

## **Glocal Colloquies**

An International Journal of World Literatures & Cultures



In Focus  
**Postcolonial Today**

Vol. 1, Issue 1  
May, 2015

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For publication details, please visit:

<http://glocalcolloquies.com/>

### **Narratives of Transition and Conflict**

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Published online: 09 May 2015.

**To cite this article:** Dattaray, Debashree. "Narratives of Transition and Conflict." *Glocal Colloquies* 1.1 (2015): 252-254. Web

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## "Narratives of Transition and Conflict"

*Unclaimed Terrain* by Ajay Navaria  
 Translated from Hindi by Laura Brueck  
 Navayana Publishing, New Delhi. 2013  
 Hardback | Pages 200 | Rs. 295  
 ISBN 9788189059521

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Ajay Navaria, a faculty member in the department of Hindi, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, is the author of two collections of short stories, *Patkathaaur Anya Kahaniyan* (2006) and *Yes Sir* (2012), and a novel, *Udharke Log* (2008). He has also been associated with the premier Hindi literary journal, *Hans*. In *Unclaimed Terrain*, Navaria dedicates his seven stories “To the characters in my stories who fight for their dream of justice and to the tradition that teaches us to struggle for dignity, equality, and freedom” (Navaria 2013). The translation by Laura Brueck does justice to the richly imagined prose of Navaria and reflects his narrative complexities in the development of a Dalit political consciousness. The stories address the identity crisis of Dalit individuals who have paved their way into an ambiguous middle class sensibility of a metropolitan city and at the same time are forever terrorized by a fear of ‘discovery’ as an ‘untouchable’ within the cosmopolitan milieu. In the first story from the collection, ‘Sacrifice’, the protagonist Avinash is a well-read, non-religious individual, happily married to a woman from a different caste. His regressive and bad-mouthed father is the only reminder of his Dalit identity. However, both Avinash and Navaria’s readers find themselves in a grey zone of material reality as they realize that his father has had a hurtful past in his love for a Brahmin girl, who had also dared to love him back and is then victimized by a casteist society. ‘Sacrifice’ also deals with the trauma of lived reality in the parallel life of the butcher, ‘Kalu’, who became an expert butcher, but at the cost of losing his beloved pet goat, Pилоo – whose memory continues to torment him. Navaria negotiates with new aesthetics and thematic norms of Dalit literature by focusing on the individual rather than the community. In ‘New Custom’, for instance, the focus is on the irrevocable truth of identity and consequent humiliation. The protagonist who has travelled to the village from the city is offered hospitality by a tea vendor as he is mistaken for an upper caste Thakur. Even so, the moment his identity as a ‘Dalit’ is revealed, the hostility of the tea vendor and the fellow villagers is a resounding reminder of the unspeakable injustice meted out to the Dalit community within a feudal society. The tea vendor asks him to rinse his glass before returning it. As a mark of ultimate protest, the visitor buys the glass and smashes it on a

stone platform. According to Laura Brueck, ‘Navaria stands alone in contemporary Hindi literature for his analytical, sensitive narrative treatment of the modern urban Dalit male’ (Brueck 123).

In the story “Subcontinent”, for instance, the protagonist, as a boy, has witnessed violence being inflicted by upper caste villagers on his father and grandmother for breaking caste taboos. He has also seen a Dalit wedding party being attacked by thugs because the groom had dared to ride a horse in the village. Later on the same day, a woman of the party is raped and the young boy narrates: “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 agreeing to file a complaint, the village policeman mocks them, ‘They say she was really tasty. Lucky bitch, now she’s become pure!’ (Navaria 97). The young boy transforms into a ‘successful’ Marketing Manager in a metropolis and has been able to cross the bridge of discrimination by being an owner of a 3BR flat; car; eating out at Pizza Hut and Haldiram’s, where the counter-boys call him ‘Sir’. He feels proud that he can now afford the services of a Brahmin doctor, employ a Garhwali Brahmin driver and also arrange for a Bengali music teacher he found on the Internet for his daughter, who attends an expensive convent school. But the city does not afford the complete “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). In “Scream”, a Dalit schoolboy is raped by a Patel boy in the village. He makes his journey to Mumbai, working on sundry jobs and eventually as a gigolo, even as he prepares for his civil service exams. He returns to the village and displays his newly acquired wealth, especially in front of the boy who had sodomized him. Then, he eventually faces a harrowing death in the city at the hands of his female clients. This is one of Navaria’s most disturbing stories, which not only challenges Dalit aesthetics, but problematizes social activism as well, exploring transitional notions of space and time. Navaria challenges the location of the apparently comfortable niche of the urban Dalit, steeped in Ambedkarite social and religious theory and a keenly modern consciousness.

Laura Brueck writes that “Dalit literature, in its social activist role, orients itself towards two specific target audiences: a Dalit audience among whom it intends to foster political consciousness, and a non-Dalit audience for whom it attempts to reveal the “reality” of caste society” (Brueck 121). “Yes Sir” and “Tattoo” invite readers from both sections of society to explore the nebulous uncertainties of ‘unclaimed terrain’ with a grim sense of dark, subversive, humour. “Yes Sir” deals with a change of roles where Narottam, a Dalit, has risen to become Deputy General Manager and an older Brahmin man, Tiwari, is assigned as his peon. Narottam’s attitude as a patronizing, office *babu* who looks down upon his subordinates is a source of constant resentment for Tiwari, who even organizes a *Satyanarayan* puja to get rid of Narottam and thinks of polluting Narottam’s coffee with his spit. Narottam has picked up all the

haughtiness of the office babu class towards subordinates. However, Tiwari's need for a job and the politics of office hierarchy leads to the ludicrous denouement of the narrative. "Tattoo" similarly deals with the dilemma of Subhash Kumar, a well-established Dalit in the metropolis, trying desperately to make his old gym shoes look new in the expensive gym where he has obtained membership. Navaria's narratives divulge the experience of loss, alienation from the physical space of a rural community which accompanies the awakening of the Dalit *chetna*.

In the introduction to his first published volume of short stories, *Patkathaaur Anya Kahaniya*, Navaria writes: "My stories are the creative works of my dreams. For your convenience, you can call them stories, but to understand them fully, you can think of them as dreams. Can such dreams be dreamed in Indian culture and society and not be understood as anti-social and anti-religious?" (quoted in Brueck 124). The courage to dream dreams becomes imperative for the young Mangal in "Hello Premchand" – a young boy who is left orphaned by the death of his untouchable mother. Mangal finds himself in the crossroads of a difficult choice: to succumb to the village Thakur's 'generosity' when he allows Mangal to enter his drawing room, and also offers him his mother's job as a sweeper or to persist to live his mother's dreams for an education and a better future. Dalit literature represents a powerful, emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Given its overarching preoccupations with the location of Dalits in the caste-based Hindu society, and their struggles for dignity, justice and equality, this literature is by nature oppositional. With the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages into English, Dalit literature is in fact poised to acquire a national and an international presence as well as to pose a major challenge to the established notions of what constitutes literature and how we read it.

#### Works Cited

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