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DALIT POETRY AND FEMINISM

Dr. Ravindra Ramdas Borse

Abstract

Dalit poetry since birth, like other excerpts of subaltern writings, entails issues related to gender and self-representation. Not surprisingly, dalit women are subject to exploitation just like their upper caste counterparts. They are even more marginalised within their own caste as patriarchy has always been ruling the roost. Simultaneously with the main current of progressive writings, though very few, but a considerable number of women poets voice not only dalit struggles, but dalit feminism also. These women poets claim for a distinct, recognisable place, not altogether separate from dalit writings. Their poems necessarily sketch the usual suffering of the low caste people in India's caste-stained social machinery. They speak of, as befitting the canon, the discrimination meted out to the untouchables. Naturally anger, despair, agony, images of captivity and intolerable deprivation form the ground of their poetic outburst. But these poems have another characteristic feature alongside the conventionality stated above - it's the woman's voice which always sees deeper and has at its disposal something more to tell than the male poets who dominate the dalit literary cult. Dalit women's poems venture further - from society to the household, from revolution to the saga of common feminine anguish.

This paper addresses and analyses the essential components of dalit women's poems with special reference to the works two women poets – Hira Bansonde and Jyoti Lanjewar. Along with studies of their major poems, this dissertation will attempt to measure both the commonness and the individuality of dalit feminism as hypothesised in the poems.

Keywords: - Dalit poetry, feminism

Indian poetry in English by women poets set sail with replications of the Romantic and Victorian style of writing, though the poems were sufficiently Indian by nature. This tradition was kept up in the colonial period. Different notes of deviation from conventional poetry which incorporated features like overt romanticism, dramatic air, description of nature or relevant patriotism were seen in the post-Independence era which combined in a set of poetry known better, in the universal arena, as the poetry of the Third World. Bruce King writes:

Indian English poetry is one of the many new areas of culture which have resulted from national Independence. Perhaps the most exciting literary development in recent decades has been the emergence of national literatures in the Third World... (King 10)

Poems written after independence become more eclectic, direct, effective and esoteric; nevertheless, it grew much more 'feminine' both in the content and by the context. Speaking specifically of the post 1980s situation in the Third World, owing to the rise of modernity, education and the emergence of a distinct middle class urbanity enjoying better financial state along with easy exposure to contemporary feminist activities, we see women, working in different fields of professions are coming up as poets. The investment of their

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own experiences and professional coverage contributes hugely to their poetic enterprises and it is found in general that most of the poems bear vexation towards the social set up. While discussing on the women poets after the 80s, especially belonging to the 'Third World' environment, it might be of help to have a prior understanding of the rage, angst and insistence of the women and the diversities of the rage. Julia Lesage notes:

...we need to promote self-conscious, collectively supported, and politically clear articulations of our rage and anger. [...] Black women rage against poverty and racism at the same time that they rage against sexism. Lesbians rage against hetero sexual privilege ...Nicaraguan women rage against invasions and the aggressive intentions of the United States.[1]

In the same page she identifies society's centrality in women's suppression and hence speaks of the necessity of a proper comprehension of the unique social, political and economic conditions.

Along with some impactful transformations in political, economic and social areas change occurred in cultural practices too. Self and collective consciousness converted the mode of literary presentations. Apart from mainstream literary creations with its sustained aesthetic zeal, literature by women writers gets directed by purposeful urges. Major political figures, social activists started trying their hands in writing and the convention went vice versa as well. Hence, literature in the post 1980s scenario went hand in hand, almost essentially, with a large number of non-literary issues. Dalit literary activities came into being along with various movements, agitations and events of unrest. Being a child of quite a few heterogeneous factors, its formulation and accurate theorisation need not only literary erudition, but insightful expertise in various other socio-historical aspects. However, the insistence on liberation and equality being central to each specimen of this literary cult, it has opened and is still opening newer scholastic approaches. It triggered off prominently in the late 60s, developed and proliferated in the 70s and firmed its place in the enormity of Indian literature in the 1980s. The practice of writing spread largely among dalit activists in many parts of India and the result is what we see today – dalit literature is not something that only speaks of revolution and demolition of age old inequality pressed on them; it offers some distinct variations in its subaltern nature by means of continuously attempting to recreate the past. It would be unjust if we classify dalit literature only as a mere documentation of the contemporary society. Rather, this canon is multi layered, heterogeneous by character and variedly oriented as the author nurture different ideological premises. Related to this factor there lies another equally important one – it's about the participation of women in dalit writings. Because in the ever broadening facade of dalit literature it is observed that male poets dominate the scenario while only a few female poets (better known as activists) find their place in. It may seem a setback against a literary movement that seeks emancipation in every sense of the word has conspicuously lesser number of female counterparts.

In an attempt to address the probable reasons behind the shortage in dalit women poets, the first obvious point that comes to the fore is the omnipresent patriarchy which is almost congenital to Indian society since the Vedic ages. There's no need to seek further

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beyond the colossal epics which present and represent the legitimised infallibility of men's authority on social and religious norms. Though there are a few names of some erudite women float to the surface, but their mention is limited within school level curriculum. We are all aware of the marginalisation of the 'weaker' sex that took place in every historical age no matter who the ruler is. This repression against gender got sanctified and became perpetual by the formidable organs of religion. Therefore while answering the question there come further questions. Is the lack of female poets due to the apparent politicised outlook which the women generally have an aversion against? Or is there any deficiency in feminine enthusiasm while responding to the call of protest and change? Or is it because of the prevalent patriarchy in the lower castes that remains indifferent, just like its upper caste counterpart, about the participation of women?

Before laying down some straight forward answer for the above questions, it is necessary to illustrate one or two fundamental characteristics of poems written by dalit women. There are, of course, some similarities with the other streams of female literary practices but alongside a few dissimilarities too. Keeping a strong bond with the typicality of post colonial writing practices, each of the dalit poems frames reaction against the Hindu culture and custom in an essential woman voice. There are caste issues working everywhere in them. But they present a intra cultural critique too. The pile of superstition and pseudo religious activities has blackened their mind and vision. Let's consider 'Request'2 by Anuradha Gaurav. The poem is a choric communication made to the people of our country from a typical dalit standpoint. It's a combination of dalit traditions and their eventual courses. The poem unfurls from the custom of devoting children to the service of different gods and goddesses. The children, especially girls, end up in prostitution, become more at service of men than that of gods. In a self-condemning attitude, the poet denigrates her whole race to beasts, devoid of sensibility, depending entirely on circumstances – 'We know what's going wrong/But what can we do?' They can only see what's happening, can never make anything happen. The realization is at work behind the following specimens of acknowledgment

Our ancestors did the same thing we are doing today our children will inherit that same thing. (9-11 Anand & Zelliot, 81)

It's a helpless passivity that flows through heredity. She cracks one example of divine injustice – Shambak was killed by virtuosity personified, Rama, for listening to the Vedas. But no remonstration took place, no voice was raised against that supremely 'righteous' king – 'Our eyes were shut then, too'.

The first distinct feature that dalit women's poetry showcases is the delineation of women labour, especially labour by a mother. The ever fixed existence of a woman or a mother in the society has always been dominated by man. Engels in his 'Origin of the Family, Private Property and State' has drawn a chronological illustration on what the title suggests and at one juncture points out that though the function of inheritance owed itself solely to the maternal lineage but due to the huge increase of property and wealth multiplied the importance of the father who eventually overthrows the lineage of the mother. Engels wrote:

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The overthrow of mother right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex [Italics in original]. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of a man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children.[3]

Surprisingly, besides rage, this is exactly what dalit women poets filled their lines with. Many of the unskilled, sometimes even underpaid worker engaged in menial professions, are dalit women. Besides their own labour power, 'Women's sole creative function was the lowly task of reproducing the labor force'.4 But as it's been commented earlier that this tribe of poetry incorporates too many dimensions, in order to keep precision in this dissertation we'll critically analyse two poems, one by Hira Bansode and the other by Jyoti Lanjewar and try to relate our earlier discussion above with other subsequent discoveries. The poem 'Slave'5 by Hira Bansode (b. 1939) is full of ironies which mirror those found everywhere in Indian society, especially in its treatment to women. Half of the poem has plenty of epanaphora intended to create a recurrence about the spot it wants to turn our gaze at. All the 'where' (s) mean our country. At once the dalit poets' attitude to our country is revealed. Hira Bansode invests this stance in a little varied purpose. She enters the world of women presenting contrasting images in succession and a refrain. The first stanza outlines the Indian ritual of embellishing houses with fresh mango leaves to complement occasions of auspice. 'Little flaming oil lamps' are also symbols of traditional Hindu decoration of households. It also instigates in our mind the occasions of offering 'puja' to goddesses. But the next line in the stanza lashes the ideas of worship. It's truly a huge irony where female deities are offered puja with devotion – 'In that country a woman is still a slave'. The stanza is studded with antithetic phrases and its conspicuous outcome is its successful tracing out of a fundamental hypocrisy existing beneath the surface sacredness. Dalit poetry, constructed upon Hindu tradition of India, bears link with the country's epics and mythologies. The second stanza showcases three legendary women, two from the great epics and the other from mythology. At this juncture, the poem sheds its apparent 'dalit' label and universalises the quandary of women in all ages in the hand of patriarchy and its different persecutory agents like infidelity, voluptuousness and polygamy. The poet's venture meets success in its statement. Sita, Ahilya and Draupadi are incarnations of women treated most inhumanly, sometimes even by the best of apostolic figures. Bansode devotes only three lines to expose their dire states, each having one for her. The women had to undergo the nastiest situation ever in their lives either with a view to satisfying or as a result of discontent of a few stalwarts of masculine hegemony. Sita, as she was kidnapped by Ravana and kept in his custody for some days, the all-virtuous Rama asked her to undergo a fire-test to check whether his wife had had any scrap of infidelity in herself. The incident of Ahilya seems more obnoxious and arbitrary in its perspective. By the touch of Rama Ahilya got back her life after she had been cursed to be a lump of stone in suspicion of having an illicit affair with god Indra. Keeping religious solemnity apart, it appears to be ridiculous that on one hand Rama liberates a woman from curse, but sends his wife to acid test under the impact of similar mistrust, on the other. Again, events related to Draupadi are equally gruesome. She was made to wed five brothers together. The pandavas shared her almost as a commodity; she

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was kept at stake in a gamble in later episode. Detail explanation is unnecessary; one can easily infer what went on her body and soul. The poem wriggles deeper into deconstruction of the concrete figures into abstraction. What women crave for, what they aim at, what they pursue and what they are capable of are always '..trampled under a heel'. If the previous stanza excels in precise allusion, this one triumphs in documenting the interior of a woman mind. Again, in three lines the poet embosses women's aspiration on a centripetal connotation. It also highlights further gaps between optimism and materialisation. Each of the lines contains hyperbolic exaggerations to designate that women's dreams, force, potentiality, individuality and identity are relentlessly ravished

Where the silvery moonlight of happiness must be poured into a jar of darkness in that country a woman is still a slave (18-20 Anand & Zelliot, 31)

The last two identical lines – 'To be born a woman is unjust/To be born a woman is unjust' can suffix any punctuation mark they like and will definitely give out varied but right interpretations. The first line may have a question mark after it and the second a full stop. This will form a template of a question and an its answer. If the marks exchange their positions it'll comprise an interrogation against a firm traditional belief., so on and so forth. Moreover, these two lines are a poetic confirmation to the opinion of Anita Ghosh – "a woman in India is a'Dalit amongs Dalits"[6].

On the other hand, Joyti Lanjewar's (b. 1950) 'Mother'7 is a visual collage of the women's contribution to dalit movements. It's not an appeal made to a mother for becoming an inspiration, Mother renders her as already a motivational figure. A dalit mother's countenance and activities are placed side by side with the depiction of affluence in the opening lines. "goldbordered saris', 'gold necklace' and the other accessories mentioned in the lines are never at the disposal of a dalit mother, not even in her dream. Her actual niche is far more appalling. Her femininity is denied as she is put to toil hard amongst a group of labourers. She is one of the workers engaged in road construction. The mother's trials are made more prominent through the images opposite in nature. Putting her little children aside 'in a cradle on an acacia tree' she joins hand with the prole

The mother's labour continues. She carries loads of soils on her head, but is never oblivious of her affectionate 'kiss to the naked child'. Situations have made her a daily wage earner, situations have murdered motherhood. Having suppressed every exertion and keeping her each torment secret, she remains busy in 'building a dam on a lake' (Line 22)

In the optimism of creating her own house, the mother carries hod of building material. She jeopardises pregnancy, overpowered by poverty as stomach listens to nothing. She must work till the evening until she expends every atom of her physical capability. Paradoxically, she is mutely contributing to our country's development, herself submerged in darkness. The later illustrations are, though stereotypical, but authentic representations. The mother, though in desperate need of money, hands a few coins to her child's happiness. To do away with their distress she wishes another Ambedkar to emerge from her progeny. The dalit mother exemplifies sacrifice, remains unfed while trying her best to make food for the family. Lanjewar subtly brings out the voluptuousness the mother has to confront every now and

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then. Unlike others, she has somehow learnt the way to see atrocities face to face – 'chasing anyone who nudged you deliberately/with your sandal in your hand' (Lines 56-57). On one hand the mother copes up with personal struggle, she takes part in collective ones on the other. Her endeavour transcends from personal to universal sphere – she takes pride in her son's heroism subsequent to the great idealist struggles; she retains a residual revolutionary powerhouse in herself willing to dedicate more sons to the cause of the untouchables. She understands the value of their present agitations, feels the need to 'fight on'. At last she dies an inspirational death calling for more participation in the struggles of the dalits.

The poem, in the end, makes a circle complete. It began with the mother's personal sufferings on what she never hoped nor had. A microcosmic issue finally gets shape in macrocosm. Personal predicaments bring forth her necessary courage and steel it to the point of putting up a strong confrontation. But it ends in re-affirmation of her personal dearth thereby referring to the millions of similar incidents that happen across the world. The two poets in discussion have touched the chord of universality through their own subjective perceptions.

Notes & References

1. See Julia Lesage, 'Women's Rage', Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, p. 420
2. Translated by Sylvie Martinez, S.K. Vimal Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot. An Anthology of Dalit Literature, Eds. Mulk Raj Anand & Eleanor Zelliot, pp. 81-82
3. See Fredrick Engels, 'Origin of the Family, Private Property and State', Selected Works, Vol.3 p.233
4. Jean Franco, 'Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power, and the Third-World Intelligentsia', Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, p.513
5. Translated by S.K. Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot. An Anthology of Dalit Literature, Eds. Mulk Raj Anand & Eleanor Zelliot, pp. 30-31
6. See Anita Ghosh, 'Dalit Feminism: A Psycho-Social Analysis of Indian English Literature' in Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration, Eds. Amarnath Prasad & M.B. Gaijan, p. 48.
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