



**Asking For ‘Social Consciousness’ Against the Conventional Rules: A
Study Of Waman Hoval’s Short Story – The Storeyed House**

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Abstract

In the short story The Storeyed House the punishment is awarded in the form of burning down to ashes a newly built house by one ‘Mahar’ - Bayaji, a retired employee who has returned from his workplace to settle down in his own native village. He wants to build a ‘storeyed’ house with his hard earned pension money to accommodate the members of the family. The local Patil objects to his proposal because it means a threat to his authority. Out of fear Bayaji has to abandon plan partially but the middle portion is elevated a little and a small first storey fixed up there with wooden flooring’ (Poisoned Bread, p.180). This small deviation costs his life and also the newly built house. ‘The govt. officers, quite expectedly the biased ones, record it as an accident due to a petromax flare-up.’ (Poisoned Bread, p.183) But his sons are desperate enough to start constructing that very day a new house- regular two ‘storeyed’ building as a symbol of an angry protest. The focus of this paper is on the social consciousness which should rise against the conventional rules of the society so people can live comfortably and normally in their own atmosphere without having any kind of biases against each other.

Key Words: Asking For ‘Social Consciousness’ Conventional Rules, Woman Hoval’s Saratchandra Muktibodh, in his essay, “What is Dalit Literature?” writes: “Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it. That is its implied value. The nature of this literature consists in

a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits – in the past and even at present – in the framework of the varna system. A feeling of rebellion is invariably accompanied by an extreme psychological commitment. As Dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary.” (trns. By Anil R Kulkarni; Poisoned Bread, p.270)

Here, in this paper, the writer likes to focus on this ‘social consciousness and the compatible changes’ which should be made into it with the special reference to the Short Story *The Storeyed House* (trans. By M D Hatkanagalekar) written by a well known Marathi Dalit Writer Waman Hoval. The short story deals with a painful struggle and death of a ‘Mahar’ (an untouchable caste in Maharashtra) – Bayaji.

Bayaji, a ‘Mahar’ by caste, is an old man who has been retired from his service and returns to his village from Mumbai. He did not hold any strong positions there, too, but when he got the chance to extend his duties, he worked as a supervisor for two years before his retirement.

He returns from Mumbai to his village where he meets the ‘well-known’ rascal of the village – Bhujaba. Bayaji greets him with respect but his being ‘Mahar’ is a very big ‘identity’ he has to carry with him and so his greetings should be the most humble and he has to accept the people of higher castes as the divine parents for him or the Godly support to him. His ‘simple’ greetings are taken as an insult by Bhujaba and so he is humiliated by that rascal on the spot. His self-respect arises and so his anger. But he controls his anger as he knows that he is going to stay in this village now onwards and so he should not quarrel or fight with these people for his rights.

This incident is the beginning of the pathetic story of a human being for whom it is more important to make identification as a ‘caste’ person rather than anything else. He has to fight not only against the other people but also against himself just because he does not want to indulge into some social protests. This is the worst part of that day of Bayaji. Bayaji got his fund amount on his retirement which is of two and a half thousand rupees. Bhujaba also gets an idea about cheating Bayaji and grab some of his savings and so he starts imagining confiscating the amount by one or another way.

Even now in many villages of India, the people of the upper castes believe that the men of the lower castes are worthless and they must not have any facility in their house or lives. Bhujaba and the other men of his group believe in the same ideology. Bayaji had just a single dream that he wanted to build a storeyed house in which he could stay with his complete family – his mother, wife, eight children in which six are the sons and two daughters included and grand children. He just had some two and a half thousand rupees in hand and in his heart, he bore a dream of building a storeyed house for his family. The people like Bayaji have beautiful dreams to be fulfilled if they can get the chance but somehow, many of the conservative social conventions do not allow them to do so. These rules and norms are prepared by the society and its upper caste hierarchy only. Therefore, many of them (those rules) do not permit the lower castes’ people to live happily and satisfactorily and according to their own desires.

This short story is full of conflicts related to vivid ideologies and caste –politics of social panorama. Bayaji – a mahar – even if he is not a person who could think bad of others, he is portrayed bad by some particular people of the village as they cannot bear the sight

of a mahar family being happy and satisfied with their own lives. How sadist some people can be! This kind of rules are made and implemented by the upper class of society.

According to the old and traditional customs, the mahars and the other lower caste people go for usual three-portioned house but according to the needs of Bayaji's big family, he thinks about having a storeyed house for them so the complete family can stay and enjoy their lives together without facing problems of eating by turns and sit crowded, knocking their knees together at the mealtime. Plan is good and so everyone in the family feels happy about it but the owner of the village – Kondiba Patil – is the only one person having a storeyed house. Out of his knowledge, Bayaji becomes Patil's rival by building another storeyed house in the village. Even if he has a thought of his family only, he is seen as an 'untouchable creature or worm'!

He is threatened and warned against his convictions and so he abandons plans for the storeyed house. The writer gives a beautiful description of the house in simple but intelligent words,

"... The conventional three-portioned house was taken up. Work was resumed and the walls rose rapidly. The middle portion was a little elevated and a small first storey fixed up there with wooden flooring. This part could be reached by stairs rising from the kitchen. No one could guess from the outside that there was a first storey to the house." (Poisoned Bread, p.180)

The village-elders – high caste people are invited to the ceremonial 'paan-supari' as they cannot be invited to a meal to refreshments conventionally in a lower caste family function. Pandal is full of guests and their wishes for the happiness of Bayaji and his family, except Kondiba Patil, Bhujaba and their other companions. The writer gives words to their emotions or jealousy in this way:

"These people felt uneasy at the sight of the brand new house, the impressive pandal and the crowd of smiling faces. Their eyes roved all over the place. [...] Patil sat quietly [...] His companions rather uncomfortably took their positions around him; [...] with this Kondiba Patil, Bhujaba and his companions rose to leave. As they came down, Bhujaba felt as if he were tumbling down the stairs. They eyed one another as if to say, 'This untouchable worm has got a swollen head. He needs proper handling.'" (Poisoned Bread, p.181-182)

The story gets its climax as on one side, the bhajans and prayers are in progress for Bayaji's family and their happiness and on the other side, the 'un-dreamt-of accident' takes place. Bayaji's new house catches fire from all sides. His agony is portrayed by the writer as he runs into the burning house crying 'my house, my house'. He cannot decide what to be saved at that time – the house, the pictures of Dr. Babasaheb and Buddha or something else. His suffering is not only his own. It is the pain of his family as well as the misery of the lower caste people everywhere in the different Indian cultures. The question, here, arises is not about the conventions only but it is about the needs or requirements of a big family. Whether it is a family of mahars or an upper caste family, the need of an appropriate house is always there; how can we make conventions bigger than the human beings and human values?

He is burnt all over when pulled out and still his agony of losing his dreamt-house is there, in his wailing continues, 'my house, my house'. With the heavy efforts of the guests, the fire calms down and so the body of Bayaji because of the great agony he is in. His body becomes completely quiet after these words:

"Sons, I want you to build a storeyed house. I've no other wish." (Poisoned Bread, p.183)

In the morning, the village officers and witnesses visit the place and record the fact that the house has caught fire because of a petromax flare-up. When a reader reads the story closely, this conclusion given by the officers seems very biased against the accident. The guests who came there for the house –warming ceremony are busy finishing the crematoria ceremony for Bayaji. This is really possible experience for them. The pain in their hearts is really heavy as they attended the funeral ceremony of the host himself. It seemed to be a real misfortune to them. But just after the funeral ceremony, the eldest son rose from the place he is sitting, outlined a square with the pickaxe and begins digging. Slowly and gradually, the others joined him in his work and all the family members started working of digging, gathering the earth with the spade, putting it in baskets and lifting the full baskets away. It is nothing else but their sense of responsibility of fulfilling Bayaji's dream of building a storeyed house.

The Storeyed House ends with a rebellious but positive tone when the eldest son says, "We're starting on a house, not one with a concealed first floor but a regular two-storeyed house." (Poisoned Bread, p.184)

This determination of the six brothers to fulfill his father's dream is not only their story. The wish of Bayaji, with his death, becomes a rebellious step in his sons' point of view. They cannot bear what happened to their father just because of his wishing to build a storeyed house. How the perception changes with the generations! Bayaji cannot control his wish to build a storeyed house even after being threatened by Patil and others and so he made an elevated storey in his house which is not visible from the outside of the house. The generation changes and accordingly their thoughts and behavior also changes. His sons cannot control their anger as well as rebellious nature they have according to their age, maturity and generation and so they plan and started working on not one with a concealed first floor but a regular two-storeyed house.

According to Muktibodh, "The Dalit point of view constitutes a clear diagnosis of a particular social reality and a sanguine hope for its desirable transformation." (Poisoned Bread, p. 270) This short story focuses on that particular point of view which is taken up by the new generation of Bayaji's family. The children cannot accept that their father, even if his being a very simple man, has to suffer just because he is a mahar – a low caste.

Jyoti Lanjewar's poem 'Caves' (Poisoned Bread, p.26) speaks out about the same rebel:

"Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves

In the rock of my heart

I must tread this forest with wary steps

eyes fixed on the changing times

The tables have turned now

Protests spark

now here

now there.

I have been silent all these days
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
for human rights.

[...]

I hold their unpardonable sins as witness
and turn, here and now,
a rebel.”

The story ends with a rebellious hope that is provided to the children of Bayaji by a horrible accident and death of their loving father and his shattered dreamt house, too. In the poem, the poetess talks about the same attitude of the rebel. When protests spark even the rocky heart gets carved because of the atrocities of the people of the society. One can pardon and keeps his/her mouth shut for a while against these atrocities but a long tolerance of this agony makes a rebel possible even in the minds and hearts made of rocks. The short story *The Storeyed House* provides an example of such a rebel through the characters of Bayaji’s children who cannot accept the wrong done to them and their family.

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