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Typical characterisation, Gandhian plot and presentation of religions in Shanta Rameshwar Rao's children of god

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Abstract

This paper focuses on progressive writers and examines whether they are biased while writing their novels. Their representation of religion, marriage, and the Gandhian plot is a constant target of criticism. The paper will mainly focus on Shanta Rameshwar Rao's "Children of God" and take references from other non-Dalit writers to understand if a commonality exists in their writings. It unravels the writing style of progressive non-Dalit writers. From Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand and Shanta Rameshwar Rao, there have been numerous works by non-Dalit writers. Writing about Dalits has always been challenging. These writers have been constantly targeted for their biases toward untouchables. This paper will determine if such biases are present among these writers. Do these writers follow a linear plot and fabricate the same types of characters? It tries to answer many such questions. It will help to understand the writing style of some eminent non-Dalit writers.

Keywords: Typical characterisation, Gandhian plot, progressive writers, untouchables, religion

Introduction

The progressive writers' group began with Lakshminarayana in 1921 and has persisted, as evidenced by the novels written by upper-caste Indian writers ranging from Shivaram Karanth to Manu Joseph, which demonstrate their engagement with the poor and downtrodden. Despite being progressive, these writers were born and educated outside the hardships undergone by the 'untouchables' and other underprivileged classes. Naturally, their representations of the poor and oppressed vary from Dalit self-representation. (Kumar 58) These novelists tended to follow a particular mode of characterisation, presentation of marital themes, christen identity, and struggle between Dalits and non-Dalits. They inclined towards Mahatma Gandhi over Dr. Ambedkar.

Gandhian Plots

Children of God by Shanta Rameshwar Rao is a Gandhian Novel like other progressive writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand. Most of these novels exhibit the temple entry movement. In children of God, it has been 25 years since India had freedom. The young boy Kittu decides to enter the temple and have a glimpse of Venugopala. He makes his way to the temple, but when he departs from it, an upper-caste woman encounters him, shrieks and gathers a mob. This young boy has transgressed by entering the temple. Firstly, the mob thrashes him from head to toe until a drunk man comes. They bind him to a giant peepal tree and set him on fire. (Rao 4)

All the Untouchables either yield to their caste role or renounce their life by challenging social norms. Like other progressive writers, Shanta Rameshwar Rao also draws her characters crushed against fate and social norms. Kittu was born on 15th August 1947, on the eve of Independence Day, but he was killed at 25. It displays the failure of Gandhi's movement. Kittu symbolically signifies liberty that the orthodox people of India have seized. Acharya Harish Chandra is a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He wants to ameliorate the condition of the untouchables in Venugopalapuram and reprimands them for their unshakable belief in their past lives' karma, which they believe, has created their present situation, and they do not even think of breaking this shackle.

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Seeing the circumstances, he resolves to pick up filth by himself, which indicates the radicalism that Rao has adopted while writing it.

Around 1.3 million untouchables do scavenging. Most of them are Dalits and especially of the Valmiki caste. (Manual Scavenging) Dr. Ambedkar reproaches Gandhi's way as a trick to engage untouchable masses into another fold of Hindus and does not fetch any potential profit. Congress had thought to grant the untouchables equality in their future Indian Republican nation. Only after Gandhi's efforts could they obtain the right to enter temples. (Galanter 34)

However, Dr. Ambedkar believed in economic and educational advancement, which were the primary needs of untouchables. It was through Political power that Untouchables could find salvation. The idea of the temple entry caught fire only when Annihilation of Caste was published in 1936. It challenged Gandhi's dominance. Therefore, the same year temple entry started and attained success. To Ambedkar, it was just a political move to keep Hindu layers strong. Untouchables were called children of god, which means Harijan. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar opposed using this derogatory term, which stands for a child of Devadasi.

Dr. Umesh B. Bansod reflects on how the novels of progressive writers end with the defeat of untouchable characters. Thus, it points to the orthodoxy of progressive writers and believes in appropriating this behaviour. He affirms that Dalit literature cannot be predicted without quoting B.R. Ambedkar. (Bansod 1)

Bakha was influenced by Gandhi, not by Dr. Ambedkar in Untouchable. All the progressive writers were well aware of Ambedkar's role in eradicating untouchability; when the world could recognise him for his crucial role, they forgot to mention Dr. Ambedkar tells a different tale. It points to the biases that they cultivated in their writing. Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, and Shanta Rameshwar Rao and many more non-Dalit writers never mentioned Ambedkar in their work.

Religion

While presenting religious figures, Mariamma and Venugopala, Rao could not hide her biases. Mariamma is the goddess of the untouchables; when they are in trouble, they worship her and Laxmi's mother continuously repeats her name if there occurs any problem in her life. Venugopala is the primary god of the upper caste. The untouchables could not even look at the statue, and their quarter was a mile away so that it could not pollute Venugopala. This god is the choice of all, and the untouchables worship it in their hearts. The jingling of bells, music and vibration can tempt anyone who passes along the temple. The statue's ageless beauty and smile make it a more appropriate option for reading.

On the contrary, Laxmi, the narrator, describes Mariamma as "The Priest brought the goddess round in circumambulation not the great goddess of rock who was in the shrine but another one, a smaller stone, but charged they said with the same power as the first." (Rao 16) Rao switches the tone and carries her biases while describing church god. When the prayer was going on in the hall, Laxmi felt afraid and wanted to leave but could not do it. Some were looking in the prayer book. The singer threw his hands in the air, clenching his fist and struck the chest.

Rao has used tales that can entice anyone with their descriptions. The first story is of a cowherd boy who finds

Venugopala, and the second is of Champaka, a courtesan and wise woman. Even Kings and noblemen came for her suggestions. The third is about Untouchable Kanka. The Christians have a story of 'Mary the Magdalene', but Mariamma has no story.

Siddha, Laxmi's brother, got himself baptised. By doing this, he obtains food, education, identity and respect. He receives a full name James Siddeshwara, unlike Chokka, Kunta, Kuruda, Bakha, Kala, and Neela. When Laxmi sees him, she cannot believe that her brother has changed. His untouchability has evaporated. The woman in the church also holds Laxmi's hand and takes her to a round of the school. The touch of untouchables can pollute anything, but the missionaries feel no abhorrence towards them.

In another novel, Choma's Drum, Shivaram Karanth does not display the development of the converted character Chainya. Shanta Rao also follows the same with Siddeshwara. Do these characters, Chainya and Siddeshwara, attain more than their untouchable siblings do? No Doubt, these converted characters obtain a sense of belonging, as they are welcome in church. If the church cannot improve them economically, it can inculcate optimism and educate them. They might have at least accepted their existence and have become better than those untouchables who remain trapped and consider themselves subject to their past deeds.

Typical Characterisation of Progressive writers

Like other Progressive writers, Premchand, Shivram karanth, Mulk Raj Anand and Shanta Rao draw their characters as oppressed and submissive. Their characters cannot challenge the caste system and have to accept their fate. There is no radical character in the writings of these writers. In 'Children of God', Boda is a bold character on many occasions. He manifests his fearlessness and is ready to beat even an upper caste man, the son of the toddy owner. He thrashes and abuses him back without bowing down, but his father presses him to comply with what the age-old traditions have ordained. He even starts earning for his self-respect and abandons his house when his father beats him for his servitude to the upper caste.

In Mumbai, Boda pretexts to be of weaver caste and works in Brahman woman's house. Thus, he takes his revenge on the upper caste people. He seems successful in his life until he falls in love with Ganga. Since his arrival in the city, no one has minded his untouchability. When the matter of marriage comes, his friend Govinda, the Union leader, also abuses and warns him not to think beyond his limit. Here, Boda shatters and returns to his village.

Soma is another bold character on many occasions. She aids Boda and offers him money to go to the city. On the feast day, she even takes a large portion of the food. She stands for Kittu's education and warns the teacher to take his admission, or the court will take action against him. She does not submit on any occasion.

Once there is no water in the untouchable quarter, they fetch it from the upper caste people's well. The upper caste women abuse the untouchables for coming to take water from their well. Everyone trembles except Soma. She goes directly and draws water from the well. There is an outcry that the water has been defiled. However, she is a strong character except for her stand in society. She believes education, bathing and wearing a full sari are useless for an untouchable. They will not bring any positive change. Her

unacceptance that anything special can happen with an untouchable count her as a weak character.

Sheha Jajoria highlights a disparity between Dalits and Non-Dalit writers. In Rao's novel, the Dalit characters readily yield to upper-caste norms. (Jajoria 209) Laxmi has no question about her people's growth, but she is infatuated with Acharya Harishchandra. She wears a fine sari to tempt the master. When Radha was in jail, she rejoices that now she could alone look after the master.

On the contrary, Sivkami's characters, exploited more harshly than Rao's, do not bow and fight for their rights. Boda cannot marry Ganga, whereas Elangovan, a lower caste man, marries Lalitha, an upper caste girl. According to Ambedkar, "I am convinced that real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin". Sivkami's characters are audacious and can combat for their rights. (Jajoria 209)

In *Children of God*, the chief priest Krishnamacharya has to quench his thirst at an untouchable's house. He instructs the woman of the house not to disclose the incident to anyone, or he will have no pride left. He does not pity anyone. He feels temporary love for the untouchable young girl that is mechanical because, after a while, he even argues with god to leave this place of untouchables and to stop polluting himself. When the god promises to return his statue, the priest returns without even thanking god. Thus, he seems more powerful than god himself.

Then the chief priest returns to the temple. Firstly, he cleans himself. However, the god himself has become a scavenger, but the priest fails to learn anything. Rao has radically created Venugopala as a sweeper boy. Thus, the priest cares about his profession rather than god. During the conversation between Venugopala and Krishnancharya, Venugopala seems to appease the chief priest. The power relation between god and the priest has reversed. Now god depends on the call of a priest. The flute player says to the priest, "These people cried out to me in their need and they loved me and I had to answer their call". (Rao 154)

Another typical character of a progressive writer is Laxmi, who is a submissive woman and narrates the novel. She thinks her child's death is the result of their past karma. She is not a responsible parent though she has spent time with father Pierre, and Hrishchandra but to no avail. When she and Mada go for Kittu's admission, she becomes numb, as if she does not know anything. Only when Soma asks the school authority to take kittu's admission she speaks & tries to terrify them by citing the law.

Laxmi's mother always repeats Mariamma's name. She is the most innocent woman. She punishes herself when some upper-caste man touches her by mistake. She also believes in past deeds. She also works like her other untouchables and picks filth. She has much more to endure and receives a beating in the prize from her husband. She goes through mental, sexual and Physical trauma. At last, her husband murders her under the influence of toddy and offers her salvation in death.

Choma also seems to have murdered his wife under the same effect in the novel *Choma's Drum*. In the novels, *Scavenger's son* and *Untouchable*, Chudulamuttu and Bakha's mother are also shown dead. It might be because women also engaged in scavenging work, then beating and labour might have killed them slowly. Most of the progressive writers seem to follow this. By doing this, they

already make the ambience desolate. Thus, the characters also end up being oppressed.

They do not appear audacious and cannot challenge the social canons and ask untouchables due from society. Bhabani Bhattacharya achieves this in his novel 'He Who Rides a Tiger'. The characters Swap caste identities and challenge society. In this way, protagonist Kale & his daughter Chandra Lekha develop a new identity and shake the whole caste system. Kale becomes a renowned priest in the city.

Death and birth are not ceremonious events in the lives of untouchables. It is a troublesome situation for the family when an infant is born. In Sidda's words, "What is it but one more mouth to feed, one more belly crying with hunger?" (Rao 11) Laxmi's mother has 13 deliveries; only six could live out of them. Four of them had died at birth, one had lost blood and only water left in his body, so he died, and two died of cholera.

Laxmi wails about her fate; she has to borrow money from Sethi for the funeral of her mother and son. In *Scavenger's Son*, Chudalamutu has to bury his father in the open ground late at night. The dog defaced the dead body. In *Choma's Drum*, Choma worries about the death of his child, who had drowned in the river. How will he manage expenses for it? In *Children of God*, Laxmi's mother did not wear flowers on her hair when she was alive. Ironically in her death, she was adorned with flowers. Laxmi also says, "While Kittu was alive, we had fed on gruel and ground chillies. But now that he is dead there must be feast." (Rao 115)

The dead person's soul will give no peace and spread disease if everyone is not fed. The unappeased ghost would enter the living bodies of people. The superstitious rituals enfeeble humans. Thus, they push them into eternal mental trauma.

Conclusion

Writing about Dalits and any social group, it is crucial to keep away biases that can hinder a book's success. The progressive writers follow a linear plot. Usually, the mother is absent or has died, and the father is a liquor fan. The characters can never conquer their battle and appear weak. The writers deliberately offer them set roles according to tradition. Rao's prejudice against other religions is apparent in the novel. The progressive writers were partially orthodox and radical in their approach. Their elimination of Dr. Ambedkar from their novels and their hero worship of Mahatma Gandhi concretely point at it. By creating god as a scavenger, Rao infused radicalism in his novel. The narrative of the Non-Dalit writers is somewhere between appropriation and a presentation of reality and it needs to be further searched.

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