

PORTRAYAL OF VOICELESS IN CINEMA AND LITERATURE

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Cinema is the powerful medium to represent the things in its own way. It plays a great role to bring the problem front of the public. It reflects many of the trends, current virtues, social struggles and patterns of living in a society. Culture is the underlying current of a society. A society thrives on its values and ideology through the medium of culture. Culture has many definitions. According to Raymond Williams, It is a whole way of life.' Cinema not only reflects culture, it also shapes culture.

Cinema is always affected by contemporary issues. Before or after independence, movies were made according to the time's demand. Ashok kumar starred *Kismet* released during Quit India movement, was a cinematic interpretation of resistance against Imperialistic British by Indians. As Anil Saari says, 'Hindi films have always reflected the prevailing mood of the society'.

Post independence Nehruvian socialist era was time of Guru Dutts, Satyajit Rays and Bimal Roys, who vividly captured the growing pains of infant democracy and universality of human emotions in their films. After 1970, that time was a period of rising worker, peasant, and student unrest, unhappy with governance so movies were there like *Deewar* (1975), *Sholey* and many more. Filmmakers have been bringing out social, political, religious and other issues through movies for long time. Bollywood has always tried to represent Indian culture and its ramifications. There are lots of movies on women, dowry, corruption, poverty, Hindu Muslim unity, Diasporas but only some names are there when it comes to dalits.

'Dalit' word originated from Sanskrit which means 'oppressed', 'suppressed', or 'broken to pieces'. This term was first used by Mahatam Jayoti Rao Phule to those who were untouchables. Mahatam Gandhi coined a term ' Harijan' (Children of God) and the term 'scheduled cast' or 'scheduled tribe' are official term used by government for these former untouchables and tribes. These people call themselves 'dalit' because this word is indicative of their consciousness of the oppression and their demand for dignity and right to self determination.

Movies on Dalits

Caste divisions have formed the backdrop of some Hindi films such as *Achhut Kanya*, *Sujata*, *Ankur*, *Eklavya* , *Aarkshan.*, *Sadgati* (based on Premchand's story *Sadgati*) and few more.

Achut Kanya (1936) was one of the most respected socials to come from Bombay Talkies. It was probably the first representative features of the Indian social film of the first decade of sound. The central story is of the unhappy love affair between Kasturi, the harijan (Untouchable)

daughter of the railway level crossing guard Dukhia and Brahmin boy Pratap. They fall in love but caste creates a big hurdle on the way of their marriage. Kasturi says to Pratap, ‘You are Brahmin and I am Ahoot(Untouchable).’

Sujata (1959) is a romance between a Brahmin young man, Adheer (Sunil Dutt) and an untouchable woman, Sujata (Nutan). Sujata is brought up by Brahmin couple Upen and Charu. Although, Upen is fond of the adoptive child, but his wife and mother can never fully embrace Sujata because she is an untouchable. In the entire movie, Sujata is reminded of her low caste.

Ankur (1974) – “This film provides a deeper insight into the ugliness of Indian caste system, particularly visible in rural areas. The villagers expect Lakshmi to work as Surya’s servant. However, being a dalit, tradition forbids that she cooks meals for Surya. Thus, when Surya asks Lakshmi to cook his meals, the villagers began to disapprove him, when Saru moves to Surya’s house, she refuses to touch anything that Lakshmi has touched. The inhuman treatment of Dalits in rural India formed the core of *Ankur*”.

Eklavya: the royal Guard (2007) shows the dalit in lead role. In this movie, a dalit character, Panalal Chauhar, a DSP has showed his arrogance against the feudal mentality of the Rajas. In this movie, Panalal Chauhar goes to the king and sits in front of him without his permission. When king is about to call him “Untouchable” then Pannalal warns him by saying “in our democracy, discrimination is crime” and you will be punished for it. He recalls about the suffering of his ancestors, ‘we have suffered for 5000 years’. Pannalal makes the king aware about the rule of discrimination.

Aarakshan (Reservation) is a 2011 Hindi film starring Amitabh Bachchan, Saif Ali Khan and Deepika Padukone. The film is a socio-political drama based on the controversial policy of caste based reservations in government jobs and educational institutions. Though, the movie gathers an attention about tuition system but it also evokes a voice of these downtrodden. When Mithilesh, an upper cast person criticizes dalits on account of getting reservation then Deepak Kumar, a dalit says,

“If you have forgotten, go read your history again. Then you know who slogged and who looted it like it was their birthright. For centuries you people filled up your coffers with handout and you accuse us of living on charity? We ploughed fields, we reaped your corn, grazed your cattle, we carried your daughters and wives in palanquins, we cremated your corpses, stitched your shoes, drove your oxen, rowed your boats, cleaned your filthy drains and we even carried your shit on your heads....”

Dalits in Literature

Be it Hindi, English or any other language, literature freely talks about dalits and related issues. Dalits have been portrayed from years in different language’s literature by dalit writers or higher cast’s writers such as Premchand, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Mulkraj Anand Arundhati Roy and many more.

Premchand is the most popular writer of Hindi literature, whose writing is very much close to real lives of people of rural India. Though, some dalit writers do not seem to agree with

those people who consider Premchand a real describer of dalits conditions. Whatever the battle of idea exist among people about him but, he succeeded to describe dalits and related issues to a great extent. The portrayal of Dalit characters is there in five of his novels and about fifteen of his short stories. Premashram (The Abode of Love, 1922), Rangabhoomi (The Stage, 1925), Kayakalp (Metamorphosis, 1926), Karmabhoomi (The Spell, 1922), 'Saubhagya key Kode' (Whips of Fortune, 1924), 'Mukti Marg' (Way to Salvation, 1924), 'Aga-Pichcha' (Dilemma, 1928), 'Mandir' (The House of God, 1927), 'Ghaswali' (The Grass-cutter, 1929), 'Lanchhan' (Stigma, 1931), 'Sadgati' (Deliverance, 1931), 'Thakur ka Kuan' (The Thakur's Well, 1932), 'Gulli Danda' (1929), 'Doodh ka Daam' (The Price of Milk, 1934), 'Mantra' (1926), 'Jurmana' (The Fine, n.d.), 'Meri Pehli Rachna' (My First Composition, n.d.) and 'Kafan' (The Shroud, 1936) are the stories depicting these characters.

Like Premchand, Mulkraj Anand's novels are a means to give voice to the downtrodden people. His novels which deal with downtrodden's life are 'Untouchable', 'Coolie', 'The Road' and many more. His first novel 'Untouchable' was based on dalits and it portrays a real picture of the mental agony and misery of downtrodden. 'Untouchable' was a chilling exposé of the day-to-day life of a member of India's untouchable caste. It is the story of a single day in the life of Bakha, who had to suffer a lot because of touching a member of a higher caste and was beaten and humiliated for the same.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has dealt with the problem of untouchable prevailing in the Indian society. This is a story about love and brutality, the brutality against the untouchables.

The same agony of brutality on the Dalits seems to be multiplied in Rohinton Mistry's novel, *A Fine Balance*. In this novel, it is shown that how the upper-caste ruling class mocks at the democratic rights to be enjoyed by the Dalits. Two characters named Om and Ishar being born in downtrodden family faces numerous problems. This novel focuses on the situation that though after Independence, the caste distinctions were abolished officially but the respite from humiliation was hardly ensured. The dalit family was murdered by the landlord because they became a threat for the landlord.

So the journey of Dukhi (Sadgati by Premchand) to Dukhi (A Fine Balance) has been pathetic and miserable.

Dalit Writing by dalit

Dalit literature is the literature written by dalits themselves in which they express their mental agony, suppressed pain and a realistic saga of torture and misery. Basically, the dalit movement started in Maharashtra and it has spread in other states of India. Many dalits writers have written in their own regional languages and many of them have been rendered into English language. For instance, in 1992, *Poison Bread* was published which was originally written by Arjun Dangle in Marathi language. *Outcast: A memoir* by Narendra Jadhav(2008), *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *Against All the Odds* by Kishore Shantabai Kale, *Shosh* by Daxa Damodra and many more.

Namdeo Dhasal observes that Dalit literature is flowing into the 21st Century mixed with blood, sweat and anger, flowering into greatest poetry that this country is producing now. G A Ghansyam states in "Voice of the Voiceless" that:

Dalit writers have learnt to assert their concerns and their identity in a voice of their own. Mostly written in an autobiographical tone dalit literature lays bare the stark realities of our modern

nation that is still grappling in the blood and mire of its century's old prejudice and old beliefs.(74)

A comparative study of portrayal of Dalits in cinema versus literature

Unlike literature, cinema does not talk so explicitly about dalit's condition. *Bakha's* (*Untouchable*) suffering is more than *Kasturi* (*Achhut Kanya*). At least, *Kasturi* is supported by a Brahmin boy but *Bakha* has no one as he says,

All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to..... I am a sweeper, sweeper untouchable! (58-59)

Incepting from rejection for a place in team however, *Kachra* (*Lagaan*) succeeds to get a suitable place in cricket team with high cast players but it does not happen with *Bakha*. As he says,

“..They think we are mere dirt, because. We clean their dirt.” (89)

Velutha(*The God of Small Things*) is the representative of the dalits in the novel and dalits were a class of people who were not allowed to walk on the public roads; they were not allowed to cover their upper bodies and not allowed to carry umbrellas. Velutha gets death punishment on account of breaking 'love-laws'. His suffering is very miserable:

“Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for slender stem it grew from. Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright bare electric bulb reflected in.” (319-20) but Prakash (*Lajja*) does not get the same.

Sohini (*Untouchable*) can not get rid of the fear of being scolded when she goes to fetch water from the well. This condition becomes so pathetic that they have to struggle a lot to get the basic needs of life like water and food. Where in, Lakshmi,(*Ankur*) though her plight was miserable but Surya does not mind being taken food prepared by her.

It proves the demonstrated reality in cinema is miles away from the concrete actualities of regular life but, literature portrays the bitter truth.

Both in movies and literature, it is shown that if proper education and chance is given to an untouchable or a downtrodden then they can also show their talent as Mammachi said about Velutha, “ If only he had not been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer.” (75) Same happens with Deepak Kumar (*Aarkshan*) and Panna Lal (*Eklavya*), when Deepak Kumar gets proper education that makes him a good lecturer and do Phd from America. Panna Lal who becomes a DSP, is an effective invocation about the empowerment that education could provide to dalits.

Literature and Cinema, both are true witness of what ever changes are there in society. The way how dalits have been portrayed in cinema and literature, it is being changed to a new and different image from earlier. If it is Velutha (*The God of Small Things*), Kalua (*Sea of Poppies*), Panna Lal(*Eklavya*) and Deepak Kumar(*Aarakshan*), all they prove that a dalit character ought not to be always dark, skinny or physically weak. Kalua is a man of unusual height and powerful body who can trump anybody in a wrestling bout. Velutha was not lesser than anybody,

“She saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed – so quietly, from a flat-muscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with a high-wax body polish. He had high cheekbones and a white, sudden smile.” (175)

Portrayal of Pannalal, Deepak Kumar and Pratap Kumar are the images of changing faces of Dalits in cinema.

Conclusion:

Film makers are bringing out social issues through movies. But, the issue related to dalits has not been handled properly by Bollywood. It seems that Hindi cinema turned a blind eye towards caste system. There are lots of reasons behind this; firstly this sort of movies can not be sold like other masala movies. Secondly, caste question needs a serious and sensitive dimension so there are no dalit actors or directors who can represent their story in their way like dalit writers in literature such as Omprakash Valmiki, Namdev Dashed, Arjun Dangle. Next, the issue of caste is dangerous territory, full of complexities similar to religious- communal problems so no director or producer wants to take this kind of risk. As it has been rightly said about Hindi cinema, “Bollywood films are fond of that attire which is flamboyant and can hide the real crippled skin”. But Anil Sari, a famous critic, says,

Whenever society itself has seemed to have lost a sense of direction, cinema has been equally afflicted by the social confusion. At same times, film makers have continued themselves to the limited concern of producing only entertainment of one kind or another.

But when it comes to literature that seed of revolution has already been sowed and in forthcoming time people will be more aware about their rights which they were deprived from centuries.

“In the end there will be no margin,
 In the end there will be no centre,
 In the end there will be no play,
 In the end there will be a free play of playlessness
 Without margin.....
 Without centre.....” (Quoted in Voice of Voiceless)

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