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THE STEPCHILD: A SAGA OFPOST-COLONIAL TRAUMA

Dr. Rajesh Shriniwas Shesham
Associate Professor, Department of English, R. B. Attal Arts, Science, and Commerce College, Georai. Dist. Beed, MS, India

Abstract

Culture, especially that of the natives, was not seen as a living tradition passed down through generations but as an artefact crafted for the Western market and consumer. There was a power imbalance; Western culture was considered superior to non-Western cultures. Thus, any discussion of post-colonialism must start with history, culture, and politics. Postcolonial fiction has traditionally served as a platform for analyzing and questioning various oppositional discourses. Recognizing injustice and oppression has been essential in shaping anti-oppressive narratives. The idea of marginalization can be studied from multiple angles: postcolonial, post-structural, historiographical, Marxist, and feminist, because a text must be situated, re-situated, textualized, and contextualized within its broader environment. In the Indian post-colonial setting, this analysis shows how social, political, economic, and cultural institutions carrying colonial legacies continue to function today, often ignoring the diverse realities of modern India.

Keywords

Culture, Capitalization, Oppression, Marginalization, Cultural Legacy., etc.

Full Article

Postcolonial literature primarily emerges as a response to European colonization, which imposed its rule on colonized nations. It is seen as a way to address the socio-cultural effects experienced by these nations, impacting their social, cultural, political, and economic spheres. Recognized as a significant aspect of world literature, postcolonial works challenge biased, Eurocentric narratives and aim to amplify the voices of oppressed peoples. They critically examine the legacy of colonialism and its persistent influence on societies and cultures across the globe, incorporating diverse historical and cultural perspectives. This genre encompasses novels, poems, plays, essays, and other formats, emphasizing themes like colonial history, cultural hybridity, resistance, and identity.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the works of postcolonial nations. This focus explores the literary and cultural experiences of people and communities that were once subjected to colonization. As history, politics, and culture are intricate and ever-evolving, the postcolonial experience emerges from their interplay. Historically, the imperial West has used its influence to shape global history and has controlled extensive regions of the world. Only in recent times have formerly oppressed populations started to reclaim their own histories, which were previously molded by Western interests designed for the West and driven by Western influence. Concepts like power, rule, sovereignty, democracy, secularism, independence, nation, and nationalism all stem from Western institutions and literature.

Culture, especially among indigenous communities, was not regarded as a living tradition transmitted through generations but rather as an artifact created for Western markets and consumers. A power imbalance was present, with Western culture perceived as superior to non-Western cultures. Therefore, understanding history, culture, and politics is essential when defining postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial fiction has regularly offered a space to analyze and challenge

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conflicting discourses. Identifying injustice and oppression has been crucial in developing anti-oppressive narratives.

The resistance discourse extends beyond mere challenges to authority and power. It is not solely about negating, rejecting, or overturning power structures; it often intertwines with the very systems it opposes (Slemon, 72). Fictional portrayals of resistance openly challenge oppression related to caste, gender, race, ethnicity, language, and religion. In a postcolonial setting, dominant discourses often emphasize marginalization. These exclusions and marginalized groups are evident in contemporary minority discourses, including movements for women's rights, struggles faced by farmers, caste and class conflicts, language disputes, regional protests, children's rights campaigns, environmental activism, sex workers' rights, and protests against honour killings, among others. Marginalization refers to groups outside the mainstream of power and now includes the subaltern. Susan Abraham observes that this space, once under imperial control, has transformed into new forms- such as domestic nationalist tyranny targeting minorities and alliances between nationalist governments and militarized global economic entities. Critical issues involve race, class, gender, ethnicity, democracy, and human rights, especially when contrasted with claims of cultural uniqueness and difference.

The truth is often crafted by a powerful minority within government, politics, societal elites, discursive creators, religious leaders, and knowledge controllers. These entities are more than passive agents; they influence fields and rituals, convincingly mimicking reality. As a result, writings from oppressed and marginalized groups inherently carry a subversive potential to challenge and protest. It is therefore crucial to uncover the truth behind totalizing myths and the suppression of the subaltern through hegemonic means. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains in *Can the Subaltern Speak*?, the subaltern can never speak for itself.

Any dominant social order is both historically and socially constructed, sustained more by hegemony than individual choice. It entails developing a version of reality that sustains itself. Society mediates this reality through stories that make sense of the world, often with unknown authorship. These stories serve to signify, shape, and create meanings that reflect the world. A particular form of reality, known as a 'discursive configuration', is designed to influence society and define who is marginalized and who is not. Consequently, Postcolonial literature frequently either supports or challenges these discourses. Human identity is moulded by the discursive frameworks present in a society at a specific time. As a result, texts need thorough analysis and interpretation to uncover hidden gaps. Marginalization of human subjectivity occurs on all levels and can only be understood through an examination of history.

Marginalization can be understood from various viewpoints: Postcolonial, Post-structuralist, Historiographical, Marxist, and Feminist, as a text must be placed, reoriented, verbalized, and set within its broader context. In the post-colonial Indian setting, the focus is on how social, political, economic, and cultural institutions, which bear colonial legacies, operate today, often overlooking India's diverse realities. Key issues include how these institutions function, the undemocratic nature of governance, religious intolerance, and the exploitation of minorities such as the poor, women, and lower castes. Marginalization is a social and political phenomenon rooted in power relations, defining the space occupied by certain individuals at a specific time and place, where the dominant group influences the behavior of those marginalized. It describes a position marked by limited access to power.

The Stepchild by Joseph Macwan, translated into English by Rita Kothari, explores the marginalization of Gujarat's weaver community. It addresses issues like caste discrimination, economic exploitation, social exclusion, Dalit agency, gender roles, and community resilience. The novel narrates a fading culture that is being deliberately forgotten. The author aims to recognize and honour its strength and character. As the author states: Most of the life experiences

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of ordinary people- suffering, want, pain, exploitation, social injustice- are not depicted at all. Despite ongoing oppression, the marginalized Dalit community preserves its culture, a unique tradition filled with stories of bravery and resilience.

The novel examines how Vankars from the Patidar community in Gujarat are marginalized. It begins with a realistic portrayal of a close friendship between two dedicated Vankar members, Teeha Bhai and Valji Bhai, who craft some of the finest woven fabrics. They sell their products at local markets. On one trip, they encounter Patels, who disrespect them by making inappropriate advances toward Methi, a Vankar girl from a nearby village. Teeha, who deeply respects women, cannot tolerate this injustice and confronts the Patel boys. This act of defiance by the high caste against the low caste challenges the Patels' authority. In response, the Patels react angrily and plot to completely destroy the Vankars. Teeha and Valji are expelled from the village and face community boycotts.

The Vankars in *The Stepchild* face marginalization in every aspect of life. They are called dhedas by the upper caste and are excluded from certain societal areas. For example, Valji and Teeha are not allowed to board a cart while heading to an auction. It is both sad and ironic that the upper caste wears cloth woven by lower caste weavers, yet they are forbidden from sitting on their carts. As the author notes: "This, too, was sad and ironic- you could carry the woven cloth in the cart but not the weavers themselves. They were considered impure! In fact, they could speak freely and openly but without any physical contact." (Macwan, 20)

In this novel, the community marginalized by the Vankars was small but exploited nearby populations. There were only about twenty-five members. They constantly devised ways to keep the Vankar leaders subdued, often considering tactics to humiliate and intimidate Teeha whenever someone suggested, "Penalize him and fill him with such fear that he never steps into this village until the day he dies" (Macwan, 27). As a result, Teeha had to pay a hefty fine just for belonging to a low caste and defending a woman's honor, and he was permanently barred from entering Shilapaar. Teeha also suffered from star-crossed love; he was in love with Methi, whom he rescued from the Patels' grasp. Methi's family also faced repercussions. The next day, Heera and her cousin Moti's fields were damaged, and they were ostracized. Their hay storage outside the village was burned, and Heera's mango trees were mutilated overnight (Macwan, 30). Enraged by their arrogance, the oppressors destroyed three-quarters of the community's livelihood overnight and left a threatening note, warning: "If you have anything to do with any members of your community in Ratnapar or let them enter here, that will be your end. You will be expelled from the village without even a drop of water from the lake" (Macwan, 30).

In this novel, the oppression faced by Dalits ranges from mild verbal insults to severe extermination. It begins with Teeho (Teeharam) and Valji, two Dalits, heading to an auction in a nearby village to sell their clothes. En route, they encounter a Thakor who criticises the wickedness of the Patels and asks them to unload their bundles onto his cart. However, he tells Teeho and Valji to walk behind him, fearing contamination, because he does not want his cart or himself to be defiled by touching Dalits. In India, caste-based untouchability involves considering Dalits unclean, with the belief that contact pollutes both parties and requires penance for purification. Macwan comments, "That was a hard luck. A cart can be loaded with goods, but the manufacturer of the goods cannot be accommodated in the cart; otherwise, it is called untouchability. People talk as if their hearts are one, but they can't be one in body" (Macwan, 11).

Dalits are often denied aid, even during emergencies. Recalling the floods mentioned by Teeho's father, Teeho explains to Valji that the floods severely affected their area, yet the caste-Hindu community did not even provide medicine. Ranchhod Dhelavala, a caste-Hindu, sold grains, medicines, and clothes, but when the Vankars asked for help, they were refused and told to first clean the village. They had to live in mud for two weeks, remove dead animals, and eat what

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was left. The Vankars' tin sheets, meant for roofs, were taken by the Thakors. During business, Teeho witnesses caste-Hindu men assaulting Methi, a Vankar girl. Nanji, a Patel boy, sees Methi approaching with a pot of water and throws a stone at it, soaking her. When she protests, she is called a slut. “Their eyes roved over the woman’s nipples visible through her wet blouse. Flustered under their lascivious gaze, she re-adjusted her wet pallav across her chest” (Macwan, 15). Dhoolsingh Thakore advises Teeha, who is ready to fight to defend Methi’s dignity, saying, “Look, Teeha, this happens every day, and it will go on. You shouldn’t have unnecessarily picked a fight” (Macwan, 17). This shows that caste-Hindu youth often harass Dalit women.

Most Dalits in villages live in fear of the Hindu Caste hierarchy, with exceptions like Teeha and Valji. The caste system's penal code oppresses Dalits, despite being outlawed by the Indian government. It has terrorized Dalits since the caste system's inception in the Indian subcontinent. Hindu Caste individuals often escape punishment through wealth and influence. Many law enforcement officials are also Hindu Caste people, and although they belong to different castes, they share mutual understanding and support. Teeha is upset because, despite saving a girl from his caste, no one from the community comes to praise him. When he tries to gather some men, their wives or daughters claim they are not home. Macwan notes, “Nobody wanted to come in Patidar’s [Patel’s] eye... Nobody could think of going against them, and how can they? Patels had money. They had influences. Police were in their hand” (Macwan, 21). Patels set fire to Dalit fields and cut down their trees.

The Hindu caste members destroy the livelihood sources of Dalits and loot their properties. They believe that Dalits should always rely on them for survival, fearing that economic independence might lead to rebellion. They pressure the village head to expel Teeho, but Dharamshi Thakor, the village head, refuses. In response, they say, “You’re forgetting Thakor. You’re in a position of power till the British are there. Once Swaraj comes, you have to oblige us” (Macwan, 38). It is notable that Dalits regard the British as allies because the British ruled everyone under a common penal code, disregarding caste. Economically, Dalits depend heavily on Hindu caste members, as most do not own farmland, and those with small plots rely on the caste members for cultivation. The financial loss from cultivation is severe, pushing Dalits to seek loans by pledging land or earning money through odd jobs for the next season’s cultivation. Hostility towards caste members means denial of loans or odd jobs.

Joseph Macwan vividly portrays scenes in his novel The Stepchild that awaken Dalit awareness among Dalits, motivating them to protest against oppression by the Hindu caste hierarchy. Teeho remains deeply conscious of Dalit issues throughout the story, and his ongoing anger toward caste discrimination keeps him fiercely agitated. Conversely, Methi’s brother, Moti, endures the oppression passively. He believes Dalits are powerless and unable to resist their oppressors. Instead of defending his sister’s dignity through protest, he considers arranging her aanu [the ceremony uniting a girl with her childhood husband who lives apart]. Moti cautions about prudence: “one cannot live in water without risking enmity with crocodiles.” However, Teeho persistently responds, “To hell with water and crocodiles... people like us either become extinct or we absorb all their water... the British sun is still warm. Once independence arrives, our days will be numbered” (Macwan, 23).

In *The Stepchild*, a few protesting Dalits, including Teeho, appear. Angry, Teeho rushes to defend Methi when he sees her modesty and dignity being assaulted by caste-Hindu boys. He challenges and fights them. One of the boys, badly injured, calls Teeho the offensive terms 'dhedh' (untouchable) and 'pargami' (outsider), and tries to file a police report against him. During the subsequent confrontations, Teeho humiliates the man so thoroughly that the man swears revenge, claiming he will complain himself and trusting British justice. He believes that caste

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discrimination will increase for swaraj (self-rule). Interestingly, the oppressed Dalits see the British in India as a blessing, viewing them as impartial, free from caste prejudices and corruption.

The novel highlights how children experience marginalization within the current economic system, where inequality between the wealthy and the poor is widespread. The residents of the Paraiya community are in dire financial straits, earning so little they cannot even afford a bowl of Kanji. As a result, women and children of all ages must work tirelessly to survive. They find jobs in the landlord's fields, in households, or in nearby factories. Sometimes, children accompany their mothers to care for younger siblings, while at other times, they work as laborers themselves. Maikkanni's story exemplifies these hardships. She is an eleven-year-old girl with bright eyes, the eldest of five siblings. Her dishonest father has abandoned them to be with another woman. He visits occasionally, either to steal their earnings or to leave a child in her mother's womb (Macwan, 69). When her mother is in the fields, Maikkanni manages the household.

Conclusion:

Religion also played a role in marginalizing the Paraiyas. The priests exploited the poor considerably, as seen in their dishonesty, expecting gifts from those who were impoverished. During the Puusai, women would offer grains, pulses, or whatever they had in exchange for blessings from the priests (Macwan, 34). The community's strict orthodoxy made it susceptible to social evils. Many uneducated people believed in spirits and ghosts, and women acting abnormally were often seen as possessed by peys. Overall, Paraiya women face dual disadvantages due to both caste and gender marginalization. Joseph Macwan's works present challenges for modern readers by portraying the silent Vankar community. Silence reflects their exclusion from certain discourses, despite their vibrant oral traditions of music, song, and storytelling that preserve their cultural identity but remain outside mainstream culture. This raises questions about whether a single intellectual voice can truly represent the diverse Dalit experiences.

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