

Dare to Read: A Dalit Reads in Daya Pawar's *Baluta*

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Abstract

For a Dalit doing something, unless ordered to do so, is always an offence in upper caste society. In this situation Daya Pawar's *Baluta* presents a world where a Dalit uses his reading and reason to oppose social injunctions on Dalits. This article puts under probe a Dalit's venture into the world of reading to analyse critically the social norms. It invites not only a study of the society but also a review of his own self. The text contains various attitudes the Dalit self exploits in his reading. This paper shows how the act of reading gives birth to a critical bent of mind. His complex attachment to the process of reading minutely unfolds the systematic despotism of the upper caste. Reading by a Dalit creates a new perception of looking at society. This article explores how reading becomes a method to claim his assertion making a demand of his right to knowledge.

Keywords: Dalit, Reading, Reality, Society, Upper caste.

Daya Pawar's *Baluta* presents a contestation of a Dalit identity and pre-established social culture. Dagdu exercises something which has been denied to the Dalits throughout ages. He cultivates free play of reason to dismantle the grand construct of the upper caste culture through his exploitation of the dynamics of reading. In doing so his intention is to find fissure in the mainstream cultural construct through a heavy utilization of the politics of reading. Pawar, through the reading of a Dalit, challenges the concept of a totalitarian approach of the upper caste that prohibits the Dalits to practise critical faculty. As opposed to this, Dagdu forms a body of sub-culture that intends to take away the task of social formation from the upper caste monopoly. Simultaneously, he lays down a general proforma for fellow Dalits to attain a sustainable emancipation through involvement in knowing. Being there in the process of knowing, he faces an urgency to negate cultural imposition of the upper castes. He does his own reading with conviction and contradiction inherent in Dalit identity. Thus his reading is an honest proposition of the self to find a voice in a society dominated by the upper castes.

In the Prologue, Dagdu talks about unearthing memories to reveal the oppressive past which is " . . . like the submerged part of the iceberg" (Pawar 3). He finds this task of storytelling a difficult one, and thus, in Pawar's narrative, history and story telling fuse to produce Dalit narrative. Dalit writing is just like unearthing the past, digging out memories to place them in articulation. His 'ability to forget' (Pawar 3) does not go well with the deliberate storytelling in the text as Badri Narayan says, "Memory is an important creative force of self and social life" (16). To Dagdu reading and creativity are complimentary to each other as he reads and creates at the same time, and reading the memory is both painful

and pleasurable to a Dalit mind. He feels a mixed feeling for the past that haunts and attracts the Dalit self. Memories of haunting past are vividly felt by the body, yet they are quite unwanted to the Dalit body as revisiting those memories would further renew the torture meted out to the self. Though he claims to have a bit of forgetfulness, the entire text, coming out in the form of multiple stories, is a product of past. Pawar unearths the long ‘submerged’ memories. It is not an easy journey to read the history and recount it at the same time. To articulate is to re-experience the past as Pawar says in *Baluta* that it is impossible to forget the past, and one “who does not know his past cannot direct his future” (Baluta 63)

Though Dagdu wills to forget everything, he cannot. This is the troubled identity a Dalit has to bear. Unless and until he invalidates the construction of the past by the upper castes, this constant process of reading and searching for a stable meaning continues to exist in a Dalit self. The text contains materials sought out from the relics of the past that he reads perfectly. In fact, he knows exactly what he forgets emphasising the constant interplay between absolute presence and ostensible absence of the past. The past is something that enriches him. The bonding between the Dalit and history is as engaging as the shepherd and the cap that Dagdu recalls in the text (Pawar 2). The story of the shepherd losing his cap and then searching for it is similar to the Dalit self’s problematic encounter with history, denying it and also returning to it for its essential support. Thus reading is used by Pawar to undo the construct of forgetting. Forgetting the past and being conscious of it are always at war. Narrating Dalit life is to release the pent-up frustrations as Gokhale says in the Preface:

I like to think that writing his life, however painful the process obviously was, released Daya Pawar to some extent from his past. (Gokhale viii)

This act of deliverance is initiated by the impact of reading. The introduction of something new does happen to him in terms of his reading that marks him out as totally different from his surroundings. This knowledge from outside incites him to undertake a task of going beyond the surface with positive Dalit intent.

Pawar seems to be drawn to the life long battle between construct of reading and construct of existence. They collide with each other, and through reading he comes to know that the Dalit reality of survival looms large. Disparity comes out of this encounter of these two worlds. It appears to be irreconcilable tussle that a Dalit self is forced to undergo bringing out successive acute pictures of poverty and reality as Pawar says that his education about ‘truth’ vanishes as he has to steal to survive (Baluta 27-28).

The passage is a painful one where his study stands opposed to the meagre sustenance and vice versa. Actually he starts imbibing knowledge through his reading about his social status which is incompatible with the upper caste social order by letting him see the differences clearly. Self-respect which is fostered by education sometimes gets shaken by meagre existence when Pawar recalls from his childhood:

I could see how we had bartered our right to self-respect for a handful of grain. (*Baluta* 213)

But it is not to imagine that the spirit to exist dies out, rather it regenerates itself with the active support of education. It claims dignity for Dalits denouncing traditional beliefs and duties.

Pawar offers a powerful picture of reading apart from being a guide in offering self-consciousness. Reading opens up certain perception that enables him to observe several differences throughout his life ranging from the presence of 'invisible wall' that acts as a border between the village and the Maharwada (Pawar 32) to singling out himself from the community. Actually the apparent divider plays a role in constituting Pawar with the reality of the society. What becomes prominent is the portrayal of society that makes the condition of Dalit painful. This realization is totally new to a Dalit. It turns him sceptical about the functions of the society and questions his own position in social hell. It is not for nothing that Pinto says:

Our world makes reading a sacred enterprise. Daya Pawar's world turns that upside down. (Pinto xv)

This demythologisation of the enterprise called reading does obviously invite opposed tendencies in the formation of the self which is circulated around his paradoxical relationship with reading. Having subversive enterprise as its core ideology, his reading attempts to re-appropriate subject formation in Dalit context. A Dalit has nothing to do with the sanctity of reading where the self is not involved, and thus, he overturns the traditional methodology of reading by making substantial input of both doubt and assertion of the Dalit body. It widens the space of alternative reality where the self is intricately involved. His reading not only sets the proposition of reality but the reality itself is educative in crystalizing the difference between appearance and reality leaving him wiser and experienced.

Reading teaches him the process of questioning that makes him rise much above the level of humble submission to the orthodoxy. He interrogates the traditional performance of Mahars. The degraded state becomes palpable to Dagdu, and he goes away from oppressive circle of society. He recognises his gradual departure from and denial of the subservient existence of the Dalits by virtue of reading. He characterises his self that stands apart:

But I was moving away from the Maharwada, seeking refuge in the world of books. (*Baluta* 59)

It opens up a new world that makes him full of unrest. His study makes him realize the intoxication of learning that he in particular has. This knowledge from outside comes within the Dalit mind to shock the numbed self. Throughout the text, whenever he goes through the process of reading, the self gets a treatment stirring up the submerged consciousness.

This distance brings out his consciousness of the brutal picture of the society by differentiating between right and slavery. In the fashion of Ambedkar he denies the traditional practices creating a new identity of the Dalits. Dalits thought slavery as their right and duty. Ambedkar makes them realise the disgrace behind it making them vocal of their actual rights. Thus his reading of Ambedkar's "Who Were the Shudras?" and writing for Janata help him become aware of the exploitation (Pawar 203). His reading of Ambedkar

opens up a new perception of the caste politics demonstrating an unmistakable link between their protest. He gradually begins to understand their slavery and servitude. The mystery gets unfolded through his reading of Ambedkar as his texts show the actual stand that a Dalit should make regarding their claims of rights.

Reading not only just offers a Dalit methodology of picturization but also makes him an analyst of the social custom that leads him to critique the practice of eating dead animal as 'primitive' (Pawar 76). He sees learning as something that teaches him the real value of modernity, and thus, he strives to do away with the tradition. But the road to attain modernity is not smooth as he has to purge the self of its rough tradition. His complicated affiliation with learning is reflected in a passage of such temper:

But it's easy enough to write revolutionary poems, poems that challenge the status quo. It's different when you must live the challenge. That I lived without self-respect is still a matter of regret for me. At the time I felt: Is it true? Am I really so spineless? Damn it, why am I such a cowardly custard? Who put this fear into me? (*Baluta* 118)

Though the passage reads like a desperate attempt to get out of social humiliation and his inability to do so but it is explanatory of the revelation of emergent consciousness. The more he educates himself, the more the injustice in the society becomes clear to him. Everywhere his identity gets stigmatised because of his caste. He can no longer be complacent since the moment of unrest has been inserted in his mind. These are the pertinent questions to the self. To get out of it he takes recourse to study that enriches him with the power of resilience. He rests his hope in education to ward off social ills as Pawar says:

I did not want to live with constant references, all slighting, to my caste origins. To get out of all this, I had to study. (*Baluta* 166)

Unified agitation that Ambedkar wishes to incorporate into the lives of Dalits gets internalised within his self by virtue of reading. Constant references to degraded identities hurled against Dalit can be shrugged off with self-respect inculcated by knowledge and learning in Dalit mind. Reading offers him exposure of knowledge which is denied to the Dalits. It is beneficial for expansion of protest to strike back to the pride and injustice of the upper castes. The resolution that learning provides calls for his revulsion against traditional jobs. Thus during the process of the elevation of a Dalit, the reading makes a marked differentiation when he clears his position by saying:

My ancestors had spent their lives stripping carcasses; I was ripping receipts out of books. (*Baluta* 123)

Not only in the community circle but also in public sphere he boastfully shows the importance of knowledge. Thus in school he attacked Manusmriti explaining it as a caste based text (Pawar 203). His intention is to break down the upper caste construct of social order. *Baluta* is a document of the applicability of learning in transforming the society. Thus when he reads the history of pathetic plight of the Dalits being trapped in the repressive politics of social discrimination, he presents an account of his mother doing old job of scavenging which is both painful and insightful at the same time. He also says that whatever

prestige he is acquiring through education has been made a waste by the scavenging of his mother, and he accuses the society for such disgrace (*Baluta* 216-217).

Education brings this consciousness that causes much trauma to the Dalit self. He takes himself apart as odd one enthused with transformative force which is the sine qua non of actualizing melioristic principles in society. The world he lives in and the world he conceptualizes through reading are poles apart. Reading makes him stand on the land of reality. It gives much needed disillusionment to the self of the submissive life he lives. That is why he is prone to cry an expression of displeasure against servility. He starts problematizing and furnishing solutions at the same time by virtue of education formulating a system of knowledge production thought earlier to be a product of the upper caste thought pattern. His tricky encounter with cultural modernity gives a pervasive fillip to the exposition of pragmatic scepticism where the process of knowing something prevails. Instead of assuring aesthetic certainty, his reading exerts a 'scorpion of doubt' (Pawar 201). In doing so he comes out of an insular cocoon to find his other side, an agitated self, to relocate the past with purposive orientation of 'restlessness':

I think this restlessness is my permanent state. When it ends, I will feel as if I am bearing my own corpse and I shall feel profound grief. (*Baluta* 297)

Reading inserts unrest within the self as an antidote to enforced ignorance. Thus learning, prohibited so far, comes as a blessing to him having continuous readjustment with the process of knowing that makes a disruption in traditional Dalit identity. This 'restlessness' is indispensable to a Dalit body since it produces rationality to find a way out of this prolonged social impasse. Ending the text with the idea of 'restlessness' is symbolic of propagation of creative reading. He breaks through the barrier of forbidden territory. His reading is a comprehensive encroachment on upper caste privilege. Pawar comes to recognise the role of education and how it makes one conscious of one's surrounding and situation where he faces discrimination. The more he becomes sensitive with reading, the more he tries to put forward questions. In the face of full uncertainty, the Dalit self appears as a perceptible being creating something productive. A synthesis is born of the unrest and agitation. The restlessness produces an assertive self leaving him with the power of reflection on the asymmetry. In a sense, the narrative invites all Dalits to nurture restlessness to form dissent and to create a new Dalit identity. He visualises the power of education in emancipating the self and lays down the text as a manifesto for posterity. The invisible wall of the society that he earlier talks about (Pawar 32) can be broken down only by knowledge. Setting a mixed feeling, he lets out the value of reading that takes away 'simple pleasures' (Pawar 47) of his dependent existence and creates a volume of unrest in its place. Identity is formed through this unrest.

In a sense, Pawar welcomes education for making reality palpable to a Dalit self:

At that time, we lived like animals in the Maharwada, our lives based on an earthy philosophy. I was filled with revulsion against the life I was leading and wanted to get away. (*Baluta* 47)

Dagdu is enraged with the status quo that Dalits are forced to maintain and becomes anxious to get out of this system. The more he reads, the more he finds how isolated he is in the

society. He finds reading as the only panacea to challenge this isolation and to crave for equality at the same time. A stimulus of recognition of Dalit existence comes to him with the advent of education. Pawar's reliance upon 'scavenger's account of his life' (Pawar 63) makes an unholy presentation of reading that destabilises superficial social composure. The addictive quality of reading opens up another world of hope and possibilities. In the process of learning he disavows caste discrimination, and thus Pawar says:

But once I was in school, I was free as a bird. (*Baluta* 86)

The democratic environment that education provides makes him contact with both the self and the society. Despite facing separation, it is in the school that he meets up with full exploration of his self seeing the ground inequality everywhere. This desire is indicative of the easy accessibility of education for full growth of consciousness. With gradual cultivation of educative mentality he recognises the dungeon like village he lives in and how disrespect and ill treatment are stored for the Dalits in a society and the role of education that can help him out:

I knew now that my only way out of the prison of the village was to study. (*Baluta* 86)

He forms his own circle of knowledge to strike hard at the larger circle of malicious separatist politics. Educated Dalit individual comes up with confidence and courage to combat with the social system that perpetuates slavery and torture and to re-form a Dalit self with 'chest swollen with pride' and 'body vibrant with energy' (Pawar 88). Ironically he says that he could have been 'a stone in a stream' (Pawar 119) conforming to the convention, but he ends up making a rupture with social stasis by virtue of his knowledge.

The painful separation that Dagdu makes from his mother shows how personal relationship becomes victim of the larger political scenario:

I burn with shame as I tell you about how I would only speak to my mother in secret. For an education, I was willing to sever the umbilical cord. (*Baluta* 122)

It is education that makes him conscious of the reality. He is ashamed of his caste that bears injustice and inequality throughout one's life which even compels to maintain the sacred relationship of mother and son in a secretive way. Probing into the cry of separation, it becomes clear that the Dalit self is unwilling to get assimilated with a rigid system of hierarchy. The pathos comes from a social critic who is made to bear the stigmatised caste identity. Pawar seems to suggest that the only way for a Dalit to liberate himself from the trap of caste based politics is to study and to educate himself as it widens one's perspectives. S.M. Michael says that the transcendence from traditional Dalit to contemporary Dalit is largely due to the deployment of radical intellectual activism (14). This broad spectrum of knowledge makes Pawar negate the set up formula of the society. The pattern of thinking that he achieves from study makes him see the reality clearly.

Dagdu's reading gives him the power to legitimate his identity in a society. The more he reads, the more he causes cracks in traditional construct of the mentality. His non-conformity to the order of the society becomes visible through his self-reliance. Far distant

from mainstream reading, the reading of a Dalit punctures the audacious construct of monolithic regime. Reading is an active process that gives him a positive direction of disposition. For a free and full growth reading acts as catalyst in transforming the Dalit from ignorance to experience. That wise self knows well the value of transmission of ideas in a society that liberates the Dalit from its closeted shell. In a sense, his reading is a social reading of his own self. He reads himself; we read him, and through reading him we read the society. Deftly both of us are involved in a social study. Dagdu not only reads but also lays down a mechanism showing us how to read.

Reading the text we enjoy a materialistic reading of Dagdu himself which is substantial for and conducive to social growth through enhancing reason and rationality. It is not an idealistic exercise based on imagination and aestheticism. Reading, to him, becomes an experimental tool that activates much needed violation of inscrutable discriminatory practices of the society. The remit of reading invites two impulses, namely, giving an all encompassing study of the self; and reinterpreting the society to deconstruct its upper caste overlay. Ambedkar equates assimilation of knowledge with the achievement of freedom and liberty in volume 17 part 2 (72-80). The will to know is nurtured in the Dalit mind to defy the restrictive policies of the upper castes. Craving for knowledge is tantamount to crying for liberty, and this upsurge is only possible when the Dalits can have the spark of knowledge. To rise above the condition Pawar relies on the importance of knowledge that can make the Dalits aware of their problems. To Dagdu knowledge and experience are instrumental in creating a new perception which not only critiques the society but also dissects the self in a logical way rendering the text a powerful platform for subjective observation. The text becomes an answer to the question of the self and presents a protagonist who is in search of a critic. It is the society that creates the Dalit self, and thus, the self is integral to the society. Hence, both fall under the scrutiny of this cogent account of a Dalit.

Pawar tries to emphatically claim that to modernize the Dalits knowledge is important. Dalits are denied admittance to civilization and culture. Instead, Ambedkar says in volume 5 that every Dalit must strive for two things- 'education and the spread of knowledge' and 'power' (396-399). Through accumulation of knowledge they would demand validity in a society and also posit questions to the power. This process seriously invokes the alternative concept of power proposed by an enlightened Dalit in the text. Dagdu's reading shows an overwhelming enjoyment of interpretation that creates a new parameter of Dalit discourse. It is a deliberate act of reacting to the exclusionary philosophy of the upper castes. His reading has the feel of immediacy to get recognised as an active social body who participates in social formation. Thus Pawar charts not only a new approach to society but also an altogether different meaning of reading, an inclusive reading, that defines the society anew and invites democratic disagreement.

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