



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & REVIEWS

journal homepage: www.ijmrr.online/index.php/home



Myth-based Literature to Strike at the Prevailing Cultural Hegemony

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Keyword

dalit, hegemony, myths,
organic dalit writers,
Bahujans, aesthetics,
propaganda

Abstract

With the rise of the dalit consciousness, that has so far been consciously kept muted through the authoritative hold over cultural hegemony, as emanating from the religious ambience, in which the dalits have been operating for the last thousands of years, the dalits writings of both the non-dalit and dalit writers have started recreating the myths upon which the prevailing brahminical or Hindu religion is supposed to operate. Whereas, the non-dalit writers like Neelakantan may have the tendency only to show the potentiality of interpreting the primary myths like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the context of caste and merely to cater to the popular demand of the readers, keeping in mind basically their economic interest, the organic dalit writers are in a mood to expose the hidden agenda of subjugating the Bahujans with the hegemony of the myths upon which the prevailing religion is based. Hence, the first category of writers consciously inculcates literary aesthetics and the propaganda comes in-between, the second category of writers consciously effects propaganda, the aesthetics come, if any, in-between; but, both, unconsciously or consciously, strike at the myth-based cultural hegemony of the privileged castes that may lead to the realisation of political hegemony of the Bahujans

One statement of B. R. Ambedkar, that is so popular among the Dalit writers and activists is “Political power is the master key using which you can open all the doors of your progress and self-respect” (<https://drambedkarbooks.com/tag/babasaheb/>). Again, from his vast study of the world history he has emphatically illustrated that “political revolutions have always been preceded by social and religious revolutions” (Ambedkar224). He has shown how the religious reformation of Luther played the role of the precursor of the political emancipation of the European people. Puritanism also caused American independence. Religious revolution started by Prophet Muhammad preceded the emergence of the Arabs as a political power. According to Ambedkar even India has realised the same experience. Religious and social revolution of the Buddha preceded the political revolution of Chandragupta. The political revolution of Shivaji was preceded by the religious and social reforms brought about by the saints of Maharashtra. Socio-religious revolution of Guru Nanak led to the political revolution of the Sikhs. Ambedkar has also shown the fact that the class or castes of the individuals of the ruling political party or conglomerate enjoys the cultural hegemony in turn. Though the majority of the population belongs to the Bahujans (SC/ST/OBC) the so-called upper caste people control the ruling roost in India—either in the centre or in the states. There is a popular perception among the Bahujans that the upper caste people belong to the Aryan race and the Bahujans are the indigenous Indians. The discourse reflects the idea of Nirad C. Chaudhuri according to whom the Aryans and not the

British people are the real colonizers of India. According to Chaudhuri we actually confuse imperialism with colonialism. Imperialists do come to a certain country, expand their empire and rule the subjugated country for a certain period of time and leave the country to its own fate. On the other hand, “Colonization is the settlement of foreign people in a country which had a truly national population, at times resulting in the total disappearance of the native population, at others in reducing it to a servile class” (Chaudhuri 57). He means to say, the privileged caste people of India belong to the Aryan race and they have been enjoying political hegemony in India.

The question is how the minuscule privileged caste people can enjoy the authoritative position in the ruling system over the majority Bahujans. Throughout India the Bahujans are deprived of the constitutional provisions concerning education, employment or other such areas where they remain almost invisible though they share the majority of the Indian population. It is due to the kind of religious culture in which they are born and brought up. They are made to believe that the upper caste people have the shastric (scriptural) sanction to enjoy authority over them. The target people can not proceed due to their mooring in this belief system that can be observed in Lakha, the father of Bakha, the untouchable protagonist in Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Untouchable*. Throughout the day he faces several incidents of caste oppression. But, Lakha is more concerned to know if Bakha has somehow dishonoured anyone of the caste Hindus. He says, “We must realize that it is religion which prevents them [caste Hindus] from touching us” (Anand 83). That means the oppressors and the side of the oppressed, as represented by Lakha, take the religious sanction of untouchability as granted. Studying this attitude of the Hindus Ambedkar quite categorically states, “They [Hindus] observe caste because they are deeply religious. ... the enemy you must grapple with is ... the shastras which teach them this religion of caste. ... The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras” (Ambedkar 286-7). Hence, if the objective is to annihilate caste to annihilate brahminical hegemony— cultural or political— then one should start with the annihilation of the sanctity of the shastras giving sanction to casteism. And, that is what is done by several writers of the 21st Century. The writers have tried to reconstruct and recreate myths to deal with casteism and its subsequent annihilation to realize ultimately the annihilation of the brahmanical hegemony.

Categorization of the caste-based literature, popularly known as dalit literature, can be made under two major headings: i. those wanting to annihilate caste but not negating the concerned religion itself; and ii. those seeking annihilation of caste along with the annihilation of the concerned religion itself that supports, rather propagates it. The first category of writings come from the hands of the non-dalit writers or the writers belonging to the hierarchy of upper caste having sympathetically or empathetically studied the issue of casteism. The sample novels, written by the non-dalit writers, dealing with casteism, include Anand Neelakantan’s *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished: The Story of Ravana and His People* (2012), henceforth to be referred to as *Asura*, Ajaya: *Book 1: Roll of the Dice [Epic of the Kaurava Clan]* (2013), henceforth to be referred to as *AI*, *Ajaya, Book II Rise of Kali [Duryodhana's Mahabharata]* (2015), henceforth to be referred to as *AII*; whereas the second category of writings selected here for analysis consists of some poems in translation of Gujarati and Marathi organic dalit poets.

In the first category, the selected novels are based on the two Indian primary epics— the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. And, the motif of casteism runs through all the novels. It is not that the novels directly recommend the annihilation of caste for the betterment of the society. But the ways through which the issue of casteism is raised, the context of casteism against which the protagonists or other characters are judged speak of the problem of casteism and its axiomatic abolition or annihilation. The characters are delineated against the stance they take regarding their attitude casteism. Even popular interpretations of the texts get jolted here due to the fact that the kind of religious sublimity or humility attached with the central characters of the epics gets dispelled in the novels.

Contribution towards raising the consciousness to hit at the hegemony of the caste Hindus, hitting at the shastric sanctity has been started since the second half of the 19th century. Jyotirao Phule’s *Ghulamgiri* (1885), writings and speeches of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar can be considered to be pioneers in this regard. Among the non-dalit writers Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s *MeghnadBadhKavya* (1860) though went against the prevailing myth-based belief-system his primary objective was not to hit at the prevailing caste system. At present some non-dalit writers have paid special attention to this aspect though it is not clear if their main objective is get the caste system annihilated to hit at the hegemony of the privileged castes or merely to provide the readers with some startling themes flooding social domain. It is true that these writers have turned upside down the

images of the iconic characters like Rama, Krishna, the Pandava brothers, including Yudhishtira, the honesty or religion incarnate, etc. On the other hands, the antagonists like Ravana, Duryodhana and other such characters are raised to the platform of the protagonists. Again, the minor and insignificant characters like Karna, Shambuka, Ekalavya, etc. have been presented as protagonists.

To start with Anand Neelakantan's novels the very fact that has to be kept in mind is that the writer belongs to a Keralite pious Brahmin family. But, what is said about his second book, that is, *Ajaya: Book I (AI)*, that 'It is the narrative of the Others' (AI 8), the same can be said of his first book *Asura* where Rama may be seen as a God but Ravana is portrayed as a complete human being with common human virtues and follies. In fact, it is the declared objective of the writer to have "felt an empathy for the vanquished [Ravana, Duryodhana and the likes] and wished to present their sides as well" (AII 513). What strikes the readers regarding Neelakantan is the fact that this is possibly for the first time that the epic is being interpreted in the context of casteism. In the present novel we see Ravana to be feeling proud to be an Asura, a community, topping the list of Scheduled Tribes in India though ignominy has been inflicted upon the Asura community with the propagation of worshiping Durga. We see Ravana to be stating with pride about "the Asura tribe that once-mighty race which built the greatest civilization the earth has known till now, ..." (*Asura* 37). The fact that stuns us is to see that there is no concept of caste in the reign of Ravana and the concept intrudes into his reign with the joint efforts of Vibhishana and Rama. Here Golden Lanka actually symbolises affluent, prosperous and happy Sri Lanka. Ravana feels proud to be a descendant of the greatest Asura emperor Mahabali and he wishes to be a "benevolent ruler [like Mahabali] who would bring prosperity and happiness to his subjects" (*Asura* 167). "Mahabali ruled with flourish and Asura art and music reached its peak" (*Asura* 31) and "It has also been shown how this great empire of Mahabali, that becomes the "hotbed of conspiracy and court intrigue" (*Asura* 28) after the intrusion of Vishnu and other devas and their brahminical customs. Ravana claims himself to be also the descendant of the great Asura emperors like the famous twin brothers Hiranya and Hiranyaksha and many such great Asuras. Whereas, the Hindus usually have a pious attitude towards Mithila, where, Sita, the great consort of Rama, is born, is portrayed so miserably through the eyes of Ravana who invades the country. We see him to be stating with much hatred the fact that "There were only wrinkled Brahmins who terrorised the people and followed a rigid caste system" (*Asura* 214). Worse is expressed concerning Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama. It is shown how the social condition is affected with the severity of casteism. We see the old king Anarnya abusing Ravana and his mother as outcaste and untouchable. Ayodhya is portrayed as one of the most underdeveloped kingdoms where the condition of the streets and roads as well as that of the whole condition of the subjects are so miserable. Added to this negative sides of the devas, to which Anarnya, Dasaratha and naturally Rama belong, we see the killing of innocent Shambuka along with the horrible form of casteism affecting the social relationship of Ayodhya, under the rule of Rama. On the contrary, we see the caste-free affluent Sri Lankan society to be affected with the insertion of Deva customs, replacing Asur customs under the active patronage of Vibhishana. To attract people Vibhishana undoubtedly did some welfare activities, along with it, he "brought some Brahmins and slowly, these people began to introduce the wretched Deva tradition of the caste system" (*Asura* 260). In fact, the myth of the Ramayana has been reconstructed in the context of caste system. Ravana is feeling proud to be belonging to the Asur community that is shown as the devil incarnate with the portrayal of Mahishasur. And, Ravana's claim stands verified with the portrayal of the glorious sides of the Asura emperors and the dismal portrayal of the places affected with deva customs. Rama, the spiritual icon of the Hindus, has been portrayed as "putty in the hands of the priests" (*Asura* 494) having no autonomous self. On the other hand, Ravana has been portrayed as one "self-willed and unorthodox", living on his own terms. And, according to the narrator, "The Ravana of the world are dangerous to those who wish to use the scriptures for their own purposes and lord over others, exploiting them" (*Asura* 494). Thus, the objective of the writer is to turn upside down the version of the concerned myth in the context of casteism and it is enough to hit at the hegemony of the so-called upper caste people though his main objective may only be to expose the caste-centric interpretation of the myth.

The Mahabharata-based novels of Neelakantan— *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan, Book I* and *Rise of Kali: Duryodhana's Mahabharata, Ajaya Book II*—follow the same tradition of role reversal. Like Ravana Duryodhana, another evil incarnate in the eyes of the devout Hindus, is portrayed as a human being of flesh and blood relating to his attitude to caste. In fact, to draw special attention of the readers Duryodhana has been rechristened as Suyodhana. It is claimed that due to his total disregard of caste, the Brahmins who created caste and his positive attitude towards merit, as shown to Karna and Ekalavya, the Brahmins of the side of the

Pandava brothers and Krishna himself propagandise his name as Duryodhana. We see Yudhishtira, the dharma incarnate, Arjun, one of the greatest kshatriyas, Krishna, etc. to be getting involved in inhuman and immoral activities. In fact, the first shock comes to us when we see Duryodhana to be the central character and being addressed as Suyodhana. We see Vidhura, the younger brother of Dhritarashtra, sired by Vedavyasa, but born in the womb of one lowly maid servant, to be considered and humiliated by Bhima as Shudra not deserving interaction with the Kshatriyas like him which Duryodhana can not take for granted (AI 22). The Grand Regent Bhishma proposes the name of Vidhura as the Prime Minister of Hastinapur and this proposal is resented at by the Brahmin Dhaumya due to Vidhura's caste though he is a renowned scholar and a gentleman. We see Duryodhana to be protesting against the perception of Dhaumya. According to him, if Vidhura is a Shudra then everyone of the Kaurava dynasty are Shudras as the grandma of the present king Dhritarashtra, Satyawathi, was a lowly fisherwoman. We see the Brahmins obstructing Vidhura from quoting from the Vedas as Vidhura, as a Shudra, is not supposed to be eligible to study the Vedas (AI/24-5). Like Rama Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna and Krishna also are seen to be putties in the hands of the Brahmins, and on the other hand, initially Bhishma and then Duryodhana are seen to be declaring, as if, jihad against Brahmins and their creation, caste, and Duryodhana's declaration is reflected in his enthroning Karna, a Shudra, as the King of Anga and providing Ekalavya, an untouchable, with physical and social rehabilitation after he loses his thumb to Drona who denied to accept Ekalavya as his disciple. We also see Drona to be discussing with Bhishma regarding this type of "blatant violations of the caste rules" (AI/35).

In the second volume of the novel also we see the continuation of the same attitudes towards caste. We see the casteist mentality of the Brahmin Parashurama by the side of the liberal attitude towards caste as posed by the Brahmin Kripa, brother-in-law of Drona, and by Carvaka, a propagator of materialism. By the side of the extreme form of immorality as shown in getting Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Duryodhana and other individuals of the Kaurava side killed by the Pandava brothers and Krishna we see the generosity of Karna, regret of Duryodhana to see Ekalavya killed by Krishna as Ekalavya tries his best to trace Samba, Krishna's libidinous son and kill him as Samba has kidnapped Suyodhana's daughter whom Ekalavya loves as his own daughter. Later, when there is a riot in Dwarka 'between Samba's [Krishna's son] thugs and Kritavarma's loyal soldiers' (AII 485), we see Krishna to be regretting killing Ekalavya instead of killing his bawdy son Samba. And, still later even Krishna, the supposed rescuer of his devotees, leaves the city handing over the security of his wives and servants to one old soldier. Arjuna decides to return to Hastinapura to provide the procession of Krishna's wives with much needed security. Now, he is attacked by Durjaya and the Nagas, the victims of caste. Arjuna is hit by Durjaya with the Gandiva, the great bow of Arjuna. Arjuna loses consciousness. All the valuables of the chariot and also the wives of Krishna are looted by Durjaya and his men.

The appreciation of Duryodhana attains perfection with the complements from his two most front running opponents—Yudhishtira and Krishna. The realization dawns on Yudhishtira that instead of living a life of autonomy he has tried merely to please others—his mother, brothers, Krishna and, most regrettable for him to remember, the Brahmins/priests. He says, "I wish I had lived like Suyodhana, listening to my heart" (AII 493). Krishna also regrets his own action and appreciates the autonomy of the self as enjoyed by Duryodhana. Krishna, when he is unable to protect his own city Dwarka from destruction bemoans his own artificial stature that he has built up so meticulously with the aid of the priest class who are against the prevalence of equality among human beings. Now, he feels "I should have aimed my chakra at Dhaumya's throat, but alas, I pointed at Suyodhana's thigh for Bhima to crack ..." (AII 491). Such an appreciation from one of the most iconic deities of the concerned religion gives perfection to the projection of Suyodhana, a projection that goes against the popular concept of the concerned religion or scriptural sanctity.

The same kind of tendency of portraying popular characters or the minor characters of the myths in a unique way also can be seen in the Mukunda Rao's *Shambuka Rama: Three Tales Retold* (2018), Sara Joseph's *The Vigil* (2014) or in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) by Kavita Kane. These are all from the hands of the non-dalit writers. Apparently such writings appear to be hitting at the brahminical hegemony. But, ultimately they do all these things with a parallel ambience of scriptural religiosity with the characters like Ravana, Duryodhana, Shambuka or Karna having their moorings in such an ambience.

But, in the second category of writers, having direct experience of what a horrible thing casteism is, one can observe the direct challenge against the concerned religion and its patronizing scriptures to realise hegemonic authority over brahmanism. Though such literature basically belongs to the genre of autobiography

there are some creative writings of such writers that centre round the brahminical myths only with the sole objective of pulling the target readers, the Bahunas (SC/ST/OBC), out of the hegemonic fold of brahmanism. In Gujrat, where “It was considered as an offence for a member of Dalit community to speak or use a cultured language of upper caste community” (*Gujarati*) such literature started emerging as the literature of anti-brahmanism. Pravin Gadhvi in his poem “Brainwash” has poked fun at the Brahmins as Bhudevas, i.e., the gods on earth, as stated in the brahminical myths. He also throws challenge at the “Meters of Valmiki, /Verses of Upanishadas, /The stanzas of Manusmriti” (*Gujarati*) on the basis of which mythical perception the Brahmins have been enjoying religious and social authority over those lying below them in the caste hierarchy. Here, direct challenge is thrown at the myth-based scriptures because it is realised that the Hindu scriptures and social structure prevent the Dalits from receiving education, training and knowledge. Hence, in his poem “Awakening” we see him to be submitting his rage against Manusmriti:

Let us incinerate with petrol,
 The corpses of several Manus,
 Who sealed our ears with lead,
 Sowed seeds of venom betwixt men. (*Gujarati*)

Against the insubstantial myth-based Hinduism Gadhvi has several poems in his anthology *A Sojourn from Margin to centre: A Comparative Study of Black and Dalit Poetry* (2010).

Neerav Patel has touched this issue in his long poem “Discarded Flowers”. Here he has expressed his extreme form of grievance against the myth-based brahminical scriptures glorifying one of the darkest sides of temple-culture— the custom of devdasi. The poetic persona states, “We are still for them /Children of devdasis- children of the temple prostitutes”. (*Gujarati*). In one of his poems Dalpat Chauhan, as if, lets out the catharsis of his bitter realisation of being born as a dalit where he addresses the God as the “god of hate” because the evil caste system is claimed to be created by the God and according to which Brahmins are placed higher and others are given lower status leading to social discrimination and associated oppression and humiliation. Shamat Parmar, on the other hand, in his poem “Self-Pride” feels proud to be born a dalit because, according to him,

If God...
 Had made me a Brahmin
 (According to the Varnashrama)
 I would have deceived the people
 By my appearance and
 False chanting of shlokas,

Same type of grudge is expressed against the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas due to their same tendency of deceiving those reaming below them in the caste hierarchy. That the annihilation of religion itself, based on myth, is the ultimate objective becomes quite clear from the emphatic declaration of the poet Harish Mangalam in his poem “I will Hang Him” — “if I happen to meet God, / I will .../ Hang him before the sun” (*Gujarati*).

Marathi Dalit literature also abounds in these types of attacks on the brahminical myth-based scriptures. Prakashchandra Karandikar in his “Amen” states the insubstantiality of worshipping Lord Ganesha, supposed to be the god fulfilling the desire of his devotees. The poet shows how, against the disastrous backdrop of not only India but also the whole world, thousands of death in the “Earthquake of Guatemala, disaster of Chasnala”, arrest of hundreds of beggars, inhuman rape of Harijan woman, suicide of the depressed and jobless youth, selling of children for subsistence and several such serious issues, though ironically stated as “Trivial”, “On the wall hangs Lord Ganesh/ remover of obstacles,/ ... God’s in His Heaven./ All’s right with the world” (Roy 89). If there is God at all the poem brings out the indifference and insensitivity of the God to the sufferings of the human beings.

Sharankumar Limbale is in favour of destroying the myth-based scriptures, patronising the caste system. In his poem “White Paper” the poetic persona states that he does not want the sun, the moon, the high houses or the mansions, the gods or the rituals, hells or heavens; he just wants his rights as a human being. And, he knows it very well that in his way of having access to that right the religious scriptures, nourishing

casteism and discrimination, will stand in his way. That is why he wants to “uproot the scriptures like railway tracks, / burn like a city bus your lawless laws” (Roy 28). Baburao Jagtap, in his poem “This Country Is Broken” also wants the annihilation of such a “heartless religion” that is responsible for the fragmentation of this country into “a thousand pieces; / its cities, its religion, its castes, / its people, and even the minds of the people” (Roy 62).

Thus, we see a sudden and sustaining uprising in the myth-based literature that is to deal with one of the most festering problems in India needing urgent and serious consideration from all concerned quarters. But, the difference between the two categories of writing, as discussed above, lies in the fact that though the non-dalit writers are in the mood of supporting the annihilation of caste, at least they pose an anti-caste attitude, they are not in the mood for the annihilation of the concerned religion giving casteism its much-needed religious sanction. On the other hand, the organic dalit writers are in a mood to annihilate the concerned myth-based scriptures and its related religion to bring the Bahujans out of the grapple of the monstrous caste system. May be, the first category of writers simply centres their recreated and restructured mythical narratives round the issue of caste responding to their sympathetic understanding of the horror of caste as suffered by the Bahujans. They may also just cater to the popular demand of the readers actually responding to their own economical instinct. But, the empirical and empathetic understanding of the organic dalit writers is prone to play a destructive role here. The bitter and horrible experience meted out to them as well as the people belonging to their community leads them to sincerely demand the annihilation of the religion itself within which they are to remain caged up though they are supposed to be belonging to the religion itself. Hence, added to their grudge against the hegemony of the Brahmins and the mythical scriptures scripted by them giving religious sanction to the said hegemony they want the religion itself to be annihilated to strike an ultimate blow against the cultural and subsequent political hegemony of the privileged castes, especially the Brahmins.

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