

Is Dalit Identity a Haunting Paranoia? - A Critical Study of *Nooru Simhasanangal***M. Lakshmi**, PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, St. Joseph's College, Devagiri, Calicut, India

Abstract: Dalits come under the 'other', or the 'marginalised' section of the society, eternally the subject of oppression and alienation from the other privileged section. Their literature, hence, is an expression of their sufferings, untouchability, poverty, stigma and also their hopes for an egalitarian society. "Dalit literature is the uprising of the written word against the millennia-old social injustice manifesting itself as brutalities committed on Dalits all over the country," said Sharankumar Limbale a Marathi author and literary critic. Dalit literature, according to him, aims at portraying the injustices that these oppressed sections of the society have been facing since ages. Dalit literature, hence, occupy a pivotal position in the current Indian literature scenario. *Oru Nooru Simhasanangal* by B. Jeyamohan, tells the story of Dharmapaalan, an IAS officer, who belongs to the oppressed Naayaadi community. The author, a renowned figure in Tamil and Malayalam literature, reveals the social injustice prevalent in our society through the experiences of the protagonist. This is a painfully truthful narration of Dharmapaalan's life after he attains a position that holds power – how the society, his mother, and his own psyche haunt him. This paper aims at analyzing the pains and sufferings of Dalit existence juxtaposed with the current social milieu with suggestions for their upliftment.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Jeyamohan, Tamil Writers, *Oru Nooru Simhasanangal*, Marginalization, Outcaste, Oppression

"Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind," said B. R. Ambedkar, the Indian jurist and social reformer. Oppression and marginalization seems universal, varying only in intensity and modus operandi. The subject of oppression is race in the western world, but caste in India. Caste is one form of social stratification, in fact, a rigid one, whereby people are classified into different categories where some are considered pure while some others are considered impure. "Untouchability" is an idea that lies at the core of the caste system. In the hierarchical order of the caste system, we have Brahmins at the top, followed by Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The 'untouchables' or the 'dalits' lie outside this hierarchical framework.

The word 'Dalit', which was popularized by B. R. Ambedkar, comes from the Sanskrit word 'dal-', which means 'oppressed' or 'broken'. The term commonly refers to the castes in India that have been considered untouchable. From time immemorial caste is always associated with the occupation each section of society pursue, and the term 'dalit' applies to those who occupy the lower strata because of the stigma associated with their traditional occupations. While talking about caste in the twentieth century, we witness various approaches towards it like rituals, traditions and religion. But the most important areas that are talked about in relation to caste are those of 'power' and 'politics'.

Dalits come under the 'other' or the marginalized sections of the society, eternally the subject of oppression and alienation from the other privileged sections. The major leaders of our nation were openly critical of this practice of oppression and argued that this should have no place in our democratic country. "The outcaste is a by product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system," said B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar, here, was expressing his deep felt contempt towards the caste system and the resulting oppression and marginalization in our society. He belonged to a so-called backward class and having had suffered all these atrocities against the Other, he tried to promote education among the untouchables and uplift them. The welfare of the outcastes was one of his major concerns.

Dalit perspectives have been gaining recognition over the last few decades. Their literature, hence, is an expression of their sufferings, untouchability, poverty, stigma and also their hopes for an egalitarian society. "Dalit literature is the uprising of the written word against the millennia-old social injustice manifesting itself as brutalities committed on Dalits all over the country," said Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi author and literary critic. Dalit literature, according to him, aims at portraying the injustices that these oppressed sections of the society have been facing since ages. Dalit literature, hence occupy a pivotal position in the current literature scenario. Having its beginnings in the late nineties in Marathi, it soon spread to other languages as well, and hold stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. Dalit literature began to be recognized as an important area of literary activity when translations of Dalit writings began to appear in foreign languages. Today Dalit literature is an important and distinct part of Indian literature. As Arundhati Roy has said, it is as important for Dalits to tell their stories as it has been for the colonized to write their histories. The growth of Dalit literature arises out of the need for creating an identity for themselves.

B. Jeyamohan is a Tamil and Malayalam writer and literary critic from Tamil Nadu. His novel *Nooru Simhasanangal* (2013) tells the story of Dharmapaalan, an IAS officer, who belongs to the Naayaadi community. This is a painfully truthful narrative of Dharmapaalan's life after he attains a position that holds power- how the society, his own mother, and his own psyche haunt him. The novel brings to us horrifying images of social injustice that is prevalent in our society through the experiences of the protagonist.

The name “Naayaadi” comes from the word ‘nayattu’ meaning ‘hunting’. The members of this community, who were once skilled hunters, are, today, known as scavengers and beggars. They belong to the Dalit community, and until recent times, they weren’t even allowed to share roads with the so-called upper caste people. They always belonged to the peripheries. In the novel, the author portrays the humiliations and othering that the protagonist has to face after having made a journey from the peripheries to the forefront. In the beginning sections of the novel we witness the inhumane ways in which the lower strata of our society is treated. The picture of the hospital where Dharmapalan’s mother is admitted, the words the authorities use to refer to the inmates there, the contempt with which they are looked at- all these images bring us to the reality that the conditions have not yet changed for the marginalized, even in the present scenario.

In the novel, we see a conversation between a doctor at the health centre where the protagonist’s mother has been admitted, and the protagonist Dharmapalan. The conversation throws light into the real condition of life of the backward classes of the society. The doctor who belongs to the community of the Scheduled Castes tells about the marginalization he faces in his profession. He says about how he has been denied promotions and how he has been made to do menial jobs by his senior authorities. He says, “it’s a nasty job, sir. Even if I put up a clinic, no one from the upper class communities would be willing to seek medical care there; nor the financially stable ones from our communities. Considering my educational qualifications, I would attain a better life anywhere in the world, but here.” To this, Dharmapalan replies, “...the situation is not any different for me...” Here we see that the doctor is a victim of double marginalization- marginalized for his caste, and for his economic background. Because of the lack of his financial stability, he is denied even the privileges that the others of his community enjoy. He says how his dreams of being a successful doctor were stamped to dirt by the society. Dharmapalan says that the condition is not any different for him. It is a prevailing social situation that Jeyamohan is pointing his finger to. Through the words of these two characters we see the real, ugly face of caste based stratification that is existing in our society. Though the leaders of our nation have tried to promote education among the downtrodden and to uplift them, it is a harsh reality that they still belong to where they originally belonged.

The protagonist Dharmapalan recalls a question that has been thrown at him in the Civil Services interview : “If you were to pronounce the judgement on a case where you have to decide between justice and a Nayadi, who would you favour?” He answers this saying that, “Dharma forms the essence of justice. Any day, if I were to weigh between justice and a Nayadi, I would stand for the Nayadi for I believe that when equity is taken into consideration, a Nayadi will always be justified, no matter what. Because on the basis of Dharma, the very fact that he is a Nayadi makes him a victim of inequality and oppression.” This answer shows the intensity of oppression that these communities face. Here, the author is painting before us the real picture of our society. He explains to us, through his protagonist’s words, the horridness of caste-based discrimination.

Dharmapalan, meanwhile, aimed at achieving in life. Having been educated, he wins the Civil Service exam, and joins to serve the public thus aiming to eliminate the injustices prevailing in the society. But since the very first day, he faces oppression in his profession. At one point he calls himself ‘a scavenger’. The protagonist in the novel is an educated, cultured young man who is denied a common man’s privileges for he is born into a lower caste. This triggers the inferiority feeling in him. In the novel, at an instance, the protagonist tells how he relates himself to a rat- he says, the rat has its back naturally bent seeming like it is begging for a life. Here he is comparing the life of every outcaste to that of a rat begging for a life.

Dharmapalan’s mother is an important image in the novel. She is naked, uncivilized, uncultured, and without any pretensions. Men scare her; she tends to run away from everything that is civilized or cultured. She is everything that is not civilization. Many a times in the novel, the novelist has used images that describe her animal-like qualities – when she expresses her love by biting and licking her son’s cheeks, when she cries uncontrollably in front of the ashram, etc. The novelist has portrayed the character in such a way that the reader is, at many instances, left thinking of the mother as Dharmapalan’s own psyche. She is horrified at the fact that her son is moving away from his original life, that her son is wearing a shirt, that he is sitting on a chair, that he is living a man’s life. She keeps asking him to tear his shirt off and accompany her to the streets- where they are free and on their own. Him wearing a shirt horrifies her. She finds harmony and peace when naked and close to nature; civilized and cultured life away from nature frightens her. She asks him to accompany her to their real life- to the streets and sewages. There, she says, that she will take good care of him. She recognizes him with the scars on his body- the scars of beatings, wounds etc. The author is, here, trying to tell the reader how these scars of wounds and beatings turn out to be their marks of identity. That is, how oppression and injustices have turned out to be a defining factor of their selves. She keeps saying “Nayadiku ethukkeda kalasam? Unari idude... Nee thambran kasherayile iruppiyade? Ezhide makka.. konnudivarede!” She keeps reminding her son, and the reader, that the life of a Nayadi is not humanly. She is stubbornly clinging on to her uncivilized, barbaric life for civilizations and civilized human beings frighten her.

At many instances in the novel, the reader might witness Dharmapalan’s own psyche and his mother forming into one single whole. His mother is a human version of all his inner thoughts-the deeply engraved

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inferiority feelings. When she invites him and forces him to the streets, it is his own psyche that is pulling him back to his roots- where he has his own identity, where he is free, where he naked and uncivilized, where he is his own self! When she asks him to take his shirt off, and when she cries out in terror when she sees him sitting on a chair, it is his own inferiority complexes and fear of the privileged class that is talking. At one point in the novel, we mother to the streets and live as his own real self, as a real Nayadi – fearless and free.

The novel puts before us a real issue worth discussing. The trauma that the protagonist Dharmapalan goes through is not just his, but of all minority communities, all Dalits. Jeyamohan paints for the reader a horrifying image of oppression and injustice that is still existing in our society. Marx viewed caste as the source of India's social and economic stagnation. In the novel, though Dharmapalan acquires education and leads himself to a position that holds power, the social stigma and his inferiority feeling drag him down. He seems to have no escape from the strong hold of the Dalit emotion. The novel ends where Dharmapalan imbibes the reality that these feelings of insecurity is their within every Outcaste, and that cannot be eliminated with ease. Though our nation has taken many initiatives for the upliftment of the oppressed sections of the society, the people of these sections of the society haven't been brought into the forefront completely. While ideologically caste discrimination practices have been abolished by law, one cannot say that the atrocities against the Dalits have stopped. Jeyamohan, I must say, has been successful in portraying images of Dalit experiences in his work. The novel is an important piece of work in the area of Dalit writings by portraying the lives of the Dalit and the oppressed in their true colours.

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