

## DALIT THEATRE AND THE PORTRAYAL OF THEIR WOMEN IN SELECT PLAYS

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*Kavyeshu Natakam Ramyam.* Drama is the most powerful medium in creating social awareness and in bringing about societal transformation while providing entertainment and awakening the creative spirit in man. While Folk arts, indigenous theatre, tribal art, music and dance are deep-rooted in Indian culture and have added to its richness, it was some time before a script was framed and brought on stage in the form of drama, monologue and street play. Though indigenous theatre owes its birth to Marathi theatre, every state in the country has its own theatre forms with issues based on its own regional problems. Dalit theatre is an offshoot of Dalit rebellion and an offspring of Dalit literature.

The Dalit Theatre belongs to the people who have been alienated from social, economic and educational benefits by the orthodox caste system of Hinduism. "This theatre works as a catalyst for generating awareness on social and women's issues," says Dr. K.A. Gunasekaran, Professor and Head, School of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University. This theatre reflects the concern and pain, sorrows and sufferings of the neglected, their protests and their aspiration for human dignity. It challenged the established, conventional and authoritative theatre, culture and literature and added an impetus to the Dalit movement of liberation of the oppressed, women's emancipation and in whole the liberation of humanity, by painting the hopes of sufferer. The Dalit dramatist is expressing his agonies and suffering through mono acts, multi acts, folk plays and street plays. Originating with the Marathi Theatre which has a tradition of over 150 years, this movement has now spread all over India. This paper aims to throw light on the various Dalit Theatre movements and art forms across India and attempts to study some texts which portray the suffering of Dalit women - *Chandalika* (1933) by Rabindranath Tagore which is a heart-rending tale of a deprived woman; *The Well of the People* (1943) by Bharati Sarabhai, which strikes the Gandhian note of equality; and *Thirst* by Vinodini, which asserts the rights of Dalits.

The pioneers of Dalit theatre - Jyothiba Phule, Raghunath Murmu, Bhikari Thakur, B.S.Shinde, Raghunath Tudu, Mata Prasad, Datta Bhagat, Bohla Soren, Premanand Gajvi, Raju Das, Arvind Gaur, A.K. Pankaj, S.Perumal, Toijam Shiladevi and Rajkumar Rajak have enriched the art while assigning a social purpose to it.

In his speech, which Ramnath Cavhan, an exponent of the Dalit Drama Movement, delivered at the All India Dalit Drama Convention of the year 1992, there are these answers: "Friends, this theatre belongs to all those whom the Hindu religion, caste and creed system have kept away from social, economic and educational benefits. It is the theatre of those who have been denied status as human beings: It is the theatre which concerns itself with the pain, sorrows and sufferings of these neglected people. It is the theatre of protest which aspires to get back

basic human dignity for those from whom it was snatched away. It is the theatre which offers a challenge to the casteists. It offers a critique of religion. It exposes and presents the naked reality of injustice and atrocities. It demands an explanation of your sins and total neglect. It is the theatre which demands proof, without which nothing is acceptable to it."(p1)

With the political and socio-religious impetus given by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar and with the literary and moral inspiration of Mahatma Phule, Dalit theatre rose as a voice against casteist oppressions and as an assertion of the right to education. Most of the plays reflected the teachings of Mahatma and Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar in spreading the theme of injustice to the less privileged classes of society. Developing Dalit sensibility was their priority. According to Datta Bhagat, "Tritiya Ratna" a play by Mahatma Phule is the first in Marathi theatre. All the dramatists associated with Dalit theatre believe in a sense of social commitment. Most of the plays center round themes like bonded-labour, Devadasi system, deprivation, etc, but Dalit theatre yet needs to portray the spirit of revolt and provide justice and equality even to its women.

*Sakharam Binder* by Vijay Tendulkar, *Rudali* by Usha Ganguli, and *Routes and Escape Routes* by Datta Bhagat are dramas which champion the underdog, in this case, low-caste women, yet not one of these playwrights is a Dalit woman. Women labeled as untouchables in Hindu society are the most oppressed people in India, but their voices are practically non-existent in Dalit drama, except through the medium of more privileged people. The authors of the former two plays are Brahmin males, whose privileged experience differs the most from the women they aim to represent. The authors of the latter two plays are a Brahmin woman and a Dalit man, respectively. While these two authors face discrimination based on gender or social status, neither has experienced the intersectionality of gender and caste oppression that Dalit women struggle with, on a day-to-day basis. This brings into question the authority that these authors have to represent the voices of these women, and how accurately and effectively people removed from a certain experience can represent that experience.

The three plays under perusal deal with the theme of water and deprivation while highlighting the vulnerability of Dalit women who are twice removed from the mainstream society. In Tagore's *Chandalika*, a Buddhist monk drinks water from the hands of an outcast girl; in Bharati Sarabhai's *The Well of the People*, a caste woman donates all her savings for the building of a common well; and in M.M.Vinodini's *Thirst*, (2005) (translation of her Telugu play *Daham*) a woman who is deprived of water succeeds in making the well-water common to all irrespective of caste. All three plays centre on water, the source of life and at the same time the source of contention between the upper and the deprived castes. Deprivation of water shoots up denial of the source of life and then leads to other kinds of oppression.

The actual tale of *Chandalika* shows how a Chandal girl tries to entice a pure Buddhist monk and how the monk could escape her spell with the help of the Buddha. Tagore has merged the theme of passionate love with that of casteism. Caste consciousness runs in the veins of the Dalit. This is evident as the mother makes a constant reference to their low caste while talking to her daughter. She says, "You are unclean; beware of tainting the outside world with your unclean presence." (p150) K.R. Kripalani in his introduction writes, "Chandalika is a tragedy of self-consciousness over-reaching its limit. Self-consciousness, up to a point, is necessary to self-development; for, without an awareness of the dignity of one's own role or function, one cannot give one's best to the world." (p145)

The fact that a high-caste youth drank water from her hands shocks and awes *Chandalika*. She was attracted to him for his broad-mindedness and generosity. His words, "Don't humiliate

yourself...self humiliation is a sin, worse than self murder.” (p148) leave her spell-bound. It was his spirit of equanimity that drew her to him and not just his physical appearance. The fact that the water which she poured to him from her hands quenched his thirst gave her immense joy. She felt that she was honoured by his request.

Leaving aside the passionate love story of the deprived girl, the play awakens the Dalit consciousness to a new awareness - the fact that human feelings are universal; that no human being is untouchable. The concept of chastity is for the soul and not for the body. No impurity touches a human being as long as his heart is pure. In the play under discussion Tagore does not justify the cause of Chandalika and in fact he makes her suffer for just being attracted to a high caste young man. Once again it is the secondary status of women that is in question.

Being the first English play written by an Indian woman, *The Well of the People* was published by Viswa Bharati in 1943. In her very interesting preface Bharati Sarabhai says that she had visited the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar, which took place from April 1938 to August 1940; she was a volunteer in the village session of the Indian National Congress at Haripura; a few months later a friend drew her attention to the simple story of an old village woman, which had appeared in the *Harijan*, a journal published by the Mahatma. Coincidentally, the three influences – Haridwar, Haripura and Harijan - the spiritual, social and political concerns merged into the fine tapestry of this play. Though the theme of the play is social reform, the verse contains the mysticism of Kabir, the philosophy of Tagore, the romanticism of Wordsworth and Keats and the symbolism of T.S.Eliot. The play progresses as one long poem and does not have Act or Scene divisions. The characters are Rani, an old woman, Sanatan, Vichitra and Chetan and some old women who form part of the chorus.

*The Well of the People* tells the story of a very old woman, Rani whose life ambition is to make a pilgrimage to Haridwar and take a dip in the holy Ganga. She is a Mythili Brahmin - one of the upper castes in Hindu society. Having lost her husband and son when very young and having no zeal in life, she saves all her hard earned money to go to Benares. But the money not being sufficient she cannot go on the pilgrimage. Meanwhile she grows old, her relatives get distanced, she becomes a cripple and so nobody volunteers to accompany her to Benares. The Mahatma visits her village and inspires her by his message. Realization dawns on her and she decides to build a well in the temple in the village so that all those who come to the temple, including the Harijans, would drink from it. Thus she desires to propagate the Gandhian ideology and vision of a casteless Hindu society. She believes that Gandhi is the true saviour and prophet who can bring salvation to mankind and decides that following the ‘Great Soul’ is the real pilgrimage that one should endeavour. Finally she hands over seventy silver coins, the amount she had saved, to the Gandhian workers to have the well built.

Finally she says it is not Haridwar that a true *bhakta* must aim at; it is humanism and social service that brings real *moksha* by washing away his sins. The path of idealism is the path to *moksha*. The journey to holy places or taking a dip in the Ganga does not bring salvation. From orthodox beliefs she moves to Advaita of Sankaracharya’s philosophy of ‘God lives in every being’ and to the Gandhian philosophy of service to humanity. She finally condemns blind faith and superstition and casteism.

*The Well of the People* is not just a clarion call for a casteless society; it is also a veiled plea for the upliftment of women. Isolation of the protagonist has made Bharati Sarabhai choose the genre of verse drama. It is a loner’s fight against society and against fate. She has taken up the Herculean task of building a common well in the premises of the temple with the intention of breaking the barriers of caste and also allowing Harijans into the mainstream society. Like the

cow, the well is also an integral part of the Hindu culture and tradition. It is not only the source of life but also a strong force in sustaining the caste order and a source through which the upper caste can deprive the untouchables and exercise power, authority and superiority over them. A common well for all communities invalidates the caste based power politics and helps remove untouchability and this revolution comes from a woman of the highest caste.

The play comes in a period when the term ‘feminism’ was unheard of in the Orient. Yet the images of women presented in the play show the writer’s awareness of the weak position of women in India. If untouchability marginalized one section of society, the women were twice removed from the mainstream - once by caste and then by their gender. There was no equality; people only spoke of upliftment of women because of their miserable condition. She was the victim of all kinds of atrocities. Wife was just a boon companion to the rich feudal lords and the wife of his serf also had to oblige him. The poor women were the ones who were exploited the most.

M. M. Vinodin’s *Thirst* is not a poignant plea for the upliftment of the subjugated but an exhortation to rise and assert their rights. Interdependency is the law of nature and exploitation of one group by the other cannot go on forever. Every beginning has an end. A united resistance always brings victory. An untouchable cannot use the water from the village well but the milk of a Dalit woman is the life source to a caste Hindu. The play breaks the path for educated youth to revolt and resist caste oppression.

The message eventually is that – struggle of any nature needs a united resistance. Denial of water – a basic life source to fellow beings is tantamount to barbarianism. The play begins with Ganga having gone to feed Reddy’s child and Sowamma coming back to her hut with torn clothes and bruises on her body. The fact is that she has been beaten up by the upper caste women and her pot broken just because she tried to draw water from the well after begging each one to pour some water into her pitcher. She had waited the whole morning in the scorching sun to no avail. So the hurt Sowamma in turn hurls abuses at those women and in consequence the family is asked to pay Rs. 10000 as fine, or else Sowamma’s head would be tonsured and she would be paraded naked in the village. This penalty imposed by Pedda Reddy infuriates Sowamma’s son Dasa and his friends and they decide to settle matters once for all.

They strike on a plan with the help of Pedda Mala and decide to protest. They first prevent Ganga from giving milk to Pedda Reddy’s grandson. Later they attend the village panchayat and boldly refuse to pay the fine. They are threatened of losing their lives and reminded of the past incidents of killings yet they remain steadfast in their protest. Meanwhile Pedda Reddy’s women come weeping as the child is crying for milk. They request Pedda Mala to send Ganga but the Dalits refuse to do so and persist in their demand for a fifth pulley on the well. The pressure from the women and the need of the child compel the Reddys to accept the sharing of the well water. Thus it is the victory of the Dalits over the privileged.

The playwright wields her pen deftly and the tempo is maintained throughout the play. The denial of well water to the Dalits is an age old practice in almost all the villages of India. In addition to this the underprivileged are victims of various kinds of atrocities as mentioned in the play and women are even further exploited. The irony is that the villagers are asked to dig the well but not permitted to touch the water. The upper caste men derive daemonic pleasure in inflicting punishments on Dalit women. But Vinodini has no intention of narrating a sob story of exploitation. She underlines the fact that any exploited group can overthrow oppression with a strong will and sharp wit.

Thus the three plays portray the agony of Dalit women. According to Ruchi Tomar, "... a derogated Dalit female laborer/slave, doing a menial service work is constructed as polluting and inferior. This dualistic construction of Dalit women in gender ideology legitimizes the sexual subordination and subjugation of them. Caste oppression, gender subjugation and class exploitation, all are interlined together. Caste uses gender to construct caste status, power relations and cultural differences and thereby oppressing lower caste women. Thus, three interlocking systems of caste, class, and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity, and intensity of oppression, which is destructive to the experiences of Dalit women."(p2)

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