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Formal Liberation, Substantive Exclusion: Postcolonial Paradox in Devanooru Mahadeva's Odalala and Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease

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Abstract
This paper examines the structural persistence of social exclusion despite formal legal emancipation in two landmark postcolonial texts: Devanooru Mahadeva's Kannada novella Odalala (1978) and Chinua Achebe's Nigerian Novel No Longer at Ease (1960). Both works inhabit the immediate aftermath of formal liberation — Indian constitutional independence and Nigerian political independence respectively — yet both dramatise the systematic failure of that liberation to produce substantive equality for caste-subordinated and colonially othered subjects. The paper advances the concept of the 'postcolonial paradox of liberation,' defined as the structural condition in which formal legal equality coexists with, and actively conceals, the continuation of hierarchical exclusion. Drawing on B. R. Ambedkar's theory of graded inequality, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, and Frantz Fanon's analysis of the national bourgeoisie, the paper argues that formal liberation functions not as the terminus of oppression but as its alibi: by creating the appearance of equal citizenship, constitutional and political independence delegitimises the subaltern subject's grievances while leaving intact the informal social, economic, and cultural mechanisms of subordination. Through close reading of both texts, the paper demonstrates that Obi Okonkwo in No Longer at Ease and the Dalit protagonists of Odalala are structurally positioned as mimic subjects — educated, formally empowered, constitutionally recognised — yet continuously reproduced as inferior through the very systems that formally include them. The paper further argues that both authors respond to this paradox at the level of narrative form, deploying ironic modes that make the systemic contradiction legible without resolving it. The paper contributes to comparative postcolonial literary studies by reading across the South Asian Dalit and African postcolonial traditions, demonstrating that a South-South critical frame — one that bypasses European metropolitan theory as primary reference — yields insights into structures of graduated oppression that neither tradition alone can fully articulate.

Keywords: postcolonial paradox of liberation, graded inequality, colonial mimicry, Dalit literature, African postcolonial fiction, substantive exclusion, Devanooru Mahadeva, Chinua Achebe

1. Introduction
The normative narrative of both anti-colonial and anti-caste struggles converges on a common horizon: legal emancipation. The abolition of untouchability under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution in 1950

and the formal independence of Nigeria in 1960 stand, in this narrative, as the decisive ruptures that dismantled the machinery of oppression. Once the constitutional guarantee is secured, once the colonial administrator departs and the national flag is raised, the logic of formal liberation declares itself complete. The struggle has achieved its object. What follows is no longer the problem of politics but the problem of individuals — a matter of merit, effort, and personal virtue rather than structural constraint. This paper argues that both Devanooru Mahadeva's Kannada novella Odalala (1978) and Chinua Achebe's Nigerian novel No Longer at Ease (1960) constitute a sustained literary refusal of that narrative. Both texts dramatise not the triumph of liberation but its paradox: the condition in which formal legal equality becomes the alibi for the continuation of substantive social exclusion.

The central argument advanced here is that formal liberation — constitutional rights, political independence — far from dismantling the structural inequalities of caste and colonialism, actively enables and conceals their reproduction through new, legitimised mechanisms. This condition is theorised in this paper as the 'postcolonial paradox of liberation': the structural situation in which the formal grammar of equality coexists with, and ideologically authorises, the informal grammar of hierarchy. The paradox is not incidental but structural. It arises from what B. R. Ambedkar (2014) identified as the irreducibility of graded inequality to formal legal categories: caste and colonial hierarchies are not simply legal structures that can be abolished by legal instruments, but social systems that reproduce themselves through the texture of daily life, through informal exclusion, cultural contempt, and economic dependency. When formal liberation arrives, it does not dissolve these systems — it provides them with ideological cover.

Devanooru Mahadeva's Odalala, first published in 1978 and widely recognised as a modern classic of Kannada Dalit literature, presents this paradox through the life of Sakavva's family in a post-independence Karnataka village. The novella focuses on a few hours in the domestic life of a Dalit household, a deliberately compressed temporality that concentrates the reader's attention on the gap between the constitutional promise of equality and the quotidian reality of spatial exclusion, economic vulnerability, and humiliating police power. Mahadeva does not write a novel of political argument; he writes a novel of phenomenological detail, allowing the ordinary textures of Dalit life to produce the political indictment (Nagaraj, 2010). The Constitution exists in this text as an absent presence — referenced in Sakavva's proud assertion of her legal rights, but conspicuously silent when the police raid her home and reduce her from the dignified head of a family to an object of pity and ridicule.

Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease, published in the year of Nigerian independence, presents the complementary paradox from the perspective of the colonially educated elite. Obi Okonkwo — grandson of Okonkwo from Things Fall Apart, Cambridge-educated, civil servant in the new Nigerian state, committed idealist — arrives in Lagos convinced that the educated African will be the instrument of genuine decolonisation. The novel follows his systematic disillusionment: the colonial administrative structure he inherits has not been dismantled but merely repainted; the Union scholarship that funds his education creates a new form of obligation and dependency; the osu prohibition he attempts to defy with Western-educated rationalism crushes his personal life; and the financial pressures of performing bourgeois respectability eventually drive him to the very bribery he had publicly condemned. Achebe's ironic narrative mode ensures that readers see, even as Obi cannot, that his corruption is not a personal failure of character but the structural outcome of a system that formally welcomes the educated African while refusing him the economic and social conditions for the integrity that welcome demands (Gikandi, 1991).

The theoretical framework through which this paper reads both texts draws on three complementary bodies of theory. Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality provides the structural diagnosis: the caste and colonial systems are not binary but graduated, producing hierarchies within hierarchies that make solidarity structurally difficult (Ambedkar, 2014). Bhabha's (1994) concept of colonial mimicry provides the cultural mechanism: formal inclusion operates through the demand that the colonised or lower-caste subject 'almost but not quite' replicate the dominant culture, creating a condition of permanent structural incompleteness that ensures the mimic subject's subordination is reproduced even within the systems that formally accommodate them. Fanon's (1963) analysis of the national bourgeoisie provides the political dimension: the native elite that replaces colonial masters without dismantling colonial structures — Obi Okonkwo's superiors in the Lagos civil service are this native elite incarnate. The paper also draws on Spivak's (1988) analysis of the double bind of subaltern representation, Memmi's (1965) account of the colonised intellectual's internalisation of dominant values, and the contributions of Nagaraj (2010), Rege (2006), and Sreedhara (2016) to the critical vocabulary of Dalit aesthetics and Karnataka fiction specifically.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework in detail, elaborating Ambedkar's graded inequality, Bhabha's mimicry, and the concept of the postcolonial paradox of liberation as this paper defines it. Section 3 analyses Odalala through this framework, examining how Mahadeva dramatises the gap between constitutional promise and lived reality. Section 4 analyses No Longer at Ease, reading Obi's trajectory as the structural enactment of the mimicry trap. Section 5 offers comparative analysis of education as the central mechanism through which formal liberation delivers and simultaneously defeats the educated subaltern or colonial subject. Section 6 argues that both Mahadeva and Achebe respond to the postcolonial paradox not only thematically but formally, producing what this paper terms 'paradox narrative.' The conclusion considers the implications of this South-South comparative reading for postcolonial literary theory and Dalit studies.

2. Theoretical Framework: Graded Inequality, Mimicry, and the Paradox of Liberation

The theoretical architecture of this paper rests on three interlocking concepts, each of which illuminates a different dimension of the structural condition under analysis. The first is B. R. Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality, which provides the structural diagnosis of how hierarchical oppression reproduces itself in the absence of explicit legal sanction. The second is Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, which identifies the cultural mechanism through which formal inclusion produces substantive exclusion. The third is the concept introduced in this paper — the postcolonial paradox of liberation — which names the ideological function served by formal emancipation within systems of graded inequality.

Ambedkar's analysis in Annihilation of Caste (1936) represents one of the most rigorous critiques of a social system produced by any thinker of the twentieth century, yet its central contribution is frequently misread as a simple argument for equality. The sophistication of Ambedkar's analysis lies in his insistence that caste is not a binary system of oppressor and oppressed — a misreading that would allow it to be dissolved through the straightforward legal abolition of its most visible feature, untouchability — but a system of graded inequality in which every group is simultaneously oppressed by those above it and the oppressor of those below it (Ambedkar, 2014). This gradient structure performs two functions that are essential to understanding the postcolonial paradox. First, it makes solidarity structurally difficult: the intermediate castes have a material interest in the continuation of the system insofar as it

guarantees their superiority over those below them, even as it guarantees their subordination to those above. Second, and more critically for the present argument, it means that the formal abolition of the most extreme features of the system — untouchability, for instance — does not dismantle the hierarchy but merely removes its most obvious legal instantiation while leaving intact the informal mechanisms through which the gradient is maintained. Constitutional prohibition of untouchability does not abolish the social, spatial, and economic practices through which Dalit communities are excluded from common wells, temple precincts, and higher-caste domestic spaces. It merely makes those practices illegal while doing nothing to alter the social power relations that enforce them (Guru, 1995).

The relevance of Ambedkar's framework extends beyond the South Asian context in which it was developed. Colonial systems, as Fanon (1963) and Memmi (1965) both observed, operate through analogous gradient structures: the colonised population is not uniformly subordinated but differentiated into an educated elite, a clerical class, a labour force, and a peasantry, each of which occupies a different position in the colonial hierarchy and has therefore a different relationship to liberation. Fanon's specific contribution — his analysis of the national bourgeoisie — can be read as an application of Ambedkar's graded inequality logic to the colonial context: the educated, professionally positioned colonised elite benefits from formal independence insofar as it replaces the white face of colonial administration with a Black one, but is structurally incentivised to reproduce the administrative apparatus whose functioning it has internalised, rather than to dismantle it (Fanon, 1963). The national bourgeoisie, in Fanon's analysis, is the colonial mimic man elevated to state power — a development that consolidates the gradient structure rather than abolishing it. As Fanon writes, 'The national bourgeoisie, instead of directing its efforts to the task of developing the nation, takes over unchanged the colonial apparatus of power' (Fanon, 1963, p. 122). The face of domination changes; its grammar does not.

This is where Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry becomes indispensable. In 'Of Mimicry and Man,' first published in 1984 and collected in The Location of Culture, Bhabha (1994) analyses the double bind that colonial education creates for its subjects. The colonial civilising mission demands that the colonised subject become like the coloniser — adopt the coloniser's language, values, manners, and professional practices — but the demand is structurally incomplete: the colonised subject must become 'almost the same but not quite,' an imperfect reproduction that confirms the coloniser's cultural superiority even as it serves the colonial system's administrative needs (Bhabha, 1994, p. 122). The mimic man is thus produced by and for the colonial system: educated enough to be useful, marked enough to remain subordinate. Crucially, the incompleteness of the mimicry is not a failure of the system but its design. If the colonised subject could become fully identical to the coloniser — could be English rather than merely Anglicised — the ideological justification for the colonial hierarchy would collapse. The mimic man's perpetual insufficiency is the structural mechanism through which colonial authority reproduces itself through the act of formal inclusion.

Bhabha developed this concept within the specific context of British colonialism in India and Africa, but its applicability to the post-caste context — and specifically to the situation of the Dalit intellectual formally admitted into upper-caste educational and professional institutions through constitutional reservation — is both profound and undertheorised. The Dalit subject who enters higher education through reservation is formally included in the dominant educational system on the condition of incomplete belonging: welcomed as evidence that the system is meritocratic and non-discriminatory, yet continuously marked as different through informal exclusion, social condescension, and the demand that gratitude for formal admission substitute for substantive equality. The reservation system functions, in

this reading, as a structural enactment of mimicry: it produces the almost-equal Dalit subject whose formal presence in the institution is precisely the mechanism through which the institution's claim to non-discrimination is established (Nagaraj, 1993). The Dalit intellectual is the institution's alibi.

The postcolonial paradox of liberation, as this paper defines it, names the structural condition that arises from the intersection of graded inequality and colonial mimicry at the moment of formal emancipation. The paradox has three components. First, formal liberation — constitutional rights, political independence — creates the appearance of equality, which becomes the ideological ground on which the subaltern or colonised subject's continuing exclusion is re-described as personal failure: 'you are free now, so your failure is your own.' Second, formal liberation provides the legitimising framework for new mechanisms of exclusion that reproduce the old hierarchy without its explicit legal infrastructure — the police who raid Sakavva's home do so under the authority of the law that also formally protects her; the civil service in which Obi Okonkwo works is the same colonial bureaucracy with a different complexion. Third, formal liberation disciplines the subaltern subject into performing compliance with dominant values as the price of inclusion — Obi must perform bourgeois respectability; the Dalit intellectual must perform gratitude — and this performance itself reproduces the mimic subject's incompleteness, since the dominant system always finds new grounds for declaring the performance insufficient (Chatterjee, 1993). The postcolonial paradox of liberation is not, therefore, a failure of the liberation project; it is its structural continuation by other means. Understanding this paradox precisely — distinguishing it from simple pessimism about liberation and from naïve faith in its sufficiency — is the analytical task that both Mahadeva and Achebe undertake through fiction.

3. Odalala: The Constitution's Promise and the Village's Reality

Devanooru Mahadeva's Odalala achieves its devastating critical force through a strategy of radical compression. The novella unfolds over a few hours in the domestic life of Sakavva's Dalit family in a Karnataka village in the decades following Indian independence. By confining the action to this narrow temporal and spatial frame — the family's cramped household, the unexpected feast of stolen groundnuts, the police raid that follows — Mahadeva constructs a structural argument more powerful than any explicit political thesis could deliver. The compressed temporality is itself a formal statement about the relationship between constitutional time and lived time: in constitutional time, the abolition of untouchability and the guarantee of equal citizenship represent a decisive historical rupture; in lived Dalit time, the structure of exclusion persists with barely a tremor across that rupture. The Constitution's promise and the village's reality inhabit different temporalities, and it is the irreconcilability of these temporalities that Odalala dramatises (Nagaraj, 2010).

The pivotal scene around which the novella's argument is organised is Kalayya's theft of a bag of groundnuts from the mill of the upper-caste Sahukar Ettappa. The scene is encoded in a way that reveals the layers of the postcolonial paradox. Kalayya does not steal from malice or greed but from hunger — the 'unbroken secret of Odalala,' in the critic G. S. Amur's phrase, is the depth of hunger that structures every action of Sakavva's family. The theft transforms the household: the whole family unites in an unexpected feast, domestic solidarity prevails over petty differences and quarrels, and even a neighbour who makes a casual call has her share (Amur, as cited in Krishnamurthy, 2007). The scene of communal eating carries a symbolic charge that goes beyond the immediate occasion: it is a moment of collective dignity and self-sufficiency achieved through the transgression of the property relations that maintain the Dalit family's economic dependency on Sahukar Ettappa. Mahadeva presents this transgression without

moral condemnation — Kalayya himself internally categorises the act as theft, and this self-accusation is itself evidence of the internalisation of upper-caste property norms — but the narrative does not adopt this self-description. The act is the family's appropriation of what the economic structure of post-independence rural Karnataka has denied them, and Mahadeva's refusal to condemn it is a refusal to adopt the legal-moral framework of the system that constitutes the theft.

The arrival of the police shatters this domestic solidarity and enacts the postcolonial paradox with precise, brutal economy. The police raid Sakavva's home under the authority of the law — the same constitutional framework that formally guarantees Sakavva's rights as a citizen and the safety of her person and property. The law arrives not as protector but as instrument of the upper-caste social order: Ettappa's missing property matters; Sakavva's dignity does not. The humiliation of Shivu and Puttagowri at the hands of the police officers is presented in 'serious and pathetic tones,' while the officers' inability to solve the mystery of the missing bag — which Sakavva's family has consumed — is presented with irony and comedy (Krishnamurthy, 2007). This tonal bifurcation is not incidental but structurally significant: Mahadeva's irony is directed at the representatives of the law, not at the Dalit family. The police cannot measure the depths of hunger; they have no instrument for the reality that the groundnuts were not stolen but eaten, not concealed but metabolised. The law, as formal system, is revealed as cognitively inadequate to the material conditions it is meant to govern (Sreedhara, 2016). The things in the house are destroyed by police in the name of proof-finding — an act of institutional violence that the formal legal framework both enables and authorises — while the wall painting of peacocks drawn by Gouri, Sakavva's granddaughter, remains unharmed: the one element of the family's life that no institutional power can seize, quantify, or confiscate.

Sakavva's own relationship to the law is the most complex element of the novella's critique of formal liberation. Earlier in the narrative, she asserts her constitutional knowledge with pride: she knows the law of the land and argues that her property is her own, that she earned it with her own hands and may name it to whomsoever she chooses — a direct repudiation of her son Sannayya's patriarchal claim. When Sannayya presses for his share in the family property, Sakavva's response — 'What did you say? Say it again. This is my property, understand? I have earned it with my own hands' — is the Constitution performing as promised: Article 14's equality before the law enables a Dalit woman to assert property rights against a male relative (Nagaraj, 2010). Mahadeva does not mock this assertion; Sakavva's dignity in this moment is genuinely earned and genuinely the product of the constitutional framework. But the post-raid scene reframes the limits of that same framework. After the police have reduced her from the proud head of a household to an 'object of pity and ridicule,' Sakavva seeks the help of her persecutors — the police themselves — to recover her missing cock. The bitter irony here is not at Sakavva's expense but at the law's: she has no recourse for her family's humiliation, but she retains enough confidence in the formal legal apparatus to appeal to it for the recovery of a domestic animal. The Constitution's promise and the village's reality exist in this moment in a relationship of grotesque disproportion — the law is adequate for the recovery of poultry but not for the protection of human dignity (Rege, 2006).

Mahadeva's treatment of spatial exclusion reinforces the argument about informal mechanisms of continued oppression. The Dalit family lives outside the main village — a spatial arrangement that has no constitutional sanction but persists through the social pressure of upper-caste norms. As Sreedhara (2016) observes in his survey of Karnataka Dalit fiction, overtly there is no practice of untouchability in the village, which may be due to the awareness that Dalits enjoyed constitutional protection and such

practices were punishable by law; however, it is discernible by the fact that the Dalits lived outside the village, and a strong sense of hatred and ridicule by the upper class on Dalits persisted. This spatial segregation is the precise enactment of Ambedkar's graded inequality: the formal abolition of untouchability does not alter the spatial grammar of the village because that grammar is maintained not by law but by the accumulated social power of caste hierarchy, which no constitutional provision directly addresses (Ambedkar, 2014). The Dalit family knows the outer world — they know Sahukar Ettappa's operations well enough for Kalayya to target the mill — but Ettappa's world does not know or acknowledge theirs. This asymmetry of knowledge is not neutral: it is the structural advantage of those who must understand their oppressors in order to survive while their oppressors need never understand them. It is also, in Spivak's (1988) terms, the epistemic asymmetry that formal legal equality cannot address: the subaltern can be constitutionally recognised without being epistemically visible to the institutions that constitute that recognition.

4. No Longer at Ease: Independence and the Grammar of Dependency

Chinua Achebe structures No Longer at Ease around a temporal inversion that is itself a formal argument. The novel opens with Obi Okonkwo already convicted — the reader encounters him in the dock at the Lagos High Court, being sentenced by Mr. Justice William Galloway for accepting a bribe of twenty pounds in his capacity as secretary of the Scholarship Commission. The judge's bewilderment — 'I cannot understand how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this' — is the novel's framing irony (Achebe, 1960, p. 5). The novel's entire subsequent retrospective structure is organised to answer this question, and the answer it provides is the opposite of the judge's implicit assumption: Obi's corruption is not inexplicable but structurally inevitable, the predictable outcome of a system that creates the conditions for corruption while providing the moral language that condemns it. The judge's incomprehension is the incomprehension of formal liberation confronted with the substance it has failed to deliver. What the judge reads as the mystery of individual moral failure, the novel demonstrates to be the transparency of structural determination.

Obi Okonkwo is Achebe's most sophisticated realisation of the colonial mimic man. Cambridge-educated, articulate, committed to the ideals of the new Nigeria — he had, in London, read a paper at the Nigerian Students' Union arguing that corruption in the public service would be solved when the older generation of African administrators was replaced by young university men (Achebe, 1960, p. 35). This paper — idealistic, naive, and deeply revealing of the mimicry trap — positions Obi as a subject who has so thoroughly internalised the colonial educational system's values that he believes his own Western-educated rationality is the solution to the colonial system's problems, without perceiving that this rationality is itself a product of the system he proposes to reform. The mimic subject cannot see the system from outside because the system has produced the very tools with which he thinks (Bhabha, 1994). When Obi arrives in Lagos and takes up his post in the civil service, he sits at the same desk previously occupied by a British officer, administering the same bureaucratic apparatus, answering to the same institutional logic. The face above the desk has changed; the grammar of the desk has not.

The Umuofia Progressive Union scholarship that funds Obi's education in England is the novel's most precise enactment of the postcolonial paradox of liberation. The Union represents the collective aspirations of a community investing in one of its members as the instrument of collective advancement — a characteristically African communal model of social mobility. But the scholarship creates a new form of obligation and dependency that structurally replicates the colonial patronage relationship it was

meant to replace. Obi is expected to repay the scholarship in instalments, to provide financial support for his family, to maintain the social performance of bourgeois respectability that his position demands — owning a car, wearing appropriate clothing, entertaining — and to serve the Union's specific legal interests in land disputes with neighbouring villages (Achebe, 1960). The Union had wanted him to study law; his choice of English literature is experienced as a betrayal of their investment. Obi is thus formally empowered by the scholarship and structurally constrained by the obligations it creates in a single gesture. The formal enabling mechanism is simultaneously the instrument of a new dependency. As Innes (1990) notes, the tension between Obi's aspirations and his obligations to the Union is not merely a personal drama but a precise representation of the contradictions inherent in the colonial education project when transplanted into an African communal framework.

The financial mathematics of Obi's situation is the novel's most unsparing structural argument. His salary in the civil service is substantial by Nigerian standards — he is among the highest-paid Africans in the administration — yet the accumulation of obligations means that he is perpetually in debt: scholarship repayments to the Union, household maintenance, the performance of the social status that the civil service position demands, Clara's loan of fifty pounds stolen from his car, the cost of her abortion, and finally his mother's funeral. Achebe presents these financial pressures not as evidence of Obi's improvidence but as the structural arithmetic of the mimic man's position: to belong to the class of educated Africans requires the performance of a standard of living that the salary of even the most highly positioned African civil servant cannot sustain through legitimate means alone (Fanon, 1963). The salary is set to sustain a European lifestyle on the assumption that the recipient will be a European bachelor; the African recipient has familial obligations, community obligations, and social performance costs that the salary does not account for. The bribery that eventually destroys Obi is not the anomaly the judge takes it to be; it is the system's equilibrium mechanism.

The Mary-Clara love plot is the personal dimension of the structural argument. Clara Okeke — educated, beautiful, professionally independent — is, Obi discovers, an osu: a descendant of people dedicated to a deity in traditional Igbo society, a hereditary stigma that persists in the community as a form of social untouchability. The formal parallel to Dalit untouchability is explicit: like the Indian caste system, the osu system marks certain persons as categorically outside the social body, regardless of their individual qualities, through a logic of inherited pollution that cannot be altered by personal merit or legal declaration. Obi's attempt to defy the osu prohibition with his Western-educated rationalism — 'I have no intention of giving her up,' he tells his friend Christopher (Achebe, 1960, p. 72) — is his most direct confrontation with the gap between formal and substantive liberation. He is formally free to marry whomever he chooses; the Nigerian constitution does not endorse the osu system. Yet his parents' opposition is not merely traditionalist sentiment; it reflects the social reality that the osu stigma would follow Clara — and any children they had — into all subsequent generations, marking them permanently as inferior regardless of education, wealth, or professional achievement. The Constitution cannot dissolve this.

Obi's failure to marry Clara is the personal enactment of the postcolonial paradox: his Western education equips him to see the irrationality of the osu prohibition but provides him with no mechanism for its dismantling, because the prohibition is not maintained by law but by the informal social power of a community on whose support Obi remains materially dependent. When his mother tells him she will die if he marries an osu, and subsequently does die — perhaps because of the stress of the situation — the causal relationship between formal choice and social consequence is rendered with Achebe's

characteristic ironic precision (Innes, 1990). Obi's liberal individualism, his Cambridge-educated commitment to rational personal autonomy, is revealed as having no purchase on the social reality that surrounds it. Like Ambedkar's insight that constitutional provisions cannot by themselves dismantle the social machinery of caste, Achebe's novel demonstrates that political independence cannot dissolve the social infrastructure of discrimination when that infrastructure is maintained by informal cultural norms rather than formal legal rules (JanMohamed, 1983). The independence of the nation state has produced a formally post-colonial administrative class; it has not produced a post-colonial social formation.

5. The Mimicry Trap: Education, Aspiration, and the Limits of Individual Mobility

Education is the instrument through which both the anti-colonial and anti-caste liberation movements sought to deliver their promises. For Ambedkar, education was the first of his three prescriptions for Dalit liberation — 'Educate, Organise, Agitate' — and for the architects of post-independence development ideology across the formerly colonised world, education was the mechanism through which formal political independence would be translated into substantive social equality (Ambedkar, 2014). Both Odalala and No Longer at Ease refuse this instrumental account of education with precise structural critique. In both texts, education functions not as the route to liberation but as the central mechanism of the mimicry trap: the instrument through which the formal liberation of the Dalit or colonial subject is delivered while the substantive conditions for that liberation's realisation are systematically withheld.

The mimicry trap as education operates in both texts through a double bind that Spivak (1988) identifies as the structural condition of subaltern representation: the very process of acquiring a voice within the dominant system — through education, professional credentialing, civil service appointment — requires the subject to internalise the dominant system's values, norms, and ways of knowing, while the dominant system simultaneously refuses to grant the educated subject the full admission that those values and norms promise. Obi Okonkwo's tragedy is not that he failed to receive a good education but that he received one so good that it equipped him to believe that education was sufficient for the project of reform. His Cambridge degree is his credential for the civil service; it is also the instrument of his alienation from his community's forms of collective resistance and the forms of knowledge that would have allowed him to understand his structural position rather than merely his individual predicament. The education equips him to diagnose the system's pathologies in the abstract while rendering him constitutively incapable of perceiving his own structural position within those pathologies.

The education that produces Obi Okonkwo is Macaulay's colonial educational project come to fruition — the production of a class of persons who are Indian or African in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 17). Obi's formation as an English literature student produces exactly this subject: someone who reads T. S. Eliot, who has internalised the aesthetic values of the English literary tradition, and who therefore experiences the gap between his cultivated sensibility and the material conditions of Lagos — the corruption, the poverty, the communal obligations — as an aesthetic offense rather than a political condition. His famous early disgust at the Lagos landscape — the rubbish heaps, the open drains, the scenes he internally categorises as Sodom and Gomorrah — is the disgust of the colonial education system's product encountering the reality that education was supposed to transcend (Achebe, 1960, p. 38). He sees the landscape through European eyes because that is what his education has given him. This is mimicry's deepest damage: not that it makes Obi complicit in colonialism, but that it equips him to judge Nigeria by standards that Nigeria's

material conditions — themselves the product of colonialism — render systematically unachievable (Memmi, 1965). The aesthetic and moral standards that Obi's education has given him are precisely the standards by which the system will judge him deficient when he fails to maintain them.

The Dalit intellectual figure in Odalala operates within an analogous but formally distinct version of the same trap. Mahadeva's narrative does not present a single Dalit intellectual protagonist in the way Achebe presents Obi; the educated Dalit presence in the novella is distributed across the constitutional knowledge Sakavva demonstrates — she knows the law of the land — and the implied literacy of the narrative consciousness itself. But the broader context of Mahadeva's work, as critics have noted, is precisely the situation of the generation of Dalits who came of age after independence with access to education that their parents had not had, and who found that education equipped them to desire belonging in the dominant social world while the dominant social world's informal structures continued to refuse that belonging (Nagaraj, 1993). The educated Dalit of Karnataka's post-independence decades is educated out of the oral, communal, and vernacular forms of resistance that sustained the preceding generation's collective life — the forms of which Mahadeva's own narrative practice is a conscious preservation and formal argument — while being refused entry into the institutional structures of the dominant culture by the informal mechanisms of caste exclusion. This double dispossession — from the vernacular community through education and from the dominant institution through caste — is the educational dimension of the postcolonial paradox.

This double dispossession is what Memmi's (1965) analysis of the colonised intellectual describes with psychological precision as the condition of the cultivated colonial: the educated colonised subject who internalises the coloniser's contempt for the colonised culture finds himself hating what he cannot escape being. The parallel in the Dalit context is precise: the educated Dalit who internalises upper-caste contempt for Dalit cultural practices finds herself alienated from the only community that offers genuine belonging, while remaining unacceptable to the dominant community whose cultural values she has internalised. Both Obi Okonkwo and the educated Dalit subject are figures of tragic structural impossibility — not tragic because of personal flaw but because of the structural contradiction that education both exposes and deepens. Education reveals the gap between what formal liberation promises and what social reality delivers; it also deepens that gap by intensifying both the aspiration and the exclusion.

The Union scholarship's role in No Longer at Ease makes this dynamic visible with particular clarity through a specifically economic lens. The scholarship is not purely enabling; it is extractive. The Union funds Obi's education as an investment — they expect a return in the form of legal services, political patronage, and financial remittances. When Obi fails to provide the expected return — when he chooses English literature over law, when he proves unable to use his civil service position to deliver Union members preferential treatment, when his salary is consumed by debts rather than distributed through communal patronage — the community that funded his education experiences this as a betrayal. The educational investment that was supposed to produce collective liberation produces instead an individual whose cultivation has separated him from the collective while leaving him financially and socially dependent on it. The scholarship creates a subject who is too educated for the village and too Umuofian for Lagos — a figure of perpetual structural displacement (Quayson, 2003). This is the mimicry trap's specific cruelty: it produces subjects whose formal qualifications promise inclusion while their structural position guarantees exclusion, and who cannot return to the communities of origin that might offer genuine belonging because education has made them permanently displaced from those communities'

forms of life. The individual mobility that education promises is structurally incompatible with the collective solidarity that genuine liberation requires, and it is this incompatibility — not individual moral weakness — that Achebe and Mahadeva expose with equal precision from their very different literary traditions.

6. The Postcolonial Paradox as Literary Form

The argument of this paper has thus far operated primarily at the level of thematic content — examining how both Odalala and No Longer at Ease represent the failure of formal liberation to produce substantive equality. But both Mahadeva and Achebe are writers of formal intelligence, and both texts' most powerful arguments operate not through what they say but through how they say it. This section argues that both works enact the postcolonial paradox at the level of narrative form, producing what this paper terms 'paradox narrative' — a mode of fiction that refuses resolution because the social contradiction it represents structurally refuses resolution. This formal argument is not a supplement to the thematic argument; it is its most rigorous articulation.

Achebe's use of free indirect discourse in No Longer at Ease is the formal mechanism through which the novel simultaneously inhabits Obi's perspective and exposes its inadequacies. Free indirect discourse allows the narrative voice to reproduce the consciousness of a character without attributing that consciousness to an explicit first-person narrator, creating a zone of ironic ambiguity in which the character's self-understanding and the narrative's implied critique exist simultaneously (Gikandi, 1991). When Achebe writes of Obi's early idealism — his conviction that the new generation of educated Africans will transform Nigeria — the prose adopts Obi's vocabulary and register, allowing the reader to inhabit his sincerity. But the retrospective structure of the novel — the reader already knows that Obi ends in the dock — means that every expression of that idealism is shadowed by the knowledge of its failure. The reader sees further than Obi throughout the novel; or rather, the reader sees the structural forces that Obi's education has equipped him to name in general terms but not to perceive in their specific operation on his own life. This is the formal enactment of Bhabha's (1994) mimicry: the narrative shows the mimic man's simultaneously penetrating and occluded vision, his ability to diagnose the system from which he cannot escape.

The opening scene at the Umuofia Progressive Union meeting in Lagos, which directly precedes Obi's trial, is exemplary in this regard. The Union members' discussion of Obi's forthcoming prosecution is a masterpiece of collective irony: they cannot understand why Obi has been caught, but they do understand that taking bribes without being caught is the operational norm of the system. One member argues that the older generation of officials at least knew how to 'eat without their elbows showing' — a figure of speech that encapsulates the system's actual moral economy, which is not the formal economy of meritocracy and legal obligation but the informal economy of distributed patronage and managed corruption (Achebe, 1960, p. 4). Obi's corruption is his failure to navigate this informal economy with sufficient skill. His Western-educated commitment to formal moral principle — his initial refusal to take bribes — marks him as dangerously naive in the eyes of the experienced system operators; his eventual capitulation marks him as insufficiently skilled at concealment. The novel's opening scene places the formal moral economy and the informal patronage economy in irreconcilable tension, and this tension is the content that the narrative's ironic mode holds without resolving (Innes, 1990).

Mahadeva's formal strategy in Odalala is different from Achebe's but structurally analogous in its operation. Where Achebe uses free indirect discourse within a broadly realist narrative, Mahadeva

embeds Dalit oral forms — the rhythms of vernacular speech, the structures of communal storytelling, the vocabulary of a living Kannada dialect — within the modernist prose of the literary novella. This formal strategy is not merely stylistic; it is a political act of preservation and argument. The Dalit oral tradition represents a mode of community knowledge that the dominant literary system does not recognise as literature; by incorporating it into a formally sophisticated prose narrative, Mahadeva enacts the double bind of formal inclusion and substantive exclusion at the level of the text itself (Nagaraj, 1993). The novella formally includes the subaltern voice while the dominant literary system's criteria of formal sophistication are simultaneously applied to it and disrupted by it. As the Monash Literary Commons notes of Mahadeva's style, his prose 'comprises condensed description, chant-like rhythms, and long, evocative sentences, densely packed with phrases,' and 'stretches the standard Kannada syntax to an extreme as he jumps from prose to poetry' — an aesthetic that enacts the tension between official literary language and oral vernacular as formal argument (Monash Indigenous Studies Centre, 2024).

The tonal bifurcation noted in Section 3 — serious and pathetic for the humiliation of Shivu and Puttagowri, ironic and comic for the police predicament — is a formal argument about the limits of official knowledge. The police officers' inability to solve the mystery of the missing bag because they cannot measure the depths of hunger is not simply a moment of plot-level irony; it is Mahadeva's formal demonstration that the official legal-rational system lacks the epistemological instruments to comprehend Dalit material reality. The bag has been eaten because the family was hungry; this is an explanation that the law, with its categories of theft and possession, cannot process. The irony at the police officers' expense is the irony of a formal system confronted with a substantive reality its categories are constitutively inadequate to register. This is Spivak's (1988) epistemic violence rendered in narrative form: the dominant system does not simply oppress the subaltern; it lacks the epistemic tools to perceive the subaltern's reality as real.

Both texts produce what this paper terms paradox narrative: a mode of fiction that holds in structural tension the two incompatible temporalities of formal liberation — the constitutional or political time in which liberation has been achieved and the social time in which it has not — without resolving that tension in either direction. Neither Odalala nor No Longer at Ease offers its readers the consolation of resolution: Sakavva is not restored to her dignity; Obi is not saved from his conviction. But neither text is nihilistic. Paradox narrative is not pessimism; it is diagnosis. Both texts insist that the social contradictions they represent are legible, that they have names and structures and mechanisms that can be identified, even as they resist the consolatory narrative of individual triumph that formal liberation's ideology demands. The form refuses resolution because the social reality it represents refuses resolution — but in refusing resolution, both texts insist on the necessity and validity of the struggle that formal liberation has prematurely declared over (Hall, 1996). Said (1993) identifies a contrapuntal mode in postcolonial writing — the simultaneous inhabiting of multiple, irreconcilable perspectives — as a defining feature of postcolonial literary practice, and both Mahadeva and Achebe can be read within this tradition. Paradox narrative is more specific than contrapuntality, however: it names the formal strategy of holding formal and substantive liberation in irreconcilable tension without offering the reader a position outside that tension from which to resolve it. The reader is implicated in the paradox. This implication is both the form's political force and its intellectual honesty.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Devanooru Mahadeva's Odalala and Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease are not simply texts about social failure; they are texts that diagnose, with extraordinary structural precision, the specific mechanism by which formal liberation becomes the alibi for substantive exclusion. The concept of the postcolonial paradox of liberation — advanced in this paper to name this structural condition — is not a counsel of despair but a theoretical instrument for the accurate description of a political reality that the normative narrative of liberation systematically misrepresents. Both texts force the reader to confront a question that the ideology of formal liberation forecloses: not 'have the legal conditions of equality been established?' but 'have the social conditions of equality been produced?' The answer both texts return is clearly negative, and the forms through which they return it make that negativity legible as structural rather than contingent.

The theoretical framework assembled in this paper demonstrates that Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality and Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry are not competing analytical frameworks but complementary tools that together describe the full architecture of the postcolonial paradox. Ambedkar names the structure: hierarchy is not binary but graduated, and each position within the gradient has a material interest in the continuation of the gradient that makes solidarity structurally difficult. Bhabha names the mechanism: the cultural process by which formal inclusion reproduces substantive exclusion, by demanding of the formally admitted subject a performance of belonging that the dominant system's informal structures will always declare insufficient. Together, these frameworks explain why formal liberation — whether in the form of the Indian Constitution or Nigerian independence — does not dismantle the systems it formally prohibits: because those systems are maintained not by the legal apparatus that liberation has dismantled but by the gradient social structure and the cultural mechanisms of partial inclusion that liberation leaves untouched.

Fanon's analysis of the national bourgeoisie adds the political dimension that is essential for understanding how formal liberation is institutionally reproduced rather than simply persisting as social inertia. The native elite that inherits the formal apparatus of liberation reproduces the colonial structure not through malice but through structural position: it has internalised the colonial system's administrative logic, its modes of power, and its standards of value, and it cannot dismantle what it has become without ceasing to be what it is. Obi Okonkwo's superiors in the Lagos civil service are these Fanonian figures incarnate; Sahukar Ettappa's relationship to the police in Odalala represents their caste equivalent — the upper-caste patrons of the state apparatus who direct its coercive power without formally controlling it. Spivak's analysis of epistemic violence provides the cognitive dimension: the dominant system does not simply exclude the subaltern but lacks the epistemological instruments to perceive subaltern reality as reality — a failure demonstrated with formal precision in Achebe's ironic free indirect discourse and Mahadeva's tonal bifurcation between comedy and pathos.

Neither Odalala nor No Longer at Ease is a nihilistic text, and this point deserves to be stated with some force against the danger of reading them simply as literature of failure. Sakavva's proud assertion of her property rights, her defiance of the death god, her stewardship of the family's domestic solidarity — these are not negated by the police raid that follows them; they are the evidence of what formal liberation, at its best, has genuinely enabled, even as it has proved insufficient to secure. Obi Okonkwo's initial idealism, his early refusal of bribes, his attempt to defy the osu prohibition through reasoned principle — these are not negated by his eventual corruption; they are evidence of what the colonial educational system, at its most genuinely liberating, has produced even as it has set that production in

structurally impossible conditions. What both texts offer is not the consolation of victory or the despair of defeat but the clarity of diagnosis: a precise account of what has not worked, why it has not worked, and what the forces are that have prevented it from working. This diagnostic clarity is, in the logic of both texts, the precondition for genuine rather than formal liberation.

For comparative postcolonial literary studies, the most significant contribution of this analysis is the demonstration that a South-South comparative reading — across the Karnataka Dalit and Nigerian postcolonial traditions — produces theoretical insights that a framework centred on European metropolitan theory cannot adequately articulate. Both traditions speak from the experience of populations who were formally liberated from colonial rule and from the legal apparatus of caste hierarchy respectively, and who found that formal liberation left intact the social, economic, and cultural mechanisms of their subordination. Both traditions developed, independently and in different cultural contexts, a mode of writing that holds the contradiction of formal and substantive liberation in irreconcilable narrative tension. Mukherjee (1990) noted decades ago the productive comparisons available between Nigerian and Indian postcolonial fiction, and the present paper advances that project by identifying the structural homology between the Dalit and African postcolonial experiences of formal liberation's failure as the analytical core of a genuinely comparative reading practice. The postcolonial paradox of liberation is not a European theoretical concept applied to non-European experience; it is a concept derived from and adequate to the experience of the postcolonial and post-caste world's own literary traditions. This derivation is itself the paper's most substantive theoretical claim: that South-South reading — reading Mahadeva through Achebe and Achebe through Mahadeva, reading Ambedkar through Fanon and Fanon through Ambedkar — generates theoretical instruments more precise and more adequate to the experience of gradated oppression than European-centred postcolonial theory, with its residual focus on the binary of coloniser and colonised, has been able to provide.

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