

DALIT FEMININE DIGNITY: A DISSENTING DISCOURSE IN TELUGU DALIT WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract

In the 20th century, a remarkable transformation swept through the literary realm of India, propelled by the emergence of Dalit Literature and its accompanying movement. This movement sought a profound shift by reclaiming the marginalized Dalit perspective and confronting the historical omission of their narratives from the annals of Indian history. In this literary tide, the prevailing homogenization of issues faced by Dalit women within non-Dalit and feminist literature became evident. These narratives, inadvertently, silenced the voices of Dalit women, drowning them amidst the currents of Dalit patriarchy on one hand and conventional feminist ideals on the other. Embedded within the writings of Dalit women writers of the 20th century were a profound realization that their oppression and marginalization were products of both internal (gender) and external (caste and class) factors. This understanding led to a daring interrogation of established norms, be it the dominance of patriarchy, the mainstream feminist discourse, or the deeply ingrained caste hierarchies.

Central to this subversion was the poignant articulation of their lived experiences of pain and humiliation. This narrative upheaval inherently challenged the prevailing hegemonic structures and the gender-based oppression that was perpetuated by them. The outcome was the gradual formation of a distinct Dalit feminist discourse within the tapestry of the Indian subcontinent's literature. The research endeavors at hand takes on the task of delving into this very emergence of the Dalit feminist discourse, focusing its lens on the realm of Telugu Dalit women's literature. Employing a rigorous content analysis methodology, this study aims to unearth the intricate ways in which Dalit women writers infused their narratives, personal anecdotes, and poetry with a consciousness deeply attuned to issues of social hierarchy, class disparities, and gender dynamics. In unraveling these narratives, the research strives to illuminate how the consciousness thus cultivated resonated within the Dalit community, fostering an increased awareness among both their male and female counterparts. The paper is an attempt to examine the emergence of Dalit feminist discourse in Indian subcontinent. It is an attempt to examine a dissenting discourse in Telugu Dalit women's literature.

Key words: *Telugu Dalit Literature, Dalit women, Dissent, dignity, Dalit consciousness, Dalit public sphere.*

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- Dr M. Koteswar Rao

Introduction

I

Dalits and other disadvantaged sections of people were forced to live in a lower status for thousands of years and were forced not have access with other communities and cultural, political, and economic institutions. Twentieth century is the landmark of the social revolutions in the world in general and in India particular. With the advent of independence, Dalits started getting educated and reading the writings of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and his democratic ideology. The reading of democratic ideals of Babasaheb made Dalits, and other disadvantaged sections, in India, started questioning the Indian historiography which considered the disadvantaged sections in general and Dalits in particular as socially unequal in Hindu social system. Dalits in modern India want to construct their own identity against hierarchical oppressive and exploitative structures to speak for themselves. They want to inculcate in themselves and others the democratic ideals of Babasaheb liberty, equality and fraternity. Zecchini writes, "from their lower status, they started questioning the representation in political cultural, social, and literary institutions/organisations in Indian nation." (Zecchini 58). Dalits brought out literary works of art by which they articulate their oppression and pain and protest for their voice/subjectivity which was silenced thousands of years ago. Indeed, the literary works of art are brought out to question their existence and express their dissent against orthodox oppressive cultural and political structures. Hence, the literature of underprivileged and Dalits are the literature of dissent which is/was to bring out to remonstrate against oppressors' historiography and its origin, nature and method. Dissent challenges the suppressive structures that marginalized the eighty percent of the population(s) in Indian subcontinent. Dissent challenges the representation of the caste Hindus in the government bodies/institution on behalf of all Indians. Dissent is a protest against hegemonic unequal system. It negotiates with the other discourses and literatures and their validity. It is a cultural movement which protests against undemocratic social and political movements in India. It deconstructs the orthodox and conventional attitudes of the

Indians who treat the unprivileged sections as inferior. It ultimately instills consciousness and imbues confidence in Dalits and others. Critic Gauthaman writes:

Dalit writing articulates a politics that can awaken Dalits' consciousness and fill them with pride and confidence, help non-Dalits deconstruct their traditional mindset that made them perceive Dalits as inferior and, additionally, create solidarity with other oppressed communities. (Dalit Panpaadu: Dalit Culture 98)

II

The research purports the use of content analysis methodology as it inquires the philosophical assumptions and stances of the subjective selves of each of the authors and their narrativization of experiences through the mode of poems/short stories. The work is theoretical in nature involving the study of both the primary and secondary sources. The primary data comprises select poems and short stories and the secondary data consists of books, journals, essays, articles, and magazines pertaining to the Dalit literature. The research work, which broadly comes under the Dalit Literary studies, is an attempt to examine select Telugu Dalit Women's Literature as narratives of collective suffering-the individual suffering as the collective suffering.

III

The history of Dalit literature and culture explicates the meaning of the word 'Dalit'. The word 'Dalit' indicates revolt, transformation, and radical change. One of the founders of the Dalit Movement in Maharashtra Babu Rao Bagul states: "Dalit is the name for total revolution, it is revolution incarnate." (Poisoned Bread 289) Babu Rao Bagul has thorough and exhaustive knowledge and understanding on method, and nature of Dalit literature and its movement. Therefore, his sense of understanding is a sense of history. Bagul says: "a human being is not inherently Dalit, neglected or untouchable. It is the system that degrades him in this fashion. When the system is changed, the human being regains his or her human essence." (Poisoned Bread 288) Bagul says that an extremely severe struggle is needed to change the system. Human beings regain their essence by the changing the system which has been orthodox in its nature. As far as Bagul is concerned an exhaustive knowledge and understanding is needed to start a struggle. In fact, Dalits' problem was/is/will be a cultural phenomenon. Thus, the problem of Dalits questions the nature of any movement which is in favour of oppressive structures. As a general assumption no movement takes place in a single direction. It concurrently starts in many directions and in many ways. To start a struggle a unified vision is important for the common agenda to fight against oppressive forms.

Dalit writers are resolutely asserting their voices through their artistic literary creations, openly sharing their experiences of past and present traumas, sufferings, humiliations, and pain. This articulation has gained significant momentum in India in general and in Telugu States in particular. In twenty first century, writers, those who have been motivated by the ideals of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, bringing out their literary works of art. This surge in literary expression provides a democratic platform to articulate the past and the present experiences. It acts a catalyst for sharing and exchanging the oppressed and exploited subjectivity of the Dalits. It creates and promotes the body of counter discourse and instills democratic cultural consciousness among Dalits in general and other sections of the people in particular in the Telugu-speaking regions. This evolving trend has contributed to the emergence of counter literature, which has played a pivotal role in nurturing social consciousness within the Dalit community. It has also actively cultivated and refined their political awareness, aiding in the development of a robust political discourse. Consequently, this corpus of counter literature not only prepares and mobilizes Dalits to participate vigorously in the democratic processes of the nation but also enriches the existing Dalit public sphere by amplifying their voices.

However, the literature produced by Dalit men has unfortunately neglected and seemingly overlooked the profound traumas endured by Dalit women. Their experiences have been conspicuously absent from the narrative created by Dalit male writers. The patriarchal constructs of caste Hindu men have infiltrated the perspectives of Dalit men, perpetuating oppressive frameworks and sustaining a cycle of subjugation. Remarkably, Dalit men and their literature have, at times, employed the very mechanisms that caste Hindu counterparts used to oppress Dalit women. This patriarchal framework has historically led to the widespread subjugation of Dalit women. Similarly, the realm of Dalit male politics has often dismissed the issues faced by Dalit women, inadvertently intensifying their marginalization. Trapped within the framework shaped by caste Hindu men, Dalit men frequently adopt and reinforce hegemonic structures when interacting with Dalit women. This imitation erodes the strength of Dalit consciousness and their movement, diverting energy away from their authentic struggles. As they mimic these hegemonic values, a negative consciousness emerges, hindering the development of a fully encompassing class consciousness. In this context, the emergence of the Dalit feminist public sphere stands as a dissenting discourse. It challenges and scrutinizes both mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit male literature, questioning their authority to speak on behalf of Dalit women and demanding an acknowledgment of the distinct and autonomous voice of Dalit women. Maddela Swathi Margaret writes:

We belong to both women community as well as Dalit .We are Dalit women community...we do not have any representation or space in these two .communities We are being excommunicated from these two communities in

Why does Dalit Woman) .,making proposals and discussions and decisions etc
 * (388 need Representation

The Dalit movement, mainstream feminist movements, and secular movements have all fallen short in addressing the pervasive structures of patriarchy in their discussions, expressions, and interpretations. The mainstream feminist discourse, predominantly shaped by caste Hindu women, fails to create an inclusive platform for all women. Both the Dalit movement and mainstream feminism have overlooked the voices of Dalit women. The enduring oppression and subjugation experienced by Dalit women have spurred the emergence of Dalit feminist perspectives. This standpoint seeks to establish a platform that not only addresses the issues faced by Dalit women but also accommodates discussions from mainstream feminist viewpoints. This convergence aims to confront the shared challenges of casteism and patriarchy, aiming for a comprehensive discourse that addresses the systemic injustices faced by both Dalit and non-Dalit women. Tapan Basu says:

This exclusion of Dalit women from the mainstream women's movement is not such a bad thing after all: it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity, and agency. (Translating Caste 2002)

IV

'Nalla Poddu,' an anthology in Telugu Dalit women's literature, along with 'A History of Telugu Dalit Literature,' shines as unique artistic creations within the Dalit literary domain. These works not only illuminate the social ostracism endured by Dalits but also expose how patriarchal values have permeated Dalit consciousness, becoming tools of women's suppression. In this literature, the anguish of injustice and humiliation finds expression, vividly depicting the identity of Dalit women and their distinctive mode of resistance. Unlike conventional literature, Dalit feminist writing refrains from seeking pity; rather, it boldly demands what is rightfully theirs. Amidst trauma, Dalit women aspire for distinction, honor, dignity, self-esteem, and self-reliance, reflecting not just emotional release but a journey toward understanding the concealed emotions and the rebellion against established Hindu power dynamics. Another notable aspect in this literature pertains to their cultural ingenuity and seemingly inconspicuous existence. An equally significant facet of this literature revolves around the cultural ingenuity that emanates from their seemingly unremarkable existence. This unearths an avenue of creativity that counters their marginalized status. In essence, 'Nalla Poddu' and 'A History of Telugu Dalit Literature' not only amplify suppressed narratives but also illuminate the intricate interplay of gender, caste, and identity in a manner that demands attention and introspection. As is evident in the poem 'Mankena Puvvu' written by Challapalli Swaroopa Rani:

I have no patience to run anymore
 I would wash my life in the
 Flames of these hardships
 And bloom like a mankena puvvu
 I will run past all the
 Adverse jungles like a stream. (190)

Dalit women's impatience and indignation are shown in the lines above as they have been subjected to traumas for years and they are not allowed to articulate their voices. Dalit feminism counters main stream discourses and movements and Dalit men's discourse and movement. The discourse of Dalit feminist literature indicates a dissent to protest against main stream discourses and movements and Dalit men's discourse and movement. This Dalit feminist dissenting discourse is neglected and excluded by both the mainstream and the Dalit men's discourses.

V

Telugu Dalit women's literature critically examines both Dalit men's literature and mainstream feminist literature, while also challenging the dominant Hindu social hierarchy. Illustrated in the anthology 'Nallapoddu,' this literature delves into the concept of turning rejection into resistance within the framework of the community's identity. The anthology portrays women as providers, carrying the weight of their families on their shoulders. Amidst this responsibility, they often face vulnerability and harassment. In the context of the Dalit community, if a wife questions her husband's financial choices or alcoholism, she is subjected to severe physical abuse. In Vinodhini's short story the characters express her anguish on Dalit male patriarchy. Her character Martha says:

My mother and my father quarrel always with each other for money ...While my father caught hold of her hair and dragged her outside and kicked at ,looking Her sari has been stained .flowed from her nose and mouth Blood .her stomach (323 Maria) .with blood and tattered by his kicks

This literature sheds light on the complexities of power dynamics and gender roles within the Dalit community, unveiling the subjugation faced by women. By critiquing established norms, it challenges the hegemonic structures that perpetuate inequality. The concept of transformation emerges as a central theme, where the resilience of Dalit women is showcased as a form of resistance against societal injustices. Through its narratives, Telugu Dalit women's literature bridges the gap between personal experiences and larger sociopolitical contexts, urging a reevaluation of existing power dynamics while amplifying the voices of those who have long been marginalized. Dalit women fight for gender equality. They are in quest for establishing fraternity between men and women. They do not want to hold up the hegemony of caste, class and gender. They do not want to hold up

patriarchal oppressive structures. The burden of their suffering is written in the lines of Challapalli Swaroopa Rani.

...?

At home male ego has slapped
me on one cheek while
In the street, caste supremacy
Has slapped me on the other. (Mankena Puvvu 189)

The Dalit women's anthology establishes a platform for Dalit feminism, aiming to expose the influence of dominant Hindu power dynamics enforced by their own male counterparts. The prevalence of poverty within Dalit communities is attributed to these hierarchical structures. This economic disadvantage further gives rise to cultural oppression. By recounting their suffering and trauma, the anthology showcases their struggles against oppressive power hierarchies, effectively waging a battle for change. Sharan Kumar Limbale comments:

All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. ... they are not even considered dignified human beings ... The hard labor they have to do all their lives. ... Dalit women have to put up with a triple oppression, based on class, caste, and gender. They die to live. (Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit literature 87)

VI

Caste Hindu women wield power over Dalit women, benefitting from ingrained hierarchies. In the Hindu caste framework, they can exert dominance over both Dalit men and women, a privilege not reciprocated. This stems from the inherent privilege of caste Hindu women and the marginalization of Dalit women in India. However, a growing realization among Dalit women about their societal significance prompts them to seek recognition and assert their rightful position in society. Maddela Swathi Margaret pointed out:

The caste Hindu women confront only patriarchy. .Dalit men confront only caste to and they have ,Dalit women have to confront both patriarchy and caste ,But Why does Dalit Woman need) .fight against both patriarchy and caste
*(388 Representation

Within Indian society, caste Hindu women exercise dominance over individuals from Dalit communities and marginalized groups due to their caste affiliation. The ongoing exploitation of Dalit communities based on caste is an undeniable historical reality, causing

enduring pain. Unfortunately, Dalit women endure mistreatment at the hands of caste Hindus, with the enforcement of the Manu social code serving as a foundation for their poverty, oppression, and mistreatment. The social movements led by social revolutionaries such as Mahatma Jyothiba Phule, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, and Periyar Ramaswamy Naikar have triggered transformative shifts in the suppressed population's mindset and outlook. For Dalit women, India is both an alter and scaffold. They critique Hindu scriptures, which have cultivated oppressive patriarchal structures and untouchability, holding these texts responsible for their plight. Their aspiration is to challenge these scriptures and Vedas, striving for an egalitarian society that upholds liberty, equality, and fraternity among all castes and communities in India. Kandala Lilly writes:

This Country!
 The alter of the weak
 The scaffold of the poor
 Which Sastra's sinful-creation is this Untouchability?
 The castes are the dark seeds sown by Vedas. (Vipra Vinodam 182)

Indeed, the women from main stream society are very much mindful of the patriarchal hegemonic structures since they face all these with their men in their everyday life. Within the life of Dalit women, caste identity takes precedence over gender considerations. The economic resources, education, and information are more accessible to caste Hindu women, granting them influence over social, economic, and religious domains where Dalit women face vulnerability. The dual oppression faced by Dalit women stems from both patriarchy and the actions of caste Hindu women. This is illustrated in the short story 'Maria,' where Martha (character in the short story 'Maria') addresses her Brahmin mistress by her name, Vakula Davi gaaru. Reacting swiftly, the mistress reprimands Martha and insists on being addressed as "ammagaaru" or "mistress ji." This underscores the power dynamic and caste-based hierarchy that perpetuates such interactions. A Dalit feminist writer, Bama's comments are very much appropriate in this context. Bama writes:

The caste Hindu women show us no pity or kindness either, if only as women to women, but treat us with contempt, as if we are creatures of a different species, who have no sense of honour of self-respect. (Sangati 66)

The perceptions of oppression that are deeply ingrained within society are not isolated occurrences; they form a larger systemic and structural framework. Caste-based oppression does not function independently but intersects with discrimination originating from caste divisions. Consequently, Dalit women find themselves subjected to a double layer of oppression within the broader context of the Indian Manu social hierarchy. Even with education, the mindset of caste Hindu women like Vakula Devi (a Brahmin woman character in the short story 'Maria') remains resistant to change. The entrenchment of

privileges tied to oppressive structures leads them to be unwilling to relinquish their advantages. This showcases how education alone might not be sufficient to transform the attitudes of caste Hindu women who are entrenched in the established power dynamics. Jajula Gowri brings out in her poem concerning the dominance of the mainstream women towards Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular.

... bonded labour

They sucked out the last drop of my blood.

What remains are bones//

I can bear it no longer

...

...

Crushed among yesterday – today and tomorrow

I'll keep myself as myself. (I Will Wash and Dry Them 171)

VII

The dominance propagated by Manu's social constructs has ingrained in caste Hindu men the notion that suppressing others is their inherent right and privilege. This oppressive power structure is deeply woven into the fabric of society, manifesting as systematic and structural forces. These power dynamics are not just theoretical constructs but stem from everyday actions and unchallenged beliefs. Within the Indian societal context, Dalit women bear the brunt of suppression from caste Hindu men. The evaluation of their character is influenced by their caste affiliation, leading to mistreatment and discrimination on those grounds. Dalit women endure the constant threat of sexual violence from caste Hindu men, particularly in workplaces. Placed at the lower rung in the unequal social system and due to their lack of education and social standing, they receive significantly lower wages than men. Many Dalit women are landless laborers, which increases their interactions with caste Hindu men as compared to their counterparts. The subjugation faced by Dalit women is exploited by caste Hindu men, who often subject them to attacks with impunity. The combination of caste-based discrimination, gender bias, and economic vulnerabilities leaves Dalit women in an extremely marginalized and vulnerable position, subject to various forms of oppression.

The short story 'Maria' portrays Maria, employed as a housemaid in a Brahmin household. She falls victim to a brutal rape by the house owner. Unable to resist due to her Dalit identity, she tragically ends her life by jumping into a well. The grim reality of Dalit women's molestation, rape, and exploitation often remains concealed due to factors like familial reputation, pressure from caste Hindu men, and influence from upper-caste political groups. Regrettably, attacks against Dalit individuals, particularly women,

frequently go uninvestigated and unpunished. Presently, Dalit women are resolute in their refusal to be shackled by caste and patriarchal power structures. Their aspiration is to emerge as agents of social change, challenging the realms of caste and gender oppression as well as other societal ills. They are determined to act as social revolutionaries, aiming to dismantle the foundations of the caste system and the deep-rooted structures that sustain it. Gogu Shyamala brings out the anguish of the Dalit women regarding the caste and its impact on them.

I am the sufferer of this nation
 I am also the revolutionary
 My anger smashes the casteism. (The Rainbow 182)

The Dalit movement, a potent battle against caste and class oppression, carries an unintended contradiction within its own ranks. While aiming to eliminate inequalities in India's hierarchical social system, this movement inadvertently harbors a paradox. Dalit women endure severe and unrelenting sexual violence, while Dalit men, in their struggle, can occupy both oppressed and oppressive roles. Eliminating this paradoxical aspect from individuals involved is pivotal to rendering the fight against oppression comprehensive and purposeful. To address this, Dalit women are very much ambitious of to form a front which stands for democratic ideals to fight for social justice. They aspire cooperation from other feminist groups and democratic organizations. Their goal is to fortify the ongoing existential struggles and provide a platform for the silenced voices of the oppressed. By joining hands across various movements, they hope to not only strengthen their endeavors but also carve out a space where their voices and rights can be acknowledged and upheld. Margaret writes:

...encouraging the representation of dalit women in public plat forms and in the politics... de is to make the oppressed vioces to if our attitu ?How is it possible this will become meaningful only by the representation of dalit ,speak aloud Why does Dalit Woman need) .women who have been oppressed in many ways
 * (388 Representation

VIII

Conclusion

Inspired by the trailblazing efforts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, educated Dalit women from diverse backgrounds are uniting to oppose the oppressive patriarchal structures inherent in Indian Social system. Their aim is to establish a society founded on principles of liberty,

equality, and fraternity, transcending the boundaries of caste, creed, class, gender, and religion. Though still in its early stages, the Dalit women's democratic movement holds promise, with their literary expressions hinting at an imminent realization of their goals. Dalit women employ literature as a potent tool to counter and challenge not only mainstream narratives but also the male-dominated writings within the Dalit movement, which has often been influenced by the inherently unequal social system. Their literary endeavors delve deep, targeting the very core of subjugation the Hindu caste system and its religious underpinnings. Through poetry, short stories, and autobiographical accounts, they effectively capture and communicate their lived experiences, using these forms to articulate their struggles and triumphs.

Drawing inspiration from the forward-thinking perspectives of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, contemporary Telugu Dalit women writers have recently produced impactful works like the anthology 'Nallapoddu' and the 'History of Telugu Dalit Literature.' These literary achievements mark significant milestones, as they challenge the conventional narratives prevalent not only in the Telugu states but also across India. This trend plays a pivotal role in fostering social consciousness within the Dalit community, while also nurturing their political awareness and facilitating the development of a potent political discourse. This may led to active engagement by Dalits, especially Dalit women, in the democratic processes of the nation, thus enriching the existing Dalit public sphere. Ultimately, this surge in literary expression not only empowers Dalits to raise their voices against injustice but also paves the way for a more inclusive and vibrant democratic landscape.

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- **Notes**
- (*) These three citations are translated by me from Maddela Swathi Margaret's short story Dalita Sree Prathinidyam Enduku , (Why does Dalit Woman need Representation) *Nalla Poddu: Dalita Sreela Sahityam 1921-2002, (Black Dawn: Dalit Women's Writings, 1921-2002)*, edited by Gogu Shyamala, Hyderabad Book Trust, 2003.
- Mankena Puvvu (scientific name of the Mankena Puvvu is 'Pentapetes phoenicea' that belongs to Malvaceae family and Plantae Kingdom) is a red coloured flower found in the fields and forests of red soil. The Red coloured Flower (Mankena Puvvu) is used as a symbol of revolution in Telugu culture.