

## Identity through Dependency: Re-defining Dalit Consciousness

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### Abstract:

Dalit literature has established itself as a distinctive genre that has emerged from the conflict between self and society. It emerged in 1960s and began to be considered as a mainstream genre with the publications of many English translations of Marathi Dalit writing. Kancha Ilaiah, an activist in the Dalitbahujan and civil liberties movement in his most celebrated work *Why I am Not a Hindu* writes about the socioeconomic and cultural differences between the Dalits and other elite Hindu classes with passionate anger. A dalit feels himself alienated from a society which questions his everyday existence. The writing is owned by a collective and oppositional consciousness against the oppressive class-based society with a language of empowerment.

In Hindu religion, there exists a system of spiritual fascism. All Hindu gods and epics deal with the stories of suppression as all they celebrate the victory of elite classes. In a nutshell, a dalit is always alienated from the so called upper class ruling authority. The basic reason behind this problematic existence of a dalit is his separation from a world of heterogeneous social attitudes. It's absolutely a mode of surrendering attitude. When Kancha Ilaiah uses the very word 'I', that itself indicates a sense of authenticity which is formulated by a quite unconscious attempt to depend the so-called other. To oppose a prominent cultural attitude of the caste system, Ilaiah depends on the conventional arguments against the dalit discrimination. This paper is an attempt to analyze Kancha Ilaiah's observations in *Why I am Not a Hindu* as expressions of a conventional subaltern who unknowingly criticizes his own way of depending the elite regulations of India.

Key Words: Dalit literature, empowerment, spiritual fascism, suppression, subaltern.

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To establish one's sense of belonging, a writer must be participant of any specific cultural pattern. The inclusion or exclusion of an individual in all institutions like religion and caste is subjected to this establishment. When speaking against systems of religion and caste, one faces a struggle to liberate himself from all sorts of exploitations or dominations. A dalit writer who speaks about exploitations tries to make himself free from the primordial and existing patterns of exploitations which always haunt his conscious. For this purpose he uses a strategy of dependency in his writing unknowingly or deliberately.

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experience of joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science thus finally ending as revolutionary. (Dangle 267)

When criticizing the system of caste system and the notion of discrimination maintained by the elite Hindu class, Kancha Ilaiah in *Why I am not a Hindu* shows an uncompromising dependency on the philosophical concepts of the so-called upper class communities. It is impossible for a writer to formulate a theory based assumption on any particular aspect focusing completely on his own perspectives. The notion opposed by the writer to formulate a concept on some sociopolitical issue cannot be denied; instead it must be projected and emphasized to clarify its rival notion which serves the major attention of the reader. As a dalit writer, Kancha Ilaiah's case too is not different. When he attempts to contrast the Hindutva philosophy with that of the Dalits in *Why I am not a Hindu*, it is crystal clear that he depends on the force which he opposes in his writing.

Divided into an introduction, seven chapters and an afterword, *Why I am not a Hindu* locates problems in contrasting the dalit experiences with that of the 'others'. Ilaiah tries to analyse, critique and problematize many popular notions of the Hindutva philosophy. Everywhere in the text, Ilaiah contrasts the Dalitbahujan with Neo-Kshatriyas:

The question before me now is not whether I must treat Muslims or Christians or Sikhs as enemies, as the Hindutva school wants me to do. The question is what do we, the lower sudras and Ati-Sudras (whom I also call Dalitbahujans), have to do with Hinduism or with Hindutva itself? I, indeed not only I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans of India, have never heard the word 'Hindu' - not as a word, nor as a name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days. (xi)

Focusing on the above division, Ilaiah depicts the existence of both Neo-Kshatriyas and brahminical community as rivals to Dalitbahujan and he gradually develops all his arguments based on this division. It is a form of dependency, derived from the intimacy to those enemies, because without them, there is no ideological existence for the Dalitbahujan. Their co-existence shows the relation between the binaries. (of upper class Hindus and Dalitbahujan) The resistance emphasized by the author is only a symptom of post-colonial attitude. Ilaiah begins his query related to the formation of cast language and caste ideals as trained from the childhood itself. Division makes differences. Even the naming process of infants in the upper class families seems to be a matter of alienation to the author and his class. They are not at all familiar with the names like Kalidasa or names of gods and goddesses. The hierarchical order of Hindu upper class family is stressed by Ilaiah in connection with a comparatively flexible family structure enjoyed by the dalitbahujan. He can't at any moment independently talk on his community without referring the 'other'. In man-women relationship, Dalitbahujans are more democratic unlike that of the neo-kshatriyas. Valsyayana's *Kamasutra* is a brahminical text on the sixty four forms of sexual expression, which might not be natural since such expressions could not have been possible in their familial atmosphere. Even Krishna is a patriarchal sexist god, admits Ilaiah. But this sort of relationship in Dalitbahujan families is markedly different and it is quite natural to them. In Ilaiah's words :

The sexual relationship has never been projected in an art form. This does not mean they do not sing songs based on love stories. They sing the love stories of people around them. The narrative is basically secular. Yet another big difference

between the family life of the Hindus and the Dalitbahujan castes is that the Hindus make sex a leisure-bound divine activity whereas among the Dalitbahujans, family life is a part of production. (33)

It is in the fourth chapter of the text where Ilaiah talks about caste and college education. It is about the struggle faced by the Dalitbahujan including the author himself at various institutions of higher education. Ilaiah argues that the life of Dalitbahujan is not described anywhere in the curriculum of their University education. They are not even familiar with the language of their syllabi because that language doesn't reflect their social context. But the upper class professors treat them as undeserving. So the separate identity of Dalitbahujan is felt only when he thinks against the Neo-kshatriya concepts and connects them with their estranged curriculum. Here again dependency is evident.

Examining the role of political parties, Ilaiah tells that the relationship between the upper class man and a Dalitbahujan in Congress party is like that of Rama and Hanuman. Though this comparison is funny and interesting, it becomes a best example for dependency since Ilaiah makes use of an upper class Sanskrit text (*Ramayana*) to introduce an apt analogy. Now the matter becomes worse because the use of such Brahminical texts provide much complication to the dalit readers. They can never understand those Brahminical concepts and language. The question now is how many of them can read and understand the text *Why I am not a Hindu?* The educated writer Ilaiah can only use the language and narration of the Hindu upper class section just as a result of his University education. That education could have made him think, speak and express in the language of the elite class. Thus it becomes quite impossible for Ilaiah to share his notions on caste system with his community which he thinks he does.

In chapter V, Ilaiah attempts a contrast between the Dalit gods and the upper class gods as binaries where without one, the other can't exist. But when speaking about the power distribution among the *trimurthies*, he considers Shiva as one who is least powerful. In terms of colour and costume he neither resembles Brahma and the Brahmins nor does he resemble Vishnu and the Kshatriyas, He is dark-skinned and dressed like a tribal. In Ilaiah's words:

Though he is also powerful and wields the *trishula* as his weapon, basically he plays the subordinate role to Brahma and Vishnu. His behaviour is a little different from that of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya Gods. He loves dancing and gets himself into all sorts of difficulties from which he needs to be rescued by Brahma or Vishnu. (79)

To prove his argument, Ilaiah points out the story of Bhasmasura where Shiva depends on Vishnu. Here, the question is about the actual dependency shown by Kancha Ilaiah on the upperclass Sanskrit Brahminical texts. His observations too are incorrect to a certain extent since Shiva is characterized as the most powerful among the *trimurthis* in several Brahminical texts which includes *Shivamahapurana*. Brahmins, says Ilaiah went on creating more and more God and Goddess through the technique of *avataras*. The way by which he analyses these *avataras* like Vamana, Rama and Krishna is excellent. At the same time, all these observations are strictly influenced by many of the Brahminical texts. At a glance those texts seem to be the tools in the hands of a dalit writer to show the established hegemonic agenda of the Neo-Kshatriyas and Brahmins. A close reading offers an interpretation of Ilaiah's concepts as the words spoken by a dalit by using the same language and literature which he wants to oppose and deconstruct. It is actually his concept on the Dalitbahujan and Neo-Kshatriyas which can be deconstructed. His

notions are basically coming out of an internal conflict between a state of being blindly critical to the upper class sections and a state of being aggressive to his own section:

Pochamma is one of the most popular Dalitmahajan Goddesses in Andhra Pradesh. She is a person who protects people from all kinds of diseases, but her gender role is not specified unlike that of Sita, Saraswathi and Lakshmi. She is not a Goddess who believes in communal conflicts. Religious distinctions have no meaning for her, argues Ilaiah:

If a pig passes by a Pochamma temple, while there are people around, nobody takes objection; no animal, including a pig, is inauspicious in Dalitbahujan culture. There is not a single example of communal riots being initiated from Pochamma temples. Such riots have been initiated from Rama temples, Krishna temples, Narasimha temples, just as riots have been initiated from mosques. (93)

Criticizing the upper class temples of the Brahmins, Ilaiah treats Pochamma as an illiterate god who represents the uneducated women of the village. It can be the lack of education in his section which makes them believe that literate gods are beyond their perception and this may be the reason behind them believing blindly in the *mantrics* of the villeges who claim that they can change the conditions of peoples' lives by calling spirits but certainly no mantrics claim that he or she controls Pochamma. The worship of some other popular goddesses like Kattamaisamma and Polimeramma creates major festival focusing on big feasts where in some villages, several sheep, goats and chickens are killed as part of the sacrifice. Though *bali* is considered to be a custom of religious festival, such believes again makes the Dalitbahujan retreat to their primitivism and forget to live in a new cultural scenario. The old cultural platform on which they are celebrating various rituals is deliberately structured so only to justify and glorify the Dalitbahujan cultural tradition. They still prefer that old platform for living in a quite nostalgic mood. This is actually a dilemma; a psychological trouble that promotes them feel inferior in front of the Neo-Kshatriyas.

Kncha Ilaiah's reading on the concept of life and death among Brahmins and Dalitbahujan is also a point of discussion. Life according to the Dalitbahujans is a one-time affair where Brahmins believe in life after death. Ilaiah treats the belief of Brahmins as blind and meaningless. It is the ambition for permanency which makes Brahmins think of another life in *Swarga*. They maintain the view that one has to do dharma or good deeds to gain *Swarga*. Actually it's a very positive concept of living. The next problem in the theory of Ilaiah is his notion on 'eating to live' and 'living to eat'. He tries to create an image of Dalitbahujan as they give importance to work rather than food. He criticizes the Hindus as they work later, but eat first. The author might not have noticed the Brahmins who are involved in the duty of priests. They never eat food before completing their works related to the temple in the early morning. Ilaiah absolutely fails to see the toils of Brahminhood, instead he becomes much narrow-minded as a repreaentative of the Dalitbahujans.

Dalit writers escape the worlds of romantic fantasy to expose the areas of darkness that consistently echo anguish along with the craving for freedom, equality justice and human compassion. They are in search of a new aesthetics that can be acknowledged as the breath of real human suffering beyond the dynamics of religion, myths, ethical commitments and artistic canons.

(Agarwal 4)

The above observation is correct as far as *Why I am not a Hindu* is concerned in the sense that Ilaiah is in a romantic fantasy while talking as a critic of the Hindutva philosophy. The

writing of Ilaiah is owned by a collective and oppositional consciousness against the oppressive class-based society with a language of empowerment. Dalitization is a different concept introduced by Kancha Ilaiah in this work. It is a kind of philosophy of Indian dalit society which is meant to be a kind of new consciousness. But this new ideological pattern is a result of a surrendering attitude shown by the Dalitbahujans. To oppose some prominent cultural attitudes, he deliberately expresses his strong dislikes just like a conventional subaltern. Kancha Ilaiah is re-defining the Dalit consciousness to establish a new identity through the quite conventional pattern of dependency.

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