



The Nexus Of Politics And Dalit Consciousness: A Critique Of Mannu Bhandari's Mahabhoj As A Dalit Literary Text

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Abstract

Mannu Bhandari, the only woman writer among the pioneers of the Navi Kahani movement, was a prominent figure in Hindi literature. Often considered as a spokesperson of the feminist issues, it was her novel, Mahabhoj, published in 1979 and translated as The Great Feast by Ruth Vinita, which established Bhandari as a revolutionary writer; a writer who dared to raise hardboiled and grim Dalit issues lucidly, with her witty and satiric writing style. Mahabhoj, a political satire on caste and class politics, is set in an unnamed rural village, about 20 km from Saroha city, in the backdrop of urban politics and dying media ethics. It is in this context of caste and class politics, politics of vote-banks and opportunism, I will study Mahabhoj as a play problematising Dalit discourse as well. This article, while attempting to critique Mahabhoj as a satire on contemporary politics, will also strive to raise a pertinent question as why the realistic representation of the Dalit exploitation and the suppression of Dalit consciousness by the power system as given by Mahabhoj, at that time when Dalit writing was not an established genre in the canon of Hindi Literature, is still not regarded as a work of Dalit literature like many other contemporary mainstream Hindi literary texts which dealt with Dalit issues?

Keywords: Political Satire, Caste Politics, Media Ethics, Svanubhuti, Sahanubhuti.

Introduction

Which caste are you, brother? "I am a Dalit, sir!" No, I mean, where do you belong to? We belong in your swear words, We belong in dirty drains and, We also belong in separated plate, sir. Oh! I thought you come in Hindu. We do, sir! But only during elections.

Baccha Lal's scandalising and scintillating poem 'Kaun Jaat Ho Bhai' (Which Caste are You, Brother?)' vehemently presents a vivid and realistic picture of India's contemporary social, political, imprudent, and impelling circumstances. It specifically deliberates on the injustices embedded in the life of Dalits and how they are exploited by hypocrite politicians, particularly during elections, for their own benefits and interests. These are not just some words of mockery and sarcasm, but a reflection of society. Literature has a responsibility to

mirror the grim realities of life to its readers. Since time immemorial, literature has been used as a tool to instruct and reform mankind. Some writers have even used literature to talk about the “unspeakable things unspoken.”

Mannu Bhandari is one such Hindi writer, whose novel *Mahabhoj* (1979) gives voice to ‘unspoken’ Dalit issues. Like Umesh’s poem, it marks a nexus between caste and politics. It is a novel which, as Bharti Arora puts it, “interrogates the exclusivist and feudalist stance of the newly formed nation as well as national identity, which refused to accommodate the identity of women, Dalits, tribals, and other communities within its ambit.” A prominent and versatile writer of Hindi Literature, Bhandari was the only woman writer among the pioneers of the Navi Kahani movement. Along with Rajendra Yadav, Mohan Rakesh, Kamleshwar and Nirmal Verma, she experimented with modern themes of story writing. Bhandari’s name gained precedence during 1960’s and 1970’s among Hindi women writers, when there was a downturn in feminist politics and women’s literature. Often considered as a spokesperson of feminist issues, it was Bhandari’s novel *Mahabhoj* (later scripted into a play and translated as *The Great Feast* by Ruth Vinita) which established her as a revolutionary writer; one who dared to raise hardboiled and grim Dalit issues lucidly with her witty and satiric writing style and addressed the complex relationship between caste and politics.

This article discusses *Mahabhoj* as a satire of contemporary politics, specifically interrogating why the novel is not generally classified as ‘Dalit Literature’ despite its obvious ties to caste criticism. This will be considered in the context of a claim made by Sharakumar Limbale, a Dalit writer and critic, who defined Dalit literature as, “writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness.” As such, this article will further consider the question of whether the novel even counts as a Dalit text.

Mahabhoj as a Political Satire

Mahabhoj is an explicit political satire on caste and class politics, set in an unnamed rural village near Saroha city, in the backdrop of the phenomenon of urban politics and dying media ethics. Bhandari wrote *Mahabhoj* in response to the anti-Dalit massacre that took place in Belchi, “the criminalinfested border of Patna-Nalanda, 90 kms from the Bihar state capital,” wherein eleven young Dalit men were tied up and shot dead, then tossed one by one into a mass pyre by upper caste men.⁷ Bhandari in an interview with Oma Sharma in a special issue of *Kathadesh* confided,

I have read the news of Belchi in the newspaper where it was mentioned that few Dalits were burnt alive. News of Dalit suppression has always been published in the small corner sections of the newspapers, but it was for the first time that the news of so many people burnt alive was published and read by mass.

Bhandari was shocked to read about the tragic incident and was filled with outrage for the corruption, hypocrisy and criminalisation of politics in post Independence India. Mahabhoj narrates this realisty though paradoxical portraits of Indian cultural and religious thoughts against the social, personal, and political backdrop of contemporary India. Though Bhandari does not give a direct description of the Belchi incident, she does not let it pass without reference. Indeed, it is mentioned throughout the novel, ensuring that it influences the atmosphere for fear and dread experienced by the characters. "It was only a month or so ago, some huts in the Harijan settlement which lies on the outskirts of the village were set on fire. The next morning the huts had been reduced to ashes and those inside them roasted."⁹ "What was the fault of these Harijans? That they asked for wages at the government rate? Was this a crime? Perhaps it was –that is why they were burnt alive."¹⁰ A few pages later, "Labors not getting the government wage, people being burnt alive, insecurity and disorder growing every day."

The novel begins with a mysterious appearance of a dead body on a bridge a few kilometres from the city. The cadaver is quickly identified as that of Bisesar, a local man who prior to his death was collecting evidence to bring justice to those killed in Belchi. As the cause of death is unknown, his kin refuse to perform the last rites unless the mystery is resolved. The very first line of the novel sets the tone of the novel as a satire on Indian politics and media: "Vultures devour the kinless dead. But Bisesar was not without kin." Bisesar was 'nobody' before he died. A character ruminates, "At any other time, who would have thought twice about Bisu and Bisu's death?"¹³ Local opportunistic politicians exploit Bisu's death into a 'maha-bhoj', a grand feast. ¹⁴ The image of vultures leering over the dead body is extremely effective here. The word 'Bhoj', 'feast', conveys a similar sentiment. It presents an image of hypocritical politicians, selfish self-proclaimed contenders of the marginals; the fake media persons, the disabled judicial system and the brutal police's feasting on the dead body of a poor, helpless man. This farce of feasting scene also finds its replication at DIG's promotional party towards the end of the novel

The unclaimed dead body of Bisu comes to be seen as a symbolic figure of the dying democracy, because as soon as the news of a mysterious murder of a poor, lower caste man reached the city, "a stream of vehicles carrying ministers, political leaders and journalists" hovered the village.¹⁵ As the novel proceeds, Bisu's dead body becomes a site of political opportunism. The narrator reflects, "[The] dead body of Bisu is the site of victimization which later becomes the site of confrontation for the different political parties, metaphorically feeding upon dead body".

As a 'political novel', Mahabhoj delineates with conviction the truth of the human tragedy, and loss of compassion of the politicians and the media personnel. Election is the crucial part of the game of power politics. Both major parties seen an opportunity to gain vote banks of the lower castes by giving attention to Bisesar's death. Saheb Kaur in his article "Intermingling

Power Relations in The Slave, Dutchman and Mahabhoj” discusses similar relation between politics, and judicial system, and asserts that, “Power relations are embedded in the socio-political and judicial systems which endow the exercising of power with the limitation of being less accommodating and thereby more confining”. The ministers of Siroha suppress the people at lower strata of the society in the name of power politics. Bhandari discloses the double standards of these politicians who, on one hand, blather for democracy, equality and justness. “Da Sahib... swears by Mahatma Gandhi, the Gita, democracy, freedom of the press, and so on,” though little comes from these pledges. Jorawar laughs, “Da Saheb is a very sharp one, he has all kinds of tricks up his sleeve... Sukul Babu too was like that when he was in power. And if he gets back into power, he’ll become that way again. Power has a way

As the novel proceeds, the masks of the political leaders of both the ruling and the opposition parties shed, and their faces of corruption are revealed. Da Saheb’s real motivations are gradually unveiled as he calls on DIG Sinha to frame Bisesar’s death as a suicide. He subsequently publicly offers compensation to the deceased Dalit families of the Dalit basti fire case He also has SP Saxena dismissed for implicating the case and sending Binda behind the bars under the pretext of false allegations. He financially fosters and supports the newspaper Mashaal, which under his influence changes their outlook on Bisu’s death overnight. This incident was an indicator of the dying media ethics and corruption at all the levels of the society, demonstrating that “power always sustains itself on the actions of resistance of others”.

Nandini Mishra says of Bhandari, “To sensitise common man of the contemporary social political horrors of life is the raison d’etre of her Mahabhoj. The main motive behind writing Mahabhoj is multipurpose and it doesn’t seem a work of fiction but a realist novel.”²¹ The novel not only reveals the realistic and pragmatic picture of contemporary politics, but it also happens to represent a pan-Indian context. Siroha has become a microcosm of the politically corrupt India. Every character reflects some aspect of injustice. For instance, Binda embodies faith in revolution and the spark of resistance. On the other hand, Da Saheb is an ambivalent character. His idea of deceit and hypocrisy is apparent in the way he approaches Bisu’s murder case. He has a dichotomous thinking that characterises much of Indian politics. Bisu’s father is a stereotypical class-suppressed elderly man at the mercy of those around him. The Thanedar (SHO) demonstrate a range of approaches to politics. Inspector Saxena was an idealist, and is eventually dismissed from service due to his hesitance to carry out more brutal aspects of the job. Finally, the characterisation of DIG mirrors the image of those officers who are nothing but puppets in the hands of political leaders

The satiric and witty language Bhandari uses while portraying the hypocritical faces of the characters is noteworthy. The anger and indignation she expresses against the hypocrisy of political power is shown through Binda. Mahasweta Devi had called this novel a classical piece of literature in her article ‘Manu Mere Bheetar Garv aur Dhokh Dono Jagati Hai

(Mannu Awakens Both Pride and Sorrow in Me)' published in Kathadesh in January 2009. She claims, "[An Indian] woman writer has written a novel which is unmatched at an international level as well. It is a classic novel. In this, Bhandari has exposed the distortions in politics and bureaucracy in post

Dalit Consciousness in Mahabhoj

Historically, Dalits have not been represented truthfully or in fairness, even from the time of Hindu religious literature. Over the past few decades, Dalit literature has emerged and grown as an important and serious literary movement. Dalit authors unitedly rejected the alienating mainstream Indian literary tradition and began writing to express their own pain, dejection, anger, and angst. With the upheaval of Dalit literature in contemporary world and the introduction of new and distinct aestheticism in Dalit literary discourse, there is a whole corpus of Dalit writers, scholars, and critics who have introduced and supported new literary theories for reading and writing Dalit literature. Professor Raj Kumar in one of his lectures at a National Webinar notably applied New Historicism in re-reading of many mainstream texts which have Dalit characters and Dalit themes at their core and aims at creating a "counterculture and a separate identity for the Dalits" in society. He challenged the concept of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram²⁴ as a "fabrication used to divide and exploit ordinary people,"²⁵ and asserts, "New aesthetics challenges the whole idea of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram. Literature is now not just meant for enjoyment, it is getting constructive as well."

Re-reading mainstream texts from a Dalit perspective has also resulted in a number of questions about the author and authorship. Since Dalit perception and representation have always been ignored in the mainstream literature, there now exists a vast category of Dalit writers and critics who vehemently criticize and outrightly reject the notion of including non-Dalit writers who write about Dalit issues in English and various Indian regional languages. They articulate a common concern that even when higher-caste writers have raised voice for Dalit issues, they still maintain a hegemonic superiority over Dalits. Their texts have been interpreted as aiming to suppress Dalit resistance and exclude Dalits from the mainstream literature and society. This article, hence, shall critically analyse Mahabhoj in context of inclusion of non-Dalit writers and their works on Dalit issues in Dalit literary discourse, and will attempt to evaluate Mahabhoj as a Dalit literary work.

Is Dalit literature defined by its subject matter, or by the caste identity of its author? In simple terms, when a Dalit author writes on a Dalit subject, it falls in the category of Dalit literature, but in which category of literature would a work by a non-Dalit on Dalit issues fall? Will it be considered as a Dalit literature text or a mainstream work? A number of established Indian literary figures have shown concern with this topic and voiced their objection against the exclusion of non-Dalits from Dalit literature. Though it was commonly argued that the 'creative/artistic licence' gives everyone the ability to write any kind of literature, it is

precisely Hindi Dalit literary critics who laid down stringent rules for non-Dalit writers' inclusion in Dalit literary canon. Most of the writers, critics and scholars of Dalit literature have attempted to explain the difference between a Dalit writer and a non-Dalit writer writing about the Dalits issues. These arguments refer to two focal terms: 'svanubhuti' (self-perception/personal experience) and 'sahanubhuti' (sympathy). Sarah Beth Hunt in her seminal work *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* explores the beginning of Dalit literary production in north India, and also attempts to settle the debate of what counts as Dalit literature. She based her study on the concept of the aforementioned theory of svanubhuti and sahanubhuti to reach the core of debate. She explains that "Hindi Dalit writers employ the concept of svanubhuti to enhance their own narrative authority as the only legitimate producers of this literature, thereby excluding non-Dalit writers from writing Dalit literature

This assertion was supported by many other critics like Kanval Bharti, Mahendra Pratap Rana, and Limbale. Kanval Bharti writes, "The purpose of Dalit literature is for Dalits to describe their own pain... For this reason, only literature written by Dalits is included in the category of Dalit literature."²⁸ Ratnakumar Sambhariya has dissented against this controversial debate. He wrote in the 2004 edition of *Hans* magazine, "from the perspective of svanubhuti a law has developed in Dalit literature that Dalit writers can only be those writers born in a Dalit jati. This rule seems to create caste reservation in literature."²⁹ Similarly, there are many non-Dalit writers, scholars and critics such as Rajendra Yadav, Namvar Singh, Purushottam Agrawal, and Neha Arora who favour Sambhariya's argument of 'caste reservation'. Purushottam Agrawal also disagrees with the exclusion of nonDalit writers from the Dalit literary canon, emphasising the importance of imagination and creative licence in the act of writing, which gives the nonDalit writer the authority to write from a Dalit's point of view. Dr. Namvar Singh in an interview published in *Hans* asserts,

The literature manifesting Dalit experiences, values, restlessness, curiosities and questions may be called Dalit literature without considering its author. Expression is a natural human right and neither Dalits nor non-Dalits can be prevented from writing against each other.³⁰

During the 1970's, when *Mahabhoj* was written and published, Dalit discourse was absent from the literary discussions. Though there were some Dalit writers in Marathi who made their impact felt in the regional literature, the movement did not see success in the north until the next decade. Even Ambedkar, the universal Dalit figure, was missing from contemporary Hindi Dalit literature and consciousness. It was Bhandari who became a voice of marginal and Dalit issues. Broadly speaking, if the main reason for the rejection of non-Dalit writers' work in Dalit canon literature is the battle of svanubhuti over sahanubhuti, then analysing *Mahabhoj* against these parameters, it could be argued that Bhandari's narrative authority in the text was not distinct from a 'Dalit Narrative Authority'. She has painted her marginal characters with a bold ink and ensures that they are treated complexly

and no less human than characters of other castes. She subverts Limbale's claim that in non-Dalit writers' works there is no realistic representation of Dalits. This statement claims that there are "no images of Dalits with self-pride" and that non-Dalit writers often portray Dalits either as stereotypes (dirty, poor, uneducated) or in a light that arouses pity and sympathy but does not provide them dignity or humanity. Bisu is a Dalit who is educated, agitated and a revolutionary in spirit, to such an extent that upper caste characters are intimidated by his resoluteness. Moreover, Bhandari does not sketch Bisu as a stereotypical poor, uneducated, silenced Dalit character; on contrary, he is portrayed as a hero with strong personality traits, a rebel who is aware of rights and consciousness of Dalits. He fights not just for himself, but against the atrocities committed on his entire caste and clan.

Before his mysterious murder, Bisu's adherence to honesty makes him a leader of his own people, fighting for equal rights of lower community of his village, a hike in labourers' wages, and justice for the death of seven Dalits in the neighbouring village, who Bisu had believed were murdered under the influence of the powerful political leader of the opposition party. Though his death arouses sympathy, he is not objectified by pity. His death provides Binda, Rukhma and even Inspector Saxena with a new direction and courage to seek justice. Similarly, Binda is a city educated, "very headstrong fellow"³³ who tolerates blows and kicks in police lock-up, but does not give up his persuasion to seek justice for Bisu's death. "I didn't kill Bisu, I could never kill Bisu. I have to fulfill his last wish. I will fulfill it somehow, whatever happens." Following the His agitation is a direct result of his education. Binda receives an equally honest and unbiased treatment from the author as "an educated, fierce, sharp-tongued and headstrong young man who cannot be cowed down by anyone nor does he spare anyone."³⁷ Though Ambedkar, Nehru and Gandhi did not find any explicit mention in the novel, it does fundamentally demonstrate Baba Saheb's ideology of the importance of education and struggles undoubtedly witnessed in Bisu, Rukhma and Bindha's struggles and resistance. This is a quintessential characteristic for any Dalit hero, as C. B. Bharti in his article 'The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature'. "The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes."³⁸ It is also noteworthy that Dalits are the protagonists, rather than mere side characters. Bhandari is ruthless in her characterisation of upper caste, upper class personas such as Da Saheb, Dutta Saheb (Chief Editor of Mashal), DIG Sinha, and SHO. Da Shaeb, a Brahmin, is particularly depicted as a deeply dark character. DIG is nothing more than a puppet in the hands of Da Saheb. Similarly, Dutta Saheb is invoked as a hypocrite and money minded character.

Bhandari has a deep compassion and understanding of the life of the downtrodden. It is through their sufferings in the caste- and class-conscious society that she presents the dark underbelly of our society. Though Bisu meets his tragic end at the beginning of the novel and Binda is behind the bars, the lead characters do not abjectly surrender before the exploitative

socio-political conditions around them. They protest against the brazen exploitation up until they physically cannot. Despite being beaten like an animal, Binda's spirit is not shattered, and his resistance becomes more conspicuous. While in jail he shouts, "Kill me, kill me. You killed Bisu, kill me too, but no one can kill Bisu's wish."³⁹ Bhandari leaves no stone unturned to bestow her lead characters with 'Dalit chetna', "the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle" which characterises Dalits as assertive and rebellious.⁴⁰ Thus, the Dalit writers' claim that non-Dalit writers often portray Dalits in a "negative or sympathetic light" does hold true for Bhandari's Mahabhoj.⁴¹ Though readers may feel partly sympathetic for Heera, Bisu's father, and pity Rukhma, Binda's wife, these emotions come about not because they are Dalits, but because of their individual lack of societal power.

Language also plays an important and discrete role in representing Dalits. Many mainstream writers have criticised Dalit writers' usage of crude and slang language, as well as "their lack of creativity and literary style" in their texts.⁴² Dalit writers have also begun to theorise and evolve ideas of criticism of literature from Dalit perspectives and rejected works of mainstream writers as non-Dalit literature on the basis of the language and literary style as well. It is established that most Dalit writers tend to choose the language they speak as a medium to write. Though in Mahabhoj Bhandari does not use particularly crude or slang language, there is a clear gap between the sophisticated language of Da Saheb and Sukul Babu versus Binda's rough, common man's language and Hira's colloquial, local dialect of a commoner. Bhandari's use of wit and satire to publicly criticise upper-caste characters publicly is highly successful in the novel. Hence, Amod Kumar Rai's criticism that "a complete good Dalit work can be written only by a Dalit and not by any non-Dalit writer... as their writings failed to instil a tone of immediacy, intensity, violence and strong disapproval of casteism through strong and abusive language" holds no water against Mahabhoj, where the language of the common man is effectively utilised.

Conclusion

Analysing Mahabhoj as a political text, and as one dealing with Dalit issues, opens it up a number of different interpretations. If we go by the general theory of Dalit literature that the advocacy of the oppressed must come from the one who is oppressed, I may rest my argument here that though Bhandari's Mahabhoj very poignantly and realistically puts forth the tragic event of the death of a Dalit and the resulting media frenzy, her status as a non-Dalit excludes her work from being included in the category of Dalit literature. It may also be questioned by critics that though Bisu and Binda lead the revolution, it is Inspector Saxena who uncovers the final revelation, rather than any of the Dalit characters. Rukhma is just an accomplice to Saxena at the end of the novel when she left, sitting next to Saxena "in the second-class compartment of the train... briefcase full of files containing evidence relating to fire incident and Bisu's death."⁴⁴ However hard they try, Dalits face significant barriers, and as such Saxena has greater opportunity to solve the mystery. Bhandari has depicted the life

of her protagonists with the intention to show the mirror to the society against the discrimination and suppression of a certain section of the society. However, her writing ultimately remains an outsider's perspective. This is precisely where categorisations of Dalit literature diverge.

We may conclude that Bhandari has written an appealing and sensational political text in a realistic manner, narrating the tales of Dalit pain, sorrows, marginalisation and suppression. Representation of Dalit consciousness and exposing the upper-caste hegemony is one of the prime aim of Mahabhoj. Since Dalit discourse "is based on Dalit consciousness (chetna) [and] a struggle for social transformation", Mahabhoj is a landmark text, which has all the determination to be accepted in Dalit literary canon. In doing so, she has created a niche for herself among both Dalit and nonDalit writers. Mahabhoj underscores its achievement as a political novel, but it takes open mindedness from both-the Dalit and the non-Dalit writers to vanish the boundaries between the two literary discourses.

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- Sarah Beth Hunt in her seminal work focusses on the assertion of Dalit writers' claim of narrative authority in their autobiographical works which also insisted that Dalit literature can be legitimately produced only by Dalit writers. Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, p. 217.
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