

## LITERARY AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDERED SUBALTERN AND CASTE: IS ANYONE LISTENING . . . WHO CARES?

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### INTRODUCTION

Caste and Gender have played a volatile role in the modern civilization. Both the terms are used to degrade and even rule the subaltern classes. Caste was the basis of discrimination in pre as well as post independent India and gender came to be known as another distinct feature to subalternise the women. Gendered subaltern came to fore with the increasing awareness on women empowerment. The more the female or women brigade came to be aware of their rights the more they realized how, ideologically, they had been ruled by the patriarchy over centuries. Gender and Caste are socially constructed categories. Many people today confuse and converge the two terms sex and gender and often use them interchangeably. Sex is a term which distinguishes male and female in terms of biological differences. Gender is the prescribed roles that society has constructed in male and female. Elaine Showalter in the essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” compares the differences between men and women on different grounds i.e. linguistic, psychological, biological and cultural and comes to the point that the only difference that consists between the two sexes is that of culture. The different cultural backgrounds create differences between men and women. As culture is a constructed ideology, it is precisely that either create or mar differences.

It is through literature that I will point out the differences between caste and gender discrimination. Through the works of Urmila Pawar *The Childhood Tale*, Premchand’s *Shroud*, Maya Angleou’s *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Margaret Atwood’s *This is a Photograph of Me*.

“Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.”

**-C. S. Lewis**

As C.S. Lewis quotes, literature not only describes reality but also adds to it. Literature is not merely a depiction of reality; it is rather a value-addition. Literary works are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in society. They are a depiction of the different facets of common man's life. Classical literary works serve as a food for thought and a tonic for imagination and creativity. It is through reading such great literary and poetic works, that one understands life. They help a person take a closer look at the different facets of life. In many ways, it can change one's perspective towards life. Lives of brilliant achievers and individuals, who have made a valuable contribution to society, are sketched in their biographies. These works

give the readers an insight into the lives of these eminent people, while also serving as a bible of ideals. Literature is a strong tool of our society. It is the mirror of our society. Today to study the culture of a particular place we not only stick to historical facts but also depend heavily on literature of that time. For example- to study the nineteenth century Victorian England novels of Charles Dickens are as helpful as to study a draft on the growth of science or history books. Where, on the one hand history books ascribe to facts and are concerned with the 5 W's and 1 H, literature goes a step further and describes the impact of industrialization on masses and tells the untold story.

In a short story, originally written in Marathi and translated by Jahnvi Phalkey and Keerti Ramachandra, *A Childhood Tale* by Urmila Pawar, the narrator states:

*“A long time went by but the pujari did not come out. We sat there, on the temple steps waiting for the prasad. . . he opened door and Ulgavva, the daughter of a Kombati came out looking scared, as if she was about to cry. . . right behind her came the pujari but he hurried away without giving us any Prasad.”*

The down-trodden, sub-caste, subaltern women have always been the object of sexual desire for people like pujaris and their “Other” status both as gendered subaltern and of a minority caste is exploited. In the novel ‘Untouchable’ by Mulk Raj Anand, a girl of lower caste, Sohini, sister of the protagonist Bakha, is exploited by a “Brahmin” *pujari*. Priest of the temple tries to harass her physically in order to fulfill his sexual desire but when he does not get this opportunity he cries polluted, polluted, polluted:

*“Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service you have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog!”*

Sohini explains after this incident. . . “That man, that man,” she said “that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled.”

In *A Childhood Tale*, Urmila Pawar talks about her own experience as a dalit child and wondered why people used to say : “*You there . . . go away . . . go far away . . . you might touch me . . .*”

Her mother used to make baskets and often sent her to deliver those baskets:

*“... Aai would send me to deliver the baskets to people’s homes. Those people would make me stand outside the door, sprinkle water on the baskets and supas before picking them up. They would drop the money onto my palm from above. Was their hand going to burn and turn black if it touched mine, I wondered? “*

As a child Urmila Pawar was led to wonder what makes her the “Other” and why she was being given “the other” treatment. All the children of low caste when given this kind of treatment feel the same. They never understand the social constructs of ‘caste biased-ness’. In Premchand’s short story *Shroud* “they had no fear of being called to account and no anxiety about getting a bad name. They had long ago overcome all such sentiments.” This is the stark reality of the “Other” downtrodden, lower castes, they are so used to listening and abuses. Nothing matters to them; they have no “*izzat*” of their own because they are a part of a minority other.

Another strange ritual that the story points out is “what a bad custom it is that one who didn’t have a rag to cover her body in her lifetime must have a new shroud after her death”. This

yet again shows the stark difference between the powerful and the powerless, where on one side there are huge funeral processes for the powerful the powerless merely struggle for a piece of cloth at the time of their or their beloved's death.

***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***

*The free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wings  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings  
with fearful trill  
of the things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill for the caged bird  
sings of freedom*

*The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own.*

*But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing*

*The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird*

*sings of freedom.*

This poem by Maya Angelou, portrays a condition of slavery with the caged bird being a metaphor of the repressed, underprivileged, downtrodden, subjugated, subordinate, oppressed either due to their caste or gender and the free bird metaphorically represents the bourgeoisie, high class, privileged, advantaged rulers. The caged bird trying to spread its wings and be a part of the open world but the cage represents the power of the oppressor makes it impossible. The poem interestingly starts with an image of the free bird and not the caged one; this is done on purpose so that a striking contrast could be made between the independence and freedom of one with the dependence and conformity of the other. The free bird is liberated to take its own decisions and start its journey whenever possible but on the other hand the caged bird thinks of its freedom, it dreams of independence, of a world of equality, of things that can change their stature and give them voice so that they no more remain unheard and dispossessed subalterns' rather have the privilege to take part in the society as equals. *There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.*

The second poem that I take for consideration represents gendered subaltern, the women question. Margaret Atwood in her poem, *This is a Photograph of Me*:

*It was taken some time ago  
 At first it seems to be  
 a smeared  
 print: blurred lines and grey flecks  
 blended with the paper;*

*then, as you scan  
 it, you can see something in the left-hand corner  
 a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree  
 (balsam or spruce) emerging  
 and, to the right, halfway up  
 what ought to be a gentle  
 slope, a small frame house.*

*In the background there is a lake,  
 and beyond that, some low hills.*

*(The photograph was taken  
 the day after I drowned.*

*I am in the lake, in the center  
 of the picture, just under the surface.*

*It is difficult to say where  
 precisely, or to say  
 how large or how small I am:  
 the effect of water  
 on light is a distortion.*

*but if you look long enough  
eventually  
you will see me.)*

The poem begins with a description of the photograph which is old and smeared but as we look at the image one could see a beautiful and serene description of the scenery in the picture. The poem is simple, gives a tranquil portrayal of the scene but its second half is shocking as the poet says that it was taken the day after she drowned. The lake becomes a metaphor for a society; blurred lines, grey flecks depict passage of time (the inception of society), the left side represents women and the right side represents man in society as in Indian context man is considered the bread winner, the patriarch who shoulders the responsibility of the house and takes the major decision in the family. In Indian marriages, too, the groom sits on the right and the bride sits on the left. Whenever we go to buy a piece of jewellery, especially bangles or try a new pair of shoes we always try the right side and never the left side because the left side is always considered meeker than the right. In the poem the poet has remarkably presented women in the left hand corner, meaning that the women have been marginalized in history and the branch also metaphorically represent women because just as branches bear flowers and fruits similarly it is only women who are blessed to bear children. The small frame house in the right represents the male patriarch, the decision maker of the house. The second half of the poem not only bewilders the reader but also changes the mood of the poem. The poetess asserts that she is living in the society, not only she but all the women folk are a part of the society. It is difficult to say where because they have lost in the pages of history, they have been marginalized, their opinions do not matter. The people think they have not made any significant contribution but they are still there and have not vanished from the society. If we look long enough at the pages of history we would be able to see and value the women's contribution. She is center for domestic work and she is marginal for social, political and economical work. In patriarchy, women are taken forward in domestic roles but in the social roles male come ahead. In the final stanza there is a shift intone. If you look carefully, you will be able to see me. Photograph is dim, its true but I am there. They have dimmed my photograph, undermined my work but my presence is there. Patriarchy cannot negate me completely. The last line is revolutionary. Despite all the discrimination I am there. They can destroy my photograph but cannot destroy my existence. Time is not clear it means that when the domination started it was not clear. Woman is exploited since time immemorial. Therefore the speaker does not like to historicize the time.

In Hindu mythology too, we talk about the split- the *Purusha* and the *Prakriti*. it is the split between the subject and the object. The subject is the conscious being- that which feels. The object is the stimulating environment- that which is felt. The subject is *Purusha*. The object is *Prakriti*. Rishis realized that just as *Purusha* cannot be explained without comparing and contrasting it with *Prakriti*, the northern direction could not be explained without referring to the southern direction, the right side could not be explained without the left side and man could not be explained without woman. Following this realization, the north, the right side, and all things masculine came to represent *Purusha* while the south, the left side and all things feminine came to represent *Prakriti*. Left was chosen for *Prakriti* because it was associated with the beating heart while the silent right was reserved for *Purusha*. We can see that even the epics and Upanishads have a basis for different gender roles, the only difference was that they had not evolved any gender politics into history rather they had thought women as the inseparable half of

the men which could only exist, not without each other, but in harmony with each other, in sync with each other.

### **Some Cultural Examples: Is Anyone Really Listening . . . Do We Bother to Care?**

- Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it's okay to be a boy; for girls it's like promotion. But for a boy to look like girls' is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being girl is degrading. (Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden*)
- When we choose a mobile network do we check whether Airtel or Vodafone belong to a particular caste? No, we simply choose the provider based on the best value and service. Then why do we vote for somebody simply because he belongs to the same caste as us. (Chetan Bhagat, *What Young India Wants*)
- Recognise the Lord's Light (Spirit) within all, and do not consider social class or status; there are no classes or castes in the world here after. (Guru Granth Sahib)
- Sri Sathya Sai Baba, "there is only one caste, the caste of humanity. All of us belong to the human race, so everyone is equal. Therefore, love each one equally."

Even if we talk about our own Punjabi culture we have a very clichéd, prejudiced, biased description of women objectified in contemporary times. Our "very own" Honey Singh points out:

*Purchase we kariye j vikke ta sahi*

*Or*

*Madde purje nu kadi haath mei na pawa*

*Or*

*O khad ta ja tu nede a eda na tu gehde kha*

*Kato eni desperate sanu das de ki a rate. . .*

*Nachdi a tu saambh kuddde tainu govermnet ne kar dena ban*

*This song has got 6,681,520 views and only this rap of the song Angrezi beat went into lacs of rupees for the movie Cocktail.*

Imagine this line being told to any of the females you know in your surroundings: your daughter, your mother, your wife or your sister. We maintain double standards in our life we like these songs and give those likes and hits on social networking sites but in our own family we do not even think of using this language.

*Hmmm pyaar karle tu aaj angoor ki daughter se*

*Pyaar karle tu aaj angoor ki daughter se*

*Naseeyat bhool jaayega tu ek quater se*

*Peene wale ko bhi jeene ka maza aayega*

*Yeh woh daaru hai jo chadh jaaye sirf water se*

*Aaja mere raja tujhe jannat dikhaaun main*

*Barfee paani me fire lagaun main*

*Main to tandoori murgi hoon yaar*

*Gatkaale saiyyan alcohol se*

## CONCLUSION

Caste which has a past of three thousand years and gender exploitation in our country can't be abolished altogether so early. The future of democracy and the system of parties in this country depends upon the willingness of the society to change according to the demands of democracy. Illiteracy among the backward castes, poverty among the downtrodden, lack of awakening among the rural folk is one of the factors responsible for the prevalence of Casteism in elections and gendered subaltern. The so-called Dalit leaders or caste Headman are encashing the votes of their members with their vested interests.

Political parties have an enormous role to play in the social awakening of India on democratic pattern. Instead of being influenced by caste and gender, they must endeavour to educate the people as per the ethics and demand of democracy and organize public opinion to regularize the progressive changes and withdrawal of privileges based on castes and gender. For the real success of democracy, both the problems are a big obstacle.

Immediate abolition of caste and gender discrimination is only a wishful thinking. For centuries it has remained in our society and to think that psychological change can come by legal measures is a difficult proposition. The people will have to be mentally prepared for this change and for that many efforts are needed. All that can be said is that grounds have been laid and unless constant efforts and endeavors are made the good work done will be lost to society.

In spite of wide ranging legislation and even special machinery for implementation and monitoring, however, the Constitutional intent has been only very partially put into effect. On the other hand, the very legitimization of social divisions through the operation of statutory process has led to a degree of their intensification in actual social conditions of existence. And, special provisions for one group of people have led to other groups vigorously, and sometimes violently, demanding similar provisions for themselves and yet others resenting such provisions. Thus, for instance, while cultural and economic needs may have fragmented society into myriad *varna* and *jati* groupings earlier, political and legislative measures have led to the creation and nurturing of three fold caste conflict between 'forward' or 'upper castes', 'backward castes' and Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes' particularly on the reservation in public employment in many parts of the country. Similarly, repeated use of religious and other divisions by cynical political operation have not only put secularism but also the very unity of India in danger.

As we have seen from the above examples both gender and caste are social constructs and it is only society which gives sanction to the use of these words. A child learns from imitation. The child is never aware of the social constructs, of what constitutes gender and caste? In reality many children learn about caste from the social sciences especially, sociology this can be said because in today's contemporary, postmodern, multi cultural world no one talks about Brahmins, kshatriyas, Vaishya and shudra. *Jaati* is talked about only by politicians to safeguard and strengthen their vote bank. Gender is constructed so that the so-called patriarchy can enforce its power on the 'weaker sex'.

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