WRITING THE FORBIDDEN: A STUDY OF THREE TEXTS, THREE GENRES, AND THREE COMMUNITIES

Sruti Manjula Devaprakash
(Ambedkar University, Delhi)

Abstract: ***Three texts have been chosen for this study: Daya Pawar's life-narrative Baluta, Perumal Murugan's historical fiction One Part Woman, and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's short story collection The Adivasi Will Not Dance. These writers hail from various subaltern groups of the Indian subcontinent, with diverse ethnicities. Besides subalternity, a significant thread connecting these texts is that the writers' respective communities took offence at the portrayal of their cultures. This study explores the self-representation of the community through a close reading of the texts, and theorizes the relationship between the writer, narrator, characters, and the community. The paper analyses how the writer employs the community in the narrative and the role this plays in the respective spatiotemporal contexts of the texts. Given the chosen texts are of different genres – a Dalit life-narrative, a historical novel, and short stories – the paper also explores the genre-ic/form-al differences in the representation/use of the community.***

Keywords: ***representation of community; freedom of expression; censorship; subalternity; postcolonial studies***

Three texts, the writers of which have come under attack for the particular portrayals of their respective communities, are chosen for this study. The texts are Perumal Murugan's Tamil-language novel *Mathorupaagan* (2010), translated into English as *One Part Woman* (2013); Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's short story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015); and Daya Pawar's life-narrative *Baluta* (1978), translated from the Marathi language into English in 2015. Murugan belongs to the Kongu Vellala community, which falls under

the umbrella Gounder caste of the western Tamil Nadu state in India, and his text is situated within the same caste and locality set in the mid-20th century. Pawar belongs to the ex-untouchable Mahar caste from the state of Maharashtra in India, and he focuses on the broad and political identity 'Dalit'[1] in *Baluta*, so this study will explore the same. Shekhar belongs to the Santhal tribe of the Jharkhand state in India, and most of his stories explore the textures of life of the Santhal people. These ethnic groups – Gounder, Mahar, and Santhal – will be defined and explored in detail later in the study. Unlike the novel *One Part Woman* and the short story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, the life-narrative *Baluta* did not directly come under attack in civil society; however, the urban Dalit's displeasure at Pawar's portrayal of Mahar culture is drawn from within the text. Given that it is a life-narrative, a genre reflecting lived experience, the tendency of othering the writer/narrator from the community is legitimized by taking from the text.

Certain sections of the writers' communities took offence at the representations of their culture in the texts, thereby sidelining the authors, and this study is interested in the portrayal/representation of the respective communities. The portrayal of the community is revealed through the characters and the plot. A common feature in these texts is that all the characters have caste identities. The caste information of every character is blatant and does not require effort to dig out from within the text. This information is lucidly presented matter-of-factly; just as gender is an essential component of characterization, caste is also represented as a character trait by these writers. By uncovering the characterization, this study explores the representation of the community. In *One Part Woman* and in *Baluta*, the dynamics between the protagonists and the other characters will be studied, and in the short stories, the various Santhal characters are studied in relation to the non-Santhal characters. I will begin by separately exploring the community's role in the selected texts.

[1] Dalit, previously known as untouchables, is the lowest stratum of castes in the Indian subcontinent. Dalits were excluded from the four-fold varna system of graded inequality of Hinduism. In the late 1880s, the Marathi word *Dalit* was used by social reformer Jyotirao Phule for the outcasts and untouchables who were oppressed and broken in Hindu society.

One Part Woman, Or the Constant Prodding of the Community

Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* has two protagonists, Kali and Ponna; neither of them overpowers the narrative, and the point of view of the narrator shifts between these characters. The narrative is about a farming couple whose happiness is marred by their inability to have a child. The plot revolves around society's reactions towards them, how they are humiliated, and what happens in the end. Even the seed that Ponna planted soon after their wedding grows into a lush, large tree in twelve years "while not even a worm had crawled in [Kali's] womb," reads the text. Every wretched thing reminds Kali and Ponna of their lack of a child. Even while spending leisure time with his friends, Kali is made to endure the humiliation of childlessness. While Kali was teasing Murugesan about his work style, an angered Murugesan retorts by saying "'Work is not about this. Work is about *this*,' and he made a lewd gesture, lifting two fingers of his left hand and inserting the index finger of his right hand between them" referring to intercourse. While drinking Munia Nadar's arrack/toddy, Kali says "Oh, this is great stuff! As vital as water" and Subramani immediately replies, "It is not enough if the water you take in is great, the water you send out should be top-class too," referring to semen. The double entendres that men use towards Kali mock his masculinity and are meant to affirm their own. Unable to speak his mind and act freely because of such humiliating responses from friends and family, Kali retreats into isolation.

Seen by society as a "barren" woman, Ponna is insulted and excluded by the community. Starting with her mother, everyone mocks her inability to produce a lineage for the family. Ponna is attentive to all of Kali's moves, and she pays close attention to all his needs, about which her mother says "Let's see if you still run around taking care of your husband after a child is born..." To which Ponna, brimming with pride, says "Even if I give birth to ten children, he will always be my first child." Her mother quickly replies that it is all right to desire, but that Ponna is greedy, and maybe that is what has put off even the gods from giving her a child. Ponna is not even allowed to use common phrases like "ten children" to make a playful point; even that is used against her. The lack of a child is part of every conversation, every thought, every move, and every breath. When Ponna raises concerns to the parents of children in the neighbourhood, they reply, "Look at her, advising me like she has raised some seven or eight children." When Ponna turns up late for a gathering, Sarasa sarcastically tells

her "Despite my telling you to come early, you are arriving only now. Did you get delayed in getting your daughters ready?" At Chellamma's daughter's puberty ceremony, Chellamma's brother's wife tells Ponna, "You stay away" from the ritual. This makes Ponna wonder if a childless woman performing the ritual would make the girl barren, and if Ponna was so inauspicious. The constant prodding of the people in her community causes Ponna to doubt herself; she begins feeling worthless and inferior. Ponna even has to endure remarks such as: "Why don't you eat what you like? Whom are you buying so miserly for?" Even her sister-in-law says so once. Some of the insulting comments hurled at Ponna by members of the same community are: "What are you going to do by saving money? Eat well, wear good clothes, and be happy," "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?", and "This childless woman smells a child's ass and squirms at the sight of a child's shit. How does she expect to be blessed with a child?"

People in the community had concluded that Ponna and Kali would never have children; it was in fact what some people desired. Convinced they would not have children, Kali's uncles would regularly send their own children to Kali's house, not out of love for Kali and Ponna, but rather, this idea of bonding regularly was a strategic move: "If it ever came to a property dispute later, the closer ones might get more, right?" The family members, who represent the wider community, were insensitive to the childless couple. Neither are Ponna and Kali's worldviews devoid of the community's expectations. The community considers procreation as an essential part of life, and so do Ponna and Kali. As such, they suffer the humiliation of not having a child from the community at every step of the story. Twelve years of childlessness are accompanied by thousands of temple visits, prayers, and offerings. Nothing yields results, and Kali is goaded into taking a second wife. After thinking long and hard about a second marriage, Kali abandons the idea; his mind simply could not envision any other woman in Ponna's place. Kali thinks that "if the only way to beat this reputation for impotence was to marry again," then he should find another woman; but, "what would happen if that failed too?" He would have then ruined the lives of two women.

The solution of adopting a child does not come from the community; to have one's own biological child is portrayed as essential. However, Ponna does consider adopting a child, when a lower caste family with many children is suggested, but the issue of caste acts as a barrier:

> "How can a Sanar child grow up in a Gounder household?" The mother of the children tells her husband, regarding the proposition, "Think before you speak! If they hear us, his relatives will come here to beat us to a pulp. Let a Gounder find a child from among his relatives."

The ex-untouchable community of Nadars was historically known as Sanars, a poor community of palmyra climbers and toddy tappers.

Kali and Ponna both attempt to run away from the crisis, physically isolating themselves from community rituals and celebrations. They are the primary sufferers. The crisis is their own and they cannot run away from themselves. The necessity to have children is internalized by them. This norm of life is socially conditioned and accepted by Ponna and Kali. Ponna wishes Kali could be like Nalluppayan, who is not concerned about the community's ways of life. He is totally devoid of the norms of society and not hesitant to offend the community and speak foully to the elders. Nallupayyan, who is forced to get married, tells his mother, "What did you accomplish by getting married? You spread your *pallu* (saree/clothing) for a worthless husband, gave birth to so many children, and you are suffering till today. Drop the matter. I don't need to go through the same hell." The character of Nallupayyan is important in the story. Besides Ponna and Kali, he is the only character described at length. He breaks the norms in the village. He cuts off his top-knot[2] and argues and wins the case in the panchayat. Nalluppayan kept a Chakkili (an ex-untouchable community, historically engaged in leather work) boy with him in the house who cooks for him. To those who take offence at that, he says, "Oh! You find a Chakkili woman fragrant and only a Chakkili boy stinks for you?" referring to dominant-caste men sexually abusing underprivileged women. After all, Nallupayyan did not care one bit what anyone thought. He wanted for nothing and that kept him happy. He tells Kali, "If you are always worried about what others are going to say, you will always be in trouble." Whenever Kali spends time with Uncle Nallupayyan, he forgets the pain of being childless. He would even feel convinced that it was good not to have children. However, soon a thought would come up and rekindle his yearning for a child. Besides Ponna and Kali themselves, the family is the immediate representation of the community. The role of the community seems

2 Traditionally all Hindus were required to wear the top-knot; today it is seen mainly among Brahmins and temple priests. It is one of the few symbols of Hindus that has transcended caste, language, or regional barriers. Although there were variations of the style of top-knot amongst communities, it was obligatory for all males.

to be to pressure, to prod, and mock both Kali and Ponna; it does not play the role of comforting the distressed couple. Nalluppayan is the only supportive and comforting character. He does not humiliate them for not having children. Moreover, he accepts Kali as he is and prefers spending time with him. Ponna lacks even that, as she has no friend to comfort her.

For twelve years, Ponna and Kali must endure the humiliation of childlessness, but this does not affect their marriage, as they dearly love each other, are loyal to one another, and do not cross the lines of fidelity. They are even possessive of each other, respectful of one another, and very much emotionally co-dependant. They do not allow anybody to create a rift between them and hinder their relationship. The day Kali finds out that "his mother and his wife did not get along, he ask[s] his mother to cook her own food". While working in the cowshed, Chellapa Gounder, indirectly referring to Ponna, tells Kali, "This is how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow. If you say yes, I can fetch you one right away". Ponna foul-mouths Chellapa Gounder to the extent that he does not return to Kali's farm. This way, both Kali and Ponna ensure that nobody comes between them, but the most trusted person, Muthu, Ponna's brother and Kali's close friend, creates the rupture. He lies about Kali's acceptance of Ponna's visit on the fourteenth day of the temple festival at the temple city Thiruchengode, where she can get a child from "God." For one night, the norms of society are relaxed: all men are deemed gods and women desiring children are permitted to have sex with strangers. As Ponna enters the temple, the novel reaches its climax.

Shifting our focus back to the real world, a woman trying to get pregnant at a controversial Hindu public fertility ritual created a stir in Western Tamil Nadu in 2015. The Kongu Vellala community, backed by local Hindu right-wingers, claimed that the novel *Madhorubhagan* (the Tamil title of *One Part Woman*) showed their religious practices and their women in a bad light. The book earned the author Perumal Murugan death threats. Copies of his books were burned, and the town of Tiruchengode, where the novel is set, held a one-day strike to protest the novel's publication in January 2015. Following calls for his prosecution, Murugan declared his writings "dead" and stopped writing. Backing away from the literary scene, he withdrew all of his Tamil writings from bookshops. The protests were coordinated by the president of Tiruchengode's Hindu extremist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The *Guardian* reported that the actions ran over 18 days in 2015 in Tamil Nadu. RSS members argued that the book was an offensive interpretation of Hindu scripture, and was

insulting to the Hindu deity honoured in the fertility ritual. A year later, Madras's high court defended Murugan's freedom to express himself and asked people to learn to accept it. Soon after, he declared "I will get up" and he resumed writing.

Baluta, or resistance from within the Dalit middle class

Daya Pawar writes that he and his family "lived like animals in the Maharwada," a settlement away from the village meant for untouchable communities to live physically segregated from people of other castes. He was filled with revulsion against the life he was leading and wanted to get away from it. Even after attaining some degree of education, Pawar continues to face the same humiliation in the village, as the Mahar identity is "a leech that would not let go." However, within the Maharwada, education raises his esteem; here he is treated with respect because he is studying in high school. Their socioeconomic conditions had improved slightly, and he observes that his behaviour had begun to stand out from that of other Maharwada children, since he moved to the hostel to pursue higher education. Udaya Kumar observes that Dalit life-narratives demonstrate a gradual distancing of protagonists from their community, and the emergence of new, more enlightened, and politically active conceptions of a collective through the acquisition of formal educational qualifications, employment, and social recognition (2013, 164). Migrating to the town, residing in a hostel, and attending high school are the first steps towards a dignified life for Pawar.

The hostel experience[3] in Dalit life-narratives are crucial turning points. The hostel is where they receive wholesome meals every day and where they befriend residents from other castes, which is not possible in the village. This gives them hope and the ability to dream that hunger, poverty, and caste-based exclusion can be overcome. This hope, however, can be a source of difficulty, as it can hinder the complete acceptance of one's community and socioeconomic background in their newfound social life, and this puts Pawar in a difficult situation. He recalls how his mother used to visit the hostel to sell her produce to the hostel residents, but Pawar would not acknowledge her in front of his fellow hostellers, instead running after her after she left. "I burn with shame as I tell you about how I would only speak to my mother in secret. For an education, I was willing to sever the umbilical cord," he writes.

[3] Found in other Dalit life-narratives, such as Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*.

Getting a job as soon as he arrived in Mumbai was not possible, so Pawar grows terribly ashamed that his mother was still scavenging. He studied a lot, but he is still living on his mother's earnings. The job that he is finally able to obtain is that of a lab assistant in a veterinary hospital, where he must work with the samples of the feces of sick animals all day long. As he writes, "On the first day I understood how I got the job. No upper-caste person would have taken it." The close connection between the caste profession[4] of the Mahar community, to which the protagonist belongs, and the profession that he was able to attain in the city reveals the reproduction of social relations, while the economic relations of his job have shifted from the agrarian/feudal/rural economy to a capitalist one. The ostracization association with Dalit communities followed him to the city, a space which Pawar believed was devoid of explicit caste experiences.

In this phase of his life, Daya Pawar marries Sayee, a poorly educated girl from his own community and his village. He loves her dearly, but he expresses his love only within the four walls of their house. He is embarrassed to introduce his village wife to his urban colleagues and so does not invite his friends to his house. He longs to see Sayee wearing the modern five-yard sari, instead of the traditional nine-yard in the Mahar style, but *Aai* (mother) does not approve of it. As he writes, "I wanted my wife to look like she belonged to the Brahmin or Baniya caste. But that never became a reality. I felt aggrieved, for many of my friends had wives who dressed in the latest fashions and I couldn't even get my wife the kind of sari I wanted her to wear." One day, when Pawar forgets to carry his lunch to the office, Sayee carries his lunch to his workplace out of concern that he would go hungry. Soon after she leaves, a colleague of his says, "You sly dog! You've got a hot one as a maid." Pawar does not correct him. Recalling this episode, Pawar writes that he was ashamed to acknowledge that the person who had brought his lunch was his wife, as he had been too concerned about how his colleagues would perceive him if they knew of his village wife. By separating references to his community, Pawar attempts to secure a specific economic, social, cultural, and spatial identity for himself among his colleagues, who had privileged backgrounds.

Pawar sees that the city is clearly divided based on class and caste lines, creating two worlds within Mumbai. We see this slowly unfolding through various episodes scattered across the text in *Baluta*. One such episode is when Baluta boards a first-class train compartment carrying some dry duck meat,

[4] Manual scavenging

prompting his fellow passengers to wonder what the source of the stench is. Embarrassed by this, Pawar de-boards the train at the next station and boards a third-class compartment filled with working-class people, where nobody feels/smells anything unusual. It becomes evident for Pawar that to be completely accepted in the city, he must change the ways of his life because his culture is not normative in an urban setting. Mahar culture, Dalit food, the lower-caste language, and their sensibilities are not socialized in the urban public domain.

Recalling a memory, Pawar writes what he told his father in his youth, “Baba, when you came to Mumbai, you were doing physical labour; I have an education. When I get a job, the basic pay will be three-four hundred rupees.” Pawar thinks that he, unlike his *Baba*, could build a house because he is educated and would earn more than his uneducated relatives engaged in manual labour. Recalling this episode, Pawar expresses his disappointment, saying, “Now I know that I spoke from the shaky foundation of hope. Today I see how foolhardy my words were.”

Despite the starker caste experience in the village, the protagonist writes about a sense of belonging and community, which is disrupted upon taking his first steps towards the city. The protagonist’s physical and intellectual journey to the city, his entry into the modern, has resulted in a loss of an essential, unmediated self that is celebrated in the rustic. As Laura Brueck argues, the road to freedom and modernity is not without sacrifice (2014). The protagonist, having lived all his adult life in the city, both yearns for a sense of community and belonging and is concurrently repelled by the caste-ridden village life. Neither completely attaining what he dreamt of nor returning to the village as a possibility, the Dalit protagonist is trapped. His migration from the poverty-stricken, caste-ridden village to a liberated space is unfulfilled. The dream-self is not attained, so the protagonist is forced to conceptualize an identity for his present self, the self that is continuously searching for the dream. Writing his life story is an important step towards conceptualizing that identity. But his fellow Dalit brothers and sisters in the city do not want to acknowledge that the migration is incomplete.

The sense of heaviness at the end of these texts comes from the protagonist not having found a community that believes the migration is incomplete and that wants to challenge Indian modernity. Although cities being caste spaces is the primary disillusionment of this genre, the secondary and more close-hearted disappointment, along witha sense of betrayal, comes from within the community.

The urban-educated Dalit class, a social strata to which the protagonist also belongs, poses a challenge to the protagonist's perception of social mobility and caste in urban spaces.

In these narratives, those in proximity to the protagonist represent the urban-educated Dalit community, such as the spouse, children, extended family members, friends, and colleagues. The challenge that the community poses is subtle but visible, as though Pawar wrote consciously not to offend them. He does not write about his present wife and children, nor does he mention their names; the wife is referred to only a couple of times. However, Pawar writes elaborately about his marriage and domestic life with Sayee. Many Dalit protagonists do not engage in detail about their present marital life and their children, and the silences must be interpreted accordingly; it is likely because their families do not wish to be associated with the Dalit identity that the protagonist holds onto.

The Dalit middle class's "mindless pursuit of modernity" (Guru 2000) makes them believe that migration from an utter casteist setting to a caste-free one is complete. This is a rupture in the process towards dignity and liberation, and this bothers the Dalit protagonist. What is meant to release Dalit characters from the stigma of the "rural" and "backward" in fact feels oppressive – such as not using one's surname, only consuming food that is deemed civilized and speaking a certain type of language. Being surrounded by a socially and economically upwardly mobile class of urban Dalits, who stand in contrast to the protagonist's belief in acknowledging caste as a means to annihilate it, disturbs the protagonist. Udaya Kumar observes that Dalit life-narratives show a gradual distancing of protagonists from the community, and the emergence of new, more enlightened, and politically active conceptions of a collective through the acquisition of formal educational qualifications, employment, and social recognition.

The people whom the Dalit protagonist refers to as one's own are offended and angered by the protagonist's language of caste, which they wish to shed. As Daya Pawar writes:

> I have tried my best to forget my past. But the past is stubborn; it will not be erased so easily. Many Dalits may see what I am doing here as someone picking through a pile of garbage. A scavenger's account of his life. But he who does not know his past cannot direct his future.

By speaking of caste and by writing of caste experiences, the Dalit protagonist associates the upwardly mobile urban Dalits with the poor, urban, slum-dwelling Dalits, and reminds this class of Dalits about their rural pasts ridden with poverty and humiliation. The characters of this class are unwilling to acknowledge their incomplete migrations and their recent pasts of oppression and suffering. It is also undesirable for them to share a common past with the lower-class urban Dalits, whom the protagonist sympathizes with. The protagonist mourns the plight of the urban wage labourers for whom high-quality education and dignified jobs are unrealized. These brothers and sisters, the protagonist thinks, are essential to urbanity, yet simultaneously are socioeconomic outsiders. By emphasizing the common recent rural past of the urban Dalits, the protagonist inevitably brings these two types of urban Dalits together, which is unwelcome by the economically upwardly mobile Dalit class. In response to the protagonist's attempt to make these connections across class, space, and time, the urban Dalit middle class distances itself from the narrator and dreads belonging to the category that the protagonist has created (based on the common past of untouchability that continues to be found in refashioned form). This breaks the notion that Dalit life-narratives speak for the community at large. From within the narrative erupts the protest against stories being written.

In the process of speaking in the collective, the Dalit writer has lost his space within the urban middle-class community. Despite the Dalit narrator's intention, in goodwill, to express the world of Dalit plight, struggles, and achievements – because only upon acknowledging caste can it be fought – the Dalit protagonist is shunned by this class for revealing to the larger world the lowly past that they are attempting to forget and move on from. According to Rita Kothari (2001), the urban Dalit middle class, which is educated and economically advancing, is facing an identity crisis, which is reflected in Dalit life-narratives. Although the urban middle class has benefited from the material advantages of modern society and enjoys a comfortable life, the protagonist feels that it is unaware of the precariousness of their newfound status. By safeguarding their own well-being, this class is isolating itself from its wider community, and the urban Dalit middle class will never completely make the journey away from the past on its own. The protagonist of the Dalit autobiography is aware of the dangers of cutting ties at the umbilical cord, as it would lead to alienation and isolated struggles, which will lead to further alienation.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance, or, there are all types of Santhals

The dynamics between people of different communities and Santhal people of varying social standings are narrated in each story of this anthology, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. No story outrightly glorifies or degrades the Santhals, or any other social group; the stories are written matter-of-factly, holding a mirror to reality. The class, gender, and spatial context of the characters are provided in the narratives, and social groups are not the singular point of oppression. Unlike in *One Part Woman*, where predominant characters belong to the same community and class, the class positions of the Santhals in the short stories vary. There are Santhals who own big businesses, as well as Santhal women who engage in sex work to overcome hunger. The portrayals are also not ideologically or politically driven and two-pronged (me versus the world) as seen in *Baluta*.

The short story "Sons" contrasts the lives of cousin-brothers Suraj and Raghu, who are born on the same day and same time. Both are Santhal tribals, but from different classes. Suraj is born into a wealthy family, and his family has a "large, two-storeyed house which everyone in Ghatshila talked about," whereas Raghu is "the son of an ordinary school teacher and a housewife from a Santhal village". This story illustrates how class or wealth are not directly equivalent to a secure and happy life. Raghu grows up in Suraj's bountiful shade, and naturally, everyone expects Suraj to do well in life, but he turns out to become an alcoholic addicted to the wild ways of life. Raghu becomes a doctor, which Suraj could not do, despite his privileges. This narrative portrays Suraj's father as a corrupt government officer, and Suraj's doom is portrayed as resulting from the degraded family scenario, even though he has sufficient wealth to assert social status.

In *Eating with the Enemy*, we see people of different class positions interacting with one another. The story is told from the perspective of a nameless narrator who is a well-off woman, possibly a Santhal, narrating about her house-help Sulochana, a Ghaasi (a Scheduled Caste community primarily found in eastern India). It projects a class perspective, where a middle-class narrator is unable to find logic in Sulochana's thoughts and behaviour. Sulochana, who would whine about her husband bringing Mohini, a mistress, into the house, but would overnight accept her without explanation. For instance, Sulochana goes on to entertain Babu, the man who molests her young daughter. The narrator is shown as being shocked and disgusted at Sulochana's ability to forget something

as offensive and humiliating as her daughter being abused and being flattered by Babu's car and money. Sulochana cooks mutton for Babu and drinks whisky with him in the new glasses he buys her.

The narrator is also amused at Sulochana's trait of not looking at her own oppression – belonging to an underprivileged caste herself, she points out others as inferior. When some Adivasi (tribal) workers were provided beverages at the narrator's house, Sulochana expresses her opinion: "But, didi… 'they are Adivasis!'" Although her life is in tatters – she is unable to provide for her daughters and her husband does not support her – she is conscious of keeping these social distinctions. *Eating with the Enemy* shows how class can be such a distinction that it is difficult to understand the thought process and behaviours of people from completely different classes.

Shekhar does not make clear distinctions between good and bad; he adopts everything from a third-person perspective, reflecting the narrator's social position. In *Eating with the Enemy*, the narrator is attempting to understand Sulochana. In this way, these stories project the interaction between different types of people, or the differences and similarities in the lives of people of different castes, different classes within the same caste, and people of completely different castes and classes. The stories challenge stereotypes that Adivasis are only oppressed and can never take on the traits of the privileged communities. Sekhar portrays inequality within the Adivasis, projecting corrupt Santhals and showing, through Suraj, that wealth is not necessarily a guarantee of social security.

"Getting Even" is a story about a morally righteous Thakur (historically a land-owning community in northern India) man fighting against a powerful and corrupt Santhal family. The Thakur man is married to a woman from the Santhal family, against the wishes of both communities. The Santhal family is shown as engaging in human trafficking, running a business selling girls from the community for sex work. The son of a Santhal mother and Thakur father is wrongly framed by his maternal family as revenge for exposing their business. The boy's father says these "Kristians[5]," "Santhals" "bring girls from villages on the pretext of giving them education, training, and work, and sell them away." Although the Thakur man opposes human trafficking, he does not oppose stereotyping tribals and discriminating against them. This story inverts the power structure, where the Adivasi is the powerful family and the agrarian Thakur is the weaker one, yet the social hierarchies seep through the class power.

5 Tribals of India have largely converted to Christianity. Common among Santhal

In the story "Baso-jhi", we also see how Sekhar does not hesitate to portray Santhals as mistreating others and being abusive. In "Baso-jhi", the primary characters are all Santhals. It shows how belonging to the same tribe, or family, does not matter, as those who want to mistreat will find reasons to do so. Basanti *jhi* (a formal and respectful way of addressing a superior or elder person) is a single parent, raising her sons alone after her husband passes away. She resists society's mistreatment of widows, but her sons go on to call her a *dahni* (a witch) and accuse her of causing the death of her grandson. She is then thrown out of her home. "The younger son grabbed Basanti by the hair and threw her to the ground. Then he kicked her in the abdomen. The old woman screamed in pain and grief." Three days pass by. She sleeps in a railway station, where Soren-babu chances upon her and brings her to his house in Sarjomdih, where most of the population is Santhal and the rest are Munda.[6] All of them are followers of Sarna, the aboriginal faith of the Chhotanagpur area. Sarjomdih is a standing testimony to the collapse of an agrarian Adivasi society and the dilution of Adivasi culture, the twin gifts of industrialization and progress. Two years pass by, during which time two old men die in the town, then Maino jhi's grandchild also dies. Once again, Baso *jhi* is framed for sorcery and being a witch. Overnight she quietly leaves Soren-babu's house, and Pushpa (Soren's wife) wakes up in the morning to find her gone. Even in Sarjomdih, where there is a possibility of community bonding, an old widow is ostracized by the family.

While portraying Santhals in such a poor light, Shekahar simultaneously portrays the plight of the Adivasis. Through Talamai, we see how poor Adivasi women are pushed into sex work, and a moralistic stand is not taken about it; only the plight is projected. "November is the Month of Migrations" is a dark story written very matter-of-factly. Twenty-year-old Talamai Kisku is migrating, along with fellow Adivasis, from her village in the hills to the Bardhaman district in West Bengal for seasonal agricultural employment in rice cultivation. Talamai is seen doing "work" for a jawan of the Railway Protection Force in the railway station for two pieces of cold bread pakoras and a fifty-rupee note. After the work is over, "she re-ties her *saya* (clothing covering the torso) and *lungi* (a wrap-around clothing) and stuffs the fifty-rupee note into her blouse" and joins fellow migrants. Sex work, which is carried out by women of oppressed communities battling poverty, is darkly and ironically portrayed as any other

[6] A tribal community largely found in the state of Jharkand in India. A popular leader from the community, Birsa Munda is an important figure in the tribal movement in the subcontinent.

work. The community members who are aware of where Talamai has been are found to be sitting around waiting for her to return so that they can continue their journey. This is a disturbing story because it blatantly describes the plight of people who are on the edge of society.

The short story "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" is also offensive; it is about 60-year-old Mangal Murmu,[7] who refuses to dance at a government function. When the indigent Murmu first receives an invitation to perform, he is pleased. He soon learns that the occasion is the inauguration of the construction activity for a thermal plant privately funded by the President of India. The land on which the plant is to be built is part of a village whose residents have been evicted through official diktat. Murmu's daughter and her family are part of the evictee group and have been forced to move to her father's house. "You are making us Santhals dance in Pakur," Mangal Murmu wants to say to the officials who are organizing the ceremony, "and you are displacing Santhals from their villages in Godda. Isn't your VIP going to see that?... Doesn't your VIP read the papers or watch the news on TV?"

"If coal merchants have taken a part of our lands," the hapless Mangal Murmu says, "the other part has been taken over by stone merchants, all Diku – Marwari, Sindhi, Mandal, Bhagat, Muslim. They turn our land upside down, inside out, with their heavy machines. They sell the stones they mine from our earth in faraway places – Dilli, Noida, Punjab." Mangal Murmu continues: "What do we Santhals get in return? Tatters to wear. Barely enough food. Such diseases that we can't breathe properly. We cough blood and forever remain bare bones." And this is why Mangal Murmu – addressing the president – announces that the Adivasi will not dance anymore. This is the last story in the book, and it calls for resistance as the only means to survive for the marginalized people.

Despite all the oppression, abuse, and plight in the collection, the first story, "They Eat Meat", shows the power of friendship. Panmuni-jhi, a Santhal woman from Jharkhand, and Mrs Rao, a Reddy woman from Andhra Pradesh, bond over secretly eating eggs in Subhanpura Colony, Vadodara, a city where non-vegetarian food is scarce, their husbands are kept away from this bonding. Their friendship, which blooms over a petty desire to eat a particular food that is restricted, goes on to help save lives during a riot. "On the morning of Wednesday, 27 February 2002, Biram-kumang and Hopen were at the Vadodara Railway Station... Someone shouted that a train had been set on

---

[7] Murmu

fire" – this is a fictional portrayal of the 2002 Godhra riots. Soon, a mob attacks the Mohammeds, the only Muslim family in Subhanpura Colony. The entire neighbourhood watches through their windows as "two trucks approached, nearly twenty men in each, armed with swords and sticks and burning torches, shouting '*Jai Shri Ram*!' (Hail lord Ram!) and '*Mussalmano, Bharat chhodo!*' (Muslims, get out of India!)". Mrs Roa initiates the resistance against the attack on the Mohammeds by throwing cooking utensils at the mob. Panmuni-jhi joins in, as do other women in the colony. This shows how a minor bonding over egg-eating can lead to something as big as saving the lives of an entire family. Similarities in cultures between and beyond social background – despite language, location, faith, and culture – as a common point to make friends is upheld. Notably, the Mohammed are also culturally meat eaters, which probably makes Panmini-jhi and Mrs. Rao empathize with them.

The Nexus of Genre and Community

Hansda Shekhar's collection of stories tells us that there are all kinds of Santhals, for whom the short story is a conducive form. It also shows the struggle that tribal communities face in their journey to integrate into the capitalist system of life. The multiplicity of the Santhals, portraying layers of the community in its transition from the tribal, forest-dwelling to the urban, bourgeois lifestyle. The Dalit life-narrative shows how the narrator is withdrawn from the majority urban-educated Dalit class, and Pawar does not portray the post-independence urban middle-class Dalits as having a uni-linear ideology or a singular lifestyle. The intuitive life-narrative captures the split in the urban Dalit identity. Lastly, the Gounders are portrayed as a historically close-knit, wealthy, and God-fearing community in the period fiction.

Gounders are a propertied and landed community; they hold panchayat for disputes and live a devout life filled with fasting and festivals. The community is not divided along lines of class, ideology, rural-urban, etc; it is a holistic community, though the future is visible through the character Nalluppayan. This is a straightforward novel with a single story; the Gounder community is also portrayed singularly, through the lens of the protagonists. This singular lens of the community reflects the genre of novel. Novels generally narrate a single story, sometimes with fragments of perspective and subplots. The split in perspective sets in with Muthu making an essential decision for Ponna and Kali, consciously aware of their difference of opinion in the matter.

The gender portrayal in *One Part Woman* is engaging. Kali, a common female name is given for a man, and he does not exude the stereotypical chivalric male characteristics but rather he is gentle, passionate, and generous. On the other hand, Ponna is a common male name, given to the woman. The title also illustrates that male and female are not clear binaries and that we all have one part of the opposite gender. The feudal communities are projected to have this belief. Furthermore, in the feudal community, procreation is illustrated as necessary. If the many curses, penances, rituals, prayers, fasts, eating of various plants, and drinking of different potions did not reap results, strict norms were shown to be loosened for those who are childless.

Autobiography as a genre, particularly Dalit life-narratives, portray the narrator versus the world. Two perspectives are available: the protagonist's and the world's, which contrast with one another. The contrast further widens with the narrator becoming critical of the community to which he belongs. As this genre reflects life, what is portrayed as the world is also the narrator's perspective, and it is singular.

The form of the short story is more colourful because intrinsic to this form is the portrayal of several narratives from various perspectives. The Santhals in the *Adivasi Will Not Dance* stories are multi-layered; no two Santhal characters are alike. There is no linear sense of community in Hansda Shekhar's stories. For each character, the community has a different meaning. Class and social status are essential to creating the various textures of the community. Shekhar has shown the ways in which the community can be a hindrance to individuals, as well as showing that it can be a point of unity and that there can be unity beyond the community as well. Such friendships beyond one's community and conflict within the community make this collection of stories futuristic. The form of the short story also provides for such a nuanced and dynamic variety of storytelling. Shekhar, through his stories, is illustrating that there is no point saying, "We are good," but the dominant castes, caste-Hindus, are bad. Such outright segregation may be counter-productive. As much as we point fingers at others, it is necessary to also look inward. In this way, the stories are similar to Dalit life-narratives, which provide a holistic take on life and society.

This politics of acknowledging caste, speaking/narrativizing caste, and broadening the vision of one's own community has offended select sections of the respective communities of these writers. These authors take up the task of representing caste through narratives as a counter-hegemonic task of resistance. Through these books, the writers do not just play the victim or master, but rather

they turn their eyes inward by portraying the various dynamics within their own caste/community. Such a nuanced lens is employed while not disregarding the humiliation meted out by dominant/privileged castes to deprived people (i.e., graded inequality is the backdrop of these narratives).

Sruti M D is presently pursuing PhD in English from the School of Letters, Ambedkar University Delhi. She is exploring literatures depicting rural migrants in the metropolitan Bombay with a focus on the promise/hopes of urban modernity, identity representation and migration literature as a tool resistance. Her broad area of research interest includes migrationliterature, literature and city, and studying social relations in narrative literature.
E-mail: sruti93@gmail.com

References

Brueck, Laura. 2014. "Alienation and Loss in the Dalit Experience of Modernity." In *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature*, 122–153. New York: Columbia University Press.

Guru, Gopal. 2000. *Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity*. Vol. 49, in *India: Another Millenium?*, edited by Romila Thapar, 123–136. New Delhi: Penguin.

Kothari, Rita. 2001. "Short Story in Gujarati Dalit Literature." *Economic and Political Weekly* 36 (45).

Kumar, Udaya. 2013. "Consciousness, Agency and Humiliation: Reflections on Dalit Life- writing and Subalternity." In *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B R Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and Subalterns*, edited by Cosimo Zene. London: Routledge.

Murugan, Perumal. 2010. *One Part Woman*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. London: Penguin.

Pandian, M. S. S. 2002. "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere." *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 (18): 1734–1741. www.jstor.org/stable/4412071.

Pawar, Daya. 2015. *Baluta*. Translated by Jerry Pinto. Bombay: Speaking Tiger.

Rege, Sharmila. 2013. "The Significance of Dalit 'Testimonios.'" In *Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Debating the Consumption of Dalit 'Autobiographies'*, by Sharmila Rege. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Shekhar, Hansda Sowvendra. 2014. *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. Bombay: Speaking Tiger.

Zene, Cosimo. 2013. "Subalterns and Dalits in Gramsci and Ambedkar: A Prologue to 'Posthumous Dialogue.'" In *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar*, edited by Cosimo Zene. New York: Routledge.