

CONDITIONAL BELONGING, NAMING AND THE STATE IN JOSEPH MACWAN'S *THE STEPCHILD*

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Abstract

Joseph Macwan's Gujarati novel Angaliyat (1986), translated by Rita Kothari as The Stepchild (2004), follows two Vankar weavers of the Charotar region and the community around them from the mid-1930s to the end of the 1950s. Its title names a child who enters a stepfather's household holding the mother's finger and who remains at the edge of that household; as Kothari points out, the same word also marks as backward the communities that permit the remarriage of women. This article takes the double sense of the title as a key to the novel's politics and proposes the term conditional belonging for the position the novel maps: a community indispensable to the economy of the village, admitted to its markets, waters and courts only on terms that can be withdrawn at will. Reading Macwan's treatment of the village commons, of the passage from colonial to postcolonial administration, and of kinship made outside ritual, the article argues that the novel records the migration of caste power from open coercion into the paperwork and patronage of the new state. It ends with the novel's equivocal closing scene, in which a murdered man's name is inscribed on a school built under his killer's patronage, and with the gendered limits the novel shares with the order it criticises.

Keywords: Joseph Macwan; *The Stepchild*; *Angaliyat*; Gujarati Dalit literature; caste and the state; naming; humiliation

Introduction

Joseph Macwan's *Angaliyat* appeared in Gujarati in 1986 and received the Sahitya Akademi Award a few years later. Its translator, Rita Kothari, has described it as "arguably, India's first Dalit novel," one that "comes from Gujarat, not Maharashtra" (qtd. in Bhatt). The claim is offered with a scholar's caution, and its value lies less in the priority it asserts than in the correction it makes to a familiar map. The history of Dalit writing in India is usually told from Maharashtra outwards, with the Marathi autobiographies and the poetry of the Dalit Panthers at its centre, and the Gujarati novel enters that history late and at an angle. Kothari's introduction to her translation remains the fullest account of the book in English, and it places Macwan in a quarrel internal to Gujarati letters, between a literary language deliberately refined away from common speech and the spoken registers that Gandhi had briefly made respectable. Macwan's use of the rural speech of Charotar, on her reading, is a choice made within that quarrel rather than a naturalistic effect.¹ The novel has otherwise received little sustained attention. Toral Jatin Gajarawala's important argument that Dalit literature "attempts to revise realism's history of representational failures" (6) is made largely on Hindi material, and the Gujarati novel that might have tested it has stayed at the edge of the field.

The novel follows Teeha and Valji, two Vankars, weavers who sell their cloth at auction in the markets of central Gujarat, across a period that Kothari dates from 1935 to 1960 (Kothari xxvi). It begins with an act of public decency at a village lake and ends with a donation to a school; between the two lie a stoning, a burning of fields, two murders, a forced marriage, a funeral attended by thousands and a slow passage from colonial to independent administration. Macwan, who came from a Christian Vankar family, chose to write about Hindu Vankars, and Kothari remarks that Gujarati Dalit writers have often preferred to narrate the community's Hindu past rather than its Christian present (Kothari). The choice has a consequence for any reading of the book. Caste in *The Stepchild* is not a feature of one religion that conversion might escape. It operates beneath religious affiliation, in the distribution of water, speech, protection and names.

This article takes its bearings from the title. *Angaliyat*, Kothari explains, belongs to the vocabulary of kinship. It names the child who arrives in a stepfather's home clutching the mother's finger, the *angali*, when she marries again, and who never moves from the margin of that home. In a society in which a woman's second marriage, *naatru*, is stigmatised, the word also classifies communities: the castes that permit such marriages are themselves marked as backward (Kothari xxviii). *The Stepchild* preserves the family sense of the word and loses the caste sense altogether, and an English reader who skips the introduction has no way of learning that the title also names a caste. I want to suggest that the two meanings together name a social position for which criticism lacks a convenient word, and which I shall call conditional belonging. The stepchild is neither outside the household nor fully of it. He is fed, housed and put to work; his presence is necessary; and his membership can be revoked, or recalled to him as a favour, at any moment. The novel extends this condition from one boy to a whole community, and it follows the condition through three domains: the village commons, the administration of the state, and the making of kinship. In each, the Vankars are present by necessity and included on terms they do not set.

A Word That Does Two Jobs

The title condition first appears not in the stepchild of the last chapters but in Valji, a respected man who carries the stigma of his own lineage. Talk of his origins wounds him, and he says, "I can't get this damn thorn out of my flesh—how long will the world consider me an outsider?" (Macwan 69). Kothari records that Bhavaankaka, the aged singer whose songs the Vankars know by heart, takes the figure further, observing that the dominant castes treat the whole Vankar community as an *angaliyat* (Kothari xxviii). The movement from a child to a man to a community is the novel's central metaphorical operation, and it is not really a metaphor. Because *angaliyat* already classified communities before Macwan used it, the insult that will later be thrown at Goka is one word doing two jobs at once, naming a family position and a caste position in the same breath.

The word Valji uses for himself, "outsider," has a history in the novel by the time he uses it. It is first spoken at the lake of Shilapaar, a neighbouring village, where it is thrown at Teeha by a Patel who means it literally: Teeha does not belong to Shilapaar and has no standing to speak there (Macwan 17). When the same word returns in the mouth of Valji, who has lived in Ratnapaar all his life, it has shed its literal sense entirely. Valji is not from elsewhere. He is an outsider in the

place where he was born, because belonging in the village is not a matter of residence but of rank. The repetition of the word across fifty pages is Macwan's quiet demonstration that the category of the stranger, which seems to describe a fact about where someone comes from, is in caste society a way of describing what someone is permitted to do.

As I use the term, conditional belonging has three features, all of which the novel keeps in view. The first is necessity. The Vankars are not marginal to the economy of Charotar; they weave the cloth the region buys, and their skill is never in question. The second is revocability. Everything the Vankars enjoy in common with others, from water to the protection of the law, can be withdrawn by those who control it, and the novel's plot is largely a record of such withdrawals. The third is reminder. The stepchild's position is reproduced not only by exclusion but by being named, again and again, by the word that fixes it. This last feature distinguishes conditional belonging from simple exclusion, and it explains why naming becomes, by the end of the novel, the ground on which the community makes its most deliberate answer.

The Lake, the Market and the Note

The novel's first crisis takes place in the two spaces that most fully embody the idea of a commons, a public lake and a public market. Teeha has gone to Shilapaar to hold an auction of cloth. At the lake a group of young Patels, perched on a parapet, are tormenting Methi, a Vankar girl who has come to fill her pot. They break it, and she is left soaked and humiliated. Teeha challenges the youth responsible and declares before everyone present, "I won't let this man off in one piece today, I say this to you all now. . . . This bastard has to pay for his deeds!" (Macwan 16). The narrator then gives a sentence that belongs to nobody in particular, the voice of the village itself: "A low-caste man publicly humiliating an upper-caste, a Patel no less!" (16). The village is outraged less by the blow than by its having been seen, and less by its having been seen than by the inversion of rank that everyone saw. Macwan adds nothing. He lets the reader hear the village thinking.

The exchange that follows is the novel in miniature. Dhoolsingh Thakore, the mukhi, wants Teeha to testify against the youths, and at this Megho Patel pushes forward: "Hold your tongue! Are you wagging your tongue simply because we let you go as an outsider?" Teeha's reply is exact: "I am an outsider! Surely not these girls! If someone were to do this to your women ...!" (Macwan 17). He accepts the description for himself and refuses its extension to the women of the village, and he appeals to a reciprocity, your women and ours, that the caste order exists to deny. The answer is a brick thrown from the crowd, which strikes him on the head (17). Gopal Guru's account of humiliation is useful here, since it distinguishes humiliation from mere injury by its relation to a claim: one is humiliated when the claim to be addressed as an equal is refused, and refused in public. The brick is not an argument against Teeha's appeal. It is a refusal to treat his appeal as the kind of thing that can be argued with, and the novel will repeat the pattern in every later chapter. Each time a Vankar claims something that is his due, what comes back is force rather than an answer, since to answer would be to admit that his words merited one.

The choice of setting matters too. Anyone may draw water from the lake, and anyone may bid at the auction Teeha has come to hold. The auction above all professes impartiality, since its

whole rationale is that cloth fetches what its quality deserves and that the parties meet as equals. Teeha and Valji's skill at the loom is never doubted by anyone in the book. What Macwan asks is whether that skill can be detached from the caste name that travels with it, and the novel's answer is that the market is open in its rules and shut in its practice. The point is never stated. The novel simply notes where each person is allowed to stand and to speak, and what follows when a seller forgets that the equality of the auction stops at the edge of the water.

The scene at the lake is also the novel's first scene of women's memory. Thinking of what her people have endured, Methi recalls that "Not only were pots broken, wrists had been held publicly. Women were raped even on the eve of their wedding day. This wretched caste had endured it all" (Macwan 25). The broken pot at Shilapaar is placed, by her, in a long series of which it is the mildest term. As Teeha goes, the two exchange a glance, which the narrator calls "a lifetime's nourishment" for him (25), a recognition that the village has no means of granting. The village, for its part, "stood unmoved and spellbound. The moment Teeha was out of sight . . . the people turned on their heels and went home" (25). It has watched a breach of its order and returned to that order without a word.

The aftermath shows how a community calculates under such conditions. With blood running from his head, Teeha seeks refuge among the Shilapaar Vankars. The men who were sitting beneath the neem disappear indoors, and their wives tell him the men are not at home. Macwan states the reasoning without reproach: "If anyone offered shelter to Teeha after his fight with the upper castes, they would set the entire mohalla on fire" (Macwan 18). He also records the sum by which that silence can appear to have been chosen: "The entire mohalla consisted of eighty houses. If all of them stood united, the twenty-five families of the Patels would be powerless" (18). The two sentences together contain a whole theory of domination. The numbers favour the Vankars, and the calculation still favours silence, because the cost of solidarity falls on whoever moves first and no institution exists to share it. Teeha's own first thought that night is for Valji, who must escape across the fields dressed in a saree borrowed from Moti's wife (24). Where staying alive requires a disguise, bravery consists in finding the exit.

The village's response is to make the whole Vankar settlement of Shilapaar answerable for one outsider's conduct. The fields of Moti and of Heera, who is Methi's father, are laid waste: hay is set on fire, mango trees are hacked, timber is carried off, and a notice is put up for all to read:

If you have anything to do with any of your community members in Ratnapaar or let any of them enter here, that will be your end. You will be thrown out of the village, without even a drop of water from the lake. If you wish to live in this village harmoniously, then let Moti Dhula and Heera Khana be ostracised and made to answer for their conduct! (Macwan 30)

The note is a small legal instrument, and it repays reading as one. It threatens three things in order: association, residence and water. It makes the Vankars' continued presence in the village conditional on their severing ties with their kin in another village, and it demands that they expel two of their own as the price of "harmony." The commons of the opening scene, the lake from which anyone may draw and the market at which anyone may sell, are revealed as goods held at

the pleasure of those who control them. The resonance with the Mahad satyagraha of 1927, when Ambedkar led Dalits to drink from the Chavdar tank in assertion of a public right to public water, is unmistakable. Anupama Rao has shown how Mahad converted access to water into a question of civic standing, and how violently that conversion was resisted. Macwan's note, set less than a decade after Mahad, records the counter-assertion in its purest form: the village's water is the village's to give, and the village is the Patels.

What the note asks the Vankars to cut, finally, is association itself. A settlement isolated from its kin in other villages is easier to control than one that can call on them, and the note's first clause aims precisely at the network through which the Vankars of different villages might support one another. The novel will return to this logic at the moment of its greatest crisis, when the oppressor himself names disunity as the condition of his power.

Macwan is equally attentive to the internal form that this external order takes. When Valji upbraids his people for keeping quiet while their women are mistreated, "For these upper-castes the dignity of our women is like a straw in the wind. . . . Arre, what kind of justice is this?", Dana answers, "It's written on our foreheads and we have been watching it since birth. How can one get away from this?" (Macwan 42). The phrase "written on our foreheads" is the note on the lake turned inward, a prohibition that no longer needs to be posted because it has been taken into the self. The same idiom is used against Methi by the Brahmin priest Manchharam, who tells her, "You cannot re-write what is written on your forehead" (80), and Bhavaankaka gives it a sadder turn in a couplet he sings for the community: "In which moment did you create us, my Lord? O Potter, on which wheel did you cast the pots?" (56). His listeners laugh, taking the lines for the universal complaint of humankind, "little noticing the tears welling up in Bhavaankaka's eyes" (56). The couplet's question is not universal. It asks why this pot was cast on this wheel, and the laughter that greets it is the community's own reluctance to hear the question as a social one.

Two States

The Stepchild gives the state more sustained attention than most Indian novels of caste, and it distinguishes between two states rather than one. The first is colonial. Following the attack at the lake, the village schoolteacher, known simply as Master and a steady ally of the Vankars, goes with Teeha and Valji to the District Collector, who has their complaint against the Patels of Shilapaar recorded (Macwan 47–48). Afterwards an inspector of police and Rehman, his constable, thrash the upper-caste culprits. "Rehman, test the strength of your arms on this bull, will you?" the inspector orders (86); and once Manchharam, the Brahmin priest, has been apprehended, the inspector says, "Rehman! It is written in this brahmin's fate to receive five blows of your stick, seal that fate!" (88). The joke turns the priest's own idiom against him: the language of the forehead, which had been used to keep Methi in her place, now prescribes the priest's punishment. In due course Valji's murderers are convicted (105).

The reader's pleasure in these scenes is real, and Macwan does not deny it. But the novel is clear about what it depends on. The protection is delivered by a sympathetic officer and by a constable who, as a Muslim, stands outside the Hindu order whose hierarchy he is briefly asked to reverse. It is the protection of a contingent alignment, available while the alignment holds and not

a moment longer. The Vankars do not command it. They are its beneficiaries, which is another way of saying that their belonging to the colonial legal order is also conditional.

Master embodies the possibilities and the limits of this order in a single person. He is learned, esteemed and faithful, and Macwan presents his help as solidarity, not as a superior's condescension. He can teach, advise, carry a petition and speak about what he has seen. He cannot shield anyone from violence, and the novel does not pretend that he can. Nor does it make him its moral centre, as so much Indian fiction about caste makes the sympathetic upper-caste reformer the consciousness through which injustice is understood. Master is one figure among many in Ratnapaar, with his own skills and his own blind spots, and the understanding of the Vankars' situation belongs, throughout, to the Vankars. When he speaks bitterly at the end of the novel, it is as a man who has learned the limits of what an honest schoolteacher can do inside a dishonest structure.

Between the two states the novel places a change in the instruments of power. As Kothari points out, Valji's death is engineered through a letter from Ranchhod Dehlavala, the Patidar who dominates the district, while another letter, falsely written in Teeha's name, results in Methi being married off to a drunkard (Kothari xxix). The detail is significant. The Vankars' world in the novel is oral: its authority is Bhavaankaka's counsel, its grief is Kanku's lament, its history is what the old remember. The dominant caste, by contrast, has mastered writing, and it is through writing, not through the brick, that it now does its gravest damage. Caste power, in other words, has begun to move out of the open violence of the village and into documents, the medium of the modern administration that is coming into being. Dehlavala himself explains the condition of his power with the clarity of a sociologist. When the Vankars gather in their thousands for Valji's funeral rites and the Patels fear an attack, he reassures them: "It's a good-for-nothing caste. Among themselves they display power; but never unite to think of their own welfare. We get away with what we do because of their failures! The day they achieve self-recognition, the sun will set on us" (Macwan 100). The note on the lake had tried to produce that disunity by threat. Dehlavala relies on it as a standing fact.

The second state arrives with independence, and its arrival changes the titles of power without changing who holds it. The mukhi of the early chapters reappears as a sarpanch, a nephew of Dehlavala; Dehlavala himself has become a minister. Teeha's death takes place at an auction in the village square:

Eight to ten young men came crashing down upon Teeha. With sticks and punches, they left Teeha half-dead. Two policemen were seated in the square. They dragged Teeha there and beat the remaining life out of his body and threw the bloodied body outside. (Macwan 226)

The policemen are already sitting there. Nobody has called them and they make no move to stop the assault; they simply finish it once the body is dragged to where they sit. A charitable hospital refuses him treatment because "It's a criminal case" (227), and the police decline to register a complaint. The Deputy Superintendent explains why: "We have an order all the way from Mumbai. He is a troublesome fellow and keeps sticking his neck out" (227–28). Two features

of this sentence deserve attention. The first is historical. Until the formation of the state of Gujarat in 1960, the region was governed from Bombay, and the novel's chronology ends at precisely this threshold.² The order from Mumbai is an order from the provincial government of the new republic, and the reader is left to connect it with Dehlavala's new ministerial office. The second is lexical. "Troublesome fellow" is the administrative translation of Megho Patel's taunt at the lake, "Are you wagging your tongue?" The offence is the same, a Vankar who speaks; what has changed is that the state now names it, records it and acts upon it. Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany have described the paradox of a postcolonial state that legislated elaborate protections for untouchables while its local agents, police and revenue officials, remained embedded in the dominant castes of the village (Mendelsohn and Vicziany). Macwan's square shows that paradox at the moment of its formation.

At Teeha's burial the two diagnoses the novel has been preparing are spoken aloud. Master says bitterly, "This is our swaraj and this our Ramrajya," and Bhavaankaka replies, "Don't blame the swaraj, Master, blame the human heart" (Macwan 229). The exchange is easily read as the old man's consolation set against the teacher's critique, but it bears a closer reading. Master's complaint is institutional: the self-rule that was promised has delivered a minister who arranges murders and police who carry them out. Bhavaankaka's reply relocates the failure without excusing it. The swaraj is a form; what fills the form is a society, and the society has not changed. In this he comes close to the warning Ambedkar gave the Constituent Assembly in November 1949, that the republic was about to "enter into a life of contradictions," with "equality" in politics and "inequality" in social and economic life. The novel's evidence supports both speakers. The heart Bhavaankaka blames has captured the swaraj Master blames, and the state that had once, contingently, punished the Patels now protects the man who had Valji killed. Conditional belonging, which had been the Vankars' position in the village, has become their position in the republic.

Kinship Without a Name

If the commons and the state are domains in which the Vankars' belonging is set by others, kinship is the domain in which the novel shows them setting it for themselves. The first sign is the community's handling of death. After Valji is killed, his wife Kanku begins a lament, and the women of the mohalla take it up:

Wait a while ... my life, my lord, take me along
I'll wear the sixteen ornaments, take my breath away! (Macwan 95)

The lines are lovely, but the loveliness is not the novelist's. It belongs to a genre the women already own, in a metre they all know and with images they have sung before. Macwan's restraint lies in transcribing the form without touching it up, so that the grief is at once private and collective: it is Kanku's, and it is also the ritual possession of a community that has buried men killed by caste violence and expects to bury more. Sharankumar Limbale asks that Dalit writing draw its authority from experience and decline to turn pain into ornament (Limbale). Macwan meets that demand by an unexpected route. The lament is beautiful, but the beauty was there before the novel, in the community's own practice of mourning.

The second sign is Bhavaankaka's refusal to let the death become a legend. When the mourners ask him to recite the tale of Ahilochan and Abhimanyu to help them endure their grief (Macwan 96), he replies, "Now just forget about Ahilochan and Abhimanyu or Arjun and the Lord Krishna. . . . We live here in this world, this is what should concern us now" (97). Valji, he says, died "in pursuit of a higher truth, of true Paramarth," since he refused to value his own life more than his friend's (97). The vocabulary of spiritual merit is retained and redirected: *paramarth*, the highest good, is located not in the other world but in an act of loyalty between two weavers. People without a written past are constantly drawn to supply it with legends, and nothing is more readily made into legend than a martyr. Bhavaankaka keeps the loss inside history, and at the New Year gathering that follows he draws the political conclusion: "Live life the way Valji did. You have endured enough wrongs. Now learn to fight back." Even a stepwell, he reminds them, receives a human offering only after long deliberation, while "this entire caste has been made into an offering, casually" (105). The figure takes the idiom of sacrifice out of the hands of those who usually wield it. A social order that justifies the Vankars' subjection as part of a holy scheme is accused of squandering, without a thought, the very thing it calls holy.

The third sign is the household that Teeha and Methi build. After Valji's death, the forged letter delivers Methi into marriage with a drunkard; she attempts to take her own life and is saved by Teeha (Macwan 175). They do not marry; yet, Kothari notes, they live as one family across two neighbouring houses for the children's sake (Kothari xxviii). On Teeha's years of refusing marriage the book is almost silent, and neither he nor the narrator offers a reason. What the reader is shown instead is a man who has learned that attachment is dangerous, that in the world he inhabits anything he loves, a wife, a son, a home, may be confiscated like goods, and who has made his affections as hard to reach as he can. The household he finally makes with Methi has no ritual name. What binds it is conduct rather than any conferred status, and the village, whose kinship runs on rites and names, can describe it only with the insult it reserves for the boy raised there.

That boy is Methi's son Goka, whom Teeha raises as his own. When he is teased as an *angaliyat* at school, he gives his name to the teacher as "Gokalbhai Teesalal Parmar" (Macwan 207). The scene is brief and its implications are large. Goka names as his father a man who is his father by neither blood nor rite, and in doing so he makes a claim of filiation that only he can make. Recent work on caste and the name has emphasised how often Dalit personhood is negotiated through the concealment or disclosure of names that carry caste (Satyanarayana and Lee). Goka's act belongs to that history and also departs from it. He does not conceal his caste; he discloses a lineage that the village refuses to recognise, and he does so in the institution, the school, through which the new state proposes to make citizens.

The Plaque and Its Patron

The ending gathers these threads into a single scene of naming. A neighbour still calls Goka a "bloody angaliyat" (Macwan 234). News arrives of a high school to be founded in Ratnapaar with Dehlavala, by now an honoured minister, as its patron; every donor of Rs 5,001 is to have his

name cut into a marble tablet. Goka pledges Rs 7,001, “In the name of Teehabhai Gopalbhai Parmar!” (235). It is the stepchild who honours the dead man.

The scene can be read in two ways, and the novel declines to choose between them. On the first reading it is a scene of co-optation. The community pays a premium to have its murdered man commemorated in an institution sponsored by his murderer, and the minister's school, built in the new idiom of development and public benefaction, absorbs the name along with the money. The patronage that once arranged Valji's death now confers recognition on Teeha's memory, and the structure of power is untouched. On the second reading it is a scene of occupation. The name of the man beaten to death in the square will stand in the killer's own building for as long as the building stands, and every child who passes the plaque will read it. The extra two thousand rupees are not a matter of generosity. They are a statement that the community can exceed the threshold the patron has set, and that it chooses to spend its surplus on a name. The novel's own movement supports this second reading without cancelling the first. It began with a name used as an insult, *angaliyat*, and it ends with a name carved in marble, and the passage from one to the other has cost two lives. Conditional belonging is not abolished in the last chapter. It is turned, briefly and at great price, into a claim.

A reading of the ending that stopped here would be incomplete, because the novel's politics of honour has a limit that its translator was the first to name. On Kothari's reading, the novel affirms Vankar identity “through physical valour in the men and through ‘purity’ as far as the women are concerned,” and in taking over these dominant-caste values it “unwittingly pushes the novel into a symbolic Brahminic order” (Kothari xxviii). Neither Methi nor Kanku ever has a sexual relationship with the man whose household she shares, and the novel thereby defends the community against the dominant castes' contempt for *naatru* by adopting the very norm of chastity in whose name that contempt was expressed. Uma Chakravarti's account of caste and gender as a single system, in which the control of women's sexuality is the means by which caste boundaries are maintained, explains why this defence is double-edged (Chakravarti). Valji's protest that for the upper castes “the dignity of our women is like a straw in the wind” (Macwan 42) names the double standard exactly; the novel's answer is to guard its women more closely, not to question the standard.

The women are, in this sense, the stepchildren of the novel's own politics. Methi's endurance and Kanku's grief are given its most powerful passages, and neither woman takes a decision that changes the direction of the narrative. Every consequential discussion in the book, whether before the Collector, at the New Year meeting or in the square, is held among men. The condition that the novel diagnoses so precisely in the relation between the Vankars and the village reappears, unremarked, in the relation between the Vankar women and their community: present by necessity, honoured in their place, and absent from the councils where their fate is decided.

Conclusion

The Stepchild is a realist novel of unusual steadiness, and its realism strips away disguises. We watch caste operating at the auction, by the water, before the magistrate, in the hospital and in the classroom, and we watch it chiefly through Macwan's record of where people are permitted to

stand, whose eyes may be lifted, and what is done to those who forget. The concept of conditional belonging, drawn from the novel's own title, names what this method reveals. The Vankars are never simply excluded. They are necessary to the economy of the region and admitted to its commons, its laws and its institutions, and every one of these admissions is revocable by those who hold the keys. The novel's distinctive contribution is to follow this condition across the threshold of independence and to show it surviving the change of regime. The mukhi becomes a sarpanch, the landlord becomes a minister, the brick becomes an order from Mumbai, and the Vankar who speaks becomes a "troublesome fellow." Caste power does not disappear with the coming of the republic. It moves into the republic's paperwork.

Against this, the novel sets the community's own practices: Kanku's lament, Bhavaankaka's refusal of myth, Teeha's household without a ritual name, and Goka's two acts of naming, first of a father and then of a martyr. None of these defeats the order the novel describes, and Macwan never pretends otherwise. What they do is establish that the community possesses forms of its own, of grief, of counsel and of filiation, in which its members are not stepchildren. The questions the novel raised in 1986 about the commons have not been settled in Gujarat. When Dalit men were flogged at Una in 2016 for skinning a dead cow, the march that followed ended with a pledge to give up the removal of carcasses and a demand for land, a demand that returns, by another route, to the lake and the fields of Shilapaar.³

The novel's limits are part of its value. Its defence of Vankar honour borrows the terms of the order it opposes, and its women carry the burden of that borrowing. To read *The Stepchild* well is to hold both of its achievements together: a precise anatomy of conditional belonging between a Dalit community and the society around it, and, within the community itself, an unexamined version of the same condition. Kothari saw this in 2004. The task for criticism now is to bring the novel, with its insight and its blind spot, into the wider conversation about Dalit literature from which its language and its region have too long kept it.

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