

Dalit Women Write Differently

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Abstract

The paper will employ textual analysis to study Hira Bansode's "Sanskirti" and Jyoti Lanjewar's "Mother". The works are interrogated by employing Sharankmar Limbale's "Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature". The poets turn to the archetype of the mother to envision Dalit feminist politics. While Bansode revolts against the 'Great culture of this land'- Mother India for being an evil stepmother who abandoned the Dalit community, Lanjewar turns to her memories of her mother who lead a life of struggle and resistance. The figure of the mother, an abhorrent representation of Brahminical patriarchy in Sanskriti is rejected and abused. On the other hand, Lanjewar's testimony seeks to reclaim the margins that the masculinist logic of Dalit politics in Maharashtra often turned away from. It is argued that the works offer a significant interjection for intersectional feminist politics.

Keywords- Masculinist, Dalit, archetype, Feminist, Ecocriticism, Slavery, Resistance

Introduction

Poetry is a trestle
spanning the distance between
what i feel
and what i say

-Nikki Giovanni

Ambedkar defines caste as a rigid, endogamous class that reproduces itself by asserting control over the woman's sexuality. Any attempt to interrogate caste or sexual politics will be limited if the intrinsic connection between the two structures is not given adequate attention. As one proceeds higher up the caste ladder, one will encounter the simultaneous withdrawal of the women who belong to this social location from actively participating in the productive activities of the public sphere. Dalit women are forced to enter the public sphere to engage in productive activities. The same gives rise to two significant ideas: The Dalit man's impurity predicates itself over his inability to control *his*

woman's sexuality. Furthermore, sexual violence against Dalit woman is a process that serves to undermine Dalit manhood.

The lived experience of Dalit women is continually erased by the Savarnisation of Indian feminist politics along with the masculinization of Dalithood. Non-Dalit women movements whether it is from the urbanized middle-class location, the new peasant movements in Maharashtra, or the ecofeminist movement do not take into account the contradictions that exist between upper caste and Dalit women. Feminist theory developed by non-Dalit women ultimately fails to take into account the Dalit woman's reality. In the cultural sphere, Dalit male writers express a complete disregard for the literary output produced by Dalit women and are often dismissive of the same. Dalit women are scarcely considered for positions within Dalit literary conferences and institutions. Furthermore, Dalit women are framed within a discourse of pity within the writings of Dalit men, famously so in Namdeo Dhasal's "*Kamathiputra*".

Gopal Guru problematized the representation of Dalit women pointing to the internal factor of patriarchal domination within the Dalits and the external factor of non-Dalit forces homogenizing the issue of Dalit women. Guru famously asserted that Dalit women talk 'differently'. The inauthentic representation of Dalit women by non-Dalit women takes root in the crucial notion that one's social location determines one's perception of reality. The post-Ambedkar period is characterized by emergent Dalit male leaders subordinating and suppressing the independent political expression of Dalit women. Guru identifies the autonomous mobilization of Dalit women through the formation of various organisations as a unique epistemological standpoint. The marginalized members of society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others for their disadvantage grants them an epistemic privilege. Guru argues that Dalit women talking differently allows for an authentic representation of social reality to emerge.

Sharmila Rege further studied the classical exclusion and erasure of Dalit Womanhood. Furthering Guru's arguments, Rege employs the concept of 'difference' as a central category in feminist analyses, historically locating this within the struggle of marginalized women. Brahmanism is a structure that cannot universalize a single patriarchal mode but rather creates multiple patriarchies. Women who should be united on the systematic overlapping of patriarchy are actually divided on caste, class lines and their consent to patriarchies and its compensatory mechanisms. A Dalit feminist standpoint employs the lives of Dalit women as the subject of its knowledge and this has emancipatory potential for it locates individual experiences within socially constructed groups. There is emphasis on multiple changing structural power relations that construct a group. Rege finds

that 'Dalit women' itself cannot be conceived of as a homogenous category but argues that the Dalit feminist standpoint is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions.

Dalit Panthers was an anti-caste, militant organization structured by the principles of Ambedkar, Buddha, and Marx. The movement was lead in Maharashtra by fiery Dalit poets Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, and Raja Dhale. The Dalit Panthers took inspiration from the Black Panthers and incidentally gained momentum in India as the latter seemed to decline in the United States. As the Dalit community had been excluded from approaching the printed word, Dalit poetry traces its roots to a rich history of oral/folk culture. With the emergence of the Panthers, the printed literary culture grew in prominence. Sharankumar Limbale's "Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature" emerges within this context as a work that seeks to respond to the Savarna criticism of Dalit literature and lay out the legitimate yardsticks that can be used to adjudicate the same.

Dalit literature emerges as a movement that stakes claim to the values of equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice. Classical Indian literary theory focalizes on the evocation of feelings and emotions while Western literature has a dominant tendency to privilege the notion of an individual's unstable identity. What constitutes a unique 'Dalitness' is that a distinctive, unique Dalit experience has existed historically and the structure of caste has repeatedly found means to reproduce itself, thus perpetuating this experience of divinely sanctioned humiliation. Consequently, Dalit literature has its distinctive aesthetics. However, it is difficult to conceive of 'Dalit' itself as a homogenous category. Dalit reality is a liminal reality in time and space and the content and form of the literature that attempts to represent this liminality has its particular features that must be identified to challenge the universalist assertions of India's dominant group (Brahmin) literary theorists. Dalit subalternity cannot be conceived of within a colonial structure but that of a caste based social, economic, and cultural order of a Hindu society. The Other is a part of Hindu society and yet, apart from it and inferiority takes the form of articulating apartness and 'difference'. If Hindu society ensured its purity by necessarily situating the Dalit in a liminal space, Brahmanical literature wrote the untouchable out of existence so that there is no possibility of pollution by the Dalit's impure shadow. Nevertheless, Brahmanical literature had to confront interjections in the form of Kabir and the Progressive Writers Association who had to be included in literary history. Yet, this was done so by normalizing this voice into the mainstream by erasing the particularity of the experience being written about and the space from which this voice was emerging as framed by the reformist-liberal discourse. Unable to erase the Other out literary imagination, Brahmanical literature attempted to contain it within a discourse of sympathy and compassion. Dalits were not speaking subjects but objects of pity.

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Sharankumar Limbale defines Dalit literature as writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is imbricated in its 'Dalitness' and its purpose is to inform Dalit society of its untouchability as well as to chronicle their suffering for the upper caste Hindus. This writing is shaped by a realistic and life-affirming aesthetic. Dalit literature demands a different set of yardsticks for its literary appraisal and this demand is rooted in the conviction that change in yardsticks will bring about an effective change in the concept of upper caste Hindu society's traditional aesthetics. Limbale challenges the 'foolish aesthetic concept' of satyam, shivam, sundaram by interrogating the meaning of untruth, unholy, and unbeauty in the Dalit experience. He goes on to argue that satyam is the notion that 'human beings are first and foremost human', shivam is 'the liberation of all human beings', and 'the humanity of human beings' is sundaram. The aesthetics of Dalit literature is in the discussion on the equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity of human beings. The anguish of Dalit literature assumes a social character. It presents a rejection of the unequal order and a revolt that demands equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice: 'I am human, I must receive all the rights of a human being'. For Limbale, the category of the Dalit subsumes the Adivasi, landless farm-laborers, workers, suffering masses, and denotified tribes. Dalit consciousness bases itself upon Ambedkarite thought and a revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. Its function is to make slaves conscious of their slavery. The Dalit writer has a social responsibility, the emotion and commitment of an activist, and must treat literature as a movement. The writing is in the uncouth, impolite, *spoken* language of the Dalits as opposed to the sanitized, pure written language of the Brahmins. The form of Dalit literature bases itself upon a rebellious collective character that narrates a set of distinct experiences, the use of foul language, and commitment to the value of human liberation and Ambedkarite thought. As long as an unequal social order persists, the subversion of Dalit literature will continue to exist. It is important to note that Limbale's categorization of Dalit subsumes a set of marginalized social locations, each imbued with a different set of contradictions. While this may further the project of building solidarity, such a conception can efface 'difference' and act to reinforce this erasure. It is important to interrogate the form and purpose of Dalit women poets.. In Hira Bansode's *Sanskriti*, the 'Great culture of this land' takes the form of a mother figure. The poet vehemently rejects this mother and goes on to level abuses at her. Bansode makes a reference to an archetype that has its roots in the country's colonial past. The politics of colonial rule gave rise to an articulation of Hindu nationalist ideology. Colonial historiography and orientalist discourse effectively created a network of meanings that framed the Hindus in a double identity: as (1) inheritors of a glorious past that was destroyed by barbaric Muslim rule (2) colonial subjects who had to be ruled over by the British who were only helping them return to a rich past. Partha Chatterjee

defines the thematic of a nationalist ideology as '*an epistemological as well as ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules for establishing relations between elements*'. The thematic of a nationalist ideology must exclude the elements that cannot be reconciled with its agenda. Hindu nationalism celebrates the modes of Brahminical patriarchy, giving rise to the concept of the problematic. Chatterjee finds that the problematic of nationalist ideology '*consist of concrete statements about possibilities justified by reference to the thematic*'. Hindu nationalism bases itself on the erasure of history and the generation of myth. It turns to the archetype of the mother goddess 'Bharat Mata', Mother India to represent the nation.

Having lost the battle to their colonial masters in the public/material domain, the Hindu nationalists assert that they deserve independence as they are superior in the spiritual/private domain. Brahminical patriarchy positions the pure Hindu woman in the private/spiritual domain as the sterile man of the house enters the public/material domain to provide for the family. The pure Brahmin woman becomes the bearer of 'Indian' culture as long as she stays within the private domain. As mentioned earlier, the potency and *purity* of a man is dependent upon his ability to control the sexuality of *his* woman. The pure Brahmin woman's body is employed as a symbol that represents the nation, in a corrupt and compromised condition that needs transformation. The intervening subject, the Brahmin man projects itself as the hero who will liberate the body from its defective present moment and take it in the direction of the ideal future. By rescuing the female nation in need of protection and emancipation, the Brahmin male gains political agency and this agency legitimizes his projects that seek to align society along the lines of Hindu nationalist ideology. This legitimacy is justified by the protection of the honor and wellbeing of the nation, Mother India. The deification of the pure Brahmin female body effectively allows the Hindu nationalist to stake claim to his political agency and simultaneously erases the problematic of Hindu nationalist ideology- Brahminical patriarchy.

Hira Bansode begins the poem by hurling abuses at the 'Great culture of this land', a mother that has been constructed by the modes of Brahminical patriarchy, and is symbolic of the same. Bansode directs her anger at the school textbooks that glorify India

'As the most ancient, lofty culture of the world

And never to forget to honor you again and again,

Althusser finds that schools can be bracketed within the category of ideological state apparatus, a private institution that belongs to the society and reinforces the repression and order of the ruling class: 'the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its

‘practice’. All the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the ‘professionals of ideology’ (Marx), must in one way or another be ‘steeped’ in this ideology in order to perform their tasks ‘conscientiously’

The Indian state reinforces the logic of Brahminical patriarchy by venerating a history that has been that of oppression and humiliation for the Dalits. Yet, Bansode refuses to be steeped in it’s ideology and continue to perform the tasks that have been ‘divinely’ assigned to her by birth as she writes a participates in the making of a literature of revolt.

Hira Bansode uses the pronoun ‘we’ to establish the collective character of the poem.

‘We are ashamed

To call you mother.’

It is a common tendency of Dalit writers to abuse characters rooted and worshipped in Hindu mythology. Perhaps, this is an attempt to dismantle Brahminical culture by attacking it’s elements- mythical characters occupy a significant position within the system. Similarly, Bansode makes reference to the figure of Kunti, a character from the Mahabharata. Kunti bore a son with the sun god to test a boon that was granted to her enabling her to mother the child of any god. She gives birth to Karna in the process but abandons the child as she is unmarried at the time. A couple that belongs to a lower caste adopts the child. Karna’s capabilities match that of Arjun and yet he is not given the chance to prove his ‘merit’ until Duryodhana confers royal status over him for the reason that he belongs to a lower caste. Bansode finds that Kunti, a figure that is often adorned with great respect for birthing the Pandavas is equivalent to an evil stepmother.

Bansode goes on to describe how Dalits were refused any sense of ‘*motherly compassion*’ as they ‘*burned beneath the summer’s sun*’. The poet juxtaposes the scorching heat of the sun and the absence of shade with the act of ‘Stumbling in the darkness’ that has been bestowed on her community for centuries. There is no shade and yet there is a pervasive darkness that haunts them. Limbale finds that Dalit literature does not confer pleasure with an aesthetic value. As the literature of the exploited, it must make slaves aware of their own slavery, and thus employs freedom as an aesthetic value. Bansode informs her mother of the ‘*tearful songs*’ that have been sung as an act of self-preservation.

The poet describes how the oppressive actions of Mother India, a symbol that venerates Brahminical patriarchy have unleashed systematic destruction over the Dalit community. Limbale outlines that revolutionary literature evokes the consciousness for self-respect in the reader while pleasure giving literature limits itself to arousing joy and sympathy. For Bansode, revolt is an inextricable part of self-preservation:

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‘We became ashes, ashes, destroyed.

Today the embers awaken us.

Our useless grief we drown.

Our loyalty, given for a morsel of bread,

Stands today as a flag of rebellion.

We sing the songs of revolt.’

The ‘heartless’ culture seeks to forget its oppressive actions from collective memory as Hindu nationalist discourse turned to the erasure of the marginalized and the construction of myth as history. And yet, Bansode knows that Mother India will be ‘tormented with repentance’ on remembering. The nation that has assumed the image of an evil stepmother too will have to confront its misgivings. As Walter Benjamin writes in the Theses on Philosophy of History, ‘The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.’

The traumatic flashes of memory will ensure that the dominant ruling class steeped in the ideology of Brahminical patriarchy will not be safe from the Dalits who it has forgotten and abandoned.

‘Oh heartless culture,

Sometime, tormented with repentance,

You will remember:

Those whose umbilical cord I severed at birth

Were my children.

I never gave them my milk.

I never gave them my milk.’

Bansode, once again abuses the ‘Great’ culture that the nation has forced down her throats. She returns to the image of ‘Stumbling in the darkness/ Bestowed on us through centuries’. While it is the Dalits who find themselves engulfed by pervasive darkness, it is the figure of Mother India appears to have wilfully blinded herself as Bansode tells this mother “The lotus lamps of your eyes never lit”. Along with evoking the consciousness of self-respect within the Dalit community, it is the lamps that remain unlit and the eyes that refuse to take cognizance of divinely sanctioned oppression that the literature of revolt must awaken.

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Sanskriti, a Dalit feminist's response to the problematic archetype of Mother India can be placed as a significant intervention for Dalit and feminist politics. The work attacks the most repulsive symbol of Brahminical patriarchy: the pure Brahmin female body that is representative of the nation positions the pure Indian women, the bearer of tradition and culture within the private domain. The potent, pure man can control his woman's entry into the public sphere, a marker of her sexuality. The Dalit man's virility and potency is put into question by his inability to control *his* woman's sexuality. The Dalit woman who enters the public sphere to work becomes impure and is always susceptible to sexual violence. All at the hands of the 'Great culture of this land', a thematic that must shove its 'problematic' elements into the margin. Even as the nation/Mother India closes her eyes to the reality of the divinely sanctioned oppression that she ordains on her own children/citizens, the literature of revolt keeps the search for freedom alive. Perhaps, Mother India can look away, but it cannot escape moments of torment, the traumatic encounters with the flashes of the past.

JyotiLanjewar offers the reader a montage of images as she remembers her mother. The poet begins by contrasting her mother with the image of a bejeweled woman. Lanjewar's mother is juxtaposed against the object of beautification that Brahminical culture has a tendency to frame the ideal woman within. Yet, the poet's mother occupies the position of a construction worker, a 'masculine' occupation that requires physical brawl and strength.

I have never seen you
Wearing one of those gold-bordered saris
With a gold necklace
With gold bangles
With fancy sandals
Mother! I have seen you
Burning the soles of your feet in the harsh summer sun
Hanging your little ones in a cradle on an acacia tree
Carrying barrels of tar
Working on a road construction crew.....

The image of a female construction worker is one that the passerby can witness on the street but solemnly as the subject of poetry and literature. Lanjewar's remembering of her mother, a Dalit woman who was a construction worker offers a significant interjection to the mainstream framing of women as the object of beautification in the Brahminical cannon as well as the Dalit man's imagination of the mother as the victimized object of pity. While Lanjewar's mother partakes in the manual labor of construction, she also nurtures her child

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The image of construction and the building of a dam are representative of the city's euphoric growth and progress. Yet, the sweat behind this progress is incurred by the oppressed manual laborer who continues to be hungry and thirsty. Where is this progress located? For whom is this growth produced? The Dalit woman worker has no rights, she must continue the physical brawl even in the state of pregnancy. On the high rise of a lush skyscraper, Lanjewar's pregnant mother carries wet cement over her head as she dreams of four modest mud walls

I have seen you

For a dream of four mud walls

Stepping carefully, pregnant

On the scaffolding of a sky scraper

Carrying a hod of wet cement on your head.....

The memories share a stark absence of the 'man of the house', the traditional breadwinner. It is interesting to note that the first instance where Lanjewar does mention her father, the reader is presented with the image of an alcoholic man who only added to her mother's chores, ones that she refused to accept as she drove the man away. The poet's mother takes care of her household's material needs alongside the emotional labor required for her child. She urges her child to "Study, become an Ambedkar" to let the baskets fall from her hands. Lanjewar's mother holds on to her self-worth and dignity as she perseveres in hardship. She does not accept the leftovers or let any man's voyeuristic gaze frame her body in a demeaning manner. The Dalit woman does not attract pity or disdain but asserts her rights and demands respect.

I have seen you

Washing clothes and cleaning pots

In different households

Rejecting the scraps of food offered to you

With pride

The poet makes a reference to a historical event, the protest that took place in March 1979 following the reversal of a decision to rename Marathawada University to honor Ambedkar's legacy. The Dalit woman not only takes care of the productive and reproductive sphere but actively participates in the social movement signifying the collective struggle for self-respect. She is arrested for the same but goes to prison of the modern Brahminical state with the words liberty, fraternity, and equality in its constitution with her head held high. Lanjewar's mother even loses her son to police bullets, the repressive state apparatus but she boldly confronts the police. The images ring close to the freedom struggle that the colonial Indian subjects had to undergo as they demanded independence

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from their oppressive colonial masters. The poet argues that the freedom struggle must continue for the Dalits who assert their right to equal dignity and self-respect to the Brahmin state.

I have seen you
Saying when your only son
Fell martyr to police bullets
"You died for Bhim, your death means something"
saying boldly to the police
"If I had two or three sons, I would be fortunate.
They would fight on."

In a poignant verse, Lanjewar recalls her mother on her deathbed. Her last words are a call to revolution, to continue the 'fight for Baba' and to never forget him.

And with your very last breadth
"Jai Bhim."
I have seen you.....

Lanjewar ends her poem by returning to the comparison between ideal woman as a beautified object and her mother, an oppressed Dalit female construction worker. Her mother does not have the Brahminical desire for a new sari or jewelry. The Dalit mother is an assertive woman who in spite of oppressed through her caste, class, and gender locations refuses to be framed as an object of pity. Instead, she is framed as a voice of revolt, a feminist intervention that refuses to let itself be forgotten. The eyes of Lanjewar bear testimony to this revolt and her testimony aligns the reader with the images that have succumbed to a classical erasure due to the masculinization of Dalithood and Savarnisation of Indian feminist politics

I have never seen you
Even wanting a new broad-bordered sari
Mother, I have seen you.....

Bansode and Lanjewar offer significant interjections towards an intersectional framing of feminist politics. The poets employ the archetype of the mother in different ways. While Bansode attacks the abhorrent symbol produced of Bharat Mata as produced by ideology of Hindu nationalism, Lanjewar uses a personal memory of her mother that has an inherent social character that can stake claim to representing an authentic representation of social reality. The works attack the structure of Brahminical patriarchy and probe the Savarna feminist and Dalit male reader whilst encouraging a culture of revolt and self-preservation among the oppressed.

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