hindus. He is a well-aware person and is a follower of R.B. Ambedkar, who advocates equality in society. He teaches the children of lower caste people about equality, social justice and "tells them to give up caste duties in the village" (Bhagat 659). Piraji, another Dalit character, on the contrary has internalized the Hindu beliefs about the caste system and to him, the Mahar way of life seem justified, and he refuse to make an effort for any change in the lives of fellow Mahar people. Rather, he tries to become a hindrance for the efforts of Manohar. When he comments on Manohar's education and questions his teachings of giving up the caste duties, Manohar tells him there is nothing wrong with what he is doing, and God has given them two hands, so they should toil and labour. When Piraji asks him who will remove the dead cattle of the village, Manohar replies that it is the responsibility of that person to whom it belongs (Bhagat 660). Here, Manohar is taking a stand against the all the myths that make the removal of dead carcasses a duty of Mahar people. Piraji is someone who has digested these myths and is incapable of challenging them. In the introduction of this paper, I have talked about one of these myths and its various versions that are gathered by Robert Deliege, where two brothers go to a God for prayer and the God orders them to remove the carcass of a cow and the elder brother takes it upon himself to remove it and says that he himself will do it because his younger brother is a *paappaan*, meaning Brahman. This is a myth, Deliege argues, that is created by Brahmans in order to subdue the lower castes and make their own superior position legitimate. It is myths like these that compel Pirajit to say "But why? Why should we change?" when Manohar tells him that the carcasses of dead animals should be removed by those to whom they belong. Pirajit is enslaved by the ideology of the Brahmans, but Manohar is a learned man, and he knows the purpose of such myths and ideology. He tells Piraji that people always tell us that we do not live cleanly and therefore we contaminate them. That we eat fish and meat and if we enter the temple, we will desecrate the deity. He says that he has instructed all the children of the village nearby and they are all living cleanly. They do not eat fish and meat and therefore they are fit to enter the

Hanuman temple (Bhagat 660). Manohar has acquired some knowledge and has seen the world outside his village and is aware of basic human rights and that is why he is conscious towards the ideology of Brahmins and is showing resistance towards the prejudice of the higher caste Hindus.

The interaction between Manohar, Kisan and Mahadu is also interesting, where Manohar is questioning the foundation of the myths that are created by the upper caste Hindus. His resistance is at zenith at this point in the play. He is in argument with Kisan and Mahadu regarding their pilgrimage and entering the shrine of Hanuman. Kisan tells Manohar that by entering the temple you intend to desecrate our deity, to which Manohar responds with a question; Is their deity that impotent that it will get polluted only with Mahar's touch. Kisan asks him why they do not make their own temples, and Manohar responds again with a question; isn't that temple theirs too? He asks, "Is God the patrimony of only one caste?" (Bhagat 666). Here, Manohar challenges the authority of the upper caste Hindus and their claim of control over the Hindu religion. Mahadu intervenes by saying that Manohar should not be teaching them about the brahmajnan (the divine knowledge) and that he is defiling both Kisan and Mahadu. Manohar responds that he is talking about bodily impurity and no one's body is born pure. He says, "Bodily impurity originates from the body. Show me that religion that teaches that the body is born pure" (Bhagat 666). Furthermore, he rejects the Hindu religion in its entirety when he says that a deity that gets desecrated by their touch cannot be their deity and a religion that keeps them away at the periphery is not their religion. When Mahadu orders Piraji to tie Manohar's hands and feet Manohar utters these lines. "I want to make it known that it is not in your power to make a decision on justice and injustice. Not even the goddess who is pretending to enter the body of the Potraj, not even she has the power to decide on justice or injustice" (Bhagat 667). It is evident from these lines that Manohar is frustrated with the caste system and is intolerant toward the prejudicial behaviour of the upper caste Hindus. Throughout the play, Manohar is in conflict with the Hindu religion and the caste system that stems from it. His last speech towards the end of the play is immensely significant in this regard.

To express the anguish of an age-old inheritance of suffering is the grave purport of my speech. I'm the world ruler of poverty. I'm the Arya Chanakya of the politics of the destitute. My hopes and desires were crushed under the rock of tradition. The challenging shout of my soul has never passed my lips. Your barriers kept the Sarasvati of my tears from flowing. But today I will speak out. The words of revolt which flowed in my blood age after age are now suddenly taking shape and becoming visible. The blood clotted by sad and dire suffering gushes out today in fiery words (Bhagat 675).

Dalit drama is predominantly the drama of defiance or revolt, and it is a revolt against all the ideologies, convention and myths that directly or indirectly contributes to the exploitation of marginalized groups of society. In the aforementioned excerpt from the text, Manohar is expressing his anguish that stems from the centuries of sufferings and oppression to which Dalits are subjected by the upper caste Hindus. This revolt is now getting a concrete shape and becoming visible. The anguish that was once caged in his soul is now going to burst out. The resistance that Manohar displays in this scene is almost palpable.

In Dalit literature, the theme of inequality and the quest for equality is always there. Dalit writers and their characters, through resistance, always strive for socio-economic and religious equality, and try to make their voices heard. Manohar's whole purpose in the play is social and religious equality. He questions the authority of the upper caste Hindus and strives to gain equal access to the temple. But, at every turn he meets with prejudice and punishments for his efforts. In the play we discover that Manohar's grandfather was murdered by Brahmins for touching Maharaja's feet. Then they painted the incident as an act that was willingly carried out by Manohar's grandfather because he was found guilty

of spreading cholera in the area which was caused by Tukaram's father touching the feet of Maharaja. We also discover that in the past Tukaram was also beaten by Patel, the police inspector, for not lying to the judge in his favor during a court hearing. Later in the play, Manohar and Tukaram are tried in court on other unjust charges and are killed while completing their punishment. All the state institutions fail to protect them for receiving all the cruel and unjust treatment. Acquiring knowledge is forbidden for the lower castes and even if they desire to seek knowledge, their miserable economic status does not allow them to acquire it. In the play, when Manohar attempts to argue with Kisan and Mahadu regarding the concept of bodily impurity, Mahadu threatens Tukaram that his son is full of wisdom, and he should take care of his son otherwise something bad will happen to him. Manohar replies, "Is it in this society an offence to have knowledge?" (Bhagat 666). By posing these questions, Batta Bhaga is trying to put forth the concept of equality and shows his audience, those who do not belong to lower castes, that Dalits are also equal individuals of Hindu or Indian society, capable of rational thinking and can contribute to society.

Though India has been a democratic society, since its independence, still the caste system is very prevalent in it. Democracy, as a political system, believes in equality and advocates that all citizens are equal, yet it has failed to diminish the inequality that is perpetuated by the caste system in India. It is only used as a tool by the upper caste Hindus to give the lower castes a sense of social and political equality but in reality, they remain victims of their discrimination. Usually, they are reminded of their equal status when politicians need them during elections. In the play, the characters belonging to lower castes are treated in the same manner. Judicial courts and other state institutions at times tell them that they are a part of a democratic society but are punished for acts that they have not done. Jester is one of the characters in the play that is not fixed and changes according to the scene of the play. For instance, in one scene he acts as a king but in the next he acts as a judge. In the scene where Manohar and Tukaram are on trial, and Piraji gives false testimony against them, the Jester allows only Manohar to speak and not Tukaram, before he passes any verdict. Manohar talks at length about his centuries-old, concealed anger, silence and suppression. Jester says that it is a democratic society and asks the people sitting around if the accused are guilty or not guilty and they announce that they both are guilty. All the people that are sitting around are upper caste Hindus. The jester says, "There is democracy nowadays. If you say so, then we will send them to the police-post (Bhagat 667). The people disagree and say that they should be exiled. Piraji disagrees with them but is silenced by the people. Then the Jester states, "Let him speak, let Piraji speak out. In a democracy everybody has the right to speak" (Bhagat 677). A Dalit who has given false testimony against two others innocent Dalit individuals are given the opportunity to speak what he desires to but those who are accused are denied this opportunity.

Conclusion

Datta Bhagat's Whirlpool stands as a significant work of Dalit minor literature that protests the oppression of caste system while exploring the limits of formal democracy within the state of India. Analyzed through Deleuze and Guattari's idea of minor literature and B.R. Ambedkar's critique of caste system of in Indian society, the play illustrates how ones' individual defiance for addressing their grievances can become collective resistance: Manohar's temple entry agitation and public speech are not isolated acts of defiance but an expression of shared historical struggle. Bhagat shows how myths, religious rituals and local authorities, as put forwards by Deliege and Weber, naturalize the practice of untouchability and enables social and legal institutions to reproduce exclusion. The false charges against Manohar, the court's complicity and the fatal well-explosion dramatize how democratic institutions can

be hijacked by caste privilege and be utilized against minorities. At the same time, the play stages defiance through Tamasha-inflected speech, song and public assertion, turning individual and private suffering into communal testimony. Whirlpool thus laments long-standing injustices and insists on collective resistance grounded in Ambedkar's thoughts and grassroots education. The tragic ending of the play underlines that the democratic system within Indian society cannot uproot the hierarchies that are established by the caste system, a system sustained by religious myths. Further research should explore theatre's role in sustaining Dalit emancipatory politics, and how minor literary form can build lasting solidarities among the marginalized populations in society. Bhagat's play compels readers to realize that cultural and political struggle must go hand in hand for a meaningful change.

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