



MATRIARCHAL ANCHOR IN A PATRIARCHAL WORLD: GRANDMOTHER AS CUSTODIAN OF KINSHIP AND CULTURE IN BALBIR MADHOPURI'S *CHANGIYA RUKH*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study explores the portrayal of grand relations in Dalit literature with specific focus on the role of grandparents in the lives of Dalit children. It examines the hardships faced by Dalit children in Indian society and the complexities of intergenerational kinship within a caste-ridden social structure. The study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How has a grandmother-grandson kinship been depicted in Dalit autobiographies? (2) How does the portrayal of grandmother-grandson kinship in Dalit autobiography differ from its portrayal in mainstream Indian literature? (3) What is the socio-cultural significance of the grandmother beyond affection and care? (4) How does this bond become a site of survival and resistance in Dalit childhood? To seek answer to these questions, Dalit autobiography *Changiya Rukh* written by Balbir Madhopuri has been selected for the study. The text is analyzed from a postcolonial and socio-cultural perspective adopting a descriptive and explanatory research methodology. The paper demonstrates how Dalit grand relations are a reflection of larger societal realities. The study reveals that grandparents play a pivotal role in the lives of Dalit children and influence their personality formation to a great extent. As custodians of oral tradition, folk wisdom, and emotional resilience, they provide security and identity to grandchildren amidst poverty and caste discrimination. The paper also highlights the double vulnerability of Dalit grandparents and grandchildren and the discriminatory treatment they receive in Indian society.

Keywords: *Grand relation, intergenerational kinship, grandparents, Dalit childhood, hardships*

Background

Grandparents play a pivotal role in the lives of grandchildren, often emerging as the incarnation of love, affection, and cozy solace during childhood. Their pleasant memories become the emotional anchor of a child who is often found more attached to his grandmother or grandfather than to his parents. In Dalit autobiographies, this relationship acquires a deeper socio-culture significance. In Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh*, the grandmother is not merely a figure of affection but acts as a custodian of oral history, folk wisdom, and resilience. She becomes the primary source of emotional security and cultural transmission for the young Balbir amidst poverty, caste discrimination and the chopped-roots existence of Dalit community.

In Dalit communities, the grand relations are found to be complex. The relations of Dalit children with their grandparents are different from that of the upper caste children. In many of Dalit autobiographies, it is observed that instead of having a ride on the shoulder of grandparents, Dalit grandchildren are seen sharing the responsibility of the family with grandparents. Instead of playing with grandparents, they are seen working with them in the fields. The stories which their grandparents narrate are not the romantic stories of king, queen or fairies rather they are the stories of their hardships and exploitation. In many of Dalit autobiographies, it is generally observed that the grand relations influence the personality of grandchildren immensely. Due to the financial hardships in the family both mother and father have to work hard to earn their living and consequently the responsibility of upbringing of children lies on the shoulders of grandmother or grandfather. Grandparents are represented as their best companions whose impact plays an instrument role in their lives.

In *My Childhood on My Shoulders*, after the death of his father and remarriage of his mother, the Child Suraj is looked after by his grandfather Gangi Baba. His blind Baba was "forced to do any kind of works he got- grinding grain, operating the straw-chopping machine or weaving twine for charpoy" (Becahin13). He cut fodder for the Yadavs. Suraj helped him in these works. Suraj along with his Baba and Tau would sit in front of their house so that they can be hired as a coolie or a field hand. Gangi Babba had taken loans from Yadavs to give education to Suraj. He decided to sell his hut for six-hundred rupees. There was a strong bond between Suraj and his grandfather. Similarly, in the autobiography, *Samboli*, the child Lachma lives with his

maternal grandparents, Thatha (naana) and Ajji (Nani). It was his Thatha who admitted him in the village school. In *The Outcaste*, Sharan had deep influence of his grandparents in his childhood. Whenever his Dada got drunk, he quarrelled with Santanai. When his Dada asked Santanai about the visit of Imam who was her lover, she got wild with anger. Santamai and Dada abused each other terribly, reducing Sharan to tears. Whenever he got the chance, he humiliated Santamai by asking her if the Imam had visited her. It had a very adverse effect on the emotional and psychological growth of the child Sharan who had to encounter such things every day in his childhood.

Research Objectives: The main objectives of this study are:

1. To study the portrayal of Dalit grand relations in Indian society
2. To analyse the role of the grandmother as a source of emotional security, oral history and cultural transmission in the life of the Dali child.
3. To explore how intergenerational kinship functions as a mechanism of survival and resilience against caste oppression and economic hardship.
4. To understand how this contributes to the identity formation and personality development of the protagonist.

Research Gap: While there has been considerable research on the representation of grand relations in literature, but a significant gap still exists. Most of the studies have focused on the depiction of grand relations in upper caste society. No adequate research has been done on the portrayal of Dalit grand relations in literature. This study seeks to fill this gap by undertaking research on the portrayal of Dalit grand relations in literature by selecting Dalit autobiography *Changiya Rukh* written by Balbir Madhopuri.

Significance of the study: The study will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the representation of grand relations in literature and offer insights into the conditions and complexities of Dalit grand relations. The study will be useful for those who wish to understand the intricacies of Dalit grand relations and the problems faced by them in Indian upper caste society.

Research Methodology: The present research is based on the close textual analysis of the autobiography *Changiya Rukh* written by Balbir Madhopuri. 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. MLA 8th edition style will be used for the purpose of documentation and formatting.

Discussion

Changiya Rukh is life narrative of a Dalit writer Balbir Madhopuri who narrates his lived experiences of life. A major portion of autobiography deals with his childhood reflecting upon his relation with his grandmother and her deep influence in his life. In the autobiography, his grandmother appears in a heroic role. The detailed portrait of his grandmother which he sketches indicates the depth of his attachment with his grandmother. The author was very much impressed with his grandmother whom he lovingly called Daadi. She is portrayed as a woman who was “always full of life. . . She was respected by young and old alike” (Madhopuri 132).

Daadi as a Site of Resistance and Dalit Feminist Consciousness: In mainstream Dalit literature, Dalit old women are portrayed as helpless victim. Madhopuri breaks that stereotype. In this text, Gudd’s grandmother, Haro is represented as fearless, tenacious and determined. In his childhood the narrator Gudd was most influenced by his grandmother. Whenever Haro saw an injustice being done to her or to any other, she would be ready to protest. She would not surrender easily. Once, someone made a lewd remark on her: “Satto has many lovers, some sweepers and other cobblers” (Madhopuri 41). She protested vehemently, “Which bitch gave birth to you! Stop, or else I ‘ll cut you into pieces!” (40). Her loud abusive protest is an assertion of Dalit feminist dignity. For child Gudd, this is the first lesson in resistance. When his cousin Phumman learnt about the incident, he became red with anger and said, “Once I catch hold of him, I will smash him; the stupid fellow has a habit of making rude remarks” (Madhopuri 42). The upper caste people never give due respect to lower caste people irrespective of their age as happened in the case of narrator’s grandmother Haro. Phumman further added, “Merely because they own a few acres of land, they can not resist spitting at the moon!” (42). On seeing Phumman’s bravery and his resistance to injustice, Gudd also gains new energy and confidence.

His Daadi reminded the people of a past event when Bhagta had come to weavers’ pit and ordered Jagar the chowkidar to cut the fodder for him. When Jagar said that he did not have time, Bhagta hit him with a stick. As a reaction to that incident, the whole Chamarli got after him and chased him away. From that day, Bhagta did not dare to enter their mohalla. They always forced people to do begaar for them. Hence, Daadi serves as counter-archivist of resistance. She does not just tell stories of suffering but those of Dalit victory. When the narrator hears these words, he begins to think about begaari, untouchability and question of high and low. This is the birth of Ambedkarite critical consciousness in Gudd and the teacher is his grandmother. Gudd resolves to work hard to get rid of this invisible, yet heavy burden. He realizes that one has to come forward to initiate new ideas and to inculcate a new ideology. Therefore, Haro is not merely a grandmother, she is Gudd’s first feminist and political guru. In a patriarchal world where upper-caste men feel entitled to make lewd remarks on Dalit women irrespective of age, Haro’s boldness and determination become the matriarchal anchor that shapes Gudd’s own identity as a protest writer.

Grandparents assist families in a number of ways and pass on cultural values and heritage to younger generations. This autobiography portrays Daadi as the oral historian and the counter-archivist. The child Gudd comes to know of his ancestral history and culture through his Daadi. She believed that one should know about one’s ancestors. Saudagar was the great grandfather of Gudd. Her was in Army. Haro tells him how some relatives cheated Saudagar and usurped the land given to him

by a British officer. Madhopuri belongs to Madhopur village in the district of Jalandhar, Punjab. In accordance with the caste system in India, their mohalla was also on the western side of Madhopur village. Their house was built on a plot of about hundred square yards. (Madhopuri 77). It was in this house that Daadi gave birth to seven children. Gudd's father was the youngest of all and Daadi lived with them.

Daadi lived in a small room where animals were also tied. Gudd and his cousin Maddi "Would loll round on the clothes of Daadi's cot" and have their meals in her room" (Madhopuri 79). Gudd often played with her and teased her. In a house marked by extreme poverty where even humans and animals share a room, Daadi's cot becomes the only safe, cozy space. Daadi always kept pieces of jaggery in her pocket. Gudd often sat by her side stealthily took some pieces. Despite having nothing, she always keeps something sweet for her grandchildren. Thus, she serves as the matriarchal anchor in a patriarchal, caste-oppressive world because she provides both emotional security and material sweetness. It shows that the grandparent-grandchild relation in Dalit life is not leisurely play as in upper-caste families, but a shared survival in scarcity.

The text establishes grandmother-grandson relationship as a site of cultural transmission and knowledge production. Gudd came to know of his social and cultural background from Daadi who used to narrate events and episodes from the past which Gudd stored in his mind. They were very poor and deprived. As Daadi explained:

Where did we get grain those days? We had to go to the zamindars, cut their millet crop. Then the grain was dried, pounded, and ground. Only then could we get grain. But we ate well, because of the meat. Many animals died during those winters and we would dry the meat. (Madhopuri 126).

This reveals the feudal economic structure and the dependency of Dalits on zamindars. Daadi tells him that they ate meat in the past. It shows that eating dead animals was not a choice but survival strategy in extreme deprivation. Gudd's heart "would sink at this description of eating of flesh of dead animals at the cost of one's health" (Madhopuri 126). It shows a generational shift. The grandson, with a new Ambedkarite consciousness, feels shame and pain about the practice his grandmother normalised as survival. Gudd observed that Daadi often visited the Jats' houses to collect leftovers of a wedding or an engagement or a bhog ceremony. She brought pieces of rotis in her dupatta and spread them out to dry. These dried rotis were then soaked in jaggery and water and they ate them. This is not begging but resilience management. The Grandmother converts humiliation into a survival technique. For Gudd, Daadi becomes a symbol of both suffering and incredible boldness.

In Dalit autobiographies, the transmission of ancestral work does not come from the father but often from grandmother. In this autobiography, Daadi is not just a loving figure but an agent of socialisation. She introduces Gudd to the harsh realities of his caste-assigned labour -- disposing of dead birds. It was from his Daadi that Gudd learnt his ancestral work. This shows that in Dalit households, women are the primary bearers and transmitters of both cultural knowledge and caste based occupational compulsion. Whenever a bird was ill and died, narrator's family was summoned to bring it away. At times, Gudd also accompanied Daadi to bring the bird. Once Daadi asked Gudd to cut up the chicken. But when he failed to do despite three attempts, Daadi shouted at him, "Stupid fool! You are grown up, but still cannot even..." (Madhopuri 25). Daadi's scolding is not an act of cruelty but a pedagogy of survival. She knows that without learning this work, Gudd cannot survive in a caste society that has already fixed his identity her harshness is a product of her own lived experience of humiliation. She wants to harden him for the world outside. Gudd took the scythe and severed the neck of the chicken from its body. He felt very sad and uneasy that evening and could not sleep at night. This marks his first traumatic encounter with his Dalit identity. The child Gudd is forced to perform an act that his conscience resists. His sleeplessness symbolises the loss of his childhood innocence and the painful internalisation of his stigmatised social and cultural background. This episode establishes the paradox of the grand relation in the text. The grandmother is simultaneously the source of ultimate affection and the one who introduces him to the degrading caste reality. This dual role makes the grandmother-grandson bond healthy yet complex, loving yet burdened by caste.

In this text, Daadi is represented as a rationalist woman. She was not a religious minded woman. She did not believe in religious traditions and idol worship. She never visited the Gurdwara on Sangrand or to listen to any katha or kirtan. She never lit a lamp at the maza of a pir or any diyas on Diwali. She believed in action and leading a virtuous life. As she says, "Man should depend only on his own earnings, not criticize others, and lead a good and honest life. Then he need not run after God!" (Madhopuri 128). She was of generous heart. She always fed the sparrows by throwing crumbs of roti at them as she sat eating. She always fed stray dogs. Thus, she rejects religious rituals and practices humanist rituals. She teaches Gudd that true religion is not in Gurdwara or Mandir but in honest labour and compassion for living beings.

Daadi had great authority and respect not only in her own family but in Jat community also. No one dared to speak anything before her. Daadi was given all things like cane juice, gur, dahi, vegetables, butter and cane. She shared these things with Gudd and other grandchildren. She also shared gur and kheer and other delicacies which many families including some Jat families sent her on the day after Lohri. Gudd learnt courage and self-respect from his grandmother who never stooped before Jats. The narrator's grandmother was bold and fearless. Like other people of her community, she was not afraid of the upper caste Jat. Her authority was unchallenged. She had great effect of her commanding presence and influence. If a Jat woman passed near her without wishing her, she would say loudly, "Wonder which arrogant bitch just passed by!" (Madhopuri 128). This is the sign of linguistic resistance. One day, a Jat woman, Tai Taro and chachi Chhinini were on the swing on the peepal tree. Daadi shouted "Is this the only work left for these wanton women?" (129). When Daadi moved towards them, they slipped away from there.

Tai Taro was very friendly with Daadi and always sent her the special food she cooked at home. Many Jat families often came to Daadi asking for her advice about weddings and other such celebrations. Gudd learnt courage and self-respect from his

grandmother who never stooped before Jats. Whenever the upper caste Jat people visited Chamarli, the chamars would make them on the cot and they themselves sit on the ground. This was the accepted mode of behaviour to show respect to upper caste people. But Daadi would never stand in their presence even when the old men of Jat community came to see her. Daadi is the matriarchal anchor because in a world dominated by Jat patriarchy, she alone anchors Dalit dignity through her speech, body and presence.

Conclusion

Thus, Balbir Madhopuri's autobiography *Changiya Rukh* reflects a very strong and intimate bond between the child Gudd and grandmother whom he deeply respects. The vivid and affectionate description that the author provides of his grandmother reveals the intensity of his love and attachment with his grandmother. It shows how child is more attached and influenced by his grandmother than even his own parents. Hence the grand relation portrayed in the autobiography appears to be healthy, congenial and motivating for the grandchildren. The authors' grandmother emerges to be a role model for him. Her qualities of boldness, fearlessness and candidness influence the author to such an extent that he is able to challenge the stereotype position of Dalits and emerges as a champion of the cause of Dalits. In conclusion, this study reveals that this grandmother-grandson bond transcends biological ties and functions as a site of survival, resistance, and identity formation. Like a spring that "had been an oasis in the barren desert of our lives" (Madhopuri 162), the grandmother becomes the emotional and cultural anchor for the Dalit child.

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