

Denial of Dalit Agency in V.S. Pamar's "Bap Nu Barmu"¹

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the denial of Dalit agency in "Bap Nu Barmu", a short story by V.S. Parmar where the major character Amrut's condition is portrayed highly sympathetic and devoid of true agency in the society ordained in the theological structure of caste based hierarchy. He belongs to Dalit community and is structured by fragmented self in the social spectrum based on the hierarchical schematization. He cannot develop emancipatory mode of thinking though he is a university degree holder; and remains crushed under the obligations of social tradition, remains muted, devoid of agency and true self in every events of the story. By representing the hardship of Amrut in this story, the writer foregrounds the real situation of Dalit subaltern of the then time and throws light on the hegemonic exception of caste system which hinders the true resistance against every kinds of subjugation imposed on Dalit community as a part of caste based society. This study tries to unearth the agency of Dalit subjectivity and inner freedom by using the theoretical tenets of Antonio Gramsci, Spivak and Michael Garnett.

Keywords: Dalit, agency, subaltern, hegemony, resistance

The agency of Dalit people is subject to different social practices that lead to the conflict between Dalit characters and social customs. The story Catalogues Amrut, the protagonist, an epitome of subaltern subject who is hegemonically compelled to bear the discrimination of caste based society and as a result, the subaltern agency is fragmented. The character in the story revolves round the social and familial hardship which lastly leads the protagonist towards pessimism and silent resistance instead of directly defying the social codes. The major character of the story is socially and financially victimized by the traditional social values. The author V.S. Parmer pushes Amrut to the point of reaching towards self agency but shows him sleeping back repeatedly under social pressure. By portraying the fragmented self of Amrut the author attempts to critique the existing social customs which relegates the agency of Dalit people to be non- agential under the terrain of customary social tradition.

The agency of Dalit people gets splinted when they are compelled to carry the customs and tradition that pitfalls them in the vicious circle of penury. This story takes its shape with the marriage ceremony of protagonist Amrut who belongs to lower class Dalit family and later on comes in contact with familial miseries. Although Amrut is educationally sound, he gets very difficult to find a proper job only because he belongs to a Dalit family. His wife Rajani is also well educated but both of them are chronically unemployed. Such particular events from the text herald a serious discourse in the fate of subaltern people who are made hegemonic and passive disregarding their true agency and capacity. Amrut at one point says "passing with the first class in M.Com is simple in comparison on lifting the burden of backward caste and looking for a job is harder even than finding salvation" (p.172). This particular statement as spoken by the protagonist embodies that the agency of the Dalit people is restricted and they are given few chances of job. Amrut develops a very pessimistic attitude towards his life which generates compassion as he is susceptible to face humiliation and subordination by so- called social system.

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Puts forward that subaltern people cannot speak as their voices are subject of negligence and unacknowledgement. Subaltern people are voiceless and remain mutilated due to the hegemonic ideology. Though subaltern people speak, their voice remains unheard by the so called high class and caste people; subaltern do not have their sovereign subject. Similarly Amrut in the story is an emblem of subaltern people whose

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agency is passive and cannot revolt against the evil practices of the society and follows them one after another. Amrut's condition can be viewed as non agent since he cannot change the whole structure. He has only one option left and that is to follow social tradition though he has the capacity for altering them. The concept is well captured by this line from the text. "This men who poses the capacity for noble thought and had been dedicated and concerned person was now badly hurt" (p.174). Amrut's agency is projected worse in comparison to his previous condition when he was unmarried. Amrut is doubly victimized by the burden of meeting the family needs and his Dalit identity that renders him mentally affected all the time.

Amrut is not only subaltern figure in relation to his caste but also his financial status gets worsened as he has to perform the series of social practices like his own marriage, sister's marriage, and the *mameru* of his brother in law which increases his burden to pay more painful predicament. Amrut is unable to do his father's *barmu* (death rites) but he gives significant *mameru* by selling the jewellerys of his own wife. Amrut performs all these social traditions because he is hegemonized by the social norms and values that are regulative in the society. Antonio Gramsci put forward "hegemony is the dominance and subordination in the field of relations structured by power" (p. 39). Dalit people remain crushed under the social customs that keep their economic burden escalating and pushing them to the position of non-agent.

Interpreting this story from Gramscian line, Amrut is hegemonic to the customary practices established in the society by the powerful people to maintain their superiority and power. As Amrut belongs to the caste structured society, he is unable to question directly against the tradition. He becomes vehemently a compassionate and hegemonic character when someone from the assembly of *mameru* points "Arre Bhai someone has yet to do his father's *Barmu*" (p.180). This statement from the closing line of the story clearly pictures the desolation of agency in the part of Amrut for he is stucked in such a condition where he pays for trifle thing but cannot perform the *Barmu*.

This story as a social commentary sheds light on the issue of social propaganda like caste which hinders the sense of freedom and agency on Dalit subaltern characters. Amrut is held up as a helpless victim of strong traditional society as he cannot break away from it. The precarious situation of Amrut carefully presents the mundane world where noble qualities are always secondary in comparison to the social status quo instead of dynamism and prosperity. Amrut loses his inner freedom in terms of failure of his true agency. In order to be true agency, one needs to rest in the idea of independence from external control. Michael Garnett writes "when a person is subject to the unauthorized control of something else- such as coercion of another agent- then the person lacks freedom. In this sense, inner freedom is a matter of acting under the control of forces genuinely internal to one's efficacy" (p. 5).

It is clear from the above line that true agency is only possible if we act under the control of our own will and desire. The deep agency can only be achieved when people have full control on their deeds and action. Amrut lacks deep agency because he is crushed under the regressive social traditions and he cannot avoid the legacy of tradition though he is in the brink of penury. The writer deploys how the social traditions are responsible for the fragmentation of Dalit agency. In the same way, the rigidity of caste system captivates the subaltern people instead of liberating them. The story preaches the problem of Dalit society and sheds light how Dalit people are in the pitiful condition. The agency of Dalit people is always relegated in the society attempting to remain complicit with the social tradition. As Dalit subaltern people are devoid of deep agency, they cannot resist in direct form rather adopt subtle resistance as a mode of defying the agency of social tradition. Amrut perceives the social obligation as mandatory and at the same time problematic, however, he chooses to fulfill each obligation in spite of being on the brink of penury. His failure to develop more emancipatory mode of thinking has to do with the social milieu that keeps his condition more pitiful and this makes Amrut a compassionate character in the story. The politics behind projecting Amrut as a compassionate character is to foreground how the social obligations deplete the condition of the Dalit people to worse situation. Martha C. Nussbaum writes that,

Compassion is a feeling of pain at the suffering of another person or another creature that necessarily involves three thoughts: first that suffering is serious; that suffering is not entirely the victims fault, and third the thought that the suffering person is among ones most important goals and projects, and thus that suffering matters to oneself. (p. 10)

Compassion is a moral emotion that registers others sufferings complicitly relating to ones' own predicament when imagined to be a part of the particular situation. The character in this story revolves around with the social and familial hardships which lastly leads the protagonist towards the pessimism. The sufferings of characters in this story, catalogues the hardship and struggle which arises pity and compassion in the readers. The major character of this story, Amrut is psychologically and financially victimized by his traditional social values and beliefs. Amrut's confrontation between the realm of societal horizon and his weak economic condition is the foundational factor in making his plight more acute. By representing the hardship of Amrut in this story writer is forecasting the real situation of marginal and Dalits of the then time and he is very cynically criticizing the extravagant culture to remain complicit with the codes the society has imposed.

Emotions that expand the boundaries of the self to include independent things and person create the sense of compassion in relation to other. Martha C. Nussbaum writes: "Compassion pushes the boundaries of the self further outward than many types of love" (p. 4). Some emotions are ruled over by the social and familial values and that makes the one as the compassionate character. Martha Nussbaum further writes that, "...compassion is a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune" (p. 5). The compassion arises when one becomes sensitive to the sufferings of the characters that in no regard are worth of such predicament. Sara Ahmad's ideas in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* can be highly applicable to understand the writer's motif in 'Bap Nu Barmu'. In her book, Ahmad writes that, "Emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachment or about what connects us to this or that" (p.11). It means that being emotional is not a negative attribute rather it joins an individual with others. This story as a social commentary sheds light on the issues of social propaganda like caste which hinders the sense of freedom and agency in the Dalit characters. Amrut is held up as a helpless victim of strongly traditional society as he cannot break away from it. The writer's politics to show the Dalit characters' sufferings resonates with his agenda to convey that society is unfair to discriminate against such well educated people only for having born in the Dalit family. The precarious situations of Amrut carefully present the mundane world where the noble qualities are always secondary in comparison to the stereotypical social norms which frames the social status-quo instead of dynamism and prosperity.

The passivity of Amrut and his wife Rajani facilitates effective hegemonic control for the ruling class –the dominant Brahmins are able to maintain their position through the consent of the untouchables without recourse to open duress. 'The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. . . . Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up' (Gramsci, pp. 54-5). The agency of subaltern people gets splintered by the power of the ruling class and it is more problematic as the inconsistencies among the subaltern people also further relegate them to the marginal position.

In this story the anonymity of the city shrouds an insidious discrimination that leaves Amrut chronically unemployed. While there are moments in the text where he seems primed to reach a more emancipatory mode of thinking, cutting through his personal problems to realize these issues plague his entire community, this self-realization proves to be a slippery slope. He always ends back crushed under personal financial and social obstacles. Unable to defy them, he attempts to merely move himself and his family past them. The author, V.S. Parmar, presents Amrut almost to the point of reaching a thought that could set him on the path to activism to assert agency and to attain freedom but consequently shows him falling down from the quest of agency by portraying him slipping back repeatedly under social pressure which is the perfect example of how Dalit subaltern people are hegemonized in the larger domain of social forces. By portraying social obligations as the hindrance for the progressive modes of thinking in the life of Amrut, the author has a politics to critique the ills of hegemony and its blunt impact on the agency of the subaltern people. In this regard, Gramsci claims that the history of the subaltern classes is as

complex as the history of the dominant classes, although the history of the latter is usually accepted as official history. The history of subaltern group is generally fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activities of the ruling class, even when they rebel. —They have less access to the authorities of social, cultural, and political institutions as they have no power to represent (p.148).

The Dalit subaltern has no access to the power zone of the society and as such their predicament becomes more poignant due to which they are obliged to be hegemonically succumbed to the social modes of traditions and practices. The observation is insightful in that it highlights the plight of Dalits who are forced to carry the customs despite the incapability to meet the required expenses. While they do not have the means to afford health care or employment, they tend to be forced into borrowing for weddings/ funerals under social pressure. More pertinently, the *māmerū* is a ceremony of spectacle that displays jewelry and clothes given to the bride to take to her in laws as a part of her financial support structure. While the term *māmerū* refers to the clothes and other accessories (typically provided by the *mama*, or the girl's maternal uncle), the custom of display that has arisen around it requires an elaborate setup which is clearly beyond the means of the lower castes. It has been given the status of an event by itself, a rite of consumerism that has evolved from a financial safety net provided by the uncle for the bride to a means of displaying a family's socio-economic status. Often, this display is a facade since it only involves more debt for the family who must keep up appearances. Dalits are thus stuck with the social rituals without the resources to fulfill them and they cannot alter them as they don't have the hold over the social and political institutions. This is the reason the agency of Dalit subalterns is never presented as an articulating force capable of constructing the self suffice subjectivity, and while the narrative voice comments on this, Amrut at no point doubts the necessity of these social obligations but cannot fight against the trend of such social practices. He continues to perform and attend them, involved in them rather than critiquing them which project him as hegemonic character and lacking inner freedom to attain true agency.

The fracture of agency gets consolidated when different social traditions keep on pushing the characters like Amrut into the vicious circle of economic hardships and the chains of infliction upon the Dalit community making them compassionate characters. Aristotle writes, "compassion is a painful emotion directed at another person's mis-happening and suffering" (qtd. in Nussbaum, p. 10). The drenching pitiful situation of Amrut signifies the forced social attributes upon the individuals having no capacity to afford the cost. The compassion towards Amrut gets fortified in this belief of his misfortune and sufferings as he has no roles to play except to be chariot of mutely carrying the social traditions and act hegemonically as the rigid caste based society prevents Dalit subaltern people to exercise inner freedom and deny to grant agency to them in order to perpetuate their rule over them. However, there are certain practices in Dalit community that make themselves meek and non-agential. In this story writer has presented the '*mameru*' system as the blackspot in Dalit community. By bringing the term '*mameru*' the writer tries to culminate the awareness in Dalit community to come out from such regressive traditions. Alternatively, he also tries to critique the legacy of social traditions that never prove to be the matter of happiness for those who are below the poverty line. While doing so, Parmar uses the character like Amrut forced to perform the social obligations hegemonically whose acts can simultaneously be related to the common fate of Dalit community as a whole. Although Dalit and other subaltern groups share what Gramsci calls 'senso commune', "this is a rag-bag of assertions and beliefs", according to David Arnold, "with little internal consistency or cohesion." (Chaturvedi, p. 29). The attempt of the writer can be appraised as it seeks to make human society devoid of social ills to envision the proliferation of mutual respect and dignity.

The story presents the character from Dalit community who is denied of agency and made hegemonic in the respect of following his traditions to remain compatible with the social discourse. Amrut who is a fine example of Dalit subaltern catalogues the fragmented agency of Dalits in the society dominated by the caste based values and norms. His compulsion to remain crushed under the traditions of customs and fulfill the social obligation hinders his true agency and becomes hegemonic character to the utmost level so much so that he cannot defy the ills of traditions though he well knows that they are superficial and divisive. All in all, the story captures the scenario of the caste based society which is always regressive to the

down trodden Dalit Subaltern people and acts as the force to deny them the experience of true self and agency. As the story is replete with the issue of Dalit people sufferings and obligatory actions, it receives tremendous attention from the perspective of subalternity and agency.

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