

Decoding Trauma, Identity, and Resilience to Caste-based Oppression in Premanand Gajvee's *Kirwant*

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Abstract

Dalit literature, deeply rooted in political reform and personal confession, often explores societal and individual challenges stemming from the Ambedkarite movement's rebellion and efforts. Premanand Gajvee, a celebrated Marathi playwright and poet, a seminal figure in Dalit literature, is celebrated for his contributions to the Dalit Theatre of Protest. His play Kirwant, inspired by the real-life issues of lower-caste Marathi Hindu Brahmins, critiques societal flaws. This study focuses on the themes of trauma, resistance and identity in Kirwant, examining the opposing reactions of two characters, Vasudeo and Siddheshwar, to caste-based oppression. Vasudeo's strong self-identity fuels his resistance, manifesting in anger and violence, while Siddheshwar's vulnerable social position and psychological trauma underscores his submission. The study explores the dualities in their responses, namely how trauma and identity performance influence their actions. By looking into the nuances of resilience and submission in Kirwant this study aims to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the marginalized experiences and their responses to systematic oppression. It focuses on how identity is constantly created and performed in response to societal pressures, providing insights into how marginalized people navigate and fight dominant power structures. The goal of the study is to advance a more sophisticated comprehension of trauma, identity, and resistance in Dalit writing.

Keywords: Dalit literature, identity, kirwant, marathi theatre, resistance, trauma

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature has historically been understood as a literature of revolution, closely associated with political reformation, and personal confession since its inception [1]. The element of confession of personal as well as societal trauma and struggles has been the most significant in major narratives of the genre. The foundations of the genre lie upon the rebellion and labours of figures like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, and others under them, so it's natural that most of the Dalit writings are imbued with a sense of resilience and resistance themselves. Premanand Gajvee, a prolific Marathi playwright and poet, expertly displays the harsh truths of reality with a strong sense of social commitment in his works. He's celebrated for his contributions to the Dalit Theatre of Protest, which serves as a vehicle for social change, giving voice to the voiceless, and supporting the call for justice and equality. His play *Kirwant*, inspired by real-life troubles of the lower caste Marathi Hindu brahmin society, works as a stark mirror to society's shortcomings as well.

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The intertwined themes of resistance and identity found in *Kirwant* are central to this exploration. Vasudeo's strong sense of self forms the bedrock of his resistance, while at the same time a lack of stability in his place in society renders Siddheshwar

weak in the face of conflict. The trauma resulting from such degradation, is also manifested differently in both men. Vasudeo resorts to anger and violence in light of any caste-based harassment, Siddheshwar's turmoil is mostly psychological. Where resistance itself is a coping mechanism for Vasudeo, the very thought of stepping out of bounds feels nightmarish for Siddheshwar [2].

The aim of the study is to analyse and decipher the dualities evident in responses to caste-based oppression among characters in similar social positions, and the inherent trauma within each response. The research will help significantly in providing a better understanding of the intricacies of the marginalised individuals and narratives, as these practices of persecution are still prevalent in contemporary times. It will assist in decoding the nuances of resistance, and its relationship with trauma and identity as seen in the play.

With the development of Trauma Studies, it has been proven that trauma is also psychological in nature with manifold causes and responses. The definition provided by P. Janet in her book. According to *The Mental State of the Hysterics*, psychological trauma is defined as one or more experiences that have the potential to change a person's psychic system and jeopardize mental cohesiveness because of their unique qualities. Trauma is subjective. It can be caused by a multitude of reasons and can equally manifest in a number of different ways. It may develop as a response to experiencing an event in which there was a "threat to life or physical integrity and safety", that causes feelings of "fear, terror, or helplessness" as stipulated by the American Psychological Association [3].

The process of adjusting well to hardship, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even major sources of stress is another definition of resilience provided by the American Psychological Association. It involves "mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" (Resilience). Under pressure, it is bending but not breaking.

Identity is perhaps the most debated and theorised concept in the past fifty years, especially with the appearance of postcolonial literature, gender and sexuality theories. Judith Butler, renowned feminist and literary theorist, emphasises the performative, and constructed aspects of identity in her theories. Butler's works *Gender Trouble* (1990), and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) highlight agency, normative frameworks, and power in establishing and rejecting identity, challenging fixities and advocating for fluidities in expression of the self.

The present study aims to examine the dynamic between submission and resistance to oppression, shed light on how trauma and the performance of identity in a social space can differ despite sharing a common origin in the struggle against dominant power structures. The goal of this study is to advance our understanding of the complexity of marginalized people's experiences and how they respond to structural oppression.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Literature is known to be a mirror to society with all its various qualities and flaws. Psychological trauma has material effects, and as such the depiction of trauma and identity formation, in literature, in terms of submission or resistance to oppression is crucial to a better understanding of such marginalised narratives. The purpose of the undertaken study is to analyse and decode the existing dualities in responses to caste-based oppression i.e., submission and resilience, and the inherent trauma within them. As well as to explore to what extent these responses are informed by identity and its performative nature.

Structure of the Study

This study is divided into four parts. The first part is a brief introduction of Dalit literature, Premanand Gajvee and his work under study *Kirwant*. Part two is literature review listing some relevant studies at home and abroad. Part three analyses the play *Kirwant* with a view of understanding the dynamic

between trauma and the performative nature of identity. It decodes the relationship between resilience and submission to caste-based oppression. Part four concluded the findings and mentions future scope of the study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The work done in the field of Dalit Studies till now explores how with the ideological turn provided by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, it became easier for Dalit writers to translate their painful experience into stories of resistance against caste prejudice. Through autobiographies and life-narratives, Dalit writers unified the community in their fight against untouchability but also erased the individual experience to some extent [4]. The inconsistencies present in the Dalit identity are accepted as a necessary component of the socio-political homogenous Dalit identity, but the complexities and internal contradictions of the Dalit identity cannot be disregarded [5]. Despite the ongoing and pervasive discrimination, the Dalit community has developed an "awareness" and a will to resist, which has led to the expression of their suffering in literature. The suffering, anguish, and trauma experienced by Dalits are depicted in great detail in Dalit literature, which also exposes the systemic problems of caste discrimination and untouchability in Indian society [6].

Gradually the challenges faced by the Dalit community began to be recorded in terms of trauma and the resistance born out of it. In works like "In the Tiger's Shadows" by Namdeo Nimgade, and "The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth" by B. Kesharshivam, writers convey their aspirations and expectations for societal change by addressing themes of trauma and suffering and using their sensitivity to reflect on these experiences [7]. Dalit literature became a medium for social development of disenfranchised Dalits [8]. It challenged societal perspectives by dispelling myths and giving voice to the voiceless by providing a distinctive investigation of collective consciousness, identity formation in terms of trauma, oppression and resistance to humiliation.

The concept of cultural hybridity, which was first introduced in postcolonial theory, represents the ways in which colonisers and colonised people interact. Globalisation has opened new spaces for hybrid and mixed identities, a blending of dominant and dominated cultures that challenge the traditional ideas of pure, fixed identity, and dismantle the inflexible labels that uphold racial, linguistic, and national disparities in society [9]. Hybridity in identity subverts the dominant narratives and allows for complex, subjective perspectives to come forth.

In *Kirwant* by Premanand Gajvee, this hybrid space is occupied by Siddheshwar Shastri and his family. As a kirwant—a Brahmin by birth but marginalised as a dalit in all manners—his dignity is taken away, along with his right to work and feed his family. His dual identity makes him vulnerable to both sides and their expectations. As a Brahmin he is expected to work for the society, but being of low caste he is not allowed in the public spheres, even public *poojas*. His low status begets discrimination and ostracization to his entire family, and he has no agency to even stand up for their survival. His brother Vasudeo on the other hand, personifies the violent and aggressive opposition to caste discrimination in the play. He tries to rouse his brother to the injustices heaped upon them time and again and becomes the major voice for equality of rights with his association with the 'All Hindus are One' movement. His passionate rejection of orthodox Brahmins and their suppression of kirwants provides an antithesis to Siddheshwar's submissive outlook towards the predicament. The psychological trauma of being divided between his religious inheritance and his family's survival, causes Siddheshwar to suffer a massive breakdown. He begins to have angry outbursts, suffers hallucinations, and eventually dies of a heart attack [10]. His death perpetuates the cycle of oppression and submission in his son Madhu, who is forced by his mother to perform the cremation rites for his father rather than follow an emancipative path of education as they'd earlier hoped.

The psychological breakdown depicted in the play is indicative of the deep-rooted impact of trauma caused by submission to oppression. Siddheshwar's identity as a kirwant, the provider of the family,

and a brahmin who believes in his profession and the sanctity of the religious texts is at once fixed in the society he lives in, and hybrid by its very definition—a brahmin who is also an outcast. His brother on the other hand, rejects his Brahminic identity and follows the Ambedkarite movement that is advocating for the rights of all untouchables (Gajvee, *Kirwant*). He wears the uniform of an upper caste educated youth, carries a stick, and is not afraid to question the superior brahmins on their contradictory and irrational regulations. He condemns his brother for not resisting the unjust rules imposed upon them, the mistreatment they receive in society, and even goes as far as turning violent to protect and take a stand against hypocrites like Dabushastri.

The resilience found in Vasudeo is a stark contrast to the submissive behaviour in Siddheshwar, whose internalisation of the power structures in a *savarna* society makes him believe in his powerlessness, and therefore renders him incapable of resisting the persisting trauma of living an outcast, and disadvantaged life.

Research Question

Based on the previous studies my research questions are as follows:

- How does trauma impact the responses to caste-based oppression?
- What are the dynamics between resilience and performativity of identity?
- How is identity formation impacted due to trauma?

TRAUMA, RESISTANCE, AND IDENTITY IN *KIRWANT*

Kirwant as a play was an important undertaking by Premanand Gajvee in the Marathi Dalit Theatre, as it depicted the socio-cultural life of kirwants on stage, and highlighted the discrimination and subjugation still present in society. Kirwants were the lower caste brahmins who performed the funeral rites of the society's departed, and were hence deemed disgraceful, despicable and lowly because of their profession. "Their presence is unwelcome and undesirable on auspicious occasions, just like the presence of untouchables" (Rautrao 16). Siddheshwar Shastri along with his wife and son, Revati and Madhu respectively, and his younger brother Vasudeo, lives on the outskirts of the village. A lower caste brahmin by birth who is treated as a dalit, Siddheshwar Shastri, the male protagonist, and his family are responsible for completing the cremation rights in the Marathi Hindu society, bringing hopes of salvation to the departed's family, yet they are not included in the social order. Throughout the play, many members of the family, and Siddheshwar himself are ever conscious of this divide that their dual identity brings to their lives.

Siddheshwar is neither a complete dalit, nor a full-fledged brahmin, yet he's performing as both in the society. The resulting discrimination from the upper-caste brahmins is distressing to the entire family. Vasudeo in order to rouse his brother confronts him brother repeatedly in the play.

"This is not a matter of strength" it is a matter of conscience. You don't have that at all. There's no difference between you and a corpse in a crematorium

"You're just a petty little worm all tied up in the strange knots of religion... Seeing the craftiness of men, even the crow refuses to touch the ritual *pinda*—and you happen to be a human being. The crow is a hundred times better than you" [11].

Vasudeo constantly tries to provoke Siddheshwar out of indolent outlook in life. To strive towards a change and demand equal treatment in their society. Yet for Siddheshwar a departure from the status quo is a disquieting thought. Vasudeo's acts of violence impact the survival of the entire family, they distress Siddheshwar and disintegrate his peace.

Trauma and Resistance

The psychological trauma of living a suppressed life since birth, having no means of upward social mobility, and being ostracized because of the very profession that allows him to feel of use to society-

turns Siddheshwar Shastri into a meek and submissive person. In the play, Vasudeo constantly confronts Siddheshwar with the discriminatory behaviour of the people in the society against him and his family, calling him weak, pathetic, worse than a “crow” in order to goad him, he says:

Brother Siddheshwara, people treat you with contempt, but call you only when someone has died. You are a crow yourself. Instead of calling a crow to touch the pinda, why don't you swallow it yourself? Your belly will be full and people will attain heaven [11].

This constant reminder of his lack of agency, and dilemma between following his *dharma* and standing up for his rights causes severe trauma in Siddheshwar. Ultimately transfiguring into hallucinations, intrusive destructive thoughts, and eventual heart attack. According to Giulio Perrotta, one of the clear symptoms of PTSD-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is:

The existence of bothersome symptoms (Criterion B) associated with the traumatic event and developing subsequent to the traumatic event: flashbacks, dreams, and memories that may result in a total loss of awareness of the surroundings. When exposed to triggers that represent or mimic the trauma, there may be severe or protracted psychological distress as well as physiological reactions.

Siddheshwar identifies first and foremost as a kirwant, a brahmin who has a religious duty to uphold and follow dharma. When that identity itself becomes problematic for him and his family's survival in a caste society, Siddheshwar suffers a breakdown.

The antithesis to his brother is Vasudeo, younger and more passionate in his rejection of the caste discrimination, he is part of the ‘All Hindus Are One’ movement that strives to bring equality and respect to all disenfranchised in the society, especially untouchables. He has denied his kirwant identity completely and presents himself as such. Vasudeo's aggressive behaviour and pleas to his brother to stand up against the bigotry in society act as a constant reminder about how the prejudiced society has turned Siddheshwar into a cowed man. The trauma of life as a suppressed dalit brings out in him the resilience to fight for his rights, as well as the rights of all who are similarly stifled. His aggression is also a sign of his trauma according to Perrotta:

Significant alterations in arousal and reactivity are linked to the traumatic event and happen afterward (Criterion E). These include agitated behavior and angry outbursts (with little to no provocation), which are usually expressed as aggressive verbal or physical behavior toward people or objects, self-destructive reckless behavior, hypervigilance, exaggerated alarm responses, difficulty focusing, and sleep-related issues like trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or non-restorative sleep.

Identity and Resistance

Both Siddheshwar and Vasudeo are the products of their upbringing and the traumatic events they've faced in life. Their response to the trauma is distinct though the origin is same. The determining element in their varied responses to trauma i.e., submission or resilience, is their identity. The key to their activities is how they choose to perform their identity and how they define themselves.

In her book *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler discussed how identity is essentially performative. According to her, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but rather as the citational and repeating process through which discourse generates the effects it names" in relation to gender [12]. It is a repetition of deliberate acts, behaviours, gestures, speech acts that constitute an identity according to pre-existing norms and cultural scripts. One can use the same definition of performance to social identity.

Siddeshwar performs his identity in society as a kirwant by wearing a *dhoti* and having a tuft of hair on the back of his head, by performing rituals, reading religious scriptures and carrying out *sandhyas* twice a day. His identity is borne out of the cultural need to follow the profession of his forefathers, his

dharma, and acting according to the dictates of the upper caste, dominant brahmins. This rigid adherence to the social order restricts him to the bounds within which a subjugated kirwant is cast. He has no agency because he doesn't believe he has the power to subvert his identity and the role he has in society. This restricted view ultimately becomes his ruin, as divided between his kirwant identity and the needs of his family to revolt against the injustices, Siddheshwar loses his sanity and passes away.

On the same note Vasudeo's rejection of his kirwant identity can also be seen as a performative act. Vasudeo understands the role of a kirwant is defined by repetition of a performance as a kirwant. Chanting of *mantras* and wearing a *dhoti* are symbols that neither make Siddheshwar an upper caste brahmin nor provide him any prestige afforded to that role.

Vasudeo: You think that you perform sandhya according to the brahmin dharma? But people know you as a brahmin meant to perform last rites. Brahmin by birth but by profession a lowly and despicable kirwant.

Identity is fluid, dynamic and can be re-created through social interactions and performances, as is proven in Vasudeo's case. Gajvee's Vasudeo accomplishes this by presenting himself as a complete opposite to the kirwant identity he was born with, by dressing up in khaki shorts and shirt, a black cap and boots and carrying a stick. He rejects the degradation and discrimination that his kirwant identity assigns him. Instead, he subverts his identity by recognizing the potential for agency and resilience in such an expression of his self. His aggression and violence are responses of his trauma, yet they're also the 'acts' according to which he expresses his identity as a strong, passionate young man who resists against caste-based oppression. Vasudeo acts as a challenge and a call for resistance to the existing power structures, he says "God helps only those who are strong. He is present in the strength of our wrists". Such an act of resistance is a direct consequence to the traumatic environment of an oppressed life, and the identity formed out of such conditions.

CONCLUSION

Kirwant encapsulates the intricate relationship between trauma, identity, and reactions to oppression-resilience or submission. Through Siddheshwar and Vasudeo, the play demonstrates how identity is perpetually shaped and performed in response to societal burdens. This performative view of identity offers a deeper understanding of the experiences of marginalized individuals in oppressive and traumatic environments and displays ways for rupturing or subverting dominant structures.

Examining *Kirwant* highlights the critical roles of both submission and resistance in shaping identity and their significant effects on individuals' lives. Siddheshwar's character embodies submission to oppression, reflecting internalized powerlessness and fear. Despite his essential societal role, he faces social exclusion only for being related to his outspoken and rebellious brother, which leads to a psychological collapse. His meek behaviour and eventual breakdown align with PTSD symptoms—intrusive thoughts and prolonged psychological suffering.

Siddheshwar's adherence to his kirwant identity and societal norms, is contrasted in Vasudeo. Vasudeo epitomizes resilience against caste-based oppression. Rejecting his kirwant identity, he actively participates in the Ambedkarite movement, showcasing defiance against societal prejudice. His aggression, indicative of traumas well, also reflects a strong sense of selfhood and determination. Vasudeo's subversion of traditional identity through his attire and beliefs of emancipation, symbolizes resistance and the performative nature of identity. Vasudeo's deliberate acts challenge existing power structures and demonstrate the fluidity and agency in identity formation, as well as the role of trauma and traumatic environments in it.

The present study focuses on the male narratives in the play *Kirwant* as the trauma and oppression found most impact on these characters, but this does not negate Revati, Siddheshwar's wife. Revati, a kind and intelligent woman, is also a victim of the degradation and ostracization that the family suffers,

and finds her circumstances changed a lot because of the events of the play. She is a proud kirwant woman and cognizant of the limiting reality of the inheritance of such an existence. She's aware, unlike Vasudeo, that marrying outside the caste like he wishes will not negate the stain the society has marked them with, it goes deeper than that. Her hopes for a better future for son Madhu are in line with the Ambedkarite thought that advocates for education as a way of upward social mobility, but ultimately Revati becomes a victim of her circumstances as well. Bound by her identity, she's forced to push her son into the very role that cost them her husband. While the present study limited itself to the male perspective, there is further scope of a psychological and feminist analysis of the female experience in Gajvee's play *Kirwant* as well.

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