



Dalit Assertion and Claiming selfhood in Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild*

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Abstract

Unlike Marathi Dalit literature, Gujarati Dalit writing was not born out of a larger political movement against the caste Hindus but as a response to the upper caste violent reaction to the reservation policy in 1981 and 1985. The resentment over providing reservations to Dalits culminated in creating hostile and acrimonious environment between upper caste Gujaratis and Dalits. Upper caste Hindus were afraid that educated Dalits would slowly but surely take over in every sector of public life and vehemently protested against the reservation policy. As a result of which, atrocities were inflicted on Dalits during both the agitations, which made them feel humiliated and victimized. However, the anti-reservation environment also provided congenial conditions for a unified Dalit literary movement, which till that point was disorganized. Subsequently, the educated Dalits were lead towards a quest for self-identity and exploring their own collective past by incorporating Dalit history, sociology and prose by Dalit writers and thus articulating a new Dalit discourse.

Joseph Macwan's *Angaliyat* or *The Stepchild* (1986) is the first Dalit novel to be written in any Indian language and with respect to Gujarati mainstream literature it marks a watershed moment as the Gujarati upper caste literati accused Dalit literature of lacking on aesthetical grounds and thereby succeeded in keeping Dalit literature out of canonizing processes as far as Gujarat was concerned. Moreover, the mainstream literature has always privileged the literary over immediate social and political concerns and lived realities of the people. Though Pannalal Patel had earlier portrayed the plight and predicament of rural peasants during the worst famine, Chhapaniyo, around 1899-1900 in his novel *Manvini Bhavai* (1947). However, as far as Dalit intellectuals were concerned, *The Stepchild*, was the first Dalit novel in Gujarati, written by a Dalit writer himself about weavers, a community of Dalits.

It is also interesting to note that the Vankar caste, occupationally weavers in a traditional sense, are not considered untouchable in other parts of India, were considered untouchable in Gujarat. In this regard, M.N. Srinivas observes in *Some Reflection on the Nature of Caste*

Hierarchy (1984) that scavenging dead cattle in the absence of Chamars (a tanner caste) in Gujarat's villages degraded them to the level of untouchables in the caste Hindu social order as the act is considered polluting or perhaps they used to measure clothes with the help of calfbones. The novel centers around the Vankar community and they are called 'Dheds' in a pejorative sense by the Patidars, referred to as powerful, dominant and oppressive caste in the novel. Historically, the term 'Dhed' was used as a catch-all phrase or an umbrella term to designate all lower castes as 'Dheds' (with the exception of Bhangis) by the caste Hindus. The Bhangis were considered lowest within the lower castes as they were traditionally associated with sweeping and other unclean menial jobs, which also suggests internal hierarchies within the Dalit communities. Etymologically the term 'Dhed' refers to uneducated, inherently inferior, unclean and impure. Addressing Dalits as 'Dheds' instead of using their names suggest an act of negation of their human identity by the upper castes. The term 'Dhed' has been termed legally offensive now and several cases have been registered by the educated Dalits under the Untouchability (offences) Act 1955 in rural and urban Gujarat. Moreover, in economic and numerical terms, the Vankars are the most powerful Dalit community. Rapid urbanization, education and high rate of conversion amongst the Vankar caste has contributed immensely to their social and economic upward mobility.

The discourse of Dalit writers is mainly centered on the caste question. The term Dalit etymologically means crushed and grinded, emblematic of their oppressed status which is reflective of the denial of basic human rights, that is access to natural or public resources, for instance, the right to drink water from a pond or well, to walk on roads, to choose one's occupation. The term Dalit literature assumed prominence in 1972, when a group of writer-activists from Maharashtra came together and were known as Dalit Panthers. The very name is emblematic of their feelings of solidarity and kinship with the Black Panthers, who offered a united front of opposition for the rights of African Americans in the United States. The term Dalit is a self-bestowed one rather than a forced appellation such as *panchamas*, *antyajas* or the term Harijan given by Mahatama Gandhi which was rejected by Dalits as patronizing. Later, Schedule Castes became the bureaucratic designation epitomizing the affirmative action taken by the government on behalf of the untouchables. Moreover, Dalit is a political identity, and not a caste category. It signifies being aware of their oppressed position as well as their collective struggle against the system that subjugates them.

However, unlike Marathi Dalit literature, Gujarati Dalit writing, was not born out of a larger political movement against the caste Hindus but as a response to the upper caste violent reaction to the reservation policy in 1981 and 1985. The resentment over providing reservations to Dalits culminated in creating hostile and acrimonious environment between upper caste Gujaratis and Dalits. Upper caste Hindus were afraid that educated Dalits would slowly but surely take over in every sector of public life and vehemently protested against the reservation policy. As a result of which, atrocities were inflicted on Dalits during both the agitations, which made them feel humiliated and victimized. However, the anti-reservation environment also provided congenial conditions for a unified Dalit literary movement, which till that point was disorganized. Subsequently, the educated Dalits were lead towards a quest for self-identity and exploring their

own collective past by incorporating Dalit history, sociology and prose by Dalit writers and thus articulating a new Dalit discourse exemplified by the first anthology of short stories which was published in 1987.

With the advent of short stories and novels, writers like Joseph Macwan portrayed rural culture through local dialects as that added to the authenticity of the experience articulated and thereby weaving together literary and folk elements of the language. Joseph Macwan a Dalit convert to Christianity, maintains that most of the central characters in the novel *The Stepchild* are drawn from his childhood experiences. In the beginning Dalit writers preferred the genre of autobiography as they laid more emphasis on the authenticity of lived experiences to lay bare the reality of Dalit life to non-Dalit readers. On the other hand, with the genre of novel the Dalit writers ran the risk of that effect being mitigated by its fictional nature. But novel unlike autobiography, is free of the intrusive reference to the self and also by raising the caste question in their novels, the Dalit writers are initiating a dialogue on the caste issues among the reading public as Dalit literature is a product of cultural conflict between the Dalits and non-Dalits. The novel *Stepchild* is a celebration of his land, his past and the rebellious spirit of his community in the face of inhuman and hostile socio-cultural and religious milieu.

The novel covers the period from 1935 to 1960, a period marked by changing socio-political dynamics, which are captured through ongoing conflicts between the dominant Patidar community and the oppressed Dalit Vankar community in Ratnapar, a small village in central Gujarat. The novel is based in rural Charotar, where the landed gentry Kanbi became the dominant Patidar community facilitated by acceleration in the process of modernization in the form of setting of textile mills in Gujarat in the mid-nineteenth century. But this modernization lead to unemployment, migration and further marginalization for the Vankar community as they were subjected to unpaid labor and humiliation suggesting no means of emancipation for Vankars whether they live in cities or in villages. Similarly, the novel also foregrounds the manner in which the members of the Patidar or Patel community appropriated Gandhi and participated in the nationalist activities to maintain the status quo before independence:

The Patels owned most of the lands, despite the fact that there were only twenty-five families in the village. [...] The Patels were also the ones providing funds for nationalist activities undertaken by the Congress and the Patel mukhi had joined in the movement for violating the Salt law. (*The Stepchild* 26)

The novel opens with two friends from the Vankar community, Valji and Teeha, who are as inseparable as “two bodies with a single soul” (*The Stepchild* 2). Teeha is portrayed as a ‘thinking subject’ as he refuses to feed the pallbearers after his mother’s death, a part of ceremonial ritual by stating that, “You will merely eat and forget. How will it benefit my poor dead parents?” (*The Stepchild* 3). Thereby, Teeha is able to deconstruct the myths of Hindu rituals. The novel also recounts how even during the time of natural calamities when everyone is extended a helping hand on humanitarian grounds, how some communities remain outside the pale of humanity as Teeha retorts to Valji:

My father used to tell me that when the floods came and our vas was submerged, it didn't matter to anybody. [...] This very Ranchod gave out medicine, food and clothes to other people. Your grandfather, my father, Dhana, Dhoola and mater of the vas visited him to beg for help; but he remained unmoved. (*The Stepchild* 10)

Subsequently, we are introduced to the prejudices inherent in the stratified and hierarchical caste Hindu society when Teeha and Valji visit Shilapaar, a neighboring village, where they come across RanmalThakore who “could accommodate the woven cloth in the cart but not the weavers themselves. They were impure! In fact one could talk freely and openly, but without any physical contact” (*The Stepchild* 9). But Teeha who is portrayed as an embodiment of valor, just and dignified demeanor who takes up the cudgels with a Patidar youth Nanio who tries to molest Methi, a Vankar girl of the same village. The display of such defiance stands in stark contrast to submissive, docile and hopeless Dalit characters penned down by the upper caste writers. Ironically, outraging a Vankar girl's modesty “was an age-old misery. Not only were pots broken, wrists had been held publically. Women were raped even on the eve of their wedding day. This wretched caste had endured it all” (*The Stepchild* 25). Moreover, considering the purity and pollution norms of the caste Hindu society these acts serve to underscore the inherent hypocrisy of caste Hindus where violating a Dalit women's body is not considered polluting. Defiance on the part of a Dalit man triggers a series of conflicts with the dominant Patidar community to lay bare any claims of a unified, just and democratic village setting as valorized by Mahatma Gandhi.

Subsequently, the conflict takes the whole Vankar community in its wake, resulting in a series of atrocities perpetrated against them from setting their storeroom on fire to damaging their fields, thereby, depriving them of their major source of livelihood and thwarting any attempt to lead a dignified life which does not demand Dalits to be subservient and dependent on upper caste Hindus as that could potentially challenge their hegemony in the social structure. The fear of antagonizing the upper castes is deeply ingrained in the Dalit psyche as this realization dawns on Teeha when he discovers that no one is willing to offer him shelter after his altercation with Nanio. Offering shelter to Teeha would have triggered backlash by the upper castes as they had threatened to set the whole locality on fire. Through this incident, Macwan draws our attention towards lack of unity within the Dalit ranks as it fills Teeha with contempt:

The entire mohalla consisted of eighty houses. If all of them stood united, the twenty-five families of the Patels would be powerless, but if they couldn't even dream of standing up for themselves, how were they to face the Patels? (*The Stepchild* 18)

The lack of unity within Dalits has always served the interests of the upper castes, as RanchhodDehlavala, reflecting on the disunity within the Vankar community comments, “If they were united, it would have been difficult for us to live in this village. The day they achieve self-recognition, the sun will set on us” (*The Stepchild* 100). But instead of portraying a simplistic binary of good against evil, between the oppressor and the oppressed, Joseph Macwan, has problematized it by infusing in the narrative, a black sheep named Ramlo, who remains loyal to RanchhodDehlavala, an upper caste Patidar who is an embodiment of nexus between the dominant community and Congress politics in the post-independence era and is instrumental in fatal

consequences that await Teeha. Such unravelling and exposing of internal enemies like Ramlo points towards the fact that enemy lies within and without. And it is interesting to note how unravelling of the enemy within and lack of unity resonates with later Dalit novels, for instance, Sharankumar Limbale's *Hindu* (2004), portrays Milind Kamble, a Dalit activist who has betrayed the movement for the luxuries and comforts thrown at him by the caste Hindus in the form of liquor, meal and sex. Milind Kamble towards the end of the novel indulges in self-reproach when he thinks of the current state of the movement which seemed to him "like that of a woman with 60 percent burns. When the movement needs surgery, it is being treated with a bandage and ointment" (*Hindu* 154) and he fears that his "masculinity was dissipating and I was undergoing a metamorphosis. My sex was changing" and he confesses that "This process of being neutered did not start today. It goes back a long way. I became impotent the day I separated from the movement" (*Hindu* 155). Also, he recounts his wife Lakshmi's admonishment, "You have sold yourself and now you want to sell Babasaheb as well" (*Hindu* 155). Thus, the novel begins and ends with the internal conflict of a compromised dalit which underscores Limbale's aim of projecting that the enemy lies within. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the Dalit writers to expose the enemy within to foreground the causes ailing the Dalit movement.

The title of the novel *Angaliyat* refers to the age-old divide between the center and the periphery in the familial and the social domain of Gujarat. The term stands for a stepchild who following the mother's second marriage, comes to a new home holding her finger or *angali*. *Angaliyat* signifies the peripheral and marginalized which is never accepted by the mainstream or the center. In the novel, the entire Dalit Vankar community has been turned into *angaliyat* for rural world of central Gujarat. Similarly, Bhavaankaka, a Vankar, an embodiment of Bhakti and traditional wisdom, compares his own community with an *angaliyat* who gets stepchild like treatment at the hands of the dominant community of Patidars. His presence also draws our attention to various art forms such as song, dance, music and oral story telling used by Dalits to reflect on their everyday engagement with the caste battles. For instance, Bhavaankaka reflecting on his caste sings:

In which moment did you create us, my Lord

O Potter, on which wheel did you cast the pots? (*The Stepchild* 56)

The language spoken by the characters is Charotari, the dialect of central Gujarat. It is the dialect of peasants which is considered rustic and harsh. The novel is rich in Charotari dialect and the idioms such as 'Ghar nu golgaarbarabar' (Jaggery of the house as good as mud) and rituals like 'Besna' and 'Aanu' make the text anchored in its traditional culture. The reference to these institutions, dialect, rituals and expressions suggest that only a Dalit writer could aid in reviving these dying institutions which are conveniently excised from the mainstream Gujarati literature that has scarcely attempted to present social reality of the state. In addition to it, Joseph Macwanin author's note asserts that though there is "no dearth of literature about the higher castes in Gujarat but most of the life experiences of the common people find no reflection at all" (*The Stepchild* vii).

And unlike the upper caste writers, the Dalit writers remain authentic to their lived experiences and endeavor to portray their experiences into art honestly, in their true and

unmediated form. The language used is often coarse and crude language of the slums and villages, a byproduct of living a life of deprivation, oppression and ignorance. The very title of the novel and the language used also qualifies the truth of Arjun Dangle's claim in *Poisoned Bread* (1992) that the words Dalit writing uses demands a new dictionary, for it describes new objects, situations, and activities, which are far removed from the experiences of privileged sections of the society (Dangle 252). Regarding the translation, it can be said that every cross cultural communication entails loss of meaning to some extent but at the same time, it is through translation that a text becomes available to a wider audience.

As stated earlier, Bhavaankaka's style reminds us of the performing arts tradition and of storytelling. Dalit communities of Gujarat were all engaged in the occupation of performing arts and storytelling like Turi, Gadhvi etc. Macwan incorporates the rich legacy of this oral tradition of Dalits. But Paradoxically, the same orality becomes a significant factor in their defeat at the hands of caste Hindus. The novel is replete with such instances, first, when Valji goes to Methi's village to take her away but fails to realize that Ranchhod Dehlavala's letter to the taxi owner would lead to his death. On the second occasion, Dehlavala sends a letter to Methi's father in the name of Teeha that culminates in her marriage to a drunkard. On a deeper level, it points towards the limitations of oral culture that is unable to cope with the written word which pervades not just literacy but access to modern institutions and power structures. Jyotirao Phule's observation in *Gulamgiri or Slavery* (1873) is insightful in this regard he stated that education in India has been used as a tool by the upper castes to sustain their dominance and making the lower castes subservient by denying them access to education in order to keep them ignorant of the exploitative nature of their position within the hegemonic caste society. Phule considered caste as a form of slavery and coined the term *ati-shudra* for untouchables. He created an alternate view of the past; a past which challenges the Brahmin view of the past and to dismantle their hegemony and suggests that it is the duty of every shudra who has availed the benefit of education to work for the upliftment of his caste and project a true picture of the status of shudra's life before the government and only after their emancipation that India can progress because they are 'life and sinews' of the country. This view was later reiterated by Ambedkar as he too emphasized the importance of education.

Similarly, when Dehlavala inaugurates the first High-school in Ratnapaar village and asks for donation that will ensure the donators name inscribed on the marble plaque. Gokal, Teeha's stepson, who after Teeha's death takes care of his blind mother left behind by her two sons Mania and Mohan, steps forward to donate Rs. 7000 which suggests that the Vankars are determined to avail education to improve their social and economic lives.

Historically, Dalits in Gujarat in order to break the endemic cycle of caste oppression, humiliation and deprivation and to attain self-identity and self-respect adopted various methods such as changing caste names, converting to Christianity, transforming social movements into the political ones to assert the Dalit identity informed by Ambedkarite ideology. The Vankar community of Charotar region preferred conversion to Christianity as a means of social transformation over the process of Sanskritization as Ambedkar himself asserted that changing

caste names does not warrant any change in the attitude of the caste conscious Hindus. Similarly, Ambedkar's exhortation resonates in later Dalit texts such as Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* (1997), Valmiki recounts how during his stay in Maharashtra his surname 'Valmiki' is mistaken for a Brahmin caste name by a Brahmin family but later when he reveals his true identity as a Dalit to the Brahmin girl Savita, she rejects him as if belonging to Dalit community tantamount to a sin. This instance and various other instances underscore the sheer hypocrisy of the caste conscious Hindu society.

Moreover, educated Dalits were confronted by two choices at the time of independence, that is either to follow the Gandhian path and integrate with the larger Hindu society or to embrace the path of struggle and agitation to assert Dalit self-identity envisaged by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The Dalit community in Gujarat has adopted both these paths. Master in the novel embodies this tension between Ambedkar's exhortation and the Gandhian ideology. The dialogue between Valji and Danaji exemplifies this conflict:

'You remember that photo on Master's table, with the clothes of a 'gentleman' - the coat and patloon, and a noose around the neck- that is Ambedkar!'

'Is he a gora sahib?'

'No bhai. Master says he is one of us. Of our caste! He went against Gandhiji for us!'

'Now why did he have to go against Gandhiji? Gandhiji is supposed to be for the poor?'

'Supposed to be. Whether he is one, Master will be able to explain it. Anyway, swaraj doesn't appear to be of use to us.' (*The Stepchild* 43)

And towards the end of the novel, when Vankar community fails to admit Teeha in a hospital as it being a police case, Master laments that, "Gandhianism disappeared with Gandhi" (*The Stepchild* 227) suggesting that change of heart propagated by Gandhi had no space in the socio-political milieu of post-independence India. Though, both Ambedkar and Gandhi had a common objective of dealing with the issue of untouchability, but they differed greatly in their respective approaches. Whereas Gandhi along with other social reformers, constituted 'HarijanSevakSangh' in 1932 to eradicate untouchability, and was convinced that untouchability was primarily a Hindu problem that necessitates its handling within the Hindu fold through change of heart, thereby, conceding the active agency to caste Hindus and hence these measures were termed paternalistic by Dalit intellectuals. As far as Ambedkar was concerned, the change of heart and maintaining cleanliness were inadequate means of abolishing untouchability and laid premise on finding untouchable agency through conversion to an alternative religious framework that does not preach caste as a principle- that treats untouchability as a moral violation and propagates rationality, justice and proper conduct and through legal provisions that safeguard the interests of the Dalits.

However, the novel remains conspicuously silent about the issue of conversion, considering the fact that one-third of the Vankars of Charotar region had become Christians and more importantly, Joseph Macwan was himself a Dalit convert to Christianity. Perhaps, the entire constituency of Dalit unity would have been jeopardized if Joseph Macwan had discussed the issue of conversion in the novel. The only reference to the issue of conversion comes when

RanchhodDehlavala an upper caste Hindu Congress leader accuses Christian padres of converting the untouchables:

The Padres have incited the bloody dhedhas. The English government has a hand in conversion. [...] This country belongs to the Hindus and will remain so. Those who wish to live here, must live the way we have been living for generations. (*The Stepchild* 101)

Moreover, in Ambedkar's view since Hinduism is inconsistent with the self-respect and honor of the untouchables is vindictive of their conversion to other nobler faith. In addition to it, conversion is a paradigmatically migrant act, one that destabilizes fixed categories of ethnic and social belonging. Dehlavala's speech also reinforces Ambedkar's realization after the independence that legal provisions did not alter the caste structure of Hinduism but merely establishing the limits of caste prejudices and hence the need to convert which was evident in his exhortations to untouchables. In fact, Ambedkar and other Dalit intellectuals saw British rule as an opportunity for mobilizing and emancipating untouchables. Christian missionaries opened the schools for untouchables towards the end of the nineteenth century that allowed Dalits to access education. Similarly, the novel also indicates how the British rule was seen as a boon by the Vankar Dalit community and the demand for self-rule as a delusion which would be inimical to their path to emancipation, recognition and self-respect. This concern is articulated by several characters in the novel as Master reflecting on the contemporary political situation comments:

Dehlavala is now the member of the regional assembly. These are all signs of the so-called swaraj for us. Look at it. Even I don't want foreign rule to last, for us it will be like the thugs have gone, and left the robbers behind. (*The Stepchild* 199)

In addition to it, Macwan also debunks the discourse built around certain commonplaces which render Dalits culturally backward. As Rita Kothari, the translator of the novel observes that in the upper caste Gujarati society, the significant demarcation between the 'ujaliyat' or forward and 'pachhat' or backward communities has revolved around the practice of second marriage, *naatru* (*The Stepchild* xxviii). Also, by allowing widows to remarry suggests that Dalits have more egalitarian system than upper caste Hindus. However, by portraying both Methi and Kanku as pure women even after Kanku remarries her younger brother-in-law Danji and Methi lives with Teeha under the same roof, neither of them get intimate with the respective men they live with. Also, through Teeha and Valji's resistance and valor even if it entails a potential threat to their lives, Macwan reasserts the Dalit quest for identity and dignity. Paradoxically, chastity and valor both are considered upper caste categories. It can be surmised that Joseph Macwan wanted to take up the cudgels in both the physical and psychological realms, with the upper caste categories that have allowed them to arrogate their position and maintain their hegemony.

Consequently, after unravelling the various intricacies that constitute and ail the socio-political and cultural milieu of central Gujarat, Macwan succeeds in giving subjectivity to the marginalized as they become 'speaking subjects'. Both the couples, Teeha and Methi and Valji and Kanku fight valiantly against two oppressive social structures- one represented by landowning and dominating

Patidar community and Thakore village leaders and the other by greedy and self-serving Dalit caste leaders. The two structures overlap and these characters are confronted with many trials and tribulations . Both valji and Teeha are ultimately killed but till the end they refuse to submit, underscoring the Dalit quest for identity and dignity irrespective of the perils involved.

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