

Reinterpretation of Myths in selected Marathi Dalit Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Demarginalization works at different levels in Dalit Literature. From the time immemorial, dalits were subjugated, oppressed and suppressed till Dr. Ambedkar instilled the spirit of revolution and self-esteem among them. Dalit literature is an expression of revolution for humility and a search for its place in almost every field including literature. Dalits were represented simply as sufferer in the writings of the upper caste writers. As Pantawane asserted *Dalit is the symbol of change and revolution*, all the dalit writers endeavor to inculcate that essence in their work.

Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past that may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values. Myths are distinguished from other commonly collected narratives such as folktales and legends. Myths were defined as stories of ancient times believed to be true. Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. From myth comes belief, from mythology customs. Myth conditions thoughts and feelings.

Dalit writers through their writings tried to reclaim the past with use of the reinterpretation of the Indian myths. The mythical figures like Eklavya, Sita, Draupadi, Shanbhuk, Karna, Yashodhara

etc. were revisited and reinterpreted in Dalit poetry. To illustrate the point, As HiraBansode, dalit Marathi poets articulates,

*“Where Sita entered the fire to prove her fidelity
Where Ahilya was turned to stone because of Indra’s lust
Where Draupadi was fractured to serve five husbands
In that country a woman is still a slave.”*

The above lines reveal the questioning spirit of a dalit woman who interpreted the condemned state of these oft celebrated mythical figures as ‘Slaves’.

The present paper attempts to explore many such mythical figures used by Dalit poets and intends to showcase the significance of these figures in dalit poetry.

Keywords: Demarginalization, Dr. Ambedkar, Dalits, Myth, Revolution, Belief system, Mythology, reinterpretation, Cultural construct.

INTRODUCTION:

'The margins of the nation displace the center; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis'.

(HomiBhabha. 1990:6)

Dalitis a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahmanical ideology (Ambedkar 1990: 204). These people, who are called as Dalits in the Indian society have a history of being lived insubjugation under the high-classes of the Indian society. So they have been a marginalized, downtrodden and subaltern group from centuries. But because of the efforts of many social reformers like- B. R. Ambedkar, Mahatma JyotibaPhule and Mahatma Gandhi, this community has also rise and been progressing day-by-day. Dalit literature, a literature by this particular ethnic group, came into use in the 20th Century in 1958, with the commencement of Dalit Conferences. The First of this kind was held at Mumbai, known as Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society), a movement driven by thinkers like JyotibaPhule and Bhimrao Ambedkar.

The 1972 Dalit Panther manifesto defined Dalit in an all-encompassing way: "A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working class, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion."

As Gangadhar Pantawane, a Marathi Dalit ideologue, says:

"Dalit is not a caste; Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects existence of god, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate, and heaven because these make him a slave." (Limbale, 2004)

In the present context, this definition appears to be far more convincing as it repudiates the law of Hindu scriptures that perpetuated fatalism and discrimination.

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If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. From myth comes belief, from mythology customs. Myth conditions thoughts and feelings. Myth and mythology have a profound influence on culture in general and literature in particular. The literary text is an expression of cultural identity of the community it represents. The movement of Dalit literature in Marathi is necessarily an assertion of the cultural identity of a community which was a victim of casteist hegemony and which felt inspired and motivated to subvert traditional cultural norms. It is a literary revolt which adopts a new mode of critical criterion, negating the old conventions.

Dalit writers have reacted bitterly to Hindu religious literature. Dalit writers have used those images and symbols in their literature that are appropriate for relating experiences. Dalit writers cannot forget that hindu religious literature has nourished the unequal caste system. 'Rama, the killer of Shambuka, cannot be their ideal. Gita and Mahabharata, which support the caste system cannot be honoured. This is the perspective of Dalit writers. Dalit writers try to construct new myths instead of using the existing symbols and metaphors of Hindu sacred literature. When dalit writers employ religious symbols, it was to deconstruct them, infusing them with new meaning and purpose.

Historically, dalits were not portrayed truthfully or with fairness, from the time of Hindu religious literature to contemporary Marathi literature. Therefore Dalit writers reject this alienating literary tradition and write with the objective of explaining to people their own pain, problems and questions. Because of their commitment, and the inspiration of Ambedkar's thought, dalit literature has acquired the form of a movement.

The beginnings of dalit literature are often located in medievalbhakti literature for two compelling complementary reasons. One,most of the bhakti saint-poets were low-caste local preachers; two,they launched a blistering attack on canonical Hindu practices. Most of the bhakti literature is appropriated by upper caste Hindus as their literature. Since bhakti saints combined apparentlycontradictory virtues of protest and surrender, they did not pose areal threat to the

hegemony of the sacred order. These bhakti saints nevertheless remain a source of inspiration for anti-caste agitations and movement all over the India.

As Chokhamela, the 14th century Marathi saint poet, questioned and raised this issue of purity in the following lines,

“In the Beginning

At the end,

There is nothing but pollution.

No one knows anyone who is born pure.

Choka asks, in wonder, Who is pure?(Abhanga 11)(qtd in Zelliott, 1992,pg.6)

The above lines make it evident the fact that dalits were considered as impure and they were subjected to live beyond boundary of the village. It was impinged upon the dalit mind that they were impure and had to live secluded and sorrowful life. So he questions this whole tradition of dividing the human beings on the basis of purity.

In the abhanga quoted below, for instance, he is less critical of the excesses of Hindu orthodoxy; he is more apologetic about his own karma and birth:

Pure Chokhamela, always chanting the name.

I am a Mahar without a caste. Nila in a previous birth.

He showed disrespect to Krishna; so my birth as a mahar.

Chokh says: this impurity is the fruit of our past.

(Abhanga 4)(qtd.inZelliott, 1992, pg.7).

The above abhanga accepts of the myth of re-birth as the outcome of previous birth's karma. He recalled the story of Nila who as a matter of disrespect to Krishna, was condemned to born as an outcaste i.e. Mahar.

KisanFagoBansode, one of the earliest dalit poet left a small volume of poetry, and in one of his poems he invokes the figure of the saint – poet Chokhamela to inspire a new spirit,

Why do you endure curses?

Chokha went into the temple resolutely.

Why do you, ashamed, stay away?

*You are the descedents of Chokha.
Why do you fear to enter the temple?
Come, take a stance like a wrestler,
Together let us conquer pollution.(Zelliot,1992)*

The myth of women as slaves:

Hira Bansode , a Dalit Marthi poet, unravels the unmitigated treatment meted out to women in history as she says,

*“Where Sita entered the fire to prove her fidelity
Where Ahilya was turned to stone because of Indra’s lust
Where Draupadi was fractured to serve five husbands
In that country a woman is still a slave.”*

The lines invoke three mythical women figures that were treated as slaves by their husbands and victimized in the history. She goes further and generalizes the fact in the following lines,

*“Where a woman in her youth is dried up by Tradition,
She is confined all her life like a stunted tree
She remains in the shadow of someone else’s light.”*

The act of writing about women’s own individual experience is a kind of reviving and creating a myth in itself that could instill the spirit of freedom among others.

HiraBansode in one of her well known poem namely Yashodhara depicts the ignorance of women even within the fold of dalit literature when she talks about Gautama and Yashodhara as follows,

*I am ashamed of the injustice.
You are not to be found in a single BuddistVihara.
Were you really of no account?
But wait – don’t suffer so.
I have seen your beautiful face.
You are between the closed eyelids of Siddharta.
Yashu, just you.(Dangle,1992)*

The Myth of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar:

Dalit writers reject the established tradition. This does not mean that they do not have a tradition. They claim the tradition of Buddha, Kabir, Phule and Ambedkar. A new tradition is born out of the negation of the old tradition. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, the true spirit of dalit literature has always been invoked as a mythical figure and model to emulate in their behavior, Namdeo Dhasal, well-known dalit poet says in his poem “Ambedkar:1980”,

*“To start education
Make B for Babasaheb.
He was far more beautiful than Lord Ganesh.
So don't trace
Shri Ganesh.
The lord of the people is never ugly
He comes from among men
True/Holy/Beautiful.”(Chitre, 2007)*

Here we witness not only the projection of New Ideal but the rejection of the age old tradition of learning which was responsible for the denial of education to thousands of dalits. Dr. Ambedkar has always been an inspiring figure to dalits and projected as a substitute of Hindu God that orthodox tradition imposed upon them.

Myth of the purity of language:

Dalit literature has always been condemned by the suvarna critics for violating the purity of language. The reality of dalit literature is distinct and so is the language of this reality. It is the uncouth-impolite language of Dalits. It is the spoken language of dalits. This language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar. When it comes to choose the kind of language that would likely to be used in the Dalit writing, they seem to be bit confused. As the poet Arun Kamble aptly portrays this conflict in his poem “Speech”

A boy was advised by his grandpa as

*“Sadding bastard, I
Tell you,
Stutter with our tongue!”*

As he goes to school and exposed to Vedas and the Brahmin teacher at school, he is told

*“Speak my pure tongue,
Whoreson!” (Dangle, 1992)*

The demand that words and language should change their traditional roles, and the notion that words and language themselves are eager to cast themselves into new revolutionary roles is common to most of the Dalit Poets. The dalit writers have chosen the language of their own choice with its own tradition instead of begging a place in the so called main stream Brahminical tradition.

Waman Nimbalkar's tends to be less aggressive, but not entirely meek. There are moments when the poet rises in revolt challenging the unilateral acts of history. He remembers the assassination of Shambuk, the unjust treatment meted out to Eklavya, and thunders —

*“We all shall come together
rewriting history
we shall raise a new house
wherein everyone will be equal and happy.”*

Nimbalkar's poetry also expresses profound optimism. Dalit literature is typically Indian not only in its roots but also in its purpose and goal. It is addressed to the entire Indian literary tradition and its fulfillment lies in the total transformation of this tradition. Dalit literature is the postcolonial nativistic movement aimed at the cultivation of creative urges of the masses of numerous castes, tribes and communities condemned for centuries to voiceless existence. Dalit literature is seen, in the main, as protest against the establishment as commitment to inculcating new values aiming at a new order. There are in it a lot of frustration, a lot of anger, and a lot of hope, too. It breathes freedom.

Conclusion:

Dalit text always draws on the archetypal pattern exploring the sources in Indian history. It has always tries to bring out dichotomy which always existed between the 'high' and 'low' cultures and attempts to deconstruct the old cultural narrative which it finds highly biased and partial. It stands for a new ideology which includes all sort of remapping of a social territory which had several lapses before, and needed to be reorganized. Literature of the Dalits represents an

alternative culture, refusing to be a subaltern any longer. A dalit text is subversive, but not necessarily intimidating. It relates itself to cultural context and speaks for the revival of sociological approach to literary arts.

To sum up, I would say that dalit literature is emerging and asserting itself in the Indian literary scenario. There is a need to explore the historical and mythical representation of dalits and re-write it with a new perspective and put new meaning into the age-old myths.

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