

# FROM POLITICS OF NEGATION TO THE POETICS OF ASSERTION: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS BY SUSHILATAKBHURE AND RAJNITILAK

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## ABSTRACT

*In India, the story of 'Identity assertion', started around 1970s that jolted the hegemonic roots of patriarch Indian society and precipitated the radical changes in its social discourse. The era is remembered for the formation of militant group 'Dalit Panther' in Maharashtra and the wave of Indian Feminism across the country. Borrowing the phrase from SharmilaRege, "the masculinization of dalithood and savarnization of womenhood" (Rege 91) obliterated the presence of dalit women both from the literature and the social movement. Both the movements failed to integrate the issues and challenges of the dalit women. The thrust of this paper is to engage with the selected works of two Hindi dalit women poets RajniTilak and SushilaTakbhure and study the text for the assertion of identity by them. The selected works were published during 1990s and played a decisive role in introducing the subaltern perspective in the Hindi dalit literature. The selected works include two poetry collections Padchaap (Marching Steps) and Hawa Si BechainYuvtiyan (Restless Women) by Tilak and two poetry collections Mere KavyaSangrah: Swati BoondaurKhareMotiaurHamareHisseKaSuraj. (My Poetry Collections: Chaste Drops Bitter Pearls and Our Space) by Takbhure. The selected poems have been translated by me from the original text. The theme of assertion comes alive in the following lines written by Takbhure, "Every inch of mine screams / I rebel / my voice echoing through horizon" [1]*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Identity, Indian Feminism, Manusmriti, Varnas.

The term "dalit" is derived from the Sanskrit root *dal*, which means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed [2]. In one of the essays by Gopal Guru "The Politics of Naming", Dr. B. R. Ambedkar defined dalithood as "kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste brahminical order" [3] The quintessential leader was referring to the caste narrative written during 7th century CE and compiled in *Dharmasutra* or legal text named *Manusmriti*. The diabolical narrative placed dalit women at the lowest rung of the social order. Languishing at the bottom of the hierarchy, their voices were subdued, stifled and left out of the mainstream. Denial of basic human rights, ignorance, explicit physical and sexual violence and the perpetual struggle with poverty took a devastating toll on their creativity, Thus their late arrival in the Hindi Dalit literature is comprehensible.

*Manu's* caste narrative divided the civilized society into four *varnas* arranged into an ontological hierarchy. The division was in accordance with the ancestral occupation assigned to each *varna*. *Brahmins* were responsible for

seeking and deciphering knowledge, *Kshatriyas* were the warriors and engaged with administrations during peaceful times, *Vaishyas* took care of trade and *Shudras* were peasants working in fields. The Brahmins were placed at the apex while as peasants and women were clubbed together towards the bottom. Untouchables or *Ati-shudra* performing the menial tasks formed the unmentioned fifth category while as their womenfolk were placed at the lowest rung. The marked indifference of the society to their beleaguered state and the perpetual denial of dignified place kept these women at the peripheries of the mainstream society. Within the dalit literary framework too, they suffered prejudice from the domineering patriarchy among dalits. In one of her recent books, Rajni Tilak strongly reacted against a well-acclaimed male dalit writer who wrote disparagingly against women writers. She wrote:

“He continues to insult dalit women writers through his work while as some well acclaimed male dalit writers not only support but call such literature as the ‘soul of Hindi literature’ comparing it to *Sant Kabir’s* writings. This proves that they too suffer from the same ailment. [4]

Not surprisingly, there are hardly any writers or critics who have engaged with the women dalit representations in the Hindi dalit literature. Most of the critical works remained confined to the works of male writers. For example, Sarah Beth Hunt’s *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* published in 2014 has deliberated on some of the crucial works by male dalit writers but made no reference to the women’s contribution in dalit literary framework.

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed the consolidation of dalit agitation in the North as it turned into a full scale caste battle. The precipitating factor was the implementation of Mandal Commission Recommendation by the central government in 1990 offering reservations to dalit youth in the government jobs. Lots of hue and cry was raised by the upper caste community against the implementation. The self-righteous dalit community was jolted by the hostility and aggression unleashed by anti Mandal stir throughout the nation. The subsequent year 1991 saw the adoption of new economic reform policy involving Privatization, Globalization and Liberalization. This policy apparently killed the Mandal commission policy as the private entrepreneurs were not restrained by the reservation clause in the jobs. Thus deprived dalit youth lost to meritorious upper caste youth. These socio-political changes unleashed a new literary wave in the Hindi dalit literature and marked the arrival of noteworthy poetry collections from the Hindi dalit women writers in prints. The subaltern perspective flooded the Hindi literary circle. Their poetic outburst was seen as the strong document of assertion and rebel. It added to the understanding of the problematic of dalit women’s lives. The pain, trauma and life sapping living conditions are well expressed in their works that separate them from the mainstream writings. Their poems are hard-hitting and reek with the sense of oppression.

While pointing towards her negated identity, dalit poet Rajni Tilak has called for attention towards her wretched state in the following lines from poem “*Kahu Kya?*” (What to Say?). The images of loud drums, stifled voices and reference to the ‘ears’ state the urgency to express and listened to.

For your ears  
I am beating loud drums  
Listen, O listen  
My stifled voice  
Struggling to be heard

I am screaming since ages

I exist, I too exist, and I lie in pain and anguish. [5]

The emotional rupture laced with pain and anguish can't be diluted under aesthetic sophistication. Thus in their poetry, there is hardly any room for beauty and colorful imagination. Their words speak of rough terrains and the poems lack warmth. The feelings of anger and rebel have been the driving force of dalit literature. SharatchandMuktibodh in his essay "What is Dalit Literature?" has called it as "essentially rebellious, optimistic and social in context" [6]. This literature speaks in multiple voices. The individual experiences shared by the poet spread across the entire community. In the same vein, SushilaTakhure, a poet known for the depth and maturity in her poetry has described her own poems as terse and realistic like her own being. The poet debunks the notion that main aim of poetry is to give pleasure.

My poem is not a fantasy

Nor an aspiring tale

Neither aims to preach

It furors from hard ships

It is a bitter reality and truth. [6]

There are too many restrains institutionalized into the social praxis by the brahminical society in the name of Holy Scriptures, religion, etc. that work against her. Adding to it, their subordination to dalit patriarchy makes her thrice marginalized! As SushilaTakhurehas succinctly commented on her enslaved personality in the following lines. Addressing to no one in particular, the poet states, "I was melted in the kiln / before being poured/ into a determined mold" [*"SthirChitra"* (Still Painting)]. Yet the stifled life failed to detour the poet. This streak of optimism makes dalit literature "Libratory" [7].Sharan Kumar Limbale has called it so because it is a literature of resistance as it questions the life denying brahminical law code. The Poet's determination to break through the bondages and the spirit to fight and live on comes alive in the subsequent poem. In spite of being repressed for centuries, poet's views are far from stagnation. Insteadher poems invigorate the cursed souls.

My eyes seek windows

As doors are secured

Waiting for the Sun's rays

To shine and pour .[8]

Though poet is critically aware of her vulnerability but she is determined to hold onlike a veteran soldier. The subsequent lines foreground the fierce dilemma going inside her. At one end she pledges to fight while as on the other hand she revisits her past state of subversiveness. The clear and frank insight into her beleaguered state touches the reader.

I languished at sea bed

Like a weed

Bearing the endless burden

Above .[9]

The image of seabed reminds of the bleak atmosphere of chill and darkness where even sunlight couldn't penetrate. The desolation and the stagnation in her existence come vivid in the image of sea weed languishing at

the bottom crushed under the infinite weight of water above. Still the tenacity in the poetry denotes the determination to fight on. The poem reflects the ethos of Gloria Anzaldua, "By creating a new *mythos*-that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the way we behave- *la mestiza* creates a new consciousness" [10]. In the similar approach, the self awareness of her victimized state is adding to her strength to resist the oppressive scenario. As the poet puts her foot down, the poetry becomes a medium of combat.

My use  
My abuse  
I shall not tolerate any more  
I have been the victim  
But not anymore. [11]

The haunting echoes of repressive past have accentuated the necessity to break the confining mold. The poet is no more embarrassed with the knowledge of her humble, impoverished history that is accountable for her negated identity.

Today I am not shy  
To see myself dwarfed  
As if a stone is trapped  
In the narrow passages  
Winding the tall hills  
Lying lifeless. [12]

The contrast between poets' own dwarfing self and tall hills brings out the profundity of her besieged position in the overbearing patriarch society. Again, the direction bound long winding lanes have been juxtaposed against the still stone lying aimlessly. The contrasting images of dwarf and tall, moving and static, aimless and resolute are pointing towards the null and void identity of dalit women in brahminical society. The point to focus in the above lines is that poet did not surrender to hopelessness. She started on the self-affirming note that propelled her towards the path of self-discovery.

Another Poet RajniTilak a well knowndalit rights activist is acknowledged for her terse and hard-hitting style of writing. Unlike Takbhure, her poetry does not engage with the motifs of nature, sea, hills, clouds, stones, etc. On the contrary her choice of words is rather ruthless. Her poems at times, become so raw and realistic that they jolt the sensibility of the reader. "For a man / every woman is / a vagina . . . / a pair of breast . . . / inviting lips!" [13]. She spared neither the uppercaste feminist nor the dalit patriarch that denied her place in the sun. In the subsequent lines, RajniTilak debunks the notion of women being a monolith identity and brings down the argument in a single stroke in her poem "*AuratAurat Mein Antar*" (Difference among women)

Are there no differences  
among women?  
One sweeps and other is Savarn  
Both undergo similar birth pangs  
But one delivers in the hospital.  
Other delivers near a drain. [14]

Her sentiments have been re-appropriated in the essay by Dietrich “Dalit Movement and Women’s Movement”. According to the author, “Women’s movement was a middle class phenomenon which had no grasp of dalit issue” [15]. The issues universalized by Indian feminism continue to represent the trials and tribulations of urban middle class, educated women. While as, it failed to address the decisive issues of dalit women like police atrocities, explicit physical and sexual violence, lack of education, perpetual poverty and exploitation in unorganized employment sector, etc. SharmilaRege in her insightful essay “Dalit Feminist Standpoint” stated that, “In the Indian context a materialistic framework was central to the analysis of women’s oppression” [16]. The observation has been endorsed by Tilak through her poems. Her poetry is replete with references to severe economic paucity that shapes dalit girl’s upbringing and distinguishes her from the mainstream. In the following poem, while recollecting her own hardships, the poet is addressing the uppercaste counterpart who is economically better off.

My birthplace stank  
I fought through every inch  
Ruthless hard work  
But you went to the school  
Started afresh! [17]

Tilak’s poems seethe with intense anger against the unjust societal pressures and dalit patriarchy. There is a pressing call to liberate herself from the drudgery, debunking the notion of blissful courtship or marriage. “I am alone / I want to live alone / away from men and reproach” [18]. The edge in her poetry while addressing dalit patriarchy can’t be ignored. While addressing male dalit writers, her poetry takes a poignant view towards their lecherous overtones, “notable writers / in your leering vision / a woman’s beauty is her merit / her ugliness is demerit” [19]. Tilak wants to narrate the story of her womenfolk who remained invisible to the outside world. In the following lines, the poet is delineating the wretched state of dalit women since the beginning and lashes out at the different agencies responsible for the horrendous treatment against her community. Here her poetry gets transformed into a powerful social dialogue.

I want to narrate the untold miseries  
Forgotton stories of  
women fighting for centuries  
Against caste, patriarch and society. [20]

meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation” [21]. Taking the discussion forward from this note, the subsequent poem is a strong assertion of self-identity that interrupts the perceived notion of a compliant and defenseless dalit woman. Poet’s revolutionary tone is renegotiating her identity from a new radical perspective.

People call me quarrelsome,  
So am I  
Because that’s the truth  
Fighting since my childhood  
And in my adolescence  
I quarreled

Carrying siblings in my lap

When it was my time to play. [22]

The confrontational tone of her poetry is also somewhere critiquing her own nature for the prevailing wretchedness in her life. Sandra Bartky in her insightful essay, "On Psychological Oppression", pointed out that, "Systematically deceived as we are about the nature and origin of our unhappiness, our struggles are directed inwards towards self, . . ." [23]. But here on the contrary, the poet's struggle is gravitating towards her inability to restrain the social oppression instead of finding faults in her own makings. This becomes the point of departure. Here, the poet's keen insight into the systematic oppression is turning her into a rebel and not the victim of her own subjugation. "Bounded in chains / why can't I dwarf / Their customs and rituals?" [24]. The binary of 'I' and 'Their' has been clearly stated in the above lines. The poet is too aware to nurture any delusion of being the cause for the atrocities perpetuated against her in the name of social norms.

## **I. CONCLUSION**

Dalit women poets have come a long way from the age of obscurity. Their revolutionary outburst is an indication that they are all set to renegotiate their marginalized identity. The recent spurt in their literary representations is playing a decisive role in changing their image from a compliant, passive and defenseless being to an assertive individual. Their new found voice has created considerable waves within the discursive framework of Hindi dalit literature. They are now determined to pen down their own story, in their own language and at their own terms. Before I conclude, let the last words be from a dalit women writer T. J. Rekha Rani, a Telugu poet who has succinctly sum up the reaction of society on their writings.

Dalit women literature has shocked the Indian critics. They have never expected or ever thought that the women of this cadre would ever pickup a pen in their defense and raise such profound questions about their negated identity in Indian culture and history. [25]

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