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Struggle for Emancipation and Dalit Consciousness in the Autobiography *My Father Baliah*

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Abstract

Dalit life narratives as a genre from the Telugu states are of recent origin. Unlike life narratives in Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil languages, few from the Telugu states caught the attention of scholars. Despite this, Y.B. Satyanarayana, a teacher and writer from Telangana wrote an auto/biography, *My Father Baliah,* in 2011 making it a valuable addition to the stream of Dalit life writings. It narrates an inspiring story of three generations spanning across two centuries. Originally written in English, this life narrative serves as an important intervention in the social history of India because it is a product of a Dalit agency where the story is written from the point of view of Dalits, a perspective often marginalized by mainstream narratives. Using this life narrative, this article attempts to deal with the cultural politics of Dalit literature, the dynamic between the Dalit life narrator and the Dalit community, the implications of writing Dalit literature in English, and more importantly the need to recognize Dalit agency in colonial modernity with the ultimate objective of making a case for Dalit emancipation.

Keywords

Dalit Literature, Dalit Life Narratives, Dalit Consciousness, Colonial Modernity, Dalit Writing in English, Y.B. Satyanarayana

Introduction

Beginning from the 1960s, Dalit literature in the form of poetry, novels, essays, drama, and songs has been instrumental in challenging the canon of Indian literature that is either heavily fraught with a patriarchal and caste-ridden Hindu consciousness glorifying the pre-colonial past or in the guise of modernity, restricts the discourse on caste to the traditional, inadequately educated rural spaces thereby rendering caste as a matter of the past. For a long time and perhaps even today, Indian literature both written

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in *bhashas* (regional languages) and English, fell short of taking a radical view on caste and offering solidarity with the political and cultural movement of Dalits. Dalit writers have been challenging such trends and notions to present an alternative perspective on Indian society with an intention to bring about change using the intellectual legacy of Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar. This perspective or what is popularly called as Dalit consciousness advocates equality, self-respect and human dignity, which is antithetical to the hierarchical and discriminatory brahmanical/*savarna* (caste Hindu) ideology. Dalit literature has consistently countered the representation of Dalits by non-Dalits as "objects of pity, helpless, child-like" (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 8). This misrepresentation which was particularly observed in the writings of "upper" caste social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, snatched away the agency and lived experience of Dalits. Later, in the postcolonial India, Dalit writers had to build a cultural base inspired from 1970s Dalit Panthers movement to reveal the discrimination, suffering and exploitation of Dalits right under the nose of the liberal and democratic Indian state. This cultural project required representing the authentic experience of Dalits and employing realism that demanded a solidarity with the Dalit movement instead of a realism that pleaded for sympathy. This movement which started in Maharashtra slowly inspired other states such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu leading to the emergence of the most celebrated genre in Dalit literature, i.e., the autobiography. It's safe to say that this genre made Dalit literature popular across India. The autobiographies were published in various bhashas beginning with Marathi in the 1970s and followed by Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia. Some notable works such as Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (originally published in Marathi in 1978), Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot* (originally published in Marathi in 1981), Baby Kamble's *Prisons We Broke* (originally published in Marathi in 1986), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (originally published in Hindi in 1997), Vasant Moon's *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (originally published in Marathi in 1995), Bama's *Karukku* (originally published in Tamil in 1992), exposed the ugly truth of graded inequality, i.e., the caste system that has been lurking under the much-celebrated veil of diversity and national unity of India. Those works represented simultaneously the awareness of being oppressed and the consciousness of change which are fundamental to Dalit movement. This generated a distinct set of literary aesthetics through which Dalit literature was able "to make it possible to talk in the language of caste" (Kumar, 2018, p. 57).

Today, other than realism, Dalit writers have been exploring various genres and narrative techniques where works such as *Kusumabale* by Devanoora Mahadeva (1988), Cho. Dharma's *Koogai* (2005), Des Raj Kali's *Shanti Parav* (2009) employ elements of fantasy, horror, magic realism and experimental aesthetics. However, there are important reasons to consider as to why Dalit writers made autobiography almost synonymous with Dalit literature. As Dalit literature is inextricably entwined with Dalit political movement, Dalit writers felt that autobiographies could act as testimonies thereby creating a much bigger political impact than other genres such as poetry, drama and fiction (Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2018, pp. 21–22). Apart from political movement, Dalit literature also has the objective of recontextualising the

rhetoric around history and culture. Dalit writings wanted to look at history and culture from the point of view of the marginalized which helped in understanding how savarna consciousness always acted as an undercurrent in determining not only the popular notions around history and culture but also the interventionist methodologies such as Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Studies. These methodologies have either collapsed caste into class or did not privilege the lived reality of Dalits according to which caste becomes a constituent factor in historical, cultural and political consciousness. Hence, Dalit writers resorted to life narratives that had the scope to retrieve the history and culture of Dalits by which they can act as the "site of counter-memory to power". (Kumar, 2018, p. 60).

Life narrative is the term that is being used today to discuss self-referential writings such as autobiographies as the "term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life narratives and life narrators in the West and elsewhere around the globe" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 4). Dalit writers and scholars further understand the category of life narratives as "critical life narratives" to describe the patriarchal caste-ridden Indian society or *testimonio* to emphasize both a group's oppression and a sense of agency in the Dalit narratives. Critics such as Gopal Guru, Bhikhu Paarekh, and Raj Kumar have tried to discover the socio-historical context responsible for the emergence of self-referential writings in Indian literature. Kumar (2004) points out that "the consciousness of new individuality during British rule and loosening of the community bond gave rise to the subjectivity necessary in autobiographies" (p. 52). Similarly, Bhikhu Parekh locates the British colonial period during which "modern individualism and rationalism" were introduced whereby "access to western literature offered the necessary intellectual tools for writing autobiographies" (1989; as cited in Kumar, 2004, p. 52). Hence, it is safe to argue that "autobiography as a practice is linked to individualism that articulates itself in the conditions of modernity" and "in India, writing autobiography, therefore, is a modern phenomenon" (Guru, 2017, para. 1). Though the same context of modernity and individuality led to the Indian autobiographies—initially written by "upper" castes and then followed by Dalits—the Dalit life narratives represent a consciousness different from the "upper" caste ones. Kumar's (2004) observation substantiates this difference when he writes:

> Even when successful, none of them [Dalits] has celebrated life achievement. This is in contrast to the upper caste Indian autobiographies who have invariably recorded their achievements in different fields with a sense of self-satisfaction and celebrated their glories and power in public. Dalits are not sure about their social positions and hence they seem to be insecure till the very end of their autobiographies. They use their community culture and identity for Dalit solidarity and self-assertion like an ethnographic account rather than as a personalized self (p. 200).

The objectives and issues that predominantly feature in Dalit life narratives also constitute what Margo Perkins calls "rewriting the self" where "struggle against the

socially dominant untouchable identity is a fundamental battle for Dalit writers as they attempt to undermine old definitions with new imaginations" (2000; as cited in Hunt, 2014, p. 199). Similarly, Dalit life narratives are also identified as countering the "silence and misrepresentation of Dalits" (Rege, 2006, p. 13) and a "source of intrusion in the calm, contemplative and reflective mode of autobiographical writings" (Kumar, 2018, p. 60). Guru (2017), as mentioned earlier, talks about the influence of bourgeois society on the development of Indian autobiographies where the individual self "I" becomes prominent (para. 1). Then the question arises as to how an individual Dalit self in the autobiographies can speak for its community when Dalit consciousness is fundamentally concerned with establishing a political subject called Dalit. However, Pandian argues that "Dalit life narratives have violated genre boundaries by depleting the "I"—an outcome of bourgeois individualism—and by displacing it with the collectivity of the Dalit community" (Rege, 2006, p. 13). But a more nuanced analysis of this individual-community dynamic is given by Hunt (2007) in her discussion on Hindi Dalit autobiographies where she complicates the notion of the Dalit individual "self" representing the Dalit community. She talks about the "complex picture of Dalit subjectivity where the protagonist (I) and the Dalit community (We) are inextricably linked in a complex web of meaning, yet without loss of either the individual or the community" (2007, p. 551). She also writes, "By reinforcing a certain presence of individuality, emotional interiority and intellectual life, Dalits claim their status as equal human beings without threatening their simultaneous claims to a communal identity" (p. 557). Therefore, we can argue that the complexity of Dalit life narratives lies not only in their challenge to the savarna representations but also in the tension between representing their individual self and collective self. Hence, one has to understand how the genre of Dalit life narrative negotiates with categories such as caste, class, religion, and gender and in this regard, this article aims to bring out how Y.B. Satyanarayana's (2013) *My Father Baliah* becomes an exemplary text to not only discuss those issues but also to make a case for Dalit emancipation. This article is divided into three sections which establish *My Father Baliah* as an important intervention in the context of socio-cultural history of Dalits, argue for the importance of English for Dalit articulation, and discuss the Dalit agency in the context of colonial modernity respectively. The concluding section identifies the limitations within the chosen text and attempts to contemplate the appropriate direction that Dalit cultural movement needs to take.

My Father Baliah – An Important Intervention

Dalit literature in Telugu-speaking states was not only influenced by Ambedkarite politics but also shaped by the movements which arose owing to the specific socio-political history of those states. These include the Dalit Nationalist movement of the 1920s and 30s which fought against the Brahmanical hegemony in the Indian independence struggle; the Telangana Armed Rebellion in the late 1940s in which the peasants rose against the oppressive landlords under whom they were forced to do bonded labour; the Naxalite movement of the 60s and 70s to which the landless and the exploited Dalits supplied cadre but the movement's leadership failed in offering a

radical response to the caste question because of its preference to the identity of class; the rise in atrocities against Dalit communities in 70s and 80s among which the horrific 1985 Karamchedu massacre led to a popular Dalit *Mahasabha* (Congress) movement in Andhra Pradesh which highlighted the importance of establishing a solid political front for Dalits; the *Dandora* (Clarion call by Drum beat) movement which spoke for the relatively more exploited sections among Dalits and the centenary celebrations of Ambedkar and Phule coupled with debates over backward castes' reservation in the 90s and finally the more recent writings of the twenty-first century which brought women writers and experimentation to the spotlight in order to represent a distinct Dalit world-view. These movements led to a rich repertoire of Dalit writings in this region in various forms such as poetry, songs, plays, short stories, and personal narratives. This article attempts to establish that the autobiography *My Father Baliah* published in 2013 enables one to get the sense of complex history and social life of Dalits as seen through the inspirational journey of the author's family.

Although in the introduction, this article had autobiography in focus, it is difficult to strictly confine *My Father Baliah* to any one genre. The text is divided into two parts, namely, Narsiah's World and Satiah Speaks. The first part deals with the stories of the author or life narrator's great-grandfather (Sr. Narasiah), grandfather (Jr. Narasiah), and father (Baliah) and is narrated in the third person point of view. The second part completely deals with Baliah and his family narrated in first person by the author. Hence, the narrative spans three generations and two centuries. Satyanarayana himself says in the preface that the story of the first part is based on whatever his father has told him making it an oral history and an auto/biography—biography inserted within an autobiography. However, even in the second part where we have Satyanarayana narrating his story, the focus of the narrative is less on Satyanarayana himself and more on the struggle of his entire family, making it a family chronicle. In addition to this, it is also has elements of social history—writing history about the marginalised sections using lived experience—where the author depicts the life of Dalits during the times of feudal, colonial, and post-independent Telangana. The second part is a life narrative where Baliah becomes a "significant other" whose story is "deeply implicated in the narrator's and through whom the narrator understands her or his own self-formation" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 65).

First, this text serves as an important intervention in the social history of India because it is a product of a Dalit agency where the story is written from the point of view of Dalits, a perspective often marginalized by mainstream narratives. One of the distinct features of Dalit literature is to engage with the project of "cultural politics" reconstituting "the terms of cultural and political discourse in India" (Kumar, 2018, p. 57). Satyanarayana (2013) in his preface, reveals the intention of writing about his family as:

> It is time we started writing our own histories. The stories written by Brahmins beginning with 'Once upon a time, there lived a poor Brahmin …' should stop now. I feel that it is not my family alone but every Dalit – and non-Dalit – who should know about our past in order to create a better future (p. 16).

Second, autobiographies also have legacy motives for passing memory on to one's posterity. Satyanarayana states that he has written the life narrative for his granddaughter to preserve their family history. This could be understood as not only preserving history but also acknowledging its "potential for reshaping the future" as he implied earlier (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 21).

Throughout the text, even when he is narrating his great-grandfather and grandfather's story, Satyanarayana (2013) in an auto-ethnographic style, gives a detailed description of the cultural and social life of Dalits. This makes his life narrative a rich repertoire of India's subaltern culture. In some instances, through these cultural descriptions, Satyanarayana tries to situate Dalit culture in stark contrast with savarna culture. His description of priesthood serves as an example—"Unlike in Brahminism, where the priest is a Brahmin, male and hierarchical, and the Varnashrama Dharma is institutionalized, there are no priests for these deities, and every untouchable is a priest unto himself or herself" (p. 27). But he mentions this when he was commenting about the superstitions among Dalit communities during the time of his great-grandfather. Similarly, when describing his parents' marriage, he writes, "Unlike the Brahmin priests, the baindlaina rendered just one Sanskrit shloka 'Shuklambara dharam …' to solemnize the wedding" (p. 59). He talks about this *baindlaina* (a person who performs weddings among the untouchable castes) for the last time when the Brahmin friends of his brother were mocking him for his non-Brahmanical accent and also as he knew only one shloka (p. 153). Based on these observations, this article argues that though Satyanarayana was trying to point out how distinct Dalit culture is and how it has more egalitarian features such as priesthood irrespective of caste, and women being allowed to carry the bier of the dead, he was also viewing that culture with a critical eye. This criticism becomes even sharper when he laments the fact that the belief in certain superstitions among Dalit communities such as "witch-hunting, sorcery, and persecution of—and incantations against—evil spirits" eventually paralyzed the leg of one of his nieces (p. 162). This tendency among Dalit life narratives to simultaneously assert the recovery of Dalit culture and to maintain a critical distance from the same culture has been well discussed by Hunt (2007). She argues that "Dalits have struggled against externally ascribed untouchable identity in an effort to redefine their caste community in positive and self-assertive terms" (p. 546). However, she also cautions about the cost of this positive self-assertion in the form of "ambivalences" with which Dalit autobiographies "struggle to reconcile their low-caste identity with their current urban middle-class status and their claims to represent all members of Dalit community are challenged" (p. 545). This argument looks fair but instead of viewing it as an ambivalence, it is important to recognize the potential of Dalit writers themselves offering an internal critique in achieving emancipation from all forms of oppression and for all Dalits. This article believes that *My Father Baliah* subscribes to such emancipation and also overcomes the unfortunate tendency of "drifting away from a sense of collective movement" observed in second-generation Dalit life narratives (Devaprakash, 2019, p. 17). This is so because, throughout the narrative, the

author never finds it problematic to identify with the Dalit community. This becomes evident as the narrator on multiple occasions shows how Dalits have internalized the caste hegemony and the need to come out of it and whenever he or his family members faced any humiliation, he expressed his concerns not in personal but collective terms. For example, when his grandfather fails to explain why the "upper" caste teachers won't allow Baliah to school, Satyanarayana (2013) writes:

> Narsiah had no answer to his son's argument; he was unable to explain to his son the laws of Manusmriti, that sage Manu had codified everything about the Hindu way of life, and untouchables had, for centuries together, been segregated. Sin and punishment – papamu and dandana – are infallible tenets of Hindu laws regarding Sudras and untouchables. This ideology conditioned the minds of the untouchables to believe that they would be committing a grave sin if they went against this law (p. 37).

Satyanarayana also repeatedly makes it a point that compared to other Dalits, his family is better privileged. Commenting on the life of Dalits in the railways he writes:

> The family, unlike other untouchable families, actually lived a comfortable life, though not in luxury. There was no struggle for food, shelter and clothing as the wages from the railways took care of these necessities. This was the case with most untouchable families working in the railways. They could even think of educating their children. For these very reasons, these families were also alienated from their own communities in the villages (p. 43).

Though the entire narrative is about how Baliah's family rose out of poverty and untouchability, the author's repeated reference to their relative privilege could be understood as his intention to inspire his community to move to the cities and get empowered through education. This becomes clear when Satyanarayana (2013) in his preface acknowledges—"We could very easily have been in the same state as impoverished Dalit families living in villages" (p. 14)—if not for his grandfather's decision to migrate away from the village and join the railways along with his father's uncompromising insistence on providing education for the children. Satyanarayana writes, "That migration had changed the course, not only of his own life, but also of the generations to come" (p. 56). Therefore, instead of viewing the narrator of *My Father Baliah* as a relatively privileged Dalit middle class individual, his work should be read as a "conscious textual intervention in the making of a homogenous Dalit community which otherwise is fragmented" (Kumar, 2018, p. 61, Note 9).

Choice of English

Caste and English

My Father Baliah is an important text for its choice of language, i.e., English. Dalit writings are mostly written in the *bhashas* (Indian languages other than English) and

they have gained prominence across the country due to their translations into English. One reason why Dalit literature is mostly associated with bhasha literature could be because of the regional character of the Dalit movements in post-independent India. As discussed earlier, Maharashtra holds the distinction of being the foremost state in building the necessary cultural base for the movement which was taken up by other states subsequently at different junctures depending on their own states' socio-political circumstances. Another reason could be the reluctance of postcolonial Indian writing in English to privilege caste over class and religion thereby rendering caste as ultra-vires to the modern individual citizen of India. Vivek Dhareswar makes an elaborate argument regarding this issue when he writes:

> The postcolonial elite in India has used English, both as language as much as a semiotic system symbolizing modernity to impose their secular categories on the social world. This modern subjectivity framed in English has allowed caste to be the private domain suffused with the vernacular (1992; as cited in Menon, 2006, p. 3).

Therefore, the choice of English in texts like *My Father Baliah* should be read as an attempt to speak the language of caste in English.

Dalits and English

Most Dalit writers still choose *bhashas* over English, maybe because English is not the dominant lingua franca among the majority of the Indian subaltern groups thereby falling short of representing their life and culture. Nevertheless, English has its own advantages when it speaks about caste. Kothari (2013) writes, "By being foreign, English does not normalize and legitimize caste, and by being an ex-colonial language with global reach, it becomes empowering" (p. 61). She also finds English to be conducive to constructing a nationwide Dalit consciousness. She writes, "English helps redefine identity and imagine a pan Indian Dalit unity while also allowing a vocabulary of human rights" and also with respect to the inadequacies of English in representing Dalit life, she asserts that "English's potential to translate the Dalit life from fatalism to an identity of rights outweighs considerations of its distance from Indian reality" (p. 67). Reading not only the present text which was originally written in English but also other Dalit texts translated into English, one cannot escape observing the delegitimization and denormalization of caste.

Aspiration for English in *My Father Baliah*

Modern Dalit literature has always been oriented towards speaking the language of human rights and human dignity. Its politics has always been for encouraging the oppressed sections to fight for their own advancement. This is reflected in their texts which often depict modernity as the means of empowerment. English education and migration to cities signify that modernity in those Dalit texts. We can see this

recognition of English education as an enabler of empowerment reflected in the present text when the narrator writes:

> Having seen the lifestyle of higher-level and upper-caste staff, he wanted to ensure that his brother learnt English. . . . It was the first attempt in the Yelukati family to learn English, another attempt to achieve a better life. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 69)

In another instance, he writes:

> Very few students from the untouchable community (like my brother) were in the English medium, and these students had a good chance of securing better jobs after graduating through matriculation, for English was desirable in government jobs. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 134)

The narrator also frequently mentions his affinity towards the English language and how his father used to feel proud about his children speaking in English. Thus English education for Dalits implies a better chance to compete with "upper" castes and achieve self-respect and liberation. Even in the Dalit literature written in bhashas, the Dalit writers tend to privilege aspiration/liberation over backwardness by differentiating the characters who speak modern dialect of a language and its marked register. This has been used by Dalit writers for resisting the stereotypical representations of Dalit characters by non-Dalits where the Dalit character always speaks the marked register and the non-Dalits speak the modern dialect. As Laura Brueck (2014) writes, ". . . for a character to speak in a 'marked' (simplified, non-modern standard) version of Hindi is to exhibit a deficiency of Dalit Chetna [consciousness], to be characterised not only as 'rural' or 'traditional' but more specifically to be condemned as 'backward'" (pp. 104–105).

However, *My Father Baliah,* unfortunately, is one of the few Dalit life narratives originally written in English in the body of Dalit writing from the Telugu region. The only other such life narrative coming from Telugu community is Sujatha Gidla's (2017) *Ants Among Elephants*. Dalit life narratives in English are also uncommon among Dalit literature from other states. We have only a handful of such texts like D.R. Jatava's (2000) *A Silent Soldier*, Balwant Singh's (1997) *An Untouchable in the IAS*, I.D. Pawar's (1981) *My Struggle in Life*, and Ashok Bhoyar's (2001) *Encounter with Dronacharya*. *My Father Baliah* holds a distinct place among these narratives because, on the surface level, it seems to be telling a simple inter-generational family story but it skilfully embedded a wide variety of themes within that story as discussed in this article. Nevertheless, Dalit narratives in English did not gain as much prominence as translated works like Bama's (1992) *Karukku* or Omprakash Valmiki's (2003) *Joothan* did. However, the situation looks hopeful with the publication of Yashica Dutt's (2019) *Coming Out as Dalit*, which has garnered widespread popularity recently due to its honest representation of Dalit middle class life particularly focussing on the

precarious situation of contemporary Dalits where economic progress falls short in improving their social status and therefore are left with no choice but to blend in with the "upper" castes by hiding their Dalit identity. Therefore it is time that Dalit literature recognizes the importance of writing in English taking inspiration not only from *My Father Baliah* but also from Dr. Ambedkar himself who "was far-sighted in realizing the importance of writing all his works in English" (Anand, 1999, p. 2056).

Dalit Agency in the Colonial Modernity

Speaking of modernity, it is important to look at the source of modernity and its encounter with Dalits in India. The distinguishing feature of *My Father Baliah* that holds our attention throughout the narrative is the description of the lives of Dalits working in the railways that were established in nineteenth-century British India. Jr. Narasiah was the first in the family to grab a job in the then Nizam–guaranteed State Railway (NSR) which later merged into the Indian Railways. Though it was the Nizam who owned the railways, it was the British who built and operated it (Kuncheria, n.d., p. 7). That's why we find a British officer, Sir Franklin, who not only gave Baliah a job, but also saved him in one instance by restoring his job. Yelukati Ramaswamy changes his name to Baliah upon the insistence of Sir Franklin so as to get back to his job. Baliah later took his first son Balraj to Sir Franklin to request a job in the same railways. The narrator describes Sir Franklin as a "young British officer, and nice to the Class IV employees [mostly Dalits and Sudras], often helping them in times of need" (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 72). The institutions and changes brought during the colonial period such as railways, English education, postal services, and missionary activities had a significant disruptive effect on the colonized societies beginning from the nineteenth century. The mainstream response to these changes brought in during the colonial period is understood as colonial modernity. Menon (2006) defines colonial modernity as "the specific contradiction between a rhetoric of universal modernity and a practice of accommodation with existing fault lines of power, tradition, and custom is what characterizes colonial modernity in India" (p. 76). There could be two ways of understanding this aspect. One is that British colonialism was only able to affect small changes to the pre-modern structures of oppression like the caste system so as to retain their rule which ultimately led to partial liberation for the subaltern communities. The other way of viewing this is that colonialism under the guise of modernity was only trying to exploit the Indian society by dividing it based on caste and religious lines i.e., *divide et impera* (divide and rule). This second way of considering colonial modernity mostly constitutes the mainstream response to colonialism in the form of nationalism and sometimes postcolonialism putting the entire blame on the colonial rule for Indian maladies. The problem with this position is that it "frames colonialism as a homogenous and singular structure of oppression. It does not sufficiently explain the different responses of various social groups within society" (Rao, 2022, p. 187). This is what the first way of viewing colonial modernity reflects though it still finds the

liberation inadequate. However, it is extremely important to recognize the agency of the subaltern communities whereby they negotiated with the opportunities opened up by the colonial institutions to emerge as modern individuals free from the traditional markers of subordination. This is what this article points out as Dalit agency in colonial modernity which is aptly represented by *My Father Baliah.* As mentioned earlier, Jr. Narasiah's decision to move out of the village and join the railways during the period of twentieth century pre-independent India changed the lives of Baliah and his family forever. The narrator describes this change as follows:

> He [Narasiah] was happy to be thus liberated from slavery under feudal lords. That migration had changed the course, not only of his own life but also of the generations to come. He felt this intensely since he perceived the change in the atmosphere and in the new lifestyle that they had since come to adopt in the city. He was even happier for his son, who had become literate. He could never have foreseen this, but he knew now that subsequent generations would also receive an education. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 56)

The narrator also traces the source of this change when he writes:

> It was a strange situation: untouchables, who were outcasts and segregated in every village, were suddenly living in the same quarters [railway quarters] as Sudras! The environment had changed, and now they had the means to learn many new things, not just about work, but about society and social structures too. In many ways, it was the British Indian era that opened the doors of development to the untouchables. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 35)

Echoing Lefebvre's notion of social space being a social product, the narrative gives a contrasting picture regarding the organization of space in the feudal, caste-ridden village and the modern grade-based railway quarters in colonial towns and cities. The narrator delineates the social space of Sr. Narasiah's village as follows:

> A village has the perfect Hindu caste set-up with all the characteristic features codified by Manu. It has two types of dwellings, varna houses and avarna huts, separated by either a boundary or a well-maintained distance. In order to avoid pollution (from the casteless untouchables) through wind to caste Hindus, the houses of each varna (caste) are built in such a way that the wind blows from the dwellings of the Brahmins to the rest of the village. Untouchable (avarna) houses are located in the east and the main village in the west, since the wind always blows from west to east. Houses are built in ascending order of the caste hierarchy from east to west – Sudras, Vaishyas, Kshatriyas, and Brahmins. The houses of those belonging to the productive caste (the Sudras) cluster together, and towards the east, finally, is the agraharam, Brahmins' dwellings – the 'beginning' of the village. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 18)

On the other hand, the narrator describes the life in a modern place like Tandur as follows:

> "This was the first time in Baliah's career that he had been posted full-time at a big station and was living in quarters where different classes of workers stayed. The size of the quarters differed according to the grade of the employee." (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 18)

Dr. Ambedkar argued regarding such caste-based segregation in Indian villages that led to the "ghettoization" of the "untouchables" and therefore contrary to Gandhi's village republics, he urged Dalits to leave the villages and move to the cities (1989; as cited in Prasad, 2021, p. 134). Therefore, cities for Dalits act as sites of transformation "in which new individuals can be forged as subjects unmarked by subjection" (Menon, 2006, p. 94). This transformation is rightly described by Satyanarayana (2013) when he writes:

> The untouchables who lived in the railway colony enjoyed the same freedom as the higher castes. There wasn't any social restriction here. In colonial times, cantonment areas and railway colonies were 'free zones' for untouchables, where they could aspire to better social lives, and earn their livelihoods like caste Hindus. (p. 81)

Similarly, there is also a significant difference in the subjectivity of Sr. Narasiah, a Dalit living under the mercy of an "upper" caste landlord in a caste-ridden village, and Baliah, a Dalit railway employee living in modern towns and cities. For example, in Narasiah's village, Dalits generally do not object to the "upper" castes' disrespectful way of addressing them as "Narsiga" for Narasiah (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 19). Also, Narasiah's extent of internalization of caste hegemony is so deep that he feels "relieved" when the landlord instead of beating him to death, allows him to retain two acres of land out of the fifty acres that were gifted to Narasiah by the Nizam (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 20). On the other hand, Baliah was exposed to colonial spaces like railways which developed a strong desire in him to educate his children so that he could see them working as higher officials in the railways. Although Baliah is also used to "upper" castes treating him as an "untouchable", he nevertheless dares to stand up for his dignity. This is seen when the narrator details the way Baliah deals with his superiors:

> He [Baliah] told his superiors to expect respect only when they gave respect; there had to be reciprocity. The officials would address him as 'Baliah' rather than 'Baliga', an appellation they would have used for a subordinate. It was now known in the railway circuit that Baliah would not have borne this patiently. He objected to officials addressing their subordinates with contempt. He also politely refused to do the personal work of the stationmasters, such as going to the market or taking their children to school, or washing their clothes.

> Because of this perceived insubordination, he was transferred many a time, but Baliah never had any regrets. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 91)

Unfortunately, some scholars with savarna consciousness tend to consider colonial modernity as problematic as they glorify the "pre-modern or pre-colonial and of everything that seems to have remained immune to the invasions of colonial modernity" (Pouchepedass, 2000; as cited in Zecchini, 2018, p. 74). This would only lead one to revert to the language of hierarchy and discrimination instead of fighting for liberty and equality. Based on the above observations and inferences, this article argues that colonial modernity has an enabling role in the development of a consciousness of equality and dignity among Dalits like Baliah.

Conclusion

My Father Baliah depicts the changes that the Yelukati family has seen over three generations by pointing out the trajectory of the caste system/untouchability during that period. The article believes that during the time of Sr. Narasiah, and his son, untouchability presented itself glaringly just like the sound of a howling steam engine. Whereas when it comes to the time of Baliah and later his children Balraj, Abbasayulu, Satyanarayana, and others, the caste system became antithetical to the modernity infused via colonialism. However, it did not vanish altogether. Instead, it transformed into subtler forms by silently lurking under the modern institutions thereby posing a threat to the struggle for Dalit emancipation. In the above section, the article has argued that colonial modernity encouraged the upliftment of Dalits through modern education and employment. However, as the narrative indicates, the "upper" caste people and also the Sudras were unable to shed their superiority/purity claims over Dalits not only within colonial institutions but also in post-independent India. For example, Satyanarayana (2013) complained that even after "the untouchables gained entry into jobs in the railways and into the railway quarters, and started living alongside the Sudras in the same areas, sometimes even the same buildings", the "Sudras still tried to maintain untouchability, though" (p. 35). Similarly, after celebrating the fact that Dalits were able to enjoy equal rights within the railways, he cannot resist stating the reality in which "the caste Hindus still tried to avoid contact with the untouchables for fear of pollution" (p. 81). In addition to this, the narrator also mentions that "the higher-caste drivers and Brahmin guards still preferred the Sudras to the untouchables when it came to carrying their boxes" (p. 103). For argument's sake, one could agree that it is too soon to expect the discrimination to die when we are talking about the colonial period as colonial modernity and also the social reform movements started creating an impact only from the nineteenth century. But as Satyanarayana narrates his own experiences occurring in the 1970s and 80s, we come to notice that the caste ideology still continues to influence the attitude of "upper" caste people. The discrimination came in the form of opposing reservations, doubting the academic and professional

potential of Dalits, refusing to give houses for rent, etc., ultimately rendering Dalits vulnerable in modern India as well. This frustrates the narrator as he writes:

> No constitutional safeguards so far had really helped the hapless Dalits; they still remained excluded, segregated and untouchable in free India. The mindset of upper-caste Hindus had not changed much in spite of the relentless efforts of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 207)

Therefore, acknowledging Dalit agency in colonial modernity is as important an issue as it is to continue the struggle for Dalit emancipation using both constitutional means and cultural struggle to build on the achievements secured during the colonial period.

Lastly, the article finds the representation of women's lives in the narrative to be problematic. Because, Narasamma, the wife of Baliah, and the mother to not only Satyanarayana but also to her other 11 children, has endured a far more arduous struggle than Baliah and other family members yet her voice is not given adequate presence in the whole narrative. This reveals a tendency common to most of the Dalit male autobiographies where "woman is projected as a sacrificing mother or a mother patiently enduring pain and suffering but very rarely as the agency for change" (Guru para. 6). Except for this limitation, *My Father Baliah* is an indispensable piece of Dalit writing that sets the stage for engaging with significant historical, social, political, and cultural issues thereby powerfully advocating for a radical transformation of Indian society.

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