



Research Paper

Rare Pauperism, Dalit Responsiveness and Destitution in Hira Bansode's Poem "Bosom Friend"

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ABSTRACT: "Bosom Friend" is a poem written by Hira Bansode, a prominent south Indian writer that narrates her personal agony in the poem. The problem of untouchability that is common and has remained a persistent problem in society for more than three thousand years has remained a persistent problem in society. Caste system in India is equally repressive as the racial discrimination in the West. Caste system amplifies its roots in every possible direction, this poem gives vivid details of discrimination in trivial, yet a significant incident.

Keywords: Dalit, Untouchability, Marginalisation, Deprivation, Subjugation, Social Stratification, Caste Segregation

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on the translation of Hira Bansode's Poem, "Bosom Friend", translated by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliott in the book An Anthology of Dalit Literature Edited by Milk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliott. Hira Bansode is a Marathi Dalit poetess, a poetess from Mahar caste; her poetry gives a vivid idea regarding the complication faced by caste lower in the Indian society. The caste system is responsible for the subjugation, suppression and repression in society. "Bosom Friend" is a poem written by Hira Bansode, a prominent south Indian writer that narrates her personal agony in the poem. The problem of untouchability that is common and has remained a persistent problem in society for more than three thousand years has remained a persistent problem in society. The problem of untouchability has more or less has remained uniformly spread in various parts of the country. North India and South India are equally afflicted by the same problem.

The caste system is similar to the oppression that was meted out to the Blacks in the European countries. The lower caste people which is comprised of a much larger population in the society has suffered oppression for a long time. Four caste systems are prominent in India in which the Brahmins occupy the prominent position in society. The equivalent position is occupied by caste Ksatriya, the third position Vaisya and the fourth class is called as the Shudra class. These four castes in ancient time were responsible for the various types of works. The Brahmins have associated teaching the class and the priestly groups; they were responsible for the suggestion of kings and religious ceremonies from the beginning of the life to the end of life was basically directed by them. They were at the behest of all the religious ceremonies for all the classes. It was this priestly class which has greater dominance over the economic structure of the society. The supremacy of the priestly classes gave mastery over the other classes. It is not only the supremacy over the other classes but also they dictated the terms of daily conduct to the other class.

The various directions that were given in the Brahmin class for the conduct all other class became the unuttered law of society. The undeclared instructions grew in stature in their meaning and they became deep-rooted in the society. In each and every aspect of society, these unwritten directions became the mode of operation of conduct for all the class of society. Ksatriyas belonged to the second dominant group of society. They were known as the warrior class of society. Politically they formed the dominant group. The power of kingship and other major political authority was conferred on them. The third class that belonged to the Vaisya class was the merchant class and they were basically involved in the agriculture and manufacturing sector. The class is basically known as the producer and artisan groups. They were basically involved in various economic activities. The Fourth class in the Indian society was basically comprised of Shudra class. They occupied the

subjugated classes of society. Shudra class was basically responsible for the cleanliness in the colony and they were basically occupied by the menial jobs. These menial jobs pertain to various odd activities of being labourer of various types. They occupied the class of boatmen, barber, water-carrier and other miscellaneous groups, etc. the social stratification was not only confined to this level rather it went deeper and led to the formation of new separate class the society that was thrown kept completely aloof from the society and they are known as the untouchable class.

This untouchable class was kept completely aloof from the premises of the society and they were not allowed to mingle in the society. Their aloofness was forced one and they were known as Chandalas in North part of India and in the Southern part of India, they were known as Holeyru. Poignancies of this class were common with few variations in all the part of Indian society.

Unuttered laws were less stringent in the beginning later become more harsh and uncompromising in the later period. The caste system that earlier came into prominence due to the division of labour, but later on the caste system became a social curse as birth became more dominant factors in the due course of action. Caste in the society then became the most acceptable feature and it eventually grew in the regular habit. The concept of purity and sense of aloofness got inculcated in the upper class to form the pure class. The original separation that was responsible for the formation of pure class, later on, resulted in the stringent laws in the society that was practiced in every walk of society. In everyday activity whether they are marriages, food habits, customs, and clothing there is a clear line of demarcation due to caste groups. The social stratification was mainly responsible for many divisions and this further led to the growth of discrimination in society.

"Bosom Friend" is a poem by Hira Bansode that narrates dramatically the discrimination based on caste. The caste system is not only confined to the marriage and inter-mingling of the people but also in every walk of life. The poem is written in a dramatic monologue in the form in which the presence of a speaker and a silent listener is evident. The speaker belongs to the lower caste of society while the listener belongs to the upper caste society. The title itself is ironical in nature as the "Bosom Friend" means a close friend. This poem is the dramatic narration of two friends who belong to two different sections or caste of society. This dramatic monologue gives a closer insight into the thoughts of the speaker and the trauma faced by her. The pathetic condition, poverty and hopelessness and feeling of inequality is evident in the poem; While the lower caste women in the poem suffer from the inferiority complex, the women from the higher caste suffer from a superiority complex and leaves no stone unturned to prove her caste superior identity. Her identity is evident by the various discourses that can be seen in her dialogue. The poem "Bosom Friend" gives a single incident scene, in which the speaker from the lower caste invites her friend to her residence for dinner. The poem starts with a welcoming note, "Today you came over to dinner for the first time/ you not only came, but you also forgot your caste and came..." (Bansode 27).

Women take pride in their identity and they do not leave any stone unturned to prove their superiority, even if they are friends. In the matter of dress, in the matter of customs and behaviour, they comment on the fellow mates and this is a similar occasion. The barrier between the two women is further widened by the extremities of the caste system. The caste system not only creates social stratification but in every walk of life it is evident. Caste domain is popularly seen in the male arena a sphere of discrimination in terms of conduct, employment and education. Poem by Hira Bansode gives us an insight into the view of women and discrimination faced by them due to the caste system. True devotion of friend is seen as the speaker from the lower caste welcomes her friend to her "pocket size house." Her "pocket size house" is juxtaposed against the "a mind large as the sky" of her friend. Ironically her devotion and dedication are similar to that Shabari, the legendary women from lower caste woman who appears in epic Ramayana. Ram though he belongs to upper caste Ksatriya caste eats the plum already tasted by Shabri. So, that her lord eats the sweetest plums and not the sour one. She says, "Truly, friend, I was really happy/ With the naive devotion of Shabari I arranged the food/ on your plate" (Bansode 27).

The woman from the lower caste exaltation soon ends when she offers food for her friend. "A little smirk you said oh My—Do you serve chutney-Koshimbir this way?" (Bansode 27) is the comment that she receives from her Bosom Friend. The derogatory reprimand the lower caste woman receives from the higher caste friend instantly reminds her of the barrier caste system has posed for so long years. "You still don't know how to serve food/ Truly, you folk will never improve (Bansode 27)," is the instant malignity that is seen in her statement. The speaker from the lower caste believed that her bosom friend would forget her caste and would accept the kind gesture of inviting her to dinner.

The second stanza opens "I was ashamed, really ashamed/ My hand which had just touched the sky was knocked down/ I was silent" (Bansode 27-28) The only scene of dinner shows the deep-rooted social stratification. In the habit of food also the discrimination, marginalisation and rebuke are seen not owing to the food changes. The proud gesture shown by the upper caste woman and friend is seen like feeling of superiority and she leaves no stone unturned to show her high social position. Alternatively, she also shows the deplorable and pathetic state of affairs of the lower caste.

The food habits, customs, and costumes become an integral part of life and they become a completely inseparable entity. A slight change in the above tradition leads to the vexation of the people and is often seen as a bone of contention. The caste system, religious system and patriarchy leave women in the Indian society triply marginalised. Hira Bansode gives us insight regarding the women in the society from the lower caste who also suffer from various domestic problems. The women from the lower caste are not only afflicted by poverty, patriarchy but also by caste dominance. "Don't you serve buttermilk or yoghurt with the last course of rice?" (Bansode 28) the woman from the upper caste asks the lower caste friend. The question is not posed to a friend but rather it is a burning question to the section of society to which the lower caste women belong. When the Bosom Friend exclaims, "we can't do without that..." (Bansode 28). "We" here stands for the entire group of upper caste groups. The food habit too becomes the symbol of status for the higher caste system.

It is for the first time that she invites her friend and she expects that everything would be great and for the first time, she would be able to show her devotion and love for her friend. But she falls dumbstruck by the comments she receives at the hands of her friend. In the third stanza, we come to the poor state of affairs the lower caste has suffered. The lower castes from a long time were marginalised not only socially but also economically. They formed the base of the superstructure in which they are the producers, workers, and labourers and form the lower strata of society. In the penultimate stanza, the pathos and pain of the lower caste women is evident and in turn she subjectively addresses her entire class or lower caste. The economically backward condition did not allow them to accommodate to luxurious food habits and was basically confined to ordinary meals. She broods about her childhood and says, "We didn't even have milk for tea much less yoghurt or buttermilk" (Bansode 28). These food items become the symbol of upper caste dignity. While the other coarser items like bread and some items garlic chutney. She explains to her friend that "shrikand", "ghee", "halva", "basundi" were rare to them.

The items that are mentioned by the lower caste woman displays the ordinary level of life that they have lived where they were deprived of the basic luxury of life and were basically confined to the level of mere sustenance level. The abject poverty they were exposed led the only estrangement in their life. In the final closing statement, she asks her friend, "Are you going to tell me what mistakes I made?" (Bansode 29). The statement highlights the acceptance of the subjugated and inferior status of life lower caste people are exposed to. The happiness of the two bosom friends is marred by the social stratification that is posed by the caste system in society. The poem starts with the state of cheerfulness, merriment, and blitheness but state of miserable feeling, downhearted, despairing and desolate feeling is left.

In the poem "Bosom Friend", dramatic monologue gives insight into the life of lower caste women or the untouchables. The suffering, agony, affliction, and torture are evident in this poem. The age-long suppression that remained in every walk of life and the psychological trauma and laceration is seen in the poem. In the most innocent act also disparage of lower caste is seen.

Historian Bipin Chandra in his book *India's Struggle for Independence* highlights the problem of the caste system and deeply gripped tendency that engulfed the entire culture of society; in each and every aspect, etiquette and deportment caste system remained a governing force, "The Hindu meets his religion at every turn. In eating, in drinking, moving, sitting, standing, he is to adhere to sacred rules, to depart from which is sin and impiety" (83).

Caste system remained a governing force even though it has terrible complications. The difficult situation every section was exposed to never daunted the spirit of any class to uproot the problem. Dr. Ambedkar asserts in his book *Annihilation of Caste*, that caste showed stateliness and majesty of one group over the other group and sustained the onslaught of the time, "Caste is his precious possession which he must save at any cost" (53).

Further he asserts, that continuation of malign and baleful practice remained intrinsic part of Indian society; Indian society which is known for its tolerance and acceptance of various culture and religion allowed the unscrupulous, unethical, conscienceless and exploitive practice to continue in the society, "the Hindu has let the savage remain a savage in the midst of his civilization without bushing, or without feeling any sense of remorse or repentance" (53).

Prominent ancient historian A.L.Basham in his book *The Wonder that was India*, gives us an account of back-breaking custom in which social mobilization becomes difficult and onerous as social stratification becomes difficult, "There was no chance of an individual rising in the social scale, but for a group this was possible, over a number of generations" (147). Earlier the differences of the classes were due to the division of labour that later on become integral parts of society. Earlier a favourable situation, later on became obstreperous for one section that was underprivileged while the privileged section riches grew. The concentration of economic fortune in the upper caste deprived the lower caste of the same. In this poem "Bosom Friend", the poverty of the lower caste host is seen

The fourth caste group came to be associated with menial jobs of cleanliness, agricultural labour and other such miscellaneous works. These works were low in esteem and civility. A master-slave relationship

between the upper caste and lower caste remained in Indian society for a long time. With control over economic assets like agricultural land, temples and military by the upper caste, the lower castes were compelled on the brink of poverty. Romila Thapar a prominent historian says, "The term *dasa* (slave) which in the Rig-Veda was used to designate the other person of a different culture was now used to mean the one who laboured or others," further it becomes a general feature of the lower caste, she says further, "This was also the function of the Shudra, who began to provide labour for occupations ranging across the agrarian and craft specializations and other less attractive jobs" (Thapar 123).

In this poem, the host from the lower caste gives her account of narration regarding her food habits that have remained unchanged. Her destitution, deprivation and impecuniousness are vowing to the extreme pauperism she has suffered from age-old caste problem. Her reminiscences, "in my childhood we didn't even have milk for tea much less yogurt or buttermilk" (Bansode 28). Confinement of the lower caste people to the menial jobs is responsible for the deterioration of the economic standard of the lower caste. Prominent sociologist C.N. Shankar Rao says in his book, *Sociology of Indian Society*, "Untouchability indicates not only a low place in the caste hierarchy together with the existence of social and religious disabilities but also a low economic position as well" (266).

In the caste hierarchy, the untouchables or the lower castes are attributed to a lower status in society. They are considered inferior, subservient and menial in the society and are vulnerable to social ostracism. Often the association with the higher caste was frowned upon. From time immemorial they have been considered as the servants of the other.

The underlying problems of food that has been highlighted in the poem throw light on the economic problems that lower section has suffered. They were not allowed to own the property. Menial jobs that they were exposed to hardly gave them attainability to own land and resources. Deprivation from education hardly gave opportunities for a job. The caste system imposed restrictions on the member of each community that hardly gave the occupational choice. The occupational choice was limited to unskilled and lowly jobs for the members of the lower caste. The deprivation from education also accentuated the poverty and depressing situation. They were compelled to do traditional and menial occupations such as sweeping, scavenging, collection of human wastes, curing hides, oil grinding, spinning and tanning, curing dead animals, leather works and shoe industry, etc. were the main occupations that they were occupied with. These occupations hardly allowed them to grow economical status in life and they were never able to move up in the social hierarchy. Even if in the rare case, handfuls were able to move higher in the economic hierarchy for them also to cut through the social hierarchy. A major section of landless labourers and bonded labourers belong to the lower caste groups. Though in the twenty-first century many affirmative actions like reservation in the government education sector and jobs sector have led to mobility in the lower caste groups. Much has been done in this area yet many other steps are required to reform the society.

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