

DALIT POETRY: QUESTIONING HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES

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Abstract: *Present paper attempts to argue that Dalit poetry indispensably explores and interrogates the hegemonic narratives established by dominant religious and feudal castes to enslave and oppress the lowered caste masses. It also makes the point that without religious sanction dominant castes cannot perpetuate their domination. Dalit poetry therefore critiques these strategies and deconstructs the basic religious construct and questions the very validity of it.*

Key Words: *Hegemony, Dalit, Phule, Ambedkar, Strategy, Brahmanism, Religion, Culture.*

Without taking socio-cultural and anthropological registers of Dalit articulation, into consideration, and without penetrating into subterranean value system, one cannot understand the legitimacy, validity and appropriateness of the protest, angst, anger, rebellion and counter cultural discourse that Dalit poetry signifies. In fact, any work of art is cultural product emerging out of specific socio-economic conditions, if put in Marxian vein. Artist herself is a product of her material realities which shape and reshape the attitude, thought process, aesthetic sensibility, perception, and, to use Gramscian term- *senso commune* to deal with the world and perceive it. Therefore, naturally, the creative manifestation of the artist becomes the reflection of her material realities. Artistic expressions find a certain kind of categorization so far as the class and caste of the artist and art is concerned. The art produced by the lower class/caste artist, no matter it may be so great, would be treated as low and less cognizable, while art produced by higher class/caste artist, no matter it may be third rate, would be brought at center stage. The mainstream academia and media has been continuously playing such mischief and adopting many hegemonic strategies to establish and perpetuate cultural domination. Dominant ideologies, in any society, create certain hegemonic stereotypes which find their implementation and execution in certain cultural texts such as literature, cinema, drama, media, advertisement, clothes, food practices, sports, rites and rituals, festivals etc. Such hegemonic stereotypes are naturalized through certain institutions. Religion and religious culture accompanied by myths play a pivotal role in supporting, strengthening and validating certain value system which results into discrimination, exploitation and subordination of masses. Jotirao Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar, by scientifically analyzing and critiquing Vedic sacerdotal literature deconstructed the dominant myths and narratives and reconstructed an alternative culture.

Phule-Ambedkar philosophical construct has become a powerful ideological force which manifests through creative articulation of the Dalit writers; in fact, this philosophy has endowed the Dalit writers with a mature critical analytical dexterity that sometimes emerges as polemics and sometimes a hard hitting critique of hegemonic strategies. Apart from autonarrativistic inclination of the Dalit writers, poetry too, has been adopted as the powerful weapon in the Dalit intellectual armory which sharply tears the veils of the religious hypocrisy of the casteist and capitalist masters. Dalit poetry, for the first time in the Indian literary history, interrogated and defied the hegemonic religious construct exposed the selfishness of the dominant castes and class. Caste/class elites, Dalit poetry pinpoints, always enjoy every pleasure of life at the cost of lowered castes' misery. This misery of the masses is the result of a discriminating religious structure which has been sanctioned and validated by certain scriptures like Vedas, Smritis and epics.

Religious scriptures, according to dominant narratives, have been created by god, hence infallible and unassailable. Keshav Meshram asks some crucial questions emerging out of harsh realities

experienced by Dalits:

*One day I cursed that mother-fucker God
He just laughed shamelessly.
My neighbor A born-to-the pen Brahman
----- was shocked.
He looked at me with his caste-oil face and said,
"How can you say such things to the source of the Indescribable,
Qualityless, Formless Juggernaut?
.....
I cursed another good hot curse.
The university buildings shuddered and sank
Waist-deep.
All at once, scholars began doing research into what makes people angry.*

He further says-

*On my birthday I cursed God
I cursed him, I cursed him again.
Whipping him with words, I said
"Bastard"!
"Would you chop a whole cart full of wood
for a single piece of bread?
Would you wipe the sweat from your bony body
With your mother's ragged sari? (Qtd. in Eleanor Zelliot, 300)*

This poem is not the result of depression and frustration, as it would be, probably, treated by the spiritual gurus, religious authorities and those who deeply believe in the benevolence of almighty god. But, this is a strong articulation of dissent against the hegemonic construction of notion of god through which elite castes have been enjoying the dominant position in the social structure and the Dalits are enslaved and exploited for centuries together.

Anthropologically speaking, god is an imagined reality brought into reality as Yuval Harari argues. It is the invention of cognitive revolution that took place during seventy thousand years to thirty thousand years before Common Era. Sapiens brought many imagined realities into realities which marks the distinctive feature of sapiens. This imagined reality of god and other associated imagined realities have been continuously sanctioning the domination of certain castes and classes.

Another prominent Dalit poet Arjun Dangle writes:

*We used to be their friends
When, clay pots hung from our necks,
Brooms tied to our rumps,
We made our rounds through the Upper lane
Calling out 'Johar Maybap' (Qtd. in Eleanor Zelliot, 302)*

Here Dangle is recalling the Peshwa rule that degraded the Dalits to extreme form of slavery. The situation of Dalits in Peshwa rule has the roots in code of conduct laid down by Manusmriti, a prominent document, a constitution of the land which governed and regulated the life and which implemented the philosophy of religion by designing it into systematic law. Dalit poetry has an adequate audacity to condemn and defy *Dharmashastra*. As mentioned above, Phule and Ambedkar are the inspiration of Dalit literature. Dalit poetry is indispensably embedded in the theoretical designs and philosophic discourses of Phule and Ambedkar. Proper perception and interpretation of Dalit poetry, therefore, is impossible without

understanding Phule-Ambedkarite theorization of Indian socio-cultural reality. Jotirao Phule derives from the non-Aryan cultural stuff to reconstruct the non-Brahmin narratives.

Dissenting against dominant cultural-political narratives, rejecting supremacist religious designs, resistance to every sort of exploitation and critiquing hegemonic cultural strategies, are the major characteristics of Dalit poetry. These characteristics are the result of Ambedkar's historical-anthropological analysis of Dharmashastra. His analysis and interpretation of Dharmashastra opens up several possibilities of waging a war against unjust and exploitative religion and its symbols. Ambedkar's microscopic study of Dharmashastra and behavioral pattern of the people pertaining to the treatment meted out to the Dalits compels him to scrutinize and criticize the Dharmashastra. Ambedkar, therefore, sees people's casteist behavior as the result of Dharmashastra. He puts in his very seminal tract-Annihilation of Caste:

.... It must be recognized that the Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrongheaded. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then, obviously the enemy, you must grapple with, is not the people who observe caste, but the *Shastras* which teach them this religion of Caste. (68)

Dalit poets, therefore, attack Dharmashastra as it is the source of casteist society, which inculcates and validates the discriminatory behavior of the people. Symbols, established by the Dharmashastra always strengthen the ideology propounded by the Dharmashastra. Dalit poetry attacks the symbols also in a deconstructive fashion. Daya Pawar writes:

*Eklavya is chopping of Drona's thumb
With an axe.
With a smile on his face,
Shambuka is killing Rama.
Bali trampling Wamana
With his small feet to hell.
Manu is piercing his eyes with needles,
Cut his tongue,
Pouring lead in his ears
Is tossing and turning in the cemeteries.* (Qtd, in Sakuntala A. I., 81)

Daya pawar intends to view the Brahmanic myths through countercultural perspective where all the oppressed and victimized non-Brahmanic characters come at the center stage and retaliate. Eklavya, Shambuka, Bali are, though mythically, the respectable representatives of the Indian masses, but, Brahmanic mythology portrays them as the villain and establishes supremacy. Mythological symbols and their religious-cultural signification lead to a certain sort of ideology which gains consent on the part of the oppressed ones. Oppression and exploitation is legitimated through such mythological symbols. Daya Pawar, therefore, attacks such hegemonic strategies through his poetry and constructs a countercultural-mythological discourse. This is not anger or resentment on the part of poet, rather, it is a serious and committed attempt to rebuild the past of the masses which has been either destroyed or grotesquely depicted by the Brahman religious authorities.

Constructing the hegemonic symbols is the fundamental feature of any dominant system, through which masses are perpetually engaged and made unconscious to subterranean strategies that enslave them. In current political scenario cow has become one of the most powerful symbol of Hinduism. A prominent Malayalam Dalit poet M. B. Manoj makes a sarcastic comment on the narratives constructed around cow in his poem *Survey of India*:

*Which is weightier
A Cow or a Chandala
Don't be embarrassed
A dead cow equates in weight
Five live Chandals
A live Cow equals
Twenty five crore Chandals. (57)*

M. B. Manoj is not merely writing in satirical tone for the sake of satire, but, deep down in the heart, an eternal wound has been agonizing and torturing him for centuries together, that, in current political sphere, disturbs and torments him even more. Dalits in India are treated lower than animals, or, to be more precise, anybody, other than Brahman, has a lower status than the cow. Cow, according to Brahmanic scriptures, the holiest species on the earth and, innumerable people, of course other than Brahmans, can be slaughtered/lynched to protect cow. Hence, whatever Manoj says, though metaphorically, is unfortunately a horrible truth which defines the current Indian politics and its modus operandi.

What, after all, is the need, for the Dalit poets, to critique the myths and symbols constructed by the Brahmanic scriptures and formulate a protest discourse through poetic articulation? The answer would be, without critiquing the myths and symbols, Brahmanic hegemonic strategies cannot be exposed and contours of egalitarian society envisioned by Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar would not be brought into reality. Dalit poets have been equipped with the methodological tools of culture critiquing created by Phule and Ambedkar, therefore, they never succumb to the hegemonic strategies of Brahmans like the innocent middle castes and other lowered castes, and rationally attack the whole discriminatory construct of Brahmanism. Dalit poets, in a way, reinterpreting the popular myths and symbols that have been established and glorified by the Brahmanic interpreters. In this connection Gail Omvedt has a pertinent point to make. She argues:

..... because the voice of low castes, women, tribal, non-Aryans, etc. in myths was from the beginning filtered through the interpretations of their masters and conquerors, Shambuk was not silent, he was silenced; his voice was not recorded. Eklavya may well have fought, but his fight has been erased from myths. In many cases though, the resistance was at least partially recorded, sometimes in the written versions of the legends and sometimes in folk versions that had to be recovered, searched out, and brought to a position of hegemony. These may seem obvious points, something that any social scientist and historian interpreting popular mythology knows: the document itself has been produced in a social process. It should not be necessary in these days of deconstructionism and post-modernism to point this out. But it has become necessary to repeat such points because even the academic interpretations of Indian culture, the ones most influenced by supposedly sophisticated methodologies, have very often taken a high-caste versions of the myths for granted, as texts which are taken to be the unexamined basis for theorizing. (2006: 98)

Brahmanic cultural construct always, not only engineers the strategies of political and economic domination, but, even sexual exploitation is at the core of the whole hegemonic project, which has been seldom taken into consideration. Most of the times, socially and economically weaker sections of the society, are sexually assaulted by the dominant castes in the name of religion. Among the innumerable inhuman traditions of Hinduism, Devadaasi is one of the cruelest traditions, which gives a religious sanction to the dominant castes to sexually exploit the lowered caste women. Rather, Devadaasi itself has become an independent caste which is meant to sexually serve the dominant castes. Devadaasi, i.e. temple prostitutes, are the girls dedicated to the god whose bodies are enjoyed by the dominant castes and landlord feudal. For thousands of years this inhuman tradition of offering girls to god is in practice in the name of religion, because, this tradition has been mythologized and glorified, hence no question of subversion. But, in recent time some temple prostitutes are voicing their angst and raising questions against their sexual

exploitation in the name of religion. Even, some Dalit poets have critiqued the deplorable plight of the Devadaasi. Meena Kandasamy, a contemporary Dalit poet, with her razor sharp satire, comments on the life of the Devadaasi in her very powerful poem *Mascara*:

*The last thing she does
before she gets ready to die
once more, of violation,
she applies the mascara.
Always, in that last and solemn moment
the call-girl hesitates.
With eye-catching eyes she stops to shudder.
Maybe, the dyed eyes mourn her body's sins.
Mascara. . . it serves to tell her that
long buried hazy dreams of a virgin soul have dark outlines.
Silently she cries.
Her tears are black. Like her.
Somewhere Long Ago in an untraceable
mangled matrilineal family tree of temple prostitutes,
her solace was sought.
It has happened for centuries. . .
"Empty consolations soothe violated bodies. "
Sex clings to her devadasi skin,
assumed superficialities don't wear off,
Deliverance doesn't arrive.
Unknown Legacies of Love made to Gods
haven't been ceremoniously accounted as karma.
But still she prays.
Her prayer words desperately provoke Answers.
Fighting her case,
Providence lost his pride.
Her helplessness doesn't
Seduce the Gods.
And they too never learn the Depth of her Dreams.
She believes
Cosmetics were once. . . War paints.
She awaits their resurrection.
When she dons the mascara
The Heavens have heard her whisper;
Kali, you wear this too. . . (2006, 128)*

The question of Indian Devadaasi goes beyond the reach of the feminist discourses as it does not pertain the elite women. Certain middle class and upper class issues are the focal points of feminist movements in India, of course with some exceptions, therefore, the entire discourse revolves around the patriarchal construct which conveniently excludes the issues of Devadaasi and other micro castes. Feminist discourse, particularly in Indian context, reluctant to acknowledge the role of religion in perpetuation of the diabolic and inhuman traditions of Devadaasi, rather, religion itself is singularly responsible for the victimization of the lowered caste women as Devadaasi, but, instead, Indian feminist discourse attacks patriarchy by separating religion from it. In fact, religious construct is, no doubt,

patriarchal, but, how can we forget that patriarchy is sanctioned and validated by religion? Thus, treating patriarchy as independent diabolical force and separating it from religion is, to a large extent, a deliberate Brahmanic project to divert the attention from the root cause of the ailment. Without inquiry and rigorous critique of religion, which sanctions the tradition of Devadaasi, no feminist discourse is complete. Meena Kandasamy, attempts to bring such a critique of religion and the dominating hegemonic strategies through her poetry.

Victimization of the dominated ones needs a certain sort of justification; therefore, hegemonizing agencies seek such justification in religious construct, and, establish certain discourses deriving evidences from religion in order to convince the victims and the other masses that may have questions in mind regarding the injustice and victimization meted out to the lowered castes. Once such discourses are established, the elites enjoy every sort of pleasure and comfort without any objection and complain on the part of the lowered masses. On the contrary, a certain situation comes in the history when the victims start enjoying their own victimization, which culminates, beyond doubt, the hegemonic conquest of the caste elites.

Dalit poetry, therefore, views the hegemonic myths and symbols in a different perspective and reinterprets the scriptural characters and themes in deconstructive mode. In Brahmanic scriptures the Shudra-Atishudra heroes have been depicted serving Brahmanical system without any complain against discrimination and oppression, so is the influence absorbed by the shudra- Atishudra masses for the centuries together. Thus, the Shudra-Atishudra characters in the Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and other scriptures have been projected as the ideal symbols for the masses. Omvedt argues that:

Thus, Karna, Vidura, Eklavya (the low-caste heroes in the puranas) all in their different ways actually served the brahmanical and feudal system despite their victimization by it, and Shambuk, the shudra boy killed for the 'sin' of attempting to follow brahmanical yoga, is silent in the face of the forces ranged against him-----.(96)

But, in order to dehegemonize the masses, Dalit poetry makes the low caste characters in scriptures to revolt against the oppression, as Hingonekar writes:

*If you had kept your thumb
History would have happened
Somehow differently.
But... you gave your thumb
And history also became theirs.
Eklavya,
since that day they
have not given you a glance.
Forgive me, Eklavya, I won't be fooled now
by their sweet words.
My thumb
will never be broken. (Qtd. in Omvedt: 96-7)*

The poets imagines the mythology to be brought on its head down, therefore, Eklavya, the docile figure, is reviewed and perceived in contemporary context. Brahmanic myths, Dalit poets believe, that depict the low caste heroes as the symbols and ideals imposed on the masses need to be understood in proper sense and reconstructed to dehegemonize the masses. In a way a strong movement of demythification of Brahmanic mythology has been initiated by the Dalit poetry, which certainly critiques the hegemonic strategies of the dominant castes and classes and marches towards the panacea i. e. an egalitarian society which would be casteless and classless. To conclude, it can be said that the Dalit poetry, by critiquing the hegemonic strategies, dreams of bringing such a society into reality as has been mentioned by Ambedkar, "If you ask me my ideal would be a society based on Liberty, Equality and

Fraternity. And why not? What objection can there be to Fraternity? I cannot imagine any. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words there must be social endosmosis.” (57)

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