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## Nuanced Absences and Presences of Innocence: Reading Dalit Childhood in Select Poems

Dr Rini Reba Mathew  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous),  
Bangalore-560077

People find childhood, being the earlier phase of life, as always difficult to memorize. In the course of Dalit writing, the child's perspective seemed to be marginalized and the writers were disoriented in documenting it because of the larger social issues in the community. People can find excuses for neglecting the child's perspective by arguing that when they were about to write or started writing, they have already lost the child's perspective and it is impossible for them to address the feelings of a child in their adulthood. Dalit childhood and mainstream childhood are different in many aspects. Childhood in a Dalit's life is the extreme opposite of the childhood of an upper-caste child. Dalit childhood would not be as imaginative as the mainstream childhood portrayed in R.K Narayan's *Swami and his Friends* and *Malgudi Days*. Narayan presents a world of wonder, innocence and mischief. He also idealizes something that is basic to the children- belongingness, affection, friendship, and security. Like Swami in *Swami and his Friends*, Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* also represents the romanticized mainstream childhood which is full of dreams and fantasies. These literary pieces present a world of the comfort zone, in which the children get whatever they want, fulfil the wishes they have, and live a happy life. But the situation is quite different in Dalit childhood. Dalit children are not living in the beautiful imaginary lands like a wonderland in *Alice in Wonderland*. They are not dreaming about a prince charming coming on a horse and taking them to a palace, as was portrayed in Children's fiction by mainstream writers. Their childhood is not about becoming the centre of attraction in the family since they have a lot of other problems to confront rather than showing affection to the child. Their childhood is not about hearing the stories told by the grannies; instead, they started working to earn their livelihood from a very early age while the upper caste children spend their time playing. The Dalit children never get a leisure time to rest and relax, unlike their upper-caste counterparts who enjoy all the luxuries of life. They never get what they need at the right moment. They have to wait for a long time to get their needs to be addressed by the parents. These experiences enable the Dalit children to internalize their social status and caste identity so that they can act accordingly.

The process of learning is important in a child's life. Unlike the non-Dalit child who gets a chance to learn from home, the Dalit child has no such chance available in his life. He has never been accustomed to learning Vedas and Sanskrit. Thus without no such basic knowledge, the Dalit child reaches the school for learning and immediately he gets isolated in the classrooms. He finds it difficult to learn as his speed of learning is far behind that of the non-Dalit child. Most of the children in the class are from non-Dalit backgrounds and they are already familiar with the sacred texts, so they find it easier to learn the school syllabus than the Dalits. The Dalit child thinks about his home, his playground, his food, his dress, his education, and his religion as the 'right' till that day and suddenly the confrontation with the outer world has given him a shock along with the self-realization. He feels inferiority and the social otherness and the backwardness make the situation much more vulnerable.

The language plays an important role in defining the place of the Dalit children in mainstream society. In schools, the medium of language would be different from the language of the Dalits. The teachers speak and take classes in a different language, which only the non-Dalits could understand. Thus from the very beginning of the education, the Dalit students feel alienated and suppressed. The linguistic acquisition capacity of Dalit children would be much lesser than the non-Dalit children. The famous Dalit poet, Arun Kamble, in his poem, "Which Language Should I Speak?", exposes this issue of language learning difficulty in Dalit children. He argues that the Dalit child is isolated at the level of language learning itself.

Chewing trotters in the badlands  
 my grandpa,  
 the permanent resident of my body,  
 the household of tradition heaped on his back,  
 Wait in this evening's glow and stand still  
 hollers at me,  
 "You whore-son, talk like we do.  
 Talk, I tell you .!"  
 Picking through the Vedas  
 his top-knot well-oiled with ghee,  
 my Brahmin teacher tells me,  
 "you idiot, use the language correctly!"  
 Now I ask you which language should I speak? (Kamble 54)

In the poem, the poet is caught between the two languages or the two varieties of the language. The child is thus caught between the two cultures or traditions. There is a split situation arises and the child finds it difficult to adjust or adapt to any of these situations. At home, he is accustomed to a certain language and his father scolds him, "whore son, talk like we do" while at school, his teacher asked him to follow the language which is taught there. The Brahmin teacher calls him an "idiot", which lowers his level. The use of derogatory language by both the child's parents and the Brahmin teacher exposes the treatment the child received in each space. There is a fear of punishment in both places and the child finds himself trapped in a split speech situation.

Language is a matter of greater concern for the Dalit writers. In India, language has also class and caste connotations and thus the writers have to think seriously about whether they should write in their regional language or in English. Language reflects one's own identity and culture and it represents the conflict between the two identities: the original and the acquired, as Arun Kamble elucidates in this poem. Writing in a regional language emphasizes the regional identity even though writers have started using English as their medium thus showing open to differences. The rude, vulgar language of his father and the self-centred extravagance on the part of his Brahmin teacher is problematized in the poem. The uncouth impolite language of the Dalits is their reality and the same reality is exposed by Arun Kamble.

The child, Raja, in Sapkale's poem saw a picture of a rich man beating a poor man in the book held by his father. The innate nature of asking doubts and clarifications of a child awakens in him and he asked his father, "Why is that man beating the other?" (Sapkale 3), and the father replied that it is because he is rich and the other is poor. The small child is not satisfied with that answer and then when he saw another picture of a man with a weapon in his hand about to kill the poor man, he looked at his father again for clarification. The child got infuriated at the moment and he decided to react against these brutalities.

He hurried to the table and took out  
 a razor blade from the drawer.  
 Once back he sliced off  
 the attacker's arm from the shoulder.  
 then looked at me triumphantly. (Sapkale 3)

The child is innocent and his immediate reaction is to react against what he dislikes. This is what exactly we saw in his reaction against the rich man in the picture. He can relate himself to the poor man in the picture. While the father keeps the fire of resistance in him, the child who is on his journey of learning is all set to resist. Maybe when he becomes an adult, might not react like this, as he did in his childhood. It is the conditioning of the society which turns the individual into a helpless, voiceless man. As a child, he does

not realize the issues behind the picture. For him, it is just a picture showing a violent scene and his immediate reaction is to resist and control it. But his father remains mute there. Arun Kamble's poem also shows a similar resistance in its end. Being confronted by the two linguistic registers, the child immediately questions back his father and his teacher, "Now I ask you, Which language should I speak?" (Kamble 54) The innate nature of questioning and doubting in a child exists throughout his childhood and begins to fade away with his learning process. The state and the school teach him to be silent and submissive in front of his caste counterparts.

The process of learning in the Dalit child's life has a lot of significance. He, with his innate nature of childishness and pranks, very soon realizes that this world is against him and his caste and he should struggle hard to stand here. This self-realization brings him to a stage of resistance and revolt which the child internalizes as an essentiality in his life. This also contributes to his relationships in his personal and public life. The Dalit child's relationships with his parents, siblings, friends, elders and teachers contribute to his life as a Dalit. In all these contacts, his identity as a Dalit emerges as an important indicator and it influences his life to a larger extent, in fact, his whole life depends upon these relationships.

The relationship that the Dalit child has with his friends is also a subject of discussion. After his parents, the child interacts most of the time with his friends. The peer group has a lot to contribute to the development of the child's personality. He shares his secrets with his friends and the peer group discussions help him to take decisions in life and widen his worldview. Hira Bansode, in her article, "Twice Dalit" says about how a Dalit is treated by the upper castes and what happens when the Dalit children are caught playing with their non-Dalit friends. "We could not enter the house of a Maratha or touch their water when they came to fill at the well. If a Maratha child played with one of us, he or she would be beaten, yet as children, we were not fully aware of the concept of caste." (Bansode 282)

S. Joseph, a powerful voice in Malayalam Dalit poetry, in his poem, "Identity Card", shows how relationships can get hurt when the caste identity is revealed. The poem portrays a classroom where one Dalit boy and a Christian girl became close friends. They sat together and shared lunch every day. But once his caste identity is exposed, things have changed between them. Joseph says,

I noticed, she said

Returning my card:

The account of your stipend

Is entered there in red. (Joseph 454)

The poem shows that the girl might have received instructions from her home to not to interact with a lower caste student. She never realized that her friend is a lower caste and once she came to know it by the red colour of the stipend entered, she left him without saying a word. The poem did not explain how the boy child feels after he lost his friend. But he says that every boy and girl who is lost in themselves will depart after a while. But he corrects his statement and said:

I won't be surprised even if they unite.

Their identity cards

Won't have markings in red. (Joseph 454)

It implies that if the children are both from the higher caste, their relationship or friendship would not get hurt. But if one of them belongs to the Dalit caste, then it will be the end of the relationship. The child, for whom the idea of caste is new, might be surprised to watch the trouble with his identity and later when he gets adapted to it, he will get used to it. But there would not be any change in this situation. Joseph's poem subtly conveys the message that relationships in society are based on the caste and status of the individual. It can get wounded without any notice.

Arun Kamble's poem, "Which Language Should I Speak?", presents the Brahmin teacher who scolds and curses the Dalit child in derogatory language. Even though the Brahmin teacher is practicing Vedas and Upanishads every day, it has not made any impact in his conversation with the lower caste people. He uses offensive language to insult and belittle the Dalit children. The psychology behind this attitude is such that the upper caste people do not like the Dalit students to sit in their class. So they thought that by harassing,

making work like hell, and insulting them, they could drive the Dalits out of the school. The same situation happens to the child narrator in Sukirtharani's untitled poem. The child says, "I feel victim to the teacher's cane" (Sukirtharani 317). The teachers usually abuse the Dalit students by asking their caste names, and their parents' occupations and calling out their caste names in front of other students. The attitude of the teachers creates some sort of anger and resentment in the child; sometimes resulting in his drop out of school or some violent reaction from his side.

Thus the relationships that the Dalit child has in his life influence his growth and personality to a greater degree. Parents at home, friends in the neighbourhood, and teachers in school either motivate him or degrade him. The Dalit child internalizes his relations and their effects and reproduces them in the course of his life. The influence of these relationships will be displayed in his behaviour and actions in the social sphere. Thus the learning process and the relationships condition and mould the Dalit child to lead a life in the casteist society. The child's existence in the society is decided by the conscious and society-inflicted absences and presences, which eventually creates an impact in the community to rise and shine in adversities.

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