A Portrait of the Artist as a Social Reformer: Nirala's *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker"

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Abstract: The Hindi public sphere of early twentieth century India was riven by competing discourses of social reform and cultural nationalism. Nationalist leaders of the time invoked the figure of the 'unmarked' citizen as the foundational unit of the emergent nation-state. In contradistinction to the homogenising impulse of the nationalist discourse, the alterity of the minority subject(s) forms an important theme of the oeuvre of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala. In his lifewritings, *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", Nirala offers a searing critique of the deeply entrenched hierarchies of a caste-bound patriarchal social order. This essay undertakes a close reading of Nirala's prose life-writings to examine the complex relation between his progressivist politics and his romantic poetics.

Keywords: Agency, caste, gender, genre, *Chaayavad*

Literary Nationalism in the Hindi Public Sphere

The Hindi public sphere of early twentieth century India was riven by the competing imperatives of social reform and cultural nationalism. A central determiner of the debates around these two themes was the mode of historicising employed to validate the respective claims of opposing factions of this discursive formation. Francesca Orsini in her book *The Hindi Pubic Sphere, 1920-1940*, discusses the influence of orientalist scholarship on the discursive construction of the past of the emergent nation-state ("The Uses of History" 4). A significant feature of this construction was its location of the origins of the nascent nation-state in a glorious Aryan past. Therapeutic in impulse, nationalist historical narratives then typically proceeded to undertake analyses of the reasons behind the putative decline of the Hindu *rashtra*[1]. As an imagined community, the nation consecrated within the Hindi public sphere of the time was constituted through the marginalisation of its minority subjects. An instance of this homogenising impulse is evident in the structural elision of the issue of caste from the mainstream nationalist discourse. Pointing to the restricted semantic range of words used to denote caste in the Hindi public sphere of early twentieth century, Orsini observes that "caste as *varna* [became] part of 'public' discourse in Hindi, [while] castes as *jatis* were not" ("Introduction" 11).

The issues of gender, caste and class received due critical attention only within the discourse of social reform and the diverse reform initiatives that accompanied it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is in this context that the writers of this "golden period" of Hindi letters deliberated upon the role of literature in the constitution of nationalist consciousness. During his famous address to the first meeting of the Progressive Writers Association in 1936, Munshi Premchand argued that "once literature becomes detached from the patronage of the wealthy, it has the freedom to be truly revolutionary and challenge the dominant paradigms of the time" (qtd in Gajarawala 36). In their self-presentation as the architects of the fledgling state, significant writers of the Hindi literary landscape in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, such as Mahavir Prasad

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Dvivedi, invoked the figure of the 'unmarked' citizen as the foundational unit of the emergent state. The rights, interests, aspirations and duties prescribed for the 'unmarked' citizen- unencumbered by caste and gender norms of a traditional society- were then elaborated within a nationalist upper-caste patriarchal literary culture. The seamless nationalist imaginary offered by this group of writers, however, found its counterpoint in the writings of minority (Dalit and women) subjects.

The schematic and rather selective view of the Hindi public sphere of the early twentieth century presented above is complicated by the work of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala. As a radical writer of the *Chaayavad* tradition, Nirala offers a searing critique of the deeply entrenched hierarchies of a caste-bound patriarchal social order and yet retains the universalist aspirations characteristic of the romantic sensibility. It is in the context of the social and political ferment of the early decades of the twentieth century that a distinctly new aesthetic characterised by introspection and a romantic poetics – *Chaayavad* -- emerges in the Hindi literary sphere (Rubin 112)[2]. While the central preoccupations of the *Chaayavadins* were metaphysical in character, Nirala's literary corpus exhibits a singular catholicity of interests. Even as Rubin enumerates the common themes to be found in the poetry of the *Chaayavadins*, such as "nature", "love", and "the yearning of the soul for the Infinite", he locates Nirala's distinction from the rest of the group in the latter's direct engagement with a host of contemporary social and political issues (112). Given Nirala's professed political radicalism, this essay studies his prose life-writings, *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", to examine the discursive construction of the savarna author as a progressive artist and reformer.

Generic Liminality

A feature common to *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" is that generically both the texts occupy a liminal space between memoir/autobiography and biography. The eponymous biographical subjects of both the texts- Kulli Bhat and Chaturi- compete for narrative centrality with the author himself. Assuming a stridently progressive voice in the "Preface" of *A Life Misspent* and the opening passages of "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", Nirala presents himself as the radical artist who has chosen to narrate minority subjects – a homosexual man of ambiguous caste origins, and a shoemaker, respectively. What makes these texts particularly engaging is that Nirala employs a self-reflexive, comic tone to critique his own flailing attempts to institute a position of authority vis a vis the eponymous protagonists of the two texts. The narrative telos of both these auto/biographical accounts is directed towards the presentation of the author as a social reformer.

Scott Schlossberg comments on the creative excess of Nirala's style in "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" in that the text eludes neat formal classifications and exhibits features of a memoir, a biographical sketch and even a folk-tale ("Introduction" 464). Nirala opens his account of Chaturi's life by informing the reader that he has undertaken the biographical sketch in response to Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi's exhortation to Hindi litterateurs to write biographies of ordinary people ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 465). The literary rendering of vignettes from Chaturi's life is intermixed with Nirala's ironic commentary on contemporary Hindi literary-critical establishment. The autobiographical account that Nirala gives of his growing literary repute within and outside of his native village forms an important context for his narration of himself as a progressive artist. The social prestige that accrues to the author on account of his literary 'genius' facilitates Nirala's contestations of caste and gender hierarchies within his village.

The narratorial tone in both the texts is richly ironic and often undermines the author himself (or the wider community of writers) as much as the more obvious targets of his satire. In the opening passage of "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", for example, even as the

narrator commends the durability of the shoes Chaturi crafted and the soundness of the latter's literary taste, he satirises the inertia-laden output of contemporary writers and their reluctance to undertake stylistic innovation ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 465-466). "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" then narrates two subjects: Nirala and Chaturi. The presentation of the former as a progressive and increasingly famous writer is inextricably tied up with the presentation of the latter as the dispossessed subject who is radicalised, to an extent, through his association with the savarna author.

It is in *Kulli Bhat* that Nirala realises, more completely, his aspiration to render a comprehensive biography of an 'uncommon' ordinary person. Nirala rationalises his choice of Kulli as the subject of his biographical venture by referring to the rare commensurability of the Kulli's actions with his professed ideals. In this, Nirala avers, Kulli is entirely unlike the conventional heroes consecrated by the hegemonic upper-caste culture who "[C]ompensate for their weaknesses with grand statements. The blaze of light around what they say hides how they live" (*A Life Misspent* 1). In addition to its biographical intent, the narrative, Nirala informs the reader in the "Preface", also includes an account of his own life, "more openly perhaps than the orthodox would like". Unapologetic for the unorthodox political positions he assumes in the text, Nirala asks the reader to evaluate the story on the "quality" of its telling.

A Life Misspent

A Life Misspent is a deeply engaging narrative to study the discursive formation of the author's savarna subjectivity with reference to his other in terms of caste and sexual orientation. A homosexual man with an ambiguous caste identity, Kulli is a doubly marginalised subject. A significant strand of the narrative has the radical author/narrator trace his own growth as an independent minded person. Intransigent to the excesses of power early in his childhood, Nirala reminisces: "[I] was a lover of freedom. I couldn't bear restrictions when they lacked all reason" (*A Life Misspent* 20). Nirala furnishes examples of his defiance of figures of authority at multiple places in the text, most notably in his account of his relationship with his father, his encounter with the itinerant sadhu and his vexed relationship with his mother-in-law.

The most significant instance of the narrator's independence of spirit in the text is his sustained resistance to his mother-in-law's advice on his interaction with Kulli. Nirala comically recounts his strained relations with his mother-in-law due to his stubborn assertion of his right to form an independent opinion of Kulli. Nirala's autobiographical account of the beginning of his friendship with Kulli is a brilliant exposition of the specular identity formation that characterises hegemonic masculinity. The narrator's need for constant flattery is met by Kulli's covert (homosexual) courtship of him (27, 30-33). Subjecting himself to gentle irony, Nirala recounts his flailing attempts to assert himself in his affinal home. Nirala's narrative suggests that a masculine identity structured by patriarchal privilege and power remains dependent on a constantly-admiring audience in order to validate itself. The account of the early years of Nirala's marriage acquires a particularly radical edge in that the narrator admits to feelings of inadequacy in the company of his highly accomplished wife. Not only is his wife better-read than him in the *khari boli* literary tradition, she is also an accomplished singer (45). Admitting eventually to his romantic attachment to his wife and the consequent emotional vulnerability to her, the narrator resolves to continue his higher-education to gain ascendancy in the relationship.

Even as the narrator ironises his complacent assumption of masculinist superiority over his wife, he also sounds critical of his unselfconscious expressions of social superiority over Kulli due to his higher-caste status. The wisened narrator rues of his younger years, "I still considered myself a Brahmin in those days. It did not seem unnatural that the dust

on my Brahmin feet should confer purification" (32). It is only when Kulli makes a sexual overture towards him that the narrator is jolted out of the smug assumptions of hegemonic masculinity and realises that the true meaning of Kulli's extravagant admiration for him.

The standpoint from which Nirala narrates and assesses the period that formed him as a revolutionary poet is predicated on the progressive ideal of radical sameness. The episode in Chapter Ten that recounts the narrator's encounter with a *sadhu* is an instance of this outlook. The episode begins with the narrator's expression of his sceptical view of *sadhus* in general and is then employed to illustrate how the narrator's chance encounter with one *sadhu* becomes a site for resolute self-assertion. Assigned the task of assessing the worthiness of an itinerant *sadhu* by the Raja he served, the narrator recounts his conversation with the former. As their conversation unfolds, both the *sadhu* and the narrator are said to have committed the same "spiritual" error: each accords greater significance to secular authority as compared to a divine order, at different points in their heated exchange (58). The narrator signals his final credo of radical egalitarianism when the *sadhu* chides him for assuming the airs of a wealthy patron, when he was in fact merely an employee of the Raja: "[H]ere the *sadhu* erred. A servant is Lord Ram as much as the master" (59). This vision of essential sameness, despite overt differences of social identity, articulate a metaphysical position that Nirala elaborates later in their conversation. Nirala eventually attributes his unflinching fearlessness, in the face of the *sadhu's* threat of complaining to the Raja, to divine inspiration (59). Interestingly, the narrator locates in his metaphysical vision a common source of independence of spirit as well as his literary creativity. He exclaims, "I saw a light; I began to understand. I had seen this light while composing 'A Bud of Jasmine' and hadn't known what the light was" (*A Life Misspent* 59). This is a metaphysical framework that occludes from critical gaze socially differentiated identities and renders irrelevant the hierarchies that obtain from them.

Notwithstanding this progressive outlook that derives its egalitarianism from metaphysical sameness underlying diverse social identities, an analysis of the narrative structures of Nirala's life-writings from the perspective of caste yields certain contradictions. These contradictions become apparent in the formal choices Nirala makes in these texts and the political implications attendant upon them. Both the texts under consideration are presented as biographies of their eponymous subjects. While Nirala admits to intermixing his account of Kulli Bhat with his own autobiography in *A Life Misspent*, the fact that he chooses to title the text *Kulli Bhat* (in the Hindi original) is indicative of the overall (romantic) biographical impulse to chronicle an extraordinary, though marginal, subject. This biographical impulse is even more explicit in "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" where the stated intent of the account, in its opening passage, is to chronicle the life of an ordinary person. However, the autobiographical impulse within both these texts decentres these biographical projects. This is apparent at the level of the form of the two narratives in that the narration of the 'revolutionary' author eventually comes to assume greater importance than the narration of their eponymous subjects. These texts thereby assume literary-historical value for the accounts they render of the formation of one of the foremost poets of the *Chaayavad* tradition. In *A Life Misspent* Nirala records the spread of his literary fame and the appeal of his poetry to readers across the class divide: "I became known to peasants and landlords" (65). Critical of contemporary literary and political conservatism, Nirala attributes his literary success to his stylistic and thematic innovations (65). Interestingly, these changes in Nirala's literary fortunes have a concomitant effect on his social status. The narrator recounts that with the spread of his literary fame, he had become "an object of wonderment" to the literary critics and the inhabitants of Dalmau. As a mature and successful poet, Nirala finds in Kulli an auditor even more reverential than earlier (65). What makes for a significant portion of Kulli's respect for Nirala is that the latter is an "independent" poet, free of the financial and cultural dependence on courtly patronage (65).

It is precisely a recurrent celebration of this independence of spirit and willingness to experiment with inherited aesthetic, social and political traditions that construct Nirala as a radical artist in the text. However, this radicalism also means that Nirala is effectively the only agential subject in these auto/biographical accounts. For instance, it is Nirala, the non-conforming savarna artist, who encourages Kulli to overlook the objections of "the guardians of Hinduism" and formalise his relationship with a Muslim woman (66-67). Widening the horizons of imaginative possibilities for Kulli, the narrator foments a veritable intellectual revolution in the latter's life by exhorting him to question received opinion. However, their attempts to exemplify ethical probity in their public and private lives have widely different consequences for the upper caste radical artist and his marginal interlocutor.

It is not just the case that Kulli incurs hostility of the conservative inhabitants of Dalmau for his interfaith marriage. He also earns the suspicion and disapproval of government functionaries and local elites for the social service and consciousness-raising projects he undertakes in Dalmau. It is only through sheer persistence that Kulli manages to earn a measure of social sympathy and respect for his unfaltering commitment to projects of social and political welfare in Dalmau. Curiously, even the narrator's initial response to Kulli's report of his political activism in Dalmau is rather tepid. In a conversation between the two, set in the context of the suspension of the Civil Disobedience movement, the narrator expresses his disapproval of politically expedient decision-making by national leaders of the time and expresses his reluctance to follow their lead. The singularly independent-minded artist asserts, "I don't go along with everything" (69).

While Nirala's romantic aesthetic that underpins his self-presentation as an unfettered subject is entirely in keeping with the European discourses of romanticism, it does not accord the same centrality to the Dalit subject. The narrator seems to suggest that Kulli's more simple-minded departures from social norms are essentially a bid to power. Contrasting Kulli's politically committed activity in Dalmau with his own tentative support for various political causes, Nirala comments: "I showed Kulli I was ordinary. He began to feel himself extraordinary in comparison" (69). This rather dismissive attitude towards Kulli's radical political activity is also evident in the "fun" the narrator decides to have at Kulli's expense by suggesting that the latter write to national leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru to fund his social service projects (71)[3]. Satirising the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the national leaders and their constituents, Nirala uses these names to signify the disconnect between the political elite and the grassroots workers. However, it is more pertinent to note that Nirala sets Kulli up for this quest of financial aid from the Congress party despite his awareness that it had minimal chances of success. Not surprisingly, Kulli's attempts yield no fruit, and it is only Nirala's intervention in the situation that resolves the problem of funding for Kulli's school. This narrative structure of the radical artist intervening in the lives of his biographical subject(s) and rescuing them from situations of distress is an oft-repeated one in Nirala's prose life-writings.

It is only when he visits the school Kulli had set up for the Dalit children of the village that the narrator truly sheds his somewhat cynical and facetious attitude towards Kulli's service projects. Deeply moved by Kulli's service to the Dalit children, the narrator records: "I felt that what I had studied was worth nothing. What I had done was worth nothing" (*A Life Misspent* 74). A marked shift in the narratorial tone - from the comic to the sombre - ensues as the narrator reflects on the inequities spawned by casteism, most concretely in the form of the practice of untouchability: "My own civilization had made them lowly" (74). The resolution of this scene of heightened consciousness of the historical cost of caste-based discrimination is effected through the normalisation and restoration of touch as part of their everyday social intercourse between him and the Dalits villagers. The narrator describes his rejection of caste-based norms of socialising thus:

> There was no room for cleverness here. My being a poet of God and beauty and splendour was worth nothing. My being a revolutionary was worth even less […] Please lay the bouquets in my hands the way brothers offer flowers to one another. They [Dalit villagers] smiled and came forward. The differences of bodies melted away. We were one spirit. (*A Life Misspent* 74–75)

This gesture, that restores touch as a part of everyday social intercourse between various castes groups, is primarily a spectacular act. Although transgressive of everyday social norms of caste-governed sociality, it has only a limited effect on the texture of everyday social intercourse in the village. This then generates obvious questions from the Dalit perspective regarding the political efficacy of the narrator's gestures.

Although instances of transgression of caste boundaries, such as the one discussed above, abound in the text, they leave unaltered the basic structure of caste. The limited political purchase of the narrator's progressive gesture is evident in the manner in which Nirala effects the closure of the auto/biographical narrative. When the local priest refuses to officiate at the eleventh-day funereal rites after Kulli's death because of the ambiguity regarding the latter's caste-identity, the narrator improvises a funeral ritual (100–103). The ritual is a veritable performance by the narrator that derives its social sanction from the narrator's identity as a well-known Brahmin writer. The narrator's choice of a non-vegetarian meal right after the performance of the ritual further stages his defiance of the food cultures of the Brahmins. Ostracised by the village Brahmins even in his death, the minority subject (and the questions generated by his minority subject-position) are ironically laid to rest by the well-inclined savarna author. The narration, therefore persistently foregrounds the revolutionary Brahmin subject despite its stated intent to present Kulli as a laudable subject of the biography.

"Chaturi, the Shoemaker"

The well-inclined savarna narrator also becomes the increasingly central subject of Nirala's auto/biographical sketch, "Chaturi, the Shoemaker". As noted earlier in the essay, Nirala's romantic impulse to chronicle the lives of 'ordinary' people finds expression in his choice of minority subjects for his biographical sketches. The reason for the narrator's deep admiration for Chaturi resides in the latter's insight into the Bhakti corpus that Nirala remarks upon in opening passages of the text. The narrator exclaims that while the upper-caste wordsmiths have historically written and edited books, Chaturi (and others of his community) crafted shoes ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 466). Although literary enthusiasts of all caste groups share fine aesthetic sensibilities, the narrator highlights the historical exclusion of the Dalits from mainstream cultural heritage and its economic cost to the community. An interesting power dynamic emerges between Chaturi and the narrator through the former's performance of Kabir bhajans at the narrator's residence. Chaturi is dismissive of the intellectual aridity of academicians who lack insight into the true essence of the Kabir corpus. The narrator, in turn, wonders whether Chaturi held a similarly low opinion of his literary sensibility (467).

An interesting feature of the two texts, "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" and *A Life Misspent,* is the highly self-reflexive narratorial voice that often employs humour to undercut Nirala's attempts at instituting position(s) of authority in his interactions with the eponymous protagonists of the two texts. In *A Life Misspent,* the narrator records his ridiculous attempts at staging hegemonic masculinity in his affinal family. In "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", similarly, the narrator reflects ironically on his implication in the caste system. When Chaturi offers to punctuate his bhajan singing with a commentary on the devotional songs, the narrator is reluctant about the idea at first (467). His unease with Chaturi's assumption of the role of the interpreter of the mystical songs of Kabir is arguably an

unease at Chaturi's resumption of a cultural corpus that belongs more appropriately with the latter's Kabirpanthi Dalit community. Once the narrator has overcome his initial reluctance to play the role of the passive auditor, he feels surprised by the profundity of Chaturi's understanding of the Bhakti tradition. The ability to instruct, the narrator concedes, is not a function of one's caste identity or level of literacy (468).

As in the case of *A Life Misspent,* the narrator's attitude towards his biographical subject, Chaturi, is that of a benevolent savarna reformer. Nirala's sketch is as much about the subject formation of the radical writer as it is about Chaturi. A significant theme in savarna writing on caste reform was that of education of the lower caste people in order to integrate them into the mainstream. Education of the Dalit subject forms a significant theme in "Chaturi, the Shoemaker". After Chaturi has instructed the narrator in the intricacies of the Kabir corpus, he requests the latter to educate his son Arjunva (469). While the narrator makes a liberal teacher to Arjunva, the limitations of his benevolent caste politics are evident in his son's condescending attitude towards the new pupil. The two children replicate the hierarchies of the adult social world, and Chiranjiv asserts his caste superiority by ridiculing Arjunva's pronunciation. The narrator observes that while he treated his pupil with "love", his son's attitude towards Arjunva was ridden with caste prejudices. Regretting the persistent oppression of the 'untouchables', the narrator rues: "*Chamaars* will be oppressed, Brahmins will oppress them. The only cure is to attack at both ends—and yet things are not so simple" (471).

Nirala's son, Chiranjiv, is comparable to the upper caste architects and guardians of standardised Hindi in his insistence on the significance of chastity of pronunciation. Characteristically, the narrator intervenes to save the 'untouchable' subject from further humiliation by his son. Interestingly, the name of the Dalit subject - Arjunva- bears the signifier ('va' appended to Arjun) of his cultural distance from the Sanskritic language (and culture) that has historically formed the basis of the putative superiority of the upper-caste people. The narrator's eventual rescue of Arjunva, and his subsequent apology to him and Chaturi, testify to the sincerity of his attempt at equalising the power differential between them (474). However, the narrative pattern of the rescue of a Dalit character by a well-meaning Brahmin recurs in the latter half of the account.

The 'episode' wherein the narrator enables Chaturi's resistance to his caste-based exploitation by the local landlords is another example of the power dynamic that structures Nirala's relationship with the dispossessed minority subjects of his auto/biographies. At one point during their interaction Chaturi complains to the narrator about the annual demand for an extra pair of shoes by the landlord's man. Educated in the protocols of officialese, the narrator informs Chaturi that he could verify the legitimacy of this demand from the official administrative record.[4] This minor narrative strand finds its closure in the last line of the text, when a somewhat radicalised Chaturi - wisened in legalese through his inspection of the official records - laughs off this exploitative practice (477).

An even more significant rescue effected by the narrator is through his intervention in the face-off between the policeman, who visits Garhakola in order to investigate the political organisation in the village, and the peasants. Set in the context of the nationalist movement, particularly the agitations against the Simon Commission in 1928-29, "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" chronicles the peasants' resistance to an exploitative regime of taxes and rents (Schlossberg 464). The narrator records that several farmers had refused to pay rent inspired by their hope of an eventual economic redressal and stirred by the nationalist fervour of the movement for political independence from colonial rule. It is the narrator's wit and intellectual resourcefulness that blunts the edge of the punitive measures the landlords of the village undertake in reaction to the peasants' revolts. The narrator recounts that the landlords had conspired to trap the poor peasantry in extravagant legal cases. In

what is typical of Nirala's fictionalised auto/biographical voice, humour is employed to stage resistance: when the local policeman comes inquiring after his affiliation to the Congress party, the narrator evades a direct answer and claims to belong to a "universal community of man" ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 467). In response to the latter's further enquiry about the nature of this "community", the narrator reels off the names of a few Nobel laureates and leaves the policeman befuddled at his answer (467).

A critical reading of the recurrent narrative patterns of Nirala's auto/biographical prose texts raises interesting questions about the politics of representation of Dalit subjects by savarna authors. The question of link between the writer's identity and their literary expression is a complex one. It rests on implicit assumptions about the very process of literary creation. Nirala's Romantic aesthetic, for instance, links his claims of a divinely inspired literary creativity with his revolutionary credentials in *A Life Misspent* (59). While Nirala's *Chaayavad* makes space for sympathy, identification even, with the minority (Dalit) subject, it remains too occupied with the formation of the writer to take his decentring of the hegemonic upper-caste discourse to its logical conclusion. Nirala's sympathetic sketches of Kulli Bhat and Chaturi are as much about his self-presentation as revolutionary writer-activist as they are about his biographical subjects. Caste, evidentially, is neither attributed the causal role in these accounts of formation of Dalit subjects and their upper-caste counterpart nor is it theorised as a significant determinant of agentiality of the savarna artist. Nevertheless, Nirala's critical subversion of the discursive scaffolding of hegemonic upper-caste masculine identity (in *A Life Misspent)* through a relentless ironising of its constitution is remarkably radical for its moment of production. An examination of radical savarna fiction of the early twentieth century reveals the contradictions that progressive upper-caste participants of the Hindi public sphere encountered in their engagement with the hegemonic impulses of Hindi nationalism. Dalit perspectives on canonical savarna Hindi writing then offers opportunity to pursue questions regarding aesthetic representation of minority subjects and the complex relation of the author's aesthetic choices with their social identity.

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Notes

[1] Orsini comments on the constitution of a homogenous category of Muslim invaders that fitted in with Orientalist bias against Islam. Given the homogenising impulse of the nationalist imaginary, literary voices of minority subjects were either ignored or dismissed as sectarian discontent (*The Hindi Public Sphere* 3).

[2] The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the Chaayavad aesthetic in the writing of four major poets that include Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala', Sumitranandan Pant, Jaishankar Prasad and Mahadevi Verma (Rubin 111).

[3] Nirala's heated public exchanges with Gandhi and Nehru, on account of their alleged indifference to writers of Hindi fiction and the aesthetic possibilities of the language, hold greater significance than merely being facts of biographical curiosity for Nirala's readers. Satti Khanna in his afterword

to *A Life Misspent*, "Bhavbhay Darunam: Terror of Being", mentions Nirala's failed attempts to convince Gandhi and Nehru of the "great progress Hindi had made" and the vigour of Nirala's own aesthetic practice when he has an opportunity to meet them in public gatherings (114-115). Khanna speculates that Nirala's satirical rendition of the two leaders in the text might partly be attributed to their putative indifference to Nirala's aesthetic concerns.

[4] Scott Schlossberg points out that the *jajmani* system that had been granted legal sanction by the British administration in the mid-nineteenth century maintained a formal record of caste obligations and their remuneration in a document called the *wajib-al-urz*. ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 470).

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