

**SPEECH REGISTER AND DALIT CHETNA: AN ANALYSIS OF
BETRAYAL BY SURAJPAL CHAUHAN**

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Abstract

The language that the Dalit text employs has repeatedly been scrutinised in terms of the role it plays in the historically revisionist project of Dalit literature. The paper will look at Surajpal Chauhan's anthology of short fiction *Betrayal* published in 2011 and examine the dialogic passages in select stories of the collection for the use of various speech and narrative patterns, incorporation of various dialects, registers and non-standardised varieties of Hindi and other languages. These registers operate not merely as identifying markers of linguistic regionalism and present an iconoclastic 'rural realism'¹ but simultaneously are used by authors for additional purposes. The Dalit text often employs them in order to identify dialectical relationships between caste groups, specifically between those within the caste hierarchy and those outside of it. Speech patterns are used to distinguish politically awakened characters from those who are not awakened or who have not achieved Dalit chetna. Additionally, the Dalit text often employs an 'aesthetic of revulsion' (Brueck 101), whereby the use of non-sanitised speech, pejorative verbal invectives and abuses are used in order to catapult the reader's sensibility into the very lived experience of Dalit reality. The paper seeks to make a foray into looking at these aspects of speech and the manipulation or intermingling of speech registers in selected stories from Chauhan's anthology of short fiction.

Toral Jatin Gajarwala has suggested that the Dalit text can trace "anti-genealogy" of literariness in the Indian subcontinent (100). The language, permeated by caste hierarchies ensures that the use of standardised and non-standardised variants of language registers creates and propagates social stratification among the communities of the speakers. In his preface to the anthology of short fiction *Betrayal*, Chauhan mentions the language of the Dalit text as 'egalitarian' instead of 'supremacist', which is closer to living everyday speech, instead of a posed, unnatural and bookish idiom. Chauhan's statement draws attention to the linguistic choices Dalit authors make

in their works that are much more than mere aesthetic preferences . Bakhtinian thought has argued that language and speech registers do not exist in innocuous relationships of equivalence, that most often these relationships are historically predefined due to imbalances of power and these inequalities often play out in speech and language variances. (Bakhtin 271). The stories in Chauhan's anthology *Dhoka*(Betrayal) are short stories.The scope of most of the stories in the collection is narrow as they are set in fairly restricted time-frames rarely going beyond a few days. The themes and subjects of the pieces of the stories range from urban to rural and semi-urban, mostly based on a single encounters with the primary thematic preoccupation being that of caste .A close textual analysis of the dialogic interactions in the selected stories reveals that they adhere to speech patterns that often demonstrate the distance between characters who have achieved Dalit chetna and those who have not attained it.

In one of the stories titled as 'NeechJaat' (Lower Caste) when a Dalit is learned enough to become a teacher, the tradition whereby the teacher is thought of equivalent to God, is efficaciously debunked and the hypocrisy of a caste-ridden society unable to rid itself of long-held prejudices is exposed. After bullying Hariya into visiting his house to teach his brother Lakshman, once the arrangement is underway, the student tells the teacher that his brother has objected to the fact that how could a Dalit spread his feet and sit on our cot, that he might be a teacher but he still belongs to the lower caste, "he dares to spread his feet and sit on our cot, so what if he comes here to teach you...he still belongs to the lower castes."(Chauhan 37). The Thakur's use of khari Boli, standard urban Hindi/Bazaar Hindustani in the narrative is noticeable, while the ruralised Hindi register is common throughout the piece. His repeated use of invectives such as "lower caste" identify him as someone who adheres to a regressive casteist ideology and is not politically awakened. Another important speech inflection to note here is the dialectical glossing in parentheses of the word "Saale" as "Saare".The author anticipates the needs of the readers accustomed to a more conventional Hindi vocabulary (Brueck 107). The phrase 'NeechJaat' which translates as someone of the lower/ lowly castes does not adequately capture the essence of the original word. The hindi word "Neech" is most often used in a pejorative context and carries within it a connotation of moral and ethical depravity. Thakur's speech littered as it is by such epithets and the use of "Khari boli" (standard Hindi speech) and the extreme ruralised Hindi register, all serve to emphasise his lack of "Dalit Chetna" in the narrative.

Despite being educated Hariya cannot supersede his position in the caste hierarchy and remains circumscribed within the hierarchical casteist paradigm. At one point in the narrative Thakur addresses Hariya as 'Bavare', (rolling the L's into R's remains a common feature of ruralised speech). Curiously, another story in the collection is titled as "Bavala", the juxtaposition of the two linguistic/speech inflections of the same word draws attention to the dissimilar contexts and speakers that they are spoken by characters. (Chauhan 36) . The second story is set in an urban middle class context where a simple act of kindness by a fellow student towards another is steeped within a casteist stereotype. The clerk who cannot believe in the act of goodwill asks for his cut in the transaction, " Did you take two thousand or five thousand, slide some of it over here too." (Chauhan 49). When the student looks baffled by his remark, the clerk retorts whether he is also dumb as well as 'scheduled caste'. (Chauhan 49) . The use of the vocative 'abe', which is a common feature of urbanised or Mumbai Hindilends a derogatory impulse to the statement from the beginning. The speech register of the clerk's hostile insinuation

is a noticeable departure from the rest of the narrative, particularly the exchange between the two Dalit students which is written in an elevated Hindi register. The high register is characterised by the use of sanskritized language absent of everyday, colloquial expressions. This is evident in the usage of certain sanskritized words and the use of the formal second person pronoun “Apko”. The cashier’s speech on the other hand is curiously informal and insulting despite the setting being that of formal exchange during the admissions process, it reflects inherent caste bias and an overall lack of scruples. He is the archetypical Indian government official who cannot imagine being of assistance to another without a quid pro quo. His speech “how much money you have earned?” is littered with expletives and denotes a certain crassness that makes it similar to the ruralized register which is steeped within caste hierarchies. It is worth noting that the cashier in the story is depicted as one of a larger group, others working along with him harbour similar preconceptions that these scheduled caste students don't know anything. (Chauhan 48).

Toral Jatin Gajrawala has argued that Dalit writing is often caught between the opposing pulls of realism and idealism, where the realist perspective demands the Dalit character’s subjugation and the idealist lens looks for the arrival of Dalit chetna.(3). In the story entitled, “Uddhar” (Salvation or Upliftment), the threat of rape against the Dalit woman character provokes her to retaliatory violence against her uppercaste assaulter. In the exchange, Kinno’s speech is presented with rural realism with common inflections such as (Moha for Munha (Mouth), Bamana for Brahman) but the most interesting rhetoric of the two is that of Gyanchand, who tries to couch his attempted rape within the narrative of an opportunity for Kinno’s spiritual upliftment. Gyanchand is portrayed as a degenerate of the worst kind, one who doesn’t stave away from talking crassly about his own daughter. He refers to the holy books and to the Hindu myth of Ahilya’s seduction by Indra in order to legitimise his attempt to rape Kinno, “Haven't you heard the story of Lord Indra and Ahilya?”. Gyanchand’s speech consists of a mixed register with the use of words such as “Taine” for the usual “Tune”, and the usual expletive ridden rhetoric. (Chauhan 46)

After hitting Gyanchand, Kinno’s final remark to him is “Remember this... I’m not that Ahalya, I’m today’s Kinno.” (Chauhan 47). Kinno’s statement is at once an attempt at self-assertion and simultaneously also locates her outside the casteist ethos of Hindu mythology. She refuses to be identified by Ahilya, who is often represented as a picture of helpless femininity with little agency of her own. She refers to herself as a woman of today, It is a shunning of both, yesteryear thought, casteist hegemony and an attempt at claiming individual identity.

However it is not always that the threat of violence leads to a political awakening. In the story entitled, Daughter and Daughter-in-law, when a newly wed daughter-in-law after repeatedly being called a Hanuman(a monkey), by her sister in law finally retorts with a joke of her own and encounters the hostility of the entire family. Her husband pulls her by hair and promises to teach her a lesson for the ‘transgression’ and the others direct a stream of abuses at her all the while reiterating her lower caste status. Her caste becomes a convenient excuse to legitimise the violence that is directed at her," this is what her parents have taught her....she belongs to a lower caste family.” (Chauhan 33) . Violence at the hands of family members and outsiders has long been a measure to keep the Dalit woman within patriarchal control and the piece demonstrates the operation of such hegemonic practices at a microcosmic scale.

In the story, Betrayal, which is also the title of Chauhan's anthology, the narrator has a chance encounter with a former senior colleague Suresh Kumar Bali who goes about with an

orange 'tilak' on his forehead and claims that he does not beat the trumpet of his Dalitness that he wants to avoid drawing attention to the fact that he belongs to the "Scheduled castes". The relative anonymity offered by the city and his own isolation by virtue of his education, work and privilege allow him to be able to do so. His wife, who acts as a foil to his own character hails from the Punjabi Dalit community and is keenly aware of the community activities. She points to the narrator the prevalent casteism in rural areas of Punjab, that there is rampant belief in notions of purity and pollution and the Sikh Jatt community doesn't allow Ramdasi Sikhs access to their Gurudwaras.

The intermingling of various registers is noticeable in the piece, words from the English register are separately denoted through quotation marks, 'dining table', 'recollect' etc. Chauhan seems conscious of his readers being unable to detect the sudden switch in language to the English register and hence the words are marked in quotations (Chauhan 38). Incorporation of the English register serves to contextualise the story to a middle class urban locale. On the other hand, the mix of Hindi-Gurumukhi spoken by Mrs Bali is more easily integrated with the predominant Hindi register in the story. Mrs Bali's character acts as a foil to that of her husband, her speech stands out in terms of being written in an alternative register and it is symptomatic of her political engagement with the Punjabi Dalit community.

Suresh Bali's claim that he does not like to go about with his caste identity scribbled on his collar encourages the narrator to question Bali's use of government reservation if he would rather hide his Dalit identity. In order to explain their predicament the narrator vividly characterises the image of a dog on a leash whose reins are in the hands of others, "the collar as it is around your neck, and one end of that chain in the hands of the uppercaste." (Chauhan 41).

The crude metaphor that the narrator employs emphasises the impermeability of caste hegemony. Juxtaposed as it is against Bali's sanitised and sanskritized Hindi it serves to draw attention to the distance between Bali's unawakened consciousness and that of the narrator. This uncouth colloquial speech analogy symbolises the legacy of violence and control that is synonymous with the caste system but the narrator's words are also meant to push Bali and consequently the reader into interrogating their political and ideological stances. The narrator points out that while the choice between conformity and dissent may be Bali's, getting rid of caste hierarchies is rarely as simple as applying an orange tilak. The final sentence of the piece alludes to the 'betrayal' by the educated Dalit elite who have turned their backs on the rest of the community. 'Betrayal', the titular story in the collection is perhaps the only one that explicitly engages with the question of the role of the Dalit individual vis a vis the community in context of the larger political movement. It is the uplifted group of people in society who have betrayed Babasaheb. (Chauhan 41).

The use of harsh or abusive Hindi recurs in multiple stories across the collection, and is often representative of an unawakened consciousness. In the story titled Worry, the speech of the brahman is easily distinguished from that of the narrator. While the opening description of the narrative is written in an elevated Hindi (almost Sanskritised) register, the first words out of the Brahman's mouth referring to a fellow passenger who has asked him to put out his cigarette "the bitch is cunning" mark the digression. (Chauhan 52). The Brahman is a smoker, lecherous, and drunk while he is on the train. That the narrator mistakes him for a priest is telling "What do you do for a living? Are you a priest in a temple? (Chauhan 53). The Brahman's response is a tirade on the fact that priests and saints are not accorded the same respect as earlier, and that it is

impossible to make ends meet in those professions any more. When he learns that the narrator is on a vacation to Varanasi, he encourages the narrator to not be stingy about giving money to the Brahman's performing pujas and ceremonies on the *Ghats*. He cracks inappropriate jokes to the extent that the narrator considers it prudent to find another seat for himself. His final line, 'a Brahman is blessing you in the train itself' becomes a mockery and reeks of hollow casteist pride and privilege when his behaviour during the journey has exposed his moral decrepitude. (Chauhan 53). The incident in the story goes much beyond the typical characterisation of the good dalit and bad brahmin as there is no reference to the caste identity of the narrator. All we are told is that he is on his way to Varanasi for a vacation.

The other stories in the collection too are preoccupied with the question of caste. In the story, Among the Upper castes, after much persuasion when two Dalit colleagues attend a party organised by their uppercaste colleague, his casual remark about them staying to themselves and not mingling with everyone exposes the prevalence of casteism in everyday speech, "You guys are sitting apart from us over here...are we scheduled castes?" (Chauhan 34). In a class when the students are questioned about things they encounter in daily life that they can see but cannot touch after a series of conventional answers like the sun, the moon and the stars leads the teacher to compliment the students, Excellent. When a Dalit student occupying the last bench raises his hand and points to the water pitcher- as something that he is only able to see but never allowed to touch, his response is quickly snubbed by the teacher. In the story, Invention, a young clerk lists the names of all the acclaimed inventions that the Europeans have accomplished, consequently a question is posed about the ability of Indians to invent things. The clerk retorts that the Indians have created something no other society could envision i.e. the caste system.

In another story, The Pen (female swan) Never Returned, the casteist paradigm is reproduced through a simplistic animal fable to the setting of the forest where the Pen by virtue of her white coat considers itself to be of a superior community in comparison with the lowly black crow. The irony is that the 'lowly' crows had once rescued the Pen from a fatal attack by an eagle, when none of her own were around to assist her.

The linguistic behaviour of characters in Chauhan's anthology can effectively convey some of the preoccupations of the Dalit text. Incorporation of diverse speech registers and speech patterns in Dalit fiction moves beyond a mere aesthetic choice representing regionalism and realism. Instead they are used to represent the political leanings of characters, often denote whether or not a character has achieved Dalit Chetna. For Laura Breuck the notion of *Dalit chetna* serves as "a theoretical tool for setting the boundaries of a growing genre" (Breuck 42). She comprehends the presence or lack of it as a critical yardstick in defining the category of Dalit literature. The notion of *Dalit Chetna* is fast becoming the benchmark through which the 'Dalitness' of a text is measured (Breuck 65). As such situating characters with very different speech registers and patterns against each other in dialogic exchanges can be understood in terms of being one of many literary strategies within the larger literary paradigm of *Dalit Chetna*. These exchanges serve to portray characters that move beyond universalisms that have populated Hindi fiction. In each of the short narratives the dialogic interactions between characters provide insight into the larger praxis of power that governs these exchanges. The keen attention paid to their speech patterns, registers and rhetoric becomes an important tool through which the Dalit text asserts itself as part of a literature of protest, and negotiates an aesthetic that is allied with the political aims of Dalit literature.

Notes

1. Gajarawala uses the term 'rural realism' in context of the *Anchalik movement* in Hindi literature, which included works by authors like Phanishwar Nath Renu and Shiv Prasad Singh . The scope of the paper is limited to an analysis of a few stories from the collection, the selection of which is subjective and based on personal opinion about their relevance and engagement with the question of caste. All translations are done by authors.

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