



“Flowers on the Grave of Caste”: A Eulogy of Caste Dynamics

Dr Sangeeta

Lucknow, UP, India

Received: 07 Oct 2023; Received in revised form: 10 Nov 2023; Accepted: 23 Nov 2023; Available online: 02 Dec 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper examines Yogesh Maitreya’s poignant short story, “Flowers on the Grave of Caste,” as a profound eulogy encapsulating the intricate dynamics of the caste system. Delving into the narrative, the study explores the symbolic layers that unravel the corrosive impact of caste, challenging established myths and exposing their role in perpetuating hegemonic power. Maitreya’s work is analysed for its adept use of allegory, chronicling the pain and exploitation faced by Dalits while cultivating new aesthetic values. The abstract further discusses the political allegory embedded in Dalit literature and how “Flowers on the Grave of Caste” encapsulates two centuries of Dalit resistance, providing a unique lens to understand the historical context and essence of the Dalit movement. The exploration navigates through the intricacies of caste dynamics, shedding light on the emergence of Dalit literature and showcasing Maitreya’s distinctive narrative prowess.

Keywords— Hegemonic power, Culture, Secular, Ideology, Dalit, Political allegory.



The Varna system serves as a corrosive force, eroding the hierarchical structure of caste by popularizing and fostering myths. These myths are strategically constructed to either rationalize or wield hegemonic power, establishing a perceived superiority over others through the manipulation of cultural, moral, and ideological narratives (Gramsci et al., 2011). The oppressor consistently endeavors to assert dominance, impose control, and exploit others through the tool of cultural hegemony. Consequently, fundamentalists vehemently reject the secular and pluralistic discourse, viewing it as antithetical to their pursuit of supremacy and control. Numerous social reformers, poets, philosophers, and thinkers have vociferously opposed the myth of the caste system, which was fabricated to suppress individuals and impede their freedom, ascent, and development solely on the basis of caste hierarchy.

The advent of Dalit literature in India not only chronicles tales of pain and exploitation but also contributes to the cultivation of novel aesthetic values. Dalit writers and critics harbor distinct perspectives on literature compared to their counterparts in mainstream literature. Their exclusion from elite historiography, demeaning portrayal, and

pervasive subjugation necessitates a literary paradigm that is both radical and revolutionary. Dalit literature, in contrast to mainstream counterparts, directs its focus towards addressing social maladies within the nation, aiming to instill awareness in readers about the perils of caste system exploitation. According to Dalit writers and critics, mainstream Indian literature lacks functional efficacy and primarily derives its significance from parameters of beauty and pleasure.

The Savarna aesthetic paradigm, characterized by its emphasis on truth, goodness, and beauty, proves inadequate in capturing the atrocities and subjugation experienced by the Dalit community. The critique of the caste system by Dalit writers transcends the conventional notions of beauty and pleasure championed by the Savarna literary cohort, as they portray heroes, themes, and ideas that diverge from established norms. Baburao Bagul, a prominent Marathi Dalit writer, contends in one of his essays that the “established literature of India is Hindu literature,” lacking in its authentic representation of Dalits. Dalit writers such as Sharankumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle, Gail Omvedt, Om Prakash Valmiki, Harish Mangalam, and others have openly expressed their skepticism and dissent

regarding the literary pursuits of mainstream Indian literature.

Yogesh Maitreya is one of the Dalit poet, translator, columnist, scholar, and publisher at panther's paw publication. He is working on 'Ambedkari Shahiri' in his Ph.D. He wants to publish his revolutionary ideas but felt demotivate with many sellers and some bookstores take a cut of 40 to 45% of benefits which cause to him to open his own publishing house "Paw Panther Publication". This publication helps him to present his research without hassles of publication. He puts his affords to bring aware regarding the real condition of lower caste in urban area. The author considers caste system as inhuman system in humankind. Human becomes inhuman to another human in which they forget the depth of their fall for being inhuman. He mainly targets urban educated people who are considers as more civilized human in the society. Unfortunately, they trapped of casteism. People in urban area are considered as more civilized which ethnically should be more civilized but reality far away of this logic. The writer critically highlighted the ill mentality of educated people in so called civilized society.

"When I was writing *Flowers on the Graves of Caste*, it was the world which was in the front of my mind, because I *knew* I was writing in English; I was writing my life, I was writing the way I want, but I *wanted* to share this with the world. Most of the audience or the readers of these books are urban-based; mostly students or professionals; people who are readers of the English language- who have access to English." (Singh)

The short story has moved around the subjugation of Dalit in Indian society. The writer has interviewed his grave digger friend. He shared one of his weird experiences when upper caste people denied for burying lower caste dead body at their land. Besides the denial, they forcefully expelled Mahar caste people from their place. It creates double panic situation for them. They lost their love one as well as in their place. This small incident reflects the condition of Dalits in the Indian society. The writer accentuates the festival of humanity which could help to overcome from the pain of casteism. The festival of humanity relates to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's conversion of Buddhism. He converted himself from Dalit to Buddhist. He acclaimed, "I feel free from Hell" (Maitreya, 21). Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar is known as messiah for Dalit who shown the path of knowledge to grow from ground. He had put all efforts to educate the lower caste community. Many Dalits become doctor, engineer, officer etc. due to his immense efforts to educate the society. The writer has

beautifully applied the symbolism in his short story "Flowers on the Grave of Caste". The Flower symbolized the growth of Dalit community. The writer says, "If you plant the seed of a flower on all these graves, and nourish it, it'll grow. The flower does not know any religion. Their character is to grow and spread life" (20-21). In this quote, the writer refers "Seeds" as education; "Flower" as education and "Graves" as castiesm. It has exactly similar characteristic of flower and education that has not discriminated anyone on the bases of caste. Their nature is to grow and spread the essence of life. Education provides the power of knowledge to understand the life which is necessary to understand the real meaning to live life. Dalits mainly suffers due to lack of knowledge. Their unawareness brought them to the edge of struggling. The need of knowledge only can bring the change into their life. It helped them to understand right way to deal hurdles of life. Their subjugation continued due to no objection on their suppression which caused them to carve their own grave. They faced the many problems in their life.

What does it entail to portray Dalit identity not merely as a circumstance, but as an artistic expression? Yogesh Maitreya grapples with this profound question in his life, writings, and endeavors. His ambitious undertaking seeks to reshape the Indian readers' perception, treatment, and engagement with Dalit experiences on the literary stage. Maitreya's approach is not confined to constructing narratives solely from a Dalit viewpoint entangled in narrow identity politics. Quite the contrary, his focus is distinctly nuanced; he endeavors to vividly bring to our consciousness the arbitrary acts of violence against Dalits by Brahmins in rural areas, the plight of urban laborers engulfed in sewer floods, and the struggles of artists whose aspirations are stifled by a life replete with passive-aggressive remarks and perpetual rejections. What distinguishes Maitreya's work is not only the forward-leaning posture of his sentences but also his adept manipulation of symbols and narrative structures. Maitreya views the short story not merely as an artistic expression but also as a potent instrument for societal transformation. Consequently, "Flowers on the Grave of Caste" emerges as a pivotal literary work, not only for those eager to witness the humanization and centralization of Dalit writers in literary discourse but also for enthusiasts anticipating the promising trajectory of a young visionary in the realm of short story craftsmanship.

"Flowers on the Grave of Caste," undoubtedly the most luminous gem within the collection. This narrative adopts the form of an interview between Nagya and a venerable gravedigger who has weathered two centuries. In this narrative zenith, Maitreya delves into profound philosophical musings on the architecture of history, the

ephemeral dance of time, and the individuals consigned to oblivion in our collective awareness at the crossroads of these phenomena. In a tapestry of eloquence, he expounds, "The departed are divested of religious affiliations; it is the living who, through the lens of their beliefs, categorize the departed within the framework of religion" (25).

"Flowers on the Grave of Caste" is adorned with a plethora of highlights, a testament to the book's unparalleled linguistic innovation. The text brims with a profusion of insights that either radiate brightly from the page or delicately illuminate a sentence. A striking illustration of this linguistic finesse is evident in the story "Re-evolution" commencing with the narrator's contemplation of the world "outside bus window, under the scorching sun in the month of May" (26) where eagles soar in the sky, encircling and emitting celebratory cries, seemingly in homage to life. In the wake of this macabre spectacle, the narrator invokes the sagacious counsel of a compatriot from the village: "When any malevolent spirit departs the earthly realm, eagles engage in circular flights, unleashing primal screams. These vocalizations, he contends, signify the dispensation of justice orchestrated by nature" (28).

The savagery depicted in the tableau, coupled with the economy of language, lays the foundation for a narrator whose existence, much akin to the relentless talons of vultures upon carrion, is savagely dismantled by the inequities of caste discrimination. In a parallel vein, Kabir, the protagonist in "The Sense of a Beginning," introspects on his stark dissimilarity from the academic realm of Mumbai. "People here looked different; they smelled different. I yearned to assimilate into their world, covertly wishing to emanate their essence. Yet, the elusive nature of this aspiration persisted" (30). Such chasms, inherent in fundamental disparities, often prove insurmountable. Nevertheless, Maitreya's characters do not invariably capitulate or succumb to the societal pressures imposed upon them by the circumstances of their birth.

The short story "Flowers on the Grave of Caste" unfolds as a potent political allegory, symbolizing the enduring resistance of Dalits against the entrenched caste system. The centenarian gravedigger within the narrative serves as a metaphor for the two centuries of relentless rebellion waged by Dalits against the prevailing caste hierarchy in India. When queried about his age, the gravedigger harkens back to his childhood during the British colonial arrival in India, alluding to the embryonic phase of the Dalit movement in the early colonial era.

The narrative takes a reflective turn as the gravedigger recounts an incident where a Dalit is laid to rest on the boundary between a Muslim and Christian graveyard. This anecdote prompts a retrospective

examination of Dalit exploitation and their ambivalent circumstances during and after colonial rule, especially in the context of conversions to Christianity and Islam. Subsequently, the gravedigger shares the narrative of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, framing the flowers on the grave of caste as the new generation of Dalits fervently disseminating Babasaheb's tenet of "educate, organize, and agitate." Yogesh Maitreya adeptly employs allegory as a literary device, skillfully historicizing the Dalit movement while encapsulating its quintessence within the confines of a short story.

In the poignant narrative of "Life is beautiful" a paternal figure imparts a crucial lesson to his progeny, emphasizing the enduring legacy of their forebears who bore the weight and excrement of societal inequities. The injunction resonates: "Bear in mind, for generations our people have been obliterated under the onus of this society's excrement and burdens. Aspire, instead, to a life imbued with veracity and aesthetics" (Maitreya). Undoubtedly, Maitreya wields his pen as a conduit for unadulterated truth and aesthetic splendor. A raconteur endowed with the resolute social convictions reminiscent of Gorky or Premchand, yet possessing the analytical acumen to dissect and disseminate profound insights into the human condition akin to Chekhov or Manto. "Flowers on The Grave of Caste" heralds the debut of an author with a reservoir of profound narratives, already etching an indelible mark on the literary landscape. This inaugural opus is but a prelude to a promising oeuvre that will undoubtedly yield numerous masterpieces in the years that lie ahead.

Yogesh Maitreya unveils the pervasive caste discrimination entrenched within the established institutions of Indian society, often overlooked in our daily lives. The trajectory of Dalit literature remains dynamic, adapting to the ever-changing position of Dalits within the societal framework. Unlike Savarna writers, Dalit literary expression transcends the constraints of tradition, boldly charting new paths toward human emancipation. Echoing Arjun Dangle's insightful observation, Dalit literature is not merely "separatist" but inherently "inclusive." Therefore, it is crucial to perceive Dalit literature as a catalyst for transformative change and societal development.

In conclusion, "Flowers on the Grave of Caste" by Yogesh Maitreya stands as a compelling eulogy that transcends the boundaries of a mere narrative, delving deep into the complex tapestry of caste dynamics. Through the symbolic richness of the text, Maitreya skillfully dismantles the prevailing myths that uphold the hegemonic power of the caste system, laying bare the stark realities of exploitation and discrimination faced by the Dalit community.

The story's adept use of allegory becomes a powerful tool to chronicle the historical journey of Dalit resistance over two centuries, encapsulating the essence of their struggle within the confines of a short narrative. Maitreya's work not only serves as a poignant reflection on the pain endured by the marginalized but also as a testament to the resilience and unwavering spirit of those who have resisted the oppressive structures of the caste system.

Furthermore, the exploration of caste dynamics within the narrative offers a nuanced understanding of the broader socio-cultural implications, highlighting the emergence of Dalit literature as a potent force for social change. As the analysis unfolds, it becomes evident that Maitreya's unique narrative prowess goes beyond storytelling; it becomes a vehicle for raising awareness about the perils of caste-based discrimination and advocating for social justice.

In essence, "Flowers on the Grave of Caste" not only serves as a literary eulogy but also as a call to action, urging readers to confront the deep-seated issues woven into the fabric of society. Through its exploration of caste dynamics, political allegory, and the emergence of Dalit literature, the story leaves an indelible mark, inviting contemplation and fostering a collective responsibility to dismantle the oppressive structures it so poignantly exposes.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gramsci, Antonio, et al. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1971.
- [2] Maitreya, Yogesh. "Flowers on the Grave of Caste", *Flowers on the Grave of Caste*. Panther's Paw Publications, 2019.
- [3] Maitreya, Yogesh. *Flowers on the Grave of Caste*. Panther's Paw Publications, 2019.
- [4] Riley, Dylan J. "Hegemony, Democracy, and Passive Revolution in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks." *Escholarship.Org*, 2011.
- [5] Rosenfield, Kim. *Re: Evolution*. Les Fignes, an Imprint of Punctum Books, 2023.
- [6] Santucci, Antonio A., et al. *Antonio Gramsci*. Monthly Review Press, 2010.
- [7] Shah, Ghanshyam. "Caste and Democratic politics." *Caste in Contemporary India*, 2017, pp. 68–91, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315095943-4>.
- [8] Singh, Akansha. "Room for One's Own: A Conversation with Yogesh Maitreya." *Lareviewofbooks.org*, LARB, 6 August 2021, lareviewofbooks.org/article/room-for-ones-own-a-conversation-with-yogesh-maitreya/. Accessed 9 Aug. 2022