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From the Margins to the Center: Dalit Women Writers

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Abstract:

Dalit literature, whether written by women or men, is most often born of the writers' angst at belonging to a community which has always occupied a liminal space in Indian society despite being an intrinsic part of the social fabric of the country. It began and continues to be a protest against being treated as less than equal even in a post-independence society which advocates justice and equality in all spheres irrespective of class and religion. It was a while before Dalit writing established itself as a means of subjecting the abject poverty and marginalisation of the community to sustained critical interrogation. Through their writings Dalit writers have dared to question existing mainstream literary theories and upper-caste ideologies and explored that which was hidden but true. This was a lived reality that stood in stark contrast to accepted norms of life. The work of Dalit women writers inevitably grows out of their own socio-political

context but their portrayal of social reality and the challenges of dealing with change and displacement move their works beyond the merely polemical. While Dalit women writers have sometimes been charged with abandoning their caste identity in favour of a gendered consciousness, it is their engagement with a wider reality which will move their work into a literary space which is open to broader critical enquiry and literary engagement.

Key words: Dalit, Gender, Marginalisation, Subjugation, Silence, Identity, Representation, Exclusion

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Dalit literature, whether written by women or men, is most often born of the writers' angst at belonging to a community which has always occupied a liminal space in Indian society despite being an intrinsic part of the social fabric of the country. It began and continues to be a protest against being treated as less than equal even in a post-independence society which advocates justice and equality in all spheres irrespective of class and religion. The problems faced by the community were and continue to be deep rooted within the soil of Hindu society. The rigid demarcations of orthodox belief have always cut the Dalit off from most avenues of social mobility and material prosperity. In the early 12th century Chokhamela, a Dalit by birth, wrote in an abhanga-

If you had to give me birth

Why give me this birth at all

You cast me away to be born: you were cruel

Where were you at the time of my birth? Who did you help then?

Chokha says, O lord, O Krishnava, don't let me go"(Abhanga -6)[i]

His was, perhaps, one of the earliest voices to question the oppression suffered by this subaltern class. But while there is a sense of abandonment, an awareness of injustice in this poem, these early writings rarely articulated a feeling of revolt against society.

The initial impetus to Dalit writing came in the 1940s when political power and education were recognised by Dalit leaders as, a necessary pre-condition for challenging the social and occupational discrimination which continued to confine them to low and menial work. Poets and educationists such as Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule, the wife of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule had already written and spoken of the power of education as a tool for empowerment and rebellion even in the 19th century. In the poem 'Go Get an Education' from the collection *Kavya Phule* which was published in 1854 she writes,

You've got a golden chance to learn

So learn and break the chains of caste

Throw away the Brahmin scriptures fast.[ii]

However it was a while before Dalit writing established itself as a means of subjecting the abject poverty and marginalisation of the community to sustained critical interrogation. The first conference of Dalit literary writers in 1958 provided a platform for the coming together of authors like Baburao Bagul and Shankar Rao Kharat, among others. They drew attention to the

injustice and cruelty of being assigned preordained and rigidly defined subordinate roles for generations upon generations.

During this period writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Narayan Surve and others came together to form the Dalit Panthers. The early poetry of these young writers, most of whom were male, drew attention to the appalling living conditions of the majority of their people and to the demeaning struggle for the basic necessities of life such as clean water and food. As Vimal Thorat points out, Dalit writings initially emerged as socio-literary revolt and they gave voice to the first hand, lived experience of those who had been oppressed and exploited for generations. Through their writings Dalit writers dared to question existing mainstream literary theories and upper-caste ideologies and explored that which was hidden but true. This was a lived reality that stood in stark contrast to accepted norms of life.

Baburao Bagul's autobiography, 'Jehva Me Jaat Chorli (When I concealed my caste), published in 1963 was one of the earliest works which drew attention to the inequities of orthodox Hindu society .It became a seminal work depicting the harshness and cruelty which impacted the daily lives of those unfortunate enough to be born lower in the caste system. It was a catalyst that brought other Dalit writers to the fore and gave the required impetus to the Dalit literary movement.

However, Dalit writing in India actually came to be noticed by the mainstream reading public with the publication of two anthologies in 1972. Arjun Dangle's anthology called *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature,* and *An Anthology of Dalit Writing* edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zealiott. These two anthologies, which included works by Dalit women writers, shook the placid world of Indian writing that was till then

nurtured on depiction of life as lived by common, ordinary people and the trials and tribulations that they faced in life. Dalit writing turned well entrenched literary notions upside down and showed what it was to live life on the margins.

Today Dalit writing is a pan India literary movement including works written in many Indian languages. It has transgressed the narrow boundaries of caste and, as Nimbalkar points out in his book *Dalit Literature, Its Nature and Role,* has come to include the literature of other marginalised people and communities such as the Adivasis, nomadic tribes, and others who have been banished to the edges of orthodox Hindu society .It has also, gradually and significantly , given space to the voice of the Dalit woman who has been doubly marginalised and pushed into anonymity and silence because of her caste as well as her gender. Dalit male discourse initially projected itself as egalitarian, representative and non-gendered based on the assumption that it also voiced the concerns of women. Gradually, however, women writers from within the community increasingly began to challenge this appropriation of their space and questioned the ability of male narratives to depict the finer nuances of their experiences.

Dalit women's writing came into prominence after the Dalit literary meet in Nagpur in 1976. Many of the works written by the early women poets were militant and aggressive and focused on issues related to the collective identity. The works of this first generation of Dalit women writers were often raw in their use of vocabulary, language and imagery-a reflection of the struggle and drudgery of their daily lives. The harsh realities of Dalit existence were mirrored in their poetry and prose.

The poetry recited at the meet by 19 year old Meena Gajbhiye was tough, vivid and combative:

In a song full of hope in the evening

There's no meaning

This is the time to breathe battle [3]

This emotion is echoed by Jyoti Lanjewar in her poem *Caves* which forcefully brings out the changing landscape of the Dalit consciousness

I have been silent all these days

Listening to the voice of right and wrong

But now I'll fan the flames of human rights

….and turn here and now

A rebel[4]

Subsequently other writers like Pragnya Lokhande drew attention to political issues and to the complacency which could dissipate the gains made by the community. Her poem *Settlement* warns Dalits against the insidious manner in which they can be assimilated yet marginalised by a political system dominated by 'others'. She acknowledges the changes that have taken place but says

But understand the language of that change-

It would be better

The best among you

They will buy openly

To decorate their own power

Only to systematically chop later-

The hands that dared to create.

Turn the gaze

Beyond the limited horizon

Look into their eyes

See the mines that they have laid

The possible danger of the gathering clouds

Let your settlement be aglow

With your own light.[5]

Her warning is endorsed by Dilip Chitre who feels that Dalit politics has been 'corrupted by the temptations of electoral politics' and that factionalism has divided Dalits into numerous 'constituent communities.' He feels that the fire and fervour of the past has dissipated and that the place of activism has been taken by willingness for political compromise and the temptation to share in the power to rule.

The writings of Dalit women writers have the rawness of reality, of life lived at the lowest levels of existence. They confirm the continuation of those socio-political structures of domination, which have supposedly been dismantled in a post-colonial world. As Jasbir Jain points out resistance literature now exhibits a realism which extends the limits of 'existing modes' by exposing the very roots of oppression rather than merely scratching its surface.Themes and sentiments in poems written by Dalit women often coincide, hunger is an image used by many poets and anger is a pervasive emotion yet each writer reveals a subtly different reality and illustrates the varied texture and fabric of each individual lived experience.

Two poems entitled *Ai* (*Mother)* in Marathi, one by Jyoti Lanjewar, who holds a Ph.D in Marathi literature and another by Alka Chandrashekhar who is an agricultural worker bring this out very subtly. Both poems expose the oppression and exploitation which are an inevitable part of the lives of women marginalised by their gender, their caste and also often by poverty. Alka's Ai's oppressors are the 'splendid 'men belonging to the upper classes, who are completely lacking in pity and hypocritical in their response to the physical presence of the Dalit woman. This is a current theme also taken up by the contemporary poet Meena Kandasamy who, speaking about physical assaults on Dalit women by such men, ironically remarks, "I was not untouchable then…"[6]

Jyoti Lanjewar's mother, living in an urban environment, also has to protect herself from predatory men who stagger in drunk from the hooch hut. But the implication that some of these men may belong to her own caste draws attention to the exploitation of Dalit women by their own men, to the systems of patriarchal oppression well entrenched within their own society.

Alka's poem is full of images of unmitigated drudgery and despair. She remembers her mother roaming from place to place in the village trying to sell the pitiful heap of sticks she collected every day. For her mother, "all days are sorrowful" and as she struggles alone with no one to share her "story full of sighs" there appears to be no hope either for her or the future generations. In Jyoti Lanjewar's poem titled 'I Never Saw You' her Ai's life is also filled with hard work and deprivation. She works as a labourer,

working in a gang of workers

repairing roads

your bare feet burning

on the burning ground

your child in a bundle of cloth

hung on a thorny tree

while you carried canisters of tar..7

But as she works she dreams of a better future for her child. Education, for her, becomes a means of enlightenment, an escape from the unending labour that has blighted her own life.

I saw you….

Late in the evening

untying the little bundle you had made

with the free end of your sari

to bring home salt and cooking oil,

putting the shiny five paisa coin

in my tiny hand and saying

Go eat what you want…

Holding the baby in the cradle

To your breast and saying

Get educated like Ambedkar

let the basket of labour fall from my hands…[8]

The difference between the experiences and responses of the two women are significant. They are related to the social milieu in which they live and it appears that movement from rural to urban centers often opens up avenues of hope for many in the community. This is reflected in the future which each mother feels she can offer her child. The degree of political awareness marks the difference between hope and despair. Alka's mother's life is permeated with the darkness of oppression and exclusion which apparently offer no escape to her or her child. Jyoti's Ai, on the other hand, takes her place

on the Long March

striding in front

with your sari drawn tightly around you

shouting

We must change our name

bearing the blow

of a police baton on your arm

entering the jail

with your head held high..9

Her strength and the hope she imparts to her child is the result of her engagement with and knowledge of the power of politics.

Recognition of exclusion forms a subtext which is finely woven into the fabric of Dalit writing. The third generation of Ambedkarites — the educated Dalits are vocal and aware. Education makes them socially acceptable to a degree but they are well aware of the subtle antipathy which is often camouflaged by a veneer of liberal utterance. Hira Bansode's poem *The Bosom Friend* rips apart the cloak of liberalism that most high caste people hide behind

Today you came to dinner for the first time

You not only came, you forgot your caste and came

Usually women don't forget that tradition of inequality

But you came with a mind as large as the sky to my pocket size house[10]

However the narrator's joy is short-lived as she realises her friend cannot really jettison her conditioning and the innate feeling of superiority which she has so graciously and superficially abandoned for a while:

But the moment you looked at the plate, your face changed

With a little smirk you said Oh my-do you serve Chutney –koshambir this way?

You still don't know how to serve food

Truly, you folk will never improve…..[11]

The insult is subtle and couched in terms which would have a special resonance for a woman especially one who belongs to a traditionally marginalised class.

In *Antasphot,* Kumud Pawate brings out vividly the discrimination which characterises the experiences of the individual Dalit and the manner in which petrified Brahmanical prejudices continue to impact his or her life. Born into a Mahar family, Kumud dreams of learning Sanskrit, the exclusive preserve of the Brahmin. She wages a single handed battle against ingrained orthodoxy in order to achieve her desire. When she completes her masters with distinction she is congratulated but cannot find employment as though the dispensation of the classics cannot be placed in the hands of a 'government Brahmin' or educated Dalit. It is only after her inter-caste marriage that Kumud finally gets a job leaving her with the nagging awareness that the credit for her job belongs, not to her, but to her new name Kumud Somkuwar. She writes, "I hear a woman's surname changes to match that of her husband's –and so does her caste," and " the result is that although I try to forget my caste-it is impossible to forget… what comes with birth, but can't be cast off by dying- that is caste." [12]

Evidently Dalit women lead a life that is marginalised - as women and as Dalits. Their exploitation is multidimensional- social and sexual both outside and inside the home. Their writing gives voice to their aspirations and lived experiences from a feminine perspective which is significantly different from that of the men. Their works reflect the Dalit woman's perception of the self, of her body vis-a-vis the manner in which she is perceived by a Dalit man and one belonging to the upper castes. The feminism of Dalit women writers draws attention to the untenable position in which many Dalit women , especially those belonging to the poorer classes, find themselves while dealing with sexual exploitation by upper caste males and with patriarchal oppression from within their own community.

In the case of Dalit women it is their caste which marks them out as easy targets to be exploited physically and sexually and it is their imaging of this difference which often sets the work of the Dalit women apart from the mainstream. Their literature documents in stark detail, what it means to be a Dalit and a woman.

As Swarupa Rani says:

If male arrogance at home

Gives a resounding slap on one cheek

Caste dominance outside

Thrashes my other cheek[13]

While caste and a portrayal of discrimination are oft repeated themes in Dalit women's writing recent works have shifted from the personal marginalised experience to a more universal

voicing of what it means to be a woman. Recognising that there are certain similarities between all women, Dalit Women writers are exploring and identifying similaritiesof lived experiences and voicing concern about the position of women in society. There is a greater engagement with diverse themes and a mirroring of changing equations in society. Urmilla Pawar's female characters bring into focus the constraints under which all women function and also exhibit their strengths. Her story *Sixth Finger* is a powerful indictment of patriarchal mindsets. The story is located in modern Mumbai and its heroine Sneha is happily married though she is childless. When she finally does become pregnant her husband's immediate response is suspicion which not only corrodes their relationship but completely destroys Sneha. The story brings out the helplessness of a woman who faces the humiliation of having to prove her integrity within a marital relationship

In another short story 'Justice' Pawar depicts the social ostracism and the constraints placed upon the young widow Paro who becomes pregnant. Paro is a young, beautiful and attractive woman who lost her husband within months of marriage. Now she is more than sixteen weeks pregnant and has to face the questions and criticism of society. However Paro is not cowed down either by society represented by the village panchayat or by brute force in the form of her brother Nagaya who comes from the city. When asked to name the father of her child she retorts,

"I want justice for myself not punishment for the man"[14]

Paro's self-defence and her subsequent refusal to endanger or compromise the life of her lover is an indictment of a social structure which, regardless of caste, gives no primacy to a

woman's right to make choices. Urmilla Pawar's characters belong to the ordinary world around her and her sensibilities are sharpened by her own experiences as a woman.

The work of Dalit women writers inevitably grows out of their own socio-political context but their portrayal of social reality and the challenges of dealing with change and displacement move their works beyond the merely polemical. Writers like Urmila Pawar draw attention to and question the absence of women from male Dalit discourses, and also to the fact that even within feminist discourses women belonging to the lower castes represent a separate category. Contemporary, educated Dalit women writers increasingly engage with diverse issues broadening the ambit of their portrayal of life. Prabha Nikunje searches for commonalities with other women like Tasleema Nasreen who have been shackled by culture and society. Sandhya Rangari depicts ,with a astonishing degree of honesty, the inner fractures within the community and the polarisations which occur in the quest for power whereas Kavita Mohankar uses the suburban train as a symbol of the hope that the rush and tumble of urban life will propel individuals beyond concern with caste on to a path of equality. While Dalit women writers have sometimes been charged with abandoning their caste identity in favour of a gendered consciousness, it is their engagement with a wider reality which will move their work into a literary space which is open to broader critical enquiry and literary engagement.

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