

Semiotics of Dalit Feminism

ANIL SURESH ADAGALE

Assistant Professor
Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce
Pune, Maharashtra
India

Abstract:

The present paper explores the idea of Dalit Feminism and exemplifies the same on the basis of semiotic analysis of two representative poems by Jyoti Lanjewar and Hira Bansode. The Feminism is a heterogeneous term and sometimes it has been unnecessarily universalised on the basis of some coterie experience of upper class and upper caste experience. As Sharmila Rega pointed out. 'There was a complete invisibility of experiences of dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voice. There was thus a masculinisation of dalithood and a savarnization of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of dalit womanhood.' she further stated that the left party based women's organisations collapsed caste into caste, the autonomous women's groups collapsed caste into sisterhood both leaving Brahminism unchallenged. Moreover, the dalit male writers are unable to articulate the representation of dalit women in their writings. The Dalit Panthers did make a significant contribution in the cultural revolt both through their writing and programme but woman remained encapsulated in the roles of the 'mother' and 'victimized sexual being'.

Key words: Dalit, womanhood, Feminism, Brahminism, hegemony, victimization, marginalization, Semiotics, signs.

Dalit women belong to the lowest category in structured, degraded and Brahmanic hegemonic system. She is vulnerable to physical, social, economic and domestic violence. For a dalit woman, her family is the community and all her efforts are directed towards the upliftment of the community against the upper caste women wherein the world is her family. Professor Gopal Guru in “Dalit Women Talk Differently” said: “Dalit Women’s claim to talk differently assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, ‘talking differently’ can be treated as genuinely representative. The phenomenon of talking differently foregrounds the identity of women. Dalit women have been misrepresented in Indian literature and Indian English literature. Most of the upper caste male writers are biased towards Dalit women. They are portrayed as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men and never as rebels to fight against the injustices perpetuated upon them. Even in the writings of the progressive writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand and so on- Dalit women are either molested or raped by the upper caste men. By depicting such pictures, writers gained sympathy for the victims but such routinely kind of treatment is not enough. They have completely ignored the fact that Dalit women can also resist and fight back like any other victim of social oppression to guard their dignity. Dalit woman is a sign of physical and socio-cultural exploitation. She is vulnerable to all kinds of atrocities.

Literature of the Dalits represents an alternative culture, refusing to be a subaltern any longer. A dalit text is subversive, but not necessarily intimidating. It relates itself to cultural context and speaks for the revival of sociological approach to literary arts. It opposes the obsessive concern with the formal accomplishment, the linguistic expertise and the modernist tendency to look for the meaning of the text within the text itself. It inaugurates a new era of cultural transformation in the Indian context, and inevitably reaches out to the global phenomenon called postmodernism. Dalit

critics and writers have raised a number of critical questions about Indian literature and Indian literary history. They identified two of the important functions of Dalit writing. Firstly, Dalit writing attempts to deconstruct 'the dominant, castiest constructions of India identity' and secondly' it constructs a distinct Dalit identity.' Dalit writing presents a dalit centric view of life and constructs Dalit identity in relation to Colonial identity and Indian identity. Dalit literature not only subverts the old canons but also believes in creating new ones. It seeks to reject those conventions and cultural norms which not only marginalised the dalit voice and the voice of other oppressed communities including women. It attempts to create a new paradigm, a new set of value adding up to the contemporary cultural scenario. The event of dalit literature could be understood as a part of the mass culture which marks the postmodernist phase all over the world. It reveals the collective consciousness of community whose voice had remained suppressed through the annals of history. The meaning of the sign is embedded in the socio-cultural milieu of its existence. There is a need to explore the new meaning to the existing signs that has been assigned by the emerging dalit women writers.

Dalit women need to be represented as subjects and not as objects with the emphasis on their active role in the betterment of not only their family but for their whole community. The articulation of their experiences came to be known as 'Stri Dalit Sahitya' in Marathi. Generally speaking, Dalit women considered to be the most underprivileged group left out at the bottom of the hierarchal caste society for centuries. In centuries to Dalit men, they suffer more to their dual oppression: being Dalit and being woman. Being Dalit, they suffer due to caste discrimination and being a woman, victimized by the patriarchal social order both in their homes as well as outside. Dalit women believed to be alienated at three levels; caste, class, and gender positions.

Dalit feminism is considered as the 'discourse of discontent', 'a politics of difference' from the mainstream Indian feminism, which often been critiqued for marginalizing Dalit women. Dalit feminist discourses not only question the mainstream Indian feminism's hegemony in claiming to speak for all women, but also the hegemony of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women. Dalit feminist theory tries to uncover and analyze the cultural, societal specificities which constructed the Dalit woman and recover them from the oppositions. This Dalit feminist theory aimed towards social justice and against all sorts of exploitation and oppression towards Dalit women.

Jyoti Lanjewar was a prolific writer who had been consistently written in Marathi contributing much to poetry. Through her poems she explored various themes like womanhood, motherhood, friendship, human values etc. She was the leading voice of Modern Indian poetry as the potent voice in Dalit Women's Writing.

Jyoti Lanjewar in her well-known poem, "*Mother*" repudiated the traditional notion of perceiving woman simply as an object of beautification. She projected the 'Mother' as a Dalit woman who never aspired for the so called womanly pleasure like wearing '*brand new silk sari*' and avoiding gold ornaments like *bangles and bracelets* which are the signs of slavery to the Hindu customs. The Mother worked hard throughout her life as a menial labourer. She got involved in all kinds of labours such as road repairing, construction and an employee of guaranteed daily wages. She even worked as a labourer to construct the dam. Water, a source of life, was denied to the dalits but she participated in the construction work of dam which would provide water to the society but not for dalits. She aptly said,

“.....to build the dam at the lake
While your own lips were parched
Tormented by thirst”

As Dr. Ambedkar pointed out the feature of caste system which is based on, '*an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt*' (p.26) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is the perennial source of inspiration to dalits for their struggle against the Brahmanic hegemonic structure and their strife for social justice. Dr. Ambedkar urged to develop strength and struggle and to give up superstitious customs. The women's conference during the Scheduled Caste Federation meeting of 1942, Ambedkar's advice included injunctions to educate their children and remove from them any inferiority complex; not to have too many children and to let every girl who marries claim to be her husband's friend and equal and to refuse to be his slave, as reported by Dhananjay Keer.

Dalit women follow the path laid down by Dr. Ambedkar. She urges her children ,

'Get educated like Ambedkar
Let the basket of labour
Fall from my hand'

She realised that education only has the ameliorating power of their poverty. It is an instrument which would strengthen their fight against inequality which was denied to them from the time immemorial. She also envisions the state of being united for his cause, so she said, 'Live in unity, fight for Babasaheb'.

Dalit women are subjected not only because of caste and class but due to gender also. Indian women were supposed to worship husband as God. He is the incarnation of god upon this earth however inefficient he could be. In case of dalit family, usually the husband is addicted to drinking which happens to be cause of dalit women's physical and economic exploitation. The Mother in the poem is not ready to accept such an inefficient and drunkard husband and even she went to the extreme of even expelling him out of the house, who had forgotten his responsibility towards the family.

Dalit woman is not tied down to her filial responsibility and she is not either denying it. Though she was busy in doing

her menial work, she always carried her child along with her wherever she goes. She offered 'a *sweaty kiss*' to the child despite being engaged in her work. She remained half-fed and seemed to be more concerned about quenching the hunger of her children. *The poet says, '....feeding everyone else four bhakaris and staying half-hungry yourself'*. She rejected the tradition that offered her the 'leftover food'. she preferred to remain half-hungry than to sacrifice her self-esteem and self-dignity. She did not believe in fate but had complete faith in her own strength.

She did not save money for future or to build her house. She was more happy to see her children happy whenever she offered them some money out of the pennies that she earned. She puts five-paisa coin in her child's hand saying, 'Go eat what you want'.

In India, the mother is venerated for the sacrifice of her children for the sake of the country. But the dalit mother did not repent for the death of her only child who was martyred for the name of Babasaheb. She was referring here the historical incident of changing the name of the Marathwada University of Aurangabad in Maharashtra. Many dalits sacrificed their lives to carve their name in the history and some even went to jail for the same cause. Instead of lamenting the death of her only child, she said, 'You died for Bhima, your life became meaningful.' She went to extreme of saying that if she would have two or three sons, she would have been more fortunate to fight again. She also described the inhuman and demonic behaviour of the police, the state agent to oppress the powerless with their power of violence.

The poem accounts the contribution of dalit women in the fight for the liberation from the orthodox tradition. It encapsulated the feminine spirit of the Dalit Movement. The contribution of the dalit women is either undermined or ignored. The poem ends with the death of the Mother, dreaming of Bhim rajya encompassing liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice. The poet says,

“..... on your deathbed cot
Counting your last moments
With a gift to charity
The money you had made and saved”

“.... breathing your last with the words
Jai Bhima on your lips”

She believed and practised whatever Dr. Ambedkar preached and she never became a victim to sanskritization through imitating Brahmins. She never prayed to God throughout her life and not even on her deathbed. The poet says’ *‘I never saw you, praying with beads, for a brand new silk sari’*

Another well-known poet, Hira Bansode also strived to subvert the notion of women that has been misrepresented in the literary canon. Her poem, ‘Woman’ explores the man-woman relation in the structured society. The poem is written in a dialogic form of the river and the sea. Conventionally woman is always associated with river and man with the sea. Like the river ends in sea, the ultimate destiny for any woman is man. Let us first have a glance through it to get the proper idea of the argument.

Woman – Hira Bansode

She, the river,
said to him, the sea:
All my life
I've been dissolving myself
and flowing towards you
for your sake
in the end it was I
who turned into the sea
a woman's gift
is as large as the sky
but you went on
worshipping yourself
you never thought

of becoming a river
and merging
with me

(Translated from Marathi by Vinay Dharwadker.)

Though the poem is small but it contains the universal truth. The woman is expected to be submissive and is not supposed to be independent. Her life is characterised by 'flowing towards' and 'dissolving herself' into the man's life. Hira Bansode has rightly captured the vastness of woman's life in an expression, 'as large as the sky'. As the vastness and expanse of the sky is immeasurable and unfathomable, so is the life of woman. On the contrary, man is always engrossed in his own image and he is almost worshipping himself. He never tried to understand the feelings and thoughts of the woman. He is not ready to make any kind of compromise. He is unable to merge with her but it is the woman who is expected to merge with him.

The poem renders a true account of the man-woman relation in the patriarchal society. The poem uses traditional symbols but infused it with new meaning. The flow and the continuity of woman's subjugation are reflected in the metaphor 'river' and her unfathomable mind is as deep as the sky. The society measures the vastness of the sky in its reflection in the sea. Similarly the success and fruitful of woman's life is measured on the basis of her devotion to man. The poet has used three dominant signs i.e. river, sky and sea to talk about the man-woman relationship. The river and the sky are associated with woman indicating the narrowness assigned to her by the tradition and the sky which the woman as human being felt to be like. These signs have interrelations like man – woman relationship. Conventionally, the meaning of the one sign is associated with the other sign.

Conclusion:

The poem attempts to offer an alternative and real picture of a dalit woman which the upper caste and even the male dalit writers fail to capture. She never made compromise so far as her chastity was concerned. She cursed the mother and sister of any man who dared to walk past her with a lecherous gaze. She did not want to be merely an object of lust in the patriarchal order. A dalit poem is unique in the sense that it builds its structural pattern out of Dalit sensibility. It is unusual, exceptional in terms of experience and expression-something alien to the so called Marathi middle-class sensibility. It transfers the themes of isolation, alienation, protest, revolt, and struggle for survival, freedom from all sorts of bondage and exploitation, apathy, estrangement and up rootedness, a search for new identity and a longing for human dignity. It is thus poetry of protest, voicing its opposition to all that is orthodox, traditional and conventional.

REFERENCES:

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory – An Introduction to literary and Cultural Theory*, Viva Books Pvt. Ltd. , New Delhi, 2011.
- Bhongale, Rangrao, “A Semiotic Study of Dalit Poetry in Marathi”, *Sahitya Academy, Indian Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (233) (May-June 2006), pp. 171-178
- Chakravarti, Uma, ed. *Gendering Caste – Through a Feminist Lens*. Calcutta, 2013.
- Dharawadker, Vinay and Ramanujan A.K., ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry*. OUP, New Delhi, 1994.
- Gautam, Udayan, “*Dalit Women Poets and Feminism*”, *Research Scholar – An International Refereed e-Journal*

of Literary Explorations, Vol. 2, Issue 1, (Feb 2014): 327-332

Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 30, No. 41/42 (Oct. 14-21, 1995), pp. 2548-2550

Moon, Vasant, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar – Writing and Speeches Vol. 7. Who Were the Shudras*. Education Department , Govt of Maharashtra, 1990.

Rao, Anupama , *Gender and Caste*. Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2003.

WEBSITES:

<http://vemaiahenglish.blogspot.in/2012/07/dalit-poetry-in-india-hoick-wave-in.html>

<http://www.researchscholar.co.in/downloads/47-udayan-gautam.pdf>