CHAPTER – 4

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SUBJUGATION

The feeling of otherness arises when one is compelled to leave one’s own beings and belongings and live in an alien land. The crisis comes when one is extirpated or deracinated and pushed to struggle in a foreign country despite his/her choice. Family, ancestry, traditions and culture are left behind and one is forced to adopt and adapt to a new life-style that has no “life” in it and it denies looking back. In such testing time their strength is turned into weakness, their skills into stillness. Even more challenging is the situation which segregates one another in one’s homeland only. It creates a divide between the high and low of the same race or class. Denying them a free space for community participation, taking lead in important occasions, the system puts them into margins. In this sense the process of subjugation is as much political as it is psychological. However, the solution is found in awakening to the suppressed self, in opposing the suppression and realization of true oneness by being one in spirit. This chapter enquires the political and economic subjugation of the African-Americans and the Dalits in their respective historical-political scenario.

Toni Morrison’s fifth novel Beloved (1987) for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction is set in 1873, appalling period just after the American Civil War (1861-65). It is based on a real story of an African-American slave named Margaret Garner who escaped slavery in 1856 in Kentucky by fleeing to Ohio, a free state. She killed her children rather than letting them into the evils of slavery. The novel is an outcome of one of her Random House Projects The Black Book (1974) a ‘scrapbook’ containing details from newspaper cuttings, songs, photographs and other memorabilia that covered three hundred years’ history of anonymous Black folks in America. Morrison became aware of the story of Margaret Garner when she was gathering materials for The Black Book. It is dedicated to ‘Sixty Million and More’ Africans who died in the Middle Passage on the slave ships to America. Although the Civil War ended slavery, it did not bring equality. The story of Beloved recollects a painful tale of slavery. But it certainly does not give a call for the abolition of
slavery. As Dr. Vishnukant notes in his introduction to *The Fiction of Toni Morrison: A Critical Study*:

> Although the novel is set in the 19th century, it has numerous implications for both black and white cultural identity in the 20th century. These includes the need for contemporary America to reclaim the full narrative of slavery, especially the suffering of black women, the need for white America to understand how slavery was justified as an intellectual and scientific project which failed to recognize the human cost; and the need for white culture to realize that the brutality and racialism of slavery has extended far beyond the emancipation of slaves in the 19th century into the late 20th century. (Vishnukant: 12)

*Beloved* is a text that includes the elements of slave narrative and history. It reminds one of Middle Passage and Atlantic Slave Trade which forcefully brought the Africans to America as slaves. At one place it arouses tension, at other place generates feeling of love as to what it is to be loved or say, be a Beloved. However, Morrison’s line of dedication of the novel reveals that it is more pertaining to slavery. It may also be read as how people behave when they are given absolute power. Such power treats human beings as animals or as commodities. Bernard W. Bell notes in his article “Beloved: A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past”:

> *Beloved* is a womanist neo-slave narrative of double consciousness, a postmodern romance that speaks in many compelling voices and on several time levels of the historical rape of black American women and of the resilient spirit of blacks in surviving as a people. (Bloom: 59-60)

It is mainly a tale of a black female slave journeying from bondage to liberation. The central character Sethe realises her sub-human status on the Sweet Home Plantation and as a result begins her search for meaning and wholeness. The cruelty, violence and degradation that a female slave, Sethe undergoes, leads her to understand her situation and awakens her from deep slumber. However her quest for freedom leads her to find escape in death. A painful saga of exploitation, frequent rapes, underground imprisonment, separated families, failed and successful escapes,
murder, haunting past, struggle for self-love and self-respect arouses pity in readers. All the characters in the novel live subordinated life; women characters, particularly, are more subjugated. The question then is how a subaltern is to find meaning of his/her life – forced enslavement, hard toil, worst exploitation, dreadful life, all ultimately ending in escape to death. Men, women and children are the victims of devastating impact of slavery. The consequence of physical and economic exploitation is psychological breakdown of the characters. In the latter half of the 19th c. life was still dreadful for Black people whether slave or freed. The novel examines the impact of slavery on a group of Black people.

The novel begins almost twenty years after the events are supposed to have occurred. It depicts two different sides of slavery: one, where the master is merciful enough in his treatment to slaves; and two, the brutal side of the masters where human beings are merely things to be used. The slaves enjoy relatively relaxed and stable life when their master Mr. Garner is alive. He treats them as human beings. He allows them to hunt, use guns, choose their partners rather than breed from them for offspring. As recorded by Baby Suggs:

Mrs. Garner hummed when she worked; Mr. Garner acted like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with… What she did was stand beside the humming Lillian Garner while the two of them cooked, preserved, washed, ironed, made candle, clothes, soap and cider; fed chickens, pigs, dogs and geese; milked cows, churned butter, rendered fat, laid fires… And nobody knocked her down. (139-40)

Unfortunately, he dies unexpectedly and his brother-in-law, called schoolteacher takes the charge. Schoolteacher is an absolute contrast to Mr. Garner. He treats the slaves as animals. They have tough times under him.

The protagonist of the novel Sethe resembles Margaret Garner whose story, as noted earlier, is the source of the novel. Sethe is a slave on a farm in Kentucky called Sweet Home along with three half-brothers – Paul A, Paul D and Paul F; two other men – Sixo and Halle. Halle becomes Sethe’s husband. The name of the farm – Sweet Home is an absolute contrast as it is neither ‘sweet’ nor ‘home’. Her present is still bleak as was her past. She is neither able to live it nor leave it. Choosing death than domestication and dreadfulness itself speaks of how the subalterns are erased by
the ruling class. Sethe is also a child of a slave mother. Recollecting her past memories, she says that as her mother had to be on the farm and undertake laborious work, she was brought up by a surrogate mother called Nan. Her mother nursed her hardly for two-three weeks. In answer to Beloved’s question whether Sethe’s mother ever combed her hair, Sethe answers:

My woman? You mean my mother? If she did, I don’t remember. I didn’t see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that’s the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was. So to answer you, no. (60)

This speaks of the fragmented life slaves used to live. As Sethe was separated from her mother, Beloved is also separated from her mother, Sethe. Nan tells her the account of their voyage from Africa to America. During the voyage both of them were raped many times by the crew-members. Sethe’s mother bore children due to that but she threw those ‘unwanted’ and ‘unnamed’ children into the sea. This is an evidence of the blacks made choiceless even in terms of physical gratification. The blacks are not supposed to have feelings. They are born to submit themselves to the whites. The physical manifestation of Beloved’s spirit also adds to this awful account. In her monologue in part two of the novel she recollects the story of the slaves boarded for America. Horrified, she calls the whites as ‘men without skin’ and that they were given sweet rocks to suck in their meals; if they want to drink more water, they will have to do with their tears; there were chains around people’s necks. Males and females were kept separate on the ship. Their condition was cramped.

Sethe has forgotten everything of the pre-Sweet Home days, even the language in which she was told by Nan. That was the language of her mother. Forgetting the mother-tongue is an oblique indication of rootlessness. Loss of language is loss of past. Morrison notes:

Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. the
same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back.

(62)

Morrison beautifully addresses this issue in her Nobel lecture with a tale of a woman to whom a group of people come to meet with a bird in their hand. Morrison reads the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer bothered about how the language given to her at birth is withheld by men. When the visitors ask her whether the bird is living or dead she replies that if it is dead the custodians are responsible for corpse. With reference to the _Beloved_, custodians are the owners of the plantation who also own the slaves. The master confines them even in terms of articulating a language. One expresses one’s genuine feelings in mother-tongue. Forgetting language may be seen as being stopped from expressing oneself. Morrison further says:

She is convinced that when language dies, out of carelessness, disuse, indifference and absence of esteem, or killed by fiat, not only she herself, but all users and makers are accountable for its demise. In her country children have bitten their tongues off and use bullets instead to iterate the voice of speechlessness, of disabled and disabling language, of language adults have abandoned altogether as a device for grappling with meaning, providing guidance, or expressing love… The systematic looting of language can be recognized… for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. (nobelprize.org)

She says that to deny the language is to trivialize them – to deny them their history, their song, their literature, the very branch of knowledge. Nan and her account of the experiences of slavery on board and in farms reveals the same setback.

Physical and psychological oppression by the supremacists is such that it results into the African-Americans forgetting their history and culture. It weakens their consciousness and erases them as individual entities. Narrating her miserable past life to Denver and Beloved, Sethe says that once her mother took her behind the smokehouse and showed her a mark on her rib saying that she was the only who had got the mark, others being dead; and that if anything untoward happened to her and if Sethe could not identify her, she should see the mark on the rib. Sethe also had
carved tree on her back. Her master known as schoolteacher had done that carving of trunk, deep roots and branches. Perhaps the slaves were given such marks to identify them. As they did not have their own identity, not even their original names, these marks fixed their identity as slaves. It shows the distortion of their African identity. They are defined by the whites where they can be known by such marks only. Morrison writes, “…schoolteacher beat him [Sixo] anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined.” (190) The line defines the colonizing role of the masters and that of the servitude of the colonized. The slaves are restricted from any utterance. Where the mark is located suggests that she is owned by her master. The blacks, in this sense, did not have right on their physique. Denver rightly observes, “Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher.” (266)

Out of the three half-brothers, Paul D is the only survivor. In his unsuccessful attempt of escape and that of killing his new master – Brandywine, he is sold and sent to a jail in Alfred, Georgia. There he was kept in an underground imprisonment along with other slaves. He was one of the forty-six men who worked in a chain gang. They were treated like animals. They were kept in dark chambers made of wooden boxes. These boxes were set in a ditch. They were not allowed to come out even during heavy rain. As the mud roofs began to cave in, the men escaped by diving underneath the iron bars that formed one side of their boxes. In the morning each man was linked to the others by a length of chain. They worked together during the day. Physical torture and starvation had taken their power of speech away. They did not communicate with each other, at least not with words. Laura Gray observes in this regard:

The fact that they were all linked by the chain meant that each and every one was brought to salvation… The men learn alternative ways of speaking. They read each other’s eyes, speak to each other through songs and communicate via the chain itself, thus transforming what imprisons them into a vehicle for communication. (Gray: 28)

The white masters cross all boundaries in their barbaric treatment to their subordinates. Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law and sufferer at Sweet Home until her son Halle bought her freedom used to say, “Everything depends on knowing how much. Good is knowing when to stop.” (87) She further says that she had eight
children from six different fathers. She could not see her children grow. The height of cruelty is that her master sold the son that he had fathered. The one who suffers worst at Kentucky is Sethe. She is raped many times by the Whites on the farm. Once Halle witnesses her rape and beating by schoolteacher’s nephews. The sight reduces him to wreck. During her pregnancy schoolteacher’s nephews took her to the yard and sucked her milk. With their help the schoolteacher put them under some investigations and experiments. The freedom that was given by Garner is taken away by schoolteacher. He restricts their movement. To put it in Morrison’s words:

…schoolteacher didn’t take advice from Negroes…. He complained they ate too much, rested too much, talked too much, which was certainly true compared to him, because schoolteacher ate little, spoke less and rested not at all… He was as hard on his pupils as he was on them. (220)

It should be noted here that there is no specific name given to the schoolteacher though he is a White master. He is known as schoolteacher because he (re)educates his slaves and records their every detail in his notebook. Sethe says that every night he used to write a “book about us” (37) with the ink for writing made by her. It means that the source for writing, be it subject-matter or an object in the form of ink, is provided by the slaves only. Ironically, the content produced misrepresents slaves, analyzing their nature and characteristics so as to suit the temperament of their masters.

As the condition of their life deteriorates, the slaves plan to escape. Only Paul D and Sethe succeed in running away. The other Pauls are killed. As the White men fail to burn Sixo alive, they shoot him dead. The trauma that these characters undergo is so severe that Denver becomes deaf when her classmates ask her if her mother killed her baby-sister. As a result, she prefers to be aloof from the society cut off from all sounds for two years. When Sethe goes to Clearing after the death of Baby Suggs, Morrison tells us that she goes to “listen to spaces”. (89) The novel is full of such gaps or silences. We do not know what happened to Halle. We are supposed to believe that he is also dead. The novelist does not say why Sethe’s mother was hanged or even where Beloved suddenly disappears towards the end. She is in fact forgotten when the novel ends. This act of not knowing is due to slavery. The impact of slavery is seen in breaking of the families or losses and silences. The
slaves, being shifted from one place to another end in destroying and forgetting family-tie or its memories. Thereby, they are uprooted from their actual self; they are left without any trace of their past life. Gang Xu cites opinion of Jill Matus in his paper “The New History” in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and the Construction of the Black’s Subjectivity”. In his view Matus approaches Beloved as “a form of cultural memory concerned with obscured or erased history.” (www.ccsenet.org) Although dysfunctional, the families in Morrison are headed by women and not males. Like other novels of Morrison, in Beloved also Halle, the father is missing; Sethe’s two sons run away never to return. She constantly plays with variants of nuclear structure while alluding to the existence of something much larger and more powerful.

Apart from the characters in bondage and those who bind them, there are also characters like Stamp Paid and Ella who work for the benefit of the blacks. They are the two blacks who help the refugees to reach at a safe place. But they do not claim anything for their merciful deed. To quote Laura Gray, “This refusal to privilege pays homage to the African concept of neighborhood; kinship and responsibilities override a narrow family structure.” (Gray: 79) It is exactly this system of family life that black people were deprived of due to slavery. Morrison revises the definition of family. Until Paul meets Sethe, he lives life sans aunts, cousins, children. As he was denied the roots of the family, he envies extended family and feels dispossessed. He starts showing affection on inanimate objects. The feel of community that he experiences at Sweet Home is also destroyed with the arrival of the schoolteacher. Sethe enjoys only twenty-eight days of stolen freedom and healing after her escape. But the concept of shared responsibility prompts Stamp Paid to help runaways in their struggle for survival by helping them cross the river and bring messages and food. His anger is justifiable when he discovers that Paul D had slept in the church cellar at night which shows marginality within the community. Stamp is shocked to learn that the power of the community to nurture and sustain its members can also destroy. Despite all these, it is Sethe and Paul D that give the feeling of rootedness to each other. He tells her about the danger that awaits the homeless black woman. He expresses his desire to father her child. He takes Sethe and Denver out of their isolation and into society when he takes them to carnival. That is, they move out of the painful chain of miseries as slaves and enter into the open world to breathe fresh air.
The colonizers also change the names of the colonized or address them by just letters. At Sweet Home Baby Suggs is called Jenny but she strongly refutes and calls herself by her husband’s name i.e. Suggs. Stamp Paid is also called Joshua but then to put in his own words, “I renamed myself.” (232) Self-baptism is a challenge to white power. It is an act of assertion of self-worth and thus an outright rejection of slavery. It should also be noted that his name alludes to the commercial exchange, the pricing of Paul D and other slaves which is an implicit meaning of the novel. The three half-brothers Paul A, Paul F, Paul D are named so by their owners for differentiation. The newspapers of the time also featured the items that interested the whites only. Black people rarely appeared in newspapers unless involved in some crime or atrocity. Hence when Sethe kills her infant daughter it becomes the news. While discussing with Stamp about Sethe’s such a ghastly act, Paul D, tired of the miseries of life, asks him, “How much is a nigger supposed to take?” (235) Perhaps this is the reason why he finds Sethe’s love for Beloved ‘too thick’ (164) or risky. He is well aware of the existence of the slaves that they do not have any right to love, to own something or to consider somebody as one’s own. Love is considered a “serious disability”. (256)

Main cause of hatred between the blacks and the whites is the colour difference. Dark skin is considered as a sign of inferiority and brings insults. Lady Jones, a teacher in a school is of mixed race. She has gray eyes, yellow woolly hair and is light-skinned. Morrison states, “Her light skin got her picked for a coloredgirls’ normal school in Pennsylvania and she paid it back by teaching the unpicked. The children who played in dirt until they were old enough for chores, these she taught.” (247) Lady Jones hates herself and her hair as much as she is hated by her own people. Her self-hatred refers to the problems having a white identity within the black community. Thus, the prejudice for colour is seen not just between the blacks and the whites but also within the blacks. The coloured population of Cincinnati had two graveyards and six churches but the rule made by the whites did not entertain them in any school or hospital. Hence they learned and died at home. Perhaps for this reason Baby Suggs is also not buried in the Clearing.

Although the novel is full of enmity towards the blacks by the whites, an instance of amity between the two races is also seen. Amy Denver, an eighteen-year old white girl helps Denver’s birth and Sethe’s survival. Her name is suggestive of
friendliness. She renames the marks on Sethe’s back as a tree, transforming her scars from their association of death and pain to a thing of growth and beauty. However, the fact cannot be discarded that towards the end of the novel neither Sethe nor Baby Suggs has any kind of feeling of love or respect for the whites. Baby Suggs is called ‘holy’. She avers:

...because slave life had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,” she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher… (87)

Unadorned, she becomes an important figure in her spectrum when she preaches about self-love to them. She means to say that unless and until they rise and resist, they are either to surrender before the power or get estranged from their community, lose their fellow-beings, jump off into the sea or murder a child – all these setbacks she herself has encountered. Therefore, she evokes the sense of self among the blacks. She says:

...we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it… Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty… You got to love it. Flesh that needs to be loved… O my people,… they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck… and the beat and beating heart, love that too… love your heart. For this is the prize. (88-9)

While White masters looked upon slaves as commodity, Baby Suggs make them aware of their worth. She preaches them to love every part of their body which their masters utilized to serve in labour or otherwise. She helps her community to recover from the trauma of slavery by healing them. She generates the feeling of self-esteem in black men, women and children. She tunes them to consider true values of their being. Thus, she takes them from hatred to healing, negation to creation, destruction to restoration. This is also the call that Spivak gives that it is only when the subalterns become aware of their own selves, can they resist. Denver is shown attending school which may be taken as a challenge to the schoolteacher’s brutal way of (re)educating his pupils as he himself used to say.
Schoolteacher comes to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home. Denver informs, “Like Sweet Home where time didn’t pass and where...the bad was waiting for her as well.” (244) His mentality is revealed when he refers to Sethe as an animal gone wild. He chastises his nephew telling him to think, “what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education... you just can’t mishandle creatures and expect success.” (149-50) It was a cannibal life they were living. It is at this point that Sethe decides to give mercy killing to one of her children. Rather than allow them to submit to the white devils and let them humiliate, violate and abuse sexually, she strangles the infant Beloved. She prefers death to enslavement for her daughter and kills her. Sethe loves her children so much that she thinks that rather than Whites enslave them and ill treat them, she would kill them herself because she would commit the act at least with tenderness. It is not an immature act on her part but rather sensible. Madhumalti Adhikari says in this regard, “Sethe’s act is an example of resistance to slavery and thus is not a senseless crime but a necessity born out of serious contemplation.” (Adhikari: 149) She is not able to slay Denver as she is prevented from smashing her head against the wall. She also intends to commit suicide but succeeds in killing one child only. Her sons Howard and Buglar survive and run away. The pangs of slavery lead Sethe to give freedom to her children in terms of killing of Beloved. She tells us, “I couldn’t let all that go back and I couldn’t let her nor any of ’em live under Schoolteacher... I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.” (163-64) She was convinced that slavery will not give her children a better life. The solution, then, was death. In the epilogue Beloved is described as, “Although she has claim, she is not claimed.” (274) When Paul D tells Sethe about her sinful act she justifies it by saying that as she herself had undergone the dreadful experience, she wanted to keep her children away from what she knows is terrible. Schoolteacher, slave-catchers and sheriff come to claim their property. Schoolteacher is a pragmatic person. He thinks in terms of gain or productivity. For Sethe, her “price” is much higher than other slaves because she can reproduce without cost. Sethe is imprisoned with Denver. But due to Bodwins and other community people’s fight for the abolition of slavery, Sethe is saved from being hanged.

The series of shocks ultimately lead the blacks to self-realisation and self-awakening. Towards the end when a white man, Mr. Bodwin comes to pick Denver for her night-work Sethe runs to protect her. It is ironical that the one who helped
Baby Suggs and her two generations is now taking toll of the third one. It shows that deep inside, “gentlemanly” whites are infected with racial pride. Their liberal attitude is veiled by racial discrimination.

It would not be incongruous to say that Morrison projects Beloved as an embodiment of true feminine spirit, a phoenix that rises from the ashes. There is a tug of love between Sethe and Beloved – Beloved making her realise her cruel deed and pay for it and Sethe trying to compensate the reason of her misdeed. Her protective act turns out to be destructive act. She ardently wishes to convey to Beloved, “That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up.” (251) Her urge is that the whites might pollute her but certainly not the most beautiful part of her i.e. her child. She would not allow her daughters to work in the slaughterhouse yard. Completely haunted by the resurrection of Beloved, Sethe feels utterly weak and helpless. The society does not regard her act as mature. Because of her merciless act of killing her daughter, she is separated and alienated from all. Her community does not approve her act. She has become so dry that nothing affects her anymore. At this juncture Denver shoulders the responsibility of the household and earnings for the family. Breaking the doors of confinement in which they all were living since long, no matter whether it was a self-imposed confinement or that from outside, Denver goes out in the world, knocks the door to get job and re-establishes with her community. She successfully comes out of the narrowly defined, self-destructive family circle. Born on the banks of the river Ohio that divides the ‘free’ land and the land of the slaves, Denver in true sense marks a shift from being a slave to being free.

The novel ends with a sudden disappearance of Beloved from the house 124. She is forgotten like a bad dream. Morrison states in the epilogue, “Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?” (274) Her footprints are seen for some time after her departure. Gradually, even a trace is gone. Recollecting her upbringing during the times of slavery, Morrison herself says in her interview with Susanna Rustin in The Guardian, “…the pressure was not to remember it, but to get over it. So when I was writing Beloved, part of the architecture was the act of forgetting.” Gang Xu also says in this regard:
In *Beloved*, the memories of the past as slaves are so miserable that no one wants to re-experience it. Even re-imagining it in the mind will cause pain… Every protagonist, not just Sethe, prefers to forget it forever rather than to reveal it before others. They exist almost as dream walkers as they remain determined to keep the past concealed. Morrison demonstrates the process of discovering and facing the past and combining the past with the present. Beloved and Sethe are portrayed as embodiments of the past to rememorise colonial past, which brings about the return of history. (www.ccsenet.org)

When Paul D asks Sethe about her plan she says that while she has no room for imagination, forget the plan. Lack of planning indicates lack of future. Racial bias and atrocity against blacks have affected their psyche to the extent that they are not able to think about their life, their future. But Paul D is still hopeful. Reversing the accepted state and encouraging Sethe he declares, “Sethe, me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.” (273) He heads for positive future.

Thus, the novel gives a voice to the curse of slavery that pained and muted many. The slaves in history are disremembered i.e. they are forgotten in body and psyche. Absolutely disintegrated, they are left to suffer or sacrifice. Primal scene in the novel of the murder of the child stands as a strong exposition of the bane of slavery suggesting putting a ban on it. It seems as if the source of the African-American identity is derived from the oppression by the white masters. They can discover their true self only when they revolt or resist. Dr. Rashmi Gupta rightly says about Morrison’s works:

Her novels are critiques of being and as such suggest strategies for survival in a world where the individual confronts tangible, immediate threats as well as impersonal and abstract hazards.

Through her novels, Toni Morrison presents the non-linear African-American socio-historical reality. Her novels show the victimization of black people within the context of a racist social order. (www.researchscholar.co.in)
To study Joseph Macwan’s *Angaliyat* (1986), conferred the Sahitya Akademi award in 1988, is the first novel in Gujarati written by a Dalit about the Vankars, a weaving caste, many of whom converted to Christianity like Macwan himself to escape oppression by the upper caste. *Angaliyat* proves to be the first authentic voice of the Dalits in Gujarat. It is rightly called “a corner-stone of Gujarati literature” as noted by Hiral Macwan and also recorded in indiaclub.com. (Macwan: 5) It is set in rural Gujarat of the 1930s and draws attention to its own aesthetics and political ideology. The word ‘Angaliyat’ (step-child) likens the Dalit community to the stepchild, condemned to remain on the periphery of the stepfather’s family, as it holds its mother’s finger (*angali*) while she enters the new home. Similarly, the Dalit community is also regarded as an outsider in the mainstream society. The novel covers the time period of pre- and post-independence India. Set in Charotar of pre-independence time, it describes the political scenario before Swaraj. It is a story about the two communities – Patel and Vankar, Patels being the dominating caste. The *Angaliyat* works on four layers. Shanta Gokhale records in her literary review of the book in *The Hindu*:

It is a gripping tale of love, heroism, humiliation, revenge and death. It is a vividly coloured picture of the lives of two neighbouring villages in the Charotar district of central Gujarat. It is a document of the politics of the pre- and post-Independence years, as seen from the perspective of the downtrodden; and finally, it is an account of the struggle of one Dalit community against its upper-caste oppressors, spurred on by two opposing ideologies, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite. (Gokhale. *The Hindu*)

The novel is significant from multiple points of view. It looks at the history from below. The community of weavers, a Scheduled Caste in Gujarat is oppressed by the more powerful upper castes, the Patels. They suffer from external and internal forms of subjugation. Highlighting caste distinctions and bitterness between the two communities, it talks about how the dominating power structure exploits the subordinated. The narrow-minded so-called high caste weighs everything in terms of benefit. The Patels are not happy with the British rule because it settles everything just. The British rule does not entertain the dominance of the Patels hence appoints a
representative of Thakors as village-head. The Patels are eagerly awaiting Swaraj so that they can hold the seats of power.

The story moves in three villages – Shilapar, Ratnapar and Keradiya and showcases the exploitation of the Vankars by the Patel community on various planes – social, economic and political. The Vankars are primarily engaged in weaving and Thakors of the village work as farmers under the Patels. Although the population of the Patel community is much lesser than that of Thakors, the former rules over the latter. Patels also take the disadvantage of Thakors working under them. They used to pay fewer wages for their labour. The labourers could not utter a word otherwise the punishment was harsh. Despite working hard and giving full amount of grains to their masters, they were not duly paid. However, the same Patels used to help monetarily in the fight of the Congress and they had also taken the lead in salt march.

The story begins with Teeho and Valji, the two strongest characters among many others going for an auction in a nearby village. On their way, they meet a Thakor who tells them about the mistreatments by the Patels and then asks them to unburden themselves by putting their bundles in his cart. He tells Teeho and Valji to walk behind. Irony here is that in a caste-ridden society where a touch of a low caste person spoils the religion of a high caste or it is considered a bad luck, the latter does not mind buying goods produced by them or keeping them in his cart. Macwan observes, “That was a hard luck. A cart can be loaded with goods, but the manufacturer of the goods cannot be accommodated in the cart; or else it is called untouchability. People talk as if their hearts are one, but they can’t be one in body.” [karamni... to abhadai javay.] (Macwan: 11)

They are also deprived of basic amenities and not given any help in time of crisis. Remembering a critical time of flood, Teeho tells Valji that flood had taken a heavy toll of their entire locality. At that time upper caste people did not provide medicines even. Thakor Ranchhod Delavala used to sell grains, medicines and clothes to others. But when the Vankars went to request them for the same, they were not just denied rather told to clean the village first. They had to live in mud for a fortnight, pull out dead animals and eat the remains. The tin-sheets brought for the Vankar’s locality were in fact used by the Thakors. The status of the Vankar community was similar to street-sweepers. They had to live quite an insulting and abusive life. Life for them was full of hardships. Valji believed, “To live where one
is born and to live is to suffer, either more or less, also not to utter a word while suffering and yet live in the village.” [jya janmya... gamvat rakhvani.] (12)

While on business Teeho observes an upper-caste men teasing Methi, a Vankar girl. The Patel boy Nanji notices Methi approaching with a pot of water on her head. He aims a stone at the pot, drenching her completely. Infuriated, Teeho rushes to defend her. Teeho challenges and fights with them. Badly injured, one of the boys addresses Teeho with the most offensive Charotari term dhedh (untouchable) and pargami (outsider) and wants to register a police complain against him. In the challenges and counter-challenges that follow, Teeho humiliates the man so thoroughly that he swears revenge. Teeho also does not succumb to him. He responds that he himself will complain as he trusts the British justice. He thinks that British reign is better than that of high caste. For Swaraj will bring more discrimination between the two castes. Surprisingly, the wronged Vankars see the British in India as a boon. They find them impartial, free from the prejudice of casteism and evils of corruption. Even more astonishing is the fact that despite the presence of some Gandhian elders in the Vankar community, they are afraid of Ramrajya that the Congress-led independent India will bring. For it will elevate higher caste to the national office and announce further repression for them. The evidences are seen later in the novel when the upper caste people pressurize the Vankars by intimidating them to live under their feet after Swaraj. Teeho worries, “Swaraj is to come and the condition of sisters and daughters is pitiable! Don’t you have any regard for our women?” [swaraj aavvani... hasab j nai?] (20) The worst of all is that his community people see Teeho wounded but nobody bothers to ask about his wellbeing. On the contrary they leave from there ignoring the mishap. Again, Teeho feels sad for his brothers. The incidence provides a scope to peep into their minds. It shows indifference and lack of unity in the community. Struck by constant fear of the upper caste, they are not able to protect a person of their own community. Master-servant hierarchy has compelled them to remain silent on such conflicting situations. What pains Teeho is that although he saved a daughter of his own caste, nobody comes out of the house to appreciate him. When he calls a few men of the locality, their daughters or wives answer that they are not at home. Macwan comments, “Nobody wanted to come in Patidar’s eye... Nobody could think of going against them, and how can they? Patels had money. They had influences. Police was
in their hand.” [koine patidarna… emna hathma hati.] (21) It is a typical example of how power corrupts. How can the browbeaten raise an eyebrow even if the worst happens? For their livelihood they were dependent on them. It also shows how the Dalits have accepted their identity as lower self imposed upon them. They are conditioned by the upper caste and they live accordingly. They have accepted their lower status as their fate. They believed that it is not good to live in water and keep enmity with crocodile. But Teeho indefatigably says, “To hell with water and crocodiles... people like us either become extinct or we suck up all their water itself... the British sun is still warm. Once Independence arrives, our days will be numbered.” [magar hoy… varoy na’i re!] (23) Hiral Macwan rightly observes:

Angaliyat is a saga which elaborates two opposite situations: the first one, in which most of the dalit community members are ready to accept the otherness in their own country and the second one, in which they wake up to protest, to challenge this unjustified otherness. (www.ijmms.in)

Fire that burns in Teeho results into taking radical steps for his community. Critics have observed the influence of Gandhian and Ambedkarite ideologies on the characters of Angaliyat. There are some in Vankar community who passively give in to the customs set by the Patels, silently follow the upper caste; even the upper caste assures only in words to help them but hardly take concrete steps in their favour. There are also people like Teeho, Valji, Methi and others who take a vow not to succumb to the injustices of the upper caste. Dr. Ratilal Rohit writes in Pravartan that people like Thakor Delavala take the lead in Congress and promise to remove untouchability as Gandhi had promised. On the other hand there are characters like Teeho, Bhavanbhagat, etc. who take action. It reminds one of Indian history when Gandhi denied a separate electorate for Dalits considering them a part of the Hindus only. It was Ambedkar who opposed Gandhi’s idea admitting that not giving a special requisition to Dalits will keep them in margin only. It is known that it was Ambedkar who first fought for the rights of the Dalits to vote as against Gandhi’s sympathetic approach to Dalits. Keeping the history in mind, in the novel the characters like Teeho, Valji and others represent Ambedkarite ideology. Dr. Kanti Malastar in Dalit: Sandarbhthi Vyanjana and Harish Mangalam in Gujarati Dalit Navalkatha: Udbhav ane Vikas affirm this view. To quote Mangalam, “The
resistance depicted here inspired by Ambedkar for not to submit to injustice and rather struggle is apt.” [anyay same... yathayogya chhe.] (Mangalam: 6)

A duel takes place between Teeho and the Patels as they couldn’t tolerate the insult done by a downtrodden. Prior also such duels had taken place but this time it affects only Teeho. This speaks of his concern for his community people and also of his bravery. Later they harm the fields and other properties of the Vankars. They set their fields to fire. They ask the village-head to banish Teeho from his caste. When the village-head Dharamshi Thakor denies, they say, “You’re forgetting Thakor. You’re on the position of power till the British are there. Once Swaraj comes you have to oblige us.” [tame bhulo... na bhulta.] (38)

The course of the action moves in a way that sometimes people use opportunity to serve their own interest and sometimes loyalties towards village and pargana take precedence over caste loyalties, and this becomes a hurdle in the way of their marriage. Methi was married in her childhood to Chunthiyo, a drunkard and thief in Keradiya village. As she grows up, she develops feelings for Teeho particularly because he protected her from the harassment of the Patel boys. Taking the love relationship between Teeho and Methi as a fine opportunity and not satisfied with the damage done to the farms, the nephew and son of Meghji Patel, Manji and Nanji respectively, find about Methi’s husband and plan to take her to her home. Thus, to create a distance between Teeho and Methi. They visit Chunthiyo’s house to know more about the matter. This shows that when it comes to fulfill selfish motives, they are not affected by caste distinctions. They are not spoilt when they enter Chunthiyo’s house as a part of their political game. It is only when something does not take place in their favour or interest they try to butcher the ‘other’. Teeho and Valji think that it is because they tolerate that the high caste people rule over them. They consider themselves real men – if a thorn pierces into their leg, they would remove it and move ahead. Metaphorically, it means that they would not be affected by any pain. They can fight strongly despite adversities. However they need ten more Teeho to fight the evil. They need to demonstrate their collective strength to the oppressors. When Teeho, Valji, Mukhi and Methi file complain against the upper caste, the Patels try to take Methi in confidence by offering her money. But she rejects strongly. A Gandhian leader from the Congress party comes to give judgment and asks the Patel residents of Shilapar village to pay the damage charges to the
afflicted. This is for the first time in the history of the Patidars that they had to bow down to the Dalits.

When Bhavankaka, a saintly figure in Vankar community convinces Methi’s father and brother for her marriage with Teeho, they deny. Bhavankaka asks him to be practical and cancel Methi’s child-marriage. Moti says, “That can work in your Charotar. We are still backward.” [e tamara... pacchalmatiya ra’ya chhie!] (62) Those belonging to lower strata of society have no option but to adhere to societal norms and customs. They are not independent in their decision-making. Helpless, Bhavankaka asks God at which moment of time He created them that nothing goes right with them.

Socially also to protect their daughters from the abuse of the high caste, parents used to arrange their marriages early. The widows of the Vankar community marry their brother-in-law in defiance of the upper-caste norms and also for their protection from the sarcasm of the community folk. This is the reason that Kanku, Valji’s wife marries his younger brother Danji after his death. If a widow has a child, the child would be called ‘Angaliyat’ (the step-child or the child who comes holding mother’s finger). It used to be considered a derogatory status for the child. In the novel Methi’s son Goka is addressed as ‘Angaliyat’. The word ‘Angaliyat’ metaphorically signifies the social position of the Vankars, a Dalit community. “The stepchild who follows the mother to a new home holding her finger or angali, remains on the periphery of the stepfather’s family. Angaliyat signifies the secondary, the peripheral, never accepted by the core family or society”, as recorded in indiaclub.com. It justifies why Goka, Methi’s son was also called Angaliyat and is considered an outsider by Monghi, Teeho’s wife and her children.

Ranchhod Delawala of Teeha’s village is the key manipulator in the revenge drama. A ‘clever’ Congressman who later becomes a Minister powerfully influences the course of events. It is due to the conspiracy of Ranchhod Delavala, Manji, Nanji and others that Methi could not unite with Teeho. Lack of unity and self-recognition in Dalits becomes the strength for Delavala. He says to his nephew, “…they are not able to unite for their own benefit… The day they become aware, the sun will set on us.” [ek thaine... aathami javana.] (115)

Master tries to raise the consciousness of the Dalits to fight for their cause but fails. The way Valji helps Teeho in arranging his marriage with Methi and his
sacrifice for the same are deeply moving. It reflects his commitment to his brotherly-friend. Valji loses his life in saving Methi when she is kidnapped by the enemy caste. But those who walk on the path of Truth are always rewarded. They are caught by the police and beaten harshly in the presence of the Vankars. Valji’s wife Kanku honours him by calling him ‘joddha’ (warrior).

Mourning the death of Valji and determined to take revenge, their community makes an armed attack on Ratnapar village. The upper caste people get frightened. A strong revolt breaks out. In the political assembly held by the Thakors it was declared that because Delavala is supporting the Congress in the movement of Swaraj, he is being conspired against by the Vanakrs under the guidance of the British government. In the second speech it was said, “The untouchables are revolting guided by the priests.” [padariona... fatya chhe.] (115) To contextualize it, this was the time when conversion was prevalent in India. To escape from the tortures of the high caste the downtrodden used to convert to Christianity. Patidars resist by criticizing Gandhi that he unnecessarily gives importance to the untouchables. But in the assembly a Gandhian follower stands up and explains the real meaning of Swaraj; “We are trying to get Swaraj for all, not just for any particular community or to establish the Hindus… Swaraj in which the poor are struggling will have no meaning.” [aapne saune... artha j nahi.] (118) He also asks Delavala to prove him innocent.

The next day an assembly to mourn Valji’s death is arranged. His photo is kept beside Ambedkar’s to pay tribute. But community people remain unconcerned as on the same day Patidars have also called a congregation. They cannot resist their voice against them nor can they participate in their own gathering when something is arranged by the high caste. No matter what, the Patidars must be duly respected. Bhavankaka advises, “Learn to have courage like Valji in life. You tolerated the wrong a lot. Now learn to fight.” [jindagima...hama tha thata shikhajo.] (119)

There are other issues also that catch one’s attention. When Teeho is beaten to death by the Patidars not a single trust hospital or nurse is ready to treat him. They do not entertain the marginalized as much as they do the high caste. On the other hand, Ramlo, an oppressed comes to be known as Rambhai as soon as he becomes the driver of Delavala, an important figure in political party. That is to say, it is the
power that decides the name, designation and status of people in society. On the seat of power the distinctions between the class and caste disappear.

Delavala takes everyone on his side very judiciously. Declaring independence, he hoists the Indian flag. He promises to eradicate untouchability as proclaimed by Gandhi. Bhavankaka says that unless and until the Patels realise, there cannot be true Ramraj and that till then many Valji and Teeho will have to sacrifice their lives. To put it in his own words:

Don’t blame the Swaraj Master! Blame the human heart. Till Ram inhabits their human heart, Ramrajya will be a distant dream. And I feel the death of a single Valji or a single Teeha cannot bring that Rajya. Many more Valjis and Teehas will have to die like this. Our eyes will not open otherwise.” [savrajne dosh... aagha j re‘vana.] (263)

Bhavankaka talks about having the Light within. Not only the weak have to be strong but also the strong have to be more open-minded, large-hearted, welcoming and inclusive. They have to realise oneness in spirit, in its essence. His words suggest realising the Upanishadic ideal of Children of Immortality – amrutasya putraha.

Here Hiral Macwn’s reflection also draws one’s attention.

At the end of the novel, when Teeha dies, it is neither the end of a person nor of a protest but in fact it suggests a beginning of a new era. Valji’s and Teeha’s sacrifices give a new dynamism to the struggle for freedom and self-esteem among the Dalits. Teeha’s death motivates the other dalits to continue with the crusade. (www.ijmms.in)

Dr. Ratilal Rohit also shares the similar opinion that the sacrifice of Teeho and Valji is the gift of the Independence to the Dalits.

It is certainly not a surprise when Teeho’s son follows the footsteps of his father when he performs a symbolic gesture of entering into the mainstream. Towards the end When Delawala inaugurates the first school in Ratnapar village he announces that the one who pays a donation of over Rs. 5,000/- to the school will have his name inscribed on the marble plaque. Goka steps forward and offers Rs. 7,000/- “in the name of Teesabhai Gopalbhai Parmar” [Teesabhai Gopalbhai Parmarne name!] (270) Inscribing the name on the plaque suggests creating a space
in the elite class – the class that so far had pushed them into the margins, denied basic rights and had humiliated. Inscription is a sign of visibility – visibility in the sense of earning position, status, name and dignity. It is also the first instance in the entire region where a downtrodden comes forward to have his name written on a public front. Teeho proves to be a rational and revolutionary hero. Dalpat Chauhan believes, “The novel gives the first hero to the Dalits.” (Chauhan: 68) Truly, the characters considered inferior in rank attain height through their indefatigable spirit, courage, heroism, strong will, determination, values, conduct and behaviour. Rita Kothari believes, “In an interesting and paradoxical way, the assertion of a dalit identity takes place through physical valour in the men and through purity as far as the women are concerned. (Macwan: xxviii)

Published in 1987 as part of the wave of Dalit writing that stirred the Gujarati literary stage after Gujarat’s anti-reservation riots of 1981 and 1985, Angaliyat undoubtedly stands as the first Dalit novel of its kind. Joydeep Sarangi and Champa Ghosal maintain, “It s the first novel of the Gujarati literature delineating the struggle of dalit community against so-called ‘upper-castes’ inhumanity treatment to the dalits. The dalit characters are agitating for their identity and existence.” (Sarangi & Ghosal: 230) It recalls a culture that is vanished and pushed into oblivion. Rajesh Karankal and Ratilal Rohit also opine:

...the real milieu of the Dalit community, their problems, Dalit characters and their pain, their social, economic, cultural, religious and physical exploitation, untouchability, atrocity, blind belief and the sore voice of the Dalit are very skillfully reflected in the first and foremost renowned Dalit novelist Joseph Macwan’s great novel... Angaliyat. (Karankal & Rohit: 53)

Although it talks about the self-centered lower strata of society, it also highlights the inner richness of some people of the same caste. Their hatred and revolt against the Patidar is just. However Macwan does not write to re-establish their esteem or to eulogies the strength and inner values of the under-rated characters. But it is certainly an urge for equality. Bhagavatikumar Sharma praises Macwan in “Joseph Macwan: Gujarati Bhasha-sahityani Ek Dhanyata” that serves as an introduction to the novel, “He describes fire but doesn’t harm. He inspires to extinguish the fire.” [e aagne... prere chhe.] (16) It would not be inappropriate to say
that one is humbled after reading Angaliyat as one feels the experiences of the oppressed in pre-independence India. Although the major characters of the novel try to elevate themselves and their brethren, they are constantly defeated by the upper caste. But their success lies in resistance. Resistance also works on two spheres: one, against the landowning, aggressive and vicious Patidar and Thakor and the two, against greedy and manipulative Dalit caste leaders. The novel critiques internal system of colonization which is far more difficult to fight than the British colonization. It is noteworthy that as most of the subaltern critics opine that the subalterns are always represented by others or spoken for, in the present novel the subalterns speak for themselves. They are not represented in its traditional sense but re-presented in new spirit. They fight against all odds – societal, political, economical and cultural yet remain firm, determined, brave, generous and pure. The characters like Valji, Teeharam, Methi, Bhavankaka live in one’s memory forever through their strife, fears, fights, ethos, aspirations and piety. “Angaliyat tells the story of oppression and exclusion by transforming the vanquished into the victor, by turning the periphery into the core”, notes indiaclub.com. In Macwan death is attained with honour. Death is not an escape from a miserable life as it is in Morrison. However as in Morrison’s Beloved Denver rises, breaks the doors to pave her way, in Macwan’s Angaliyat also Teeho, Valji, Kanku and Methi stand up for the cause paving their way to creating space and establishing in it.
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