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Aesthetics of Resistance: Dalit Experience in Laxman Gaikwad's Autobiography *The Branded*

Ms. Jyoti S. Patil

Assistant Professor (CHB),
P.G. Department of English,
Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University

Dr. Sandeep P. Joshi

Head,
P.G. Department of English,
Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the aesthetics of protest in Dalit literature through Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*, a Sahitya Akademi Award- winning autobiography that unveils the grim realities of the uchalya (pathrut) community in Maharashtra. Dalit writing, like other forms of protest literature (Black, Queer, and Subaltern), prioritizes content over form and often shocks the reader into self-reflection and social awareness. In Gaikwad's narrative, protest is not just literary- it is lived. His work deconstructs the stigma of "born criminals" imposed on his community and challenges the entrenched hegemony on upper-caste society.

By blending personal narrative with collective trauma, *The Branded* provides poignant commentary on caste-based exclusion, poverty and systematic violence. It also reflects on how traditional structures- economic, educational, religious and political- collude to *marginalize* Dalits and Vimukta Jatis. The paper positions *The Branded* within the large spectrum of Dalit

literary traditions and interrogates its aesthetics through the lens of social realism and political resistance.

Through critical analysis this study underlines how Gaikwad's work embodies Dalit consciousness defies castiest structures, and foregrounds the lived realities of the oppressed. The text does not merely seek literary appreciation but demands cultural and political introspection. The concluding section synthesizes this literary resistance as a call toward inclusivity and human dignity.

Keywords: Dalit, Protest Literature, Dalit Consciousness, Collective trauma.

Introduction:

“Sexual, racial, gender violence and other forms of discrimination and violence in a culture cannot be eliminated without changing culture.”¹

-by Charlotte Bunch

The well-known *Dalit* autobiography, *The Branded* by Laxman Gaikwad opens with the words saying that “NO NATIVE PLACE. NO birth - date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born. In an Uchalya community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur.”² The mentioned words like birth date, native place, location, caste, class, and religion give us a symbolic view of an identity on the formal level. But, the line suggests us that somebody was being deprived of his/her own identity. The inclusion in the *Uchalya /Pathrut* community makes us aware of the issues like caste, class, gender, sex and religion for the identity formation. Those



who are being alienated from their own identity on the basis of above issues become the undividable part of 'marginalized group'. The word 'marginalized' suggests the unfair or unjust treatment to the minority or minorities and weaker individuals or groups by the majority or stronger group of the rest of the society. It refers them to be separated from the mainstream society and were compelled to live in the fringes and outskirts. The word also advocates those who are totally alienated and segregated from their fundamental rights to participate in the social, ³religious, cultural, political, educational and economic spheres of their lives and are kept aloof, remote and separate them physically from the general public called the sophisticated Hindu or the elite classes of the world.

The Word called *Dalit* has its deep grassroots in the caste system which has ever been remained a part and parcel connections with the Hindu scriptures, *smritis*, *Dharmashastras* and *Vedas*. A unique feature of Indian society is its composition on the basis of caste. As we know that the issue of Caste System has been very prevalent in Indian Culture, and has been deeply rooted in the arrival of Aryans in India in the form of the following four *Varnas*: ⁴*Brahmin*, *Kshetriyaa*, *Vaisyaa* and *Kshudras*. The formation of these four categories gives us an idea about the traditionally received belief that; *Brahmins* are the creation of head, *Kshtriyas* are of the hands, *Vishayaas* of the thigh, and *Kshudras* of the thumb of the leg. *The Brahmins* were priests; *the Kshtriyas*, warriors; *the Vaishyas*, traders and *the shudras*, skilled, semi-skilled laborers doing menial work. This hierarchy is primarily a class system and the development of a society based on class is a world-wide phenomenon. Thus, the tradition of Indian history has imposed the Caste System upon Indians for many centuries. Specifically in the Maharashtra state, it has often been notorious in following and implementing such evil traditions. Indian social environment has become habituated with this inequality. The conflict related to Caste System is

still in existence and widening the gap between White Collar Society and *Dalits*. The word *Dalit* raises number of questions in our mind as given below.....

- ❖ What does the concept Dalit literature signify? And who are to be categorized as the *Dalit* writers?
- ❖ What are the concerns of the *Dalit* writings?
- ❖ Is *Dalit* literature the literature of and by those who are born in *Dalit* caste or *Kshudra* category?
- ❖ Is it appropriate to apply the term *Dalit* literature in assessing the work by the non-*Dalit* writers, basically from the upper caste/class writers like Mulk Raj Anand and his work *Untouchable(1935)*?
- ❖ Then who is to be term as a *Dalit* or *Dalit* writer?
- ❖ Are the *Dalits* born category or is it imposed one?
- ❖ What kind of experiences do Dalits have in the society and how are they marginalized socially, culturally, economically and politically?

While answering to the question '*Who is a dalit?*' Gail Omvedt says that 'Dalit' is the "members of Scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion."⁵ The word 'Dalit' literally "means the ground down, broken, depressed and down trodden".⁶ The entire Dalit liberation movement was sprouted by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's in his revolutionary speech at *Mahad Satyagraha*. But, with the efforts were led by Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Anna Bhau Sathe and others gave the whole Scenario a revolutionary turn to the



whole movement. In the literature, the movement took its further step by the most powerful writing in the literary field by Baburao Bagul, Anna Bhau Sathe, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar, Dalit Panther's Activist Namdev Dhasal, Mallika Amar Shaikh, Laxman Gaikwad, Laxman Mane, ShankumarLimbale, Prof. P. E. Sonkamble, poured in their writing the grinding poverty, misery and agony of not only their personal experiences but reflected the mirror image of the whole Dalits' also. Their anger got reflected in the form of their autobiographical writings, short stories, poems and fiction and non-fictions. In Maharashtra, we have the rich Dalit literary tradition, which can be seen as below:

- Daya Pawar's '*Balutan*',
- Prof. P. E. Sonkamble's '*Athvaniche Pakshi*' (Birds of Memoirs),
- Shankarrao Kharat's Taral-Antaral (AHarijan's Rise to the Sky),
- Madhav Kondvilkar's '*Mukkam Post Devache Gothane*',
- Laxman Mane's '*Upara*'(Outsider)
- Laxman Gaikwad's '*Uchalya*'(The Branded),
- SharankumarLimbale's '*Akkarmashi*' (The Outcaste),
- Kishore ShantabaiKale's '*Kolhatyache Por*',
- Narendra Jadhav's '*Outcaste-A Memoir*',
- Babytai Kamble's '*JinaAmucha*',
- JanabaiGirhe's '*Marankala*',
- Vimal More's '*Teen DagadachiChuul*' and
- Urmila Pawar's '*Aaydan*'(The Weave of My Life).
- Baburao Bagul's '*Maran Swast Hot Ahe*(Death Is Becoming Cheaper)

As the main focus of this paper is on the masterpiece autobiography of 1988, originally written in Marathi entitled as *Uchalya* by an activist Laxman Gaikwad and translated into English as *The Branded* by P.A. Kollaharkar. Other notable novels written by him include *Dubang*, *Chini Mathachi Divas*, *Samaj Sahitya Ani Swathantra*, *WadarVedna*, *Vakila Pardhi*, *Utav* and *A SwathantraKonasat*. He was born in 1956 at Dhanegaon in Latur Taluka in *Uchalya/Pathrut* community. Shedding light on his text Gaikwad confesses,

I had little opportunity to acquire education and sophisticated cultur

These are the reflections of a non- Martic social worker... It is an attempt of a sensitive mind to pen what it has felt and experienced. This writing has been inspired by the stimulating encouragement of Laxman Mane of Upara fame and Sri Balkrishna Renke, the Secretary of the Nomadic and Vimukta Tribes association . (T.B.,ix).

Though he couldn't finish his further education, but he is an activist and revolutionary writer. He depicts his whole Suffered life under exploitation and hegemonic power of (The word *Hegemony*, according to Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebook*,). The author puts before us really thrilling and scary picture of how he was brought up in *Santamuchchar*⁷ community and denied to earn bread and fill their stomachs in respectful manner. He gives his personal voice as a representative to the universal suppressed voices of *Uchalya* community. The novel also exhibits his resistance to the corrupt and unjust practices for a successful mobilization of the branded community. The author highlights the harsh realities of his personal life as well as of the life of the community through the medium of his native speech. Gaikwad recalls nostalgic memories of his childhood days as well as his wanderings from one place to another while fighting poverty, starvation and exploitation. He presents a stark picture of the abominally



unhygienic living conditions of the tribe. Though his grandparents (Lingappa Gaikwad and Narasabai) and brothers (Manikdada, Anna, Bhau and Harchanda) depend on thieving Gaikwad's parents earn by respectable means (Gaikwad 1-4). In fact, Laxman's father, Martand, encourages him to take an education. But it is the hegemony of the Upper class that always tries to prevent him to live respectable life as they are being born with the curse, of always live under oppression. His personal experience in school days shows us how the teasing habits of his school friends also make him habituated with dominance and superiority over their community.

*When I went to school, the boys in my class sniggered at me. They
mocked derisively: 'Lakshya, Patharut boy, has come to school!'
I used to sit in a corner meekly as if I had been forcibly dragged there....
some of the boys in the school used to call me Lachhmantata
(Laxmantatya) crabcurry(scorpion) khataa. (p. 34).*

Such habits make the upper-class society to keep them under surveillance. Even community allows indirectly to the high class to continue their control over them and their oppression. The education, economics, religion and politics of the mainstream society never touched to them. They were automatically pushed into the dark world of superstitions, of ignorance and of primitive norms of wild justice. The Uchalya community, therefore, is downtrodden to outcaste lower than the lowest untouchables and thrown on the margins of the social hierarchical structure. As Laxman Gaikwad retrospects about him and his community's reduction to subhuman condition just like all other Dalit writings, it subscribes to Dalit aesthetics, consciousness and secular values which pave the way for a just order. He has always been

obsessed with questions in his mind. According to the doctrine of Pledge, given in school books...

- “If all Indians are brothers and sisters, then why are being treated as the marginal aspect of the society?”
- Why are not my brothers given jobs?”
- “If living with dignity and self-respect is what has been denied to them then what is the use of this freedom?”

Such questions create the un-solving conflict in his mind. Thus, to follow the duties like robbing, looting, pilfering and pick-pocketing became the law of *Uchalya /Pathrut community*. The living conditions of the whole family and even the community members were shameful. They had no land nor could they follow any proper profession. The author's personal and universal anger, agony and annoyance for his community made him to pour out all his suppressed and subdued anguish. Dalits as a marginalized group should live according the Upper class hegemony as a regular norm. *The Branded* manifests both political and aesthetic resistance to inequality and injustice. Gaikwad laments their animal like existence and continues to question further,

“We are forced to take to thieving because we are denied work. Why is it then that the whole community is branded as thieves? Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life? Why is my mother forced to borrow from moneylenders to pay the police? And when the burden of loans piles up, why are my all brothers forced to resort to thieving to pay off the debt? Are we to be proud of this varied heritage because we have been inured to



these conditions for ages?" (P.No.63)

The group of Uchalyas is forced to live outside in the nation, on the margin and as an ostracized part which has ever been imposed their status on the society. They are always subjugated by the ideology that their community is not the integral part of society. Thus, the segregation impels them to live an aliened and isolated life. Even, they couldn't dare to break the rules which are laid by the so called Hindu class. The *Uchalya* community nurtures their children for pick-pocketing, robbing and pilfering and opposed the schooling of not only to the whole community children but even though having the support of his father, Gaikwad was also denied education by his other family members. The people of this community thought that

"If our children started going to school, our race would be doomed", (p. 17)

It is the result of customary ideas of caste system in the society. The upper caste Hindus view towards lower castes here clearly brings out. The lower castes like *Uchalya / Pathrut* think that the education is endorsed by religion and tradition only to Brahmins and merchants. To live decent life Laxman joins the spinning mill as a worker. But the exploitation of worker by mill owner, the abusment, beatings of jobber and supervisors muted the worker and reduced to miserable condition. Their self-realization starts questioning to the established and mainstream dumb society.

"Why is it then that the whole community is branded as thieves?

Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life?

Are we to be proud of this varied heritage because we have

been accustomed to these conditions for ages?" (p.63)

This awakening social consciousness among Gaikwad and the Uchalya community provide them the insight to build up the new world. It also nourishes their capacity to resist against inequality and injustice to come into the respectable mainstream of society. The 'Sickle and Banner Morcha' or 'Gaikwad's Morcha' symbolically gathers people belonging to several tribes and castes for equal community identity. The people participated in the rally, were shouting for equality and justice in the name of communist identity.

Conclusion

Laxman Gaikwad's '*The Branded*' is a powerful example of Dalit protest literature that exposes the cruel social, economic, and psychological realities of the Uchalya community. The text not only documents systemic injustice but also resists it through a voice that demands recognition and dignity. By foregrounding lived experience over literary ornamentation, Gaikwad aligns with the aesthetic of protest- uncompromising, raw and necessary. His narrative challenges caste- based hierarchies, questions inherited stigma, and offers a deeply human plea for equality. The text exemplifies how Dalit literature transcends mere documentation, becoming a tool for social awakening and transformation.

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End note:

¹http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/c/charlotteb201447.html?src=t_discrimination

²Gaikwad, Laxman. *The Branded: Uchalya*, Tran. by P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005, page no.014.

⁵Above mentioned definition is from Gail Omvedt *'Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste movement and the construction of an Indian identity'* (Revised edition) New Delhi: Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd., 2008. P.72.

⁶The Above mentioned meaning is from Suneetha K. Rani's 'Dalit Literature' in Sanga Jain c, *'South Asian Literature in English: An Encyclopedia'* London: Greenwood press, 2004 p.65

⁷*Santmuchcharis* the one who steals from weekly markets or bazars (Gaikwad 4)