

Choma's Drum, a Perennial Dystopian Narrative of the Marginalized

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to relate the predicament of Dalit as a dystopian narrative. *Chomana Dudi (Choma's Drum)*, by Kota Shivarama Karanth, a Kannada writer, gives insight into the marginalized life of Dalit in the early 20th century. A 21st century rereading and analysis of the novel, astonishingly reveals the unrelenting plight of the Dalit situation in the present times. Dalit is still marginalized and quite unfortunately, the society seldom tried to accommodate them into the mainstream and continue to mock at their status; in fact, the monumental holy books destined the marginalization. Over the time he was doomed to all sorts of struggles, which he accepted as his wretched lineage. Amidst a vast population and variant demands to meet and fulfil, the Dalit voice is ignored by a larger section. The ego of the upper castes is intact disturbing the distribution of granted benefits to the oppressed. As long as the society fails to accept Dalit as an equally important fellow being holding every right to enjoy all the utopian benefits granted by the nation, he will be looked down upon by himself, resulting in his continuing deprivation from self-esteem. Centuries of oppression enslaved the Dalit in a dystopian ambience from where even an escape is disregarded and is attributed to further degradation. Dalit identity remains haunting in all settings and scenes. Dalit Voice has to be strengthened enough to shake those who turn a deaf ear to many atrocities. The humble Dalit demand is for equality, liberty and dignity; the right of every citizen. The backwardness of Dalit will continue till it remains a task of the Dalit alone; and the social, political and economic uplift of him in the society needs a compromise of support and cooperation from the majority sections of the society. The agonized cries from *Choma's Drum* still reverberate amidst us expressing the desperate feelings of Dalit in his segregation, exploitation, discrimination and oppression.

KEYWORDS

Dalit; Dystopia; Oppression; *Choma's Drum*; Discrimination

Introduction

The term *dystopia* is an antonym to *utopia*, coined by Sir Thomas More as the title of his famous work *Utopia*. Utopia derived

from Greek meaning 'no place' or 'good place' denotes an 'ideal state', where there is no poverty, crime or corruption. *Dystopia* was coined and first used by John Stuart Mill

referring to in parliamentary speech in 1868. As defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary dystopia is an “imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives”. In this paper, an attempt is made to adapt the definition of “dystopia” to redefine the underprivileged status of Dalit, the oppressed. The Hindu society, as mentioned in the *Purusha Suktha* of *Rig Veda* is divided into four *varnas* or *chaturvarna*. The various *varnas* or class has a different role to play through their occupation contributing to an organic whole of the society. *Brahmin* is the supreme class, of the priests; the second class, *Kshatriyas* are warriors; the third class, *Vaishyas* are traders; and the fourth class, *Shudras* are manual laborers, servants, cobblers, scavengers etc. *Shudras* are unskilled laborers, at the mercy of their masters, destined to feed on the meagre provision in return of menial jobs. The present study attempts a rereading of Kota Shivarama Karanth’s *Choma’s Drum* in the light of the present day status of Dalit and what could be done to bring equality for Dalit in India. Most of the works have been done to unravel why a Dalit is Dalit but the present inquiry is to state why a Dalit should not be oppressed.

The most inhuman part of being a Dalit is his further degradation as an outcaste, the untouchable. Physical contact or even the shadow of an untouchable would pollute the superior class and are supposed to take an immediate bath to recover purity. No further explanation is needed for the adaptation of Dalit as a dystopian citizen in a larger utopian world. The utopians, the upper class, least bothered, or they never came across, the predicament of Dalit. They trusted it as a rule set by the Vedas, not to be violated and if questioned it is an offence to the divine; and after all, who will do all these lowly jobs. Dystopia is a term coined by the west, but it is applicable in the east in comparable settings. The constant struggle of Dalit at all times is his passionate desire to shed his wretched

identity. That is how he started embracing the foreign or newly found religions to press his new form in the society; but it has done little good to the Dalit. The religious leaders and philosophers of various strata provide little hope to the Dalit except for the First law minister of independent India, Dr B R Ambedkar, who escaped his Dalit identity only to be called as a Dalit Buddhist. The silence and escapism of Dalit have passed to generations through his genes.

The Dalit in *Choma’s Drum*

The term ‘Dalit’ is from the Hindi word ‘dal’ meaning ‘crushed’ — or, in a general sense, ‘oppressed’. *Choma’s Drum* is a portrait of the wretched condition of Dalit in the early 20th century, penned by Karanth, an upper caste, who witnessed a stagnant tradition of his nation. *Choma’s Drum* resent the inhuman evils in the caste-based society. Choma is a bonded labour serving Sankappayya, the feudal lord of his village, Bhoganahalli. The bondage is tradition-bound and unbreakable, running through generations; the labourer cannot leave his master and the master is obliged to support the labourer’s family. For the menial jobs Choma does, he receives an allowance of 2 quarter seers of rice and 5 quarter seers of paddy, obviously insufficient to support a family of six members.

Choma, a holeya of the Mera subcaste has an ambitious passion in his life – to become a farmer, to till his own land, for he has reared oxen found from the nearby forest. But this dream is beyond his reach, as the tradition prevents a holeya from becoming a farmer. He repeatedly requests his master for a strip of land, but the master retorts, “Look here Choma. Our elders never rented lands to your people. It can’t be given now either” (Karanth 21). And even if Sankappayya takes an empathetic stand, his mother is stern and curses the temerity of holeyas to ask for lands to cultivate. Choma could only implore, can’t

defy or rebel against his master, as the daily allowance, he depends on for the survival of his family may be discontinued.

The church is ready to provide land for Choma, provided, he converts to Christianity. The church keeps cultivation lands as an allurements for religious conversions. But Choma is not ready to give up his religious beliefs, and still fancy a chance of getting land from his lord. Choma sends his elder sons to work in coffee plantations to pay off his debt of Rs. 20. There, one of them dies of malaria and the other converts to Christianity, marrying a Christian girl. Disappointed by these developments and rejection of land for cultivation, once, Choma in a fit of rage disregards his master. The master almost threw him from his household, but for the begging of Belli, Choma's daughter, the master agrees to provide the daily allowance to his family in return of the labour she and her younger brother offer. Choma's miseries deepen when his third son get drowned in the pond, with people looking around, no one trying to save him, as it is forbidden to touch the untouchable, even if it is to save a life. The unfortunate series of events in his life make him utter his caste as a godforsaken one.

The Dystopian Themes in *Choma's Drum*

The common man in all dystopian novels is ignorant, innocent, subservient and confused about his pathetic being. *Choma's Drum* is not different either; it draws several dystopian parallels in themes and motifs. Usually, dystopias portray a whole nation as under the rule of a totalitarian state, but in the case of the Dalit, he is subjected within a relative utopian society, unable to break the clutches of caste labyrinth. Individualism is denied to the oppressed he has no identity of himself among the upper castes; he is served with food or his remuneration in the courtyard, an untouchable is supposed to keep even his shadow away from others. He may

not keep a passion or dream to fulfil, as his birth decided the denial of all aspirations. Dalit is controlled by the order of caste system from the *Vedas*, reading and hearing of which is strictly prohibited for people of his caste; and if he happens to listen, molten lead is poured into the ears. The distinction as an outcaste is of his unfortunate birth in the caste which he cannot change by himself; caste compels its members a fixed social milieu, a condition that controls his conduct, bearing, lifestyle, contacts and ambitions. The propaganda of the society is a plague on the uplift of the Dalit; the caste system and the related superstitions are divine and the breaking of them may bring *Pralaya*. Oppression is the order for Dalit and regression is the social order of the caste system.

Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism is the centralized control of an autocratic or authoritarian government, group or individual on its subjects. Choma is under the control of his feudal lord, Sankappayya, who is competent only to give him his daily rations upon execution of menial jobs. He is also under the control of the caste system, which he never questions but considers as the unfortunate destiny bestowed by the divine. The caste system denied him the right to worship Hindu Gods, instead, he worships Panjurli, a diety for the marginalized, who he frequently appease for favours by sacrificing animals or fowls. Years of illiteracy, ignorance, penury and agonies press him to believe in the powers of Bhootaraya, the evil spirit. Choma's passion for tilling a strip of land is left unfulfilled as the upper caste fear the superstition, that the land may go barren if it is tilled by the lower caste. The caste system defines the totalitarian aspect of *Choma's Drum*. Choma shall get a piece of land from the government but then the bondage with the feudal lord will break, suspending his sole source of survival. The

crop from that piece of land depends on nature and climate and the returns would not be equal to that of what he gets as the daily allowance. The caste system has refused him the acquisition of any skill to make a living, the only skill which he attains is the making of bamboo baskets. The daily allowance of provisions is inadequate to meet the appetite of a six-member family; eagerly they feast on the dead bodies of animals, which they get occasionally and the caste system makes a taboo of it. Choma's sons working in the coffee plantations to pay off his debt gets a pittance for their labour, of which a major part is, spend in the toddy shop. The church is taking advantage of the pathetic condition of the Dalit and they offer land to cultivate in return for conversion.

Individualism

Choma cannot be identified as an individual; he is part of a collective group with similar struggles. The Dalit identity is bizarre, he cannot walk along the upper castes; he shall take water from ponds and wells exclusively for them; not allowed to enter the temples; he may eat left overs, animals, fish, fowl and the like, adding to his degradation in the caste system; he may do only menial jobs, as servants, cobblers, sweepers, scavengers etc; cornered into colonies in the outskirts of the town or on hillocks inaccessible by roads; his funeral ground is on hill top and is never expected to get cremated, but buried in the ground. Women are exploited, abused by all castes and races. He is imposed with superstitions and education is not his lot. The *Vedas* played fatal politics with the identity of Dalit in the caste system; it never assured an option by *karma* or *dharma* to change his identity, the unfortunate birth decided his worst future. The epics also drew similar events. The story of Ekalavya, an indigenous boy in Mahabharata describes how he had to cut his right thumb off as he mastered archery

so well to match the skills of Arjuna. It is important to note that Dalits were denied education, justice and social status for centuries. Church offers land to all and also facilitates an escape into another identity by means of conversion, but Choma feels, such an act would be an offence to Panjurli, and according to him his origin is superior to that of Christians.

People of other castes consider Dalit as impure by birth, their mere presence made uneasiness for them. Choma is denied self-esteem; always pleads before his master whether for land or for decisions to be taken in his family; waiting in the courtyard of toddy shop for a relief in exchange for the grain; lives in a hutment, the roof of which leaked in the rainy season, that needed annual maintenance; whereas his master lived in a big house with several servants working in his courtyard. In the end, we see Choma, devastated by the cruelty; destiny played on him isolates himself in the hut beating his favourite Drum, till he succumbs to his pain and agony.

Propaganda

The propaganda against Dalit is that of social stratification, segregation, discrimination, oppression, and violence. Social stratification is the serious problem for the uplift of Dalit. Choma does not desire to escape from his Dalit identity, and instead, he wanted dignity within his religion. A crowd of non-Dalit watches over the drowning of Choma's younger son Neela. One Brahmin boy indeed wants to rescue Neela but his friends warn him of untouchability. Choma is discriminated for his choice of food, shelter, livelihood, entertainment and worship. Dalit lives in huts; eats animals; can do only menial jobs, under enslavement of feudal lord, government or church; his only means of entertainment is singing and dancing with his family, beating his favourite Dudi; he prays to

primitive gods or spirits because the Hindu Gods and incarnations are for the worship of uppercastes. Choma is repeatedly oppressed by Sankappayya, his master reminding him of his Dalit origin, barring him from becoming a farmer. His daughter Belli also advises him to leave his ambition as she perceives it as a dream beyond holeyas. The oppression of Dalit turns out to be a lineage. Choma's Drum depicts violence in undertones. The violence of the spectators in the drowning of Neela, Choma's son; the psychic rebellion of Choma against his master, church, the conversion of one of his son Guruvato Christianity; the contempt and agony over his daughter's relationship with the Christian estate manager. The propaganda against the Dalit has been prevailing for centuries in our society. Ignorant and illiterate Choma is a victim of being a Dalit, or in other words, every Dalit is a victim of being a Choma.

Fear

Choma and his family are obsessed with different fears. His prime fear is of his untouchability, which stems to all associated worries. Choma always pleads before his master for all his causes. He begs for a strip of land to till and raise his crop. Before sending his sons to the coffee plantations he procures consent from his master. He fears the life of his elder sons in the coffee plantations and advises them to abstain from toddy. Toddy, the local alcohol, is a passion for Choma and he fears his sons also may fall into addiction. He fears the wrath of a local deity, Panjurli for his elder son Chaniya's death by malaria. The *holeya* priest, Achila Chinna advocates sacrifice of a pig and fowl to pacify Panjurli. Choma upon advice from his daughter decides to convert to Christianity to live his dream as a farmer but change his decision after the vision of a furious Panjurli.

Dissent

Choma dissent his identity as a Dalit. He repeatedly claims the right to be a farmer before his master; hope for the mercy of the church. He is silenced, but his drum symbolizes his voice. The novel starts and ends with the beating of a drum. In the opening, he and his children sing and dance to the tune of the beating of the drum. Listening to the drum, the people going back home after the village festival comments on Choma's singing as a drunkard's mischief; Choma is rather dissenting his exclusion from the society by finding whatever little happiness he can have within his limits. The drum stands for Choma's self-expression and individualism. He asserts his feelings of anguish, sadness, protest, and despair through the beating of his drum. Choma once in a fit of rage disrespects his master, who but forgives for the begging of Belli and assures to continue with the daily allowance. Choma is confused by the stand of the church luring with the offer of lands for converts. Choma disowns his son Guruva for the religious conversion after marrying a Christian girl, Mary. In the end, we find Choma beats and throwing his daughter out of the house for her relationship with the estate manager Manvela. In a fit of distress, he challenges his destiny, starts to till a piece of land and chases off the pair of bullocks to the forest. Later he shuts himself in the hut beats his drum till he succumbs to his agony.

The Echoing of Choma's Drum

Choma's Drum portrays the life of Dalit in the early 20th century. Since independence, the government took several steps for the uplift of Dalit, incorporated schedules in its constitution eventually terming Dalit as under scheduled castes (SC). While drafting the constitution, provisions made to ensure equality for Dalit in the society. The Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955/1976 gave many utopian promises to the Dalit lot. The

government abolished untouchability, assured protection from various forms of exploitation; opened entry to temples; promised access to roads, streets, wells, ponds etc.; granted right to acquire property and right to education; enforced reservation of employment in state and central government institutions; prohibited forced labor; reserved representation in parliament, assembly, panchayat and the like. The Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 described compelling bonded labour as a punishable crime. But according to the report of the Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice and Human Rights Watch, New York School of Law presented in 2007,

There are an estimated 40 million bonded labourers in India, of whom 15 million are children. The vast majority of these labourers are Dalits or tribals. Bonded labor is sustained by the caste system, in particular through the traditional expectation of free labor and /or inadequate remuneration for work, the lack of Dalit ownership of land, social and economic boycotts levied by upper-caste community members, police extortion and looting, and by acts of threats and violence that prevents Dalits from reporting abuse against them (including that they are being held in bondage) (57, 58).

The central government has set up a National Commission as an advisory board on issues related to SC and ST; state governments also have separate departments for the welfare of SC and ST. A number of voluntary organizations are also in place to promote the welfare of Dalit. Having all these measures in place, Dalit is still socially and economically

backward, he is principally in a dystopian condition. The welfare schemes fail to reach out with the conceived intention. Socially still they follow many of their old customs and traditions. Politically, they have no voice in the mainstream political debates, economic exploitation is another serious problem faced by them.

Conclusion

A rereading of *Choma's Drum* reveals that dystopian elements still prevail in Dalit life in our society. The novel is worth reading even today to inform ourselves that Dalits are an unfortunate lot and even after a century, the Dalit situation hasn't improved as it should have; and it is an individual responsibility of all educated, socially and economically forward people to uplift the Dalit social status in the society. We should stop crying for the lifting of SC and ST reservations and try to empathize with their oppression. In many parts of India many religious sections are demanding an inclusion in the OBC list but none is asking for SC/ST status, evidently OBC status is worth for reservations and for procuring rights and benefits from governments; and the same benefits provided for SC/ST is neither reaching to the benefactors nor they have a strong voice to claim them and are looked down upon by the general society. Job opportunity in the government sector is limited, reservations of Dalit shall be made in private section also as India adopted and moved through the liberalized era. The governmental and voluntary organizations should be more committed to implement and inform the schemes to the Dalit; as they are ignorant about the policies allocated by the government for their uplift.

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