



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2024; 6(2): 99-101
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 15-05-2024
Accepted: 23-06-2024

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Analyses of three Dalit short stories: 'Gold from the Grave', 'Mother', and 'Tar Comes'

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i2b.212>

Abstract

Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra and which along with it, brought a new perspective of looking at Indian literature. It is a perspective which is given by the Dalits or lower caste and downtrodden people. The paper attempts to study and analyse three randomly selected short stories from Dalit literature: 'Gold from the Grave' by Anna Bhau Sathe, 'Mother' by Baburao Bagul, and 'Tar Comes' by Devanoora Mahadeva. Each of the stories has been popular and widely acclaimed masterpiece from Dalit literature. In the present investigation, these stories will be analysed in terms of the norms adopted by short story writers in their short stories across the globe. The paper will attempt to explore whether the stories are in conformity with the said norms.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Dalit short stories, anna bhau sathe, devanoora mahadeva, baburao bagul

Introduction

Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra and which along with it, brought a new perspective of looking at Indian literature. It is a perspective which is given by the Dalits or lower caste and downtrodden people. Before Independence, literature by Dalits, or lower caste people was also there, but that literature was rejected by the upper caste literatures simply because they could not accept Dalit heroes or characters playing decisive roles in literature. According to Bagul, "the (Hindu) writers who have internalized the Hindu value-structure find it impossible to accept heroes, themes and thoughts derived from the philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar" (Dangle, 1992, p. 282) ^[1]. Dalit literature produced by Dalit writers "represents a new thinking and a new point of view. It poses the question of the representation of dalit and lower caste life ('heroes, themes and thoughts' from dalit society') as a critical public issue" (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013, p. 8) ^[2].

The paper attempts to study and analyse three randomly selected short stories from Dalit literature: 'Gold from the Grave' by Anna Bhau Sathe, 'Mother' by Baburao Bagul, and 'Tar Comes' by Devanoora Mahadeva. Each of the stories has been popular and widely acclaimed masterpiece from Dalit literature. In the present investigation, these stories will be analysed in terms of the norms adopted by short story writers in their short stories across the globe. The paper will attempt to explore whether the stories are in conformity with the said norms.

Features of a short story

According to Edgar Allan Poe, a short story narrative "which can be read at one sitting of from half an hour to two hours, and is limited to "a certain unique or single effect" to which every detail is subordinate" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, pp. 365-66) ^[3]. There are certain other features that are commonly found in good short stories (Chandra, 2012, pp. 3-5) ^[4].

Length: A good short story is characterized by brevity of expression where every word contributes to the main effect of the story. Normally a short story is told within the canvas of 3000 to 6000 words.

Scenes: In short stories, normally, the story is told in about three scenes. Keeping economy in mind, scenic descriptions are avoided; instead, the settings are described in concrete terms so that the reader can visualize them easily.

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Characters: There are usually three to six characters in a story, and each one has a vital role to play in the plot, adding to the overall effect. Instead of going for character development, a short story writer shows his characters as they are.

Structure: The structure of the short story is characterized by ironic reversals, epiphanic moments and revelations.

Point of view: Depending upon from whose perspective the story is narrated or told, the writer may adopt First-person narration, Third-person narration and Second-person narration.

Three Selected Stories as Short Stories

In this section, the selected short stories will be investigated as per the characteristics mentioned in the previous section. The structural pattern of all these three stories is in conformity with an ideal pattern of a short story. For instance, as far as the length of these stories is concerned, it is between 2000 to 4000 words. This reflects the mastery of the authors over the language because it is only then brevity of expression achieved.

These stories again conform to the limited number of scenes normally allowed to a short story. For example, in 'Gold from the Grave', the plot resolves round the cremation ground, graveyard and Bheema's own house; 'Tar Comes' is set in the front of the village, the *chavadi* and the pit, and finally, in 'Mother', the scenes take place first in the school and then at Pandu's house. In all these stories, the respective authors have described all the scenes in their respective stories in concrete terms. In 'Gold from the Grave', the author describes the atmosphere at night in the following words, "The atmosphere was charged with expectancy. The silence was oppressive. A pack of jackals scampered away after a piercing howl. A snake wound away from the path into the jungle. An owl screeched and the silence grew more frightening. Bheema approached the village and squatting down, peered all over. The village was very quiet. Someone coughed, a lamp winked and everything was still again." (Sathe, 2013, p. 51) ^[5]

We find a similar preciseness of description in 'Tar Comes', where Devanora Mahadeva delineates the cutting of trees in the village for road construction. He writes:

"Now the village is a regular battlefield. The banyan trees that once stood spread against the sky, as high as the eye could see, have all been razed to the ground. To those who remember a village that was hidden behind a dense mat of banyan trees, this must look like a desert." (Mahadeva, 2013, p. 92) ^[6]

In 'Mother', when the mother could see suspicion in her son Pandu's eyes, the memories of her flashes through her mind. Expressing this emotional turmoil in her, Bagul writes in concrete terms,

"She noticed at once the suspicion in his eyes, the glance that took her in from top to toe, and her love, her concern for him slowly turned to rage. At that moment he looked exactly like his TB-ridden, suspicious, nagging father. In his eyes she could feel again the accusations that her husband had often levelled against her. The memories of all the physical and mental torture she had undergone were very painful, hard to forget. Pandu now looked exactly as his father had done years ago." (Bagul, 1992, p. 187) ^[7]

In an ideal short story, there is a limited number of characters, normally between three and six. This feature is true with the three Dalit short stories. In 'Mother', there is Pandu, his mother, Dagdu, and the overseer who are significant, in 'Gold from the Grave', there is only Bheema and his wife, and in 'Tar Comes' the focus is mainly on the Patil, 'the four young men who have studied up to high school', and Rangappa's son. What is important to notice in all the characters in the selected stories have very crucial roles to play in the progress of the tell told.

Further, conforming to the tradition of short stories, in the stories studied in the paper, the author at no point attempt to develop any of the character; these characters are presented as they are.

Analysis of the stories

'Gold from the Grave'

The story has a very good beginning providing the reader all the necessary information regarding the protagonist i.e. Bheema, his family background, the place, the time and the physical details of the protagonist. The opening lines reveal Bheema's struggle for a permanent livelihood and his subsequent job of shifting ashes in the cremation ground and to dig the graves out in search of gold and other precious metals. We again come to know that the story takes place in a suburb in Maharashtra which is situated on the fringe of a jungle. The entire series of action in the story occur in such settings.

The story also has an appropriate conclusion. At the end of the story, the author employs ironic reversal. Bheema had very strong physical features and he previously worked in quarry but when that quarry was closed, he became jobless and then started to collect gold from cremation grounds and graveyards. Ironic reversal comes when the two fingers with which he would smash giant rocks were cut by the teeth of a dead body. He was searching gold in the mouth of the body. In the concluding sentence of the story, the author comes back to the title with the remark that Bheema's two fingers "Those very fingers with which he smashed stone to smithereens were lost for the sake of gold from the graveyard." (Sathe, 2013, p. 54) ^[5]

So far as the narrative mode of the story is concerned, Sathe has reported the incidents of the story by using action verbs like 'stood', 'bent', 'squeeze', 'shift', 'shout', etc. The entire story is narrated in past tense.

Thus, the story has all the features of a good short story, and the story is a veritable piece of Dalit literature. It reveals the helpless condition of the poorer and weaker section of the society; how they, to fulfil their necessity, have to adopt different unwise means. They are compelled to do so; however, the story also preaches the message that wrong at any condition is wrong after all.

'Mother'

The beginning of the story reveals that the story has as its protagonist a little boy named Pandu and his most beloved mother. We are also informed about her illicit relationship with an overseer. From the beginning itself we can speculate about the approaching crisis of the story. The background of the story is rural and almost all the characters belong to the poor section.

The story concludes with an incomplete sentence and disappearance of Pandu, the central figure in the story. The conclusion reveals the sham and hoax prevalent in the

society the trace of which we can get in our existing society. The image mother is suppressed and overcome by her desire for physical gratification that arose “out of the hunger of the past ten years of widowhood” (Bagul, 1992, p. 190) [7]. At first, she herself initiated her relationship with the overseer but at a later point of time, she is unable to set herself free from the iron cage of the same relationship.

As far as the technique of narration is concerned, ‘Mother’ is narrated in third person narrative and the narrator is present everywhere and he knows whatever his characters feel or think. He has reported the story in past tense without any scope for character development.

Tar Comes

This story by Devanoor Mahadeva is another specimen of good short story. The story has an appropriate beginning that discloses the background, place and the setting of the story. At the very outset, the reader is given the details of the village highlighting its rural and remote background.

“The dirt track that's just good enough for a bullock cart to amble along starts like an alley from the village and winds for three miles before joining the main road on which the buses ply. Back from the main road, the route dips down to the village and, hedged in on both sides by cacti, meanders around the banyan grove in which the spirits reside, forks into three and then runs into the village. On either side of the forked alleys are houses that stand so close together that, at first sight, they seem to choke each other.” (Mahadeva, 2013, p. 91) [6].

The story depicts the conflict that arises due to a decision by the village *patel* to renovate a temple out of the money saved from a government contract for a tar road construction in the village. This decision is challenged by a group of four high school educated young Dalits of the village: Lakuma, Rajappa, Madu and Shambu. These four represent of the impact of modernization and education on the younger generation. Motivated by their education and modern ideologies, they do not hesitate to contest the propositions of the village *patel*. At the superficial level, the conflict seems to arise from the split between religious and secular ideologies. However, at the deeper level it would be a mere simplification. Against the background of age-old oppression at the hands of the upper-caste people, the Dalits are now conscious of their rights. They no longer hesitate to challenge the dominant casteist narratives and offer a counter-perspective that empower the Dalits.

In the story, Mahadeva also employs *tar* as a metaphor of modernism (komalesha, 2008) [8] that has the capability of putting a challenge to the feudal social hierarchy in Indian context. Cleverly, the author employs the image of tar in the story, “The boy opened his mouth wide and started to cry. When Rangappa... hit him on the mouth...the tar on his hands stuck to his mouth. The mouth was sealed and the crying stopped. Many such things happened every evening.” (Mahadeva, 2013, p. 94) [6]. He aptly says that tar can be used “to plug a leak in a pot with the tar, and it worked like magic” (Mahadeva, 2013, p. 94) [6].

The story comes to an end with an ironic reversal when Rangappa's son is found trapped in tar waiting for death. The entire time, the focus is on the conflict between the *patil* of the village and the four young and educated Dalits. The story tells us about various positive aspects of modernity, such as “the modernity of the press, of a government that formally at least is accessible to everyone, and not least, the

empowering modernity of education” (Satyanarayana & Tharu, Dalit Writing: An Introduction, 2013, p. 17) [2]. The epiphanic moment that comes at the end of the story in the form of ironic reversal reveals that modernity can bring death as well.

Conclusion

The stories discussed in the paper, besides establishing themselves as proper short stories, reveal that Dalit short stories have their own *differentness*. What is interesting about all the three stories is that these stories do not attempt to portray Dalits as “helpless and child-like people who cannot make their own decisions or take action” (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 8) [9]. On the contrary, in these stories we confront with Dalits who are conscious and responsible, who have emotions, commit mistakes, indulge in illicit relationships, are prompt to oppose any sort of corruption. They are portrayed sometimes ‘struggling for survival at their different levels’ and ‘confronting limitation, abject poverty, misery and brutality’ (Dangle, 1992, p. xiii) [1]. ‘Gold from the Grave’ is a story of the ‘epic struggle to survive and remain human’ (Satyanarayana & Tharu, Dalit Writing: An Introduction, 2013, p. 12) [2], ‘Mother’ a Dalit widow is shown struggling between her love for her son and her desire for a companion, and ‘Tar Comes’ narrates the struggle of the educated Dalits to establish modern ideologies as against the corruption of the dominant section of the society.

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