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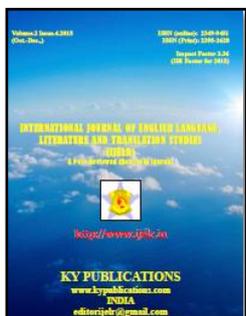
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POETRY OF PRADNYA LOKHANDE:
A MANIFESTATION OF DALIT FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature is seen primarily as a protest against the establishment, as a commitment for instilling new values and aims at a new order. There is a lot of frustration, a lot of anger, and a lot of hope in it. It invokes equality, justice and freedom for all. It is not just modern, but a new kind of writing in terms of experience and sensibility, structure and style. In dalit literature, Poetry comes first, followed by other kinds of writing such as autobiography, drama, criticism etc. The protagonist, be it of a poem or an autobiography, is usually projected as a rebel standing up against subjugation, humiliation and atrocities and is also shown at times as 'the precursor of the dawn of a new life'. The poets are, of course, in the front line of Dalit writing. The paper tries to focus on dalit women poetry which is basically imbued with dalit feminism and the protest against the established supremacy of the high caste. The paper elaborately deals with the trends and tendencies in the writings of the new generation Dalit women writers in general and the writing of Pradnya Lokhande, as a leading feminist voice in particular.

Key Words: Dalit, patriarchy, protest, identity, mainstream poetry.

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Dalit poetry has acquired a distinct place in the literary culture of Maharashtra. Dalit literature mainly comprises Dalit poetry and Dalit self narrations. More than half of Dalit literature consists of poetry. In fact, Dalit literature begins with Dalit poetry as it inspired the poets to wield their pens for revolt, protest, revenge, and anger against upper caste oppression and exploitation, unjust and enslaving social customs and traditions. According to Vimal Thorat, "The most original voice of Marathi Dalit literature found its best expression in poetry."¹ The process of poetry arising out of a distressed cry is the core of Dalit literature, necessarily because in these utterances protest seems to come from the offended and the injured who have laboured like slaves for centuries together to gain the lost identity. The protest of the Dalits against the establishment finds its best expression in the Dalit poetry. Their poetry, like other forms of literature, portrays the life and struggle of the low castes for dignity, pride, justice and equality. Dalit poetry challenges the existing literary traditions, critical theories, and literary aesthetics. It is distinct, because it is completely different from the theory and the aesthetics of mainstream poetry. The poets make an attempt to use images as well as words which come from their own experiences. Dalit poetry is mainly inspired by the humanistic philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar who taught the ways towards liberty from the clutches of Brahminic slavery, towards equality between Dalit and

Non-dalit, towards humanity of social harmony stability. These universal values are accrued, apart from the weapons of education and agitation.

With the progress of creative writings, considerable number of Dalit women came forward to question the caste-class-patriarchal agencies that have assigned Dalit women a marginal position. The women poets claim for a distinct, recognizable place in Dalit literature. Their poems forcibly sketch the usual suffering of the lower section of society. The core of their poetry seems to be the discrimination meted out to the Dalits, former untouchable in a Hindu social structure. The poems written by the women poets have distinguishing features of being deeper, sincere, and honest apart from women's sensibility. It is the women's voice which always goes deeper and has at its disposal something distinct that can never be found in the writings of their male counterparts.

Dalit women poets are sensitive and sensible enough to present their plight in the social order. They brought forth how women belonged to lesser castes are ground down under the burden of caste - class and male dominance. A woman, subjected to the female body whether as an earner, a child bearing mother, a core of the family, or as a labourer, occupies a position of vital importance in the writings of women poets. Dealing with problems of prejudice, oppression, poverty, deprivation, they also bring into focus the problems occur due to gender bias. Dalit women poets crave for freedom from their double slavery as women and demand equality as Dalits. These twin values are held as essence of their writings. They oppose male hegemony and dominance and so sometimes are rigid in their approach. Their questions are close to their identity as a woman, as a Dalit and as a human.

Daya Pawar's daughter, Pradnya Pawar Lokhande is the most acclaimed of today's young Marathi poets. She is considered one of the most important representatives of Dalit women community to give vent to their anger, agony, and suffering through poems. Her poetry reveals the social rather than individual sorrow. Rather, it is in the very nature of Dalit poetry that it believes in humanity where the society comes first. She has so far published five anthologies of poetry entitled *Antahstha* (1993), *Utkat Jiwaghenya Dhagiwar* (2002), *Mi Bhidawu Pahatey Samagrashi Dola* (2007), *Aarpaar Layit Pranantik* (2009,2010) and *Drushyancha Dhobal Samudra* (2013). Through these poetic volumes she questioned the caste-class-gender problems in the country in a blatant manner.

Pradnya Lokhande vehemently protests against the social values that blinded and maimed the Dalits. Like other women poets, she seeks the solace at the feet of Ambedkar because of his role as Saviour. She acknowledges that the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar is the only new sun that brings the rays of hopes in the life of darkness. She highlights the agony, pain and rage of her heart in every poem. Her concern is not only to the lower caste but to the triple oppressed Dalit women. The Dalit as well as the non- Dalits have appeared as inborn enemies for the women. Her concern is more public than private. She does not speak her heart, but speaks her mind through the poetry. According to R.G. Jadhao, "*Social consciousness in Dalit poetry is getting standardized. This poetry is becoming confined to provocative emotional outbursts. It is getting set into the usual moulds of revolt, helplessness and protest.*"²

In many of her poems, she struggles against rape, domestic abuse, environmental destruction, equal wages and mental-physical health of women. As women's movement has so far been the prerogative of non-Dalit women, Dalit women writers have come forward to voice their angst and experiences through their writings. Therefore, their poetry is sheer experiential rather than imaginative. It is based on the first hand experience of caste-class and gender discrimination in the society. The realistic approach and the social content make their poetry distinct from the non-Dalit poets. She expresses her disillusionment over the brutal incident in her poem, "Love in the time of Khairlanji". She puts in it, the womanly feelings and womanly sorrow on the unlawful treatment she receives in this caste- class bound Indian society.

She wanted to be human
In every battle,
In every decapitation,
Every riot,
In the anarchy of violence

In Khairlaji,
And even after Khairlanji.³

The perpetual sufferings of women are not yet stopped. She, being the agent of purity- pollution notions of Hindu religio-cultural set up, is still living in slavery. The weeping wounds of centuries are yet to dry. The poet, being a woman and being a human, presents the trauma in the lives of women. She is destined to be sad, sorrowful and distressed. She further asks question to herself:

Why do I cry?
I can't find solace after I weep
Like Aristotle's catharsis
How far is yet
The battle against caste...
How far is there
The last man standing in the queue⁴

In the poem "Kokila" (*Cuckoo*) she protests against the male dominance and male preference which has resulted in discriminated humiliated status accorded to the females.

Haven't you bother ever

While cutting down her wings
Souring high
And while cutting her flourishing throat
Why haven't you hesitate.
The ego in you has fanned
By Manu's "na stree swatnraym arhati"
And
Even you, established a fence around
Witnessed by the system⁵

Men and women are the two integral and inseparable parts of the society. In fact, the overall development of the society is the end product of its collective growth. But women as the weaker sex are subordinated and even subdued by their male counterparts. She is not allowed to spread her wings or even to breathe freely. The social system is patronizing the male ego and male dominance confirming the subsidiary status to women. The universal question of gender inequality is severe in our country because of the religious base and the cultural notions. The yoke of the religious rituals and systematized role of women are still followed in the modern India. Still she is guided by the codes of ancient religious laws and injunctions issued by Manu. According to the poet women themselves are sometimes guilty as they have accepted the yoke of the religion and social system which unknowingly usurped their rights and even identity. As a true radical feminist, the poet condemns such idealistic, blind acceptance of the system.

A Dalit woman today is pre-occupied with the freedom of caste-class- gender burden. The writings of the upper caste women and the Dalit women are different as the gender oppression is the unique issue for mainstream women writers, while gender along with caste are the dual agency that operates to cut the wings of Dalit woman. It is an urge of the Dalit feminism that a human being, though he/she belongs to the last tier, should be the receiving end of every opportunity. Then nobody would sketch the lame duck or the lost ship in the ocean or the falling leaves of the winter.

.....
I will lose the present
While living the past.⁶

The rejection of the stereotype history is the feature of Dalit literature. The alphabet is now a weapon in the hands of the Dalits-a weapon to defend and at times attack the deadly oppression perpetuated by Brahmanism for centuries. They aspire to remould the history by looking at it from the point of view of the downtrodden. The people, who have been denied a basic humanity and banished from the world of

knowledge, have now stormed into literary avenues. It is the fierce wind of Dalit women poetry that created a great future in the enlightened world of literary culture.

The Dalits are ready to remove the history of upper caste dominance. They resolve to create new history in which humans will be treated as humans. Dalit feminist literature anticipates that, all people should be respected and treated as human beings irrespective of their caste. Rebellion, revolt, anguish and agony are commonly found in Dalit feminist literature that craves for equality and justice. They stand against illiteracy, atrocity, suppression and all round exploitation. They give expression to their revolt against existing conditions and hurdles in their lives through their writings.

Being a woman in modern India is being caged herself in the trio : woman-wife-mother. A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of this trio. Otherwise, she is perceived as a useless and unworthy according to the traditional Indian view. Moreover, she is only an entity in the male defined and male dominated context. Vrinda Nabar says: "From beggar to bai, to housewife, the one common thread linking these women together is their more or less unquestioned acceptance of their role as male/husband/father defined. They exist in relation to a particular male principle and it is their mission to cement that principle."⁷

Pradnya Lokhande as a voice of Dalit feminist movement chooses the medium of poetry to express herself. She raises her voice against the inhuman activities through the medium of poetry which is nothing but the human voice. Her poetry thus is the analysis of the pathetic life of the ostracized in the name of caste and gender. The foundation of Dalit poetry is their power of language that expresses their feelings without any gaps. Dalit women poetry, thus, becomes the academic stance of the women who aim to challenge the hegemonic reality of the patriotic society.

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