

Social Realism and Dalit Sensibility in Devanoora Mahadeva's *Kusumabale*

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Abstract

The social and political content of a text enables one to have an understanding of the sociology of caste. This paper, in particular, will look into Devanoora Mahadeva's *Kusumabale* to understand how the form and aesthetics of Dalit fiction have radically altered the way caste oppression is challenged in India. The innovative narrative strategies imply newer ways of imagining Dalit communities and registering their protest. *Kusumabale* highlights the relevance of rejecting European realism to understand Dalit realism critically. Various motifs employed by Mahadeva like folklore, the *kathakava* tradition, alternative historiography etc. will be analysed to rethink the cultural memory of the past as well as the contemporary lived experiences of the Dalits. These narrative elements will further examine how the novel as a form has been "hybridized" by the Dalit writers to resist caste-based oppression. This paper also aims to interrogate how the novel ways of articulating anger, agony, resistance and hope in Dalit literature affect the Dalit subjectivity while imagining caste in literary works.

Keywords: Realism, history, oppression, resistance, politics, aesthetics

Dalit¹ literature is a meta-narrative of the plight of the "lower" castes in India. It is marked as literature of protest, re-envisioning history by documenting the violence, oppression and systemic exploitation. Hardly a product of five decades, the corpus of Dalit literature is no longer limited to the Hindi belt² but it has spread itself throughout the

Indian mainland. Besides poetry and autobiographies, novels, short fiction and literary criticism have been added to the growing corpus. Dalit works of fiction have been radical in their form and outlook. Sharankumar Limbale's *Hindu* (2010), G. Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring* (2000), a few stories from Gogu Shyamala's anthology *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* (2012) testify to it. They aimed at creating an alternative Dalit historiography employing cultural myth as aesthetics of resistance to create a rightful place of their own. P. Sivakami's *Grip of Change* (1988) created a stir in Dalit writing with the publication of *Author's Notes* in 1995 which deployed post-modernist techniques to further deconstruct her work. A few years prior to Sivakami, Devanoora Mahadeva had created an uproar with almost redefining the idea of the novel itself with the publication of *Kusumabale* which is nothing like the usual realist novel one may come across. When we analyse caste in literary imagination, *Kusumabale* stands out with its use of fantastical elements, magic realism and absence of sloganeering (despite the presence of a Dalit banner), magically capturing the Dalit spirit with linguistic creativity.

The novel as a form can be seen to manage social guilt, articulate the outrage and potential radicalism in a conservative generic form. This has been tweaked and culturally appropriated to create a new genre of Dalit novels. Eleanor Zelliot (1978) explores how the "materialist considerations of caste have been key to literary production as well, highlighting the gap between the actual texts of Dalit literature and what passes as 'theoretical' commentary in the metropolitan academy" (p. 79). She cites certain indigenous writings like *lawani* (ballads), *powada* (panegyric poetry) and *tamasha* (folk dramas) which have lent their techniques and "radical newness" to hybridize the form of the Dalit novel in the world of literature. The resultant cross-breeding of Dalit fiction produces experimental writing which violates the conventions of mainstream literature and is "one of the engines of literary change and renewal" (Bray et al., 2012, pp. 1-2).

A meta-narrative of oppression and victimization, *Kusumabale* was serialized in a Kannada magazine in 1984 and later published in book form in 1988. Devanoora Mahadeva is a highly respected icon in the Kannada political and socio-cultural milieu, known for his outright and uncompromising pro-people and anti-establishment stand. Vivek Shanbhag (2015) says in his splendid 'Introduction' to the translation

under study, "For a man whose entire literary output is but a few hundred pages, the effect of Mahadeva's person and writing is unprecedented" (p. xxv). But with such radical narrative and writing style which limits further experimentation, Mahadeva could mime and repeat his technique or abandon this style. This explains his limited literary output. Along with Siddalingaiah, Mahadeva carried the onus of the Kannada Dalit literary movement on his shoulders with active participation in the Dalit Bandaya movement³.

Kusumabale presents the need for a new cultural politics to address the caste system through folk narratives. The novel in Kannada is dedicated to the memory of ancestor Male Maadeshwara, the central figure of a well-known oral epic highly revered by Dalits and other lower castes in Karnataka and not to Ambedkar or Phule. Like most of the Dalit novels that we have come across so far, this was also translated quite late by the Oxford University Press. The novel/novella was translated in 2015 exposing the glaring gaps in the prejudiced treatment meted out to Dalit fictions. Mahadeva radicalized the narrative by adopting a unique technique of mixing folklore and social reality and also breaking up of a linear narrative.

Radical Narration

Mahadeva's novel is rooted in the folk traditions and influenced by the egalitarian *Vachana* movement of twelfth century Karnataka initiated by Basava to eradicate discrimination on the basis of caste and gender. Mahadeva's language of narration and the language in which the story takes place is the same. It is written in a dialect spoken in parts of Nanjangudu and Chamarajanagar district thus questioning the hegemony of Mysurian Kannada in Karnataka. Besides the language of the text being complex, this politics of a standard hegemonized language is one of the prime reasons for the delayed translation of the text. Mahadeva's chosen language discusses the power politics that is at the core of bilingualism. As Pierre Bourdieu (1991) states power is exerted via language by the dominant force when the majority of the masses is unable to replicate the "ideal" language (p. 60). Thus the Dalit Bahujans here subvert and destabilize the Mysurian Kannada by their adoption of the Nanjangudu dialect.

The structure of the novel resembles a traditional folk narrative. Govindray Nayak, a Kannada critic, remarked that the novel's unique

style and narrative technique, probably not seen thus far, insisted on the need to overhaul the existing canonical critical tool to dissect the text (cited in Shanbhag xxii). Mahadeva breaks the mould of European realism and calls it *kathakava* or narrative verse, dissolving the difference between prose and verse. The use of the language is very different from the language of realist novels. While debating on the form of this classic cult text in *The Flaming Feet*, D.R. Nagaraj (2010), a cultural critic, asserts that by refusing to adhere to the tenets of realism and by adopting the Kathakava tradition, Mahadeva refuses to be a slave to the literary consumerism hinging on capitalism.

With a non-linear narrative structure and very few actions directly occurring in the text, the tone of the novel is more reflexive and meditative. Mahadeva subtly satirizes the caste society. Channa, a young Dalit is murdered at the beginning of the story by the upper caste. And yet, as the novelist writes there is occasional laughter and mirth as if Dalit lives do not matter. Instead of accusing the upper castes of the oppression meted out to the lower castes, Mahadeva uses a self-reflexive tone to let the readers ponder over the social inequalities. It breaks the dichotomy of oppressor and the oppressed. Mahadeva employs a diegetic mode of narration with multiple narrating voices populating the text. Animate as well as inanimate characters talk about their lives. Fabular elements are noticed through the characters of *Jothammas* (the lamp spirits), bedstead, the personified Worry and Fate as they strengthen the narrative structure. In fact the narrative of *Kusumabale* forces the reader to rethink the socio-political compulsions behind the creation of such a work, with its unique deployment of language and narrative. Engaging with *Kusumabale* requires a certain sensibility as it tries to build a new world and a worldview which was totally alien to the Kannada reading public. The fractured narration provides no easy way of reading this text. But perhaps it also reminds us of the oppressed communities (the Holeyas here) whose voices are robbed or fractured by the elite, upper caste modes of narration.

The narrative is further splintered with the use of humour that occasionally seems to trip the flow. This is most evident in the narration of the encounter between Channa and his Brahmin teacher Madhavacharya. Mahadeva emphasizes the difference in their spoken language, with the teacher attaching an 'aha' at the end of every sentence, in a parody of his Sanskritized Mysurian Kannada, while Channa struggles not to get

his 'sha' and 'sa' mixed up (Mahadeva, 2015, p. 79). This episode also further highlights the hierarchical caste relationship between Channa and Madhavacharya where Channa tries to hide from Madhavacharya as he would have to pay the master's bus fares out of his scanty funds. Though the guru attempts to present himself as a secular Brahman—a paradoxical term in itself—who has taught an untouchable pupil like Channa, his hypocrisy is revealed when he asks his student to find a suitable match for his daughter Bhagavathy, where suitable undeniably means belonging to the same caste. The character of Madhavacharya is lampooned to highlight the caste superiority clasp by the upper castes even in the face of poverty. He justifies his old age that does not permit him to engage in inter-caste relations as it would require him to frequently cleanse and purify himself with those ritual cold water baths.

Multiple narratives are woven intricately through the fabric of *Kusumabale*. It presents the images of a village and not an entire community. It enables the readers to reflect who is at the margin and who is at the centre stage of the narrative and more importantly who determines these discourses of power. There are stories of Garesidda's transgression to consume sixteen coconuts from an upper caste house, stories of bonded labour which Channa's parents risk to visit their son, story of miscegenation, birth of Kusuma's child and death of Channa. Anti-caste intellectuals, time and again, have reiterated that inter-caste relationships can only destroy the caste system. A similar stance has been revealed here through the relationship of Kusuma and Channa which is like an *ur* text which signifies the atrocities meted out against Dalits (Sreedhara, 2019). And here also it ends in a gruesome murder. Mahadeva does not engage much in the relationship between Channa and Kusuma. He presents their union, in a matter-of-fact way, as forbidden. He focuses on the consequences of such a union between an upper caste female and a lower caste man. This union has been historically disapproved to chastise women's sexuality and this gave rise to the notion of purity and pollution denying the Dalits access to social prestige and power. They were also given polluting menial tasks to further decry them in the caste hierarchy and thus the Brahmanical theory of purity and pollution acted as an ideological tool to perpetually place them in a depressed state.

Personal is Political

The caste system is challenged both at the personal as well as the political

realm. It is personal as Channa sleeps with Kusuma and political due to the existing activists of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (hereafter mentioned as DSS) who protest against his murder. Identities are socially constructed which signify a specific power play which thrives on differences. Dalit identities in particular had been established in retaliation to the 'otherization' of certain communities by the upper castes. In the early 1970s Karnataka, DSS emerged as one of the foremost organized forms of the Dalit movement for the empowerment of Dalits. Social identities being fluid in nature, DSS ensured to arouse self-consciousness among the Dalits in Karnataka. In an event organized in the University of Mysore, B. Basavalingappa, a dynamic Dalit state minister at that time, made a public remark saying that all Kannada literature was just '*boosa*' (cattle fodder) (Siddalingaiah, 2006, p. 95). By this, he was making a critical reference to the fact that mainstream Kannada literature was so dominated by savarna voices and savarna ideologies that it culminated in nothing but unimaginative works that sustained all the inequities of society. But the so-called upper castes galvanized linguistic chauvinistic hate against Basavalingappa and eventually de-platformed him from his ministry. Hate against Basavalingappa also poured over as casteist attacks on Dalit communities, especially on Dalit students. It is in this background that the DSS was formed.

Devanoora Mahadeva had played a critical role in shaping DSS into a powerful socio-political force. But later he was critical of the role played by DSS. The activists were engaged in their own ideological framework but not with the lived realities of Dalit lives. The most pungent of this criticism emerges when Uncle Garesidda, an extremely spirited and talkative character, meets the Communist doctor who had come from the city to participate in the DSS programme of protesting against Channa's murder. Garesidda asks: "'And what was that you said in your speech last night? Couldn't catch the first or the last of it, doctor!' The doctor now put on a serious look and with no *ahaha* to go before, 'I was pointing to ... the contradiction...' he said..." (Mahadeva, 2015, p. 103).

Channa's murder is revealed at the beginning of the text. The diegetic narrator employs folkloric retellings and not the realistic portrayal of what happened to him. The spirit of subversion in Channa is noted whenever he appears in the narrative. In fact, social change for Channa refers to violating the established caste norms and not necessarily traversing to a different terrain of caste and class. In doing so, Channa

fell in love with the upper caste Kusuma and a child is born out of their union. He takes charge of his own name and changes it to Channarasa, meaning Channa the king. In a time when Dalits still find it difficult to sport a moustache (symbolic of masculinity), Channa grows one and makes a political statement. We also find him educating himself in English as he holds an English newspaper at the bus stop when he meets his teacher. Educating oneself is a potential weapon to emancipate oneself from oppression. By providing himself with English education, Channa poses a challenge to the historical power wielded by the upper castes where they had monopolized education.

A clarion call against bonded labour was given by the Dalit Sangh as they poured into the Mari temple. When the protestors gathered in front of the Mari temple, they forced Kuriyaiah to wear the Male Madhadeswara costume; he was covered in ragged blankets with bidi stubs all round him. Through Kuriyaiah's attire the idea of revolution is ushered in the novel. The iconic symbol is the portrait of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Before they began the march against the hegemonies, Kuriyaiah bowed in front of the portrait of Dr. Ambedkar which symbolizes his victory over all the obstacles as a Dalit and it inspired them to triumph over the hegemonic exploitation of the Brahmanical Hinduism. The march which was initiated by Kuriyaiah succeeded in arousing the collective consciousness of the Dalits. But Dalit activists in *Kusumabale* are amused and annoyed by Kuriyaiah's worldview. As D.R. Nagaraj (2010) points out:

Kuriyaiah traces the problem of hurt egos, in this instance social or caste ego, as the root of the conflict between caste Hindus and untouchables, through a story about Dalits kidnapping upper caste women and living with them merrily in some mythical past. He thus explains the deep-rooted hatred that has poisoned the relationship between these communities. Being an untouchable himself, Kuriyaiah refuses to take sides. He says both the communities are at fault, thus rejecting the notion of ego itself, be it collective or individual (p. 240).

In *Kusumabale*, a Dalit activist Nagaraju rightly argues that only the police and court of law are competent authorities to take suitable action in relation to crime. This was in context of Garesidda stealing coconuts when the entire caste Hindu society was waiting to pounce on him. Garesidda's subversive act and his cunning calculations surprise Nagaraju as well as the readers of the story. Expectedly, caste Hindus go

wild when they hear the sober and intelligent argument of the activist, but they are helpless to counter him. In the feudal set up of a village, the upper castes have discharged the functions of both police and court of law for centuries without facing any sort of institutional challenge and hence they were furious. And because they possessed socio-economic power, their fury quickly escalates to violence—in this case they flog Garesidda.

Realism and Dalit Fiction

Recent studies by critics like Laura Brueck (2014) and Toral Jatin Gajarawala (2013)⁴ have established that Dalit writers have not accepted realism in its Western form but have instead critically engaged with this mode of writing. Mimesis, as a crucial linchpin in realism, has failed in portraying Dalit experiences. Gajarawala (2013) argues that Dalit literature forms part of the lineage of social realism but Dalit writers revise the history of realism on how it has failed to represent the marginalized characters thus creating the genre of neo-social realism.

The form of *Kusumabale* is a challenge to realism. The novel begins with a congregation of Jothammas at a time when stone melts in water. Jothammas belong to different castes: from headman's house to Brahmans to fishermen to untouchables, showing multiple viewpoints. An articulate Jothamma from the Untouchable Street curbs the authoritarian voice of the headman's house, Jothamma setting the tone of the novel. An innate sense of justice is perceived in their conversation. At the end of the novel, one of the spirits (of the fisherman's house) enters the body of Kuriyiah making him speak the truth. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (2013) mentions in the article "The Elusive Peacock: Devanoora Mahadeva and Dalit Imagination" that when mainstream Dalits engaged with realism and straightforward storytelling and documentation in an aesthetic manner, Mahadeva in his writings complicates that creative project by re-imagining realism in a novel way. Mahadeva blends the political and the aesthetic but seems to lay greater emphasis on the aesthetic starkly departing from the hyperrealist Dalit writings. Mahadeva's presentation of Dalit cosmologies in a magic realist fantastical world employing folk aesthetics heralded a new age in modern Kannada literature.

In his discussion on the novel, D.R. Nagaraj (2010) states that realist novels have failed to depict the plight of the lower castes. He further

adds, "The life of untouchables and other lower castes—in a total sense—has always remained outside the patterns of realism... Realism can be said to transform history into fiction. In fact, the realist novel is even seen as a fictional strategy to appropriate a form of history..." (p. 229). A cot here narrates its life-story telling the decadence of the family to which it belongs. Similarly, a home lamp assumes the form of a human being and comments on the events of the day. So, while realist novels somehow restrict the scope of narrative, Mahadeva uses several techniques to throw light on Dalit realism and sensibility.

Asserting Dalit Individuality

Deriving from Ambedkar's ideas, Baburao Bagul (1992) suggests that Dalit literature is nothing but human literature. This formulation is significant as this elaborates the meaning of Dalit as "human" and counter-poses this category which accords "human" to Hindu (p.289). As K. Satyanarayana (2019) lucidly observes, "the Dalit is a self-conscious, autonomous, and assertive individual (the Ambedkarite hero, if you like) who rejects his or her fatalist existence with its demeaning names, occupations, and practices and demands self-respect, equality, and freedom. The new identity—Dalit—offers a positive self-definition and rejects stigmatized, dehumanized, and humiliating identities" (p. 14). This stand is clearly seen in the figure of Channa who we see changes his name and aspires for a social change.

Dalit fiction is a product of radical protest laying bare the structural inequality. It is a process of transcription and recovery. The involvement of self-reflexivity overcomes the ideological and aesthetic constraints of realism. The difference of power and the absence of public space for Dalits have led to increased identity assertion by Dalits (here, by wielding the pen), and collective action has increased political consciousness among Dalit communities, amongst other developments such as the assertion of equality. D. R. Nagaraj (2010) argues for a reassessment of folk art as both a form of subaltern art and a resource for contemporary Dalit art and literature: "Folk epics . . . are necessarily the creation of subaltern communities [that] are never canonized in the history and theories of Indian literature" (p. 190). This calls for a de-hierarchization of Indian literature that enables Dalit literature to find a legitimate space within Indian literature. Such a legitimation would also facilitate an appreciation of the way Dalit fiction incorporate innovative mixes of genres and

traditional forms that challenge the aesthetics of mainstream literature. To conclude, *Kusumabale* presents a vibrant tapestry of the human condition and Dalit exploitation. The contribution of modern Dalit literature is to retrieve the human figure by reconfiguring modernity which Mahadeva ably justifies in his work. In this sense, Dalit literature is anti-establishment and it is capable of shaping a new India. The most noteworthy aspect of Devanoora's achievement is his attempt to realize the scope and intent of a myth within the structural possibilities of a novel. He does not reject the modernist aspect of the novel but attempts to reconfigure it. A definitive way of enhancing the self-respect of humiliated communities like the Dalits is to revitalize their cultural forms and this has been appropriately done by Mahadeva.

Endnotes

1. The term Dalit means ground down and broken to pieces in Marathi and is a pseudonym that Dalits adopted in the twentieth century. See Rao.
2. This includes the states of Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan.
3. The Bandaya movement is a progressive literary movement in Kannada started by D.R. Nagaraj and Shudra Shrinivas in 1974. It promoted socially committed literature and sought to make poetry a weapon against socio-economic injustice.
4. Toral Jatin Gajarawala argues that "[t]here is no doubt that Dalit literature is infused with a radical newness and is quite literally unlike anything lettered before" (p. 198).

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