



Silenced Voices: An Analysis of Unheard Voices in Hira Bansode's Poetry

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Introduction

“The margins of the nation displace the centre; the people of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis” (Homi Bhabha, 1990: 6). Marginalisation works at different levels in Dalit literature. Dalit Literature is an expression of revolution for humility and a search for its place in almost every field including literature. Dalits were represented merely as sufferers in the writings of upper-class writers. As Pantawane asserted, “Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution” and all Dalit writers endeavour to inculcate that essence in their work. Like all Dalit Literature, Dalit Poetry constitutes another dissenting collection of voices that try to articulate the silent anguish, pain, and anger of the Dalits. For them, like most other Dalit writers and thinkers, caste is much more real than class. Consequently, their articulation revolves around the experiences that spring from the humiliating caste equations of Hindu society. Dalit Poetry has tried to rework a new aesthetic, different from the mainstream literature, by exploring areas of experience neglected by the mainstream poetic tradition. Dalit Poetry marks itself by rejecting values of the mainstream poetic tradition like propriety, balance, restraint, and understatement. They often challenge even notions of patriotism.

Dalit women poets have primarily focused on women's experiences within as well as without. Dalit women's experience seems to be qualitatively different. As has been often observed Dalit women are like drums, beaten on both sides. Or one can say that thus they are 'twice Dalit' - Dalits in the larger social scheme and Dalits within their own community as well. Thus, their poetry tends to be more introspective and less given into sloganeering and abuse. It is more mature, sober, and larger in its concerns. Much of Dalit women's poetry is conscious of form, less angry and complaining. There is even a time of celebration of Dalit identity in their poetry.

Hira Bansode, one of the best-known poets and the most celebrated poet of Dalit Literature chose poetry as a medium to express her agony and disbelief against the rigid and futile divisions on the basis of caste. Her

three poetry collections *Pournima*, *Phiryad* (1984) and *Phoenix* (2001) are highly acclaimed and have received several awards. Her works reveal the collective consciousness of her community whose voice had remained suppressed through the annals of history. Her poetry aspires to give voice to the dreams, unfulfilled hopes, and pain of the Dalit community who occupy a rather oppressed position in Indian society. She had managed, with encouragement from her husband and her father-in-law, to acquire higher education and even managed to secure a government job with the Indian Railways. Her poetry originates from her own experiences and tends to be gentle and understated. With a subtle irony she is able to express the pain and anguish of the Dalit existence, the voice of the marginalised, which is marked by constant deprivation. This paper 'Voices from the Margin: An Analysis of Hira Bansode's Poems' focuses on her poems that illustrates the voice of the marginalised Dalit. She vehemently attacks and challenges the ideas of caste, atrocities, and injustices inflicted upon Dalits. Her poetry carries the themes of alienation, freedom from all sorts of bondage and subjugation, estrangement, search for identity and dignity.

Bell Hooks says, "When black people are talked about focus tends to be on black men while when women are talked about focus tends to be on white women". Women have always been regarded as the other and in the caste system, they are marginalised twice on the basis of gender as well as caste basis. Bansode asserts that the high caste women are established in society, but Dalit women must struggle for their basic needs. Bansode's writings question the oppressive doctrine, and give voice to the marginalised, particularly women who are considered "like a drum (of Manu) that is beaten at both ends... and continues to be so."

Silenced Voices in Hira Bansode's Poems

The position of Dalit women is visualised by Hira Bansode in her introduction to the collection of poems *Phiryad*. She writes, "I visualise a funny picture. A white-collar woman is running behind a western lady... and two thousand miles behind the white-collared woman, there is a tiny point on the horizon, a Dalit woman... travelling in that direction This is an uneven race."

Hira Bansode's personal struggle has found a place in her poetry, both the title and content of her poems are piercing through the socio-cultural conclave that have structured our society. In her poem 'Sanskriti', Hira Bansode rebels against the great culture of India.

"Great culture of this land

To hell with you!...

We are ashamed to call you mother.

You may be to some,

But to us you are an evil step-mother.

Like age-old Kunti

Abandoning her son Karna

You denied us your motherhood" (Sanskriti, 1-13).

She attacks the so-called civilization which has been boosted often but internally remains hollow. Her deep agonies are visible in the lines,

“We’ve sung our tearful songs

Unsoothed by your lullaby.

Our humanity tested again and again.” (Sanskriti, 24-26).

She ends the poem with the note,

“Therefore,

Great culture of this land

To hell with you!

To hell with you!” (Sanskriti, 42-45).

Society which still has not changed much for Dalits is evident in another poem, ‘Bosom Friend’. As the title suggests this poem is about a very good friend, a woman friend, who accepts the poet’s invitation for dinner and visits her for the first time. The poem is a vehement critique of the hypocritical caste-ridden society. It speaks about the untold sufferings and insults of the Dalit at the hands of the upper castes for centuries. The narrator is a Dalit girl who has invited her upper-caste rich friend to dinner. The poem opens with the speaker's surprise as well as admiration and gratitude for the friend who seems to have broken through the caste and traditional barriers to reach out to her untouchable friend. This friend, who obviously is from a higher caste, surprises the poet because women, who are actually the worst victims of oppressive traditions, are often the most orthodox defenders of the same traditions. The poet is overwhelmed by this magnanimous gesture and the courage shown by her friend. Her own small existence is marked by her pocket-sized house.

“But you came with a mind large as the sky to my pocket size house.

I thought you had ripped out all those caste things

You came bridging that chasm that divides us

Truly, friend I was really happy” (Bosom Friend, 4-8).

Her expectations are shattered the moment she offers food to her friend. The friend smirks at the way the food is arranged and promptly reproaches the poet for her inability to serve food the way upper-caste people do.

“You still don’t know how to serve food

Truly, you folk will never improve” (Bosom Friend, 15-16).

This heartless reproach reopens the chasm that was bridged for some time with the friend’s visit. This us and them divide, it seems, has much deeper roots. Identities that are built up on the notions of pure/impure need much more than a visit to be merged into one human identity. The poet now turns inwards with this reproach. The poet’s outstretched hands, which had touched the sky of freedom, freedom from her caste bondage, find rejection. She feels ashamed.

“I was ashamed, really ashamed

My hand which had just touched the sky was knocked

Down

I was silent” (Bosom Friend, 17-20).

A further reproach from the friend for not serving buttermilk makes her sad and speechless. The sky, a symbol of hope and freedom, which was within reach a moment ago recedes back. The hurt, almost a betrayal, stirs up memories of loss and deprivation.

“I was sad, then numb

But the next moment I came back to life.

A stone dropped in the water stirs up things on the bottom.” (Bosom Friend, 26-29).

The poet wakes up to the reality of her existence which she had forgotten for a moment in a state of heightened expectation, triggered by the visit of this friend. Though she now leads a middle-class existence, her past is marked by deprivation and struggle. An existence marked by much deprivation leaves its mark on the mind and shapes habits of thought that are difficult to shake off. This is something that the friend cannot understand because she is far removed from this experience due to her privileged position in society. There is a slight reproach along with a sense of hurt in the poet’s tone. Though she had accepted the poet’s invitation and visited her house, in apparent disregard for caste or tradition, she still carries the baggage of her tradition in her mind.

“Dear Friend-you have not discarded your tradition

Its roots go deep in your mind

And that’s true, true, true

Friend” (Bosom Friend, 44-47).

Though this friend has crossed the physical threshold of caste she still carries it in her mind. She has recreated the emotional and psychological divide once again within the poet’s house. The ‘you’ in her phrase ‘you folk will never improve’ once again imprisons the poet within a predefined psycho-social space and simultaneously redefines herself in opposition to the poet’s identity. She denies the poet’s essential humanity by formulating in a fixed communal identity.

The poem ends with a couple of theoretical questions,

“Are you going to tell me what

Mistakes I made?

Are you going to tell me my

Mistakes?” (Bosom Friend, 46-47). These questions carry within them a reproach as well as a challenge.

These questions also put this visit in its real perspective. Friends visit each other to share, to be together in an emotional and social bond, and not to find faults. This friend makes the visit but retains her sense of superiority. The attitude displayed by this friend is symptomatic of a larger problem that simply cannot be resolved by empty gestures like this visit. The chasm of caste that divides people, that sets people up in a hierarchy can only change when we change habits of thought. This divide can only be bridged in a spirit of accommodation and understanding, by accepting alternate realities and alternate identities.

In the poem 'Ghulam', she expresses the marginalisation faced by a whole lot of women; she satirically traces the pages of history and myth with examples of Sita, Ahilya, Yashodhara, and Draupadi and says "in that country, women are still a slave." Her tribute to Buddha's wife in the poem 'Yashodhara' attempts to understand the depth of Yashodhara's experience after she is abandoned by her famous husband. The poet laments and tries to seek answers to why Yashodhara was forgotten. Her deepest agony can be felt in the poem where she writes:

"O Yashodhara!

You are like a dream of sharp pain,

life-long sorrow....

we were brightened by Buddha's light,

but you absorbed the dark

until your life was mottled blue and dark,

a fragmented life, burned out, (Yashodhara, 1-8).

Bansode further continues:

"But history doesn't talk about

The great story of your sacrifice....

O Yashodhara!

I am ashamed of the injustice." (Yashodhara, 41-49).

Conclusion

Hira Bansode offers a variety of concerns in her poems. She attacks the caste divisions arguing that these are not mythical or cultural manifestations but something that reflects the interest of the dominant class, castes, and gender. Her writings offer a voice identifying itself empathically with those on the margins. Her emphasis is equally on the upliftment of Dalits as well as women and her poems offer a space to those who are lost on the horizons, it appeals to equalize this uneven race.

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