

Challenging Caste and Patriarchy: Dalit Identity and the Rejection of Brahmanical Traditions in the Works of Kusum Meghwal

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Introduction

The caste system in India, a deeply entrenched social hierarchy, has shaped the lives and identities of millions for centuries. Rooted in Hindu religious scriptures like the Manusmriti, caste divides society into rigidly defined groups based on birth, occupation, and purity. The upper castes, particularly the Brahmins, have historically wielded power and privilege, while the lower castes, especially Dalits (formerly known as "Untouchables"), have faced severe oppression, exclusion, and discrimination. This hierarchical system has been instrumental in perpetuating not only social and economic inequality but also cultural and religious subjugation of Dalits. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit leader and the architect of the Indian Constitution, argued that the caste system's discriminatory practices were central to maintaining Brahminical dominance and Dalit subordination (Ambedkar 126). Despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies aimed at eradicating caste-based discrimination, the lived experiences of Dalits in contemporary India continue to reflect the brutal realities of caste oppression.

The caste system's intersection with gender further complicates the experience of Dalit women, who suffer from both caste and gender oppression. Feminist scholars have highlighted that Dalit women are "doubly marginalized" (Thorat 58). Not only are they subject to the rigidities of caste but they are also forced to navigate a patriarchal social order that dehumanizes and exploits them. The pervasive violence,

both physical and structural, faced by Dalit women reveals how deeply intertwined caste and gender hierarchies are in maintaining the status quo of Brahminical traditions. Dalit literature, especially the works of female writers, has played a crucial role in exposing these intersections and challenging the hegemony of caste and patriarchy.

Kusum Meghwal, a powerful voice in Dalit literature, writes from this perspective of intersectional oppression. Her stories vividly depict the brutal realities faced by Dalits, particularly Dalit women, and offer a sharp critique of the Brahminical traditions that uphold caste and gender hierarchies. Through narratives like *Subah Ka Bhula*, *Meri Sas Ne Kaha Tha*, *Angara*, *Dal-dal*, *Face Fire*, and *Yahi Hakikat Hain*, Meghwal explores the complexities of Dalit identity and the ongoing struggles against Brahminical patriarchy. Her characters challenge the deeply entrenched social norms and seek to assert their identity and agency in a system that continually denies them both. This paper examines how Meghwal's stories interrogate the caste system, critique Brahminical traditions, and advocate for a redefined Dalit identity rooted in dignity, equality, and resistance.

Caste Oppression and Dalit Identity

Kusum Meghwal's stories provide a deep insight into the nature of caste oppression and its impact on Dalit identity. Her characters are often portrayed as individuals struggling to navigate a social system designed to oppress them based on their caste. In *Subah Ka Bhula*, for example, the protagonist Nirmala, a Dalit schoolteacher, faces systemic caste-based discrimination from her upper-caste colleagues and superiors. Despite her qualifications and dedication, Nirmala is viewed through the lens of her caste, and her contributions to the school are dismissed because of the social stigma attached to her Dalit identity. Meghwal uses Nirmala's experience to highlight the ways in which caste-based discrimination permeates even modern institutions like schools, where caste bias should be irrelevant in a democratic society. This aligns with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's critique of the caste system, where he argues that "caste is not just a division of labor, but a division of laborers" (Ambedkar 105).

Nirmala's resistance to caste oppression is a powerful assertion of Dalit identity. When she stands up against the discriminatory practices in the school, she challenges the very foundation of the Brahminical order. Her determination to assert equality for Dalit students in the face of upper-caste hostility shows that Dalit identity is not merely a passive acceptance of caste but an active struggle against it. Meghwal uses Nirmala's story to convey that Dalit identity is tied to the broader struggle for justice and equality, one that requires confronting Brahminical traditions that sustain caste hierarchies.

Similarly, in *Meri Sas Ne Kaha Tha*, Lalita's journey reflects the struggles faced by Dalit women who must navigate both caste and gender oppression. Her mother-in-law, Angoori Bai, serves as a voice of wisdom, encouraging Lalita to resist the Brahminical traditions that have long suppressed Dalit women. The story highlights how the caste system reinforces gender inequality, with Lalita being treated as inferior not only because of her caste but also because of her gender. Lalita's resistance to her oppressive marriage and the Brahminical norms that dictate her life exemplifies the broader Dalit struggle for autonomy and self-respect.

The Intersection of Caste and Gender in Brahminical Traditions

Brahminical patriarchy has historically positioned both Dalits and women as subordinate, and Kusum Meghwal's stories expose how these two systems of oppression intersect. In *Angara*, the protagonist Jamna, a Dalit woman, is subjected to brutal violence by upper-caste men. This violence is not only a result of her gender but also her caste, as Dalit women are often the most vulnerable to exploitation by upper-caste men. Jamna's resistance, where she castrates her rapist, is a radical rejection of the Brahminical patriarchy that views Dalit women as mere objects. Meghwal writes, "Jamna, who had been tortured by Sumer Singh, turned into a symbol of resistance, showing that even the most marginalized can rise up against oppression" (Meghwal 45).

Jamna's story reveals the deeply gendered nature of caste oppression, where Dalit women are doubly marginalized. Feminist scholar Vimal Thorat argues that "Dalit women bear the brunt of both caste and gender-based violence, as their bodies become battlegrounds for the enforcement of Brahminical purity" (Thorat 19). Meghwal's portrayal of Jamna's act of vengeance is not merely about personal revenge but represents a broader critique of Brahminical traditions that condone the exploitation of Dalit women. By making Jamna the agent of her own justice, Meghwal challenges the caste and gender hierarchies that continue to marginalize Dalit women.

In *Dal-dal*, the narrative shifts to focus on the social status of sanitation workers, who are largely from the Dalit community. These workers, seen as impure by upper castes, are essential to maintaining cleanliness in society, yet they are treated with disdain. The story exposes the hypocrisy of Brahminical traditions, where those who perform essential services are shunned and ostracized. The sanitation workers' strike in the story is not just a demand for higher wages but a demand for recognition of their humanity. Meghwal writes, "These are hardworking people, and they deserve respect from the society that depends on their labor, but instead of respect, they are humiliated" (Meghwal 83). This sentiment echoes Ambedkar's assertion that "untouchability is the worst form of social slavery, and it is maintained through the perpetuation of caste hierarchies" (Ambedkar 58).

Resistance against Brahminical Authority

One of the key themes across Meghwal's stories is resistance against Brahminical authority, both through individual acts and collective struggles. In *Face Fire*, Sunanda challenges centuries-old Brahminical traditions by performing the last rites for her father, a role typically reserved for sons. Her mother supports this decision, asserting that her daughter has the same right as a son to perform these rites. Meghwal uses this act of defiance to question the rigid gender roles imposed by Brahminical patriarchy, which dictates that only male heirs can perform such sacred duties. The act of a daughter performing the funeral rites

becomes a symbol of resistance against the deeply patriarchal nature of Brahminical rituals, reflecting a desire for social reform.

Sunanda's act challenges not only the gendered nature of religious practices but also the broader Brahminical system that limits social mobility for Dalits and women. By defying these traditions, Sunanda asserts her Dalit identity, which refuses to be constrained by caste-based rituals. As Ambedkar famously declared, "The caste system is the enemy of human dignity," and resisting it is essential to creating a just society (Ambedkar 127).

Conclusion: Redefining Dalit Identity

Kusum Meghwal's stories offer a compelling critique of the Brahminical traditions that sustain caste and gender oppression in Indian society. Her characters, particularly Dalit women, embody resistance against these oppressive structures, asserting their right to dignity, equality, and self-respect. Through stories like *Subah Ka Bhula*, *Meri Sas Ne Kaha Tha*, *Angara*, *Dal-dal*, *Face Fire*, and *Yahi Hakikat Hain*, Meghwal interrogates the caste system, exposes the intersections of caste and gender oppression, and calls for a rejection of Brahminical authority. Her works advocate for a redefinition of Dalit identity, one that is not shackled by the constraints of caste and gender hierarchies but is rooted in the struggle for social justice.

In her stories, Meghwal paints a vivid picture of the realities faced by Dalits, especially Dalit women, and offers a vision of hope through resistance. By challenging the caste and gender hierarchies that have long dehumanized them, Meghwal's characters carve out a space for themselves in a society that denies their worth. In doing so, her stories serve as a powerful testament to the ongoing struggle for Dalit identity and the need to dismantle the Brahminical traditions that continue to perpetuate social inequality.

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