



MYTH, MYTHOLOGY AND DALIT IDENTITY: A CRITICAL READING OF MOHAN PARMAR'S PLAYS

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Abstract

It is shameful for the whole Indian continent that even after 75 years of independence we have not been able to erase the curse of untouchability from our society. There are scores of laws against untouchability but in practice they have never been implemented honestly. It also a fact that Dalits still are savagely attacked in the rural countryside and even in the urban milieu, untouchability still knocks at the closed doors of such institutions as the arranged marriages, the caste Hindu temple, the private sector, etc. The cultural hegemony of the caste Hindus arises from the myths and mythological heroes and it has remained virtually intact till today. The physical reality of the Dalits which is a result of the cultural hegemony of the caste Hindus and thus the Dalits remains at the bottom of the intellectual and emotional landscape of contemporary India. Mohan Parmar has presented the physical reality of the Dalits through his collection of one-act plays Bahishkar. In this research paper the researcher has analyzed how the playwright has inverted the upper caste myths and mythology to present the social landscape of contemporary India in which Dalits are still suffering.

Key Words: Cultural Hegemony, Myth, Mythology, Dalits, Untouchability

Full Text of the Paper

It is shameful for the whole Indian continent that even after 75 years of independence we have not been able to erase the curse of untouchability from our society. There are scores of laws against untouchability but in practice they have never been implemented honestly. The Khairlanji Massacre (2006) in Maharashtra, Rohith Vemula Suicide case (2016) in Telangana, the Una Atrocity (2016) in Gujarat, the Hathras gang rape and murder of a Dalit girl(2020) in Uttar Pradesh – are few of the vivid examples of this deliberate negligence. This underlines the fact that Dalits still are savagely attacked in the rural countryside and even in the urban milieu, untouchability still knocks at the closed doors of such institutions as the arranged marriages, the caste Hindu temple, the private sector, etc. The cultural hegemony of

the caste Hindus remains virtually intact. Dalitness still exists as much as an idea as a physical reality. And the Dalit remains at the bottom of the intellectual and emotional landscape of contemporary India.

Ambedkar had found that Hinduism is the root cause for the horrendous situation of the Dalits which is still governed by a mythological text called *Manusmriti*. Ever since the *Manusmriti* was created in the Indian history, there has been no favorable representation of Dalit culture and life-style in the domain of everyday socio-historical paradigms. The worshipers of the *Manusmriti*—the caste Hindus—have till today imposed upon Dalits, the identity of being ‘untouchable’, which has become their only definition. Thus, Dalits are still ‘untouchable’, both in society as well as in literature created by the upper caste Hindus over the ages.

It may be necessary to remember here that Ambedkar never believed that his people would change because of the external factors but more because of their education, movement and agitation. It is in this context that the words of Paulo Freire are significant. As he advocated, ‘He is the one who advocates that the search for liberation must come from the oppressed themselves.’ Further he says, ‘They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it.’

Ambedkar believed that literature should not only promote social and human progress, but also foster values and thus Dalits must write their own literature as the upper caste literature never foster values as its core lies in the *Manusmriti*. He said:

‘*Manusmriti* is not acceptable to us, given its endorsement of inequality. Why should we not burn such a text? (Limbale)

In 1938, more than ten years after the burning of *Manusmriti*, he explained in an interview with T. V. Parvate:

It is not that all the parts of *Manusmriti* are condemnable, that it does not contain good principles and that Manu himself was not a sociologist and was a mere fool. We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries. Because of its teachings we have been ground down under despicable poverty. (Limbale)

A literature that supports inequality is not only unacceptable to him, in his view there must be a mass movement against such literature. He did not stop with

saying that *Manusmriti* was unacceptable to him and ultimately publicly burned it. According to him, every text must be accountable to society and to humanity. He took the position that literature must enhance equality and destroy inequality. For Ambedkar, Dalits who wrote Bhakti literature failed this test because it was of no use in the destruction of the Hindu Varna system.

Dr. Ambedkar posed the question:

‘Why a Voltaire could not be born in our country?’ Voltaire’s literature caused a revolution. An oppressive state was overturned and common people were released from subjugation. Today there is a need for a talent like Voltaire could emerge from the ranks of Brahman scholars, for the cost would be too high. (Limbale)

Writers emerging from amongst Dalit, exploited and deprived societies must accept this call for Voltaire. But in order to be Voltaire, one must stand up to religion and state, as they sanction exploitation. Hindu writers have defended *Manusmriti*, being agents of the established order. Ambedkar asserted that writers should take inspiration from the greatness of common people:

Through your literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don’t have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of villages is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of the Dalits and ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there. (Limbale)

Ambedkar’s literary thought is founded on this humanism. Ambedkar accorded the highest place to humanism. Inspired by him, Dalit literature holds the human being to be its focal point. This literature is a declaration of human freedom. It encourages human liberation, believes in the greatness of human beings, and firmly opposes notions of race, religion and caste. Humanity is the religion of Dalit literature. Therefore, in its world, no imaginary or worldly object is greater than the human being. It rebels against any culture, society or literature that degrades the human being. Dalit literature will have to be analyzed in the context of the Ambedkarite thought, of which rebellion is an indivisible part.

Ambedkar inspired not only the Dalits of Maharashtra but of whole the nation. Dalit writers of Gujarat also started to write their life experiences and asserted their human identity which was denied for the centuries. Gujarati Dalit writing does not aim at achieving an aesthetic performance in literature as an art but it serves purposes of social intervention and accordingly carries strong militant connotations. The main concern is of self-assertion and protest, and the ways of a quest and construction of an identity of one's own, on the part of those who have been denied a full human dignity, and whose consciousness was made to forcibly internalize patterns of cultural depreciation and social subalternity.

In Gujarati Dalit literature the genre of drama is not as rich as poetry and short story. The main reason for this lack of abundance is unavailability of public space. Because of this unavailability writers are also seen a bit less enthusiastic. Whenever he/she writes a play, he keeps the audience in mind and the writer has specific target of awakening the Indian mass and also Dalits through his play. But the Indian populace is a very less aware and awake about the problems of the Dalits. So, nobody takes a risk of presenting a Dalit play. So, if his/her play is not presented to the public he/she takes it as a failure and thus they are becoming less enthusiastic for this highly potent genre of literature.

During Gandhian age of Gujarati literature some one-acts plays were written on the lives of Dalits. Umashankar Joshi has written a one-act play *Dhed Na Dhed Bhangi* which was published in his collection of play *Sap Na Bhara* in 1936. Chandrabhai Bhatt's one-act collection of plays *Ashokstambh and other plays* included two plays *Eklavya* and *Manvi Nu Mulya* which were based on a Dalit life. Jashwant Thakar has written *Achut No Bhavai Vesh*. Shantaben Patel has given *Jasma Odhan* which was quite experimental and very well received by the audience.

Gujarati playwrights Madhu Ray, Labhshankar Thakar, Adil Mansuri, Chinu Modi, Subhash Shah, Mukund Parikh, Shrikant Shah, and Ramesh Shah appeared with very different plays from all the previous ones. With many experiments in the subject and structure of the play, these creators made a sincere effort to change the whole taste of the play and the climate of the play itself. These playwrights were known for their constant experimentation in discourse-dialogue-language-style etc. These playwrights were also urging the audience to re-equip themselves. These creators strive to change the basic concept of life and the world. Institutions like Ray Math, Akantha Sabarmati, Natyashala had made

invaluable contribution in establishing and developing the modern tradition of new plays. But this new tradition lasted for a very short time. Many questions arose which were mainly confusing to the audience, but these plays of the new genre changed the concept of drama, gave the play a new direction, its effect was special on compositional dialogues and especially on staging ability. The Gujarati plays of the 1970s and 1980s were created again depicting social reality, real depiction began to take place in simple language instead of experimental and so-called absurd dramas of the 1960s. The satire began to be portrayed on a literary scale; the questions of social inequality now seem to be portrayed in the form of realistic truth without being too vocal.

In such scenario Dalit drama began to flourish. Shrikant Sharma has compiled three one act plays under the title of *Triveni Sangam* in 1977. In this compilation we can see biography of Veer Maya, Saint Rohidas and Swami Tejanand. Shivabhai Parmar has given *Manavta Ni Jyot* in 1978, which is based on life of Havsi Degama. He has also written a play titled as *Maya Ni Mahanta* which presents a complete life of Veer Maya. This play is a complete representation of Dalit Society. This play has used references of sanskrit plays. The play writer has used Sutradhar, Nat, Nati and other sanskrit play devices in this play. In this play we also find songs and comic sequences. It is also divided in acts and scenes. Thus, *Maya Ni Mahanta* could be placed as the initial play of the Dalit plays. Mohan Parmar is a new name that can be added to the new stream. He has successfully cultivated the form of the short story. Now he has tried his hand in the world of drama. He has come up with a solo collection titled *Bahishkar* (Boycott).

Mohan Parmar has mentioned about his inclination for the drama in the foreword to *Bahishkar*, “Not out of imitation but I started to write the one act play with whole preparedness. The story of writing one-act plays had been going on for a long time. After the novel and the story, the study of one-act plays became my interest. These plays have been written as a result of the study as well as the outline that has been marked in my mind. According to the taste of the creator, how the statement of theatrical readiness, in the end, takes place in his one-act plays, remains a matter of interest”. Rajendra Mehta mentioned in his article “Rachanashilta no Treejo Adhyay” in *Bahishkar*, “In these one-act plays, the creator has shown sympathy for the deprived but the playwright’s yearning in that is “social harmony.” There are seven one act-act plays in *Bahishkar*. In this research paper the researcher has analyzed two one-act plays *A True Saga of Satyanarayana* and *Bahishkar*.

A True Saga of Satyanarayana (Satyanarayana ni Satyakatha) is divided into four scenes. In this one act play there are three characters, all are male. The playwright has asked the serious question about the place of the Dalits and their status. He has succeeded in presenting such a serious subject very lightly and in a way that does not hurt the subject idea at all. In *Bhasmasur* – one-act play – Chinu Modi, presents the issues of racism at the global level and casteism in the Indian context. *Bhasmasur* didn't receive the desired goal after many years of austerity just because he belongs to demon category. Mohan Parmar also puts forward the same question in his play *A True Saga of Satyanarayana*.

A True Saga of Satyanarayana opens with Karunashankar who tells the story of Satyanarayana. On hearing the story the god Satyanarayana himself appears and communicates with Karunashankar. Karunashankar is very happy on seeing the god. The god complains, "I have been tired of hearing very old persistent story. So something new should be added to this." He orders Karunashankar to add a new chapter in the katha. Also in order to sustain his godliness the god yearns to punish someone as he feels unhappiness for not punishing anyone from quite a long time. He gives one more task to Karunashankar, "Also tell me who denied to take my prasad?" After the katha god appeared and inquired for the person who has denied his prasad. Karunashankar gave name of 'Ravla' and said that he is the servant of this house who has disrespected your prasad.

'Ravlo' is an important character of the play and carries the main idea of the play that enters in the third scene. The angry god appears on Ravla's room and steals his bedstead, but when asked about prasad, he gives a clear answer that he did not take prasad just because he is diabetic. God ordered him to perform a Katha as an act of confession. Ravlo denies god's proposal as katha is a costly affair. However in order to get back his bedstead he does a Katha. God appears again and inquires for a person who has disrespected his prasad. In reply, 'Ravlo' says that Karunashankar – the priest – did not take prasad and the reason is that Ravlo is an untouchable! Anyone who disrespects prasad thus deserves punishment. But god Satyanarayana's gentle attitude towards Karunashankar exposes his double standard. Despite repeated imploring of 'Ravla', Karunashankar does not receive any punishment due to the double standard of the god; moreover, he takes the side of Karunashankar and says that he is a poor brahmin! But 'Ravlo', motivated by a sense of equal justice and rights, insists Satyanarayana to punish Karunashankar. God Satyanarayana does not listen to 'Ravla', does not believe and disappears. In a fit of rage for the equality, 'Ravlo' challenges God by

throwing God's stuffs and challenges the god, "I give power to spoil everything I have, Diyor!" The one act play ends with Ravla's loud laugh.

The playwright symbolizes the change by the dialogues of the characters. On the one hand, god himself is tired of hearing katha consisting of 5 sections. It expects the change in traditionally persistent sections of katha. The playwright and spectators all have the same expectations for change in rigidity and orthodoxy in society. In the end, it does so by going into the idea of inevitable change in social structure itself. The humor presented in the dialogues of the play gives a special dimension to the play. All the hooks and crooks are natural by god to keep his power intact. While acknowledging this, god also says, "If I don't do that, who will believe in me?" He also says, "Vatsa, tell me, how well is my propaganda going on! Many such humorous dialogues give lucidity to the play. Ravla's character is obviously a carrier of humor whose speech, behavior, innateness of a village man, instinctive logic, etc. from his dialogues with god are shown so even god is also confused and a humorous situation is created. But in this entire situation Ravla's yearning for social harmony deepens the one act play. God's whole personality is revealed from the dialogues of Ravla. Even though Ravlo enters late in the play but with his straightforwardness and self-esteem he dominates the play.

In the very beginning dialogues, Ravlo also puts god in the place after his self-esteem. When god appears he welcomes god and says, "I'm blessed after seeing you but I have not done such a thing that you have to bother to come to me." The character of 'Ravla' has become a possessor of a certain place in the one act play literature; this hope is awakened by the character. The playwright has to say that Dalits who are despised by the upper castes have a longing for self-esteem and harmony. Why to stop them from getting merged in the mainstream of society? On the other hand, the same section of the society cheats with god, flatters, shows their faith. In fact in the end only sees the economic interests, in spite of all this, where god is theirs, everything is covered up. Satyanarayana asks Karunashankar, "Hey Vatsa! How many kathas have you done of me? In reply, Karunashankar says, "So far, I have done so many kathas that I can't say for sure about the number!" God says that you will have the right to the offerings of the devotees. That is why Karunashankar says, "If you don't say that, I take it, Lord!" Thus Karunashankar accepts that the katha is just a means of income. God also knows, yet this fallacy goes on, strives and is nourished – is nothing more than a social tragedy.

Dalpat Chauhan notes, “The sarcasm and frankness of Ravla’s dialogues creates a difficult situation for Satyanarayana. The disregard for the religious sacred characters and rituals are the center of attraction of the play.”

According to Rajendra Mehta, “The playwright has severely attacked the double standards of the ‘God’ and ‘Godman’ in the fast paced and tight knit scenes of the play. The play is a depiction of the idea that even the god also doesn’t support the Dalits. It is also a satire on how the upper castes has monopolize the religion and also its rituals for the exploitation of the poors.”

Bahishkar is the titled one-act play of this collection. It consists eight scenes and nine characters. The central character of the play is Monghi – a sweeper – a kind hearted lady but for her self-respect is of utmost important and she doesn’t compromise with it. Kanaklata is a suspicious, selfish and castiest lady represents the upper caste psyche of the Indians. Kanaklata and Hasumati live in the same society. Rashmikanth is Kanaklata’s husband and Pravinchandra is Hasumati’s husband. As Kanaklata is suspicious she quarrels with Monghi without any reason. Monghi has a very good relation with Hasumati and her husband. She talks with her quite freely and therefore Kanaklata thinks that both of them are talking about her and makes fun of her.

Kanaklata and Rashmikanth never respect Monghi and scolds her without her fault. When Monghi sweeps the road in front of their house they rebuke her for the dust which enters their house due to wind. Once their latrine was choked and they had to call Monghi to remove the chock. Monghi removed the chock. For her laborious work Kanaklata gave only two rupees which she denied to take as it was too little. Kanaklata took back the two rupees immediately. This shows the selfish and miserliness of her. As she is suspicious she also quarrels with her husband when he was reading newspaper in the verandah and Monghi was sweeping the road. She threw some plastic bags and quarreled with Monghi for not cleaning the road properly. Monghi. Monghi was quite sure for her work and argues with her. She rebuked Monghi by castiest remarks which Monghi couldn’t bear.

Monghi: If you didn’t find my work good enough then tell me to stop but don’t scold me without any error.”

Kanaklata: Oh! You behave like an upper caste. If you want to be respected then you have to take birth in an upper caste family.

When both of them were quarreling Rashmikant also supported his wife and spoke castiest words.

Monghi: (Smiles at Rashmikant) Rashmibhai, you shouldn't behave like your wife otherwise you will also be rebuked as your wife.

Kanaklata: Just shut up, you whore! Are you not ashamed to play with my husband!

Monghi: (Angrily) I heard all the ills but not such stuff.

Kanaklata: Now go away without chirping.

Monghi: I am leaving but now onwards I won't clean the road in front of your house and won't spit also.

Monghi boycotts to sweep the road for her insults. Due to her boycott there was a heap of rubbish and everyone turned up their nose looking at the heap. Kanaklata couldn't bear such an insult. She pleaded to Monghi to compromise and also promised that she won't utter any ill wills. She took her to her home to end the boycott. Thus Mohan Parmar tries to present a world in which caste differences don't exist.

Dalpat Chauhan evaluates the play *Bahishkar* thus, "Monghi, a Dalit woman, breaks caste pride of Kanaklata but at last she shows her kindness and forgets her insults. The boycott of the upper castes by a Dalit is the most special facet of the play."

Rajendra Mehta notes in his article, "Monghi's boycott of Kanaklata is the central event of the play. The boycott is a counter attack of the Dalits on the upper castes."

The issue of untouchability is presented quite artistically and this is the biggest achievement of the playwright. The question – of casteism and untouchability – posed here is of the society and the society is still in its tight grip till today. The playwright has said everything that has to be said here. The essential art of restraint is commendable. After studying both the one-act plays *A True Saga of Satyanarayana* and *Bahishkar* it can be said that the writer has interwoven quite meticulously the concepts of myth, mythology and the Dalit identity to assert the identity of the Dalits who are still on the margins of the society even after 75 years of the independence.

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