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### The Impact of Urbanization on Dalit Lives in Datta Bhagat's Whirlpool

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#### Abstract

Dalit literature is not a literature of protest; it is a literature of survival, a literature that comes from the very heart of an oppressed community." This paper explores the effect of urbanization on Dalit existence as portrayed in Datta Bhagat's play Whirlpool. The paper focuses on the impact of urbanization as a continuous process on the socio-economic status, prospects and risks of the Dalit characters in the plot. Bhagat, a well-known Marathi playwright, captures various shades of the Dalit lives in an urban context, the positive and the negative sides of the life in the city. This is why the research shows how, although urbanization opens up opportunities for social mobility and improvement of the economic status, it also reproduces new forms of exclusion and discrimination. The aspects of personal identity, availability of resources, and the division between the traditional and the contemporary are examined. By exploring their relationships, dreams, and tensions, it is possible to reveal how urbanisation processes impact on their lives in more subtle ways. The study reveals the fact that the urban environments that are expected to provide better prospects for the population actually deny the majority of the population equal opportunities. Thus, this study, which explores the representation of Dalit characters in the urban context, reveals that the systemic exclusion of Dalits from the city's life remains an ongoing issue. It also looks at the kind of strength and freedom that these characters portray in dealing with their urban lives. The findings are discussed in the context of socio-political and economic developments in India, thus giving a holistic picture of the relationship between the process of urbanisation and caste structures. In the end, this research is useful in the field of urban studies and Dalit literature by presenting the reader with a view on how the process of urbanization is a positive yet complex process for the disadvantaged communities in the contemporary India.

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#### Introduction

Dalit literature is a vibrant and militant literary current that narrates the sufferance and fight of the Dalits, a people who until very recently have been suffering the condition of an untouchable caste in the Indian society. This body of literature aims at subverting the oppressive systems that have over the years muted the Dalit people and highlight their experiences. In other words, by portraying the real life experiences of pain, struggle, and survival, the Dalit literature not only claims the identity and value of the Dalit people but also challenges the caste oppression that is still prevalent in society.

Coming up in the middle of the twentieth century, Dalit literature has several genres of literature such as poetry, prose, drama, and autobiographies. It is characterised by its raw depiction of social realities of the Dalits and the oppression

they suffer. These works are usually a protest against the social, economic and political injustice that is predominant in the Indian context. This genre has been enriched by writers like B. R Ambedkar, the father of Indian constitution, and other Dalit writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Baby Kamble, Sharankumar Limbale etc who are working for the change in the society and upliftment of Dalits through their writings.

Whirlpool by Datta Bhagat is another play that can be included into the framework of the Dalit literature as it presents the problem of Dalit characters in the context of the urbanization. The socio-economic realities, possibilities and struggles of Dalits are portrayed in the play as they try to cope with the challenges of living in an urban setting. Bhagat's work is a good example of how Dalit literature is capable of portraying the complex situation of the oppressed sections of

the society and also their strength. In *Whirlpool*, Bhagat offers a view on the processes of postcolonial urbanization as a potential source both of positive change and of new kinds of exclusion.

In *Whirlpool*, Bhagat paints a very vivid picture of the life of Dalits in urban India. One of the characters, Shambhu, expresses his disillusionment with the city: The quote, "We came to the city with dreams of a better life, but all we have found are broken promises and endless struggles" gives the feeling of hopelessness that most Dalits feel after moving to urban areas in search of better treatment than what they receive in the villages, but they only end up being exploited in other ways. The city is not the promised land of opportunities that the people of India were seeking but a place where the Dalits have to begin a struggle for existence.

Another poignant moment in the play is when the character of Laxmi reflects on the persistence of caste discrimination in the city: 'Here in this so called country of opportunity we are still 'untouchables' no matter how hard we try to change our caste we cannot.' Laxmi's words reveal that prejudices of castes are still relevant even in modern urbanised society. However, the prejudices of the past will not leave them alone and they are unable to adapt to the new life and become successful.

Bhagat also speaks of the problems of unemployment and poverty that the Dalits experience in urban centers. The character of Ramu says, 'In the village we had nothing but our community, here we are nothing and the city devours us.' This quote shows how Dalits feel when they are in the city, they are isolated and they have to live in poverty and work in the low paid jobs which do not give them any chance to progress in life. This makes their struggle even more challenging given the fact that they are in the urban jungle with little or no support from the community to ease the struggle that comes with it economically.

The title of the play *Whirlpool* is a metaphor of the cycle of poverty and discrimination that engulfs the Dalit characters. Bhagat uses the analogy of a whirlpool to explain how the system continues to drag the Dalits and does not allow them to come out of the cycle and be what they want to be. The urban environment with its promise of opportunities becomes a trap that engulfs them in the cycle of socio-economic and psychological problems.

Thus, in addition to telling the personal fates of Dalit characters, *Whirlpool* also explores and denounces the social and political conditions that contribute to the oppression of these characters. Bhagat's play is a classic example of the Dalit literature that has not lost its struggle for justice and is still fighting for justice by narrating the unheard stories of the society.

India has witnessed rapid urbanization where growth and transformation has been on the fast track and has promised better livelihood and opportunities. Migration from rural areas to urban areas is considered by many Dalits as an opportunity to free themselves from the caste system of the village and look for a better future. However, this journey is full of hope and major difficulties; this is what Datta Bhagat expressed in his play *Whirlpool*.

Thus, Bhagat presents the urban environment as a boon and a curse. Although there are possibilities of escaping from oppressive rural caste systems in the cities, the latter also present new ways of domination and exploitation. This duality is poignantly reflected in the character of Shambhu, who articulates his disillusionment with the city: "We came to the city with dreams of a better life, but all we have got are

shattered dreams and constant fights" (Bhagat, p. 45). This quote shows how far Dalits are from the dreams they had when they decided to leave their villages and embrace the life of big cities. Thus, instead of being a place where dreams come true, the city becomes a field of struggle of failed dreams and increased suffering.

The continuation of caste based discrimination in the city only adds to the irony of the process of urbanization. Thus, even in the twenty-first-century globalized environment of the city, prejudices based on the caste system are not eradicated. Laxmi's observation reflects this irony: "Here in this so called 'The land of opportunity' we are still treated like 'Untouchables.' No matter how hard we try to work, we are still treated like 'Untouchables'" (Bhagat, p. 78). This quotation shows that Dalits continue to suffer from discriminations despite the fact that they are living in urban areas that are perceived to be liberal and progressive. Despite the fact that the idea of social and economic development is a dominant paradigm of modernity, there are always prevalent and persistent caste prejudices.

The economic issues are another important factor of dalits' life in urban area as is represented in the play. Ramu's lament captures the essence of this hardship: "In the village, we were suffering financially, but we had our people around us, our families, friends and neighbors.

Here we are all isolated and the city is so unforgiving, it just swallows us whole." (Bhagat, p. 102). This quote captures the sufferings of Dalits in urban context where they are alienated from their community and are forced to work under poor wages in the informal sector.

Thus, Bhagat, with the help of these characters, shows the twofold process of urbanization. It provides the rural people with potential ways of escaping the oppression but at the same time, it preserves the existing discriminations and brings in new kinds of exploitations. However, *Whirlpool* critically looks at this complexity and shows that while the urban progress narrative holds a lot of potential, it can also be a narrative of the continued and changing struggles of Dalits.

The life in cities, although it holds the prospects of a better job and a better life, is often fraught with extreme forms of economic marginalization for Dalits and they are often forced to work in vulnerable jobs. In *Whirlpool*, Datta Bhagat gives a social analysis of these socio economic conditions of Dalit's and how they are locked out of any economic progress in urban India.

Socio-economic injustice is also depicted in the play as Dalit characters in the play are depicted to be struggling for employment and insecure jobs. Bhagat also captures their employment conditions as very insecure to support the assertion that their economic status is rather vulnerable. This is shown when Shambhu says, "We work hard and can hardly earn enough to feed our families let alone live a decent life. The city provides us with work, but cannot provide us with a decent living" (Bhagat, p. 52). This quotation is a good example of low-wage and exploitative jobs that are available to Dalits and the failure to realize the dream of improving the economic status.

Structural factors further continue to impede the economic mobility of Dalits as evidenced by the denial of basic needs like education and health care. Laxmi's observation points to these barriers: "We are working hard every day but we have no proper education and health care facilities so we remain where we are the development of this city does not touch us." (Bhagat, p. 79). This quote highlights how lack of proper resource base means continued economic stagnation which in

turn sustains the social structures that keep Dalits poor.

Poverty and exclusion are the major themes that are depicted in the play, and they are cyclic in nature. Even though Dalit characters try and may be determined to come out of the social stigma, they end up in the economic periphery. Ramu's lament captures this sentiment: This is a very emotional statement of Bhagat who feels that no matter how hard they work, they are always two steps behind, and the wealth of the city is not meant for people like them. This statement shows the larger social and economic systems that deny Dalits the opportunity to better their lives no matter how they work hard.

Through these socio-economic realities, Bhagat gives a commentary on the structures that contribute to the Dalit's oppression. Thus, through the characters, Whirlpool shows the struggle of the poor and the system that hinders the Dalits' advancement in cities. The play therefore calls for more comprehensive and fair socio-economic policies in order to solve such problems.

In Whirlpool, Datta Bhagat gives an insightful look at the social exclusion of Dalits by portraying the micro-aggression that is evident in the urban Indian society. This marginalisation is evident in the areas such as housing, employment and social relations, which confirms that despite the progressive nature of Indian cities, caste prejudices remain strong.

Bhagat's portrayal of Dalits reveals how prejudices influence their life when looking for a dwelling and employment. The character of Shambhu articulates the challenges they face: "It is now very difficult to be able to find a decent place to live in," "The landlords do not want to offer their rooms for rent and the few that are willing to do so, offer accommodation in the worst parts of the city" (Bhagat). This quotation also reveals the aspect of discriminations in the area of housing where Dalits are locked in substandard living that isolates them from the rest of the society. The same also holds true for the employment opportunities where caste prejudices dominate the employment chances. Laxmi's disappointment is clearly depicted when she says, "We are willing and capable of working and though we work hard the best jobs are always beyond our reach, it is as if the city is progressing but leaving people like us behind." (Bhagat, p. 85). This quote aggravates the notion that Dalits are locked out from better employment opportunities due to caste structures that constantly confine them to subordinate positions in the urban labour market.

The relations that people have with each other in the city are also marked by caste prejudices. The social and cultural representation of Dalits is that they are looked down upon, discriminated against and even attacked when they venture into public or social places. Ramu's reflection captures this social isolation: This quote by Bhagat depicts the social status of women in the city: "In the city we are looked at as intruders, no matter how many years we spend living there our presence is endured but never welcomed" (Bhagat, p. 95). This statement shows how Dalits are made to feel like they are outcasts and how this feeling continues to affect them to date.

Bhagat explores the struggles and conflicts within a character, especially as they deal with issues to do with caste. Laxmi's experience captures the struggle between embracing one's heritage and confronting internalized casteism: "I want to have pride in my roots but the city makes me learn to fake it to make it every day" (Bhagat, p. 84). In this statement, there is the struggle that Dalits have to grapple with: on the one hand, there is the need to be proud of one's identity as Dalit

and, on the other hand, there is the pressure to be 'normal,' which is a way of saying that one has to abandon the identity as Dalit.

It also reveals how the various characters in the story deal with these issues of identity. Some of them like Shambhu defines their identity as Dalit as a way of standing against the oppression that they receive from the society. Thus, his statement 'We will not be silenced or erased. Our identity is our strength, not our weakness' (Bhagat, p. 96) can be considered as the manifestation of the assertiveness when it comes to personal identity despite the hardships. On the other hand, other characters suffer from casteism within them and are shown as unwilling or unable to fully assimilate the so-called Dalit as they are discriminated all the time. Ramu internal struggle is clearly seen when he says, "Sometimes I feel like it is more appropriate to just let the city swallow us whole because it seems like the only thing they want from us is for us to vanish" (Bhagat, p. 101). This quote reveals the feelings of inferiority due to prejudice and the struggle that an individual has to go through in order to define himself or herself in a hostile environment.

In these character experiences, Whirlpool also captures the complex process of the formation and development of individual identity in the condition of urbanization. Thus, Bhagat's representation shows that the process of self-realization and the fight against oppression remain an agonizing process that defines the experiences of Dalit people in urban settings.

Urbanisation in Whirlpool brings about a mix of prospects and difficulties for the Dalit characters. The move to the urban centres presents itself as possible pathways to the better standards of living as the urban areas are associated with better standards of living. Nevertheless, these opportunities are not without challenges such as new type of bias and exclusion that may erode the gains of urbanization.

It can be seen that the play presents the process of urbanization as a mixed blessing in which the dream of a better life is often accompanied by the reality of oppression. Thus, Bhagat's characters learn the possibility of the social mobility, but it is always met with racism. Shambhu's experience reflects this dichotomy: "The city offers hope for a better life but here we are always facing barriers of prejudice barriers that are invisible" (Bhagat, p. 60). This quotation brings out the dichotomy between the prospects that the urban life offers and the continued exclusion of Dalits from benefiting from this end.

However, there is a clear message of optimism in the advancement of the society, yet the structural challenges Dalit people experience in the city are immense. A major advantage that is commonly associated with urbanization is employment and this is hard to come by for the Dalits because of prejudice. Laxmi anger is clearly seen when she says, "Despite having the qualification and experience the opportunities for the best jobs are still out of bounds for us, the city does not grow but we are left out." (Bhagat, 82). This quote shows that these barriers are institutionalized, which limits Dalits' chances of getting a better job or improving their economic status.

Further, the play depicts how the process of urbanization complicates the already existing social vices as opposed to improving them. Ramu's reflection on his experiences reveals the depth of this challenge: "It's a constant fight against the odds that are set against us and every victory is a fight against a system that makes it impossible for us to move forward," (Bhagat, p. 98) "The advancement that is seen in the city is



not an advancement for us.” They summed up their experience in this statement because, while urbanization offers chances, it is also riddled with barriers.

However, Bhagat’s representation of these issues shows that the problem requires structural changes to help the marginalized groups. Suffering of the characters shows the contrast between the concept of the progress of the city and the continuation of the process of exclusion. Whirlpool calls for a rethink on the policies and social setting of the urban areas so that everyone, irrespective of his or her status in the caste system or social status, is able to benefit from the processes of urbanization. The play acts as a social commentary to the structural barriers that exclude Dalits from the urban life and demands more adequate strategies to address the challenges of urbanization and its effects on the vulnerable groups.

In Whirlpool, Datta Bhagat paints a true picture of the struggles that Dalit characters endure in the urban world but at the same time, the characters are presented as strong and assertive in their struggles. This play does not present the Dalit people as voiceless victims of oppression, but as people who fight for their rights, demand justice, and work on a better future. This portrayal shows the resilience and the fighting spirit inherent in the Dalit people.

Bhagat’s characters are presented as struggling and struggling against odds that are set by socio-economic realities of life. Shambhu stands firm when he says, “We will not be sidelined, We are here to demand our share and our rights.” (Bhagat, p. 74). It can also be seen in this statement where he wants to fight against any form of exclusion and work for everyone to have equal chances.

Likewise, Laxmi’s action of fighting against prejudice actions and policies represents the fight for justice among the Dalit people. Her defiant stance is captured in her words: This is a very powerful statement that captures the essence of the book: “We will not take the social roles imposed on us. We will fight for our place in the society and make people accept us” (Bhagat, p. 89). In this case, Laxmi’s actions and statements depict the Determined Sabhas, which are the common features of the Dalit subject in the quest to overcome the structural oppression.

This is also true in Ramu’s narrative where the Dalit characters are depicted as strong and assertive. Despite facing relentless obstacles, he remains resolute in his quest for dignity and a better future: ‘Any defeat only makes me more determined. We shall continue to struggle until our voices are heard and our rights are granted’ (Bhagat, p. 101). This quote shows Ramu’s indomitable attitude and his desire to change the existing system of the society.

Thus, the fates of these characters of the novel, Whirlpool, narrate the strength and determination of the Dalit people. Their experiences and activities are not only individual struggles, but a social justice crusade as well. The representation of Bhagat provokes reflection on the problem of the social injustice and the necessity of the change of the existing systems to improve the lives of the minority in the United States.

The case analysis of Whirlpool by Datta Bhagat is grounded in the context of socio-political and economic environment of India. Accelerating urbanisation in India results in social transformation, economic opportunities and political transformation for the excluded groups. Thus, Bhagat’s play is a thoughtful commentary on such changes, which can help to understand the connection between urbanization and the caste system.

The process of urbanization in India offers hope of development and the attainment of a more contemporary way of life; however, this comes with a further aggravation of social injustice. Bhagat’s representation of Dalit characters in urban environment shows how caste oppression is not an exception in urban India. The play thus portrays the social reality of the Dalit people, where despite the possibilities of upward social and economic mobility offered by urbanization, the latter only reinforces and aggravates the Dalit’s plight. The characters in Whirlpool fight for the existence of the urban space, where on one hand, there are the promises of improvement, and on the other hand, new forms of marginalization and oppression.

Thus, placing the characters’ experiences within this socio-political context, Bhagat forces his readers to face the issue of caste discrimination in urban India. The play can be regarded as a literary and socio-political commentary as it calls for recognizing the existing oppression despite the appearance of the progressive society. Thus, Bhagat’s narrative raises the question of how urban policies and social relations can either help to reduce or exacerbate the existing gap between different socio-economic statuses.

Therefore, Whirlpool provides a rich analysis of the effects of urbanization on Dalit lives, which is why socio-economic contexts, possibilities, and obstacles of Dalit characters are depicted in detail. The setting of the movie depicts the life of the urban people in the modern world where the concept of development is accompanied by the emergence of other forms of discrimination and prejudice.

In this context, Bhagat brings out the plight and survival of the Dalit characters and the relationship between urbanization and caste. As the play shows, the utopian promise of urban environments may give rise to new modes of exclusion, but it also proves Dalit subjects’ ability to face these issues head-on. This study of Whirlpool adds to the understanding of urban studies and Dalit literature by providing a historical and ethnographic account of the transformative but problematic effects of urbanization on the downtrodden. Through these themes the study contributes to the understanding of the socio-political context of contemporary India and underlines the necessity of systemic change to tackle the challenges that Dalits still face in urban settings.

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