

Critical Study of Joseph Macwan's 'The Stepchild'

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Abstract

The exploitation of the powerless by the powerful is not a new thing. It has been going on for centuries. The condition of the victims is pitiable. The superiors think of themselves as the masters of the victimizers, so they behave with them as if they were animals. They are treated as if they were made up of other soil. They are paid less than they work. The condition of women is worse than men. They are harassed, raped, and exploited by their masters at workplaces or farms. Even girl children are not spared from harassment by their masters. If they are sent to school to get an education, they are harassed and raped by male teachers. They cannot raise their voice against injustice done to them.

Moreover, if they raise their voice against them, the blame comes upon them for seducing them. Dalit children do not get proper food, cloth, and home. To live civilized life is a dream to them. Education which is considered the key to getting rid of their misery proves meaningless to them as they are deprived of it. India got freedom from the former rulers, but the lower caste did not get it all; the upper caste still governed them. They are in the firm clutches of slavery. The present research paper focuses on the miserable condition of the Dalits, who still suffer from the social evil of the caste system. In independent India, they are still governed by the upper caste. To show the colonization of the Dalits by the upper castes, the researcher has taken the Sahitya Academy Award-winning novel *The Stepchild* by Joseph Macwan.

Keywords: Colonization, Dalits, exploitation, untouchables, stepchild, Vankars, Patels, identity, harassment

Introduction

The thugs have gone and left the robbers behind. (Macwan, 199)

Lots of progress has been made in the field of education, science, and technology since the independence of India. However, the status of Dalits is not changed yet. They have

been still suffering in the name of caste. The Hindu caste system made their life intolerable and treated them as inhuman. Their touch, shadow, and even their voice is suppressed by society till today. In many daily newspapers, it is often reported about Dalit women's harassment or rape. Even today, Dalits kids are expelled from schools for being untouchables. In the hostel, they have to bore torture and humiliation. If they get a job, they must bore their harassment and partiality from their co-workers or boss. Millions of Dalits converted themselves into Muslims or Christians to overcome the age-old miseries.

The Dalits have =been let down both by the ruling class and the government. v8; The constitution of India has abolished untouchability, but it is only on paper. After 74 years of independence from India, untouchability is not entirely removed from the country. The constitution has abolished only untouchability, not the caste system. Himansu Charan Sadangi rightly said,

... the constitution abolished untouchability, not the caste system itself. As long as the caste system as a whole is not abolished, untouchability alone cannot be removed. The ruling class knows it, so it has no plans to abolish the caste system. (Sadangi, 39)

India's ruling party does not try to remove the caste system to get socio-economic benefits and a considerable vote bank.

The Dalits are more in numbers but are very poor, weak, and unorganized. Further, they are divided into castes or sub-castes. Illiteracy is the main weakness of the Dalits. Educationally, they are backward, so they cannot get good jobs and earn money to live civilized lives. Because of their illiteracy, they must work in factories, farms, or workhouses. They live on a basis and own pigs, donkeys, and dogs. They eat partake of food only in clay utensils and wear torn clothes. At the workplace, they are exploited and tortured by their landlords or masters. The position of Dalit women is worse than that of Dalit men. They are sexually harassed and raped by their landlords or masters. Despite equal work in the factory, Dalit women are paid less than Dalit men. Their masters neither feel pity when they are pregnant nor have babies with them. They are beaten mercilessly if they do not work correctly. At the school, they are ordered to sit in the last row of the class, and the co-students misbehave with them. In this way, they bore daily insults, weakening their mental strength. Their divisions into caste and sub-castes push them back to get workforce. Darkness is seen everywhere in their life. They are all around chained in the Indian caste system.

The Internal Colonization of Dalits in Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild*

The Stepchild is the most acclaimed novel by Gujarati Dalit writer Joseph Macwan who won several state and national awards for his contribution to Dalit literature. He wrote many articles, short stories, and novels to represent the injustice, inequality, and exploitation of Dalits. His literary works represent the pain and suffering of the Dalits in the most realistic manner. He expressed what he has experienced in his life.

The novel *The Stepchild* (2004) was initially written in Gujarati by the author who titled it *Angaliyat* (1986). The author has made the novel very rich by using local dialects.

The novel represents the gripping tale of pure love and heroism of Dalit couples who are the victim of the caste system. They suffer from upper-caste wickedness and their own caste's faults and weaknesses. The novelist has exposed the strength and weaknesses of the Dalits in the novel in the most vivid narrations. It became so famous among readers that it won the Sahitya Academy Award 1989. Later it was Rita Kothari, the professor of Humanities at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar, who translated the novel into English and titled it *The Stepchild*. This novel gave pride to the Gujaratis that it was the first novel in Gujarati literature which was translated into English and published in Oxford University Press.

MacEwan's *The Stepchild* is set in rural Gujarat in the 1930s. The author has taken the Charotar region to represent the humiliation of Dalit communities, especially the Vankars of Gujarat. The two villages named Shilapaar and Ratnapaar of Anand district are mentioned in the novel. In Shilapaar, there live the upper castes like the Patels or Patidars, the Thakors, and the other eighteen castes people including the lower caste. The Patels or Patidars own most of the land of Shilapaar. Even the Thakors have to depend upon the Patels in economic terms. They distributed free food and clothes to the flood-affected victims, but in reply, they made the Dalits clean the whole village. Beside Shilapaar, there is a village named Ratnapaar where the Vankars lived, who are either field workers or weavers of handloom clothes. Some Vankars weave clothes and sell them in the nearby villages and towns or in the bazaar; the others work in the mill to earn their livelihood. In *The Stepchild*, the author has very vividly exposed the internal colonization of the Dalit community, especially the Vankar community of the Charotar region in particular and the lower castes in general of the 1930s. The Patels or Patidars of Charotar are the rulers of that region. Economically, there are more potent than the Thakors, though their families are fewer in numbers. They exploit, humiliate and harass the members of the Dalit community. They sexually harass Dalit women in public places, whether they are married or single. Methi is one of the victims of this evil. One day she was carrying a pot of water on her head; Megha Patel's Nanio threw a stone at the pot, which was broken. Nanio, with her fellow friends, was gazing lasciviously at the girl. The author highlights,

The woman, wet from head to foot, stood rooted on the ground..... A man from the opposite parapet got up, and the rest guffawed. Their eyes roved over the woman's nipples visible through her wet blouse. (Macwan, 15)

This is an age-old misery of Dalit women. Their pots were broken, and their wrists were held publicly by the upper caste men. They are raped even on the eve of their wedding day. Moreover, the helpless Vankars cannot do anything against them. They have been enduring all for years. To save their single girls, they marry their girls at an early age.

Teehalal Parmar, or Teeho, the protagonist of the novel *The Stepchild*, is a man of twenty-two or twenty-three who is made up of other soil which cannot endure the sexual exploitation of Dalit women. He belongs to the Ratnapaar village. He and his close friend Valji are weavers by profession. They usually sell their handloom cloth in the nearby villages or towns or the local bazaars. One day they were selling their cloth in the village of Shilapaar when he saw the sexual harassment of Methi; he could not bear it and stood beside her. He fought with the

Patel youths very bravely and hit them. Dhoolsingh Thakore, the headman of Shilapaar, rushed there and disentangled the man from Teeha's grasp. When the headman asked Teeha what had happened, he asked the scoundrel to admit the truth and told the headman to ask the women of their village. When he saw the shattered pot, a charming young woman, drenched and abased, and the broken pot shards around her feet, he understood what had happened there. He rebuked Nanio and his companions. However, they did not seem humble to him and, in arrogance, told Mukhi that they wanted to file a police complaint against the low-caste Teeha. Dhoolsingh asked them to remain present at the village square because he wanted to file a complaint against the harassment of poor girls in the village. When all went from there, Dhoolsingh Thakore advised Teeha that that type of incident happened every day in the village and that he should not take unnecessarily pick a fight and warned him that the Patels would not leave him live there.

On the next day, the village square of Shilapaar was jam-packed. Dhoolsingh Thakore, known for his kindness and cunning nature, was crowded with the older men. He knew little about the law, but his instincts and common sense prevented anything unlawful in the village. The Patels argued that the law caste man and an outsider had publicly beaten up Patel's son, so he must be taught a lesson for life. They insisted that the Mukhi penalize Teeha and feel him with such fear that he would never enter their village till the day of his death.

As there was a call from the village headman of Shilapaar, Teeha came to the village square and asked the headman why he was called. He was told to put his bundle down by the headman. He told Teeha to pay 125 rupees as a penalty. When he asked the headman what he should pay the penalty, he was told that he had no power to ask them and further told him that he had violated the law by beating the higher caste man. Moreover, he was warned never to step into Shilapaar again. However, the Patels were not satisfied with the punishment; the Patel youths attacked Teeha when he was returning to Ratnapaar. He fought with them bravely, but they were eight in number. He got an injury on his head.

The Patels were enraged with Teeha, who had beaten the eight Patel youths poorly. They showed their anger by damaging the fields of Moti, Heera, Methi's father, and many other farmers. They burnt Moti's storeroom and mutilated Heera Khana's mango trees overnight. They stole heavy bevel tree trunks. They destroyed three fourth sources of livelihood in a single night and hung a threatening note,

If you have anything to do with your community members in Ratnapaar or let them enter here, that will be your end. You will be thrown out of the village without water from the lake. If you wish to live in this village harmoniously, let Moti Dhula and Heera Khana be ostracized and made to answer for their conduct. (Macwan, 30)

The Patels were not stopped there; they met the headman of their village and tried to manipulate him. When he told them to accept their offense, they threatened him that he would have to bow down before them after independence. The village headman knew the truth but could not go against them because the Thakors were Patels' tenants and tilled their land. They were utterly dependent upon them in economic terms.

The Patels of Shilapaar were so evil-minded that they planned to disturb the internal relationships of the Vankars. They used the Britishers' break-and-rule policy upon Vankars. To take revenge on Teeha, they stop him from entering their village and disturb his possible marriage with Methi, his lover. They manipulated the social relations set up among the Vankars. Methi had a child marriage with Cynthia, a drunkard, a rogue, and a gambler. Her father, Heera himself, was not ready to send his daughter with Cynthia. However, the cunning Patels did the trick and wrote a fake letter addressing her parents. It was mentioned that to honor Valjibhai's last wish, Teeha would marry Valjibhai's sister-in-law Monghi. When Methi came to know about Teeha's refusal to marry her, she was shocked, and in desperation, she decided to live his life with drunkard Chunthia. In this way, the Patels manipulated Teeha and Methi's marriage. They also set up Vankars against one another.

The Vankars of Ratnapaar were weavers or farm laborers who depended entirely upon the Patels for their livelihood. The Patels misused their power and money and humiliated them. To save their daughters from the harassment of the Patels, they had to marry their daughters at an early age. However, after their marriage, they were not secure. Ramlo work for Dehlavala, but Dehlavala sexually harassed his wife. It is the harsh reality of the Patels; on one side, they avoid the shadow and touch of the Vankars, considering them impure or untouchables, while on the other side, they sexually harass the Vankar girls or women.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the exploitation and humiliation of Dalits by non-Dalits have been going on for years in the name of caste or religion. They have been oppressed, harassed, and exploited. Independence of the country was a little hope for him, but it also proved meaningless for them. India gained independence, but the Dalits' social condition has not yet changed. They are still under the rule of the upper castes. They are undoubtedly trying to eliminate this slavery, but the social orders do not allow them. Joseph Macwan, the novel's writer, was Dalit who tried his best to reveal this reality through *The Stepchild*. As a Dalit writer, he has very beautifully exposed the social evil of the caste system, which prevailed in India. The novelist successfully presents the pitiable condition of Vankars through his characters. Through the novel, the novelist has presented the internal colonization of the Vankar community of Gujarat in particular and the Dalit community of India in general.

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