

Gender, Caste and other Subaltern perspectives reflected in Pannalal Patel's Gujarati novel, "Malela Jeev".

Prof. Jalpa Soni¹, Megha Dave²

¹ Assistant Professor, Shri Shankaracharya Institute of Professional Studies,
Raipur, India

² Undergraduate Student, St. Xavier's College, India

Corresponding Authors Email: jalpasoni@ssipsraipur.in, meghadave2005@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores Pannalal Patel's Gujarati novel Malela Jeev through subaltern perspectives, focusing on gender, caste, and class. The tragic love story of Kanji and Jivi exposes how rigid social hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and caste restrictions marginalize individuals, especially women. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of "subaltern classes" and Spivak's "subaltern female," the study highlights Patel's realistic portrayal of rural Gujarat and the struggles of oppressed groups, revealing systemic injustice and challenging hegemonic social order.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Gender, Caste, Class.

Introduction -

The word 'subaltern' means 'of inferior rank' or status (Gundala). It is originated from Latin word *sub* - ("under") and *alternus* ("every other (one), one after the other"). The term popularized when it was used by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the article "*Notes on Italian History*" which was published under his book *Prison Notebooks* written between 1929 and 1935 and published in 1947. Subaltern refers to those subordinate group of society who has experienced hegemonic power of the ruling group.

Gramsci has primarily used the term 'subaltern' from political perspective. However, he has also introduced a wider meaning of 'subaltern' by presenting the idea of 'subaltern groups' and 'subaltern classes', which highlights the concept of repression through class, caste, gender, race, language and culture dominated by power, rank or authority. In general, 'subaltern' implies to a person with a low ranking in a social, political, economic or other chain of command and can be ensemble within the representation of the Oppressor/Oppressed (Gundala). Pannalal Patel is a renowned Gujarati writer known for his distinguish and realistic style of writing, which has always reflected 'the inner truth through outer reality' (qtd. in Kikani and Shah).

He is well known for his empirical and undecorated description of rural background of Gujarat in his novels, while maintaining its true essence.

One of his widely recognized work is 'Malela Jeev'. The novel tells the tragic love story of Kanji and Jivi, who are separated because of deeply rooted societal norms and expectations. Being born in different castes, Kanji and Jivi are not allowed to get married. In order to remain close to Jivi, Kanji with suggestion of his friend Hero, decides to get Jivi married to the barber of their village. This leads to intense emotional and psychological struggle. This paper analysis 'Malela Jeev' with the lens of subaltern approach, with a primary focus on gender, caste and class.

Gender

The concept of 'subaltern female' is one of the crucial concept under the umbrella term 'subaltern'. The term 'subaltern female' refers to women who are marginalized because of both gender and position in social hierarchy. As the Indian scholar, feminist critic and a pioneer in Subaltern Studies, Gayatri Spivak has said, "...the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 41)

The female characters in the novel, particularly the protagonist Jivi, is subjected to double marginalization - first on account of their gender and second by their inclusion in the 'subaltern classes', consisting of peasants, workers and other groups. As a result, they are denied of any power and are subjected to various forms of abuse. Women are inferior to men. This predefined perception on females is shaped because of traditional beliefs, ideas and cultural norms. These irrational societal expectations has also given the outline to the status of women in the social system. Status means a position in a social system or a subsystem. ("Unit-1 Rural Women : Status and Development Strategies")

The Committee on the Status of Women recognized status as: 1. Place in ritual hierarchy, 2. Financial position, 3. Independent job, 4. Educational background, 5. Political participation (qtd. in "Unit-1 Rural Women : Status and Development Strategies")

The novel critically reflects the status of women in rural area as it is, which is victim of societal norms and patriarchal structure. The women of Udhadiya belongs to the very bottom position in their village. A stark discrimination between the status of men and women in regards of roles and values can be seen. Women are largely marginalized and constrained because of the rigid notions of the society that are held against them. They are perceived solely as vessels for reproduction and caretakers of domestic responsibilities, reflecting their objectification within the society. In addition to performing all their primary activities which includes household chores, child-rearing, and caring for the elderly, they were also expected to engage in agricultural labor alongside men.

"...પણ એય બિચારા જાણે છે. કાંઈ વત્તુઓછું બોલીશું તો બેરૂં હેંડતું થશે પિયરમાં. પછી
દળવું, ખાંડવું, વાઢવું, નેંદવું એ બધી લપ જ ને?"

The women are not engaged in any independent job apart from agriculture. And as a result they also remain financially dependent. Moreover, education is not the concerning subject for the people in the village, especially for women. It could be seen that apart from Bhagat and Kanji no one else in the village was literate.

Addition to this, patriarchy plays a pivotal role in shaping the individual's role. India is a patriarchal society. Patriarchy is a hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert absolute authority over the community as a whole (Britannica). This social system can also be noticed in Udhadiya village. In Udhadiya, men have absolute power. Women have no voice to express their opinions, feelings and thoughts in domestic and public spheres. They are not allowed to participate in any social or political activities. They are also excluded from participation in any form of governing systems such as panchayats by reducing their opinions and votes to null. Moreover, the act of voicing or sharing their perspectives in front of governing authorities, such as panchayats, councils, or law enforcement officials, is often regarded as disgraceful and outrageous.

‘હેવે ધૂળાની બૈરીને બોલાવવાનો વારો આવ્યો. ગામલોક ફોજદાર આગળ કરગરી પડ્યા:

‘સા’બ, બૈરા માણસને ચોરે બોલાવે એ તો ગામનું નાક જાય.’

In consideration of above five points, it could be concluded that women are subordinate in the society. They are placed at the lower end of social hierarchy and as a consequence of belonging to inferior group they are frequently exposed to abuse from the dominating groups. Jivi's experience reflects this dynamic. Jivi is the victim of domestic violence. Domestic violence is defined as any abuse including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological or financial, between intimate partners. Jivi was also abused verbally by being called 'whore' by her husband, mother-in-law, other women of society, and majorly the whole community.

‘મને ઊઠવા દે ને ! રાંડને માર મારી મારી..ને અધમૂઈ જ કરી નાખું !’

‘ધૂળાના બરાડા ને હાથ હજુ ચાલુ જ હતા : ‘આજ મારે તને પૂરી જ કરવી છે, તુંય

જાણીશ કે મલ્યો’તો વળી.’

Moreover, because of the orthodox and patriarchal society, lack of education, poverty and financial dependency, social stigma and weak legal system, females like Jivi are silenced. In addition to this, Jivi received no support from Kanji, her only alliance and figure of trust and love in the new village.

Because of all these reasons she experienced a sense of helplessness and despair. The prolonged exposure to abuse and the absence of adequate support systems led to severe psychological and emotional trauma, resulting in suicidal thoughts and a loss of self-identity.

Caste –

Gramsci has proposed the idea of 'subaltern classes' that refers slaves, plebeians, peasants, and the proletariat, who are struggling for hegemony. It is believed that Gramsci used the term 'subaltern classes' as code for 'proletariat' to avoid prison censors. Though, the term has been used in Italy as early as 18th century to classify subcategories and 'subaltern species' and during mid- to late 19th century to describe the status of lower, subordinate social classes (Gramsci, 56). Generally, it refers to any social class of society that is marginalized and oppressed. These classes are often excluded from main power structure of the society. Due to their lack of power, they are mostly being dominated by the upper classes.

Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense. Every trace of autonomous initiative, therefore, is of inestimable value. In any case, the monograph is the most suitable form for this history, which requires a very large accumulation of fragmentary materials. (Gramsci, Notebook 3, §14)

In India, these marginalized groups are comprised of peasants, tribals, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The foundation for this caste system is Hindu Varna System. According to this system, Hindus are classified into five main categories as per their works (karma) - Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (kings and warriors), Vaishyas (farmers, traders and merchants), Shudras (laborers) and Dalits (latrine cleaners, sweepers). Later, this caste system was replaced by classified groups namely General caste, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC).

Kroeber defines caste as “an endogamous and hereditary sub-division of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such sub-divisions” (qtd. in Ghurye)

Kathleen Gough refers castes as “ranked birth-status groups which are usually endogamous and tend to be associated with an occupation” (qtd. in Ghurye)

An intricate caste division can be observed in Gujarat. The Hindu population of Gujarat is divided into several levels from high to low. The hierarchy which is mostly followed is as given - people of 'twice-born' (comprises of first three varnas of Hindu Varna System) are considered in the upper strata - Brahmin (priest), Rajput (warriors), Vania (traders), Kanbi (farmers/landowners); castes such as Koli (peasants), Soni (goldsmiths), Suthar (carpenters), Valand (barber) are considered subordinate to 'twice-born' and at last Bhangi (scavengers) are included in the lowest strata. These castes are also further divided into numerous sub-castes. 'Malela Jeev' is centered on the issue of caste discrimination. The male protagonist, Kanji, belongs to the Kanbi (Patel) *samaj*, which is a part of the upper tier of caste hierarchy. While on the other hand, Jivi, the female protagonist, is from the Valand *samaj*, which is comparatively backward class. Other characters such as Hero - Kanji's friend, Bhagat, Kaali, Mukhi belongs to the privileged group and on the contrary, characters like Dhulo, Nanidoshi, Reshmo are from the oppressed group.

The experiences of character are mostly influenced by their identities. The novel depicts some of the severe and strict norms being practiced by people concerning to castes.

Physical Restriction:

Restriction on any type of physical contact were imposed upon people. It was believed that one (of top castes) could get polluted by merely touching a bottom castes' member (also known as achhoots or untouchables). This notion has also influenced the living condition of lower castes and upper castes. Upper-caste were expected to live in separate posh neighborhoods while individuals from lower castes mostly lived outside of the village. They were not allowed to use any public facilities like well, roads, schools etc.

The spatial arrangement of the Udhadiya village reflects the caste hierarchy of that region. In the village Patels were of majority. The Thakor community, a lower caste, had their dwellings outside the village limits, reflected the restriction on social distance. The separate residence of the Brahmin, separate from the village further highlights the social hierarchy.

‘ઉધડિયું ગામ એક મોટા ટેકરા પર વસેલું હતું. ગામમાં મોટે ભાગે પટેલની વસ્તી હતી.....ગામની આસપાસ છૂટાછવાયાં વીસેક છાપરાં ઠાકરડાઓનાં હતાં. ગામમાં એક વાણિયાની દુકાન હતી. નજીકમાં મોટા ગામના એક બ્રાહ્મણનું અધવારું પણ ત્યાં હતું. ઉપરાંત ગાંધજી, દરજી, સુથાર તથા લુહારની પણ અકેક ઘરની વસ્તી હતી. અને એ રીતે આસપાસનાં ગામ કરતાં ઉધડિયું મોટું ગામ લેખાતું.’

Commensal Restrictions:

There were complex rules regarding the acceptance of food from lower castes. Edward Blunt has described seven main taboos -

- (i) The commensal taboo-which lays down the persons in whose company a man may eat food,
- (ii) The cooking taboo-which lays down the persons who may cook the food that a man eats,
- (iii) The food taboo-which lays down what kinds of food a man may eat, (iv) The eating taboo which lays down the proper ritual at a meal, (v) The drinking taboo-which lays down the persons from whom a man may take water, (vi) The smoking taboo-which lays down the persons whose pipe a man may smoke, and in whose company he may smoke and (vii) The vessels taboo-which lays down the nature of the vessels that a man may use for eating, drinking, and cooking

In novel, taboos such as commensal taboo, cooking taboo, food taboo, drinking taboo, smoking taboo and vessel taboo are being noticed. The incident when Jivi invited Kanji to her home, Mani insisted on taking the men to her home as they belonged to her community while pointing out that Jivi was not suitable to be their host, highlights commensal taboo. Further, it was seen that Kanji politely refused the offer of Jivi to have water or any food and only accept to have tobacco in company of her acquaintances which reflects cooking and drinking taboo.

When Kanji and Hero reached Jivi's home they were presented with bidi by Jivi's father, which they initially declined, and insist on having their own. Eventually, they were convinced to share it, albeit with some reluctance, as evidenced by Kanji comment 'એમની મેલી ત્યારે !' (Then foul bidi it is!) The taboo of smoking is also emphasized when after the day's end, men of the Udhadiya village namely Kanji, Hero and other from same community gathers at Bhagat's home for smoking a pipe. Additionally, the scene were Kanji asked for drinking water from Mani draws attention to the taboo of drinking. When Kanji saw a lady descending from the hill near where he was sitting, he thought that if she belonged to some higher caste, he would have to drink water offered by her, and then it would be improper to stay near the public well any longer.

‘કાનજીને થયું કે જો કોઈ ઊંચા વરણની નીકળી તો પાણી પીવું પડશે...’

Moreover, after recognizing Mani a while later, he pretended to not to know her and asked whether she was Patel or not so he could drink water from her pot.

‘કોણ પટેલ છે ? જરા પાણી પાશો ?’ કાનજીએ મણિને જ પૂછ્યું. “પીઓને ભા, પાણિયારે આવેલાનેય નહિ પાય !” પાણી ભરતી બીજી બાઈ બોલી. પૂછ્યું : ‘શી નાતે છે, ભાઈ ?’ ‘હુંય છું તો પટેલ’

This incident demonstrates how individuals were only allowed to drink water from members of their own caste. This also reflects the belief of being polluted if one gets in the contact with lower caste.

Marital Restrictions:

In India, mostly all the communities are strictly endogamous. Marriage within the own caste and sub-caste is enforced. The concept of endogamy is in the center of the caste system. Finnish sociologist has termed endogamy as "the essence of the caste system". The violation of this rule was taken as very serious offence and the practitioner has to face harsh consequences, often leading to ostracization. Children born from inter-caste marriage also faces struggles and challenges in being accepted by the community. Those children are often labeled as outcasts and are denied of any community support. The constant exposure to discrimination and prejudice can lead to psychological and emotional trauma. It may also lead to identity crisis in children.

‘નાત, જાત, ભાઈ, ભોજાઈ અને ભાઈબંધ- બધુંય છોડવા બેસે તો છોડી શકાય પણ પાછળ છોકરાંછૈયાં થાય એમની શી દશા !’

In 'Malela Jeev', there is a vivid description of struggles and challenges faced by Kanji and Jivi for the acceptance of their inter-caste relationship. Kanji belongs to higher caste whereas Jivi is from lower caste, and because of this difference in their social status, despite being in love, they are not allowed to get married.

The influence of caste based traditions and norms could be seen when Kanji, despite of his personal desire to marry Jivi, in fear for the disgrace his actions will bring on his family, particularly on his brother's well-being abandon his love.

‘આપણી નાતની હોત તો હું એને ઘરમાં ઘાલ્યા વગર કદી ન છોડત!’ કાનજીએ કહ્યું.’

‘હીરો બોલી ઊઠ્યો : ‘પણ અલ્યા કાનજી, નાત નહિ, જાત નહિ- તારે આ શું જોઈએ ?’

The lower castes are exploited, suppressed and marginalized by the dominating castes. Because of rigid notions held against these castes, they suffer immensely because of the upper castes. Further, because of acceptance these caste ideology by the lower caste subalterns, they feel obliged to the upper casts. They become submissive and their submission is one of the key issue of their subordination (Nath and Singh, 52)

Class -

'Subaltern groups' refers to the social groups who are socially, politically or economically oppressed. The term 'subaltern groups' was used by Gramsci in synonyms with 'subaltern classes'. Though, according to Giorgio Baratta 'subaltern groups' is more specific category compared to 'subaltern classes'. In addition to this, he also points that the concept of 'subaltern group' could overlap with 'classes' creating complex and multifaceted forms of marginalization.

In village, Kanji has a high social status and rank. When he went to city he got employed in a low-skilled job of washing women garments, faced exploitation and marginalization, demonstrating how even those outside of traditional subaltern classes can experience exploitation, especially being a proletariat in city. Further, despite having a high social status in village, Kanji has economic disadvantage, compared to Nano Kataro, who has low status in village in relation with Kanji. It is evident that in spite being placed at top of social ladder, one could still be marginalized in in other ways, such as economically, and become part of a 'subaltern group' in terms of monetary status.

The theory of the 'subaltern' can be effectively understood through the intricately layered characters in *Malela Jeev*. The novel reflects the lives of individuals who exist on the margins of society and how they are affected by rigid social norms, patriarchy, caste-based hierarchies, inequality, and oppressive systems.

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