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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN VIBHAVARI SHIRURKAR'S NOVEL 'THE VICTIM' AND LAXMAN GAIKWAD'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY 'THE BRANDED'

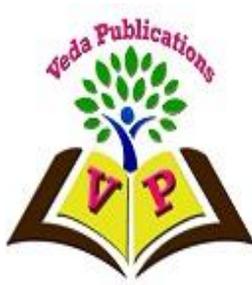
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ABSTRACT



Dalit literature is a literature by Dalit writer or any other writer with Dalit consciousness. Most of the Dalit writers and critics are of the opinion that Dalit consciousness is an exclusive experience of the person born into Dalit community. However, many writers belonging to Upper caste communities like Munshi Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy etc. wrote on Dalit lives with Dalit consciousness throwing light on the plight of Dalits. When we read the novel *The Victim* by Vibhavari Shirurkar and Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography *The Branded* the live picture of the branded communities appears before our eyes. The present paper aims at in-depth study and the analysis of Dalit consciousness found in these two works and the similarity of experiences portrayed by the writers.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Dalit Consciousness, Dalit Community, *The Victim*, *The Branded*, etc.

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INTRODUCTION

Vibhavari Shirurkar was a famous novelist and sociologist. She has closely observed and studied the lives of the branded communities living nearby their localities barbed by the British Administration. In her Marathi novel *Bali* which was translated into English as *The Victim*. She portrays the lives of the Branded Communities in Maharashtra. Vibhavari Shirurkar though not belonging to the branded communities could feel their pain due to the inhuman act imposed by the British Government and officers and later imitated by the successive Indian Government and the officers belonging to upper caste communities.

Laxman Mane is a famous Dalit writer and activist who has been working for the uplift of the nomadic and branded communities. Born in Pathrut community and branded as the criminal tribe he portrays the first hand experience of his community in his autobiography *The Branded*. The autobiography also received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1988.

Though both the writers are having different social locations the thread that binds them is the Dalit consciousness that we find in their writing.

DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS

Sharatchandra Muktibodh in his article 'What is Dalit Literature?' defines Dalit Literature as 'the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. (Muktibodh)

Dalit Consciousness is Dalit sensibility that seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness. This Dalit Consciousness is rebellious in nature and having its foundation in optimism and revolutionary approach. In short, Dalit consciousness is the feeling by which Dalits realise their social position and strive to uplift their social positions by

bringing about revolutionary changes in the social and economic system. For that purpose they are ready to fight against the unjust social and economic system and the beneficiaries of the system. They also deny the religious and social system that gave them lower position than animals and accept the revolutionary ideologies by which they could free themselves from psychological and physical barriers.

Most of the Dalit writers are of the opinion that Dalit consciousness is the exclusive consciousness shared by Dalit writers. However, most of the Marxist and liberal critics consider that Dalit consciousness cannot be the exclusive preserve of Dalits alone. However, followers of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar do not accept this liberal kind of approach. They believe that Dalit consciousness cannot be shared by anyone who does not undergo the experiences Dalits have to undergo.

Like African American literature, Dalit literature is also the outcome of a heightened group consciousness which provides a frame of reference in the form of "special memories, sentiments and aspirations." Establishing relations between consciousness of African Americans and Dalit consciousness S.D. Kapoor writes:

"Unlike savarna consciousness which suffered from selective amnesia about the past, Dalit consciousness collected bits and pieces that were thrown as crumbs by the savarnas. What rankles in them are the unpleasant memories of their ancestors.....Dalits kept their part of history and by implication savarna part of history also alive. Consciousness in their case is total



perception of reality which forms their world view. The process of opinion forming and evaluation of experience cannot be separated from consciousness, although it may not be visible initially. In this sense consciousness as reflected in literature gives Dalits and African Americans an understanding of their predicament, of the social order of which they are a part and their place in it (Kapoor 116-17)

The class consciousness and Dalit consciousness are not same as they belong to two separate categories. The experience of the poor and the experience of untouchability and exclusion on the basis of the caste and tribe differ on the basis of the degree of oppression they undergo. The experience of the poor upper caste and the poor Dalits cannot be the same. Therefore, there is difficulty in deciding the authenticity of the Dalit consciousness shared by the Savarna writers. Prof. Laura Brueck considers Dalit consciousness as a central concept in both the creation and evaluation of Dalit literature.

She writes that Dalit consciousness is the Dalit Chetna, an experiential and political perspective made up of the first hand knowledge of caste-based oppression and atrocity, along with the political goal of a liberating awakening that results from the exposure of this atrocity as central to the maintenance of caste hierarchies (Brueck). Dalit consciousness is awareness about the Dalithood as well as the point of view of liberating Dalits from their Dalitvatva. In short, it's a vision seeking liberation of Dalits from their Dalithood.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before throwing light on the comparative aspects of Dalit consciousness found in Vibhavari Shirurkar's 'The Victim' and Laxman Gaikwad's 'The Branded', the researcher consulted the research paper of Mr. Sunil Ramteke titled Laxman Gaikwad's 'The **Branded': A Voice Against Oppressive Structures** (Ramteke). The paper highlights the plight of the people of the branded tribe and the protagonist Laxman's protest against the unjust social system. The researcher also has consulted the research paper of Renu Josan titled: **Oppression to Assertion: Dalit Consciousness in Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan** (Josan). In this research paper Renu Josan explicitly discussed the arousal of Dalit Consciousness in Om Prakash Valmiki through various experiences he had undergone in his life.

The present paper aims to throw light on the comparative study of the two works based on the life of the branded communities who were deprived all rights of human beings not only before independence but even after independence of India. *The Branded* is the first hand experiences of Laxman Gaikwad narrated through his autobiography that have won Sahitya Akademi Award while *The Victim* is the experiences of the Branded communities narrated in the novel as the first hand experiences of the novelist. Though Vibhavari Shirurkar does not belong to the Branded communities she narrated the experiences of the protagonist Aaba who belongs to Chorbasti. Both the autobiographical novel *The Branded* of Laxman Gaikwad and Vibhavari Shirurkar's novel *The Victim* need careful study to compare them.



DETAILED ANALYSIS OF *THE VICTIM*

The Victim is the first novel about Dalits written by Vibhavari Shirurkar, a distinguished writer far ahead of her time, was born Balutai Anant Khare on 01 October 1905. She was sent by her forward-thinking father to be educated at Hingane, an ashram for widows. The novel *The Victim* throws light on the protagonist Aaba and the Chorbasti he belongs to. Aaba, the protagonist after getting educated in a Gandhi Ashram up to seventh standard decides to change the destiny of his people who were living as sub humans behind the barbed wires demarcated by the Britishers, being branded as criminals by birth under the provisions of the Criminal Tribes' Act of 1871. After India's independence, it was repealed by the Indian Constitution. However, the people from the Branded communities carry the stigma to be born to a criminal tribe and are exploited by the people from the upper caste.

Vibhavari Shirurkar in the novel *The Victim* successfully portrays the two phases in the life of the protagonist Aaba, one before independence and another after independence. The novel was originally written in Marathi as *Bali* and translated into English as *The Victim* (2006) by Yashodhara Deshpande Maitra and won Sahitya Akademi Award. The novel won Sahitya Akademi. The novel depicts the predicament of the protagonist when he returns to the Chorbasti after spending his formative 12 years of childhood in the Gandhi Ashram and getting educated there till seventh standard. Aaba, when returns to his Chorbasti, he doesn't find any similarity between him and his kith and kins. Even he feels that he doesn't belong to Chorbasti. After completing his education at Gandhi Ashram, Aaba wants to meet with his family members and get reunited with them

with bonds of love and affection. However when he reaches Chorbasti his feelings have changed and a sudden revulsion and feeling of pity for his relatives and people of his community have arisen in his mind. Vibhavari Shirurkar very minutely observes the inner change happen in the mind of Aaba, the protagonist and his predicament in the following words:

He had often pictured his joyful union with his family: Aai-baap, brothers, sisters, all held together with deep bonds of love and affection. In this filthy place, these broken down souls, covered with tattered, putrid rags-were they really his kin? No! This could not be the family stored in his memory. For twelve years he had lived in a different world, cocooned in that free and open atmosphere. And had sped home, seeking love and affection. But, those emotion-laden bonds seemed to have taken on this inhuman form just to test him. The world he had left behind was still enticing him. His beautiful dream was shattered; now he was back facing the stark reality. (Shirurkar 7)

Aaba wanted to change not only the atmosphere of his basti but he also wanted to change the people in the Chorbasti on the basis of Gandhian ideals. However, he faces several hurdles in the path. Aaba whole-heartedly participates in India's Independence movement as per the ideals of Gandhi initially. However, he turns violent envisaging the need of the hour. He expects the great change in the Indian society and his Chorbasti after India's Independence. However, nothing has been changed over the years even after India's independence. The leaders who promised to bring about changes in the people's lives of the branded community could not



fulfill their promises and the people of branded communities have to resort to the old ways and means to earn their livelihood. Aaba tried to convince the people of his tribe to follow Gandhian ideals. However, gradually nobody pays attention to the advice of Aaba as they had to starve if they will have to follow the advice of Aaba. Ultimately, his own tribesmen kill Aaba as he becomes hurdle in their path of illegal means of livelihood. Aaba who remained bachelor to bring about change in his tribe was killed by his own tribesmen. He was brutally murdered by Bhivadada by smashing a large rock on Aaba's head.

The novel ends with the remark of the novelist who is also the narrator of *The Victim*. She remarks:

Cruelty started to cackle. Purity looked at Aaba's corpse, recalled the memories of past martyrs, and grew dejected. The ruling force and all the wisdom of the world adorned the veil of purity, and readied themselves to set the legal network and executioners' tools to punish the 'culprit'. With goodness and decency destroyed, these human beasts set off, to plunder and loot. To struggle to live! Sharpening weapons they would need to survive in a dehumanized world. (Shirurkar153)

The novelist and the narrator of *The Victim* brings forth the plight of the branded communities during British India and Post-Independent India. The narrator narrates the stark reality of branded communities in such a manner as if she belongs to the branded community.

The class consciousness and Dalit consciousness are not same as they belong to two separate

categories. The experience of the poor and the experience of the exclusion on the basis of the particular tribe differ on the basis of the degree of oppression they undergo. The experience of the poor upprecaste and the poor Dalit cannot be the same. Therefore, there is difficulty in deciding the authenticity of the Dalit consciousness shared by the savarna writers. Prof. Laura Brueck considers Dalit consciousness as a central concept in both the creation and evaluation of Dalit literature. She writes that Dalit consciousness is the Dalit chetna, an experiential and political perspective made up of the first hand knowledge of caste-based oppression and atrocity, along with the political goal of a liberating awakening that results from the exposure of this atrocity as central to the maintenance of caste hierarchies (Brueck)

However, *The Victim* is not written from the perspective of the savarnas to show the tribes by birth criminal. The novelist Shirurkar tries to convey through the novel the circumstances under which the branded tribes commit the crimes. The Government administration, politicians and the Savarna people take advantage of the branded tribes' disadvantaged socio-economic as well as educational condition to subjugate them. Here, Shirurkar not only writes from the empathetic approach but she is also compassionate toward the tribes. The protagonist Aaba's long stay at Gandhi Ashram made him a good human being and inculcated in him good habits. However, the world beyond the Gandhi Ashram is not amenable to accommodate him. Here, Shirurkar points out the social reality that could not be changed by Gandhian ethics and ideology.

Gandhian Ideology failed to annihilate the caste barrier in the society. Therefore, Raee, the girl



belonged to Scheduled caste didn't dare to marry Aaba, who belong to Maang-Garudi community. Here, people from the lowest caste also follow the caste hegemony and despise other caste lower to them. The novelist also points out the false promises of the Congress leaders to bring about change in the lives of the lowest communities after independence while garnering support from them in India's freedom struggle. However, after India became Independent they also showed the same treatment toward the branded communities which was shown by the Britishers. In this respect, the novelist does not fall short in showing Dalit consciousness in *The Victim*.

The protagonist of the novel, Aaba wholeheartedly, honestly and devotedly tries to bring about reformation in his community. He also participated in the freedom struggle movement to see the new light for his community after India's independence. He sacrificed his life, remained bachelor to see the positive change in his community. However, the elected government of Independent India didn't pay attention for the uplift of the branded tribes. They were treated as criminals as they use to be treated by British officers before India's independence. Therefore, for their livelihood they had to resort to petty crimes. Aaba tried to preach them Gandhian ideology to wear neat and cleanly clothes, giving importance to purity of speech and the earning their livelihood by righteous ways. However, the social circumstances, hunger and poverty compelled them to return to their previous profession. Aaba's attempt to make them respected citizens of India by removing the blot of criminality failed. Aaba was insisting them to return to the honest ways. However, his tribesmen considered him

as their enemy as he was coming in their way to satiate their hunger by thieving and looting they ultimately killed him. Aaba could not fulfill his dream and his Gandhian ideals failed to bring about any changes in his community and the approaches of upper caste people towards the branded community. The novelist however is able to communicate the stark reality of the community of the branded as if it is the reality of novelist herself.

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE BRANDED:

Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography *The Branded* originally written in Marathi as *Uchalya* in 1987 was translated into English by P.A. Kolharkar in 1998 as *The Branded: Uchalya*. The autobiography is an account of the tribes which have been branded as criminal tribes by British law. Even after independence these tribes have been suffering a stigma of criminal tribes. The plight of these tribes is more deplorable than the erstwhile untouchables. The erstwhile untouchables and now termed as Scheduled Castes have the village of their own. Though they are discriminated against by Savarnas, yet they at least have found a place in the village community. The untouchable communities have the stigma of untouchability by birth. Likewise, the branded communities have been looded down as born criminals. They were denied an opportunity of lawful living. They were forced to resort to thieving and pilfering to satisfy the basic wants-hunger and shelter. The autobiography of Laxman Gaikwad is an attempt to shed some light on the lives of the people of branded communities. Speaking about his objective in writing autobiography Laxman Gaikwad says:

However, while engaged in bringing home to my people that we have every right to live as



dignified human beings, that we must live decently and honourably eschewing criminal and immoral ways of earning livelihood, that we must educate ourselves and unite in strength against injustice inflicted upon us. I realized that the so-called intellectuals, important people, and the middle class had absolutely no idea of the sorrows of my community. Hence, this urge to write to awaken this bourgeois society to the sorrows and plight of my unfortunate community. It is high time that the established political and social leaders and classes set aside their prejudices and preconceptions about my community and began to rethink, in humanistic terms. At the same time those of us who have acquired the benefits of modern education must not forget the inherent bond and must ever remain committed to the betterment of the lot of our mother-community. It is with this dual purpose that I undertake to write down the following rankling account of my life. (Gaikwad viii)

Speaking about the rootlessness of the Uchalya community Laxman begins his autobiography in the following words, "No NATIVE PLACE, No birth-date. No House or farm. No caste, either. This is how I was born. In an Uchalya community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur" (Gaikwad1)

. Even after 40 years of independence if the protagonist Laxman had to express such sentiments we are reminded of the statement of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in his visit to Gandhiji at Manibhuvan, 'Gandhiji, I have no homeland' (Keer166)

Without any regular source of income, ho house and even not having the caste of their own the people of the Uchalya community have to resort to the business of petty thieving to earn their livelihood. Democratically elected governments even after 50 years of independence do not take care of the welfare and uplift of such tribes. The people of the branded tribes are considered criminals immediately after their birth. The mark of being criminal is attached to them since their birth. The autobiography of Laxman Gaikwad is an honest attempt to familiarize the plight of the people of his community to the rest of the world who are unknown to it. Laxman Gaikwad's father decides to educate his youngest son Laxman. Laxman studies up to ninth standard.

He got awareness of exploitation of his community due to the education he has got. The autobiography throws light on the insensible and irresponsible approach of government and police towards the branded tribes. They use inhuman methods to punish the thieving community without having any will to improve their lot and provide avenues for them to earn their livelihood with dignity. The ignorance on the part of the branded tribes, indifference of government towards their lot and the encouragement by the people who want to earn easy money on the thieving business of the branded communities are the factors responsible for the backwardness and involvement of the branded communities in the thieving business. Brutal treatment by the police and the approach of society towards them like a criminal, branding them criminals by birth are the factors that compel them to continue the business of thieving and neglect of education.



It was a notion prevalent among the Pathrut community that education is not their domain. They have a firm belief that Brahmins and merchants only had a privilege to send their children to school. The Brahmanical value system was deeply rooted in their minds that they consider sending their children to school against the social custom of Pathrut community. In such a social environment it was unimaginable for anybody to get any inspiration to get educated.

The setting of the autobiography seems to be the setting of 'picaresque novel' in which the protagonist is a scoundrel caught in the whirlwind of circumstances committing the wrong deeds much against his wish. The protagonist Laxman, holds responsible the government, police and the society for the degraded position of the people of the Branded tribe and their resorting to the illegal profession of thieving.

Laxman was discriminated against in the school by the teacher and the students of the upper caste. They used to tease him. Hunger and poverty are the constant companions of Laxman. His story throws light on the inhuman aspect of Indian society that brands particular sections of society as criminals depriving them of all the resources of their livelihood. After analyzing the autobiography the autobiography of Laxman Gaikwad we realized that Laxman looked towards the issues of his community from the perspective of Marxism. While working in the textile mill, he raises the issues of the labourers. He also became a member of the labour organization that was affiliated to Marxist ideology. Due to compelling economic situation Laxman could pursue his study up to ninth standard and then take up the job at the textile mill to earn his livelihood. Later, he was

appointed as Labourer's representative on the management of the mill. As the leader of the labourers he put forth all the legitimate demands before the management of the mill. However, the management of the mill adopted the policy of 'divide and rule' against the workers of the mill and they successfully failed the strike of the workers. The charges were leveled against Laxman and he was sacked from his job. To make both ends meet he had to do the petty works like running a tea stall near the mill, working as a peon in Nagar Palika, as a checker at toll, running a cycle repair shop and later a vegetable and provision shop, etc. For time being he tried his hand to become a contractor. However, due to the corruption prevalent in the government office, he had to stop his work.

Later, he engaged himself in awakening the consciousness of the people of his community against the atrocities of the society and the police department. He also organized the rallies and marches against the injustice of the government and police against the branded tribes. He also founded Pathrut Samaj Sanghatana for the uplift of his community. He tried unsuccessfully to run a hostel and school under the aegis of Pathrut Samaj Sanghatana. For some time, he was engaged in the work of running a cooperative dairy with his sister-in-law. However, he was misused by his sister-in-law for corrupt practices and economic discrepancies in the society without giving any monetary benefit to him. Due to his poor economic condition he had to drive away his elder brother Harchanda who was epileptic. He also contested Loksabha election on the ticket of BSP and due to economic crisis he had to support his rival Congress candidate. After making an in-depth study of the autobiography of Laxman Gaikwad it is



found that the protagonist gives much importance to material gains and economic security. In that respect, he is much concerned about advancement rather than finding out the ways that make him completely liberated from the physical slavery as well as the slavery of mind. However, towards the end of the autobiography we find some change in the mindset of the protagonist that he rises above the boundaries of his community and decides to work for the transformation of the Nomadic, and Denotified Tribes, and the Scheduled Tribes, and the exploited and downtrodden underdogs.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE VICTIM AND THE BRANDED:

Both *The Victim* and *The Branded* portray the plight of The Branded communities who were branded as criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribes Settlements Act(1925) enacted by British led Government of India. *The Victim* is a novel and written by Vibhavari Shirurkar, a Savarna writer and *The Branded* is an autobiography of Laxman Gaikwad, himself belonging to the Pathrut community, that is included in the list of branded communities. *The Victim* portrays the lives of the Branded communities from Pre-Independent India to Post-Independent India. Therefore, we get a whole picture of the apartheid treatment of The Branded tribes both by the British Government as well as the elected government of Independent India. On the other hand, *The Branded* by Laxman Gaikwad throws light on the apartheid treatment of the Branded communities even after Post-Independent India. Here both the writers experience a Dalit insight. Both want to bring about a positive change. Both the works lay focus on the social change. Dalit consciousness is inspired by human freedom. We find the inspiration of human

freedom in both the works. Both the writers want to emancipate the branded communities from the physical, psychological, political and social slavery. The protagonist Laxman somehow successfully started his journey towards that direction by following the Marxist and Ambedkarite ideology. However, Aaba in *The Victim* failed to materialize his dream by following Gandhian ideology.

CONCLUSION

After studying both *The Victim* and *The Branded* we can arrive at the conclusion that Gandhian ideology is successful in bringing about the change of the heart of an individual. In this context, the protagonist Aaba completely changes himself and motivated to bring about changes in his community in particular and Indian society in general. However, it seems that he failed to emerge as a leader and change his community in particular and Indian society in general. In the case of *The Branded* we could see the positive changes in the Pathrut community by the consistent efforts of Laxman Gaikwad. However, we could see the changes in Indian society at a slow pace. Laxman Gaikwad emerges as a leader for the betterment of his community as well as the communities which are oppressed by Brahmanical social order. In this context, we can arrive at the conclusion that we find revolutionary Dalit consciousness in the protagonist Laxman which we don't find in the Protagonist Aaba. However, we don't find any lack of social consciousness in Vibha Shirurkar's *The Victim* though she is a Savarna writer. She is successful in her attempt to portray the social reality of The Branded tribes.

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