

**Striving to be in the Mainstream: Maitreyi Pushpa's elegiac  
portrayal of the Kabutara Community in *Alma Kabutari***

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***Abstract***

*The present paper seeks to examine a Hindi novel and explore the power politics prevalent in society along the yardstick of caste wherein the marginalized kabutara community - a group identified as a criminal' tribe during colonial times has to undergo tremendous suffering and oppression at the hands of the upper-caste Kajjas. Further, the paper tries to explore the feasibility of (re)defining the relations between the two groups from that of oppressor-oppressed to that of mutual respect and trust. The declaration of Nehru comes as a welcome sigh of relief for some forward-looking Kabutaras. However, the ground reality does not change overnight leading to atrocities and the resultant disillusionment. Alma, the daughter of Ram Singh Kabutara, who unlike other Kabutara women is educated, successfully uses education as a tool of emancipation. She emerges as the quintessence of nobler human virtues of perseverance and forgiveness showing magnanimity even towards the oppressors.*

*Alma Kabutari* (2000) is the SAARC Literary Award winning novel by the famous Hindi novelist Maitreyi Pushpa. Based on the folklore of Rani Padmini and her descendants, the novel primarily

projects the pitiable plight of the kabutara community which was declared to be a criminal tribe by the British government. Labeled as criminals, the Kabutaras are subjected to exploitation in varied forms—physical, social, economical and even sexual. The upper-caste Kajjas employ repressive as well as hegemonic strategies to subdue the kabutaras in the name of caste Hinduism and class differences. The harsh, sordid realities of the life of the kabutaras have been depicted with an overt ruthlessness by the novelist. Perhaps, this is the only book ever written on the life realities of the kabutaras who are forced to lead a sub-human life owing to the criminal tag attached to the entire tribe. Starting from Veer Singh and Bhoorie, the incessant struggle against gross injustice meted out to Kabutaras begins and through Ram Singh, reaches down to Alma, the third generation of the family.

The novel uses as an epigraph a quotation from Jawaharlal Nehru's speech on "Ex-criminal Tribes of India" in 1936. Nehru's concern is clearly discernible in the introductory quote:

I am aware of this monstrous provision of the Criminal Tribes Act, which constitutes a negation of civil liberties. Wide publicity should be given to its working and an attempt made to have the Act removed from the Statute Book. No tribe can be classified criminal as such, and the whole Act is out of consonance with all civilised principles of criminal justice and treatment of offenders...

The pitiless precision with which the writer lays bare the layers of social and sexual exploitation of the persons belonging to the community becomes all-the-more acute and heart-rending as the quote is perceived by some dreaming Kabutaras as a harbinger of a promising future for the tribe. Ironically, they are let down at every step by the society, police and the government. Obviously, the dream of equality is far from being realized but the unwitting victims cannot see through the ideologically promoted hegemonic image of themselves. First through Veer Singh and Bhoorie and later through Ram Singh, the novelist succeeds in mapping the contours of various power structures that unleash repressive measures on the 'audacious' outcastes. The couple has to wage the battle on two fronts simultaneously: first, against the oppressive forces and second, against the traditional mindset within their own community. Veer Singh's euphoric reaction to the 'King's' speech is well narrated by Malia, the old custodian of the Kabutarabasti:

Veer Singh said, the king said that nomad folks and gypsies who were listed as criminals are also free from now. The law that was the enemy of man is henceforward struck down. The nomad people will get the same justice, and the same rights that every man in the country gets. They are not criminals, but born warriors... These lion-hearted sons today will uphold the honour of the motherland by enrolling in the army. (114-15)

Having heard such noble words from the 'king' of the country, Veer Singh and Bhoorie are ecstatic. They now feel that the days of equality and justice have come. However, no one from within the community shows interest in their raptured talks. On the contrary, people make fun of them and ostracize them. The community's banter and scoffs do not disparage Veer Singh's determinism that jubilantly goes to join the army but is rejected at the very mention of his caste. Realizing the importance of education and the power it brings, he tries to seek justice in the court but is killed mercilessly by the petition writer and other upper caste persons before he could appeal against injustice.

Bhoorie's struggle against the oppressive forces is most courageous. As a Kabutara woman, she is doubly oppressed. She has to fight against the exploitative mechanisms of the Kajjas while at the same time, she is looked down upon as a low woman by her own community. Veer Singh's death has pushed her back to the wall but her faith in the power of education remains unshaken. She decides to use her sexuality both as a means to counter oppression and, more importantly, to educate her son. The woman willingly accepts prostitution and turns a deaf ear to all criticism. Her determinism emanates from her philosophy: "This body is nothing compared to the treasure house of knowledge"(117). Thus Bhoorie is the first character in the novel who comes to realize the importance of education and decides to empower her son with education—a potent weapon to negate coercion. Amidst tremendous uproar, she sends Ram Singh to school. She bravely withstands all pressures from within and without the society and consoles herself with the idea that if she is able to make Ram Singh able, she will consider herself flawless. She openly flaunts the 'customs' and 'traditions' of the Kabutara community and even rebels against the headman.

Bhoorie had consoled herself with the idea that the way to education for her son has to pass through her body. Finally her determinism bears fruit as Ram Singh successfully becomes a school teacher. But the poor woman hardly knew that when faced with a potential threat from outside, all loci of power join hands to annihilate the threat. An educated Kabutara is one such threat to the Kajjas—be they in the form of villagers, Police or Dacoits. The young boy who has always been dreaming of bringing justice to his community by becoming a role-model for them, is cornered at every step. He is made to realize his lowly status in spite of the fact that he has now become a teacher. He is insulted and incited in every possible manner to resort to criminal activities. The following scene well captures the essence of the argument:

The chaprasi's laugh flew over his shoulders like bat's wings. 'You heard the kabutara, bade babu? Without handcuffs his wrists are itching! The scoundrels have swallowed up the rights of the upper

caste boys and have become schoolmasters from common theioves. All this while his mother went about with her ghagra never down. He gets a chair to sit on, and pronto, his mother becomes a model of chastity! The constables still lick their lips over her – she may be old but a woman yet! And this pimp of his mother’s is explaining his rights to you?’ (160)

The provocation works and Ram Singh kills the chaprasi there and then. All the hardships that his mother underwent to educate him have become null and void instantly. However, he does not lose his job as it would mean the end of monthly installment for the police. Now onwards, Ram Singh finds himself caught in a quagmire of dirty nexus between the police and the upper caste people and is never able to be his own self. Particularly, when the police visit his house for the installment, his self respect is thrown to the winds. The policemen threaten to strip his wife in front him if he does not pay them the money. They further warn him against any complaint as the ‘real’ power of the government is vested in them. Ram Singh feels how hollow and deceitful the ideals of equality have been. He is forced to think that Education has not empowered him enough to counter this nexus of power:

The Prime Minister of the country, a man like god, and the brazen lies he’s told! In Ram Singh’s notebook the lines he spoke were still living, shining in bold letters – “I know the fearsome realities of the Criminal Tribes Notification Act. It denies man the freedom of man. We have to make efforts to repeal this act from the laws of the constitution. No community or caste can be categorized as criminal from birth. This pre-determinism violates the principles of equal justice of the accused, and of the ideals of progress.”

Ram Singh had decked out his notebook with these lines as though they were garlands of flowers round the frame of his life. He’d open the notebook and smell each word like a flower. The words had an essence. A fragrance that filled his hut. From the same notebook now waves of stench rose.

This fetid, stench ridden history of the years after independence! He tore the leaves of the notebook into shreds. False essay, false mouth! Enticing sentences spoken for the sake of speaking! Deception! Dirty game! (162-63)

A completely dejected, disillusioned man, Ram Singh surrenders himself to the circumstances still harbouring the illusion that by carrying out the instructions of the police, he can still manage to educate his daughter Alma and thus save her from humiliation. Finally, he becomes a victim of fake encounter and is killed by the police in the name a fierce dacoit, Beta Singh.

Alma's odyssey begins after Ram Singh's death and she is sold and purchased like a commodity. From Durjan Kabutara to Surajbhan to Sriram Shastri -- the dacoit-turned-politician she suffers like her grandmother and other Kabutara women. However, the girl somehow stumbles her way through physical and sexual exploitation to write a new destiny for herself. Educated as she is, she soon becomes the indispensable consort of Sriram Shastri and thus earns herself a place in the political realm becoming at the same time, however, disenchanted with the dirty system. Now she can understand the essence of her father's disgust with the entire set up: "Bappa used to fret, is the government running its writ or has it made over all its responsibilities to dacoits, murderers and police? On top of it, the claim that everything is for the people, by the people and for the people. What could be better eyewash?" (550)

This state of disillusionment is the final culmination of the real-life experiences that Alma, Ram Singh and some other progressive Kabutaras who show keen awareness towards their status as human beings. They just want that they also be treated like one. They steal only to survive. They do not know the tricks to annihilate using smart maneuverings. When Jangalia, Kadambai's husband, poses a naïve question to Mansaram, a Kajja 'benefactor', it actually rips apart the veneer of sophistication and propriety of the upper caste Kajjas: "Malik, the tricks that we people use just to keep alive, you people use to finish off your own family. And you don't go to jail. Is simple stealing the biggest crime in the world?" (25) Even Sriram Shastri sees through the dirty politics of the 'civilized' society and finds that his life as dacoit was much more comfortable and straightforward. When he counts the number of murders he committed as a dacoit and compares it with that of the political murders happening in broad-day light in the cities, he is astonished to find that the latter is greater.

Thus, *Alma Kabutari* is a saga of the woes and sorrows of the tribal Kabutaras. In their journey from the times of Rani Padmini, they have seen numerous rulers and governments – from the Muslims to the British and thereafter, the post-independence 'king', the ground realities happen to be the same for them. Even if the discriminatory laws have been abolished, the discrimination continues. Kadambai's brother, Sumer is killed by the caste Hindus for he happened to kill by mistake, a peacock – the vehicle of gods. Jangalia too becomes a victim of the foul play of the Kajjas. Mansaram uses him as a weapon against his own cousin brother Lallu Raja. He first takes the poor Kabutara into confidence and asks him to steal the idol of Hanuman and then leaves him to die like a dog at the hands of the atrocious police.

While presenting an authentic picture of the life the Kabutaras lead even after so many years of independence, the writer also highlights the role of education in shaping their destinies and thus transforming their lives for the better. Though the path to education is not easy, it has a tremendous enabling power. However, education alone does not suffice to face oppression. Here, the role of upper-caste people is crucial. Through the characters of Mansaram, Kehar Singh and more importantly, Dheeraj, Maitreyi Pushpa calls for a more active and positive role that the Kajjas can play to help the tribals join the mainstream of society. Therefore, despite the overall gloomy atmosphere of the novel, there are some affirmatives also. In her success story as a politician, Alma becomes the torchbearer for the entire community to earn a respectable position in the society. Towards the end when she shuns all hatred and desire to revenge upon Sriram Shastri – a representative of the Kajja self, Alma has embraced greater human virtues such as forgiveness and magnanimity of heart, thus becoming modern-day Rani Padmini.

### References

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