

## A Journey towards a Symbolic Centre: A Portrayal of the Dalit Mothers in Some Selected Dalit Poems

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### Abstract:

While going through the hymns of black letters about the Dalit Mothers by the Dalit poets, a different kind of post colonial gender question peeps through in between the lines. The agonized but enlightening mother-poems such as —‘*So That My Mother May be Convinced*’ by Namdeo Dhasal, ‘*Mother*’ by Jyoti Lanjewar, ‘*Mother*’ by Waman Nimbalkar, ‘*Do You Want to be a Mother*’ by Tryambak Sapkale, and ‘*Ancient Mother Mine*’ by Shiva Ingole— conform to the fact that they are the part of a literary and linguistic experimentation which is flowing from the ‘Below’. So, here, the movement is from the ‘Margin’ to the ‘Centre’— strive to find out a ‘Symbolic centre’ rubbing off the age-old injustices, neglect, deprivation, hatred and oppression cast upon a vast community by both the insiders and outsiders. The portrayal of the mother provides a bold cry of ‘Revolt’ against that as well as presents the aesthetics of the Deleuzean ‘Minor Literature’—not indicating that it is a literature from the minor, rather pointing out that a huge and heavy ‘Possibility’ (in Deleuzean sense) is there in the representation of the Dalit gender discussion. Their portrayal also questions the deep ‘silence’ (which may be because of the ‘Habit’ in the great philosopher Bourdieu’s sense) of this community—‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ as to employ Spivak’s phraseology. So, the poems are the milestones of a journey—a journey of ‘Becoming’ towards achieving a different social and linguistic positions.

**Key Words:** *Dalit, Margin, Centre, Symbolic Centre, Minor Literature, Possibility, Habit and Becoming.*

I heard about this fact that Michael Jackson owned a farmhouse named ‘Nowhere’. I wonder why this kind of name of a living place. Did he never want to go somewhere? Or this ‘nowhere’ means the shadowy ultimate destination—death. It is really very difficult to say. True to this, the motherly figure in the Indian Dalit poetry is the epitome of nobody journeying towards nowhere. They all are suffering for the wellbeing of the others—for the family, for the children, for the society and so on. But they never get anything to call them of their own. They all are moving like the lifeless lump always cleansing the society and holding the carcass to be dirtier and to be more impure themselves. But the wheels of oppression are somehow turning over—some of them are narrating their own experience or some their narrations are getting the objective expression by the others. Thus, the dalit mother poems below give vent to the life-long agony duped in the deep depth of the Dalit mothers—‘*So*

*That My Mother May be Convinced*’ by Namdeo Dhasal, *‘Mother*’ by Jyoti Lanjewar, *‘Mother*’ by Waman Nimbalkar, *‘Do You Want to be a Mother*’ by Tryambak Sapkale, and *‘Ancient Mother Mine*’ by Shiva Ingole. They are moving towards achieving a ‘centre’—a symbolic one.

These poems reveal the sordid sagas of Dalit women at the individual and collective levels with detailed description of the squalor brutality of their experience in the gory and gruesome language. They are usually offered ‘silence’ and ‘distortion’ in dominant discourses. Sometime they have dared to bring out the ugly truths. They are the brutal exercise of casteism in society and the sexism exercised ‘within and outside’ of the community. They are oppressed by the male within the community and the male from the society itself or from the outside of the community. For instance, education in the Dalit is a great uplifting thing—but they are consciously denied to that. They are deprived of this education with utmost care. As a result the Dalit thinks that this deprivation is very much ‘inevitable’ to those who belong to the lower caste. Their acceptance of the situation or condition makes them permanently ‘disable’ and this makes their ‘self-esteem low’.

The oppression on the Dalit girls is casted upon them in two different ways—physically and psychologically. Dalit girls are easier to be humiliated than the Dalit boys. So here ‘caste combines with gender’ comes to play a role in the humiliation of the Dalit girls. Dalit mothers are not like the mothers of the upper caste or class in Indian context. The upper caste mothers do not go out of the household chores to perform in the field usually. They stay inside the home. But in case of the Dalit mothers, they have to go out of the room or house to get the livelihoods and the means to live. Jyoti Lanjewar’s *Mother* can be a good example in this respect—

“Hanging your little ones in a cradle on an acacia tree

Carrying barrels of tar

Working on a road construction crew...” (Anand and Zelliott 99)

Waman Nimbalkar also portrays the helplessness of a Dalit mother in his *Mother*—while depicting the mother as wood seller. But one day she comes back home to her much waited hungry children with the bite of a snake. She dies leaving all of them behind and this indicates at the bitter truth that the mothers have to face the ‘snakes’ (a symbol of danger and oppressive evil) outside of the house—

“Mother came, foot wrapped, blood flowing down.

A huge black snake had bitten her...

Mother had gone leaving her children in the wind.” (Anand and Zelliott 121-122)

They cannot stay in the household only; but they also go to the fields for hard work like the Dalit men do. Although they do not get similar fair as the Dalit men and the upper caste mothers do. This is really a different Dalit dimension inside the mainstream Dalit literature or critical perspective. Not only that but also it highlights the multiple feminist folds in the feminist criticism. The multiplicity of feminist criticism is highlighted here.

On the other hand, when back to home Dalit women have to perform the household chores. The cultural practices now confine her in her domestic sphere. Their sons and daughters are waiting for her to return with the food as evident in Waman Nimbalkar's *Mother*—

“All we brothers sitting, waiting, watching, for her.

And if she did not sell the wood, all of us slept hungry.”(Anand and Zelliott 121)

She can perform only two things—‘reproductive’ and ‘domestic’. This is very similar to Beauvoir’s domestic slavery” (Beauvoir 57). In the mainstream dominant patriarchy, another patriarchy becomes active—that the patriarchy of Dalit men – who has the power because they can communicate with the outer world—so they are entitled to exercise the power over women. Thus, Dalit women are subjugated by the double patriarchy. Sara Sindhu Thomas in “Witnwssing and Expressing Dalitness” said—“this reveals how Dalit women are resisted by entrenched holders of political power whose reluctance to accept Dalit women in a position of power has both caste and gender aspects of oppression.”(Thomas 244)

The bodies of the Dalit mothers become easily ‘accessible and unresisting’. Astonishingly enough when the men from the upper caste talk to a Dalit mother or woman, they use the vulgar language—automatically their standard language goes down in the parameter of its standard, and they (men from the upper caste) begin to use mundane, rude and vulgar language as if the women are very much easy prey for them. Their bodies become their first and foremost target—usually their ugly and unclean bodies lure the upper caste men into sexual fantasy that is wild and normal and the men from the upper caste imagine that this sexual fantasy can be very “natural” and “primitive” very much unlike they do with their own women who belong to the upper caste. And from that natural or normal and primitive sexual urge in their mind, they speak with the lower caste Dalit women in that language.

Thus, the mothers show that their Dalitness is not only about ‘hunger’, ‘poverty’, ‘opression’(physical) and subjugation, but it is also about the resistance of the disempowered against the dominant group. This only can give them dignity and self respect. Shiva Ingle in ‘*Ancient Mother Mine*’ nicely notes the notions of resistance done by the Dalit mothers—

“None but I

Have tattooed songs of liberty

On the bare torsos

And planted drums of defiance

On the lips

Of womenfolk here.” (Poisoned Bread 79)

This ‘songs of liberty’ would lead them towards a place or position where there would not be any Draupadis to be undressed in the public—

“In the polluted atmosphere

Of vedantic wrangling

All Draupadis are auctioned in the bazaar.”(Poisoned Bread 79)

Dalit women are sometimes oppressed by the women from upper caste as Arpita Chattaraj Mukhopadhyay points out in “Literature of Suffering and Resistance”—“the repressive experiences of the women are usually conceived to be common to all women. However, the subalternity of Dalit or black women is symptomatic of greater discrimination, violence and torture not only at the hands of patriarchy but often times in complicity with women of upper caste and dominant race.” (Mukhopadhyay 252). The suffering of a Dalit mother or woman is completely different from the suffering of the upper caste mother, though the western feminist complacently used the homogenous umbrella term—‘Woman’ without taking into consideration the differences in historicity, class, caste, race and sexuality. Dalit women are very much dubious about ‘Indian Feminism’ which does not include them and which is described as the ‘Savarna’. Gopal Guru calls it—“politics of difference.” (Guru 80). There is a huge difference between the sufferings of the Dalit mothers and the upper caste women in general. For the Dalit mothers there is no hope or aspiration for even a simple earthly material as evident in the agonised tone of Jyoti Lanjewar’s portrayal of the Dalit mother—

“I have never seen you

Wearing one of those gold bordered saris

With a gold necklace

With gold bangles

With fancy sandles.” (Anand and Zelliott 99)

This tolerance by the Dalit mothers gives birth to a ‘Habit’ through the agonizing repetition of deprivation while ‘Naturalizing’ it. Their ‘silence’ plays the part of an instigator there as Lizardo in “The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu’s Habitus” points out—“Habitus is a system of embodied dispositions, tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it. These dispositions are usually shared by people with similar back ground in terms of social class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, education, profession etc. as the habitus is acquired through mimesis and reflect the lived reality to which individuals are socialized, their individual experience and objective opportunities.” (Lizardo 387)

Completely different role of the Dalit mothers can be seen in some of the Dalit-mother poems. Tryambak Sapkale in his *Do You Want to be a Mother* portrays a Dalit mother who is a prostitute—

“All of your life you’ve been only a woman;

You have never become a mother! ” (Anand and Zelliott 153)

They sell their bodies for the living. They do not have any option to get their livelihood because their untouchability cannot provide them with the decent and modest job in anywhere. But the funny and contradictory part is that the Dalit women's bodies are untouchable to the Babus in the broad daylight or in the open eyes of the public. But in the shadow of darkness or in the 'shabby tent'—

“Your shabby tent is raised on three pegs” (Anand and Zelliott 153)

they can touch the body of a Dalit woman to exploit it for their need. This poem shows the fakeness of the varna system of the Indian society which is very much like a major hypocrisy in the figure of the mother. Again this poem portrays a Dalit woman's (who is a prostitute) deep agony for not being a mother. She is only a woman—she can never be considered by any man to be given the semen in her wombs so that she can be a mother of his child. She is, on the contrary, used to release the body urge of the dominant patriarchy mostly the upper class).

Dalit women are untouchable as the Dalit men. But their untouchability does not stop there—they are doubly untouchables to the upper class Hindu societal persons because of their polluted bodies. Carolyn Hibbs in 'Polluting the Page' comments on this—“Dalit women bear the embodiment of pollution doubly: through their status as outcaste and through their female bodies. As Dalits, their caste, assigned at birth, carries untouchability through polluting occupations which mark their bodies, regardless of a change in occupation. As women, their female bodies, regardless of a change in occupation. As women, their female bodies also assigned a birth, carry untouchability through biological functions including menstruation and child birth.”(Hibbs 263). According to *Manusmriti* if a man from the upper caste touch a Dalit woman, he must take the bath to purify himself because he touches the polluted body of a Dalit woman—“When he has touched a Kandala, a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbed, a corpse, or one who has touched a corpse, he becomes pure by bathing.”(Manu 85). The purpose behind this defining Dalit women body as polluted is to restrict, exclude and dehumanize her in every possible ways of life. This way sexual or bodily violence is cast upon the bodies of Dalit mothers. But this violence is not taken as violence because everyone living in Brahmic patriarchal culture thinks that Dalit women's bodies are sexually available and they (their bodies) are beforehand polluted. So it would not be a violence and crime to rape them. Namdeo Dhasal's *So that My Mother May be Convinced* peeps through that wrapped world of violence and crime and finds out that the Dalit mothers are in the midst of 'rhinoceros'— the fake vegetarian but truly flesh eater upper class Babus—

“Mother, you have been sucked dry all your life...

How easily you lived wrapped in rhinoceros hide...

When I see women selling their bodies or begging in the

Bazaar

Mother, I think of you.”( Anand and Zelliott 66-67)

But not only the meek representations of mother prevail the pages of the Dalit poems, but also a very bold and angry look out of mother is there in the representations of some Dalit poets. Jyoti Lanjewar in her 'Mother' depicts the mother as bold and courageous to protect herself from the lust of the upper caste men who cast a bad glimpse at her half naked body covered by the half torn sari—

“I have seen you...

Covering yourself with a sari

That had been mended so many time

Saying, “don't you have a mother or sister?

To anyone who looked at you with lust in his eyes...” (Anand and Zelliott 101)

Or taking sandals in her hand and chasing a person who had been nudging her intentionally—

“Chasing anyone who nudged you deliberately

With your sandal in your hand...” (Anand and Zelliott 101)

This revolting spirit in mother does not only restrict itself to protect her own body and the bodily feelings, but also it extends towards protecting her own Dalit community from the black hands of the upper caste. And this is why she never recedes back from sacrificing her life even for the cause of the community. She gladly joins the Great March of her own community at the call of Ambedkar—

“I have seen you

At the front of Long March

The end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist

Shouting, “change the name”,

Taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised

Hands

Going to jail with head held high...” (Anand and Zelliott 102)

Her sacrificing self reaches to the acme of glory when she tells her dying son dying for the cause of the community. Her objective self heightens itself to its utmost level—

I have seen you

Saying when your only son

Fell martyr to police bullets

“You died for Bhim, your death means something”

Saying boldly to the police

“If I had two or three sons, I would be fortunate

They would fight on.” (Anand and Zelliott 102)

In regard of this revolting spirit of Dalit mothers, in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* Sharankumar Limbale (translated by Alope Mukherjee) writes—“Revolt is the stage that follows anguish and rejection. ‘I am human, I must receive all the rights of a human being’—such is the consciousness that gives birth to this revolt. Born from unrestrained anguish, this explosive rejection and piercing revolt is like a flood, with its aggressive character and an insolent rebellious attitude.” (Limbale 31). Actually Jyoti Lanjewar’s entire poem is a pain of praise to the hard working Dalit mothers who in spite of illiteracy and many forms of back-breaking labour give great dedication and strength to the Dalit movement begun by Ambedkar.

The concept of motherly figures gives a glimpse in the injustices done to them by their community itself because often in Dalit literature (re)presentation of Dalit body indicates the male, Dalit body excluding the Dalit women. This universalization of the male body as the representative one and neglecting woman body is the vividification in all the mother poems of Dalit literature. The narratives of the Dalit mothers are given by two different spokespersons—by the son and by the daughter. One is from the Dalit male patriarchal paradigm and another one is from the Dalit oppressed class. So a gap or difference always should be there in the narratives of their mother. Thus, Dalit mother does not remain only Dalit mother, rather she becomes ‘Dalit mothers’. This plurality in their representation makes them unique and embellished. But a common and coherent current is therein all representations of Dalit mothers. It is the common emotional, hardworking, unfed and torn garmented mother is the basic mother represented in all Dalit mother poems. Now the question is that will somebody be willing to listen to that voice? Or is it just an unheard ‘shouting’ just like the picture of Edward Munch? As Spivak states in an interview, “the subaltern cannot speak” means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she (here the Dalit mothers) is not able to be heard” (Spivak: 292).

As Dalit the Dalit mothers experience their Dalitness and when they witness, they experience that similar Dalitness in the Dalit men. Thus sometimes the Dalit mothers or women become the spokesperson not only about themselves but also the spokesperson for the men of their self community. This shifting of their ‘subjective’ (I) experience to the ‘collective’ (we) is there in the Dalit literature. And that is the way out from their perpetual Dalitness. Their collective self is much stronger than their fragmented identity; and this collective self can lead them towards a common struggle good for all of them. This is the greatest ‘possibility’ embedded inside of this Dalit literature as enunciated by Gilles Deleuze—the possibility of a ‘minor’ literature. So, what needs for the Dalit poetry is the ‘scope’ to flourish its possibility and more and more ‘different’ voices of the neglected mothers from the nook and corner so that their actuated and actualized ‘Being’ (done by the centre) becomes ‘Becoming’—a virtual plane of potential—a symbolic ‘centre’ so as to use the conception of Deleuze—“life begins with pure difference or becoming, or tendencies to differ—such as the differential waves of sound and light, and these differences are then actualized by different points of perception:

such as the human eye. Our worlds of beings, the extended term that we perceive, are contractions of flows of becoming” (Deleuze 126).

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