
Telugu Dalit Women's Poetry: An Over View

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ABSTRACT

Publication Info

Article history :

Received : 02-05-2024
Accepted : 05-05-2024
DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v20i1.8

Key words:

Dalit Women, Identity,
Exploitation, Oppression,
Redressal, Resistance.

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Dalit women face discrimination on multiple fronts like African American women and Aborigines in Australia. They have to keep shifting from one position to another constantly. They are viewed as morally fragile, unreliable and treated as commodities always. Several instances of atrocities perpetuated by landlords and the wealthy sections in society have galvanised all Dalits into a strong vocal group that fears not to express anger, frustration and desire to retaliate whenever their patience is tested to the extreme. The Dalit women poets chose their own language and idiom. Their poetic journey from turning to God for support to declaring their identity and aspirations vociferously marks a remarkable trajectory. Poetry written by Dalit women in Telugu is vibrant, specific and relevant. Many new voices are heard depicting the deplorable conditions in which they live, demanding redress of their grievances.

Dalit writers make their personal experiences the basis of their writing. Always prominent in their writing is the idea that certain notions have to be revolted against, some values have to be rejected, and some areas of life have to be strengthened and built upon. Because Dalit writers write from a predetermined certitude, their writing is purposive. They write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems - their writing articulates this impatience with intensity. Dalit writers are activist - artists who write while engaged in movements. They regard their literature to be a movement. Their commitment is to the Dalit and the exploited classes. [S.K. Limbale, 2004]

As one goes through the creative works of the Dalits, it may be noticed that they have used the language of the quarters rather than the standard language. Standard language smacks of a class, which has been rejected by Dalit writers. Cultured people in society consider standard language to be the proper language for writing. Dalit writers have rejected this validation of standard language by the so called educated and cultured classes as it is felt 'conceited'. The language of the 'harijanwada' is more familiar to them than standard language. In fact, standard language does not include all the words of Dalit dialects. Besides, the ability to voice one's experience in one's mother tongue gives greater sharpness to the expression.

Just as the African Americans have scoffed at the word 'Negro' and called themselves 'Blacks', Dalits also ridiculed the term 'Harijans' and named themselves 'Dalits'.

Creative writing of the sufferers across the continents is a unique reflection of pain

and hurt feelings portrayed eloquently, powerfully, and touchingly. Folk forms, folk songs and performing artistes projected the suppressed feelings of the oppressed Dalits effectively. The rankling wound allows not the sufferer live in comfort or peace. Dalit poetry has drawn public attention with strongly worded stunning pictures of dreadful discrimination.

What is conspicuous in the poetry of Telugu Dalit Women is that they always chose and maintained a specific and different path, idiom and experiences portrayed were typically feminine. Prior to 1940 not many women were educated. Some learnt Christian hymns, and expressed their creative force in a spiritual manner. From 1890 evidence of such poems was available. A few poems written by Telugu Dalit women which were translated from Telugu into English by me are presented as under:

A Song

Graceful Esu swamy- come to me
 Fulfilling all my needs, shower love on me
 Like rain and shine for trees
 Pleasure and pain are to my misery
 Certainly needed now as never before.
 Hands like Martha, mercy of Mariamma
 My guide give me, bless with compassion Swamy.
 Systematise my life, though a labour
 Cleanse me corrupted with illusions.
 Father's censure symbol of love
 Father's castigation for good of the child
 If required reprimand, yet save me
 Swamy punitive though, saviour you are;
 Vindictive Satan ready to devour me.

[Philip B.Gnana Ratnamma's Poem ' A Song' My Trans 13]

Dedicated Writer'Vesapogu Gulbanamma [1905-1971] was born in Warangal and was a pastor when women were not permitted. Her hymns were highly inspirational.

Total Surrender [Raga –Yaman]

Sree Yehova offer do I, welfare at heart
 Without parting with my prosperity in your presence
 With total devotion dwell I always - *Sree Yehova*.
 Absolute surrender at your feet, offering all my possessions
 Serve you without any flaw
 Accept me Father, *Sree Yehova*.
 You are my Lord forever, your child certainly
 I am Before the Sacred Lord,
 I pledge my life
 For blessed life, *Sree Yehova*.
 Oh my Lord let me submit, fill my self with devotion
 Let auspicious abilities lead me well
 Load my life, *Sree Yehova*.
 Psalms of praise, holy hymns
 Embellish thy name ever, my savior

You are the protector, Sree Yehova. [My Trans 14]].

The translator confesses his inability to translate the 'raaga' soul of Indian music into English. However, the spirit and text are tendered faithfully into an alien language like English to the best possible extent.

Veenavaani' Theresa Devadaanam [1937] was born in Guntur and was a teacher for a long time. She took part in freedom fight and she wrote socially relevant poems and articles extensively.

Eradicating Untouchability

Untouchability horrifying than leprosy
 If not disallowed progress nil
 They called us Adi Andhras then,
 Call us Harijans today
 Branding us Maalas, Maadigas on this earth
 Untouchability attached to us
 Untouchable you call, extract work well;
 Servant's work has no untouchability !
 Shouting differences, raped our women
 Maalas were crushed, Maadigas driven out
 Kept us apart, smiles on the faces
 Branded sacrificial goats, kept us confined;
 Slaves we are, sufferings for us
 Trained in bonded labour, toil we always
 Destined to suffer, deliverance no where.

Stain of Maadiga won't you carry?
 Never say Maadiga even by slip
 Jewel like shining, bright star in the sky,
 Arundhati her name, your clan lady!
 Stainless shines your pretty vote
 Teach a lesson to the tainted fellows illness you cure,
 Ill-treated folks bear not bruises,
 Bottom line reached
 Ambedkar's voice stirs us all!

[My Trans 21]]

Leftist ideology and ensuing feminist trends stirred some Dalit women poets to confront vestiges of patriarchal fervour with all their might. Like all women here too exploitation goes on unremittingly. Besides social, domestic oppression, sexual harassment is singularly specific to Dalit women.

Some Dalit women took part in different movements and emerged as leaders. It is a moot point to question whether movements created leaders or ordinary women sustained movements through their leadership qualities.

As Debjani Ganguly opines in her book *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds*:

The pain of Dalits is palpable and embodied. I cannot presume to reduce it to a text or even to a series of texts, or even to discourse pure and simple. Its corporeal presence will

forever cast an anguished shadow over anything one writes, or has written, about it. At the same time, it is also a pain that has long, complex and overlapping histories, histories about which there is even today hardly any consensus, notwithstanding the tomes that have been devoted to their analysis. (10)

Superstitions are bane of any society, more so among uneducated, poverty ridden Dalits. In the name of religion, appeasing an angry village goddess, many Dalit girls are forced to become 'Jogini', 'Basivi', 'Devadasi', 'Mathangi' or 'Basivi' in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. They are, in fact, pleasure givers to all men in the villages. Here, ironically untouchability doesn't matter, since seeking pleasure is the main goal. Religion is used as a ruse to lure or force an innocent girl child in Dalit families in getting married first to a village deity and then become a puppet to satiate carnal desires of men of means. This abominable practice is on the wane slowly due to the relentless efforts of social reformers and educated Dalit women.

Dr Challapalli Swarupa Rani [1980] a highly accomplished lady is credited with bringing out a volume of poetry, a representative work of Dalit Women's poetry. Her powerful poetry reflects the self-respect of Dalits and the need to assert themselves.

Forbidden History

As a babe in the womb
depicted as an untouchable
stamped with a low caste,
I was born.
That day itself branded a slut
amidst senseless rules
in the cesspools of superstitions cast away,
I became a forbidden woman.
My childhood
that should grow
amidst pampering, scampering
has prelude of sorrowful songs.
Scorns of generations indifference of ages
I carry as a legacy.
In this holy land of 'karma'
as a newborn infant
yet to open eyes
credit for the identity
as a 'prostitute', is mine.
My story that demands
all cyber revolutions
to lower their heads
at once in to stone ages,
will be inscribed in which canto
in the annals of this country's history? [My Ttrans 43]

[In some parts of Karnataka state there is a practice of tender aged girl children from Dalit families forced to become 'Basivi's', pleasure givers to village men].

Gogu Shyamala [1969] was born in Ranga Reddy district and functioned as a full time activist in Rythu Coolie union. Subsequently she encountered troubles due to police

harassment. Under her leadership crimes against women of all hues were taken up by many organizations. She attended third world conference against apartheid in Durban in 2001 as an Indian representative.

Varada Goodu*

[* Halo round the sun or the moon in moist or misty weather]

I am the victim in this country
I am the way to revolution too!

.....
My past lies in suppression
my present and future ensure revolt,
Caste my target,
Durban my triumph!

[My Trans 39]]

Jaajula Gowri [1967] was born in Secunderabad. Ambedkar's life instilled confidence in her and she took part widely in Dalit movement. Her short stories are as well received as her poetry.

I will bash up!

Among annals of history stacked truth
I am standing on precipice of innocence
subjected to societal scorn,
to the charms of cheats and male chauvinism
succumbed dalit woman, I am
Braving innumerable torments,
intolerable insults,
from unbowed audacity of 'Madiga'
Self itself declare a revolt!
Societal superciliousness
I will bash up!

[My Trans 37]

Dalit women face discrimination on multiple fronts like African American women and Aborigines in Australia. They have to keep shifting from one position to another constantly. They are viewed as morally fragile, unreliable and treated as commodities always. Some critics opine that ill-treatment the women face and the agony they experience can best be expressed by poets from these sections only. Hence, they only are entitled to create their own literature.

Untouchable Assault

I am 'untouchable Sunitha' speaking now
long back forgotten by you all.
Why I mention untouchability
is because in this country
just like untouchable hunger
untouchable exploitation,
untouchable (suicides) murders
untouchable sexual assaults too exist.

It may surprise you
with my love for Yogeswar Reddy as my witness
mine is certainly untouchable suicide...!

Otherwise I too would have
 remained as freshly flavoured tandoori
 on parliament dining tables,
 instead of being buried behind newspapers!
 Since education, love, marriage here carry
 colour, flavour, taste of caste,
 our Nirmala's death the other day
 became a 'natural death'.
 Yesterday as my younger child
 learnt alphabet in school
 with the apprehension that her low caste eyes
 may brighten with enlightenment
 the teacher's eyes focussed on them for 'guru dakshina'.

No need to tell of poor nurses in hospitals ---
 served night long, with compassion
 tending their cancerous tumours
 Instead of certifying as 'Florence Nightingale'
 they creep on her 'sister' heart as cancer cells.
 Here they pay compensation
 to our honour and life occasionally.
 Strange thing is
 even after our (murders) deaths,
 instead of extending a little respect
 hurling lance-like invectives
 "who asked them to flirt?"
 "who asked them to die?"
 they torment our conscience, killing once again.
 Now tell me, in this country
 don't murders and assaults carry
 untouchability tag?

[In memory of Sunitha] [Translated by T.S.Chandra Mouli]

Many poems cited in this paper are meant to be read in full and get a feel of the spirit with which they are created. Quest for identity is common for all people across the globe. What sets apart poetry by Dalit women is their incessant struggle against exploitation in diverse dimensions. Sexual exploitation is the most abominable form of harassment for any lady in the world. Audio and visual media generate hype whenever a Dalit woman's modesty is outraged and try to perpetuate sense of insecurity and vulnerability among Dalit women. Several instances of atrocities perpetrated by landlords and the wealthy sections in society have galvanised all Dalits into a strong vocal group that fears not to express anger, frustration and desire to retaliate whenever their patience is stretched to the extreme.

Difference of views on account of categorisation of SC community into sub-categories in former composite Andhra Pradesh for creating reservations in administrative and educational arenas has dented the powerful movement that gathered magnitude and momentum earlier. Regional aspirations to secure a separate state have tentatively veiled Dalit

movement in Telugu speaking areas. Now that a separate state of Telangana has been created a decade ago and post- bifurcation issues are sought to be resolved amicably, ensuing environment generates hopes that Telugu Dalit women will be able to raise their voice powerfully as always to create a niche for their creative work.

Poetry written by the Dalit women in Telugu is vibrant, specific and relevant. Many new voices are heard depicting the deplorable conditions in which they live, demanding redress of their grievances. Their efforts and sincerity deserve all compliments and commendation. Poetic excellence of Telugu Dalit women can be assessed from the poems cited above.

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