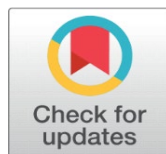
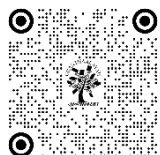


REFLECTION OF CASTE POLITICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NISHKASAN BY DOODHNATH SINGH

Manjeet Singh ¹, Bijender Singh ²

¹ Research Scholar, Ph.D., Department of English, I.G.U. Meerpur (123401), Assistant Professor, Government College Kosli, Haryana, India

² Associate Professor, Department of English, Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur (123401), Haryana, India



Corresponding Author

Manjeet Singh,
manjitsingh.lecturer@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the caste politics and exploitation of Dalit students especially Dalit women in the institutions of higher education. The paper examines the struggle of Dalit girl student for self-respect and survival. The research questions guiding this study are: How does caste operate on educational campus? Does caste identity determine and influence the behavior of upper caste teachers towards Dalit students in higher education? How a Dalit girl student is treated in academy? Do the highly educated professors practice casteism in universities? To seek answer to these questions, Doodhnath Singh's novel *Nishkasan* has been selected for the study. The novel will be analyzed from postcolonial perspective. The study shows the pitiable plight of Dalit students who succumb to the system and commit suicide. It shows how Dalit students are harassed and exploited due to caste identity. It also reveals the casteism prevalent in the higher educational institutions and the conservative mentality of the upper caste professors in post-independence India.

Keywords: Institutions of Higher Education, Caste Politics, Exclusion of Dalit Students, Harassment and Exploitation on Campus

1. INTRODUCTION

Caste plays a central role in Indian society. As Omprakash Valmiki (2020) argues, "Caste is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, caste determines his or her destiny" (p. 133). In *Caste Matters*, Suraj Milind Yengde (2019) argues, "Caste in India is as absolute *sanction*—of the dominant class over the dominated" (p. 7). Similarly, Dipankar Gupta (2000) argues, "Dominant castes exercise power by forcing subaltern groups to accept their vision of caste hierarchy as the working principle in everyday life and conduct" (p. 182). The observation is also true in the context of academia. The writer, Doodhnath Singh remained associated with the university campus for a long time. '*Nishkasan*', published in 2002, is a novel written focusing on the caste politics happening with the Dalits on university campus. This novel presents a poignant scene of the exploitation of a Dalit woman in the university. The story of this novel is a living document of a poignant story narrating the exploitation and atrocities happening with Dalit women in educational

institutions all over India. This story shows the inner struggle of a Dalit girl whom this patriarchal upper caste society does not consider appropriate to even call by her name.

2. THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

Indian society has always been indifferent towards women for centuries. They have been seen only as an object of pleasure and have been forced to live a life worse than animals. Society has always prevented women from progressing. If a woman belongs to Dalit community, then she has been subjected to double torture by this society. This novel pictures the caste-based discrimination, oppression and injustice meted out to Dalit Students in higher education. It shows how the system shatters the hopes, morale and confidence of a Dalit girl student to the extent that the girl who decides to fight against the cruel and corrupt system, ultimately has to commit suicide. All the power structures come together to crush her. The novel mourns not only the death of the girl but the failure of all government and non-government establishments set up to impart justice to the oppressed people of the society.

In a democratic country, a Dalit girl wandering from door to door for justice puts the society and the system in the dock. Through the struggle of a Dalit girl, the author has exposed the exploitation of Dalits in educational institutions. Along with this, he has also exposed the contractors of knowledge who discriminate on the basis of caste. If the person is a Dalit and that too a woman, then her suffering increases even more. The mentality of the upper caste society towards Dalits is still the same. Even in the present times, the upper caste society wants to deprive Dalits of higher education. Therefore, it is clear that in this novel, the author has denounced the cruel mentality of the upper caste teachers. The author satirizes this Brahminical system and writes, "This is the effect of Indian Brahminical culture which kills silently and for that creates a beautiful stage, trained actors, dim light of thoughts and a world of logical fallacies" (Singh, 2022, p. 26).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this study are:

- 1) To study the exclusion of Dalit Students on educational campus.
- 2) To explore the harassment, exploitation and humiliation of Dalit Students in higher education.
- 3) To examine the role of higher education administration in dealing with the issues of Dalit Students

4. RESEARCH GAP

While there has been considerable research on Campus fiction, a significant gap still exists. Most of the studies have focused either on the representation of academia depicting campus culture, follies and foibles of professors or on commercialization of higher education. No adequate research has been done on the depiction of the plight of Dalit students in higher education. There is a need to explore the condition of Dalit students in academia. This study seeks to fill this gap by undertaking research on the exploration of caste politics in the institutions of higher education by selecting the novel *Nishkasan*.

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study will contribute to the ongoing discourse on higher education and offer insights into the conditions of Dalit students especially Dalit women in the institutions of higher learning in postmodern era. It serves a tool for the policy makers and administration in higher education to frame policies to bring positive change in the plight of Dalit students and ensure equal treatment to them at par with upper caste students in higher education.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is based on the close textual analysis of the novel *Nishkasan* by Doodhnath Singh. The analysis of the story will be done from postcolonial perspective. The study adopts a descriptive and explanatory research method. The secondary sources include literary texts, postmodern studies, cultural studies, research papers, articles, reviews and newspapers. APA style will be used for the purpose of documentation and formatting.

7. DISCUSSION

In this novel, the author has not only depicted the exploitation of lower community but has also criticized the exploiters. He has made the readers aware of the Brahminical sick mentality of the society through the teachers of the educational institution. Educational institutions are the medium through which moral development of any society can be done. But when the educational institutions themselves fall prey to the leprosy of immorality, corruption, casteism and start teaching immorality, then that country, its society, the achievements of that society come under question. This novel depicts one such educational institution where the minds of the teachers are stuck in the caste-based conservative mentality which cannot see any Dalit students progressing. Omprakash Valmiki (2020) writes in his autobiography:

Dalits want to join the mainstream of the society after getting education, but the Savaran prevents them from doing so. They discriminate against them. They consider them inferior to themselves. Doubts are expressed on their intelligence, ability, and performance. All kinds of nefarious means are used to attack them. (p. 127)

The novel tells the story of a poor Dalit girl who enters the university with the hope of a bright future on the strength of higher education. She belongs to the Khatik family of the Dalit community. She has to bear immense mental agony and humiliation at the hands of upper caste hegemony in the university. Not only the inmates of the hostel but the teacher of the university harass her. She got first division in B.A. She takes admission in M.A. She is very intelligent in studies. Despite this, she has to face many difficulties in university set up. When she comes to Mridula Sarabhai hostel with her elder sister for the first time, the girls who belong to upper caste families, make face and put handkerchief on their noses. The Dalit girls are usually allotted the corner rooms near the toilets. But the girl of this novel is allotted a middle room no thirty. Throughout the story, she just remains room no thirty and is not given a name. Maitreyi Mishra who is the general secretary of the hostel gets angry and remarks, "If you go to that block, the smell of toilets comes later, theirs comes first. *Yaar*, they all smell very bad... It is a biological factor for all of them to stink" (Singh, 2022, p. 19). They cannot bear that she has been allotted a good middle room. Similarly in the story *Ghuspathiye*, Valmiki (2023) depicts how Dalit medical students are kept in separate rooms or hostels to make them realize their otherness. It clearly shows how Dalit students are systematically excluded from the mainstream in educational institutions.

Even in the higher education institutions of the country, where every student has equal right to education, this casteist sick mentality can be reflected there too. Dalit students get admission through reservation and quota, but the gap between Dalits and upper castes has not been eliminated even today. Her sister has also been a hostler in the same hostel and has suffered a lot due to casteism. She instructs her how to conduct herself in the hostel as she tells, "Don't listen to anyone in the hostel. And don't complain to ma'am. Derogatory things keep happening about us. And in the class too. Have to do your work quietly" (Singh, 2022, p. 23). This line of class division can be clearly seen not only in the Mridula Sarabhai hostel described in the novel but also in the so-called big universities of independent India.

Her sister gets an ad hoc appointment in a college of Gopeshwar. After her departure, the problems of the girl increase drastically. She has to face difficulty and humiliation "in the university campus, in the class, while commuting, in the hostel and in the bathrooms" (Singh 24). She has to bear the derogatory remarks and taunts of the boys. When she hears, "Hi my sweetheart" from a boy, she feels "as if black ants have suddenly appeared inside her salwar-kurta. She nervously adjusts her folded white-grey scarf on her breasts" (Singh, 2022, p. 25). One boy says, "It is heard, there is some Manoj Pandey who has bought her". Another boy speaks loudly, "Brothers, give her a long broom, what will she do after studying" (Singh, 2022, p. 25). These remarks clearly show how Dalit girl students have to bear the sting of humiliation on campus.

Through this novel, the cruel reality of the upper caste patriarchal society has been depicted. The girl is not only harassed in the educational institution, but even after her expulsion, this patriarchal society harasses her mentally to such an extent that the girl is ready to commit suicide. The author has exposed the upper caste professors who are currently using educational institutions for adultery. The upper caste madam Dr. Mahishmati Singh of the Mridula Sarabhai hostel described in the novel has converted the entire hostel into a brothel. Her husband comrade Shardul Vikram Singh who is the in-charge of university cell is also involved in this illegal and immoral activity. He is a member of communist party and plays a significant role in the illegal activities happening in the hostel. Every day, when a guest comes, some girl or the other is called to serve them. The author writes, "But this is a common custom in the hostel. In the evening, some girl or the other is called to serve madam or to welcome her guests" (Singh, 2022, p. 42).

In the story *Shodh Prabandh*, Sheoraj Singh Bechain (2023) reveals how a Dalit girl is sexually exploited by her upper caste professor. In this novel also, the girl is tried to make the victim of lust. She is called to entertain a guest and to satisfy his sexual desires. Unaware of the conspiracy hatched against her, the girl gets trapped in the web of madam but refuses to sell her self-respect. She runs away from the hostel. And from this moment begins her struggle not only for self-respect but also for survival. When her younger sister comes to know of this incident, she asks Manoj to lodge an F.I.R. She remarks, "This is not a hostel but a brothel. University is a junkyard of 'virtuous' scoundrels. She was afraid that something wrong will happen "because she is beautiful" (Singh, 2022, p. 54). When the matter of staying in the hostel is brought to the notice of the Dean, Students Welfare, he calls Dr Mahishmati Singh but she calls the girl 'characterless' and accuses her of "being ill-mannered, doing politics and practicing casteism" (Singh, 2022, p. 63). The Dean allows her to stay in the hostel but Shardul Vikram Singh forces her to pay ten thousand rupees to stay in the Mridula Sarabhai Hostel. If she is not able to pay the money she is asked to "give something else." In the novel, *Campus*, K.L. Kamal (2002) feels disappointed to observe the caste politics in university. As he rightly comments:

The university was being run on the basis of class and caste leading to the lowest kind of viciousness and hatred. If this is the deplorable level which a university can be reduced to, how can we ever think of bringing about any change? When the torch bearers themselves lose their way, what greater tragedy can there be? Such universities are going against the concepts of equality and secularism enshrined in our constitution. They are defying the very ethos of our country; they have become the strongholds of narrow casteism and bigotry! (Kamal, 2002, p. 91)

In the novel *Nishkasan*, the girl keeps wandering from door to door to get justice and knocks at the door of every democratic institution from university to judiciary. But she gets justice from nowhere. Every time she gets failure and disappointment. She sends the report to the Governor, the Chief Minister, Education minister, and National Scheduled Caste-Tribe Commission. The Governor who is also a Dalit orders for immediate action in this case of Dalit oppression. But the Chief Minister gives the statement that there is no Dalit oppression in the university. He even gets angry and says to the Governor that he has been sent to this state to increase the vote bank and to give the message to Dalits that they are not the leaders of the upper castes only. But after detailed noting, the Governor forwards her file to the Vice-Chancellor to conduct an immediate inquiry and take action on it on priority basis. As he says, "Suppose she is your daughter then? She was Mufti's daughter then? Then the entire administration would be upside down!" (Singh, 2022, p. 72). This statement shows the lethargy and indifference of the system of government towards the oppression of Dalit students.

The Vice chancellor constitute two different committees to probe into the matter. Dr. Mahishmati is also made a member of one committee under the chairmanship of Prof. Tripathi who is the stooge of V.C. A Dalit professor whose case is pending in executive council is included as a member in the committee. The girl sends another memorandum to His Excellency to remove the superintendent from the enquiry committee as she herself is accused in the case. But her appeal is not heeded. A social boycott is announced against number thirty by superintendent on the proposal of Maitreyi. The girl is harassed and insulted in the meeting of enquiry committee. The committee recommends that she should be expelled from the hostel immediately on account of making false and fabricated allegations. Both committees, one of Women cell and other of professors give their report that all the allegations against the superintendent of the hostel and her husband made by the girl are baseless and fabricated as she could not present any evidence to support her allegations. Instead of providing justice to her, it is concluded that "she wants to live illegally in the hostel by raising slogans of Dalitism on the strength of threats and intimidation" (Singh, 2022, p. 115). A serious disciplinary action is recommended against her for making very vulgar allegations. She is ordered to vacate the room thirty of the hostel immediately. After viewing the behavior and attitude of the university administration in the case, the Chairperson of Scheduled Caste-Tribe Commission, remarks to the Prof. Trivedi, "You people are professors but not human" (Singh, 2022, p. 110). His stern remark exposes the hypocrisy and shallowness so upper caste professors:

If it is a Dalit girl, you will try to get the business done by her, ask for bribe and if she has no money, will say, 'Give something else in exchange'. You are upper caste people, intellectuals- you have everything, yet haven't lost the habit of 'give something else'. Earlier there was carefree coercion, now the same thing with harassment and threat. (Singh, 2022, p. 111).

It is worth noting that in independent India, the girl knocks on every door of the country to get her expulsion cancelled but she does not get justice from anywhere in this upper caste society. Through this novel, the writer has strongly attacked the educational system and power structures of the society. The girl goes to every door of this democratic country to save her existence but due to being a Dalit, she gets disappointment from everywhere. Realizing

no hope of getting any kind of justice from university administration, she sends a report to His Excellency, the President and the Prime Minister. She personally pays visits to Chief Minister's residence, BSP office and MP office with memorandum but she gets no respite. The P.A to M.P. tells her that they do not interfere in the affairs of university because education is a matter of states. He tries to persuade her that it would be best for her to quietly hand over the money to the superintendent otherwise they will snatch away her degree. At last, he is dragged out of the house of M.P.

When the Governor himself visits the university to take cognizance of the matter of Dalit oppression, the case is presented as a conspiracy of the communists by the Vice-chancellor who presents the reports of investigation committees before the governor. Though the girl struggles against this male chauvinistic upper caste system and loses, she exposes the hollow democracy of the country. She goes to every political party with her complaint, but these political parties ignore the complaint of the Dalit girl to save their seats and vote bank. Manoj advises her to meet Dalit minister Nanhe Lal to seek help. Manoj explains her that His Excellency may come from the Dalit community, but if it comes to Dalit vs. RSS, His Excellency will only support the RSS. But instead of giving her support, Nanhe Lal admonishes her "to live with fear in the society. Don't be bold, you will get killed" (Singh, 2022, p. 85). He asks her, "Who you are?... Who gave you so much courage? You want to become Mayawati, and among the pandas of university?" (Singh, 2022, p. 85).

The author unmasks the real face of the communist party in the novel. On the one hand, the leftist parties talk of fighting against exploitation and for justice but on the other hand, they see the party's interest in her case as a 'Dalit versus party issue'. The girl reaches the office of communist party along with Manoj. The secretary of the Communist Party expresses his helplessness:

And the time is such that we should not get trapped in the debate of party versus Dalit. We are in favour of Dalis, but in party versus Dalit, we will see the interest of the party first. And if the matter becomes public, it will harm the party. Anyway, Dalitism has not done less harm to the party. Then it is a minor hiccup. The girl has made it a question of her respect and ego. It has nothing to do with party policy. (Singh, 2022, p. 120)

His statement clearly exposes the dual policy and real face of communist party which claims to fight against injustice, exploitation and for the rights of the exploited and oppressed people. When the girl is thrown out of the hostel, she files a petition in the high court against the order of the Vice- chancellor. But her hopes are shattered when her petition is dismissed. Now she is left with no other option than committing suicide by hanging herself from the hostel tower in the university. Similarly in the story *Ghuspathiye*, Valmiki (2023) raises the issue of the death of Dalit medical students due to caste-based harassment and exploitation in medical colleges. In this novel, the girl leaves a note behind that "No one is responsible for my death- number thirty!" (Singh 143). It is actually not the death of the girl but the death of the whole system. It is the crumbling of the democratic structure of which India boasts off. Thus, through the struggle of the girl in this novel, Doodhnath Singh (2022) leaves this question before the readers:

What was she punished for? Because she did not have money, or because she did not turn out to be Maitreyi-brand? What will happen if our parents come to know what kind of hell we live in? They will immediately take us out. But what is this, friend, social boycott? Because she reported? Because she went to the top? If she had agreed, everything would have been fine? (p. 98)

In *Professor's Dairy*, Laxman Yadav (2024) rightly remarks that "When the children of Dalit, backward, tribal Pasmada and deprived-exploited sections have started accessing higher education for the first time, they are being ruined by a conspiracy. (p. 09). Pathania and Tierney (2018) assert, "The educational institution plays a role in highlighting caste identity. There is no mechanism to cope with such humiliation and prejudice, in general, and in postsecondary education in particular... Caste is seen as a part of culture and not a structural shortcoming" (p. 10-11).

8. CONCLUSION

On the basis of above analysis, it is evident that even today in the twenty-first century, despite all the constitutional provisions and rights for the upliftment of Dalits, this upper caste society has been exploiting Dalits in the name of caste, religion, tradition and culture. In today's scientific age, where many achievements have been made in the field of knowledge and science, the upper caste mentality has not changed much. Although the Constitution has given the right to equality to the citizens of the country, yet even today this caste inequality can be observed in the institutions of higher education. Even today, the attitude of upper caste teachers towards Dalit students in many big universities of the country has not changed. It is evident from the news of students committing suicide due to caste-based harassment in various higher education institutions of the country. Thus, through the struggle of the Dalit girl, this novel raises questions on all

the government and non-government organizations established for ensuring equality and human dignity in democracy. In this novel, along with caste discrimination and exploitation in educational institutions, all political parties, courts, media and the corrupt power system have been exposed.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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