



When the Dalit Speaks: Neeraj Ghaywan's Vision of Dalit Empowerment in *Geeli Pucchi*

Tushmit Mehruba Aka

Lecturer, Department of English

Jashore University of Science and Technology, Jashore, Bangladesh

E-mail: mehrubatushmit@gmail.com

Abstract

Geeli Pucchi (trans. *Sloppy Kisses*), directed by a Dalit filmmaker Neeraj Ghaywan and part of Netflix India's four-part anthology titled *Ajeeb Daastaans* (trans. *Strange Tales*) (2021), explores the intersections of caste, gender, and sexuality within the framework of Indian society. The narrative follows Bharti Mandal (played by Konkona Sen Sharma), an ambitious Dalit and queer factory worker, who confronts systemic oppression rooted in caste-based discrimination and patriarchal control. Despite her qualifications, Bharti is denied a data operator position in favor of Priya Sharma (Aditi Rao Hydari), an upper-caste Brahmin woman with fewer skills. The story intricately navigates Bharti's evolving relationship with Priya—initially marked by camaraderie but later compromised by caste consciousness and social hierarchy. This paper critically analyzes Bharti's character arc, focusing on her agency and the complex moral decisions she makes as she navigates the dynamics of casteism and gender. By manipulating Priya, Bharti subverts her long-standing victimhood and asserts control over her destiny. Using Gayatri Chak Spivak's theory of the subaltern, this paper aims to evaluate the film's narrative strategies and visual metaphors and show how Ghaywan subverts typical Bollywood depictions of Dalit characters by making Bharti an empowered, complex, and multi-dimensional figure.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, Subaltern, Manipulation, Power, Empowerment

Introduction

Geeli Pucchi is an impressive short film directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, a Dalit filmmaker, featured in the Netflix anthology *Ajeeb Daastaans* (2021). The film explores complex themes of caste, gender, and sexuality through the lives of two women—Bharti Mandal, a Dalit factory worker, and Priya Sharma, a privileged Brahmin woman. Through their budding relationship, Ghaywan masterfully portrays the intersecting oppressions that shape their lives, highlighting how societal hierarchies influence their bond. *Geeli Pucchi* stands as a powerful annotation on the deeply ingrained prejudices of caste and the limitations of female solidarity in the face of social inequity. However, unlike most literature that feature Dalit characters, *Geeli Pucchi* not

only focuses on the struggle of the Dalits but also on their empowerment. It is a refreshing tale of resilience, agency, and the nuanced dynamics of caste and gender in contemporary society.

Who are the Dalits?

Merriam-Webster defines the word “Dalit” as “a member of the lowest class in the traditional Hindu social hierarchy.” The word is borrowed from the New Sanskrit *dalita*, not a member of any of the four traditional castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and the Shudras) in India. According to Hindu belief, people are categorized into four castes based on their jobs. The *Brahmins* are priests or teachers, the *Kshatriyas* are rulers or warriors, the *Vaishyas* are landowners or merchants, and the *Sudras* are servants. After these four groups come to the fifth group, the group of the untouchables or Dalits (Tóth). The term is coined by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, the founder of the Satya Shodak Samaj, in the late 1880s. The term, Dalit, stands for “the outcastes and untouchables as the victims of the caste-based social division of the Indian society.” The caste hierarchy, founded upon “ritual purity and occupation,” positions Dalits at the lowest and assigns them derogatory jobs like “working with leather, cleaning toilets and sewage, etc” (Mondal). Though the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, one of Hinduism’s eighteen great Puranas, evidently states that the castes should be decided upon the “skills, qualities and activities” of an individual, in reality, “castes separate people according to their birth” (Tóth, 2022). They are marginalized and deprived of fundamental human rights and dignity. They had no access to sacred and educational places because of the caste stigma. Moreover, it was believed in ancient India that if someone from a higher class touched them, s/he would be polluted. Hence, they were the “untouchables.” Indeed, the world has evolved with time, and so has the mindset of society to some extent. Even the Article 17 in the Constitution of India has abolished the practice of untouchability in any form, but surprisingly, deep-rooted casteism is not entirely extinct. To date, Dalits are looked down upon and suffering from casteism. For example, many villages have isolated areas for Dalits; many schools have separate classrooms for Dalit children and even tea shops with different eating utensils for Dalits. The age-old suppression has horrifyingly wrecked their mind and drowned them in a deep sea of trauma.

Triple Exclusion of Bharti

Bharti Mandal, as a person is triply excluded in the *Geeli Pucchi*; firstly, as a headstrong woman in a man’s world, secondly as a Dalit and thirdly as a queer. Her character has many complex layers. She has a B.Com. degree with 74% marks, is a divorcee in her early thirties, companionless and lives alone in a gloomy apartment. Though currently not involved in any romantic relationship, she often cries herself to sleep watching videos of her and her ex-partner’s videos (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:14:35). In the video she is seen to be intimate with a woman which clarifies about her sexual orientation. Bharti mostly dresses in masculine clothes, such as checkered shirts, pants, and black shoes, and wears her rough and curly hair in a ponytail. She has her nose and ears pierced but the only accessory she wears is an old red bandana which she wears on her wrist. The dark-circles around her eyes, the textured and pigmented skin, chiseled facial features are the proofs of her drab and dull life. She is devoid of any feminine quality and seems to be unbothered about it. However, when a male co-worker makes fun of Bharti’s virile features and sexuality in front of Priya, she becomes angry and throws water in his face (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:10:55). In response, the man calls Bharti a “Motherfucker” and aggressively slaps her which makes her nose bleed (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:10:58).

Neeraj Ghaywan, the writer and director of the film, has charmed everyone with his magnificent storytelling, splendid use of symbolism, and credible representation of different strata of social identities. However, the best thing about this film is it strips off all sorts of glitz

and glamour and illustrates the ugly reality of caste system in a picture-perfect manner. The story exquisitely narrates the trauma of the two women from two different social classes. One of them is Bharti Mandal (played by Konkona Sen Sharma), a Dalit factory worker with a B.com degree. Being the only female machine operator in the factory, she is often bullied by her male coworkers. Bharti's dream is to be respected and recognized for her intellectual abilities since she has always been looked down upon. She applies for the post of data operator at her workplace. Despite Bharti's apt performance in the interview, the manager rejects her, saying there is no vacancy for the position. However, the actual reason behind her rejection is her subaltern identity. To Bharti's utter surprise, the manager hires Priya Sharma (played by Aditi Rao Hydari), a beautiful Brahmin woman, in Bharti's desired post. When Bharti confronts the manager to find out why he lied to her about that job vacancy, the manager tells Bharti, "There are many factors when it comes to hiring" (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:06:50). He indirectly refers to Bharti's Dalit identity without uttering the word "Dalit". His prejudiced mind refuses to see a Dalit nailing a white-collar job same as his. Thus, Bharti receives the first stroke of casteism in the film. Ghaywan brings focus on the messiness of caste and power politics of the society through Bharti's character.

Bharti and Priya's Budding Friendship

Unlike Bharti, Priya Sharma, the other protagonist in the narrative, epitomizes traditional femininity with her attractive features and fair complexion. In her twenties and married, Priya mostly dresses in salwar suits or sarees, accessorizing with earrings, bangles, rings, bindi, sindoor and a mangalsutra. Her bubbly and talkative nature contrasts with Bharti's more reserved demeanor. On her first day at work, Priya befriends Bharti, the only other woman in their male-dominated office, unaware that Bharti had also applied for the same position. She voluntarily comes to dine with Bharti in the factory and takes genuine interest in her. When Bharti has a feud with her male co-worker and gets injured, Priya takes care of Bharti. At the beginning, Bharti conceals her full identity and introduces herself as "Bharti Banerjee" (a surname for Bengali Brahmins). Although she envies Priya's privileges, she enjoys Priya's companionship. Nonetheless, as the two start spending time with each other, the two women eventually discover a deeper connection. Like Bharti, Priya is attracted to women but struggles to accept her truth, as her Brahmin family has forced her into a heterosexual marriage. She finds it difficult to establish physical intimacy with her husband, due to her lack of interest and the also lack of privacy in her in-laws' home. Though her in-laws allow her to work, Priya is not permitted to walk freely in public due to her status as "Mr. Sharma's daughter-in-law" (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:15:42). While Bharti's primary obstacle is her caste, Priya's struggle is rooted in heteropatriarchy. Their shared experience of queerness momentarily forms a bond that bridges the social class divide between them.

Acceptance of Reality

As their friendship develops, Bharti often assists Priya with her clerical duties. During their interactions, Bharti learns that in Priya's interview, she was asked about her hobbies and impressed the manager by reading his palm, a skill she proudly attributes to her Brahmin upbringing. Bharti admires Priya but she feels devastated to learn how effortlessly Priya got the job while she was striving for it.

One evening, a crying Priya shares the complications of her conjugal life with Bharti. She is grateful for her loving and caring husband but is not ready to be a mother. She is neither mentally nor physically ready to mother a child as she has no love for her husband. She even feels that she is cheating on her husband as she cannot make love to such a nice husband. Priya asks Bharti, "What should I do? Is there any defect in me? Should I see a doctor? Am I crazy?" (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:28:37). The fact is Priya sees her queerness as a defect but Bharti assures

her that both of them are completely normal and need no rectification. She tells Priya that she cannot be happy unless she owns her truth. Deep inside her mind, she also feels bad for lying to Priya about her caste. She understands that if she does not accept herself, how will others accept her? Having said that Bharti decides to reveal her truth to Priya. With a shivering voice she states that she is a Dalit and her surname is not Banerjee but Mandal. She also declares that her mother and grandmother used to work as midwives, like most women of her caste (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:30:13).

Bharti never comes out vehemently as a queer person to Priya, but she comes out as a Dalit person to her. Coming out itself is very political in nature that presupposes that there's a secret that needs another person's consideration, it needs acceptance. Here, Bharti knew that probably her queerness doesn't need acceptance from Priya, but her caste does. The coming out is followed by Priya's discomfort around Bharti. Though their queerness binds them together, their caste difference distances them. (Das, 2021, para. 16)

When Priya pulls away her hand from Bharti's learning about her Dalit identity (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:30:33), once again Bharti is reminded that she is untouchable. At this point, she faces the second blow of casteism in the film. She realizes that Priya is no better than the manager who denied her a respectable job because of her class. Priya accepts Bharti's blue-collar job, reserved personality and even her sexuality but she despises Bharti's Dalit identity.

Being with Bharti makes Priya ecstatic and she becomes quite accommodative of each other's friendship that reminds her of her college friend. However, at the end, also puts to light the fact, that no matter how accepting you are – of your sexuality, the society does not accept it, and you need to keep hiding the so-called ugly truth for fear of not fitting in as per the acceptable parameters. (Purvi, 2021, para. 6)

Immediately after that incident Priya gets an urgent call from the manager and becomes terrified. She requests Bharti to accompany her and Bharti agrees. They enter the office to discover that the manager has thrown a surprise birthday party for Priya. Priya happily enters the manager's room and asks Bharti stay on the other side of the glass door. It is to be noted that she earlier invited Bharti to her house party because at that time Bharti's caste was unknown to her. However, this time, after knowing Bharti's social class, Priya hesitates to be include her in the party. As Priya happily cuts the cake without even acknowledging Bharti's presence in front of her, Bharti's whole world collapses in front of her. The manager even orders Bharti to serve the cake to everyone. Priya watches everything with an awkward smile but does not talk to Bharti. Bharti rushes to the changing room and bursts into tears. Everything changes for Bharti from this very moment (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:33:35). Bharti's silence in this four-minute-long scene (1:30:40-1:34:14) effectively illustrates the voicelessness of a Dalit.

Bharti is constantly marginalized due to her caste, a reflection of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, whose voice is systematically silenced by dominant power structures. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the author argues that marginalized or oppressed groups are either ignored or not heard in meaningful ways. Even though society has become advanced and is more inclusive, the way marginalized people are represented is still controlled by those in power (Spivak, 1994). Bharti, as a Dalit and a queer woman, faces compounded suppression due to her intersecting identities, reflecting Spivak's assertion of the compounded marginalization of the subaltern subject, particularly women. Bharti's gender, sexual orientation and caste contribute to her expurgation within a society dominated by heteronormative and casteist norms. She marks, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 1994, p. 82-83)". This relates to how Bharti's identity as a Dalit woman is either ignored or silenced by the dominant caste, symbolized in moments like being excluded from Priya's birthday celebration. Bharti's voicelessness in the birthday party scene highlights

this enforced silence within hierarchical systems that value caste over individual relationships. Though Priya and Bharti initially bond as women in a male-dominated workplace, Priya's behavior after discovering Bharti's caste reflects Spivak's notion that privileged women often fail to understand or represent the struggles of subaltern women.

Priya, though a woman herself, is unable to transcend the barriers of caste, embodying Spivak's critique of the displacement and erasure of subaltern women even within feminist discourses. In *Geeli Pucchi*, the relationship between Priya and Bharti highlights the contradictions inherent in female solidarity, particularly in a society divided by caste. Though Priya and Bharti initially form a bond as women working in a male-dominated environment, Priya's behavior after learning about Bharti's Dalit identity states the limitations of their solidarity. This mirrors Spivak's critique that privileged women often fail to fully understand, acknowledge, or represent the struggles faced by subaltern women. Spivak highlights this in her work when she writes, "The question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context, as it is the place of displacement par excellence" (Spivak, 1994, p.90). Here, she explains how "woman" is not a unified or simple category; instead, the experiences of women vary greatly depending on other factors such as class, race, or, in this case, caste. While both Priya and Bharti are women, their identities are shaped by different social structures, and Priya, being a privileged Brahmin, cannot fully grasp the layered oppression Bharti faces as a Dalit woman.

Ghaywan's Vision of Dalit Empowerment

Priya's character in *Geeli Pucchi* is marked by a profound hypocrisy that reflects the complexities of privilege and social identity. Initially, Priya appears to be a supportive friend, bonding with Bharti over their shared experiences as women in a patriarchal workplace. However, her attitude shifts dramatically once she learns about Bharti's Dalit identity. This revelation exposes Priya's underlying caste bias and her inability to extend genuine solidarity to those she perceives as socially inferior. She expects Bharti to give her professional and moral support but cannot show Bharti the respect that she deserves. She kisses Bharti in private but in front of others she feels uncomfortable to even talk to Bharti.

As Bharti comes to the realization that Priya is no different from the casteist manager who looks down upon her social status, she embarks on a calculated strategy to undermine Priya's position. This time she sees Priya as "the product of her cocooned upbringing" (Roy, 2021). Bharti has always been a pawn in other people's games but this time she decides to choreograph her own moves. One of the senior colleagues of Bharti, Dashrath, once told her, "We are Dalits... They will allow us to eat at a table but they will not allow us to work at one. Do not fight for what cannot be yours or they will burn you up in flame" (Ghaywan, 1:8:19-1:8:34). History always portrays the marginalized as invisible and oppressed but interestingly Ghaywan portrays Bharti in a different manner. Bharti appears as an ambitious woman who is willing to fight for her rights. Hence, she decides to play the same mind game with Priya which has been played with her multiple times. She knows that despite coming from a privileged class, Priya lacks practical and analytical ability. Consequently, she manipulates Priya to have a child assuring her that motherhood will solve all her problems. "In her own way she is trying to say that I will take what is rightfully mine. And I feel my whole aim was to present all that characters not as just positive and negative," says Neeraj Ghaywan about Bharti's character the film in an interview with Outlook (Roy, 2021).

Since Bharti knows Priya is struggling in her married life, she takes advantage of Priya's vulnerability and advises her to lead a heterosexual life with her husband suppressing her sexuality. "Once you become a mother, you will stop fighting within yourself. The storm inside you will settle down" (Ghaywan, 1:36:08). She even narrates the intimidating story of her divorce at the age 32 after she had a miscarriage. She gives Priya two options, "Whether you want to suffer like me... or live happily with respect. Think about it." (Ghaywan, 1:37:02).

Priya thanks Bharti and approaches to hug her but Bharti stops Priya. Bharti returns home and deletes all the pictures she had with Priya. Ghaywan wittily picturizes how Bharti finally learns to take control of her body and emotions.

The next few days Bharti educates Priya about how to get pregnant as soon as possible. Priya is amazed to see Bharti's knowledge on this subject and asks her how she knows all this. "The same way you learnt palm-reading" (Ghaywan, 1:38:58), Bharti replies indicating her mother's job as a midwife. This scene is a mirror image of the scene where Priya tells Bharti how she got the job with her palm-reading talent. The way Priya once used her palm-reading skill to get the job, Bharti uses the knowledge of her family business to dethrone Priya. Bharti even lets Priya use her apartment as Priya's is devoid of privacy. Bharti's actions show the complexities of female relationships in a context where caste plays a crucial role. Her willingness to assist Priya, coupled with the suggestion that they utilize Bharti's home for privacy and intimacy, underscores the nuances of power dynamics between women in a patriarchal society. However, Bharti's motivations are deeply rooted in resentment and a desire for retribution against Priya's previous privilege and caste biases. When Priya is busy in family planning, Bharti takes care of Priya's share of work at the office even though the manager is not happy with her presence in the office. Once Bharti wanted to sit on that chair with the manager's approval but now, she does not care about anyone's approval to claim what she deserves. The manager also cannot evict Bharti from the office because she performs the job better than Priya. Before going on her maternity leave, Priya requests the manager not to hire someone else in her place and entrusts her position to Bharti thinking that she will be back in three months. Priya sees Bharti as her substitute but Bharti takes full advantage of Priya's absence. The manager refuses to sing Bharti's praise but he clearly looks very impressed with her professionalism and skills. Bharti finally proves that she is not a replacement for just three months rather she is the one who deserves to sit on that chair.

Four months later when Bharti goes to visit Priya and her new born, Priya expresses her concern about returning to work but Bharti advises Priya to focus on her baby and family. Because by this time Bharti has completely replaced Priya at office. Priya's mother-in-law serves tea and biscuit to Bharti in steel utensils while the other family members drink tea from ceramic cups (Ghaywan, 1:45:01). Serving Bharti tea in a steel cup, while the rest of the family drinks from ceramic cups, reflects the entrenched caste discrimination still present in society. This act symbolizes the subtle exclusion of Dalits, like Bharti, who are treated as socially inferior through such mundane practices. The distinction between steel and ceramic cups highlights the ongoing marginalization of Dalits and the deep-rooted caste-based discrimination. This distinction between steel and ceramic is symbolic of the deeply entrenched social hierarchies that continue to reinforce caste boundaries. Bharti looks a little uncomfortable as Priya has exposed her identity to her prejudiced Brahmin in-laws. When She looks straight into the eyes of Priya, Priya lowers her gaze in guilt (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:45:09). The last one minute of the film is a proof of Ghaywan's cinematic brilliance. Bharti knows how Priya is a victim of patriarchy and decides to use it as her golden move. Bharti lectures Priya about her (Priya) duties as a mother in front of her husband and mother-in-law. She ironically repeats Priya's own statement as she mentions the condition of the factory is not good for Priya's health, "It stinks so much there" (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:46:47). She discourages Priya to come back to office as she is a mother now. It is believed that men and patriarchy always encage women within the four walls. In this context, not a man but a Dalit woman uses patriarchy as a weapon to confine a Brahmin woman within her domestic boundary. Priya's expression tells that she clearly understands Bharti's motive but remains silent. Her tense facial muscles and rapid heartbeats clearly show how angry and devastated she feels. The next day the manager informs Bharti about Priya's decision of quitting the job and asks Bharti to take over Priya's responsibilities (Ghaywan, 2021, 1:47:04). The final shot, which is a flashback scene of Bharti's visit to Priya's house, Bharti proudly sips from the steel cup while looking straight into Priya's eyes. This

symbolizes her reclaiming and asserting her Dalit identity. This act, apparently mundane, becomes a powerful declaration of victory and self-respect in a society that has long ostracized her. By embracing the steel cup, which was intended to mark her as inferior, Bharti subverts its meaning and transforms it into a symbol of empowerment. The fact that Priya lowers her gaze highlights her recognition of Bharti's newfound strength, as well as her own complicity in the caste-based discrimination. Ghaywan uses this moment to illustrate how Bharti, for the first time, takes pride in her identity, marking a shift in power dynamics. Ghaywan allows Bharti, a Dalit queer woman, to assert her voice and agency, showcasing her ability to navigate and manipulate the patriarchal and caste-dominated structures, reflecting Spivak's emphasis on the necessity of marginalized voices being heard. This also echoes Spivak's belief that the subaltern can act tactically within oppressive frameworks. Bharti's knowledge about midwifery which comes from her family and her strategic manipulation of Priya's situation underscore the importance of knowledge and skill in empowering Dalit women, resonating with Spivak's call for education as a means of self-advocacy.

Conclusion

Bharti knows that it is not Priya who is responsible for her marginalization but she also knows that Priya is a flag-bearer of the system that has suppressed her. Every time she looks at Priya, she scratches the wound she wants to heal. However, at the end, Bharti chooses dignity over love. This is how, Bharti, a Dalit woman, achieves acceptance with her indomitable spirit. In *Geeli Pucchi*, Neeraj Ghaywan himself identifies as a proud Dalit and this film is his way of portraying the empowerment of a subaltern. In a world where some people still suffer for their silence, people like Bharti chooses to raise their voice against society's power politics. Bharti proves that when the subaltern finally learns to speak, she makes sure that the voice is heard and respected. Ghaywan presents a nuanced and powerful portrayal of Dalit empowerment by illustrating the complex intersections of caste, gender, and patriarchy. Through Bharti's journey, Ghaywan establishes that empowerment is not always a loud, revolutionary act but can be subtle, through reclaiming one's identity and outsmarting societal structures. Bharti's quiet manipulation of Priya and her eventual acceptance of her Dalit identity, symbolized in the film's final moments which represents a significant transition from victimhood to agency. Ghaywan's vision of Dalit empowerment resonates with Spivak's critique of subaltern marginalization, showing how marginalized individuals, particularly Dalit women, can navigate oppressive systems to assert their dignity and autonomy. By confronting both caste-based and patriarchal oppression, the film offers a fresh perspective on Dalit empowerment, one that does not rely solely on external validation but rather on self-awareness and strategic action.

References

- Das, S. (2021). *Geeli Pucchi: Exploring the messiness of caste and sexuality. Feminism in India.* <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/04/21/geeli-pucchi-film-review/>
- Johar, K., Mehta, A. (Producers), & Ghaywan, N. (Director). (2021). *Ajeeb Daastaans*. [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.netflix.com/bd/title/81206929>.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Dalit*. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Dalit>
- Mondal, P. (n.d.) Dalits and the origin of untouchability in India: Origin of untouchability. *Your Article Library*. www.yourarticlelibrary.com/sociology/dalits-and-the-origin-of-untouchability-in-india-origin-of-untouchability/32966.
- Purvi, K. (2021). *Geeli Pucchi: How it changed things for women. SheThePeople.* www.shethepeople.tv/top-stories/opinion/geeli-pucchi/.

- Roy, L. D. (2021, April 23). “Geeli Pucchi”, a realistic film on caste and sexuality. *Outlook*.
<https://www.outlookindia.com/art-entertainment/entertainment-news-geeli-pucchi-a-realistic-film-on-caste-and-sexuality-news-381040>
- Spivak, G. C. (1993). Can the subaltern speak? In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial and postcolonial theory: A reader* (pp. 66-111). Routledge.
- Tóth, Z. (2022). Caste System in India Today. *Phiren Amenca*. <https://phirenamenca.eu/cast-system-in-india-today/>