

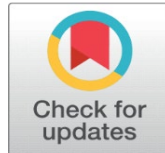
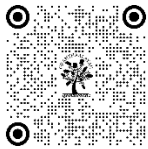
INTRANSIGENCE AND SELF-IDENTITY IN NAVARIA'S NEW CUSTOM

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ABSTRACT

The short story "New Custom" crystal clearly expose the prevailing caste system in our country. Though everything may change, the caste system in India will never change. Even if our India become a developed country, it is hard for our people to get away from this ridiculous practice of casteism. Ajay Navaria has beautifully brought about that no one can erase casteism from the mind of people, such as the people of Rajgarh in the story "New Custom". Action that are taken to prevent casteism remains only a printed text, it doesn't come into practice and it won't unless the antibiotic enters in, which is education. Well educated and scholarly men will never think of it. That's how the protagonist of this short story be like. He has been portrayed as a pure, and good hearted soul. It is true that "unless we change the belief, we could not change one's character". The belief of a person can be changed only by Education. Education is the light, which eliminate the darkness which abound the society.

Keywords: Casteism, Light, Shudras, Financial Affluence

Ajay Navaria is the author of two collections of short stories, *Patkatha aur Anya Kahaniyan* (2006) and *Yes Sir* (2012), and a novel, *Udhar ke Log* (2009). He has been associated with the premier Hindi literary journal, *Hans*. *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013), an anthology of his short stories translated into English, has been critically acclaimed.

The system of caste in India deeply embedded in the Hindu culture of the country does not sanction the inclusion of the "Shudras" within the closed door system. Ajay Navaria's *New Custom* illustrates the discriminatory practices which survive the legal prohibition of untouchability. What is disconcerting in the story is that changes of a so-called lower caste man's status endowed with education and financial affluence does not put an end to his humiliation. Although the protagonist is a university professor who has a commendable sense of physical and mental sanity, he becomes a victim of the caste prejudices of a rustic, uneducated and vulgar tea-shopkeeper simply because he is a "harijan".

In this short story "New Custom", Ajay Navaria represents this twin façade of the Hindu society. In the story he builds on the psychological construct of caste with which the rural scenario is still confined. The narrator who is also the protagonist arrives to a North India village, Rajgarh, by bus. From the beginning of the story the protagonist is portrayed as a clean and tidy person who despises anything dirty and odorous. This hygienic person is not only physically clean but also mentally pure. He is well-dressed and his appearance creates an air of superiority. He teaches in a university and

thus he is free from caste-related prejudices which paralyze the entire society. He has disagreement with his father who thinks that changes of one's.

Social status or money cannot change everything. But the protagonist is confident in his education and financial affluence. He says very firmly that "money changes everything" and his father has to quiet down because the "position of a young salaried son" is like a lion's. The protagonist cannot expect the kind of humiliations that lies in wait for him. The caste system in India is based on some psychological prejudices which is implied in the way the tea-shopper at first thinks the protagonist to be an upper-caste man because of his decent manners and neat dress-up. He addresses him as "darbar" a title "reserved for the thakur landlords of the region". The protagonist enjoys the address "darbar" which however proves to be his mistake.

He forgets for a moment that he is a "harijan" and the caste-prejudiced social circumstances in the village will not allow him to join the group of the upper class people. He was born in a so-called lower-class family, and the caste system demands that he must bear with the humiliation for his ancestry. The imitation of the manners of the upper-class people, which is decidedly another form of Hinduization, must face the reality, because the shudras are not permitted to imitate the Brahmins or the Kshatriyas. And when such a person faces the reality, his illusion is broken as he is subjected to disgrace and exploitation by the upper caste members when the protagonist enquires about the houses of the person he would visit, the shopkeeper comes to know about his caste. His relative Dharm Singh is a "harijan" who is a person of the lower caste. It is because only a harijan can be the relative of another harijan. The closed system of caste is maintained by endogamy and thus harijans are confined within the sphere of harijans.

The protagonist is a man of higher education. He does not suffer from mental illness that shrouds the mind of the village. He is conscious of hygiene as he urges his wife Romila to clean her hands every time before preparing dough of roti. While he tells Romila, "You don't care for hygiene," his wife would shout at him saying "and you are obsessed with cleanliness. He repulsive of the uncleanness of the tea-shop. The utensils are very dirty. But he is compelled to visit the shop because he is unable to find any clean tea-shop nearby, and also because he has to enquire about location of his relative's house in the adjacent village. The owner of the shop is also very unclean. The shop-keeper has a dusky, oily face that sported a vermilion tilak. His rotten teeth were stained black "paan masala".

Ironically, when the protagonist's identity is exposed, the shopkeeper's voice abnormally changes from respect to disdain. He rudely tells the protagonist to wash the glass. The protagonist was absolutely not prepared for such an offensive behavior; he feels "as though a bucket of water has been dumped on him". The inhuman and offensive behavior curbs his dignity. He protests it even though his protest does not make any change in the mindset of the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper's next question was meant to clinch the issue. "Should I serve you the tea now in a harijan glass?"

"And if I hadn't told you?" under the weight of the insult, the words emerged with difficulty.

"If you hadn't said anything, the sin would have been on you. You don't drink from a cup once you've spotted a fly in it," the shopkeeper shouted, raising his hands.

The shopkeeper even gets some of his friends by his side to argue the harijan's guilt in suppressing his caste. One of them pursues him. "Why are you being stubborn, brother? Just wash it this is the custom here". This clearly reveals the psychological construction of caste which is not based on scientific or empirical premises of inferiority and unworthiness but on narrow minded dogma. The protagonist would not have suffered from humiliation if he had suppressed his caste. It is difficult to conceptualize an educated, decent and well-dressed person to be "harijan", especially when perceived from the stereotypical notions of the shudra as ill-bred, untidy and dressed in rags. As the protagonist stubbornly refuses to wash the glass, the shopkeeper shouts his "war cry" in a tone of threat. "He's the custom of the village that any harijan taking tea should wash the glass before leaving the tea-shop. The shopkeeper, who is uneducated and hence cannot look beyond the stereotypes, adamantly follows the custom. This is also "New" custom although the government has legally banned the system of untouchability, the practice is still prevalent in many parts of the country, especially in rural sides which are deprived of the light of education.

The psychological construction of caste is again brought out in this story with a sharp distinction drawn between the protagonist and the shopkeeper. While the protagonist is educated and refined in his taste the latter is vulgar and crude. Unlike the shopkeeper the protagonist does not see women as sex-objects. He does not feel easy with the gross joke of the shopkeeper whose reaction to a snacks advertisement by an elderly actress crosses the limit of decency. The shopkeeper justifies himself with these words. "I slave away the whole day for two pieces of roti. and what do women do? Then live off our earnings, they idly eat and sleep".

The jeer of the shopkeeper at the very end of "New Custom" after he is successful in defeating the protagonist has been compared with the smile of Gandhiji on a hundred rupee note. It is often debated by dalit scholars that Gandhiji was not genuine in his "Sympathy" with the untouchability but the seldom spoke of the dismissal of the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar felt that "treating as equal those who are not equal, only increased inequality".

For Dr. Ambedkar, "the congress was a handmaiden of the capitalists and the upper class". Dr. Ambedkar gave equal importance to the abolition of the caste system and India's Independence, because the Independence would be meaningless unless the free provided equality and justice to its lower stratum of people who had been chained with the manacles of caste.

However, the protagonist faces most offensive treatment not so much from the nature of humiliation as from its uncommon manifestation to him. He has distanced himself from the lower-class delits of his community blinded by his sense of superiority. He enjoys the address "darbar" when the shopkeeper addresses him so. He is forgetful of the wide spectrum of caste in India. The protagonist of Navaria's story is one such "elite dalit" who is hurled down to dust to remind him of the shallowness of his vanity. This is not a comforting issue though. The elevation of status is every person's right, and when someone's higher education, prestigious job and sense of dignity are thwarted by some irreverent beliefs the democratic structure of India proves to be shaky.

The story is set in foggy morning, "it was well past nine in the morning, but because of heavy fog, it seemed that night was gathering, the sun's rays could not penetrate the dense fog". This weather is symbolic which implies the fog of caste-ridden psyche of the Hindu culture in India. And because of this darkening fog any better future cannot be envisaged. But the story shows a glimmer of subversion of stereotypical notions of caste that faint the upper caste Hindu psychology. The protagonist does not obey the shopkeeper's insistence to wash the glass but instead of that pays the price of the glass and breaks it stridently. Picking up the glass he smashed it against the chabutara, the platform under the trees on which village folk sat for tea, and chit-chat. This is small act of protest, which is however, the core of dalit literature, as dangle points out, "Dalit Literature is marked by revolt and negativism". The breaking of the glass saves the protagonist from the humiliation of washing the glass. He retains his self-dignity but the smile which blooms on the shopkeeper's face is a proof that his catharsis negated by his obstinate character.

The short story "New Custom" crystal clearly exposes the prevailing caste system in our country. Though everything may change, the caste system in India will never change. Ever if our India become a developed country, it is hard for our people to get away from this ridiculous practice of casteism. Ajay Navaria has beautifully brings about that no one can erase casteism from the mind of people, such as the people of Rajgarh in the story "New Custom". Action that are taken to prevent casteism remains only a printed text, it doesn't come into practice and it won't unless the antibiotic enters in, which is education. Well educated and scholarly men will never think of it. That's how the protagonist of this short story be like. He has been portrayed as a pure, and good hearted soul. It is true that "unless we change the belief, we could not change one's character". The belief of a person can be changed only by Education. Education is the light, which eliminate the darkness which abound the society.

Education was in accessible for the villagers, and for that reason the people could not think in a matured way. As if the uncared old vegetables rott, the village without education stinks. The author, Ajay Navaria has primarily revealed that the village is stinking, though the naked beggar who was lying on the sand and from him the protagonist feels nausea. The beggar represents the stinking village. The protagonist has some concern for the beggar but he could not do anything. There is a clash between the village custom and the Government law. Government has implemented cretin laws. It declared and printed that "Untouchability is a crime, Untouchability is a sin and Untouchability is an inhumane activity" in the front page of every school book. Though the practice of casteism was prohibited, still in rural across casteism is surviving. The author has conveyed the clash between the law of the government and the law of the village through the dog fight.

In the story white and brown dogs were fighting on the road. White dog represent the government law or the educated people and the brown dog represents the law which is followed in the village or the people of the village. At first brown dog wins and the white puppy ran away in fear, later the white wins. The author has indirectly pointed out that the education wins but the protagonist who belongs to a "Harian" community was ill-treated by the tea-shopkeeper. At first the tea-shopkeeper respected him invited him to his shop and offered him tea but later when he came to know that the protagonist was from a low-caste his tone was completely changed. The words of the protagonist's father came true that change of money or status doesn't change anything. The protagonist is a well educated man, of course he earns and has more money and thus he is living a high standard life. But that doesn't create any impact in the custom of that village.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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