Defying The Marginalizing Forces: Reading The ‘Dalit’ Hero In Sea Of Poppies And The White Tiger

Abstract:

The Dalit has come a long way from the plight he suffered in the nineteenth century. Today’s dalit is no more the Bakha of Mulk raj Anand’s novel The Untouchables, rather he has evolved from Bakha to Kalua and from Kalua to Balram Halwai or Munna. He is no more the figure to be kicked around washing people’s toilets, doing their menial chores and suffering in silence; he has a mind of his own even if he has no voice, a noteworthy fact is, that his actions are his voice and are louder than words. I support the argument with the help of two texts from the contemporary Indian Writing in English. My focus is on the main protagonists, ‘Kalua’ of Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies and ‘Munna’ of Arvinda Adiga’s Booker award winning novel The White Tiger. Both the protagonists are seen as suffering their lot in silence till resentment starts taking shape in each case in various forms. In Kalua’s case it is love for his sympathizer and fellow victim Diti whereas in Munna’s case it is his realization that with some disloyalty he can get rid of a life of drudgery and graduate to a life of comfort and luxury. It is no wonder that ultimately Munna ends up slitting his employer’s throat whereas Kalua being a benign soul ends up fleeing the ship in the midst of a storm which was taking him and his pregnant wife Diti and many other “girmitiyas” (coolies) to Mauritius in 1838. Both Kalua’s rebellion and that of Munna can be read in the light of an uprising against injustice, inequality and oppression, where in Kalua’s case his caste has a direct bearing on his humiliation; in case of Munna it is his class (poor vs. rich) which determines his fate.

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I will rise'

-Maya Angelou, ‘Still I Rise’ (www.poemhunter.com as on 25/1/2013)

The Indian caste system has been a major defining characteristic of the Indian society dating back to 1200 BC. According to the system the society was divided into four ‘Varnas’ or ‘Classes’: the Brahmin, commonly identified with priests and the learned class; Kshatriyas, associated with rulers and warriors including landowners.; Vaishyas, associated with commercial livelihoods (i.e. traders) and the Shudras, the servile laborers. The Untouchables were the worst off of the lot. Their jobs being the lowliest of lowly, as toilet cleaning and garbage removal and cremation, their very source of livelihood became a cause for them to be considered impure and thus “untouchable.” Historically the untouchables were not allowed in temples and many other public places as they were considered impure and contaminated and their contamination was considered contagious hence they lived in areas that were separate from that of others. Marriage between a person of upper and lower caste was not acceptable and the dark fate of the successive generations was predetermined.

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A similarity can be read in the plight of Both Kalua and Balram for both of them suffer on account of their station in society and the acute poverty delineating it. The Sea of Poppies unfolds in the year 1838 and describes graphically a tale of exploitation at multiple levels. We see the Indians exploited byers, higher classes exploiting the lower classes and the Patriarchal system cruelly sidelining women. As a child Kalua had shown an insatiable craving for meat which was satisfied by his family had by feeding him carrion as being leather makers, it was their trade to collect the remains of dead cows and oxen, thus it is on the meat of salvaged carcasses that Kalua had earned his gigantic frame. Ghosh describes Kalua as:

…a man of unusual height and powerful build: in any fair, festival or mela, he could always be spotted towering above the crowd- even the jugglers on stilts were usually not as tall as he. (Sea of Poppies 53)

But despite his frame like the others of his community Kalua was aware of his position in society and took care not to irk the people of the higher caste in any manner. It is interesting to note that despite being heavy in build Kalua does not offer any assistance to Hukum Singh when he has to sit in his cart. Though they carry an amiable conversation a distance is maintained as they are acutely conscious of their social status. Describing graphically their interaction Ghosh writes:

Kalua, the driver of the ox-cart, was a giant of a man, but he made no move to help his passenger and was careful to keep his face hidden from him: he was of the leather-workers' caste and Hukam Singh as a high- caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead. Now, on climbing into the back of the cart, the former sepoy sat facing to the rear, with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent it's coming into direct contact with any of the driver's belongings. Thus they would sit, driver and passenger, as the cart creaked along the road to Ghazipur–conversing amicably enough, but never exchanging glances. (Sea of Poppies 4)

It is interesting to note that Hukum Singh though light of build displays an air of superiority and Kalua despite his stature is reserved and wary of his high caste passengers. Deeti is also seen as a secondary, marginalized figure; who does not walk with her husband but a good step behind.

Kalua lived in the "chamar- basti", a village inhabited only by the people of his caste- the leather workers. Here also he lived at the very edge of the village, his dwelling: a cattle pen, where he had been resigned to survive after being ousted from his own home by his greedy family members and cousins following the death of his parents. This is where Deeti comes to look for him when she needs his assistance to carry home her opium addicted husband lying

unconscious in the opium factory of Ghazipur where he worked. Belonging to a higher caste it would be considered improper for Deeti to enter Kalua's home so when her shouts for him go unanswered she resorted to throwing small pebbles at his house in order to get his attention. Ghosh describes lucidly Deeti's attempt to draw Kalua out of his dwelling simultaneously pointing toward its dismal environment: "After three or four shouts there was still no answer, so she picked up a stone and aimed it at the door less entrance of his dwelling. The pebble vanished into the unlit darkness of the hut and a tinkle of pottery followed to tell her that it had struck a pitcher or some earthenware object" (Sea of Poppies 53)

Cheated by his brothers and other relatives Kalua had been rescued from his miserable plight by three brothers belonging to a Thakur family who for an oxen cart lured Kalua to fight in a wrestling match. Kalua easily gave in that time for an oxen cart would be a source of livelihood for him. But the tale of exploitation would not abate as the fame of his physical prowess spread. Little did Kalua realize how the first fight would ultimately lead to a second one, marking him for life. The Maharaja of Benares expressed a desire that the Hercules of Ghazipur should fight with the champion of his court. The shy and peace loving Kalua was cajoled, and when he did not relent, then threatened into fighting; not trained for the game he lost and had to pay dearly for the shame that was brought on the town. He was deeply humiliated, beaten, abused and treated like an animal brought to the brink of having sex with one. When the Thakur sons left Kalua unconscious in the poppy fields on their way back to the town he was rescued by Deeti. Deeti on her way to the Ganges for getting water had hidden behind the poppies and had witnessed the whole scene. It was she who cleaned and tended Kalua.

This act of kindness would be repaid later as Kalua would rescue her from her husband's family which was forcing her to burn to death on her husband's pyre, in the name of the now long banned 'Sati- pratha'. Ghosh describes Kalua's act of bravery in the following lines following his patient waiting on the sand bank of the river in order to rescue Diti:

Unloosing a roar, he began to whirl the bamboo platform above his head, holding it by the end of its rope. The heavy, sharp edged object became a blur, cracking heads and breaking bones, clearing a path through the crowd – people fled from the hurtling projectile, like scattering before some whirling demon. Racing to the mound, Kalua placed the platform against the fire, scrambled to the top, and snatched deeti from the flames. With her inert body slung over his shoulder, he jumped back to the ground and ran towards the river, dragging the now smouldering bamboo rectangle behind him, on its rope. On reaching the water, he thrust the platform into the river and Placed Deeti upon it. Then pushing free of the shore, he threw himself flat on the improvised raft and began to kick his heels in the water, steering out towards midstream. (Sea of Poppies 177)

The act of rescue ended in a twice unacceptable marriage, of a widow in the first place and of a woman of a higher caste being married to that of a lower caste adding to it. By the time Deeti's brother-in-law and his men would chase them both Deeti and Kalua had escaped, and with this act of boldness Kalua had metamorphosed from a victim to a hero. Kalua's transformation from a victim to a rebel hero can be attributed to not only the extreme humiliation that was meted out to him by the Thakur sons but also due to the confidence that Deeti's presence and support brought to his life. It was due to this new founded confidence that Kalua would rebel against the autocratic behavior of the crew of the 'Ibis' and would have to escape from it.

Similarly, Balram Halwai the son of a rickshaw puller living in the village of Laxmangarh is the

hero of The White Tiger. He is from a family too poor and illiterate to fund his school education or realize its importance, despite his brilliance; even his name was given to him by his teacher. Studies point that:

Bihar is a predominantly agrarian economy with a small manufacturing base. The share of services has increased from 41% to nearly 50% of GSDP, which is roughly the same as the Indian overall average. While the share of agriculture has declined, it is still very large. According to the NSS, nearly 40% of the workforce is engaged in agricultural labour (1999-2000) down from 42% in the previous round. Cultivation and farm labour together account for 80% of employment.

Crop productivity has been below the Indian average for most cereals. The causes for the large yield gap include: low investment rates, lack of water management with annual flooding of the Gangetic plain, weak transport and marketing infrastructure as well as severe fragmentation of land holdings. 31 districts are flood prone and 11 are drought prone. Only five districts are not prone to floods and drought.

Poverty is predominantly rural in Bihar and is associated with limited access to land and livestock, poor education and health care, as well as low-paid occupations and social status. NSS data show that 75% of the poor were landless or near landless in 1999-2000. Although land reforms were introduced in 1950 they have been slow and ineffective. The rural poor tend to depend on agricultural wages or casual non-farm jobs for a living. Over time the proportion of non-farm labourers in the poorest quintile has increased and the proportion of farm workers decreased. (10, source found http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/2354.pdf on 3/2/12)

Circumstances force Balram to work as a help in a teashop. But he is sharp and on learning about the high salary paid to drivers he learns to drive and gets a break as a driver in the house of a rich man (hailing from his village) for his son in new Delhi. With the passage of time Balram becomes ambitious as he sees opulence and wealth as never imagined. His murder of his employer and his subsequent life of corruption and deceit is a result of being exposed to such a culture; with the robbed sum he bribes a police commissioner, changes his name to Ashok Sharma and starts his own taxi company. The journey of a successful entrepreneur from extremely humble beginning ends in achieving wealth and success. The lesson conveyed is a lesson of corruption and dishonesty mirroring the changing social values. It also conveys the lesson that corruption breeds corruption and oppression leads to rebellion from unimaginable quarters.

In The White Tiger it becomes extremely clear that the expectation of the employer to hire a man below his status not only socially but intellectually too is understood and fulfilled by the survivor subaltern. It was with this calculated cunningness that Balram answers the “Stork” that he belongs not to higher but lower caste

At one point in the novel Balram thinks, “Do we loathe our masters behind a façade of love- or do we love them behind a façade of loathing?” (The White Tiger 187) This loathing does not come uninvited or un- instigated, it comes as a result of several incidents that take place due to the insensitivity of the masters toward those who serve them. Before Pinky (Balram’s master Ashok’s wife) killed the tramp accidentally she deliberately left Balram standing on a dark and deserted highway, the idea was to have fun. Balram was the family driver but he was a servant more and a driver less, whenever Ashok’s father, the Stork, would come visiting Balram was

required to wash and massage his legs. He would do all the small chores in the household as required and for a pittance. It was never considered that the man piloting the car was an individual, for Ashok and his family Balram could not be more than a piece of wood for had he not always been at their service.

After his wife deserts Ashok totally alone in the house, he takes recourse to liquor, it is finally Balram who comes to his master's rescue in the form of a loyal servant. A completely depressed Ashok is supported by his driver at this time of crisis. Balram stands by him like a friend and a family member, taking care of him, driving to wherever asked, listening to philosophy that rises from the pain of desolation, and then making a show of being a dim wit so as not to threaten the master. A desolate, deserted Ashok in a conversation with Balram says, "['Sometimes I wonder, Balram. I wonder what's the point of living. I really wonder…']" And Balram thinks, "The point of living? My heart pounded. The point of your living is that if you die, who's going to pay me three and a half thousand rupees a month?", but this is not what he says, what he says is, "['You must believe in God, sir. You must go on. My granny says that if you believe in God, then good things will happen.']" And to further amuse Ashok with his stupidity he adds to it a make-believe story, a story too ridiculous to believe but serving its purpose nevertheless, further underlining the illusory nature of truth as perceived by some mammon blinded, self-centered individuals of the Indian society, representative of a growing class of such individuals. The conversation goes like this:

"['Once there was a man who stopped believing in God, and you know what happened?'] Balram says to Ashok and a curious Ashok wants to know what to which Balram replies in a simple hearted, innocent manner, "['His buffalo died at once']", (186) as expected Ashok laughs and to furth r heighten the effect Balram adds that when the next day the penitent man asks God for forgiveness and speaks of his belief in God, God immediately blesses him by bringing his buffalo back to life.

It is the same Balram who was full of loathing for Ashok and his father for having forced him to take the blame of the killing of a man by Pinky in an accident when she was driving to amuse herself. The same Balram willingly forgives Ashok seeing his helplessness after Pinky left him.

It never struck anybody that their corrupt ways could influence the driver too. Balram ultimately was influenced and infected with the corrupt ways of his master's family, it is thus no surprise that having changed his name and identity, and made it big through murder and corruption, Balram says at the end of the novel:

"I have switched sides: I am now one of those who cannot be caught in India. At such moments I look up at this chandelier, and I just want to throw my hands up and holler, so loudly that my voice would carry over the phones in the call-centre rooms all the way to the people in America:

"I've made it! I've broken out of the coop!" (320)

Like Kalua, Balram's transformation is also complete.

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