

## **The Invisible Caste Burden: The Psychological Struggles of Middle-Class Dalits in Ajay Navaria's "Tattoo"**

**Renu Singh**

Associate Professor  
Department of English  
Delhi College of Arts and Commerce  
University of Delhi  
Co-Author

**Dr. Shivani Vashist**

Professor, Department of English  
School of Media Studies and Humanities  
Manav Rachana International Institute of Research & Studies  
Faridabad, Haryana

### **ABSTRACT:**

Dalit literature in India has developed into a powerful and a unique genre. It has gained widespread acclaim within critical and literary discourse and is characterized by its own unique poetics and politics. It is asserting the rightful place for Dalits in the society. The term "Dalit Literature" was first officially defined during a Dalit literary conference in 1958, and since then, the genre has evolved into a phase of self-realization and empowerment. Dalit writings have moved beyond the narrative of oppression towards a quest for identity and social equality. Dr Ambedkar's efforts and emphasis on education has played a crucial role in this transformation. Dalits are trying to rise from a state of marginalization to one of dignity and prosperity. However, despite a little change in their condition and a bit of progress in their status, the treatment of Dalits in both rural and urban contexts reveals that the struggle is far from over. While physical discrimination may be less visible in urban settings, the psychological trauma and pressures faced by Dalits persist. This paper highlights how in cities, Dalits experience new forms of discrimination and hardship. To escape from uncomfortable situations often they are forced to conceal their identities out of fear of stigma. Dalits live under immense psychological pressure and burdens in the pursuit of a better life. This research paper examines the ongoing challenges faced by Dalits in modern India, and the nuanced ways in which urban and rural contexts shape their experiences.

*Keywords: Dalits, Discrimination, Education, Urban spaces, Psychological trauma*

### **Introduction:**

Urban India is often assumed to be a progressive space where the rigid boundaries of caste begin to dissolve. The assumption is that the urban space provides a more inclusive environment where caste-based discrimination is ostensibly diminished. It is considered as a 'melting pot of diverse communities and identities'. This perception suggests that metropolitan areas, due to their diversity and modernity, blur the caste boundaries and the oppressive structures of caste hierarchies are presumed to have less impact. Urban spaces provide Dalits with greater anonymity and opportunities for social advancement. It is often perceived that urban spaces are less hostile towards Dalits and offer a more egalitarian environment compared to rural areas. Cities, in contrast to villages, are primarily viewed as economic hubs that create wealth, offer employment, and enhance the quality of life. Due to increased availability to education and job opportunities, urban areas attract a diverse population. The possibilities of blurring caste distinctions at various spheres in cities get increased like in public transportation, people do not separate passengers by caste. In educational institutions, students of all castes share the same classrooms and seating arrangements. At workplaces employers are not given spaces according to castes, similarly at other public places like restaurants, shopping centres, cinema, etc, there is no visible caste distinction. In cities people are rather free to break away from traditional caste-based occupations, embracing a wider range of professions. People are free to abandon the traditional caste-based occupations. According to social critics, "The caste discrimination in metro cities is lessened by education, income and social network" (Desai and Dubey 2011). However, this notion needs closer scrutiny, as it overlooks the complex, often covert, forms of caste-based prejudice and exclusion that persist within metropolitan contexts. The study of various Dalit narratives such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Bama's *Karrukku*, Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* and Ajay Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain* (collection of short stories translated from Hindi) leave the impression that caste discrimination is prominent in the urban areas among the educated groups, and economic status in this context has little significance. It would be accurate to say that caste remains a powerful force in contemporary Indian society, influencing nearly every sector, including politics, employment, and the formation of colonies and communities in urban areas. This contrast in viewpoints between the critics and the Dalit writers holds considerable importance to understand the intricate functions of caste in the urban areas and thus needs to be discussed further. This paper explores, how Ajay Navaria's short story "Tattoo" depicts that education, economic

development and urbanization fail to eliminate the caste practice, With the primary aim of understanding the emotional and psychological trauma that educated Dalits endure in order to navigate and survive in urban spaces.

Dalit literature emerged out of the anguish of unjust social systems and caste or class iniquities. Dalits are in quest for new dignified identity in the caste ridden and caste biased Indian society and the very same mood is reflected in almost all the contemporary Dalit writings. Dalits have become responsive towards their marginalized position in the society and now they are challenging the hegemony of the higher castes. Ajay Navaria is a reputed name in contemporary Dalit literature. He has been recognized for his substantial contributions to the genre. He currently holds a professorial position at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Navaria's body of work includes two acclaimed collections of short stories, *Patkatha aur Anya Kahaniyan* (2006) and *Yes Sir* (2008). His novel *Udharke Log* (2008), recently translated as "Worlds Within Worlds", further solidifies his standing in the literary landscape. Alongside his writing, Navaria has been deeply engaged with *Hans*, a leading Hindi literary journal.

Ajay Navaria through his collection of seven short stories, *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013), Which is translated from Hindi to English by Laura Bruke, establishes a new trend in representing Dalits in the field of Dalit writings. It is an exploration of Dalit experience and social landscape in the framework of contemporary rural and urban society. It is observed that due to constitutional safeguards and reservation policies, there is a change in the economic condition of Dalits. These new improved economic conditions and socio-political developments, have provided Dalits with opportunities for upward mobility, enabling them to redefine their roles within both rural and urban contexts. They now try to navigate spaces with a sense of empowerment, challenging traditional hierarchies. This paper focuses on the story, "Tattoo". The protagonist of the story reflects this evolving position, embodying the newfound agency afforded by these changes. As it's not all sunshine and rainbows always, Navaria is illustrating the complex interplay between historical oppression and modern advancement. He is highlighting how Dalits are navigating a complex world that still throws plenty of shade their way. In his works he has portrayed a different Dalit image, which is divergent from the past images of the Dalit presented in Dalit writings. Through his Dalit characters, he has tried to exhibit the new Dalit consciousness; the way they are aware of their rights, realizing the importance of education and economic independence.

In the story "Tattoo", the protagonist of the story is Subhash Kumar Paswan, an undersecretary in the ministry, belonging to the urban middle-class. One day he decided to join a gym in the city. The incidents at gym shows how this man always tries to hide his old shoes, surname and a tattoo of 'Namoh Buddhaya, Jai Bhim' in his arm. The tone of the story is simple and amusing sometimes. It does not portray Dalits facing insult, humiliation, exploitation or marginalization by upper castes. The issue that Navaria has taken up in this story is totally different. He talks about the Urban Dalits who have risen above from the lower status to the higher status, which is like the higher castes, and have started hiding their caste identity. A possible reason for this is that Dalits have not fully come out from the weight of their past, which continues to impact their sense of self-worth. Despite holding positions of authority or having achieved equal social standing, the legacy of historical oppression still affects their perception of themselves. Even in positions of success, they may struggle with feelings of shame linked to their history. Thus, the psychological impact of their past continues to influence their present experiences. On many occasions Subhash Kumar knowingly or unknowingly becomes very offensive when someone tries to know his identity either his name or profession etc. This is because of the socio-cultural conditioning Dalits have faced since childhood. This lingering sense of inferiority, shaped by centuries of discrimination, remains a barrier to their complete self-empowerment. In such critical conditions, life for Dalits in the educated urban society becomes difficult. They hesitate to have relations beyond the caste boundary as there is always a chance of being humiliated and insulted. Out of fear of insult and humiliation, Dalits often distance and isolate themselves from their surroundings. They suffer from a feeling of detachment from society, a state of being an outsider. Though physical discrimination may be less visible in urban settings, the subtle forms of bias and exclusion faced by Dalits often indicates an emotional and mental struggle. This covert discrimination creates a persistent sense of alienation and stress that Dalits endure. It is a kind of psychological trauma which is significant and cannot be overlooked. This ongoing psychological burden is as harmful as overt discrimination, continuing to shape their lived experiences in urban society. To provide a deeper understanding of the psychological trauma, I would like to draw upon an example from the story. This example will illustrate the emotional struggles of Dalits which are often overlooked in contemporary society. The protagonist, Subhash Kumar, when first entering the gym, observed a young man seated at reception on a throne-like chair, smiled and greeted him. Navaria further writes:

Between me and the young boy there was a small rectangular table...his faired skin face glowed the sheen of wealth and long sharp nose as mark of his lineage, he was wearing blue branded shirt and white gleaming reebok shoes. Under the Table my shoes faced his they had lost its original colour some time ago...I drew my feet back and put some distance between us. The young man got up tried to shake hands politely...I took his hand hesitantly...as I put my hand forward I suddenly remember my Tattoo, and as best I could I turned my arm in such a manner to hold it downward. (109)  
In another incident when the boy enquires about the protagonist's full name, he says:

Subhash Kumar ...” I wanted to add Paswan, but desisted after a moment’s thought. “Is that it, sir? Any surname?” he asked casually. His eyes were still on the form. “Is it necessary to put down a surname?” Anger suddenly coloured my voice. This was a completely foolish, unjustified reaction. (112)

The incidents at gym shows how this man always tries to hide his old shoes, surname and a tattoo of ‘Namo Buddhaya, Jai Bhim’ in his arm. The important thing to be observed here is that Subhash Kumar is not treated badly by the gym instructor rather he was welcomed politely, but his inner low self-esteem, due to his caste, does not let him feel comfortable in this normal interaction with people. He gets uneasy and stressed and tries to hide his caste identity. Throughout the interaction or rather in the story he remains acutely aware of his identity as a "Harijan" and is constantly reminded that the caste-based prejudices of the society will prevent him from fully integrating with the upper-caste. His sense of belonging is perpetually overshadowed by the fear and stigma associated with his caste identity, reinforcing the boundaries of social exclusion that continue to govern his interactions and opportunities. Such emotional circumstances affect the individual's mental well-being and can give rise to psychological anxiety and trauma. The internalization of societal prejudice and the persistent fear of discrimination increases the level of emotional and psychological burden that impacts daily functioning and overall quality of life.

Psychologists have sought to explain how people experience trauma, emphasizing that the objective circumstances are not the ones that define whether an event is traumatic, rather, it is the person’s subjective emotional experience of that event. The greater the feelings of fear and helplessness, the higher the likelihood of being traumatized. The tendency to feel excessive anxiety in everyday social interactions, along with a feeling of lack of “fit” with other individuals or groups, often leads to withdrawal. In such cases, withdrawal isn’t a targeted reaction to particular threats but becomes a habitual response to any situation perceived as even slightly uncertain or risky. The purpose is to avoid contact with people, thereby reducing conflict and escape from anxiety. This is exactly what the protagonist demonstrates throughout the story. He does not want to indulge himself in any conversation with new people. He feels uncomfortable and tries to escape from the situation. It has been observed that Dalit’s mind is Persistently burdened by self-doubt and shameful feelings of inferiority. The protagonist got worried when the gym instructor further questioned him, “Are you in government service?” He was worried about his appearance. But soon he was relieved when he was reassured by the gym instructor’s explanation. He said to himself, “He didn’t find anything out of place in my attire or my manner; he was just asking for business purposes.” (111) The deep seated sense of inequality in Dalits which has been ingrained from ages does not allow the protagonist to handle such comments easily. His behaviour at gym is generally quiet, calm and makes no reply to anybody because he thinks “Being reserved is the greatest strength of all” (119).

Navaria portrays the struggle of the protagonist to shine his old, tattered shoes. The shoes have become a metaphor for his caste identity. He tried to find out ways to hide the discoloration of the shoes by seeking advice from his family. His son suggests him to buy a new pair of shoes, while his daughter suggests dyeing them in a new colour. He decided to first dye and polish them as the shoes lost their shine in the process of dying. The shoes were looking new, but the sole was still in the old colour. “But yes, there was something new about the shoes now... “there is still some green on the sole” (118). The protagonist’s attempt to polish the shoes reflect a deeper effort to repair his damaged self-esteem, with the shoes representing his marginalized status. The entire episode of attempting to change the colour of the shoes establishes the fact that, despite Dalits’ efforts to elevate themselves through education, secure employment, and achieve middle-class status, they remain constrained by their past experiences. Their attempts to construct a new identity and sense of self are continually hindered by their marginalized history, which makes it difficult for them to eradicate their old self.

In urban spaces distinct caste boundaries and restrictions are not visible, due to which Dalits can build social relations beyond their own caste groups. But in the long run, in many cases, it has been observed that the Dalits become disillusioned and alienated when they closely experience their relationship with the upper castes and find that the hatred towards Dalits is deep rooted in the upper caste culture. Education and modernity do little to get rid of their upper caste consciousness. This reminds me of a poem by Hira Bansode. She is a best known Marathi Dalit-women writer. Her poem, “Bosom Friend” explains how she felt humiliated by the remarks of an upper-caste friend, whom she invited over lunch at her place. The setting of the poem is a city which is supposed to be a caste free space as people are educated and working in offices together irrespective of their individual caste identities. The poetess writes:

You came bridging that chasm that divides us,  
Truly, friend I was really happy,  
With the naive devotion of Shabari I arranged the food on your plate  
But the moment you looked at the plate, your face changed  
With a smirk you said, “Oh my-Do you serve chutney Koshimbir this way”?  
You still don’t know how to serve food  
Truly, you folk will never improve. (48)

In the early lines of the poem the poetess expresses her surprise, gratitude and admiration for the upper caste friend whom she invited to her house over lunch. She feels deep gratitude and admiration for her friend, believing that she has transcended traditional caste barriers by choosing to visit her home. The poetess has meticulously prepared everything with the innocent devotion like of Shabari. But her optimism belied when her expectations met reality. The friend's question about the way the food is served shatters the poetess's illusion. The guest asked the host, "Oh my-Do you serve chutney Koshimbir this way"?... Truly, you folk will never improve". The use of 'you folk' in the lines tells the psyche of this educated upper-caste friend. She tries to indicate the poet's low-caste identity. The questions that should be raised here are, if this upper caste friend did not believe in the caste system and accepted the invite from the lower caste friend, then why did she give such an offensive statement? Where does the real problem lie, was there a conscious intention of the upper caste friend to humiliate her Dalit friend, or the rhetoric that was used in the conversation was unintentional? Did the lower-caste friend misinterpret the statement due to the low self-esteem shaped by their caste background? The questions raised may not find a straight answer, but it certainly invokes a rethinking about the urban spaces, which are generally considered to have a caste-less and secular atmosphere. Such caste-less images of the cities have swept the complex practice of caste under the carpet.

Dalits become disillusioned and alienated as they confront the realities of their caste identities with the upper castes. Despite their efforts to rise through education and modernity, the deep-rooted caste prejudices restrict their mingling with the upper castes. The tension of revelation of Caste identity is always there which makes them uncomfortable in establishing friendly relationships with others. In the story Navaria is portraying this fear through his protagonist Subhash Kumar, who does not want to disclose his identity to anyone. Towards the end of the story, the gym instructor discovers his identity when he answers a phone call and begins with "Jai Bhim." This simple phrase, uttered at the start of the conversation, reveals his Dalit background, marking a pivotal moment where his identity, concealed until then, becomes evident, subtly challenging the societal norms and expectations around him. This very moment the relationship with the gym instructor did not end, the way it usually happens with Dalits, rather it had started. Gym instructor also revealed the truth to him that he also belongs to Dalit community and showed his buddha locket hidden under his T-shirt. At this point of time the narrator found himself and the gym instructor were at the same platform. The gleaming white shoes of the instructor were no longer the same. He said to himself "This one has changed his shoes, I thought as I looked at my own dyed ones. Suddenly, my eyes fell upon the tattoo on my wrist: 'Namo buddhaya, Jai Bhim'. Ufff, these old and discoloured shoes can always be changed, but this tattoo?" (122)

At the end of the story, he comes to terms with his Dalit identity. He accepts that caste identity is the reality and understands that it is unalterable. Ajay Navaria has highlighted some very important issues in his story "Tattoo". The tattoo on the wrist of the protagonist has become a metaphor for Caste identity. Navaria has established the fact that self-esteem can be shaped or polished, like a pair of shoes, while the caste identity in Indian context is permanent like a tattoo. One cannot escape from it, not even religious conversion is a solution to the problem. The writings of numerous Dalit Christian authors, such as Bama and B. Rajan, illuminate the complex reality that conversion does not offer respite from the pervasive social injustices and systemic discrimination rooted in caste. Through their narratives, these writers articulate the enduring struggles faced by Dalit Christians, revealing that despite their religious conversions, they remain entrenched in a socio-economic milieu marked by marginalization.

### **Conclusion:**

It is true that migration from rural to urban areas cannot quickly eliminate the social prejudices of caste. These biases or prejudices are brought into cities, where they may evolve in different forms and shapes. Although Dalits may experience a certain degree of freedom and well-being in urban settings but they simultaneously confront various forms of hardships, challenges and discrimination. Dalits continuously find themselves balancing the difficult realities of life with their personal responsibilities and ambitions. They are afraid to reveal their caste identity to people. They undergo a significant psychological challenges and struggle to maintain a balance between the ambitions and reality. According to K. Satyanarayana, "The constant everyday pressure that requires a Dalit who moves into the upper caste world to make sure he cannot be seen as 'unclean' or primitive. We might think about all this as a new kind of violence-the everyday, continuous, psychological violence of social and cultural power" ( 15). The story "Tattoo" delineate the psychological construct of caste and has highlighted the modern problems of Dalits in urban middle-class society. Dalits hide their caste identity and distance themselves from their roots, fearing that revealing it will bring societal dishonour. While modernization, education, and urbanization may have transformed the traditional forms of caste practices but the consciousness still operates in the educated minds. The insensitivity of people, compel Dalits to fear their caste association. As Dr Ambedkar has said, "Caste is a mental state, therefore it cannot be eradicated through constitutional measures alone".

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