

READING DALIT IDENTITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN JYOTI LANJEWAR'S POEMS

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Abstract

Jyoti Lanjewar was born on 25th November 1950, in Nagpur Maharashtra. Lanjewar was an acclaimed Marathi writer, critic, poet, feminist scholar and social activist. Women, womanhood, motherhood, struggle, sacrifice and human values are the important themes of her writings. Women, womanhood, motherhood, struggle, sacrifice and human values are the important themes of her writings. The present paper will try to understand the plight of Dalits particularly Dalit women using Jyoti Lanjewar's poems. Lanjewar talks about injustice and oppression in her poems but at the same time, there is a celebration of life in her poems. At times she writes about hopelessness and despair at other times she asserts herself, her Dalit identity and raises questions about equality and inclusion. Lanjewar's poems are powerful and authentic, through her poems she depicts the lives of Dalits and the problems they face on day to day basis. Lanjewar has creatively woven the tale of her sufferings into beautifully crafted rhythmic poems.

Jyoti Lanjewar has used the power of writing as a tool to protest against the injustices inflicted on them. Jyoti Lanjewar's poems also bring up the question of reviving the socio-cultural aspect to understand them and their writings as their writings deal with their consciousness and identity. She paves a way for a new cultural revolution where they will get accepted by society as they will get a wider readership. Taking into consideration the feminist theory it can be argued that in her poems Lanjewar presents the woman as a subject and no more as an object.

Keywords: identity, struggle, survival, rights, equality.

Introduction

Jyoti Lanjewar was born on 25th November 1950, in Nagpur Maharashtra. She completed her M.A, M.Phil and Ph.D from Nagpur and started teaching at S.B City College, Nagpur. She worked there for years and later on also became the head of the department over there. Jyoti Lanjewar was an acclaimed Marathi writer, critic, poet, feminist scholar and social activist. She has to her credit four poetry collections, seven books on criticism along some other works. Jyoti Lanjewar was honored with many prestigious awards including the Padmashri award for her writings. Her poems have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages and they are also part of the syllabus in various Indian and foreign universities. Women, womanhood, motherhood, struggle, sacrifice and human values are the important themes of her writings.

Statement of the Problem

Women, womanhood, motherhood, struggle, sacrifice and human values are the important themes of her writings. Literature represents our society as critics have already said that it is a mirror of our society. Enough literature is already available written about the themes of human suffering and plights. Subaltern literature, marginal literature or Dalit literature is literature that portrays human sufferings and miseries. Bill Ashcroft in his 1998 book *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* asserts that "Marginality has become an unprecedented source of creative energy for the marginalized people. The literature by the Burakumin of Japan, Backjeong of Korea, Midgan of Somalia, Dalits of India are existing instances of this phenomenon. They explore the underbelly of the society in a diction that subverts the middle-class concepts of linguistic etiquette and standards" (Ashcroft 72). In India, Dalit literature and Adivasi literature are particularly the pieces of works of literature that give voice to their sufferings and emotions. They are the people who have always been on the periphery but now they are carving ways for themselves on their own to represent themselves and assert their

identity the way mainstream society has always been doing and writing has become an effective tool for them to win the battle against injustice and discrimination.

The dominant themes in Dalit poetry are the questions of identity and equality. It was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision that the Dalits realized that they were denied basic human rights and they started to protest against the social system that oppressed them. They chose writing as one of the forms of their protest which ultimately helped them a lot in telling their stories to others. Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary defines 'Dalit' as someone who belongs to the lowest caste and gets very few advantages. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was against using the word Dalit and he always preferred to use the expression 'depressed classes', instead.

Review of Literature

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar promoted and supported Dalits and their writings. The history of Dalit literature can be traced back to the first Dalit literary conference held in 1958 which was not noticed by many. It was in the sixties that the hard work of writers like Anna Bhau Sathe, Shashankarrao Kharat and Narayan Surve played an essential role in developing and establishing Dalit literature. Dalit poetry has emerged out of painful, unjust social situations; hence they represent a painful narrative of the injustice done to them because the poets depict their traumatic first-hand experiences in their poems.

In India, Dalits, Adivasis and people belonging to lower social strata were exploited and suppressed for centuries by the higher castes. The basic right to education was denied to them, they were not allowed to speak against the injustices done to them. They were treated as slaves to the extent that they themselves considered themselves slaves to the higher castes. It took several reformers and movements to fight against the system that was oppressing and exploiting them to the worst levels. Gail Omvedt in his 1995 book titled *Dalit Visions* draws light on the rise of Dalit awakening and Dalit movements in the early 1980s that the "1980s were marked not only by the assertion of Dalits and other lower castes but also by the rise of other new social movements, of peasants fighting against their exploitation by the market and state of women, of tribal and caste," (82). K. Singh in his 2011 book *Dalitism and Feminism: Locating Women in Dalit Literature* states that "any discussion on Dalits and Dalitism is prone to be incomplete unless we take into account a strong undercurrent of Dalit women and their condition as a distinct stream under the overall space of Dalit literature" (15).

Bama Fustina's words give expression to the state of double marginalization of a Dalit woman as she states that "the position of Dalit women is both pitiful and humiliating. In the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church, they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment" (122).

While talking about the molestation and exploitation of Dalit women by the upper caste men one also needs to notice the hypocrisy that the upper caste people consider Dalits untouchables, they do not touch them nor do they allow the Dalits to touch them or the things belonging to them be it a well, temple or their houses. But they would forget about all these things while sexually abusing and exploiting the Dalit women.

Jyoti Lanjewar's poems are based on the politics of Dalit feminism. Her poems can be called a tribute to the womanhood, motherhood and resilient spirit of Dalit women. Her poems raise a voice for their empowerment so that they can lead respectable life in society. Lanjewar's poems give voice to the Dalit woman who has been treated as the other and whose voice has either been ignored or unheard because she did not have the proper agency to make herself and her sufferings heard. Her writings belong to the domain of protest literature, through her writings she strives to bring a positive

change in the lives of Dalit women. Writing for Lanjewar became an effective way of voicing the self. The themes, structure, style and language of her poetry are very much influenced by the sufferings of her people. Her poems deeply unsettle the dominant assumptions and theories.

The important aspect of her poetry is the fact that it opened possibilities not only in terms of concerns, themes and topics but also in the way language was used to narrate one's story. Her innate self, location and culture form an important part of her verse. There is bitterness, irony and sarcasm in the tone of her poetry. The urgent powerful tone of her poems is suggestive that her poems are a take on the lives of her people as they explore the themes such as womanhood, identity, relationships, political awareness, social awakening and self-exploration etc. Her poems inspired other women to write with a strong and confident voice.

'Mother' is one of her most celebrated and acclaimed poems. This poem deals with all aspects of Dalit life and their constant struggles to change their life for good. The poem depicts the selflessness and sacrificial nature of a mother's love. The poem's crux lies in Dalit feminism as it clearly mentions the plight of Dalit women and the way they were treated unfairly by society. Anupama Rao very aptly says that a Dalit woman is doubly marginalized, she asserts in her article that "a Dalit woman has to face "two distinct patriarchal structures and situations: first being the Brahmanical form of patriarchy that has deeply stigmatized Dalit women because of their caste status and the more intimate forms of control by Dalit men over the sexual and economic labor of 'their' women" (Rao 1). In Lanjewar's poem 'Mother' also, it can be observed that this Dalit woman was negatively affected by the patriarchy, she was abused by the men of the upper caste, by the Dalit men and her husband also exploited her. Following are a few stanzas from the poem 'Mother:'

Mother
I Never Saw you
In a newly brought
Brilliant brocaded
Nine yard earkali sari,
Metal necklace adorned
Or gold bracelets worn,
Not even rubber sandals
On your feet.
Ma
I saw you burning your soles
In the scorched heat
Hanging your abdomen's
Tender shoot bundled
On the acacia tree.
Carrying vats of tar
Amidst the construction crew
Repairing roads.

In this poem, the plight of Dalit women is very aptly depicted. This poem was translated into English by Lanjewar's daughter hence making it a tribute to motherhood and the sacrifices a mother makes to raise her children, especially a Dalit or any such mother who does not have access to so many basic amenities but still does her best to raise her children. The mother in the poem 'Mother' is a helpless Dalit mother who is working on a construction site, her children are lying in a cradle tied to a tree, she does not have sleepers to protect her feet and she works in the scorching sun as it is the question of survival for her and for her kids.

The imagery of road construction used in the poem suggests that on one hand the construction of the road suggests development and progress but behind this development and progress lies the fact that these roads were constructed on the place where the Dalits used to dwell. Their homes were demolished in order to construct the so-called roads that stood for the development. It is difficult to imagine the pain that this mother might be feeling while working on the road construction site as it had been her dwelling place once. The image evoked in this poem of a Dalit working woman is unique yet striking. The lines of this poem are tinged with sadness and sorrow.

In the next section of the poem Jyoti Lanjewar writes that:

Mother
To me, your tattered sari's end
Is as dear as the national flag.
The vermilion mark of your forehead
Accords semblance to the Ashok Chakra.
The mountains of your dreams
Prodigious than the tall Himalayas.
Your self-respect bears
The soaring wings of an eagle.

In the above section of the poem 'Mother,' there is a celebration of motherhood, the speaker of the poem is a Dalit daughter who is proud of her mother's hard work and dedication to raising her children.

In her poem 'Sting' Jyoti Lanjewar celebrates womanhood and motherhood. Lanjewar gives voice to all the voiceless women when she writes that:

How long must I endure the venomous sting?
How long must I chop my own wings?
Who has tethered my legs thus?
Who has ruined my mad hopes?

At times then I search for myself
In the page of history, I land
In the indigenous culture
The aborigine... Durga
The great goddess
At times YashodharaDraupadi seems an old story.

What is a woman supposed to be after all?
The originator of sins?
Graveyard of insults?
Or
Then the embracing motherhood: -
On whom nature gazes -
The daily devouring flesh?
Planting pretty delicate promises.

In the above poem, the anger in her tone can be read as she asserts that women are not the originator of sins nor should they be treated as a graveyard of insults, rather their womanhood and motherhood should be celebrated as they are the epitome of love, affection and play an important role in peacebuilding.

In the poem 'Coming Closed to the Shore' Jyoti Lanjewar laments over the plight of their lives and the harsh treatment they get from society. Lanjewar states that:

Even the stars are not mine
Wonder to which birth belongs
This anonym restlessness,
The contest of your words
I hid in my lips.

It needs to be noted that Dalit women are most vulnerable. They are safe neither in private spaces nor in public spaces. They feel the most unsafe in the public space where higher caste men exploit them and intimidate their men who fail to do anything for their women and children. Lanjewar focuses on the fact that most of the time the Dalit or the victims of social injustice remain silent and fail to express themselves because either they are not allowed to speak or they are not heard; hence their voices remain unheard.

‘Caves’ is also a renowned poem written by Jyoti Lanjewar; it can also be called the poem of the protest. The poem moves through the map of Dalit history depicting the atrocities inflicted on them, the way they remained quiet for years and finally, they gathered the courage and chose to speak for themselves. ‘Caves’, needs to be analyzed taking into view the Dalit feminist standpoint. The poem presents a Dalit woman’s voice against their oppression and subjugation. The poem questions the brutal atrocities the Dalits became a victim of in the name of caste and class. In the opening lines of the poem, Lanjewar writes about the brutal inhuman atrocities that have shattered the poet’s heart and carved out caves in the heart of the poet.

The poem can be analyzed using two perspectives the oppression of the Dalits in general and the exploitation of Dalit women in particular. The speaker of the poem is talking about the hardships yet she is also expecting a change: a change that will topple the oppressive power structures. The long awaiting change does take place in the later section of the poem where the speaker finds a voice of protest and rebellion.

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
in the rock of my heart
I must tread this forest with wary steps
Eyes fixed on the changing times
The tables have turned now
Protests spark
Now here
Now there.
I have been silent all these years
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
of human rights
How did we ever reach to this place?
This land which was never mother to us?
Which never gave us
even the life of cats and dogs?
I hold their unpardonable sins as a witness
and turn, here and now.
a rebel.

The speaker of her poem ‘Caves,’ is a victim of social discrimination and the narrator narrates that “their inhuman atrocities have carved caves in the rock of my heart.” The speaker of the poem brings

to attention that there had been a long disturbing history of suffering and oppression, and they did not speak against that oppression but:

The tables have turned now
I have been silent all these years
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
of human rights.

Now they are ready to protest and speak for their basic human rights. There is agony and pain in their heart, there is a lament over the fact that the land they live on never became their mother, never fostered them, and never identified their existence. In this poem, poetic imageries have played an important role in conveying the strong message of a rebellion and a protest. In the last lines of the poem, the poet declares her anger and opposition, it becomes a moment where the Dalit woman chooses to speak for herself, asserts her identity and refuses to remain silent.

In the poem titled 'Life Long Kinship,' Jyoti Lanjewar presents a positive approach to life.

Nobody can snatch the songs
From the enunciated lips of future
I am the living allegory
Of the annihilating sun
That burns all darkness
To rise.

Those that have drunk
To the darkness of orthodoxy
Those that invoke religions for self
For all such heads and pundits
I will dig mines, lay trenches
And fill gunpowder
To balk them all.

Now none of these hilly terrains
Can ever scare me again
As I have a lifelong kinship
With the tempestuous windstorm.

In the above stanza, Jyoti Lanjewar challenges the age-old rigid rules of society which treated Dalit people unjustly. The poem also articulates her hope and resolution.

Conclusion

Lanjewar's poems make effort to construct a vocal, active and assertive Dalit voice. She criticizes caste-oriented social injustice and oppression. The range of concerns of her poetry, its themes and the use of language are the most striking features of Lanjewar's poems. Her poems clearly exhibit her anger against the tyrannies these people have suffered in the past. Lanjewar uses poetry as a tool to raise her voice and speak for her people and others who have been a victim of discrimination. In Lanjewar's candour a celebration and an exploration of women's identity and selfhood can be observed clearly. The relevance of her poetry lies beyond themes, there is an innovation of form and structure in her poems. Her poems have played an important role in creating a new consciousness. They break new grounds with regard to experiences, sensibility and expressions that ultimately celebrate peace, courage, resistance and optimism.

The most striking feature of her poetry is the fact that her verse explored possibilities not just in different themes and subjects but the way language was handled and poetry was carved to speak, assert and resist. Through her verses, Lanjewar brought in her poems her innate self, enlightened by her sense of identity and her place in mainstream society. Her poems show a shift in poetic concerns. Her poems played a key role in slowly narrowing down the gap between the public and the private and between the margin and the center. Lanjewar inspired the other women to write with a strong and confident voice.

The entire process of writing in itself means to revive, evolve and explore. Through her writings, she voiced out her feelings with self-assertion and she shattered all preconceived notions. For her writing became an effective tool to voice the self. The act of writing enabled her to move toward a progressive journey and create order and personal space in her life. For her writing also became a therapeutic exercise. There is warmth, intimacy, and closeness in her words at the same time there is protest, anger and agitation.

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