

The Changing Contours of Dalit Women Poetry: A Critical Study

Ph.D. Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By Anjali Singh

Enrollment Number: 90094101215



University School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

Sector 16-C, Dwarka, New Delhi

June 2019

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Dalit women's poetry has moved beyond the realms of protest and helplessness that punctuate their day to day life. The contemporary poetry resonates with confidence, introspection, self-critique and assertion. Not only the seminal themes like caste oppressions, religious atrocities, perpetual poverty, etc. underscored Dalit literary sensibility but also the new themes such as inclusion, patriarchy, internal migration, human trafficking, anti-poor policies, globalization, etc. found their place under the sun. It also shows some interesting intersections with the mainstream poetry as the selected poets foray into the troubled domestic zones, incompatible marriage and domestic violence, lack of communication between the spouses and the strict code of conduct for the girls coming of age. The thematic and linguistic shift in the poetry post- 1990s ushered a watershed in the Dalit literary sensibility. Dalit women's poetry has truly transcended the regional boundaries and reconfigured its space with a global appeal in the twenty-first century. Their poems encompass world events like the formation of WTO, nuclear threats, Durban Convention, etc. The selected poets have also commented on the irrelevance of mainstream feminism in their daily lives through their works. Commencing from the age of Theri Gatha to the poems of Rajni Tilak , the writings of Dalit women have always been rebellious. With time, issues evolved so are the voices but the radical hue remained the same.

Since the potential take off era of Dalit literature i.e. the eventful decade of the 1970s, the marginalized literature largely showcased the works by male Dalit writers while as mainstream movement concentrated on the writings of the upper caste women intellectuals. Their experiences were universalized and acknowledged as the total of the 'feminist sensibility'. It was only post-1990s that the voice of Dalit women got louder and their number

greater. In the year 1994, the first National Assembly of Dalit Women was held in Delhi and gave them the long-awaited platform to voice out their concerns. Dalit women poets from eight states participated in this event. The occasion turned out to be a milestone as it shaped the road map for the subaltern's representation in Hindi Dalit literature. In the decades of 1990s women poets like Kunti, Rajni Tilak, Sushila Takbhure, Rajat Rani 'Meenu', etc. published their poetry collections and towards the turn of the century, more names like Poonam Tushamed, Anita Bharti, Rajani Anuragi, etc. were added to Hindi Dalit literature.

The literary journey for the marginalized section was not easy. Lack of financial resources and negligible guidance continued to plague the publication. The newly published poetry collections were not only ignored by the established Dalit writers but also by the mainstream critics. Research scholarships also engaged with the works of male writers while women's corpus remained largely unexplored. One such example is Sarah Hunt's *The Politics of Representation in Hindi Dalit Literature*, published in 2014. The book mapped the rise of Hindi Dalit literature since the era of Chandrika Prasad 'Jigyasu' till the end of the twentieth century. Yet it focused only on the male Dalit writing in Hindi and overlooked the contribution of female writers.

The year 1991 was celebrated as Dr. Ambedkar's birth centenary. On this occasion, Dalit representatives in the mainstream movement declared Dr. Ambedkar and Savitri Bai Phule as their national icons. This step proved to be a turning point in Dalit women's struggle. It not only consolidated their identity across the nation but also created ripples in the mainstream movement. The move triggered fractions in the Indian feminist movement. The mainstream intellectuals refused to accept the two social reformers as the central figures of their movement and paved the way for disjoint and disjunction between the marginalized and upper-caste ideologies. Nevertheless, the event encouraged Dalit women to raise their issues in their voices. Their experiences as a subaltern found place in their literary

representations. Post-1990s was the eventful decade for Dalit women poets writing in Hindi. It witnessed the spate of Hindi poetry collections hitting the shelves. Among the various names, Rajni Tilak remained one of the quintessential poet who shaped Dalit feminist sensibility. Her works are inspired by Theri Gatha in which women spoke about their freedom and development. Her preoccupation with the subjugated position of Dalit woman within her household remained the thrust of her literary muse. She strongly critiqued the oppressive institution of marriage and comprehensively deliberated upon the trials and tribulations of married women writers. In her poems like “*Pyaar*”, “*Aurat*” and “*Saankal*”, she has expressed her discontent over the life-negating marital institution, lack of meaningful communication between spouses, pre-defined role of a woman as ‘kitchen slaves’ and the lopsided division of labor dictated by the patriarchal hegemony inside the marital homes. Her works register a strong protest against regressive practices like female infanticide, dowry deaths, preference for the male child, corrupt medical practices like pre-natal sex determination etc. Another important theme discussed by Tilak is male chauvinism rampant among Dalit writers. She has confronted male Dalit writers head-on for their biased outlook. Some cited poems like “*Mere Bhai*”, “*Aadi Purush*”, “*Yoni Hai kya Aurat?*” etc. draw attention towards the narrow-mindedness of the community. Her poems make a powerful commentary on the anti-poor new economic reform policies like Globalization, Privatization and Liberalization adopted by the government in the 1990s. The lack of access to the quality education and health care facilities by the poor was brought under the lens. Tilak’s poetry has the element of Marxism as well where she has addressed the grievances of the labors and workers across the country irrespective of their caste. In poems like “*Mazdoor hai is Desh Ka Dalit*” she discussed the themes of a perpetual state of poverty, lower wages, poor working conditions, emaciated bodies and blank eyes. The subject of forced displacement has also been delved into. The poet has referred to the issues of migrated women lacking in education

and skills to survive in the city. Their physical vulnerability and lack of proper documentations make them easy prey to landlords, supervisors and employers.

Rajni Tilak's work is rich in autobiographical elements too which makes it vivid and alive. Her autobiography *Apni Zameen Apna Asmaan* was launched on 18 Jan 2017 at Pragati Maidan. Her poetry collections were published in 2000 and 2010. As a writer of more than thirteen books, hundreds of published articles, editor of three volumes of Dalit women's anthologies, an autobiography, etc. Rajni Tilak has carved a noteworthy place for herself in Hindi Dalit literature.

Kunti's two poetry collections have been included in the present study. She has ushered aesthetic sophistication in Dalit poetry that redefines the parameters of Dalit aesthetics in terms of the usage of language in the literature. Her poems transcend the caste class barriers and show some interesting intersections with mainstream poetry. The theme of love, passion, belonging, man-woman relationships and troubled domestic zone, etc. have been sensitively handled and well-expressed in her works. Her poems interrupted the view that Dalit Poetry lacked in *shringaar rasa*. Her collection *Paanchava Mausam* can be seen as a repository of human emotions expressing love, belonging, desires, sensitivity, emotional ruptures, surrender, pledges exchanged between lovers and the collection ends on a positive note. This collection appears as a huge departure from her previous collection *Andhere Mein Kandeel*.

Andhere Mein Kandeel makes a strong commentary on patriarchy and opens up a dialogue on women centric issues. The poet critiqued the unequal power equations within the man-woman relationships that keep a woman in a state of perpetual subjugation. Unlike Tilak her poetry encompasses women's issues beyond caste-class, intersecting with mainstream writings. The seminal issues discussed in her works are the troubled domestic zone, mirthless marriage, inner turmoil, struggle with the gnawing silences in relationships, etc. Other major

themes discussed in her works are female infanticide, sexual violence against woman, preference for the male child, search for home, etc. Her sensitive portrayal of a lonely wife in her poems opens a new chapter in Dalit women's writings. Kunti's works defy the notion that the element of "I" has taken a back seat while as "We" dominates in post-1990s Dalit women's writing (Kumar 262). Her works also challenge the discretion adopted while placing a piece of literature under different compartments. It questions whether it is the thrust of writing or the caste of the poet that decides the label on the work? Her work not only shreds patriarchal boundaries but also makes a strong case for inclusion in the mainstream literature.

Dr. Sushila Takbhure is the most quoted poet in the present thesis. Her collection, "*Tumne Mujhe Kab Pehchchna*" is a head-on confrontation with the patriarchy among Dalit. Her poems are addressed largely to Dalit women. There is an underlying urge to liberate them from wretchedness and push towards education. The poet perceives knowledge to be the only way out of the devastating world. Her poems resonate with the agitation and ideology of Savitri Bai Phule who was the first feminist to stand for the girl's education. Takbhure's poems are rich in vivid images like a floating cloud, river, ocean, sea bed, mountains, etc. that are juxtaposed against the stifled existence of marginalized women inside the four walls. The theme of isolation has been well-expressed in a poem like "*Sagar aur Akash*".

Takbhure's earlier work like *Hamare Hisse Ka Suraj* critiques caste oppressions while as her later poems like "*Durghatana aur Dampati*", "*Aag*", "*Stree*", etc. foray into the troubled domestic zone. She has delved into themes like incompatible marriage, disoriented thoughts, deafening silence, etc. Like Kunti, her literary expressions show intersection with mainstream poetry where her poems critique and confront the patriarchal hegemony. As she transcends the caste-class boundaries in some of her later works, her poems make a strong statement for the inclusion. Takbhure is one of the most prolific Dalit writer. She has written

in almost all the genres like short stories, play, poetry, autobiography and critical writings. Her poetry shows a thematic shift from the public domain to the personal sphere.

Rajani Anuragi's poetry showcased the perspective of a young, urbane and educated twenty-first century Dalit woman who is aware of her caste identity and the treacherous working of caste biases in her day to day life. Her poetry makes a strong commentary on the condition of Dalit community residing in towns and cities. Anuragi's works foreground the regressive impact of globalization on her community. Her poems register a strong protest against increasing economic divide, unemployment in Dalit community, the menace of child labor and the various ways by which a lower class has been further displaced from the mainstream. She has coherently expressed the dangers of new economic reform policies for the poor with a specific reference to the marginalized women. According to the poet, the anti-poor policies further added to the woes of the poor section and drove the country towards a clean cleavage along the caste-class domain. Anuragi's poems also engage with the themes of isolation and perpetual struggle with loneliness in the big cities underscoring the seedy side of the fast paced city life. Anuragi's work has not only been acknowledged for its critical take but also for the aesthetic sophistication and refined language. The poem like "*Abhishipt*", "*Aurat*", "*Tumhara Coat*", etc. are some of the well acknowledged works. Anuragi is one of the youngest poets selected for the present study that has taken the Dalit writing to a newer plane.

The fifth and the last poet Poonam Tushamed's selected poems are rich in the autobiographical element and a profound sense of nostalgia. She is the only poet who has delved into her childhood era through mother-daughter dialogues and foregrounded the nuances of a life-denying upbringing of a Dalit girl. She has also forayed into the menace of forced internal migration and its painful consequences on Dalit women. Her poetry has strongly critiqued the caste biases and patriarchy carving a noteworthy place in Dalit

Women's writings. Tushamed's works voice the fears and struggle of a Dalit girl living alone in fast-paced city life. Her poetry uncovers the seedy underbelly of the big towns in a straight forward manner that touches the heart of the reader.

The major themes discussed in the main chapters demarcate Dalit Women's Writings from the Indian Women's writings and Male Dalit Literature. The monologue literary expression representing the trials and tribulation of a Dalit woman from the patriarchal and upper-caste feminist lens have been duly confronted by the writings from their pen. They have turned their pre-conceived oppressed image into a thing of the past. Each issue, impacting their lives has been deliberated upon through the poetry in a straight forward manner. There is an underlying urgency to assert their space inside home, society and literature. As told by Dalit poet Pushpa Vivek ,” for Dalit women disparaging forces become multiple folds” (Singh, Annexure-II). The negating forces operate inside and outside the home, within and outside the community, within the present and in the historical context. The perpetual fight goes on. The marked shift in the themes has focused on debunking caste and patriarchy. The poems center on the life of Dalit women giving them an identity of their own. The strong assertion of identity has ushered the subaltern poetry into a newer plane where it penetrates the caste fractured society's compartments and made the boundaries porous. The change in tide has demystified the pre-conceived notions about Dalit women.

All the Dalit poets discussed and quoted in the study have refused to give in to the prevailing dismal scenario. The struggle against disparaging forces continues to get tougher with time but the dismantling voices too got louder and greater in numbers. They have not only critiqued the regressive forces prevalent in their society and families but also confessed to the trauma faced by them while doing so. It was not an easy affair to go against their people. Rajni Tilak has expressed this dilemma in her interview. The poet mentioned that:

I wrote what was going on in my mind. I was aware that when a girl wanted to speak about her feelings, she was not encouraged. There was suffocation and if she did, it brought bad name to the family. That was a challenge before me. (Singh, Annexure-IV)

The new sway in the poetry sets the tone of the contemporary Dalit women's writings. They refuse to tread the trodden path but set the new guidelines for themselves. The lack of aesthetics, passion, *shringaar rasa*, autobiographical element, etc. in Dalit literature have become the things of the past. New writings not only celebrate life but also demand freedom. The only reason that could explain the radical shift is access to education. The poetry ceases to be merely an emotional rupture but transforms into a social dialogue. The vision has moved beyond the four walls and upper caste atrocities. The poets have accepted their humble origin and with the new found knowledge questioned the lack of financial and social equality in independent India. Their sharp critical acumen and analytical approach seek the rationale behind the perpetual marginalization of their community. They question the lack of government schemes and policies addressing their woes? They have also debated on the issues of lack of publications and limited readership of their works. Their critical analysis has underscored the seminal reasons such as financial difficulties, lack of encouragement from the spouse and limited guidance regarding the publication venues. Challapalli Swaroop Rani, a Telugu poet has targeted, "casteism and patriarchy" (Rani 21-24) responsible for the feeble representation of their writings. Marathi Poet Chaya Khobragde pointed out the dearth of translations of their works from regional language to others that render most of it inaccessible to the readers and research scholars.

The working of the patriarchal dominance inside and outside the home has been comprehensively discussed and critiqued by the poets. The themes of domestic violence, dowry deaths and female infanticides, denial of freedom to venture out of the house,

unending physical labor and denial of speech punctuate their day to day lives inside the house. The exploitative role of religion, sexual exploitation at work place, verbal abuse, lack of freedom to exercise their vote, discriminatory behavior at public hospitals and educational institutions, police atrocities and prevalent stereotypes nailing them as ‘loose in morale’ seal their fate in public and private sphere. According to the Telugu poet Challapalli Swaroop Rani, “ If there is any soul in this country who subjected to all kinds of oppressions and exploitations, it is the Dalit women” (Rani 21-24).

The rise of political consciousness is well reflected in the poems that question the anti-poor policies, fractured deliverance of rights to their community, ill-representation of their issues in the mainstream movement, lack of access to the quality education and healthcare, absence of basic amenities in their filthy colonies and political ill-will to move beyond the ‘reservation policies’ for the lower caste. The poets have criticized the Dalit youth who get swayed by the ‘reservation policies’ and chided them for their shortsighted vision on the contrary, the poets demand the equality and equal opportunities in education, healthcare and jobs in global India.

The lack of leadership is another issue, plaguing the poets. They have expressed their discontent over the digression of Dalit struggle from the path shown by Dr. Ambedkar. The politics of opportunism have taken its place where the present leaders languish in their comfort zones, cut-off from the ground realities. In Tilak’s poem, “*Dalit Ki Beti*”, the poet has written an open letter to Chief Minister Mayawati in verse. She took a satirical take on Minister’s failure to do something for her community. Such poems can be seen as an effort to address the gap between the creamy layer of the Dalit community and the toiling masses.

The poems by the female poets also address the gender gaps in Dalit poetry. The poetry challenges the stereotypes referring to the victimized image of a mother, sister and daughter in the family. The ideological underpinnings that portray them as vulnerable and in

perpetual need of male protection have been debunked in a straight forward manner. The poets have also drawn attention towards the ‘missed’ depiction of oppressed wife, domestic violence, female infanticide, dowry deaths, and denial of access to resources like education, agricultural equipment, property, finances, etc. in the male literary representations. The same themes have been dealt with ferocity in Dalit women’s poetry.

In mainstream writings, the pre-occupations with patriarchal freedom, sexuality, loneliness and contemplation of suicide have failed to address the issues of subalterns. Tilak has drawn attention to the patchy representation of ground realities in mainstream movement. Anuragi and Takbhure have also engaged with the different concerns and realities that demarcate Dalit women from the upper-caste counterpart.

The literary innovations could be seen at the levels of themes and language. The hesitation and rawness have been replaced by cogent argument and refined language. The underlying anger and urgency to transform the society run throughout the selected works. Their poetry appears as a clarion call to liberate themselves and shun off the draconian code. In the poem of Pragya Daya Pawar, “*Theri Gatha*”, the poet has expressed the desire to re-write twenty-first century Theri Gatha. The poem depicts the zeal to live on one’s terms. In the same way, Poonam Tushamed’s “*Nadi*” breaks all the bondages and expresses the craving to live life unrestrained. Such poems reflect the positive sway of the Dalit literary sensibility and draw attention towards the fact that the poetry has traversed the journey progressed from the state of perpetual subjugation to liberation.