

Treatment of Women in Anna Bhau Sathe's Works

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Abstract

The literature that was produced by writers who themselves had experienced at first hand the oppression and segregation, issued out of the cores of their bleeding hearts. The literature of the marginalized community attracted attention of readers, both of the down trodden and the well placed sections by their profoundness and veracity. In course of time through works of Anna Bhau Sathe, a new poetics of the oppressed classes emerged distinctly. It was, and continues to be even today, the poetics of liberation. Anna Bhau Sathe's famous path breaking works prove that often, truth is stronger than fiction where the tenacity of the downtrodden to eke out a living is concerned. In a way, Sathe intuitively knew what feminism was without knowing that it was developing into a branch of theoretical discipline. This he could do because of his genuine and deep sympathy towards women, their lives and their problems. This also further shows that that theoretical training is essential for only those who do not have inborn understanding of the problems of the masses. The present paper is a humble attempt to touch upon all these facets of Sathe's writings.

Keywords: *Marginalization, Oppression, Liberation, Feminism*

Dalit writing is a post- Independence literary phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance. It has served the purpose of awakening the consciousness of the down- trodden for forging their identities. The Dalit writers, in their writings, give expression to the protest against the established order of the society that discriminates one man from other on the basis of caste, colour and religion. They envisage a society that is based on new order, a society that values the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Dalit literature is a recent development. However, within a span of two decades, it has established a strong identity in Indian literature. The fountain- head of its inspiration is the philosophy advocated by Mahatama Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar and Gautam Buddha. The Dalit scholars and writers protest against inequality which is incongruous with the present order of society.

‘Marginality’ as a term is applicable universally to the peoples of the world living in conditions of abject poverty and as a consequence isolated from the mainstream life. The Blacks in other countries and the Dalits in India belong to this marginalized group. Inequality of all kinds resulting from insecurity, injustice and exploitation consigned them to their deplorable life. The causes and circumstances leading to the age- old existence of oppression and despair of the lives of the marginalized class of nation's vast majority of people are many.

The self down gradation of these people since ages, suppressing even the slightest protest against injustice that sought to find a voice, is one of the major causes. The conditions of abject poverty, unhealthy and insanitary conditions in which these people had been sheltered were completely inhumane, but they held a belief that they were accursed to live such lives. Even the minimum rights as human beings were denied to them, rendering them incapable of seeing the light of freedom and comfortable living, thanks to the age old ideology taught to them by the upper castes in India that they were fated to be hewers of wood and drawers of water- mere slaves. The portals of education were never opened for them to taste the power of freedom.

The literature that was produced by writers who themselves had experienced at first hand the oppression and segregation, issued out of the cores of their bleeding hearts. The literature of the marginalized community attracted attention of readers, both of the down trodden and the well placed sections by their profoundness and veracity. In course of time through works of Anna Bhau Sathe, a new poetics of the oppressed classes emerged distinctly. It was, and continues to be even today, the poetics of liberation. The need is now to fulfil a long cherished and much deserved liberation of the down trodden through education as well as legislation. The social process of regeneration that has been set in motion by the literature produced by the oppressed, for the oppressed, has had a salutary result, namely that of creating awareness among the oppressed about the need to rise above their line of least resistance and to claim their right to live with honour. Legislation and the process of reorientation of the social system have begun to yield results. But, the damage done over the years cannot be compensated overnight. The battle for rights has begun and the new dawn of freedom and equality is appearing in the sky.

The four- fold caste system in India denigrated women to the lowest and fourth category alongside Shudras, and *Manusmriti* rendered their plight worse than that of slaves. Through his fiction, Anna Bhau Sathe projects women as strong, self- respecting and of good moral character, thereby equating them with men and even elevating them to a model of sacrifice and selflessness, worthy of emulation even by men. Sathe gives them names such as Sandalwood, Lotus in the Mud, etc. he was, undoubtedly, the first, championing the cause of Feminism in India, not by following the Western Feminism which upheld socially superior and well placed women, but by evolving a new image of woman from among the down trodden. His works dealing with the women characters project the theme, not of submission and fatality but of putting up a brave front to write a new chapter of their rightful place in society by reordering the caste ridden society into recognizing the worth of the erstwhile downtrodden, so- called marginalized. Anna Bhau Sathe's famous path breaking works prove that often, truth is stronger than fiction where the tenacity of the downtrodden to eke out a living is concerned.

Although Anna Bhau Sathe was not formally educated, he wrote 32 novels, 22 collections of short stories, 16 plays and folk dramas, a number of poetic compositions and a travelogue. He is one of the few Indian writers who produced such a vast gamut of writings. It was almost for the first time that through his writings, the heart rending portrayal of the sorrows, hopelessness, helplessness and the exploitation of the Dalits and the neglected became available in the Marathi literature. Therefore, he could rightly be called the bard of masses. He was not only a writer but also an activist of Communist Party of India. Since he wrote about the lives of the oppressed, depressed and neglected, he could be considered as one of the most articulate

spokesmen of caste system in India and its disastrous consequences on the Dalits. Initially, he was influenced by Marxism, but later on came under the impact of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's teachings. During the Dalit literary movement in Marathi, the caliber of Anna Bhau as a gifted writer was acknowledged. His most famous novel *Fakira* (1959) which won Maharashtra State Award for the best literary work in 1961 was dedicated by him to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's warring pen. It was the first award won by a Dalit literary piece

Sathe can be described as a philosopher artist. He wrote about almost all strata of society. He wrote about most of the social groups like that of Dalits, Adivasis, beggars, labourers, criminals, nomads, farmers, etc. His writings didn't remain restricted to only readers of Marathi, but they spread to the readers of almost all major languages in India and have been translated to foreign languages like German, French, Russian, Slovak, English and others. In short, he is a writer of enduring fame in Indian literature.

The cause for the writing of Dalit literature is found in the system of Hindu religion. The four varna system which gave birth to the untouchability is a terrifying force which divided Indian society into thousands of castes which is irrational and grinds humanity remorselessly under its wheels. This system gave the fourth place of Shudra to Adivasis, Untouchables, Other Backward Classes, and Women. The Shudras and those far worse than the Shudras were made to live a life of wretched, beggar-like, homeless and considered them as ignorant, filthy, polluted, inferior, sinner and lowest of the low. Their lot was worse than that of slaves and that slavery had no parallel. Their freedom of mind was destroyed and they were made to live under the state of mental slavery. This casteism and religious fanaticism have had a very pernicious effect on their minds. Preservation of caste system and untouchability and suppression of women remained the law, culture, religious practice and mentality of Indian religion. No man is basically a Dalit or Untouchable, but this very system deteriorated the life of the downtrodden and made them lead a life of drudgery. The magnitude of deplorable plight of the Untouchables was appalling. In short, it is the most artificial social order- the world has ever known.

The Untouchables in India have been persecuted and neglected sections of the Hindu social order for centuries. They remain neglected and outcast not only in the Hindu religion but in the Hindu literature as well. The Hindu epics- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* mainly speak of an oligarchy in which the Untouchables had no place. *Manusmriti* of Manu is the manifesto of women's servitude. Therefore, in order to throw off the shackles of slavery of Hinduism and Hindu society and discarding untouchability as a curse or a stigma on humanity, it was Gautam Buddha who tried to give a shock to the rigid caste system by presenting the coordination of three principles i.e. Prudence (Pradnya), Compassion (Karuna) and Equality (Samata). He discarded casteism and untouchability and declared humanity as his religion.

The seeds of the Dalit were sown by the struggles and activities of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Therefore, he could be called the father of Dalit Literature. It was his inspiration that set Dalits to work with determination and vigour to record their miseries which they were going through for centuries at the hands of Hindu caste system. Dr. Ambedkar's struggles to free the

Dalits from the languishing state and the bondages of four fold classification of the Indian social system had acted as epoch making milestones. The cultural struggle which took place in Maharashtra through the teachings and philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar for the freedom of Dalits gave birth to Dalit literature. Therefore, a number of writers came forward and started ventilating the pains and pangs of the ostracized class of the Hindu society who were denied the basic rights by the Indian social hierarchy, through the various forms of literature.

The level to which Indian women were oppressed in the Indian social system can be seen in *Manusmriti*. Manu gives women a status of almost slaves; they are given a completely inferior place on the ladder of social status. According to Manu, women are physically and intellectually inferior to males; they are weak, sentimental and dependent. Hence, they can never rule. On the contrary, they will always remain a ruled class and they should always obey the males as slaves obey their masters. (Chapter VIII: 416). He further says that women are frail and of weak character (Chapter II: 213). Manu seems to be thinking that they are a consumable commodity. The paternal family system gave further validity to the slavery of women. Therefore, *Manusmriti* could be taken as a manifesto of women's slavery.

A woman is exploited not only because of her sex but on the basis of her class, race and caste. The plight of Dalit women is far more terrible because she is imprisoned in three ways, i.e., caste, class and sex. The pangs of neglect, rejection and poverty that a Dalit woman is subjected to are unimaginable. Due to the horrible treatment meted out to women in various parts of the world in general and in India in particular, it is essential to take women's liberationist attitude in the interest of the women themselves. On account of such attitude towards women, most of the Marathi writers up to Anna Bhau Sathe, hardly thought that a woman could be a subject for their writings- novels or stories. Most of the Marathi Dalit writers wrote about the plight of women depicting their miseries, helplessness, diffidence, inability and exploitation. Among these writers, Anna Bhau Sathe occupies a prominent place due to his specific treatment of women in his fictional writings. He depicted women with a difference. He showed that women should not be depicted as unattractive, helpless, incapable and docile. On the contrary, he showed that women are also powerful, capable of protecting themselves and of taking revenge on those who trouble them. He dealt with a number of facets of women's lives in his writings.

Due to Sathe's insight into women's problems and a deep sympathy for them he felt like portraying their terrible plight through his literature. It is with this conviction that Sathe started writing about women. His portrayal of women is distinct from other writers in Marathi. Contrary to women being portrayed as helpless, weak, exploited, and defiant, Sathe depicted them as strong, confident of fighting, self respecting, and of good character. He depicted them as capable of freeing themselves from the devilish clutches of slavery at many levels- physical, mental, intellectual and cultural. By doing this, in a way, Sathe was launching a severe attack on Manu who had insulted women. The women he treats in his fiction play a number of roles. The thought which Anna Bhau Sathe introduced probably for the first time in Marathi literature, was that a woman is not an object of sexual pleasure, but a life partner. He has given equal and respectful status to women. He gives unique importance to the chastity of a woman. The women in Sathe's novels are bold, they face the situations squarely. In an age when most of the Marathi

writers showed the women characters continuously weeping over their lot, Sathe showed such women who tried to shape their future with their fortitude.

Anna Bhau Sathe rejected the traditional portrayal of women where it was shown that the women are only to be looked upon from utilitarian point of view. On the contrary, Sathe portrayed his female protagonists as self respecting, fighters, and self reliant beings. In his writings, the presentation of the dignity of women has a central place. Although these women came from the disadvantaged classes like Dalits, farm labourers, and workers, Sathe tried to show that man- woman relationship should be based upon equality among man and woman and also on morality and humanity. Therefore, his female characters seem to be commending the good and condemning the evil. In this attempt of theirs, they don't hesitate to make any kind of sacrifice that is required of them. The female characters in Anna Bhau Sathe seem to be strong, courageous and talented as his male characters. Although these females are bold and fearless, they don't lead a wanton life.

Sathe's female protagonists are women with pleasant personalities. This kind of portrayal of women has its basis in Anna Bhau's attitude towards women. He looked at women as one of the pure, chaste and attractive creatures. Therefore, he used to say that he does not like uglifying his characters and more specifically, female characters. This is the reason why Sathe portrayed women in his writings as attractive persons. Some of the most important novels of Sathe which deal with women characters are *Chitra* (Picturesque), *Vaijyanta*, *Chandan* (Sandalwood), *Chikhalatil Kamal* (Lotus in Mud), *Phulpakharu* (Butterfly), *Tila Lavite Mee Raktacha* (I Put Gory Mark on Forehead), which is also titled as *Avadi* (Loved and Liked), and *Ratna* (A Gem).

Chitra is titled after the central character, Chitra. This novel shows the demerits of Industrialization that took place in cities like Bombay around 1945- 46 and its effects on the sexual morality of the people. It depicts how flesh trade boomed along with the increase in Industrialization and how thousands of females were made the victims of flesh traffickers. Due to the attraction of money even some closest kith and kin forced female relatives into flesh trade. Chitra's story stands testimony to this theme. *Vaijyanta* focuses on the problems faced by the Tamasha artists. This has been accepted as the first novel in Marathi dealing with this theme. It depicts how particularly female artists in tamashas are sexually, socially, financially, and emotionally exploited and how most of them enter this profession out of sheer helplessness. In *Chandan*, Sathe depicts the courage shown by Chandan, a work woman from the slums in Bombay, in order to preserve her physical chastity vis- a- vis the attempts of some villainous characters who are bent upon molesting her. The novel is the story of how she fights against these villains. Probably for the first time in Marathi literature, a work woman is depicted in this light. *Murti* advocates inter- caste marriages and breaking of caste barriers by the youth. The story of the novel revolves around Vasant, a school boy and a sensitive parentless artist- painter who falls in love with Murti, his classmate, a girl from upper caste. In the end, they get married in spite of being from different castes.

In conclusion, we may say that Sathe was one of the far sighted writers about the problems of women. This could further be extended by saying that although Anna Bhau Sathe

was not formally educated and although he did not have the knowledge of recent theoretical/philosophical developments about women's issues; his writing was along the lines of feminist theory. In a way, Sathe intuitively knew what feminism was without knowing that it was developing into a branch of theoretical discipline. This he could do because of his genuine and deep sympathy towards women, their lives and their problems. This also further shows that that theoretical training is essential for only those who do not have inborn understanding of the problems of the masses. Without any formal theoretical training, Sathe could rightly understand the problems of the masses including those of women. This is the hallmark of a real genius which Anna Bhau Sathe certainly was. His treatment of women seems more sympathetic and genuine than other writers in Marathi literature. It would suffice to say that he believed in chivalry and was, still is, very much of a minority in this belief.

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