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In search of voice and feet: A study on localization, globalization and reflexivity in Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (2015)

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Abstract

This paper seeks to interrogate the local and global dimensions of change and reflexivity as captured in the plight and lives of the Dalit-Mahars as represented in Dagdu Daya Pawar's *Baluta*. *Baluta* is touted as among the first autobiographical account of the 'untouchable' low caste Dalit-Mahars in India. First published in Marathi in 1978, it was a bold and courageous step that acted as a harbinger to other Dalit stories that opened up the virtually 'untouchable' world to the global scene. Although the writings have been central in the fight against the discriminative and humiliating traditions and customs in India, there is more that they actually bring to light and even more that is not said or told. Pawar himself captures this assertion in *Baluta*: 'The reflection of a man in the mirror does not know the whole story of the man it is reflecting' (Pawar, 2015, p. 4). What is the whole story of 'the man' being reflected in *Baluta*? How does it reflect the reality locally and globally on their plight? Did the writing or movement achieve anything? These are pertinent questions that this paper seeks to address itself to.

Keywords: Dalit-Mahars, globalization, localization, reflexivity

Public Interest Statement

The Indian community has for long been divided into classes in line with the caste system, in the process marginalizing and disenfranchising some communities. Literature by the Dalit-Mahars, a marginalized group at the bottom of the caste system not only reflects on their experiences, but also show the strides they are making towards being 'acceptable' and appreciated members of the local and global community. *Baluta*, is taken as an important text in discussing the search for recognition and hence the main text in this dissertation.

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Introduction and Literature Review

William Young (2014, 44) approaches reflexivity from the perception that it is inherent in humans. Anyone is capable of reflexivity; however, there must be a situation which requires a solution. The conflict must be something that impacts the community and its trajectories. The situations and circumstances that define the community and reflexivity are not constant: they are consistently changing due to the influence of the social, moral and historical conditions that shape the communities' characters.

Inken Carsteinsen-Egwuom (2014), while building up on the arguments of Pierre Bourdieu, opines that the political, social, economic and many other struggles the societies go through have their basis on categorization. There are always classes, imagined or real, in the societies we live in and it is the onus of the social sciences researchers to analyze these reflexively. The text is reflexive of the culture of the society the author emanates from.

Stuart Hall postulates that cultural identity is rooted in a shared history and almost common ancestry (Hall 1994, 223). This portrays people as 'one' and 'similar' in beliefs and practice with a standard approach on what defines them and how they are divided. This is against the reality of change and our actual history. The other side of culture comes from the perception that it is fluid and quite mercurial. It is the process of 'being' or becoming'. These changes are necessitated by the transformation that societies undergo due to the interplay of history, culture itself and power.

In the course of representation, texts and culture as captured move from the individual and 'limited' society to the global. Culture becomes 'paradoxical' because it defies all possible definitions; it gets 'cultureless'. It ceases to represent any specific form of life but captures the human life in general (Terry Eagleton, 2000, 53). The context and relevance of culture and its representations in the given text move to a higher plane from the local to the universal or the global. 'Localization' is based on the range of choices that the individual or the collective culture of the society is provided with (Mihai Spariosu 2018, p. 22). Culture grows, acquires and conceives new realities, concepts and choices besides those available, in the process creating 'new social facts'. These are the elements that usher in the idea of globalization. On the different concepts of culture, Spariosu further opines:

The first one is an essentialist and 'substantialist' view, tied to no less than the notion of globalism and localism, to dialectic of the universal and the particular. In this view, culture is a durable, substantial and, ultimately, universal entity that determines the identity, coherence, and solidarity of a larger or a smaller social group. In turn, cultural identity creates cultural differences, which are, as a rule, contingent, insubstantial, and can eventually be resolved or reconciled in a universal culture. (2018, p. 28)

The representation in literature is more than the culture as it involves the creative imagination of the author. This creativity starts from the local and moves to the implied and suggested. Literature seeks to create awareness and give the way forward as an author may deem possible. This shift is the same that transforms the local to the global as it builds its own ideal society.

The Indian Caste System

The Indian society is divided into castes sanctioned by the Hindu religion. There are four main castes with distinct places and roles in society.¹ The Brahmins occupy the highest place at the hierarchy. Priests, teachers and academicians are the major tenants here. Warriors and rulers are in the second tier, the Kshatriyas caste. The Vaishyas are next comprising farmers, traders and merchants. The laborers are in the fourth caste which is the Shudras. Lastly are the outcastes. They do not belong to any specific caste. These are the Dalits. They do the 'dirty' work, street sweepers and latrine cleaners.

The caste system follows very strict rules in the society. Murray Milner (1993) enumerates the central ones in his essay on the Indian Caste system². To begin with, one is restricted to his or her social class or caste. Mobility through whatever means is prohibited. The social status conferred to one by the community is inalienable. Also, inheritance and ascription determine one's caste whose membership cannot change even with proven merit and performance. Thirdly, concerted efforts are made by the individuals and the society to maintain the castes' boundaries and identities. There are many ways this is done but primarily, the laws on purity are very conspicuous. The outcastes are specifically affected by these laws as they are seen as polluted and spreading the pollution through contact or association.

Autobiographies from the Dalit- Mahars have been important in exposing the ills and evils that come with being marginalized and discriminated against in the society. They give the Dalits a platform to express themselves without any inhibitions. These autobiographies 'have caused some ripples which are set to grow even bigger' (Purnachandra Naik, 2016). The ripples are reminiscent of the growth from the local to the global through the issues tackled and raised in the texts. *Baluta* is an autobiography by Dagdu Daya Pawar and will be the central text in the explication of the social change in the Indian society with the mind of transmutation from the local to the global.

Baluta

Baluta is a story that follows the life of Dagdu Daya Pawar as he tries to fit in the Indian society. He is lauded as a courageous Dalit because the atrocities and stigma associated with discrimination had been going on for a long time but nobody had dared talk about them openly before. He gives the readers a chance to walk with the outcastes and feel what it means to be one. Satyanarayan Kaikal (2003) encourages those reading these Dalit autobiographies to perceive them as life stories as opposed to individual texts as they are in the context of social movements that expose these evils with an aim of instigating change in the society.

The Dalit Naming

The discrimination meted on the Dalit social space starts right from the names that they are given. The names given to the Dalits are supposed to show their social status and to reinforce the contempt that the society, and especially the Brahmins, have for these outcastes. "The Manusmirti has a list of names for Shudras: it requires that our names should reflect society's contempt for us" (Pawar 2015,5). Dagdu and Dhondya are loosely translated to 'stones'. This is

1 From the BBC News 20th July 2017- www.bbc.com

2 Hindu Eschatology and the Indian Caste System: An Example of Structural Reversal

one of the reasons the narrator does not like using the name. Very few people in school and even his wife and children, he is sure, do not know him by the name. This starts the process of alienation from within. He questions how on earth someone can have a name like Kachrya which means dirt; Gavtya which means to be unnoticed, secretive, invisible; Shudra or Mataang meaning a low class person or even Bikhya which means beggar. These names define the stigma and discrimination that their allotted social space confers on them.

The Brahmins naming was done differently. Brahmins' names for instance Vidyathar which means learnedness or the Vaishyas' name Laxmikant which means wealthy were taken from the goddess of wealth. This implies that being a Dalit, the name given shows how one is far from the perfection of the gods. The structure of the society was very explicit as the higher the caste, the closer one was to the gods. This was a way to sanction the placements as constructed by the society.

The names were also a kind of prison to which the outcastes were condemned by the society. Some Dalits, like Pawar himself, were learned. However, the society could not change his name to Vidyathar which would capture his academic prowess because he was not of the Brahmins' caste. This is in confirmation of the assertion that the castes were inalienable³ by whatever performance or merit one had. The titles given to the Dalit texts also showed the impact of names vis-a-vis their social status and place.

Baluta is drawn from the annual share of the harvest the Dalits were entitled to. After the harvest they used to move to the cities and places inhabited by the rich and ask for their share in a form of begging. Jerry Pinto, the translator of *Baluta* into English observes in the preface of the book that it was interesting for Pawar to name his book after this demeaning exercise. *Baluta* was usually given to the Mahars after working for the rich as a form of payment. Pinto sees it as a form of bondage and it is symbolic that Pawar decides to take it as the title for his text. He feels that it widens the story so that it is not just a 'boy's own story'. Pinto looks at the text as the reality of being Indian (2015, vi).

Joothan (1997) is another Dalit book by Omprakash Valmiki. It is a name from jootha which means impure. *Joothan* itself means the scraps of food left after a rich family has eaten or had a festival. These scraps remain sticking to the sides of the saucepan or those that are destined for the dustbin. This symbolically is the place the Dalits belong- in the dustbin.

The Social and Geographical Alienation

The Dalits were also set apart geographically. They lived together in the Maharwada, a place specifically set up for the Mahars. Here, they would not pollute the others easily and could be easily rounded for the usual labor they are required to offer. Pawar captures Kawakhana, the place they lived in as children, in a vivid description:

You won't find Kawakhana on any map of Mumbai. In those days the tram from Khada Parsi turned into Foras Road on its way to Girgaon. Aaji says that she remembers horse-drawn trams. She would tell me her memories. As a child, I would dream of horses, foaming at the mouth, struggling to get the trams up the bridge. Nagpada props itself up against this bridge and in the middle of Nagpada

3 *Ibid.*2

was Kawakhana. Today, it's all tall buildings, five or six storeys high. On one end was Chor Bazaar or the thieves' market. On the other side was Kamathipura, the red-light area. Golpitha was where the prostitutes lived. Kawakhana was squeezed between these two. (2015, 7)

Whether by design or coincidence, the location of the Mahar's place is symbolic of how they are viewed and taken not as part of the 'mainstream' society. It is with prostitutes and thieves that the outcastes belong. Even with the squalid conditions they are living in in their 'islands', they are similar to the horses that pull the trams. They work so hard to move up the mountains. The Mahars are the work horses struggling to pull the trams across the bridge. Sadly for them, the bridge is not 'crossable' as the rules are quite strict and skewed against them. The 'squeezing' and not being found anywhere on the map of Mumbai is also a significant pointer to the social space of the Mahars in India and specifically Mumbai. This explains why the Narrator is never 'quite at home' in Mumbai or in the fields. His psyche is split into two as he is alienated from his mind to the geographical place he lives in (2015, 6).

The Mahars did the jobs that could not be done by people of any other caste, exposing them to exploitation and misuse. Besides working in the fields of the rich for the Baluta, they were to tend to sick animals and carry away the carcass once the animals died. This they 'disposed' after skinning. All the weddings had the Mahars playing the music and escorting the bridegroom. Just like the horses the narrator in *Baluta* used to dream about after hearing Aaji's stories, the Dalits were the ones to pull the chariots of the folk goddess Mari-Aai whenever there were any birth or death announcements to be made in the villages. It was their duty to celebrate the feast of Mari- Aai and Mhasoba. These were gods of the poor and the narrator observes that they had the same kind of treatment as the Mahars: these gods were all outside and faced the brunt of the harsh weather on them. Some of the Mahar women made a living from collecting and reselling waste papers. They had to bribe to actually get the papers. Sometimes they were forced to run for their honor when the men selling the papers had 'mischievous' intentions on them.

Discrimination of the Dalit-Mahars was everywhere and sanctioned by the Hindu Religion. There was an invisible wall that separated the Maharwada and other estates. This invisible wall is reminiscent of the harsh rules the religion and the society sanctioned against the outcastes. In school, the narrator had to sit facing away from the others. This was a way to keep him in class without polluting those from the upper castes. A case was witnessed of a student who was denied a chance to act in a religious play because he was a dark Mahar. The narrator used to eat alone in the school dining because the rest could not risk being polluted by eating or even sitting with him. The Mahar even had their reserved burial grounds, discriminated against even in death.

In the farms, the narrator observed that their Mahar village was made in a way that it faced away from the other villages. He believes this was a way to keep the air and water of the upper castes pure from any kind of pollution (2015, 32). Uma- ajya was a man who foretold people of their future and was quite of service to many in the Maharadwa where he lived in a dilapidated house. He was nicknamed Shakuni. This is a name taken from an evil uncle in the Mahabharata. Even if Uma- ajya served the people well, his complexion was more related to evil than good, worsening the place in society the caste placed him.

The Mahars were not allowed to participate in the games of the society. Mahar wrestlers were not allowed to participate in the wrestling matches at the Maruti temple. They had to go to their own Mahar games where they wrestled among themselves (2015, 84). This was one of the reason Pawar's father made some arena in his house so that the Mahar wrestlers could practice and exhibit their skills.

The Mahars were never allowed to relate to and marry the non Mahars. Sometimes they related but once the idea of castes came into focus they separated. The narrator in *Baluta* had the woman that accepted him as he was- a Dalit Mahar and an outcaste, forcefully married off to a person of a similar caste to hers. The narrator actually witnessed the marriage. These discriminative practices had an impact on the lives of the Mahars and their interactions with the people of the other castes.

The Distracted Mind

Many Mahars were psychologically alienated as a result. This can be seen in the narrator's choice of persona in the story. *Baluta* starts as a fictive narration. Pawar sets out to tell his story but as the narrative moves on he decides against using this fictive self. He assumes the autobiographical mode so as to capture his real situation and place in the social space that the Hindu society has created for him. He feels he has nothing to lose even if he is to be known and his plight put in focus now that no other Dalit-Mahar had ever done anything of this sort before. He is not happy but has to wear a 'happy man's shirt' on the streets just to fool the people. One has to wear a mask (2015, 88). He believes that one thing that makes him survive is his ability to forget. While in school, he immersed himself totally -physically and mentally- in the books (2015, 46). This is what psychoanalysis is about when it talks of displacement as a defense mechanism. You get one thing or event behind which you hide all that you feel is not pleasant to you. This alienation can also be inferred from the way the story is narrated. The narrator severally veers off the trail and asks what he is saying (2015, 27, 81). This is a pointer to a distracted mind. The alienation also led to gender re-definition in the Marathi relations. The work of going for the *Baluta* was specifically assigned to the Mahar women. However, with time even the old men in the society were made to do this work which would have been otherwise below them.

While in school, the narrator develops the habit of remaining behind when the other students go for a weekend out of school. Slowly, he begins to be addicted to some adult and funny magazines, a habit he manages to stop when the boarding master catches him reading one (2015, 161). The Mahar men get to be violent womanizers, characters the narrator observes they wear as a badge of honor. The narrator does not understand how the father ended up as a violent alcoholic and how the mother relates with him (2015, 25).

7.3.4. Re-defining Realities

With time however, the society experiences some changes. A number of factors could also be attributed to these changes. The narrator observes that the generation that loved patiently and was humble like that of Aaji- his mother- had vanished. In its place are a bitter people who are driven by material interests (2015, p. 15). This is a result of the fight against discrimination which has changed its trajectory towards getting fulfilled in the material things. The way the culture fought to protect the idea of inequality through the traditional division of the society based on

caste was now being challenged by the clamor for equality and consideration for the Mahars. On the ensuing tension, Amkur Barua opines:

These tensions and contradictions present in the traditional attempts to reconcile hierarchy with an all-encompassing social order came to the fore in a particularly acute mode during nationalist movements, and especially during the mobilizations of Dalit identities in opposition to brahminial orthopraxy (2009, p. 10).

With the lectures that Dr Ambedka was giving, there were changes in the Mahar society. The Mahar got tired of the Baluta and decided to revolt against it. This was because they felt it was demeaning and wanted to cut out that kind of slavery (2015, p. 95). The skinning and eating of dead animals was also being discouraged. Paraffin was poured on the carcasses of the dead animals rendering them unfit and unpleasant to anybody harboring any ideas of 'disposing' it through eating. The Mahars took the challenge of revolution in their stride and sort to be the challenge and not just write or talk about it (2015, p. 128). The narrator in *Baluta* was now plucking receipts instead of the skins of the dead animals that the Mahars were known for (2015, p. 128).

In the wake of the lectures by Dr Ambedka, the Mahars' lives began to change. The social changes were visible for all to see. For the first time in a long while, a Mahar actually became a minister. This was a surprise even to the narrator as he had been a witness to the ostracism that came with the caste system. Pawar was invited to the birthday party of Dadasaheb (2015, p. 165). All the ministers from the Dalit caste had all been corrupt and so this one was expected at least to be different. He did not last long in the post but at least his presence, and the idea of the Dalit in position of power was not missed. Change was also visible in the political scene. After the decentralization, many Mahars started moving away from Dadasaheb's communist ideas and towards the ruling classes. The decentralization brought the people in the Maharadwa closer to power (2015, p. 251). The traditions were also changing in favor of modernity.

Although Dr Ambedka's movement was hugely responsible for these changes, there were other factors at play. Education was at the center of these changes. The Dalit Mahars who got educated had to make huge sacrifices and reaped huge. Pawar was willing to sever the umbilical cord so as to get an education (2015, p. 122). He felt that if he had an education there is a way, he could have been more useful to himself and the society. It is while in school that he actually discovers that the idea of social classification is more of classification without a real logical reason behind it. He sees how even some of the teachers who taught him, and who were Brahmins themselves, had disabilities. This meant that all are equal and could suffer the same calamities but the place of birth and the parents ascribed one to a given caste. The barrister who went to England for an education could not take part in the communal bathing outdoors any more (2015, p. 267). He was exposed when he went out for an education.

In the face of consistent and continuous discrimination and alienation from the other castes in the society, the Mahars felt that education was the only way out of their miseries. The narrator also saw education as a way of escape from the village (2015, p. 86). The village with its illogical but strict rule of caste was viewed as a prison from which education had a chance of getting one away from. Education was also a way of escaping the low position and the stigma

associated with caste. He was always so immersed in books that he did not have time to pity himself or get into the way of scoffers. Taty, his uncle, tried to make him comfortable when he went to school to 'learn English' (2015, p. 149). He bought him good clothes so that the narrator could easily fit into the society and not be despised or alienated because of his dressing. His desire was to see his nephew settle easily into the school he was joining.

Religion was another vehicle for change as used by the Dalit Mahars. Hinduism had its castes that were set to organize the society so that it worked 'well'. The end result was untold suffering and humiliation that the Mahars and the outcastes went through. One was not given a caste but was born into one. With time however, it is the change in religion that some Mahars felt would somehow change their plight in life. A change in religion meant that the converts were not tied to the rules any more but could relate easily with like-minded converts. Buddhism was one of the religions that Mahars converted to (2015, p. 85).

The Raiwands were Mahar performers who moved throughout the towns performing. They did not discriminate but mingled with the Mahars quite freely despite their hero status in society. The Raiwands dressed flamboyantly, with beautiful turbans on their heads, and giving rides to the Mahars on their camels. This attracted the Mahars who desired to be like them. The Raiwands were mostly Buddhists and hence the encouragement for the Mahars to convert. The Mahars at last had something to be proud of. Religion was the reason they were in prisons literally and now the same religion was to get them out. Some Mahars also converted to Christianity and Islam (2015, p. 120).

Globalizing the Mahar Text and Experience

The underlying text from the foregoing discussion is that if used well, education, religion and the performing arts have the power to transform society and break the unfair boundaries created. Mihai Spariosu is of the opinion that:

If literature can be reduced to its semantic or representational level, then it loses its imagining or luminal features. Thereby, it loses its capacity for pointing to values outside its immediate cultural context, such as "unrepresentable" cultural otherness and alternative worlds (2018, p. 21).

Baluta is not just limited to the representation of the plight of the outcastes in India, a critical look opens up the text to the global realities alluded to. Some of the questions the text asks open the net wider to the 'alternative world'. Jerry Pinto in his foreword to the *Baluta* English translation is amazed that a boy could be denied a chance to act in a school play because he was dark (2015, xiv). Some roles could not be played by the narrator because he was either too black or too poor for them (2015, p. 171). The simple question opens up the text beyond its boundaries. The argument has shifted from the caste system to racism and wealth. One should not be judged based on race as it hinders one true self and abilities from coming to light. The marginalized here are not just the Mahars, but all those of a different complexion and physical features.

Andre Beteille⁴ finds it unreasonable for the Indian community to claim to be fighting

⁴ Quoted in Ankur Barua's *The Solidarities of Caste: the Metaphysical basis of the 'Organic' Community*, 2009.

racism and discrimination while at the same time upholding the social divisions based on the caste system. He also questions the treatment of people based on gender. He had observed how the villagers tried treating a lady, Sita, of madness. In all the things they did to her, the narrator observes that they were selectively applied and not the most pleasant experience. They were not performed on Shankar, who had the same disposition, but was a man (2015, 108). He finds the ethics of the village as following an 'entirely different order.' This is the order that allows one to be treated differently based on the gender. These gender affairs are not limited to the Indian society. Discrimination by whatever name is just discrimination. One should not be marginalized for whatever excuse or reason.

Pawar criticises the idea of castes. He finds the social stratification of the Indian society odd and complex for no good reason (2015, p. 84). He looks at the system as set out right from the word go with an aim at gratifying people's egos at the expense of others. This he finds dumbfounding as the price that the society pays is too high for just an ego ride. There is a good chance that the society could be much better if the desire to gratify egos was shelved and people to be appreciated from the humanity point of view: that we are all equal. From the story there are instances where he enumerates cases that should actually lead people to appreciate others as they are. There are cases of the Brahmins who also have disabilities like the case of his teacher. The challenges we have make us human and hence should not be used to judge or discriminate against anyone.

Education and religion are also vouched for as a way of fighting discrimination. Any religion that discriminates against others on whatever ground is not worth its salt. Most Mahars found refuge in Buddhism and Christianity to escape the reality of the caste system. Religion can also be used to enhance peace and tranquility globally in the light of how it can actually unite people.

Daya Pawar uses a number of devices to compound his local and global dimension embedded in the narrative. He makes use of the local folklore to illustrate his points. There is a case of a father-in-law acting untoward against a daughter in law. The daughter in law sent some message home and there was a seating of the clan courts to judge the case (2015, p. 108). A parable was given by the wise Buwa, the judge to illustrate the point that the young man was somehow to blame for leaving his wife. It was stunning when the man agreed that actually the wife is a common property between him and the father. Either could 'keep her company' whenever the need arose. This story as much as it is drawn from the local collection cements the place of women in the society. They are 'property' that can be easily exchanged. They are not given the value befitting them. Symbolism is another device the author uses to get his points across.

Daya Pawar makes use of the prison motif to capture the curtailed dreams and a society out to divide the people. The Narrator sees school as a way out of the prison that the village is reminiscent of (2015, p. 86). When he goes to the Taluka School, slowly he begins to discover his identity. Here he feels more appreciated, transforming the school into a symbol of equality.

One of the poems the narrator is fond of is from a collection called *In Prison* (2015, p. 3). He compares his life and the sorrows he encounters to the iceberg. The people always see the tip that is just above the water but do not know the whole story. He wonders how he has survived all along especially when the memories come in as drops of acid- they corrode. Symbolically people are in various types of prisons. It may not be caste but many others unique to the society and

globally. There are statements and questions asked by the narrator which succinctly summarize the ideas in line with the fight for equality and appreciation.

Can a story, told from beginning to end, ever be simple? (Pawar 2015, p. 2) Then you come along and ask that I should take an axe to the iceberg. Will it break? Or would I reduce myself to the state of a Pothraj?⁵(Pawar 2015, p. 4). The narrator is comparing what he wishes the text to achieve with the cutting of an iceberg with an axe. It is not an easy task and even the tools sometimes just do minimum damage. Despite all, he goes ahead and tells his story. The English translation opened up the narrative further as more and more people are now privy to the stories of the Dalit Mahars and the plight of the marginalized. Though locally captured it has some truths that can be applied globally. This is why there is some truth in the narrator's assertion that the reflection of a man in the mirror does not always reflect the whole story of the man.

Conclusion

The world of the Dalit-Mahars is a microcosm of the challenges that bedevil the globe. Though Pawar's *Baluta* captured them in a limited light, the experiences and lessons are applicable to some of the global problems that seek to be solved. The positive application of religion, education and the performed arts have a way of breaking the boundaries so that local solutions can be appropriated and customized to help deal with global situations. The fight of the Dalit-Mahars to have a voice and feet is the cry of many going through a similar experience albeit with a different name for instance racism, discrimination and alienation for whatever reason. Literature is at the center of the application of these solutions if well applied.

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5 Circus performer/ dancer.

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