

Locating Violence in Kusum Kumar's *Suno Shefali* (*Listen Shefali*)

Vikram SINGH THAKUR

Author:

Vikram Singh Thakur
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi, India
vikramsthakur05@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9984-5772>

Date of reception: 07/07/2022

Date of acceptance: 05/12/2022

Citation:

Thakur, Vikram Singh. 2023. "Locating Violence in Kusum Kumar's *Suno Shefali* (*Listen Shefali*)."
Alicante Journal of English Studies 38: 59-73.
<https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2023.38.04>

© 2023 Vikram Singh Thakur

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).



Abstract:

India has a long tradition of social dramas that dates back to the 19th century. Such plays have been instrumental in raising social and political awareness among the masses. Located within this strong tradition of 'socials', is Kusum Kumar's hard-hitting play *Suno Shefali* (*Listen Shefali*). Originally written in Hindi in 1975 and published in 1978, the play is significant for it engages with violence and oppression at the intersection of caste, class and gender at a time when feminist scholars had not theorized intersectionality as an important analytical tool of analysis. The play also predates several important Indian plays, especially by the male playwright, that deal with the problems of caste system in India. In this essay, I will attempt to study various forms of violence committed on a Dalit woman at the intersection of gender, caste and class in Kumar's *Listen Shefali* using theoretical concepts like Kimberle Crenshaw's 'intersectionality', Johan Galtung's 'structural violence', M. Weigert's 'personal violence', Pierre Bourdieu's 'symbolic violence' and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's 'epistemic violence'.

Keywords: Violence; Dalit; untouchability; intersectionality; self-respect; feminism.

India has a long tradition of social dramas that dates back to the 19th century. Plays like Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (*The Indigo Mirror*, 1859), Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Bharat Durdasha* (*The Plight of India*, 1875), G.B. Deval's *Sharada* (1899), Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (*The New Harvest*, 1944), Jan Natya Manch's *Aurat* (*Women*, 1979) and Brijesh's *Shambukvadha* (*The Killing of Shambuka*, 2004) among others have been written over the past century and a half across various languages. Such plays have been instrumental in raising social and/or political awareness among the masses. While some of these have attempted to propose solutions, others have forced their readers/audiences to find their own resolutions. Located within this strong tradition of socials is Kusum Kumar's hard-hitting play *Suno Shefali* (*Listen Shefali*). Originally written in Hindi in 1975 and published in 1978, the play coincides with Datta Bhagat's *Avart* (*Whirlpool*, 1978) and predates Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* (*The Gift of a Daughter*, 1983), Girish Karnad's *Taledanda* (*Death by Beheading*, 1990) Swadesh Deepak's *Court Martial* (1991) and Premanand Gajjee's *Kirwant* (1981;1991) all of which deal with social and political evils of caste system in India. In this essay, I will attempt to study various forms of violence committed on a young Dalit woman at the interstices of gender, caste and class in *Listen Shefali*.

Kusum Kumar is a poet, critic, translator and an accomplished novelist. However, she is primarily a playwright and has been one among those few women playwrights who have been conferred the coveted Sangeet Natak Akademi award (2016) for playwriting. While Kumar has written ten one-act plays including *Nirma*, *Khabgaah* (*The Bedroom*), *Salaami* (*A Guard of Honour*) and *Manch* (*The Stage*), she is best known for her full-length plays like *Ravan Leela* (*The Story of Ravana*), *Pavan Chaturvedi ki Diary* (*The Diary of Pavan Chaturvedi*), *Sanskar ko Namaskar* (*Farewell to Rituals*), *Dilli Uuncha Sunati Hai* (*Delhi is Hard of Hearing*), *Lashkar Chowk*, *Prashn-Kaal* (*The Question Hour*) and *Suno Shefali* (*Listen Shefali*). Her plays exhibit a variety of themes ranging from individual, social, and political issues. The play under consideration, *Listen Shefali*, involves a young self-respecting Dalit woman, Shefali, who refuses to succumb to the political manoeuvres of her upper-caste Brahmin lover Bakul and his aspiring politician father Satyameva Dikshit. Instead, she chooses to resist the combined onslaught of patriarchy and caste only to find herself betrayed by everyone around her in the end. Since the plot deals with a social problem, Kumar uses realism as her mode of expression in the play and employs ordinary characters, everyday speech and a common-place setting. Though Kumar's play is proscenium-bound like most realistic plays in post-Independence India, yet there is a significant difference. While most Indian playwrights of realism, especially the male playwrights, have confined their dramas to the middle-class drawing rooms, Kumar's choice to

set her play (except one scene) on the open *ghats* of the Yamuna is significant. Moreover, the separation of *ghats* in the play depicted by a wooden partition is symbolic as it manifests social hierarchies implicit in the caste system. Pointing towards this social division in the Indian society, Nandi Bhatia notes that “it serves as a reminder to audiences of the separatism practiced in daily life ...” (2010, 93)

Indian realistic drama has explored various forms of realism ranging from social realism to psychological realism and playwrights have explored the theme of violence in such dramas as *Ghashiram Kotwal* (Ghashiram the Constable), *Sakharam Binder* (Sakharam the Binder), *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084) and *Holi* among others. Kumar also explores various forms of violence in *Listen Shefali* which will be discussed in this section. However, before analysing the play, it is important to consider as to what constitutes violence and how intersectionality as an analytical tool can help understand violence in a nuanced manner. While sociologists have debated as to what exactly constitutes violence, I find Johan Galtung's concept of “structural violence” which is “built into structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (1969, 171) quite useful in understanding the workings of violence. Galtung argues that,

... violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations ... Violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is. Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes the decrease of this distance. (168)

Building up on Galtung's idea, Kathleen M. Weigert differentiates “structural violence” from “personal violence” as follows:

Structural violence (also called indirect violence and, sometimes, institutionalized violence) is differentiated from personal violence (also called direct or behavioral) and refers to preventable harm or damage to persons (and by extension to things) where there is no actor committing the violence or where it is not practical to search for the actor(s); *such violence emerges from the unequal distribution of power and resources or, in other words, is said to be built into the structure(s)*. (2005, 2005; italics mine)

Other than structural and personal violence theorised by Galtung and Weigert, I have also found Pierre Bourdieu's “symbolic violence” defined as “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part

through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” helpful in my analysis of violence. (2001, 1-2) The focus of all three scholars on the non-physical aspect of violence offers a nuanced understanding of violence.

In the late 1970s, several feminist scholars had begun to draw attention towards the inability of the mainstream feminist discourse to account for the issues of the non-White women. The following years witnessed such significant theoretical works like Susan Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1980/84), Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, (1984/88) and Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) that began to analyse class and ethnicity as important constituents of oppression alongside gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, coined the term ‘intersectionality’ in the context of black women that played an important role in theorising “intersection” as a crucial determinant in the ‘third world’ feminism. In yet another essay on intersectionality “Mapping the Margins”, published in 1991, she argued that,

many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (1244)

Intersectionality, since then, has been used by feminists as an essential analytical tool to examine oppression and exclusion at the intersection of various categories like race, class, gender, caste, sexual orientation and so on.¹ I have found ‘intersectionality’ particularly useful for my analysis of violence in Listen

1 To read more on intersectionality refer to Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8; 139-167 and “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour.” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299; Davis, K. (2008), “Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful,” *Feminist Theory*, 9(1), 67–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086364>; Yuval-Davis, N. (2006), “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*,” 13(3), 193–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752>; Nivedita Menon (2015), “Is Feminism about ‘Women’? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 17, pp. 37–44.

Shefali as it focusses on the interconnectedness of several factors in propagation of violence and oppression against women especially from the marginalised sections of societies. Kumar's play can thus be called prophetic in a sense for it engages with discrimination and violence on the cross-roads of caste, class and gender at a time when intersectionality had not yet made inroads into the mainstream feminist theoretical models.

In a highly stratified society like India, intersectionality can play an important role in developing a nuanced understanding of violence, oppression and discrimination due to the interconnectedness of gender, caste and class. Borrowing Galtung's and Weigert's ideas on violence and Crenshaw's intersectionality, one can find both personal and structural violence committed at the interstices of caste, class and gender in *Listen Shefali*. Though, violence in the play does not take the overt form of physical or verbal abuse, yet it depicts violence that is subtle, covert and insidious, which is why it so often goes unnoticed by the perpetrator and the victim. My contention is that the very absence of physical violence seems to normalize other forms of violence that are either structural, symbolical or personal in nature. Kumar's play is, thus, prophetic for it engages with discrimination and violence on the cross-roads of caste, class and gender at a time when intersectionality had not yet made inroads into the mainstream feminist theoretical models.

Kumar presents her protagonist Shefali as an educated, strong, self-respecting and confident young woman who is a victim of violence which is structural, symbolic and personal and takes place at the intersections of caste, class and gender. Shefali and her sisters have experienced the trauma of being identified as 'Harijan' girls since her childhood.² Recollecting the humiliation, she tells Bakul: "Right from childhood, in the society, at every stage I found generosity surrounding me. We just had to accept it saying, 'yes sir'... In school, food, clothing books were given generously... in fact, given free ... we just had to declare that we were "Harijans" (2005, 195). What Shefali points out is a complex problem that cannot be grasped solely within the political and economic realm of the state. While the state may take affirmative action with regards to education and employment of Dalits, however the deeply entrenched

2 *Harijan*: A term used by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933 to refer to the "untouchables" as "Children of God." The term was rejected by B.R. Ambedkar and several others who considered the term patronizing and that located the depressed classes within the larger Hindu religion and nation. Though the term 'Dalit' was part of Dalit parlance by the 1970s, the deliberate use of an older term 'Harijan' seems to be employed as a way of irony to present a subtle critique of Gandhian reformism. In fact, the failure of Gandhi's idea of inter-caste marriage as a step towards an upward mobility of Dalits constitutes the central conflict in the play.

caste system in Indian society does not necessarily facilitate their upward social mobility. It is deep-seated casteism that is responsible for crimes against Dalits on day-to-day basis despite the Indian Constitution criminalizing untouchability. In the play, the necessity to openly acknowledge their being 'Harijans' in order to receive the government aid plays havoc with the psyche of three young sisters affecting Shefali the most. Shefali doesn't complain about the lack of affirmative action on part of the state but points out towards the social unacceptability of Dalits by the 'upper' castes. Shefali's dignity and self-respect which do not let her accept herself inferior to anyone only further the conflict in the play. She tells Bakul that in the school the "three sisters never accepted such generosity" (195). Even as a child, she deconstructs the caste binary, though for a brief moment:

What must other people be ... I used to think that they must be 'janharis'. So, we three sisters wanted to remain 'janharis' in school ... why should we say that we were Harijans? The 'janhari' girls, are they better than us? They bring broken pens and pencils and borrow from us to write ... at such times they need our help... (195)

Her choice to be identified as a '*janhari*' instead of 'Harijan' is not just a linguistic word play but an index of her ideological landscape emblematic of her resistance against the oppressive caste system. In the overall schema of the play, Shefali's supplanting of the term 'Harijan' with 'janhari' is also suggestive of her rejection of the Gandhian Dalit reform which operated within the *varna vyavastha*³ (the varna system) and did not seek a complete 'annihilation of caste' as emphasised by B.R. Ambedkar – the champion of the Dalit cause. Shefali makes her ideological position amply clear that she is an equal and does not seek the pity of the upper classes throughout the play.

Shefali, in the play, does not face physical violence as a child but her younger sisters do. What makes it worse is the fact that the young girls are beaten up by their own mother for not bringing "alms" from school in the form of food, books and clothes like other children from the community do. While the mother beats the younger sisters, Shefali is the target of verbal assault. This is one among several instances in the play where the reader cannot miss oppression at the intersection of various factors. Crenshaw has argued that 'intersectional subordination need

3 According to Monier, varna refers to "colour of the face" but also refers to "the four principal classes described in Manu's code, viz., Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras" in Monier-Williams, Monier, 2005, [1899], *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages* (Reprinted ed.), 924.

not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.' (1250) Extending her argument to the hierarchical Indian society, one can find that Dalit women are caught up at the ineluctable interstices of caste, class and gender. In the play, Shefali's mother faces a Janus-like situation where the only choice available to her is between self-respect and survival. She does not have the privilege to choose both. That she chooses survival over self-respect is guided by her working-class conditions that further complicate the relationship between caste and class. This constitutes what Galtung calls structural violence in which a clearly identifiable agent of violence cannot be detected but which is constituted in the unequal social structures. She makes her position clear while reprimanding her daughters: "Very fine people that you are ... We are Harijans ... Listen Shefali, you listen carefully ... you pass your tenth class and join me with my work. I can't educate you any further" (196). As Shefali grows up, her mother is unable to accept Shefali's reservation against getting married to a "respectable" man from an upper-caste and class. Unlike Shefali, she is unable to accept the fact that Bakul and his father are merely treating Shefali as a publicity material to expand their Dalit vote bank. Shefali tries to show the hidden agenda of the father-son duo:

I know why they want this marriage, at this moment ... right now ... both father and son want to announce to the world that they have contributed towards the upliftment of a Harijan girl. They want recognition on this basis ... for this they want to hear slogans of *zindabad* ... I'll merely be a means for their self-advertisement. (209)

Her mother, on the contrary, takes this marriage as the only possibility that will guarantee her family a chance to move up the social ladder. For her, what could be better than a rich Brahmin man proposing to her Dalit daughter for marriage! That is why she tries to coerce Shefali into this alliance saying, "The gentleman [Dikshit] came to our house twice, only to settle your marriage. *We're poor people* ... what else do we need? For the last so many years you have been meeting his son ... now marry him and be the *respectable daughter-in-law of a well-to-do family*" (209; italics mine). Respect that a Dalit woman would gain by becoming a member of a not just a rich but also an upper caste family!

It is ironical to see that the mother, a victim of the Brahmanical patriarchy owing to her caste, class and gender, has internalised it so much so that she herself becomes its perpetrator without realising it. Her normalising patriarchy can be seen as an act of what Bourdieu's calls "symbolic violence" defined as "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the

most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (2001, 1-2). Explaining the internalisation of such patriarchal domination by women without any coercion, Bourdieu argues that “their acts of cognition are acts of practical recognition, *doxic acceptance*, a belief that does not need to be thought and affirmed as such, and which in a sense ‘makes’ the symbolic violence which it undergoes.” (34; emphasis mine) Following Bourdieu’s argument, the acceptance of a certain kind of ‘womanhood’ reflects “doxic acceptance” on part of Shefali’s mother and, in turn, constitutes “symbolic violence” by perpetrating it on her own daughter. The play provides several instances to prove this contention. Shefali’s mother, for example, is concerned about her daughter’s “honour” if the marriage is not materialised. Despite being a woman, she plays into the hands of patriarchy that she has internalised and accuses her daughter instead of supporting her. Patriarchy requires a woman to have no control over her own body since she is considered to be the custodian of not only her own honour but the honour of the family and community. The need for men to take absolute control, physical and cognitive, over women has been ingrained in the Hindu society through the sanctions of religious texts the origin of which lies in the laws laid down by Manu in 200 BC. For instance, the *Manusmriti* prescribes a complete control over woman by men as is evident in the following *sloka*:

*Pita rakshati kaumare, bharta rakshati yauvane,
Rakshanti sthavire putra, na stree swatantryamarhati.* (Kavyatirtha, 364)
Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth,
and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.
[Buhler, 1886, 139]

Kanchan Mathur in her essay “Body as Space, Body as Site” notes that “[V]irginity and chastity are virtues, which are entrenched as part of the socialisation pattern of girls... The typical image of a “good woman” is still one who upholds the honour of the family, maintains the “culture of silence” prevailing in the private domain and is obedient and sacrificing.” (55) Mathur’s argument finds ample echo in Kumar’s play. Equating “honour” with a woman’s body, Shefali’s mother asks her: “If you didn’t have to marry, why did you sell your honour to him? ... Shefali, why did you put us in this difficult situation?” (2018, 339; translation mine) Yet again, she asks, “You fell in love with him ... now why do you complain? If you knew that they were selfish people, why did you lose your honour?” (340; translation mine) The implication is quite clear in her mother’s accusation: it is not only about her honour but, by extension, the entire family’s honour at stake. Shefali confronts her by saying, “If dignity and reputation are

mere adjuncts of the physical then he too has lost something" (2005, 210). And like a typical patriarch, the mother replies, "It is a different matter for a woman, Shefali! If a girl loses her honour, her life is ruined" (210). Unable to bear her mother's arguments, Shefali "shouts in pain",

Enough amma, enough! You're still dreaming about against which you have seen resentment in my eyes right from my childhood ... you place that very thing before me and watch? Perhaps you're thinking of something else ... perhaps you're thinking what will happen to my defiled and used body? Nothing will happen to it ... nothing... *If anything has happened, it is within me ... much is ruined within me, mother. It would have been better if it hadn't happened so soon.* (210; italics mine)

Clearly, the emotional damage and psychological trauma that her relationship with Bakul has caused to her is greater than any physical violence or dishonour.

Among various forms of violence that take place in the play, there is one that can be missed easily for its impact may not be realised immediately. However, it is a form of what direct and personal violence as it can be attributed to individuals who perpetrate it on Shefali in the play. This is to be located in the persistent degradation of Shefali's self-respect by various characters including her own mother. Before I analyse this form of violence in the play, it is important to examine the concept of 'Self-Respect' as envisaged by Indian social thinker, activist and politician E.V. Ramasamy fondly called Periyar. Attributing self-respect as a crucial political tool to fight caste based social injustice in India, S Ramanathan, an Indian politician, had launched 'Self Respect Movement' in 1925 in Tamil Nadu and Periyar contributed immensely to the movement. The objective of the movement was to encourage the backward classes to have self-respect and eradicate caste-based discrimination. According to Periyar:

... he who is called 'man' embodies dignity in himself, and only through his right to this dignity, reveals his human qualities. That is why self-esteem is his birth-right. Man must cast aside his feelings of inferiority, the feeling that he is less important than other beings, and attain self-confidence and self-respect, it will automatically set right politics, nationalism and also theology. (As qtd. in Jha and Chouhan 2011, 194)

Thus, for Periyar, one can have a meaningful existence only if one has self-respect and dignity. In the play, the character of Shefali seems to be modelled on the lines of a young Periyarite who is not willing to compromise her self-respect at any cost. Throughout the play she refuses to be identified as an 'inferior' caste.

However, despite her courage and self-respect she has to pay a heavy price. As a Dalit woman, she is not entitled to have self-respect since the patriarchal *varna vyavastha* (varna system) reserves it only for the *savarnas* (upper-caste). Throughout the play, her self-respect is mocked, threatened and dismissed. It is not difficult to identify Bakul's inability to appreciate Shefali's self-respect given his social privilege that he enjoys being an upper-caste male. He refers to Shefali as a woman with an "enormous ego", a "sensitive" person and even pathologizes her self-respect as a "disease that should have been treated during her childhood" (2005, 195). He reduces a complex social and political problem to a mere personality trait and a "disorder" in Shefali. This is symptomatic of his unwillingness to acknowledge the social, psychological and political implications of caste system. It becomes even more ironical since Bakul is busy in the electoral campaign of his self-proclaimed 'social worker' father who is an aspiring politician. Given their approach towards a Dalit woman, it does not need much political acumen to foresee the future once the father-son duo occupies the center of power. Shefali faces this form of psychological violence from within her community too. Her own mother dismisses Shefali's resistance as "cold reasoning" and "false pride" (195) and Shefali as a "victim of her own pride" (210). A close look at the text reveals that Shefali is a victim not of her pride but a victim of betrayal inflicted upon her by everyone around – Bakul, Kiran and her own mother. This is perhaps the worst form of violence that one can find in the play.

Finally, Kumar deals with violence that relates with the production and dissemination of knowledge. Following Michel Foucault's exploration of "episteme" in *History of Madness* (1961) and *The Order of Things* (1966), Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has used the concept of "epistemic violence" in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) to argue that knowledge production by the dominant groups has its own forms of violence. Referring to the process of colonialism, she argues that the epistemic violence is particularly manifest when the dominant power, the colonist here, attempts "to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (1988, 280-81) thus creating knowledge about the colonial subject which becomes an 'objective' truth. Thus, the process of knowledge production and the knowledge produced both constitute violence against the colonial subject as it prioritises, and at times also invents, certain 'truths' over others. Kumar engages with this form of violence in two different ways in the play – one relates with the orientalist construction of India while the other with the Brahmanical hegemony over Dalits. Kumar's play critiques the typical orientalist image of India created by the West which is so often encountered in the colonial discourse. Scene II in the play presents Dikshit, the aspiring politician, meeting Manan, the astrologer. As he shows his palm to Manan to know about his future,

he is “disturbed” and “agitated by the loud *keertan*” on the other side of the ghat (2005, 200). When he asks the foreign tourist, who has organised the *keertan*, to stop the noise, he is told that the latter wants pictures of Indians singing *keertan* “with uneven expression of the faces” for his film (202). When Dikshit enquires about other pictures that he has taken, he tells Dikshit that he has already shot pictures of “Indian beggars” and want to photograph “snake charmers” which would be published in a cultural magazine back home. The message is loud and clear: India is understood by the West as its Other, as a spiritual anti-thesis of the scientific West even after the formal end of colonialism. It is interesting to note that Kumar’s problematization of such orientalist construction of India coincides with the publication of Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) which engages critically with the power of representation.

The second form of epistemic violence, in the play, inflicted upon Dalits by the Brahmanical patriarchal structures constitutes what Galtung calls “structural violence” that is “built into structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (1969, 171) and which Weigert considers stemming from “the unequal distribution of power and resources.” (2005, 2005) This relates with producing knowledge about Hinduism by the dominant group, the Brahmins in this case, and creating caste divisions based on that knowledge to exploit those belonging to the ‘lower’ castes. Such violence has been institutionalised as it is sanctioned by the religious episteme and has held a strong influence in Hinduism. Historically, the knowledge preserved in such religious texts called the *Dharmasastras* like the *Manusmriti* have played a crucial role in keeping Dalits on the margins of *varna vyavastha*. The very basis of the division of caste according to Manu is encapsulated in the following Sanskrit *sloka*:

Lokana tu vivridhi-artham mukh-baahu-uru-paadatah,

Brahmanam kshatriyam vaishyam shudram ch nirvartyat. (Kavyatirtha, 13)

But for the sake of the prosperity of the worlds he caused, the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya, and the Sudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet. (Buhler 1886, 5)

And the following *sloka* establishes the Brahmanical hegemony clearly:

Vipranan vedvidushan grihasthanan yashasvinam.

Shushrushaiv tu shudrasya dharmo naishreyasah parah. (Kavyatirtha, 414)

But to serve Brahmanas (who are) learned in the Vedas, householders, and famous (for virtue) is the highest duty of a Sudra, which leads to beatitude. (Buhler, 1886, 164)

The *Manusmriti*, the foundational text on caste, is also problematic for it considers women much lower than men in the social hierarchy and lays down laws that are clearly anti-woman. One, among many such examples, in the *Manusmriti* is:

Naasti strina kriya matrairiti dharme vyavasthitih

Nirindriya hyayamantrashch striyonritmiti sthitih. (Kavyatirtha, 366)

For women no (sacramental) rite (is performed) with sacred texts, thus the law is settled; women (who are) destitute of strength and destitute of (the knowledge of) Vedic texts, (are as impure as) falsehood (itself), that is a fixed rule. (Buhler, 1886, 141)

It follows from the above instances that in Hinduism violence – symbolic, personal and structural – has been sanctioned by the religious episteme. Kumar represents such epistemic violence in her play that serves as an important principle of exclusion for Shefali and her people. In scene III, after Shefali has had an argument with her mother, she finds a young girl praying to a *tulsi* (Holy Basil) plant. Shefali, for whom “*tulsi* symbolizes steadfastness in love” and nothing more, is unable to comprehend the reason for praying to *tulsi*. (2005, 213) When enquired about the ritual by Shefali, the young and clearly an upper caste girl, though not mentioned explicitly, and for whom *tulsi* is an avatar of goddess Lakshmi, takes an offence and replies in agitation: “You are insulting our gods and goddesses – *chhi chhi!* All my prayers have been wasted. Can’t you differentiate between gods and ordinary folk? You call gods examples! Not only are you a sinner, you’re making me one too!” (213) The scene evokes the notion of spiritual pollution and ritual defilement which is so strongly entrenched in caste system that even the shadows of the *sudras* and ‘untouchables’ were considered potential sources of caste pollution by the upper castes. Hence, after the argument with Shefali, the girl “gets up quickly, goes to the river, washes, and wipes her hand with her scarf” and sits to pray (213).

Another manifestation of the caste pollution is manifest in the fact that traditionally the lower castes had been kept away from Hindu places of worship for centuries. Even the radical Kalaram Temple Entry Satyagraha by Ambedkar at Nasik, along with 15000 Dalit followers in the 1930s could not gain Dalits the right to enter Hindu temples. In fact, even after 67 years of criminalising untouchability by the Indian Constitution, the sight of Dalits being denied entry into Hindu temples is not uncommon. Kumar’s play, written in independent India, also highlights such social exclusion of Dalits in the name of religion through Shefali who has never visited the Shiva temple on the other side of the Yamuna ghat. Nandi Bhatia notes that it is a constant reminder to the audience about the fact that in India “temples have traditionally been the hubs of caste

exclusion.” (2005, 91) It is only in the last scene that Shefali is able to enter the Shiva temple in the company of a Brahmin male, Manan, only to experience another violent moment. Inside the temple, Shefali is shocked to see Kiran, her younger sister, in the company of her newly wedded Brahmin husband Bakul. Kumar's choice to end the play in a temple with a Dalit woman entering the traditional sphere of *savarnas* only expedites her tragedy. While raising questions about the intersectional nature of violence in a deeply hierarchical society, the play's ending is also significant for it raises an important concern in the Dalit literary discourse: whether Dalits writers need to reclaim space within the mainstream literature or should they focus on creating their own literary tradition guided by its own aesthetics?

Kumar's open-ending, devoid of a 'solution' or an ideological position, may seem pessimistic to the audience/readers as is the case with theatre scholar Jaidev Taneja who,

fails to understand why at the end of the play, the same Shefali – in spite of all her pain, guilt and anger – silently accepts and even blesses the surreptitious marriage of her younger sister, Kiran, with her lover, Bakul. It seems as if Shefali's struggle is a small and limited struggle against her own personal exploitation. Rather than fight and protest against her exploiters and their stratagems, she escapes into a self-destructive silence in the final, decisive moments. The play ends in darkness, hopelessness and defeat as Shefali is left all alone.' (2002, 87-88)

However, my contention is that such a judgement needs some re-thinking for it only looks at one side of the situation. Nandi Bhatia has critiqued Taneja's position by arguing that his argument does not take intersectionality into account, merely considers Shefali as a woman and not a 'Harijan.' (2010, 95) Such neglect is symptomatic of feminist scholars' inability/unwillingness to locate the intersection of gender, class and caste which reduces the complexity of issues concerning the 'third world' woman. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has critiqued such a position which assumes "that all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis." (1984, 337-338) Kumar's ending, on the other hand, prevents a cathartic moment in the play which is a significant feature of feminist drama. Tutun Mukherjee has argued that the anti-cathartic ending of what she calls a 'womanist drama-text', does not aim 'to leave the audience with a pleasurable equanimity. On the contrary, its intention is to roil the equilibrium, to disturb the mind, to resist closure, and deny a therapeutic purging of the mind. Often the characters are not well rounded off at the finale but are left at a highly nuanced state of transformation' (2005, 19). Kumar's

play successfully achieves this aim by not providing a denouement and instead compelling her audience/reader out of their comfort zones to probe deeply the complex issues of caste, class, gender and their inter-relationship. Though Kumar's play may not classify as Dalit drama in the strictest sense since the playwright is not a Dalit, it definitely is one of the earliest plays written in the post-Independence India that foregrounds the question of a Dalit woman at the intersection of caste, class and gender firmly.

Works Cited

- BHATIA, Nandi. 2010. *Performing Women/Performing Womanhood: Theatre, Politics, and Dissent in North India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP.
- BUHLER, George. 1986. *The Laws of Manu (Manusmriti)* (Vol. 25 of the Sacred Book of the East). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. 2001. *Masculine Domination*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1: 139-167.
- CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299.
- GALTUNG, Johan. 1969. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (3): 167-191.
- JHA, Niraj Kumar and A. P. S. Chouhan. 2011. "Periyar: Radical Liberalism." In *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers*. In Singh and Roy, 185-200.
- KAVYATIRTHA, Narayan Ram Acharya, ed. 1946. *The Manusmriti with the Commentary Manavarthamuktavali of Kulluka (Various Readings, Foot-Notes, Indices, etc. Tenth Edition)*. Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press.
- KUMAR, Kusum. 2005. "Sunu Shefali" [Listen Shefali]. Trans. by B.T. Seetha. In *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*. In Mukherjee, 182-228.
- KUMAR, Kusum. 2018. "Sunu Shefali" [Listen Shefali]. In *Samagra Naatak [Complete Plays]*. New Delhi: Kitabghar, 295-367.
- KURTZ, Lester R. 2005. *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict*. Amsterdam: Elsevier/Acad. Press.
- MATHUR, Kanchan. 2008. "Body as Space, Body as Site: Bodily Integrity and Women's Empowerment in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(17): 54-63.
- MOHANTY, Chandra Talpade. 1984. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary 2* 12 (3): 333-358.
- MUKHERJEE, Tutun. 2005. "Prolegomenon to Women's Theatre." *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*. In Mukherjee, 155-157.

- MUKHERJEE, Tutun, ed. 2005. *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*. New Delhi: Oxford UP.
- Nelson, Cary and Lawrence Grossberg. 1988. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Hampshire: Macmillan.
- SINGH, M.P. and Himanshu Roy, eds. 2011. *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers*. Delhi: Pearson.
- SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravarty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. In Nelson and Grossberg, 271-313. Delhi: Shakti Books.
- SUBRAMANYAM, Lakshmi, ed. 2002. *Muffled Voices. Women in Modern Indian Theatre*.
- TANEJA, Jaidev. 2002. "Contradictions and Complexities: Women in Modern Hindi Drama." In Subramanyam, 76–90.
- WEIGERT, Kathleen M. 2005. "Structural Violence." In *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict*, 2nd edition. In Kurtz, 2004-2011.