

EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS IN BHIMRAO SHIRWALE'S "LIVELIHOOD"

Dr. Karthik Panicker

Assistant Professor of English,

J. M. Patel College, Bhandara- 441 904,

Maharashtra.

Abstract

Bhimrao Shirwale's Liveliness, part of the influential Dalit anthology Poisoned Bread, narrates the grim story of Kashi, a Dalit woman navigating poverty, caste oppression, and gender violence. This article explores the existentialist dimensions of the story, focusing on themes like alienation, freedom, absurdity, and self-creation. Shirwale's work, though grounded in specific socio-political realities, resonates with existentialist philosophy, emphasizing individual agency amidst systemic constraints.

Key words: Dalit woman, poverty, livelihood, Existentialism.

Introduction

Dalit literature amplifies the voices of marginalized communities, challenging the entrenched caste system and societal inequities. Rooted in the lived experiences of Dalits, it critiques oppression, celebrates resilience, and advocates for social justice. Writers use powerful narratives to expose systemic exploitation, as seen in works like those of B.R. Ambedkar and other Dalit pioneers, fostering awareness and empathy. Dalit literature also reclaims identity, history, and dignity, offering a counter-narrative to mainstream representations. By addressing themes of resistance, empowerment, and transformation, it serves as a vital tool for social reform and equality in modern India.

In his introduction to Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) the translator Alok Mukherjee notes that these writings (Dalit Literature) confront traditional intellectual frameworks that often exclude the lived realities of marginalized groups, demanding acknowledgment of their experiences and contributions. He records: "Dalits are an important political and social force in India. Their literary and critical writings constitute a major challenge to, and questioning of, the theorizing about Indian politics, society, culture and literature by intellectuals from upper caste Hindu and other dominant communities, and by non- Indians. To fail to pay

attention to this challenge and questioning, is to engage in a hegemonic discourse that excludes the realities and experience of nearly a quarter of the country's people” (p. vii).

Dalit literature expresses the angst of a section of the society that was kept on the margins. Dalit literature powerfully conveys the existential concerns of marginalized communities by depicting their struggles against caste-based oppression, poverty, and dehumanization. It highlights themes of identity, dignity, and survival, revealing the psychological and social toll of systemic discrimination. It seeks justice, equality, and the affirmation of humanity.

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, grapples with fundamental questions of human existence, freedom, and the search for meaning in an indifferent or hostile world. While it originated in Western philosophy through figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Albert Camus, its themes find a profound resonance in Shirwale's story *Livelihood*, a story in the anthology *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle. The story's exploration of suffering, survival, and agency within a caste-ridden society mirrors existentialist concerns with human autonomy and meaning in an absurd world.

This Paper examines how *Livelihood* engages with existentialist ideas, emphasizing the tension between individual agency and structural oppression, the absurdity of life in poverty, and the creation of meaning in a seemingly purposeless existence.

Bhimrao Shirwale's short story *Livelihood* explores the grim realities of poverty, resilience, and the struggle for survival through the life of Kashi, a dalit widow living on the margins of society. Kashi, like many others in her village, faces dire economic circumstances, exacerbated by her vulnerable position as a single woman.

As the story opens, we find Kashi pushed straight in the middle of a 'wilderness' on the very second day of her marriage. Her mother, who had brought her up, is run over by a railway engine when she had gone collecting coal. Kashi was married to Dharma who had "...some education, but no qualifications" (198). Since Dharma didn't get jobs on a regular basis, "he thieved as well as laboured. Picked pockets and carried loads. Conned people, cheated people, slit people's throats. He did all these things because there was no alternative to living ..." (198). Kashi's life takes a turn when Dharma is arrested and sentenced to twenty years hard labour for murdering a Marwari, Shah Banwarilal Khiwarchand. All of a sudden, Kashi finds herself all alone. She had no idea as to "How was she going pay the rent? How was she going to live?" (200). Kashi was fair and had a 'delicately chiselled' body. With Dharma around, she had never felt any threat. But now she felt clueless about her life. She realises that "life without Dharma was going to be dark and dangerous" (200).

It is at this point that the bootlegger Kesu Ghatge enters into Kashi's life. Kesu had a hideous

face. He was feared by the neighbourhood. Initially, he addressed Kashi as ‘sister’. Kashi tried to earn a living by working as a domestic help. But she felt helpless when the house-owner tried to molest her. She quit the job. She resisted the attempt of Kesu to rape her. She threw burning coals at him. But in course of time, she weighed her options and allowed Kesu to be her ‘man’. “There was only one valid motivation. The stomach and support, and both were in the hands of Kesu Ghatge” (203). She became “his wife...his mistress”(203). But this only turns out to be a disaster. Kesu would not go to work. He would assault Kashi and did everything to make her ugly. One day Kesu was caught by the police trying to rob a young couple near Marine Drive. He is tried in the court-of-law and sentenced to three year’s rigorous imprisonment. This comes a shocker for Kashi. The shock causes Kashi’s foetus to slip out of her womb prematurely. And she delivers a child on the footpath. Another shock awaits her. The child had no shape or form: “The head was outsize. The upper lip was missing. And the only sign was a nose were two holes. With a distended stomach and limbs like match-sticks, the creature bore no resemblance to humanity” (204).

Left to fend for herself, Kashi resorts to selling her body. But she found it difficult to sell her ‘loose and flappy’ body. With no earnings, Kashi began to starve. In frustration, she takes to begging: “She put the weird child on her lap and sat begging on the unknown pavement” (205). This came as a rewarding endeavour. People threw coins on account of the weirdness and ugliness of the child. The child that Kashi hated had now become the trump card of her life. For the first time in her life, Kashi had seen prosperity. She bought a hut for herself at Nariman Point. Soon she began to rent out the child.

Kesu Ghatge returned after serving the sentence. He comes searching for Kashi. When he finds out that the disfigured child born out of his seed had become the source of Kashi’s prosperity, he wanted the child for himself. The people of the area who were jealous of Kashi’s prosperity supported Kesu. Their “convention-ridden minds” (208) stood with Kesu. Kesu barged into Kashi's hut and knocked her down with a brutal kick to her face. With his weird offspring on his shoulder, Kesu walked out of Kashi’s hut. On his shoulder was his livelihood. Societal norms had ensured that Kashi had been stripped of her livelihood and pushed to the margins once again.

Alienation and Absurdity

Alienation, a central theme in existentialism, manifests powerfully in *Livelihood* through the character of Kashi. From the outset, her life is defined by exclusion and marginalization. Orphaned after her mother’s death under a train while scavenging coal, Kashi is thrust into an existence devoid of familial or social support. Her relationships—with Dharma, Kesu Ghatge, and the wider community—are marked by violence, mistrust, and exploitation, intensifying her sense of

estrangement.

This alienation aligns with Camus' concept of the absurd: the dissonance between human beings' search for meaning and the indifference of the universe. Kashi's struggles are devoid of cosmic justice or redemption. Her use of her deformed child as a means of earning through begging symbolizes the absurdity of survival under dehumanizing conditions. As Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy"—a sentiment that resonates in Kashi's adaptation to her grim reality, even if it is devoid of traditional notions of happiness.

Freedom and Responsibility

A key existentialist concern is the idea of radical freedom and the burden of responsibility it entails. In *Livelihood*, Kashi exercises her agency within the oppressive framework of caste and poverty. Her decision to use her child's deformity as a source of income exemplifies Sartre's notion of "condemned to be free"—the paradox of being free to make choices, even when constrained by external forces.

Kashi's actions are not framed as moral or immoral but as necessary for survival. This moral ambiguity is central to existentialist thought, which rejects universal ethical frameworks in favour of individual authenticity. Kashi's life, shaped by choices made in the face of overwhelming constraints, underscores the existentialist belief in the primacy of individual action.

Authenticity and Self-Definition

Existentialism emphasizes authenticity: living in accordance with one's self-defined values rather than societal expectations. Despite her exploitation by Kesu and the judgments of her community, Kashi asserts her will to survive. Her refusal to despair, even when abandoned and brutalized, reflects an existentialist ethos of self-definition. Shirwale's portrayal of Kashi challenges deterministic narratives often associated with caste oppression. While structural forces undeniably shape her reality, Kashi's choices and resilience highlight her ability to define herself. This aligns with Sartre's assertion that existence precedes essence—individuals create their own essence through actions, even in oppressive contexts.

The Absurd Hero

Kashi embodies Camus' concept of the absurd hero, who confronts the absurdity of existence without succumbing to nihilism. Her life is marked by suffering, yet she continues to adapt, finding ways to survive and, in moments, thrive. This defiance in the face of an indifferent world is a hallmark of existentialist thought.

The story's climactic moment—when Kesu forcibly takes their child, Kashi's source of livelihood—underscores the fragility of her existence. Yet, Kashi's prior resourcefulness suggests

that she will continue to navigate her circumstances. Like Camus' Sisyphus, she persists, not because of a belief in ultimate meaning but because survival itself becomes an act of resistance.

Intersectionality: Existentialism in Context

While existentialism traditionally focuses on individual freedom, *Livelihood* situates these concerns within a specific socio-political context. The story highlights how caste, gender, and poverty intersect to shape Kashi's experiences. This intersectionality complicates existentialist ideas of freedom, suggesting that structural oppression significantly limits individual agency.

However, Shirwale's narrative does not negate existentialist principles but redefines them within a Dalit context. Kashi's life exemplifies a "situated freedom"—a term coined by Simone de Beauvoir to describe how freedom operates within specific social and historical constraints. Her survival is not a rejection of existentialism but an adaptation of its principles to the realities of caste and poverty.

Conclusion

Bhimrao Shirwale's *Livelihood* resonates deeply with existentialist philosophy, exploring themes of alienation, absurdity, freedom, and self-definition. Kashi's journey, though grounded in the specificities of Dalit oppression, reflects universal existentialist concerns with human agency and the search for meaning in an indifferent world.

The story's engagement with existentialism enriches its critique of caste and poverty, demonstrating the adaptability of existentialist ideas across cultural contexts. By situating existentialism within a Dalit framework, Shirwale expands its relevance, offering a powerful testament to human resilience and the capacity for self-definition amidst systemic oppression.

References

1. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New York: Vintage International, 1991.
2. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956.
3. Shirwale, Bhimrao. "Livelihood". *Poisoned Bread*. Ed. Arjun Dangle. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd, 2009. 197-208. Print.
4. Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*. Translated and edited, with a commentary by Alok Mukherjee. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004.