



RESEARCH ARTICLE

SUBALTERNS CAN SPEAK: A STUDY OF SELECT YOUNG INDIAN DALIT POETS

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ABSTRACT

Simone de Beauvoir, the great feminist, says in her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949) that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, if we alter it a bit and say, a subaltern is not born but rather becomes, would not be wrong. When the world literature abounds with numberless examples of discriminations related with colour, class and race, and their critical analyses in different Discourses that probe binary positions of the Man and the Woman, the White and the Black, the Colonized and the Colonizers, the Orientals and the Occidentals and so on so forth. If we take a cultural look at India's history of more than 5000 years, right from Vedas to the present, it is a history of assimilation and adaptation in general. But, it is also true that discriminations and injustices on the basis of caste have ripped apart the organicity of the society over the years, and there seems a cultural divide on the basis of one's caste. The present paper attempts to examine how some of the young Dalit poets in English have responded to it, their anguish inked in literature transforms or rather revolutionizes the form and content of the present day literature.

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INTRODUCTION

History of mankind affirms that it is the power dynamics that has been responsible for all discriminations such as related to sex, age, caste, colour, creed or place. Human-beings, discarding the basic principle of equality, have constructed systems and codes and have given them mythological bases to justify inequalities to establish their superiorities over others. Social scientists study these complexities of human social behaviour and systems and formulate theories to put into action for adequate changes in the interest of the larger society or mankind. The approach of social scientists is largely imperial and based on the physical behaviour of a particular group of a particular region of the world in a particular time and space. While literary artists like poets represent such discriminations through the medium of language that is metaphoric and symbolic in its orientation. Unlike the language of social scientists, literary language is more connotative than denotative. The present paper seeks to see how young Indian Dalit poets in English have articulated their angst and revolt against the discrimination that the caste has inflicted on them and how the atrocities they are subjected to, are not only physical but also psychological that often get ignored or less documented in the researches of social scientists. The paper seeks to examine the poetry of select young Dalit poets in English from the various parts of India. Their poetry is a revolt against that age-old caste system that has been responsible for the dehumanization on the basis of one's caste. The images, metaphors and the language of these young Indian Dalit poets in English, have revolutionized the idiom of English poetry in the country and have strengthened the cause of the eradication of caste

discrimination by their writings. In the Hindu caste system of India, 'Shudras' were given the lowest place, there are numerous incidents in the country's more than 5000 year long history and mythology when the lower caste people were denied education and status and put to all inhuman violence and injustices. Even classics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* reverberate with the stories of such injustices and atrocities based on such discriminations. While Dalit poets Nam Dev Dhasal, Daya Pawar and Urmila Pawar have taken lead in exposing the exploitation of the Dalits in Maharashtra, Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan*, Sharan Kumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste* and Vasant Moon's autobiography *Growing Up as a Untouchable in India*, have been successful to draw international attention to expose the discrimination a Dalit has to undergo during his life and career. The short stories of Prem Chand, Mudra Rakchhas, Sheoraj Singh Baichain, Mohan Das Namishraya, Baburao Bagul have given an in-depth insights into the lives of Dalits who suffer inhumanly. With the emergence of young Dalit woman writers like Bama in Tamil, Urmila Pawar in Marathi, Arundhati Roy with her novel *The God of Small Things* in English, Telugu poets Jupaka Subhadra, Challapalli Swarruprani and M Gowri, and Hindi Dalit autobiographers Kawasila Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishap*, Kamal Tejas's *Gawa Tathagat* and Sushila Takbhore's *Shikanje Ka Dard*, Dalit literature has registered a mammoth upsurge where the contribution of women writers is not less significant than those of male ones. In the following discussion, it is worthy of note how some of the young Dalit poets of India have retorted to Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and asserted vociferously that subalterns can speak for themselves. With such outstanding writers, writing about the wretched lives of the Dalits and subalterns, rushing forth in every decade after Independence with a gusto and commitment, it is very surprising that they are hardly admitted within the sphere of university

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syllabi, only very few universities in the country have prescribed their poetry, stories and autobiographies, there is still a glass ceiling to be smashed to accommodate such writers whose works represent the stark realities of more than the half population of the country. Is it sheer politics of the upper class educated or sheer ignorance of the literature of the downtrodden, is a question to be pondered by the authorities in the university- Departments. Writing in 21st century one rues over this situation and ponders over the possible reasons of this exclusion of Dalit writers and literature. Perhaps, it has to do with the complexity of the topic, certainly, but it also has to do with the continued, fraught debate on the definition of Dalit and on the issue of representation, accessibility and appropriation. Whatever may be the reasons, there are numerous young Indian Dalit poets, their poetry is brilliant in terms of form and content and invite a fair evaluation of their craft. One of such outstanding women writers in India, is Meena Kandasamy, a young Chennai based poet, fiction writer and translator. Her first book *Touch* came out from Peacock Books, Mumbai in 2006. It contains Foreword by renowned poetess Kamala Das, where she finds her 'poetic vision' appreciable. Kandasamy regards her poetic corpus as a process of coming to terms with her identity and consciousness, she declares, her "woman ness, Tamilness and low/outcasteness" are labels that she wears with pride. Her poetry reflects her awareness of what it means to be a woman in a caste ridden social environment of Tamil Nadu. For Kandasamy, writing is a means of creating a place in the world; the use of the personal voice and self-revelation, are means of self-assertion in the Indian context where to be a woman and to be a Dalit woman is to be doubly marginalized and oppressed. Her poems revolt against the age-old caste hierarchies in Indian society. Her poem "Becoming a Brahmin" takes a dig at how upper caste people undermine the dignity of a lower caste person-

"Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin
Begin.

Step1: Take a beautiful Sudra girl

Step2: Make her marry a Brahmin

Step3: Let her give birth to his female child.

Step4: Let this child marry a brahmin

Step5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.

Step6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End.

Algorithm advocated by Father of the Nation at Tirupur,

Documented by Periyar on 20.09.1947

Algorithm for converting a Pariah into a Brahmin

Awaiting another Father of the Nation

To produce this Algorithm.

(Inconvenience caused due to

inadvertent delay is sincerely regretted.)(*Touch* 42)

The undercurrent irony in the poem and a sharp criticism of Father of the Nation, makes the poem poignant, it rips apart the hypocrisy of the upper caste thinking. She, like all other poets of personal conviction and confession, gives new form to her poems. They startle the reader not only by content but by innovation also in the cliched form of poetry. Her quest is not just the quest of a usual confessional poet, it has a universal appeal, it aims no spiritual objectives but a social engineering. She says:

"caste, yet again authored a tragedy

The disease wreaked, downtrodden" ("Prayers", First published in *Kritya*.)

She articulates the hate that untouchability engenders in the hearts of an untouchable in these words, how this feeling can but be experienced:

"You will have known almost
Every knowledgeable thing about
The charms and the temptations
That touch could hold.

But, you will never have known
that touch-the taboo
to your transcendence,
when crystallized in caste
was a paraphernalia of
undeserving hate." ("Touch" 36)

Meena Kandasamy emerges as a strong voice for the underprivileged and the downtrodden class in her poems, she boldly debunks the mythological characters like Dronacharya who first deprived Ekalavya from receiving education on the ground of his low caste and later demanded his thumb as *Guru dakshina*, in her poem "Ekalaivan", she straightforwardly attacks the mentality of Dronacharya in this poem. Naveen k Mehta has rightly commented here, "Kandasamy finds this situation quite pathetic and arouse the soul of Ekalaivan to come out something which can be lethal to break the age old circle of suppression and tries to offer consolation (60)":

"You can do a lot of things
With your left hand".

and quickly retorts,

"Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant
Left handed treatment." (42)

Meena Kandasamy does not find herself comfortable with the philosophy of Advaita that asserts that the individual is nothing other than the brahman (Ultimate soul), she asks God when this state will be really achieved and the untouchables be one with the higher caste Brahmin?

"Advaita: The Ultimate Question".....

"One	More
Final	Question
Can	My
Untouchable	Atman
And	Your
Brahman	Atman
Ever	Be
One? "	(37)

The form of the poem itself answers the question, that so long as untouchability exists, an Untouchable can not be equal with a Brahman. For Meena Kandasamy, poetry is a weapon to expose the atrocities, insults, humiliations, discriminations and injustices done to the whole class of lower caste people who lead lives in sub-human surroundings. Her poetry takes account of the Dalit exodus, rapes committed on young Dalit girls, and it sensitizes the downtrodden to wake up, acknowledge their dignity and change the scenario by a revolution:

"We will learn
How to fight
With the substantial spontaneity
With which we first learnt
How to love.
So
Now
Upon a future time
There will be a revolution.
It will begin
When the oppressors will wince
Every time
They hear our voices and their sparkly
Silence
Will never be taken for a sacrament" (60).

And so, she advises in her poem "Aggression"-

"Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting."

She knows it very well that the things will not improve automatically, they will have to struggle for their due rights. Political parties will only use them for their vested interests.

Only ideas can bring revolutions:

“Sometimes
The outward signals
Of inward struggles take colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our
Dreams explode.”(38).

Her message to the oppressed people is quite clear, it is not a political agenda but the question of one’s identity and dignity as a human-being:

“But, don’t suppress
Our rightful share of dignity.It
might even prove helpful
If you ever learnt
That virtue
Though inherited
Was nothing beyond
The appearance
Of the foot-print
Of a bird
On water...” (43)

Hers is poetry of anguish ,a search for identity and a yearning for liberation from the stigma of being an untouchable, this is writ large on every page of her poems .In one of her Interviews, she says:

“My gender, language and casteless-ness were not anything that I had to be ashamed of... I wrote poetry very well aware of whom I was. But I was also sure of how I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be taken on my own terms... I wanted to be totally bare and intensely exposed to the world through my writings. I wanted it to be my rebellion against the world.”

(Poetry International Web).

With her very few collections of poems, she stands as one of the most revolutionary voices among the women Dalit poets of modern India. Whereas most of the poets of the Subaltern have devised new ways of articulation in form and language, and their devices are quite varied ,they all share a subversive attitude towards traditional myths which are marked by discriminations on the basis of caste and gender. One of such Dalit thinkers, critics and poets of note is Rajat Rani Meenu who originally writes in Hindi, raises the question of the exploitation of the Dalits in her stories and poems. Besides her many collections of Dalit stories and poems, her ‘Hindi Dalit Kavita of Ninth Decade’ was awarded by Dalit Sahitya Akademi, MP. One of her poems translated into English is titled, “ Why is it that Even a Leaf Does not Stir” wonders on the studied silence of the Elite on the rape of a Dalit girl:

“When we are raped
Even gang raped
Why is it that even a leaf does not stir?
Yet when rape was your lot
The foundations of Parliament itself did shake,
Women Parliamentarians screamed in protest
Roaring from its dream-slumber the commission for women.
Why do we hear today the demand
For death sentence to the rapists
When yesterday you/all of you were mute?
Was the Maulana Azad Medical College student’s rape
The first rape ever
If not, then why were you/all of you silent
When I was being raped, even gang-raped?
Yes, the answer is this:
That you are from the upper castes/the pure castes
While I, after all, am a mere Dalit.”(*Journal of Literature & Aesthetics*,2008,46)

As it happens in Dalit discourse, the exploitation of the Dalits is often associated with Feminism. While all Dalits undergo the discrimination

of being a member of a low caste, Dalit women suffer doubly, first as a victim of the rigid norms of the patriarchy and secondly as being a low caste member of the society. A Telugu Dalit poet Challapalli Swaruparani puts this predicament of a Dalit woman in her poem, “Mankenappuvvu”:

“The hazard hisses about forever
Sandwiched between the wall and a ditch,
When is it that I lived my own life?
The male-control at home slaps one cheek
While the caste-control in the street slaps the other.”
(*Journal of Literature & Aesthetics*,2008,77)

Thus, Dalit women are excluded by the Feminism of the West that is more concerned about the discriminations of race and colour than caste. They are the “Other” whose positions never change, they are not the subject of “Ambivalence” in the Post colonial discourse as propounded by Homi Bhabha and other western post-colonial critics. They are the permanent ‘colonies’ crying for decolonization. Their agonies can be understood only by Dalit discourse and a poetics of the subaltern literature. A Bengali poet Marshal Hembram ‘s poem ,translated beautifully in English by Jaydeep Sarangi, himself a poet and translator of note, reads like this:

“All by a thunder
They say
this land
this pond
this farm house
are not mine.
Red eyes pierce us
to leave
all these
and to be without address.
But, with these
There are stories numberless
We fought to make
this untrodden territory of forest
for a land
to live in;
with happy family.
If you ask these
from me
my land
my pond
my farm house
What else can I do
But to take the bow and arrow.”(“We shall take the Bow and Arrow”)

The last line of the poem highlights the point why do they resort to violence? Violence is not the remedy of discriminations and injustices done to the Dalits, but ,perhaps, the last resort of the have-nots. Voices of the Dalits are the voices of the marginalized societies. In a healthy and sustainable society ,such discriminations have no place .Like Byron, Blake, Shaw and Arthur Miller who spoke and wrote against the powerful structures of their times, their voices are to be heard ,their poems ,novels and autobiographies have to be studied critically like a *Sahrdaya* and it is equally obligatory for genuinely politically conscious people and scholars of literature. As literature with its universal nature, represents all people with their failures and triumphs. It has only “inclusions” and no “exclusions.”

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