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Claiming the Terrain of Unclaimed: A Saga of Social Mobility Portrayed in Ajay Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain*

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Abstract:

The proposed paper attempts a close reading and analysis of one of the primary text namely *Unclaimed Terrain* by Ajay Navaria. The text is a collection of seven short stories and was originally written in Hindi and subsequently translated by Laura Brueck into English and this English version was first published in 2013. Some of these stories had been published in well-known Hindi journals such as *Kathadesh, Pragatisheel Vasudha, Sunday Post, Naya Path* and *Hans.* This English versions contains three short stories ("Sacrifice", "Scream" and "Subcontinent" ("Bali", "Cheekh" and "Upmahadweep" in Hindi respectively) that are based the versions from the writer's first collection of short stories (*Patkatha aur Anya Kahaniyan)* while "Yes Sir", "New Custom" ("Naya Kaayda", and "Hello Premchand" ("Uttar Katha") are culled from his second short story collection *Yes Sir.*

Ajay Navaria, a professor of Hindi in Jamia Milia Islamia University, writes in Hindi. He is the author of a novel *Udhar ke Log* (2009) and two collections of short stories *Patkatha aur Anya Kahaniyan* (2006) and *Yes Sir* (2012). Characterizing Navaria's writing, Namit Arora observes that it

> is deeply political but rarely simplistic. There is truth in his fiction, the kind that's best revealed in storytelling. He has a keen eye for hypocrisies that lurk in Indian hearts, across caste and class

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locations. His Dalits are flesh-and-blood humans: sympathetic because flawed, not nobler than others, not above ordinary vanities and prejudices.

In these seven memorable stories, Navaria brings into focus not just the pervasive caste-based discrimination prevalent in India, but also the slowly changing circumstances in a candid manner. Each of the characters in the short stories is represented as making an attempt to break the shackles imposed by rigid social mores with a hope to live a respectful and dignified life. This is hinted in the epigraph that Navaria writes:

> To the characters in my stories
> who fight for their dreams of justice,
> and to the tradition that teaches us
> to struggle for dignity, equality, and freedom (Navaria 6)

The paper attempts to do textual analysis of the text.

Key Words: Dalits, Discrimination, Assertion, Urban Dalit, Rights and Justice.

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The first story in the collection entitled "Sacrifice" sensitively portrays the emotions of a boy who had to help his father slaughter Piloo, a kid goat he loves. As an adult, the protagonist, a Dalit Ambedkarite, recoils from and confronts his father's prejudice against the protagonist's wife, who is from a caste even lower than theirs. A death at home and revelations of a romantic affair in father's youth bring hope for mutual understanding.

The second story "Yes Sir", presents a historic role reversal in a government office. Narottam, a Dalit, has risen to become Deputy General Manager and has inherited as his peon an older Brahmin man, Tiwari. Narottam has picked up all the haughtiness of the office babu class towards subordinates. He is patronizing and sometimes rude to Tiwari, who burns with resentment and inwardly swears at him—even organizes Satyanarayan puja to get rid of him and considers polluting Narottam's coffee with his spit—but his need for a job and Narottam's place in the office hierarchy keep him in check, leading to a brilliantly comical end.

In "New Custom", an urban middle-class Dalit arrives in a village to attend a wedding. At the bus stand, a chai-seller, impressed by his demeanor and attire, takes him to be a Thakur, i.e., high-caste, and treats him with deference. When the truth is indirectly revealed, the deference turns into rudeness. The tea-seller asks him to rinse his glass before returning it. In a powerful scene, the visitor buys the glass and smashes it on a stone platform.

In the next short story entitled "Subcontinent", the protagonist, as a boy, has seen village men abuse and assault his groveling father and grandma— returning

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after a stint in the city—for breaking caste taboos. As a boy, he has seen a Dalit wedding party attacked by thugs because the groom has dared to ride a horse in the village, and later that day, a woman of the party being raped: "I saw, beneath the white dhoti-clad bottom of a pale pandit-god, the darkened soles of someone's feet flailing and kicking (Navaria 96). Rather than file a complaint, the village policeman mocks them, 'They say she was really tasty. Lucky bitch, now she's become pure!' (Navaria 97). In his middle-age, the protagonist, Siddhartha Nirmal, Marketing Manager in a government enterprise in the big city, exults at the distance he has travelled in the world: 3BR flat; car; eating out at Pizza Hut and Haldiram's, where the counter-boys call him Sir. He can hire the services of a Brahmin doctor, keep a Garhwali Brahmin driver who bows at him, and employ a Bengali music teacher he found on the Internet for his daughter, who goes to an expensive convent school. But such welcome anonymity that the city affords him disappears in familiar spaces, such as his office, which has 'the same snakes. The same whispers, the same poison-laden smiles. Our "quota is fixed". I got promoted only because of the quota ... that's it. Otherwise ... otherwise, maybe I'm still dirty. Still lowborn. Like Kishan, the office janitor. Like Kardam, the clerk. Because I am their caste (Navaria 100).'

Subhash Kumar, the protagonist in "Tattoo" is a bureaucrat in his 40s. He enrols in a upmarket gymnasium in Delhi located in a prominent locality. His biggest concern is to keep his old and tattered shoes and a tattoo of 'Namo Budhhaya, Jai Bhim' hidden from others so that no one questions his social and economic standing or associate the two. Much as he might try to maintain a calm demeanour, during an interaction with the owner of the gymnasium, Subhash Kumar, experiences anxiety which stems from his perception that the owner is carefully trying to ascertain his (Subhash

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Kumar's) caste through what seems to be probing questions camouflaged as casual conversation.

Subhash Kumar's obsession with his shoes only aggravates his uneasiness for he sees them as exemplifying his social background. He expends a considerable amount of emotional energy trying to overcome his apprehension regarding his shoes: "A few more days passed like this, but I now felt apprehensive of someone commenting on my shoes each moment of every hour I spent in the gym. Finally, to be free of this, I took myself in hand—this is it! I should neither hide them nor be ashamed of them" (Navaria 119-120). What is notable is how strongly a seemingly common situation can overwhelm the protagonist and intensify his shame of belonging to a stigmatized group. In this sense, Subhash Kumar is as Deepak Chaudhary notes, a typical Urban Middle Class Dalit (UMCD) who has achieved some amount of economic prosperity but still experiences evolved forms of discrimination in urban landscapes (79).

"Hello Premchand" is an adaptation of the iconic Hindi writer Munshi Premchand's short story "The Price of Milk" ("Doodh Ka Dham", 1934). Navaria's story can be seen as an endeavour to acknowledge his debt to Premchand who is considered as the father of Indian social realism. In this context, Paul Giffard-Foret remarks that '[by] acknowledging the pivotal role played by non-Dalit Hindi authors such as Premchand in bringing forth the issue of caste, Navaria inscribes his oeuvre within the larger body of Hindi literature.' (Giffard-Foret 9)

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The protagonist of "Hello, Premchand!," Mangal, is determined and able to continue his studies, following his mother's last wish that her son ought never to "have to carry piss and shit" (Navaria 134). Part of Mangal's success in rising above his caste results from his refusal to disclose his social status. Mangal accedes to a state of Being beyond the proper: viz. beyond the prerogatives of naming to the point of forgetting his origins, and beyond the strictures of property-wealth, allowing him to be removed from the worries of material comfort. Personal success is thus never far from the dangers of alienating oneself from one's community, the collective suffering of an oppressed group inciting many to barter dreams of equality for upward mobility. The dichotomy between pre-class rural communalism and modern metropolitan individualism is felt sharply by Dalits like Mangal. In the following passage, the reader is exposed to what seems like an incommensurable gap:

> … Here is the village—our roots, our land. Where there is indignity, abuse, helplessness, and weakness. Every moment, the fear of dishonor. Every second, the feeling of being small… Here in the city, I am an executive in a big government enterprise. An officer. Mr Siddharth Nirmal, Marketing Manager. My wife works as a college lecturer. We have a house…. (Navaria 98-9)

In the last short story, "Scream", a Dalit schoolboy is raped by, Vinayak, the village Patel's son. He runs away to Mumbai, does sundry jobs, comes under the intoxication of money ('…money is never enough because aspiration is always in excess' (Navaria 166), and becomes a male prostitute, even as he pursues an MA and prepares for the civil services exam. Now wealthy, he visits his village, donning a fat gold chain and two gold rings. Coming face to face with the boy who sodomized him,

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he gloats: He 'couldn't even speak. He couldn't even smile. Next to me, he seemed like a beggar. I saw the defeat in his eyes' (Navaria 173). Back in Mumbai, his life twists and turns with two of his female clients, through scenes that is strongly reminiscent of Bollywood movies, until he meets a harrowing end.

Conclusion:

In *Unclaimed Terrain* the protagonists of most stories are Dalit men who have clawed their way into the urban middle-class through their wits and education, sometimes with the help of reservations. Many harbour episodic memories of social life in ancestral villages, memories in which bigotry and abuse overwhelm kindness and beauty. They love the anonymity of the big city, even as they live in fear of being "found out" and reminded—in the artful ways of the metropolis—of their "proper place".

Navaria is deeply political but rarely simplistic. There is truth in his fiction, the kind that's best revealed in storytelling. He has a keen eye for hypocrisies that lurk in Indian hearts, across caste and class locations. His Dalits are flesh-and-blood humans: sympathetic because flawed, not nobler than others, not above ordinary vanities and prejudices. They love and suffer and do what it takes to survive their often-hostile situations. Nor are his upper-caste characters black and white. *Unclaimed Terrain* offers sharp vignettes of the psyche of urban North India, from a vantage point that is both new and indispensable—and largely missing from the work of Indians who think and write in English.

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