

Re-visiting 'Marginality' in Dalit Women's Life Narratives

Putul Sathe

Abstract

Dalit women's life narratives have become a part of syllabus and are often quarantined as 'marginal literatures'. This caveat often sets into play a formulated mode of reading/consumption of these texts entrenched in pedagogical practices that do not engage with the silent histories of casteism. The article argues that an empathetic engagement with marginality in these cultural texts calls for interrogating existing disciplinary grids and dominant narratives to create a literary and cultural space for talking about caste in its own terms. Re-visiting the margins is not to valorize the margin, rather to engage with marginalised and silent histories to create possibilities for liberatory versions of history.

Keywords: Dalit, margins, modern, pedagogies.

Introduction

Dalit women's life narratives have become a part of syllabus and are often quarantined as 'marginal literatures'. This caveat often sets into play a formulated mode of reading/consumption of these texts entrenched in pedagogical practices, where engagement with the silent histories of casteism is often resolved by redefining the life narratives as " 'the narratives of sufferings' of 'the underprivileged'" (Satyanarayana 2014 :161). These readings have created a certain kind of epistemology based on objectivity, which have legitimized the "prejudice of the modern". Gyanendra Pandey in his book, *A History of Prejudice : Race, Caste and Difference in India and the United States* (2013) has elucidated on the 'prejudice of the modern', where the "prejudice of the modern world . . . has produced an ideal grammar (the correct form of speaking and writing), a rational order (the rule of reason), and an unmarked citizen (man, in the broader sense of humans as well as the narrower sense of the male of the species) entirely competent to implement this rule of grammar" (Pandey, 2013). This prejudice of modernity according to Pandey also carries with it the "fable of freedom, prosperity and peace" only to be extended to those communities and groups, who have been easily assimilated into the homogenous narrative of modernity and nation (Pandey, 2013). Dalit life narratives have in many ways raised critical questions about the homogenous character of Indian literary historiography, which is part of the narrative of modernity. The article argues that an empathetic engagement with marginality in these cultural texts calls for interrogating existing disciplinary grids and dominant narratives about Indian literary historiography.

Neil Mukherjee's review of Sujatha Gidla's book, *Ants Among Elephants : An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) in the Times Literary

Supplement (October 13, 2018) concludes with the observation that the “indispensable book comes from a place of deep and necessary anger” against a system of social engineering where the caste system ensured the survival of a “systemic hierarchy”. The “deep and necessary anger” has produced a radical literary register and aesthetic, which has produced a critique of dominant Indian literature. Baburao Bagul has defined Indian literature as Hindu literature. He has argued that Dalit literature has articulated a vision for the Dalits, which has made the “common man its hero and advocates Socialism” (Bagul, 1992). The revolutionary potential of Dalit literature moving beyond identity has been highlighted by Bagul along with the Dalit’s “ unfulfilled quest for personhood”(Ganguly, 2012) in a caste ridden society:

... it is Dalit literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. ‘Dalit’ is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate.

Tracing the historicity of the term Dalit within the anti-colonial nationalist discourse, where gender and caste were kept out of the political domain, which was valorized over the cultural domain to the post-colonial times is a complex narrative. The term Dalit, was first used by Dr Ambedkar in 1928 in his publication *Bahiskrut Bharat* to counter Gandhiji’s patronizing term ‘harijan’. However, it was only in 1972 with the emergence of Dalit Panthers, a radical political group inspired by the rise of Black Panthers in the United States in 1960s that the term Dalit was reclaimed as an empowering term as opposed to the previous meaning of depressed or broken men. Therefore, ‘Dalit’ does not represent a caste, rather it is a “ constructed identity”. Subaltern communities,” who have been discriminated against for centuries have found a new identity by coming together with the perspective ‘dalit’”(Bhrati 2002). It is in this context that “Dalit” is an empowering ideological and political identity that lays bare the gap surrounding the bureaucratic statist euphemism SC(Scheduled Caste) and the lived social inequalities in a caste stratified society. The end of colonial rule saw the emergence of the nation and modernity came to be defined around the discourse of nation and the nation was an unilateral construct.

The modern state embedded as it is within the universal narrative of capital, cannot recognise within its jurisdiction any form of community, except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation (Partha Chaterjee quoted in Pandain, 2002).

It is in this context that Dalit as a subaltern group challenged the narrative of dominant nationalism, where the Indian nation was “a domain of enforcing domination over the subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and marginal linguistic regions by national elite”(Pandian, 2002).

Modernity was now defined around the discourse of ideal of the modern, bourgeois-liberal, secular democratic nation, where the citizen subject was conceived in a manner that the caste identity indicated only a low-caste or dalit identity. New emerging acronymic identities like OBC(Other Backward Castes),SC(Scheduled Caste) and ST(Scheduled Tribes) were attempts made by the liberal bourgeoisie state to constitutionally address caste imbalances and in

the process they created a “utopian domain that rendered subaltern identities invisible’(Ganguly, 2005). Articulations by Dalit intellectuals and writers as a critique and rejection of the claims of modern Indian state and claiming a space was a process of ‘resignification’:

In carrying forward the agenda of carving out of a space for those who are outside the pale of civilization in Indian modern reckoning . . . one needs to resignify as positive those cultural practices which are deemed by the upper castes as lowly. Beef -eating, drinking, speaking in dialectic are necessary part of this cultural politics (Pandian, 2002).

Cultural texts as part of cultural practices from this ideological location calls for the need for a dialogue based on empathetic understanding, which Ashish Nandy (2012) in the essay, ‘Theories of Oppression and Another Dialogue of Cultures’ talks about the “otherness of ‘other’”:

All dialogues have to cross borders- cultural, political, and above all, psychological.. Usually these borders are thought of as international or civilizational borders. When we cross these borders, we are supposed to get a new, deeper, more empathetic understanding of the other ways of looking at the world and at ourselves. There is an implicit assumption in this proposal, particularly when it involves crossing the borders within us: Others are never entirely strangers. ... Only when we have dialogue can we claim to have opened India to the other India where the dalits and tribals live. (Nandy, 2012).

Located within this framework, Dalit life narratives are counter hegemonic discourses that refuse to “fit into the model of a one dimensional life as the poor and the exploited” as has been the case in the writings of upper caste writers located within what SaranKumar Limbale has described as “discourse of pity” and were now “claiming the right to imagine and write their own future”(Nandy, 2012). In these life narratives, one talks of caste on its own terms, rather than caste by other means (Pandhian, 2002) and in the material sphere and thereby offers a critique of truncated Indian modernity. Caste is the point of “critique of modernity for its failure as well as an invitation to it to deliver its promises”(Pandhian,2002) :

. . . this corpus of writing can be seen as an integral part of a continuing contest within Indian democracy about the role of caste and its visibility/invisibility in the public sphere; and of the differential relationship of caste with the temporality of Indian modernity, as both its past-in-the-present and present-in-the-past. It also brings to the fore the low-caste rejection of the civilizational claims of Indian nationalist rhetoric, while at the same time embracing its liberating potential. Most significantly, . . ., such narratives herald the emergence of the Dalit as a figure of suffering, unsettling the celebratory mood of contemporary Indian democracy, even as these same narratives demand recognition, and in so doing, offer that democracy the opportunity to realize its true potential(Ganguly, 2012).

Dalit life narratives belong to the broad evolving category of Dalit literature which emerges in post -independence India as a protest literature not merely

confined to documenting Dalit struggles in the face of the failure of the Nehruvian democracy, which did not challenge the “Brahminical concept of a Hindu nation”(Pandit , 2008) to the failure of the Indian state to politically recognize Dalits represented in the mass conversion and finally the fragmentation of Ambedkarite movement. George Orwell in his essay , “Why I Write” gives four reason for writers, who chose to write. They are sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and a political purpose. Dalit life narratives were written with a political purpose and a historical impulse to bring to the forefront of the nation the “practices of othering: discrimination, exclusion and humiliation” (Pandey, 2013). These narratives can be read as literary articulations, which have re-visited and re-defined nationalist literary historiography and literary canon. As a literary and cultural performance from a marginalised location Dalit life narratives have challenged caste discrimination :

The literary historiography of Dalit literature derive from this principle of racial inequality of Indian society. It focuses on the question of otherness, difference, marginality, canon and the categories of aesthetics. In order to voice the protest of the marginalised, Dalit literatures often follows the subversive historiographic path of personalizing history. It is, therefore, . . . , that autobiography is the most potent and often exercised form of fiction produced in Dalit literature (Devy, 2009).

Governed by a “subversive historiographic path of personalizing history”(Devy,2009), Dalit life narratives are political gestures in the context of Indian literary historiography to focus upon a sort of “epistemic mutation”(Mohanty, 1998) not only in “cultural criticism but in social and historiography as well(120). The agenda of personalizing history points to the central political claim that significant features have been repressed or left unarticulated in Indian traditional paradigms, and hence the need for a critical discourse to create the possibility for self-representation has emerged. The life narratives bear a problematic and questioning relationship to both history and literary canon in terms of their articulation of marginality. They have challenged the notion of essentialism and what has been described as “genuine historicity” by Fredric Jameson prevailing in Indian historiography by focusing on marginality resulting from caste-fractured Hindu identity influenced by the philosophy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

The question of re-visiting the domain of Indian literature and the relation between this narrative of Indian literature and culture acquire greater significance in the context of Dalit life narrative, where there is the powerful articulation of “hidden histories of hurt and humiliation”(Rao, 2003) through a “narrative of pain”, which locates these texts “within a global conversation of human suffering”(Ganguly,2012) and citizenship. Inclusion of these voices in the dominant literary canon is related to the question of culture as mentioned above and to the larger agenda of re-imagining the trajectory of Indian literature. Indian literature historically was shaped during the colonial period by the Orientalist and Anglicist agenda, which complemented each other in ensuring that the Indian classical traditions formed a part of the canon, while all the

indigenous literary traditions became the 'other' and categories like folk literature, tribal literature and oral narrative arrive on the scene as the 'other'. Dalit life narratives as part of Dalit literature has contested the unitary character of Indian literature to include "various subjectivities, gender positions and ideas of resistance". The need for a "dynamic model of Indian literature . . . to accommodate the view of literary production as negotiation and contestation among various ideological positions"(Ramakrishnan,2011) has been brought to the forefront.

II

Baby Kamble's *The Prison's We Broke* (2008) is a gendered dalit life narrative that challenges a simple categorization as dalit women's life narrative. Located within the psychodynamics of Dalit literary space, it traverses the realm of Dalit literature, women's autobiographies and dalit women's life narratives representing the transformative potential of the genre. Baby Kamble describes her narrative as collective in nature and not an individual act:

I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community (Kamble, 2008).

The absence of a marked liberal universal subject position, which defines autobiographical writings of upper-class bourgeois men and partially women also marks the "agenda and politics of specific subaltern constituencies"(Pandey, 2013):

The articulation of the subaltern subject- the assertion of humanity, agency, subjectivity – occurs in a fairly untypical manner. The distinction between subject and object often disappears, In Dalit life-stories, the 'community' is the omnipresent; hence, the subject who writes and the object of reflection are not really separated. On occasion, an apparently unconscious slide from the first to third –person narration, and the other way around, signals the particularity of the experience-possibly suggesting also that the first-person voice cannot bear the weight of the life being relived.

The shift in the narratorial voice defies the hegemonic definition of the genre, which is defined as a type of writing that seeks the sanctity of the 'self', a feature which does not define women's autobiographical writings :

As a polyphonous sign, women's autobiographical writings have provided a critique of masculine genre of autobiography by negotiating with multiple forms of self. Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrated that there are many way of writing the subject (Anderson 2007).

Baby Kamble's narrative is the narrative of a politicized activist Dalit women situated within the Ambedkarite movement, which underscored the epistemological disadvantages of unmarked Indian feminism(Anand). The text simultaneously question the geneology of Indian feminism, where caste has been articulated as the 'other' of the upper caste women and located within the private domain(Rege, 2006). Addressing the hegemonic nature of caste structure,

the narrative points to the “moral corruption of the society which legitimises caste oppression”(Ramakrishanan, 2011) and marks the beginning of a new Dalit politics led by Dr B.R. Ambedkar :

What a beastly thing this Hindu religion is ! Let me tell you, it's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy - it is the life blood of the Mahars! When the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish ! Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then? Just as the farmer pierces his bullock's nose and inserts a string through the nostrils to control it, you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all that your selfish religion has given to us. But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is. And the one who taught us this, the one who transformed us from beasts into human beings, is the architect of our Constitution - that shining jewel of sheel and satwa, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. (Kamble , 2008).

The narrative located within the larger discourse of the anti-caste movement questions the liberal, unified humanist vision of a nation controlled by elites. As a site of articulation, the text spells out the tenets of the Ambedkarite project and brought to the centre stage of Indian political modernity the stigmatized Dalit community as a political community. The term “political autobiography” coined by Gyanendra Pandey to describe some of the Dalit life narratives can be applied to Baby Kamble's narrative. Kamble's life narrative as part of the genre of Dalit life narrative focuses on certain kind of “radical empiricism”(Pandian) that could “transcend the divide between theory and fact and open up spaces for alternative politics for subaltern groups”(Pandian 2008). It is the language of affect and not of reason that gives meaning to these experiences and these texts produce different forms of truth and knowledge and one way to engage with them is to “take recourse to Stanley Tambiah's distinction between the “discourse of causality” and the “discourse of participation”.

While much of the discourse of causality and positive science is framed in terms of distancing, neutrality, experimentation, and the language of analytic reason, much of the discourse of participation can be framed in terms of sympathetic immediacy, performative speech acts, and ritual action. If participation emphasises sensory and affective communication and the language of emotion, causality stresses the rationality of the instrumental action and the language of cognition.

(Tambiah quoted in Pandian, 2013)

Located within the discourse of participation, the narrative teases out questions of pedagogy and authority, which is related to empathetic engagement with what Sharmila Rege has described as “dalit imagination” The process of emphatic engagement introduces new vocabularies for imagining the nation and calls for questioning of “assumed hierarchy of different knowledges, archives and methods of knowledge”(Rege, 2009) and simultaneously foregrounds the

“experience of caste to challenge the feudal backwardness of Hinduism normalised in educational practices”. The site of this engagement is the classroom and by extension the academy, which is part of the larger institutional space which “domesticates and manages differences and inequalities and enables struggles against domination. Therefore the need to “develop pedagogies as a political project”(Rege, 2009) along with a search for an alternative subject position for teachers and students. It is in this context that Rege elucidates upon the Phule-Ambedkarite pedagogical perspective to challenge the academic practices, where caste and gender are co-opted in disciplinary grid without changing the core disciplinary contours:

The ‘difference’ of Phule- Ambedkarite pedagogical perspectives lies in a double articulation that conceives education . . . not only in terms of cultures of learning and teaching but also dissenting against that which is learnt and taught by dominant cultural practices. This entails constituting teachers and student as modern truth-seekers and agents of social transformation who seek to become ‘a light unto themselves’. The methods are those that seek to integrate the principles of prajna(critical understanding) with karuna(empathetic love) and Samata(equality). This democratisation of method of knowledge marks the Phule-Ambedkarite perspectives from methods based on binaries of reason/emotion, public/private, assumption of neutral objectivity/celebration of experience that inform much of our teaching and research (Rege, 2009).

Finally to conclude, the article has argued that a dialogic understanding of gendered margin calls for a historical understanding of how the term ‘Dalit’ has evolved in contemporary times of powerful Dalit assertion and the need for emancipatory frameworks to understand margin as a site of alternative knowledge production .

References

- (2008). “Writing Ordinary Lives”. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 20 September, 2008. 34-40.
- Anderson, Linda. (2007). *Autobiography*. London : Routledge.
- Bagul, Baburao.(1992). “Dalit Literature is But Human literature”. *Poisoned Bread : Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Ed. Arjun Dangle. Hyderabad : Orient Longman.
- Devy, G.N. (2009). *The G. N. Devy Reader*. Hyderabad : Orient Blackswan.
- Ganguly, D. (2005). *Caste, Colonialism and Counter Modernity : Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*. New York : Routledge.
- Ganguly, D. (2012). “Dalit Life Stories”. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* . Eds. Dalmia, Vasudha and Rashmi Sadana. New Delhi : Cambridge University Press.
- Kamble, Baby. (2008). *The Prisons We Broke*. Trans, Maya Pandit. Hyderabad : Orient Longamn.

- Mohanty, Satya.(1998). *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press.
- Nandy, A. (2012). " Theories of Oppression and Another Dialogue of Cultures". Economic and Political Weekly. 30 July, 2012. 39-44.
- Nayar, Pramod. (2012). *Writing Wrongs : The Cultural Construction of Human Rights in India*. New Delhi : Routledge.
- Pandey, G. (2013) . *A History of Prejudice : Race, Caste and Difference in India and the United States*. New Delhi : Cambridge University Press.
- Pandian, M S S . (2002). "One Step outside Modernity : Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere". Economic and Political Weekly. 4 May, 2002. 1735-1741.
- Ramakrishanan, E.V. (2011). *Locating Indian Literature : Texts, Tradition, Translations*. New Delhi : Orient Blackswan.
- Rao, A. (2003). "Introduction". *Gender and Caste* . Ed. Anupama Rao. New Delhi : Women Unlimited.
- Rege, S. (2009). NCERT MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES. Savitribai Phule Second Memorial Lecture. Theme : Education as Tritya Ratna : Towards Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogies. New Delhi : NCERT.
- Satyanarayana, K.(2014). Colonial Modernity, Indian Literary History, and Modern Dalit Literatures. *English in the Dalit Context*. Eds. Alladi, Uma, K.Suneetha Rani and D.Murali Manohar. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan.
-