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Text, Reading and Interpretation: Problematizing the Myopic Categorisation of Annabhau Sathe's Writings with Reference to the Select Short Story

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Abstract: The veteran *Marathi* writer 'Annabhau Sathe', as an epitome of marginalised voice, is trapped in an ideological and critical predicament. Being an author from the periphery in terms of language, caste and class, he has not been a thorough perusal that eventuated into mere tagging and clogging of labels rather than insightful readings of his literary corpus. The survey of *Marathi* criticism on Annabhau's writing exhibits that his literature has been constrained within the boundaries of either Marxist or Dalit identities and theories. However, lenses of such a kind are not invalid but need to be extended to offer unconstrained and comprehensive criticism, as his written corpus has potential which needs to be unpacked. Various Western critical theories are cited extensively to uncover and substantiate the argument to underscore the plausibility and tribulations of critical engagements. Annabhau may be a representation of such a writer who has not been highlighted due to the fences of caste, class and language. A country like India, where multilingualism functions as a stumbling block as well as a beauty in diversity. Hence, the present article is a concise attempt to pave the way for the rereading of marginalised authors in order to make them free from any sort of myopic approaches and language boundaries.

Key Words: Text, Ideology, Marxism, Multilingualism, Dalit, Interpretations, Caste, Class.

Our view is different. The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 451)

Certainly, it need not be with a derogatory purpose that one points out personal studies, as distinct from poetic studies, in the realm of literary scholarship. Yet there is a danger of confusing personal and poetic studies, and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 455)



So once again, I have made the text disappear, but unfortunately, the problems do not disappear with it. If everyone is continually executing interpretive strategies and, in that act, constituting texts, intentions, speakers and authors, how can we know whether or not he is a member of the same interpretive community as any of us? (Fish 485)

..... the poem not as a self-contained organism but as a sequence which has meaning only in relation to a literary system, or rather, to the “institution” of literature which guides the reader. (Culler 291)

Annabhau and Criticism: In Brief

It is obvious that any act of interpretation, whether it is of literary or non-literary text, is influenced by manifold theoretical approaches. The critic is one of the vital agents who sometimes decide and define the line of thinking of an author, which shapes the interpretation of a text and ultimately establishes the author's identity. Hence, it triggers the plausibility to argue that literary text and the author of it, sometimes, are interpreted in an unexpected way, about which the original author may or may not be aware or never thought of it. The rise of theory in the second half of the twentieth century became the battleground on which literary texts have been dissected in an attempt to enlarge and enhance the field of literary studies. Naturally, the rush of theories packed the non-European academia where some erudite invested their erudition to interpret, sometimes misinterpret, the literature of their own land. These theoretical properties of Europe have been patented to be authentic and insightful inputs to understand the non-European literary and non-literary world. Nothing is objectionable.

A glimpse over an entire literary contribution of Annabhau into the Marathi literary world is substantial, but he has been sidelined by the fraternity of the Marathi literary clique. As mentioned earlier, our literary consciousness is manifold because its deepened diversity is embedded in language, culture and social dimensions. Sometimes it becomes very painstaking to understand and situate a writer in any specificity of cultural and ideological consciousness. Despite these adversities, there have been extensive, sometimes unnecessarily dragged, attempts to label the writer under an ideology which has made unpardonable plunders in the literary and social world. Annabhau, a prolific writer, has always been destined to be labelled as a communist and Dalit. He indeed belonged to the Dalit, marginalised class that definitely influenced his



literary and social consciousness, and there is no hesitation in denying the fact. But a close reading of Annabhau, without any ideological bragging, creates multiple possibilities of interpretations which bear the potential to trespass the constraints of any rigidity of ideologies like Dalit or communist.

The story is selected as a specimen to examine the narratives which are abundant with the potentiality of critical reading, thereby the problem of interpretation can be investigated. If we look at some criticism made on Annabhau's writings, it seems there have been only reductionist approaches to reading his writings. Reductionist, what I mean is, an exercise of homogenising of interpretation, as mentioned earlier, labelling him under some tags of ideology. Mostly, Annabhau's writings have been read as if he were the messiah of Marxism and thereby Dalit consciousness. There is no doubt that he was influenced by Marx and his ideology, as he was an activist who was involved in mill workers' agitations in Mumbai. He was singing the ballads of revolution in an expectation of justice for workers. In many of his famous ballads, he has glorified the Russian Revolution and its leaders.

Theoretical Predicaments

In Western academia, there are substantial exercises in the name of 'literary criticism and theory', particularly with the emergence of 'New Criticism' that extended towards poststructuralism. However, theorists from France and Germany have tremendously enriched and enhanced the reinterpretations of literature, culture, and politics. The history of this exercise begins with New Criticism and the U.S.A. The analysis of literary text has been reduced to the 'textual analysis' by pushing back the author as a source of interpretation. The famous catchline of Wimsatt and Beardsley, "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable," impacted literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth century. The autonomy of the text challenged the role of the author as a sole creator of the text, which turned the 'authorial' role problematic to gain a neutral or unintentional reading of the text. Wimsatt and Beardsley argue:

The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge. What is said about the poem is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement in linguistics or in the general science of psychology. (Ramaswami and Sethuraman, 451)

Making of textual reading as a linguistic practice open to the public by putting aside the influence and intrusion of the author. Once reading becomes a public activity, then it turns the text into a site of varied ideologies uncontrollable to the author as the sole creator of the text. Any reader can enter and bring out the meaning suitable or convenient for his or her ideology. Terry Eagleton, in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), refutes the 'closed reading' of a poem practised by I.A. Richards. He argues:

Reading Richards' undergraduates' accounts of literary works, one is struck by the habits of perception and interpretation which they spontaneously share- what they expect literature to be, what assumptions they bring to a poem and what fulfilments they anticipate they will derive from it. None of this is really surprising: for all participants in this experiment were presumably young, white, upper or upper-middle class, privately educated English people of the 1920s, and how they responded to a poem depended on a good deal more than purely literary factors. (13)

What Eagleton argues is that the operation of 'ideology' as an influencing force causes to variety of textual readings. The critical responses from students are entwined with their varied belongings and beliefs. Hence, the argument of New Criticism, reading as an autonomous or autotelic process, is problematic. However, Eagleton's denial of textual reading of this sort brings us towards another bewilderment: 'Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, is an ideology' (19). I shall take this up a little later.

An objection Eagleton raises to Richards might be discernible here, as it is highly impossible to expect such an unbiased approach towards the text. Hence, an exercise of temporary suspension of ideological bias from the reader can be practised. Is it possible to read the text, for a while, neutrally? I left the question unanswered.

A reading of a reader cannot be an opinion of the author. Moreover, the cultural, social and political diversity, and sometimes the time and location between the author (text) and the reader, widens the gap between both of them. An absurd theatre in Europe after the Second World War is a natural expression of their writers, but at the same time, in India, for instance, we started finding new meanings in our national consciousness. An independence in India was being celebrated with great optimism for a better future. The point is, on what ideological or philosophical bases we read Samuel Beckett in India. Which ideology of Beckett's literature can an Indian reader discern from his plays? Even though Beckett has been a monumental



author amongst the Indian academia, the reason, I think, we look at his plays as a reaction to the predicament of post-war horror, with spectacular experiments with literary devices. Meaning Becket has been interpreted in the broader context of contemporary time and artistic experiments. If it is not happening and the author has been enclosed within the boundaries of a select ideology, then it is a serious issue. Annabhau has been trapped in such a monolithic approach of 'Marxist' and 'Dalit' ideologies. The story which I have selected to address this predicament is also titled '*Trap*'.

After New Criticism and its strategies of textual reading, once again turned down by critics like Stanley Fish. The formal categories, which were once considered by new critics as textual properties, were later transferred to the reader. The very process of reading, being an experience from the side of the reader, made the text a receiver of interpretations. The consciousness of the reader is deeply rooted in non-textual entities. Fish argues: "the reader whose education, opinions, concerns, linguistic competences, etc. make him capable of having the experience the author wished to provide" (1976). The notion of 'intended reader', though, denies the presence of the author; Fish does not deny the possibility of 'author's intention'. However, it seems that he is not in favour of the author. The essay, 'Interpreting the Variorum' (1976) explicates the role of the reader as a central phenomenon in the interpretation of a text. Reader, as an individual and as a part of the community, becomes the sole determiner of the interpretation. The reader has been placed by Fish in an 'interpretive community' which shares different strategies not for reading but for rewriting the text. Further, Fish states: "In other words, these strategies exist before the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the way around" (Fish,483). The concept of reading and, thereby, the interpretation of any literary text is still detached from the author. It is true that Fish somehow dares to include the author in the process of interpretation, but it remains at a negligible status. Reader, as an individual and as a part of the community, having certain strategies of reading becomes a deciding factor in the destiny of the text, and may be of an author. These interpretive communities will come on certain shared strategies of reading despite their subjective inclinations. Now, in this mode of interpretation meaning of the text and the ideological shape of the author are decided by organised interpretation, which I think is quite problematic. It is because here meaning and formation of an authorial identity now is in the hands of certain collective strategies.



The process of reading as a reinforcement of the reader's consciousness, as an individual or as a part of a community, later on shifted to an 'institutionalised' approach of reading. Now, the reader, as a subjective or a part of collectivism, needs to acknowledge literature as a long system coming down for centuries. The meaning of a text has to be related to a system where interpretation is taken as parasitic. Jonathan Culler argues: "Interpretation of authors and works is wholly parasitic on the activity of reading literature: the critic who writes about an author is simply producing a more thorough and perhaps more perceptive version of what readers of literature do for themselves" (Culler 290). The perceptive reading of an author fails to validate the author's ideological shape. Just looking at the biographical or social activism of an author, which is in fact outside the literary text, should not be pasted as his or her ideological inclining. An author may have distinct views at the time of writing a literary piece, which always waits for unrestricted appreciation. Moreover, if a critic endeavours to relate an author to a system of literature, as Culler states, then the validity and availability of a system becomes debatable. We need to raise doubts if we are talking about systems, what does it mean by system? Who decides the validity of the system? How or on which ground can we situate an author in any system? A critic may celebrate freedom to adjust an author in any system, but that does not offer the authenticity of the real author's permission to do so. Meaning, again, an act of reading and interpretation comes under the question mark.

Case Study

The story titled '*Trap*' (*Marathi: Saapala*) may be a subject of little commentary. The story has been set in a small village of Maharashtra, which might be in Annabhau's vicinity of birthplace. The tone of the story is highly caste oriented, which was or is the fact of the Indian social fabric. The villagers are grouped into two: Dalits and Savarnas (not Brahmins!). 'Dada Deshmukh', a leader of the Savarna group and 'Hariba' Mahar, a spokesman cum leader of Dalits, set the narrative of the story. The story opens with a very casteist remark: "Buddy, Mahars have forgotten their place, we will show them villagers' anger'. Otherwise, they will not obey us" said Dada Deshmukh, loitering amongst the villagers (Annabhau, 394). The reason behind the anger is, Dalits are not obeying the high castes of the village. A bullock has died at the farmhouse of Dada Deshmukh, and Dalits have to drag it outside the village, but now, after a day, no one from the Dalits is coming to drag this stinking carcass. All villagers are gathered in front of the panchayat to penalise Dalits.



The anger amongst the villagers is on high alert. Suddenly, the group of Dalits approached the panchayat led by Hariba. As soon as they arrive, everyone starts shouting at them, threatening them. But Hariba, a wise man, responds moderately and refuses to do the work. After a long confrontation matter remains disputed, and villagers decide to torture Dalits by various tricks. The tussle goes on for a few days without any settlements, and now Dalits are facing a lot of troubles as they are on the verge of famine. Hariba boosts their zest and promises to find out the solution. One day, he decides to visit the Tahsil authority to complain villagers. One day, he starts early in the morning, having little fear in mind of attack by the villagers, but he starts bravely. He passes through the barren plateau, which is just outside the village, still having fear. Suddenly, he sees two villagers ahead of him, which makes him cold. But his fear dies down immediately as these two are his village mates from the high cast. Annabhau keenly narrates the incident, which is quite interesting. He says that now, at this barren and life-threatening plateau, they have forgotten their caste and dispute and walk together. Annabhau States: “out of the fear of death they walk together forgetting their caste and quarrel” (400). Hariba reaches the tahsil, while searching the office to lodge the complaint, his attention goes towards the auction going on in the campus of the tahsil office. He just slides towards the crowd and finds that the auction of his village is just opened. Suddenly, an idea strikes him, and he jumps into the auction and wins an auction.

The story takes a turn and heads towards the conclusion. After taking an auction of the plateau of the village, now Dalits have become the owners of that plateau. Now, the rest of the high caste and others are detained to bring their cattle to the plateau. Only Dalits’ cattle are allowed to graze on the plateau. Again, the entire village slips into unrest because Dalits become the powerful strata of the village. After a few days, Dada Deshmukh and others willingly accept the denial of Dalits’ grievances, and the story concludes with:

Yes, yes, it is true, Patil said, but without village Mahar-inhabitation is void, and without Mahar-inhabitation village is pale. This land belongs to all, we should all live together as if we are the sons of the same mother..... now onwards we will live straightforward.

Hariba said, “means how? I don’t understand”, and Patil said, “like human beings”. After listening to this, Hariba breathed out calmly. (402)



The compromising conclusion of the story from either side of the villagers urges the reader to rethink certain issues. The submissive 'other' and aggressive 'self' sort of categorical bifurcation willingly accepts the compromise on the grounds of humanitarian ideology. The reading of 'compromise' in fact interrogates the ideology of 'thesis-antithesis' confrontation between two groups. The systematic rebellion of Hariba without urging fellow villagers against the Dada Deshmukh and high castes is a strategic yet peaceful move which succeeds in compromising. One can read the compromise from the side of the upper caste as a matter of helplessness, or maybe for the time being. The real question, one may ask, is whether the upper castes are really willing to accept the counter of Dalits? Or it is just a temporary maladjustment. Meaning, one possible reading of the conclusion of the story depends on the reader and his or her approach to look at the story. Rather, the interpretation of a reader relies on the ideology he or she follows. The acceptance of Hariba's move by the upper caste can be a political strategy of compromise to respond after some time. Hence, compromise of Hariba can be another way of accepting the dominance of the upper caste, which is merely a temporary relief.

The second lens of reading 'compromise' from the side of Hariba and Dalits brings out certain threads of interpretation. Hariba 'breathed out calmly' may drag one's attention as a helplessness because Hariba is still not sure about the willingness of the upper caste. Hariba is quite sensible and wise, and can recognise the deep political subtleties of oppression by the upper castes. It seems he is still having the feeling of a counterattack by the upper caste in the coming time. His relief carries the fear of further exploitation through different strategies. The anger of villagers at the beginning of the story completely vanishes in the end, and need not be read as a complete and sudden transformation amongst the upper castes. Centuries-old social structure is being dismantled in a sudden, freakish a strategic move by Hariba. Is it really acceptable to the upper caste?

Conclusion

The above interpretations are just an attempt to reread the conclusion of the story with two quite different readerships, which unsettles the text. However, there is one more possible way of reading the conclusion based on 'humanity'. Annabhau's literature has been interpreted widely on this ground. The humanitarian approach is visible everywhere in the writings of Annabhau. Annabhau does not provoke his



protagonists to unnecessary violence against the upper caste. His downtrodden characters are aggressive and upset by the caste politics. They fight, sometimes involved in violence, but their violence is against the system and not provocative as such. Even the language he employs in his ballads, short stories and novels is quite moderate. Hariba and Dada Deshmukh are ready to settle their dispute on purely humanitarian grounds suggest a healthy compromise. Hariba does not instigate violence amongst Dalits; rather, he takes a democratic move and settles the matter.

I have uncovered three possible readings of the conclusion of a story. The rest of the story and character analysis are laid outside of my interpretation. The question is where and how we can 'situate' Annabhau as an author? Is he a comrade? Is he Dalit? Is he a Humanitarian writer? My objection is not to the title one can attach to him. Neither am I claiming that Dalits and Comrade identities are based on non-humanitarian grounds. I do not have any personal problem or objections to these identities. My concern is tagging an author under the specific category, which may encompass the varied appreciation of an author. Annabhau, it has been claimed by many critics, that not been recognised as a versatile writer who bears the potential to be a world-class author across the castes and classes. I have found some writings where Annabhau has been tagged either as Comrade or Dalit. As I mentioned above, I do not have any objections to these tags. The problem is that Annabhau, as a litterateur, has been reduced to identity politics. We need to rethink and differentiate Annabhau as an activist, maybe a communist, and as a writer/artist. Some may object to this approach as ridiculous because they believe the writer and ideology or caste-class consciousness are inbuilt consciousness. We read Becket beyond his class or race identity and interpret him as one of the brilliant authors on the affirmation of his artistic yet social and political criticism on general human concerns.

The reading of Annabhau's select story here is in complete denial of any constrained ideological interpretation. The text does not allow the reader to shape the text in any ideological direction. However, a reader has full right to analyse his writings through any lens. What I am trying to suggest is that cramming of his texts into ideologies like Marxism and Dalits would be an injustice to enlarge the scope of reading Annabhau as a creative writer. We need to rethink Annabhau as a creative writer first to uncover literary qualities which are yet to be discovered. Pre-decided theoretical reading will shrink the literariness of his



writings. The story selected here, therefore, is in absolute rejection of planned interpretation like Marxism, for instance.

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