



Research Article

Tracing the Scars of Caste: Interpreting *My Childhood on My Shoulder* by Sheoraj Singh Bechain

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Abstract

This essay looks at Sheoraj Singh Bachain's autobiography *My Childhood on My Shoulder* as a powerful story of caste tyranny, resistance, and self-creation in modern India. The article uses Dalit autobiographical studies, subaltern theory, and social justice critique to look at the text and conclude that Bachain's work is an important testimony to what it is like to be a caste outsider. It puts the text in the Bigger Picture of Dalit life-writing in Hindi literature, illustrating how it breaks apart upper-caste history and gives back voice and dignity. Using academic references and comparative frameworks, the study argues that Bachain's autobiography is both a record of suffering and a call for freedom. In the end, it shows how complicated caste is as a physical weight that people carry and fight against by recounting their own stories.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Caste is still one of the strongest social hierarchies in India. Even if "untouchability" is no longer legal, caste-based prejudice still affects millions of people in physical, symbolic, and emotional ways. Dalit writing has been a strong voice against caste injustice, giving firsthand accounts that go against Brahmanical dominance. Sheoraj Singh Bachain's *My Childhood on My Shoulder (Mera Bachapan Mere Kandhon Par)*, originally in Hindi) is a moving and politically charged autobiography that stands out among these stories. Bachain's writing is part of a bigger movement in Dalit life-writing that uses personal stories to criticize society. His story shows the everyday humiliations, structural exclusions, and psychological suffering that caste causes. At the same time, it keeps track of actions of disobedience, self-assertion, and group action.

The title, "*My Childhood on My Shoulder*," makes you think of the weight of caste as something that is actually on your body and psyche. This essay looks at how Bachain's autobiography serves as both proof and resistance. It wants to know how the literature "carries the weight of caste" by not just showing oppression but also by giving people back their power and voice. Using Dalit studies, subaltern theory, and autobiographical research, the study puts Bachain's work in its historical and literary settings. It says that the work changes the way history is usually written by giving a subaltern counter-narrative that focuses on Dalit subjectivity.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Since the 1960s and 1970s, Dalit autobiography has been a well-known type of Indian literature. Some well-known authors in this genre include Daya Pawar (*Baluta*), Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*), Sharan Kumar Limbale (*Akkarmashi*), and others. Scholars like Eleanor Zelliot (1992) and Gopal Guru (2001) have said that Dalit autobiographies are very important for self-representation and political action. By telling the story of caste from the inside, they question the dominance of upper-caste people.

Sharmila Rege (2006) says that Dalit life-writing is not just personal; it is also quite political. It describes what Rege calls a "testimonios" style of writing, in which personal experiences stand in for shared histories of oppression. In the same way, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991) say in their breakthrough anthology that Dalit and subaltern literature break apart the official nationalist stories that leave out voices from the margins.

This is the tradition that Sheoraj Singh Bachain's work comes from, but it isn't talked about as much in English-language studies. But among Hindi Dalit literary circles, *Mera Bachapan Mere Kandhon Par* is praised for its honest look at caste persecution in Uttar Pradesh. Researchers like Raj Kumar (2018) and Badri Narayan (2004) have looked at how Dalit autobiographical writing in Hindi has become a type of resistance literature. These studies show how these kinds of literature take back the right to define oneself, challenge Brahmanical stories, and build new communities.

Also, theorists of subaltern studies like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak have asked if the subaltern may speak in the records of history. One way that Dalit autobiography tries to speak up is by making a counter-archive. Gopal Guru (2001) says that Dalit testimony changes the way we think about ethics and knowledge by emphasizing the truth of the experiences of those who are not in the mainstream.

This examination of the literature shows how important it is to have a theoretical and historical framework in order to comprehend Bachain's autobiography as a work that "carries the weight of caste" in both senses: carrying it and exposing it.

3. METHODOLOGY

This essay looks at *My Childhood on My Shoulder* as both a text and a piece of evidence using a literary-critical and cultural-studies perspective. It uses attentive reading of certain parts of the autobiography to show how caste violence and resistance are shown. It puts these readings in the broader context of Dalit studies and subaltern theory, focusing on themes of voice, agency, and memory.

Rege (2006), Limbale (2004), and Kumar (2018) are all examples of secondary sources that are scholarly works on Dalit autobiography. Other examples are theoretical debates of witness, subalternity, and narrative. The goal is to illustrate how Bachain's writing criticizes the caste system and builds Dalit identity at the same time.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Weight of Caste in Childhood

Bachain's autobiography, *My Childhood on My Shoulder*, is a strong metaphor for the heavy load of caste that comes too soon. His early years were full of uncertainty, shame, and anxiety. He talks of being forced to sit alone at school, not being able to get water, and being called caste insults. Other Dalit autobiographies, like Valmiki's *Joothan*, in which the author had to scrub the school grounds due to his caste, have similar stories. Rege (2006) says that these early traumas are not just random; they are at the heart of the Dalit autobiographical mode because they show caste as a form of violence that happens every day. In one very sad part, Bachain remembers being forced to carry cow excrement on his head as locals from higher castes made fun of him. This actual weight is like the metaphorical weight of caste, which affects how people see themselves, what opportunities they have, and their social position. He says, "Living through my childhood was not good." It felt like a weight on my shoulder that I had to carry. This statement sums up the title's two meanings. Childhood itself becomes work and shame. The strain is on all three levels: physical, emotional, and social.

Education as Freedom and Exclusion

In Bachain's story, education is both a source of hope and shame. He has a hard time getting an education since he is poor, faces teasing, and is separated from other students. But education is also the way to respect yourself and go up in life. A big subject in Dalit memoirs is how education can be both good

and bad. Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013) say that education becomes a battleground where caste hierarchies are fought over. Bachain talks about how he had to trek a long way to school barefoot, hungry, and fatigued, just to be humiliated by his teachers. "You hardly look like a Chamar! All dressed up like a Nawab, did you hope to gain entry into our courtyard? Out you go!" (*My Childhood on My Shoulders*, 103). But he also says that it has the power to change things, "Education was the only thing I could use to win this fight. "This reminds me of Ambedkar's appeal to 'organize, educate, and agitate.' Bachain's desire for knowledge is not just a way to improve himself; it is also a political act of rebellion. He won't accept the 'natural' lower status that has been forced on him.

3. The Importance of Family and Community

Bachain's story doesn't show the Dalit topic as being alone. Instead, it focuses on how families stick together and how they all suffer. He illustrates how caste and poverty work together to shape family life. His parents are bonded workers, and the kids have to help out from a young age. But there are also times when people in the community help one another and stand up to the government. Bachain talks about village meetings where Dalits talk about how to fight back against upper-caste exploitation. He talks about how songs, storytelling, and folklore keep a feeling of dignity and criticism alive. Badri Narayan (2004) talks about Dalit folklore and how these kinds of cultural resources are vital for resistance.

Voice and Language

Choosing to write in Hindi is important. Sharmila Rege (2006) says that Dalit writers typically employ regional languages to reach their communities and fight against upper-caste dominance over literary canons. Bachain's Hindi is straightforward, plain, and full of political meaning. "It was then that I felt the first stirrings of my sense of self-respect." (40) He doesn't like Sanskrit or Brahmanical phrases. Rege calls this way of using language the "politics of voice." Bachain says he has the right to say anything he wants. In doing so, he goes against the silence that dominant histories and literatures put on Dalits.

Testimony and Memory of the Group

One important part of Bachain's writing is that it serves as a testimony. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991) say that Dalit autobiographies typically speak for a group rather than just one person. Bachain keeps saying that his narrative is not one of a kind: "Thousands of people were going through what I was going through." By putting the focus on shared experiences, he makes his autobiography a record of social history. It goes against the upper-caste view that caste is either not important (because of modernity) or just a question of different rituals without any real violence. In this way, *My Childhood on My Shoulder* adds to what Gayatri Spivak calls a "counter-archive" that contradicts mainstream histories by adding voices from the bottom up.

Standing up for your dignity and fighting back

Even though caste is a big deal, Bachain's story isn't only about being a victim. It also keeps track of actions of disobedience. He talks about how he refused to do embarrassing things, questioned older people, and finally became a political activist and writer. This fits with the general trend in Dalit memoirs to turn pain into criticism. Limbale (2004) says in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* that Dalit art comes from pain but is not limited to it. It is also a vision of fairness. Bachain's story shows how caste is both a burden and a challenge. It is both a record of tyranny and a call to freedom. "The sovereign remedy for all the inequities of caste and poverty in this telling is literacy and literature" (*My Childhood on My Shoulder* 50).

6. CONCLUSION

My Childhood on My Shoulder by Sheoraj Singh Bachain is an important work in the field of Dalit autobiography. It tells a story of caste tyranny without holding back, as well as stories of resistance and self-creation. By emphasizing how caste affects the body, mind, and social life, the work goes against sanitized stories of Indian modernity that ignore or downplay caste violence. If you look at the autobiography through the lenses of Dalit studies, subaltern theory, and testimonial literature, you can see that it serves two purposes: it is a record of pain and an act of resistance. Bachain's emphasis on narrating his own story in his own words is a way of fighting against upper-caste history writing. *My Childhood on My Shoulder* is not just the account of one person's life; it is also a tribute to the enduring reality of caste in India. It should not be taken as a confession, but as a political statement that calls for acknowledgment, respect, and justice.

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