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Dalit Writings and the Critique of the Mainstream Public Sphere

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Abstract

Dalit writings from India have been read as trauma narratives. They have also been treated as “cultural apparatuses” of the human rights discourse. This paper proceeds with these two approaches to Dalit writings and shows how they have contributed to the strengthening of what Nancy Fraser (1990) has termed the “subaltern counter- public.” This would be done by showing how writers highlight the presence of a “dysfunctional” public sphere by writing about the experiences of dalits. Through articulating about this “dysfunction,” dalit writings align themselves with a literary counter public print sphere which in turn strengthens the discourse of the “subaltern counter public.”

Keywords: Dalit writings, public sphere, human rights, subaltern counter public

Introduction

What are the implications of the publication and circulation of Dalit Writings from India? A huge corpus of criticism has emerged in relation to Dalit Writings ranging from the demand for “alternate” aesthetics, to treating them as discourses on Human Rights violations. Contemporary scholarship on human rights has highlighted that it is not enough to focus on the legal or the juridical language of human rights alone to gain a better understanding of human rights violations. Instead, it requires a “cultural apparatus” which may include literary forms also (Mc Clennan & Slaughter, 2009, p.1). Mc Clennan and Slaughter have also pointed out how critical attention has been directed to literary forms of writing which can supplant the human rights discourse like the spy novel in the context of post 9/11(p.13), the relationship between sentimental novel and human rights as explained by Sarah Winters (p.15). Following Sidonie Smith, Kay Schaffer, Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey C Alexander, Pramod K Nayar has treated Dalit Writings as trauma narratives and established their connection to the Human Rights discourse. He has shown how “newspaper coverage, documentation of violations” (Nayar, 2009, p.1), victim life narratives all constitute the “cultural apparatus” of human rights discourse. This paper takes off from this juncture and attempts to show that dalit writings, by articulating about gross violations, have strengthened what Nancy Fraser (1990) has termed “subaltern counter public.” The paper achieves this by examining certain themes that constantly appear and reappear in Dalit Writings, linking these themes to the “dysfunction” of the public sphere.

“Subaltern Counter Publics” according to Nancy Fraser are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretation of their identities, interests and needs” (1990, p. 67). In this essay, Fraser points out the desirability of several counter publics that compete with each other because it “means a widening of discursive contestation” (p.67). The inability of the mainstream public sphere to cater to the “public” makes it a dysfunctional public

sphere. Through grouping themselves under a subaltern counter-public, dalit writings create a platform from whence the mainstream public sphere can be critiqued. Dalit Writings have been treated here as a literary counter-public which is a part of the subaltern counter-public.

The paper limits the choice of Dalit Writings to two genres namely that of the autobiography and the fiction. It is presumed that these two genres are able to incorporate a plethora of “voices” which are very essential for any critique of the public sphere. Additionally, the genres of autobiography and novel have been the most utilized and the most translated genres in Dalit writing. Autobiography as an elite genre was appropriated by dalits to suit their needs. Autobiography became an important genre in Dalit writing because it could be used to contextualise the lives of Dalits in the larger socio historical process. Individuals through their life stories were able to raise voices for the muted. Studies have demonstrated how the narration in dalit autobiographies is similar to the Latin American *testimonio* due to the shift between the “I” and the “we.” Being able to accommodate a plethora of voices within a single text, the dalit autobiography provides the scope for poly-vocality. Studies like that by Joseph Slaughter have linked the notion of public sphere and human rights through the genre of the novel. According to him, the realist novel is the “predominant narrative form that abstracts and regulates the communicative social relations of the national public sphere” (2007, p.155). As Edward Said observes, it also provides the bourgeois reading public a sense of the limits of their aspirations and the possibilities of their growth in the nation (1993, cited in Slaughter, 2007, p.156). Thus, Slaughter argues that the choice of the novel explored the “possibilities of and boundaries of emancipation of the individual in the new political formation of the rights-bound nation state” (2007, p.156). Instead of being conventional realist novels, dalit novels explore how the public sphere in the nation state occasioned what Slaughter terms as “systemic exclusions” (2007, p.156), yet by the exercise of the choice of the novel sought to expand the notion of the public sphere.

Human Personality is a term from the language of Human Rights. Human Rights discourse stresses the rights of all individuals to achieve the state of fully developed individuals. Human Rights narrative agenda is one that uncovers the visible and invisible blocks that thwart the smooth progression of individuals or communities in achieving the status of the human rights personality. Needless to point out, most resistance writings have portrayed how the capacity of the individual to “develop” is always frustrated at several levels by hegemonic forces. Dalit autobiographies and fiction instantiate the thwarting of individual development at all levels of an individual’s life. They expose the hegemonic structure of the caste system that straitjackets the body in a social system that looks natural. The legitimized inequality of the social system is exposed in these works. In Dalit Writings, this serves to interrogate the elite discourse of a unified homogenous India and show how dalits have been excluded from the nationalist project.

Disengaging with “Norms”

Dalit Writings protest against limiting normative prescriptions and orders. These are mainly connected to the occupations and choices that were made available to dalits. Since the caste system was based on the division of labour, it was ensured that each caste had to perform the kind of job ordained according to the caste hierarchy. This meant that dalits were often made to perform menial tasks which were tough, disgusting and demanded back-breaking labour. Further, since toiling on the land or working with dead animals was considered as impure, negative connotations were associated with the labouring body and work. These negative norms figure in the deliberations of all dalit writings. Bama and Valmiki take up this issue in their

autobiographies *Karukku* and *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* respectively. Talking about the casteism within the church, Bama notes:

But I felt a burning anger when I saw that all the menial jobs there were done by Dalits who were abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way. I was pained to see even older people trembling, shrinking like small children, frightened by the power and wealth that the sisters had, burying their pride and self-respect, running to do the menial tasks assigned to them (2000, p.23).

Valmiki notes an incident which took place early in life when he was forced to perform the skinning of the hide of a dead animal: "That day something broke inside me....I felt I was drowning in a swamp. I was being drawn into the very quagmire that I suffered with *chacha* on that hot afternoon are still fresh on my skin" (2001, p.35). The helplessness when, even the State machinery such as the police conspires with the powerful in the enforcement of norms, is captured both by Bama and Valmiki. Looking at these memories retrospectively assumes the language of rights. Valmiki notes:

Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one's labour? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins. As though we are not citizens of this country. The weak and the helpless have been suppressed for thousands of years, just in this manner. (2001, p.39)

Bama also ponders at length regarding how dalits continue to remain in their subjugated positions:

Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable ; they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice....We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. (2000, p.24-25)

Such junctures need to be marked as the production and dissemination of discourses that are critical of the dominant ideologies that govern the nation. This is one of the important functions of a counter public. The writings here become a literary counter public that boosts and reinforces the subaltern counter public.

Impediments to Participatory Parity in Education

Literacy as an educational technology helps an individual in attaining the "highest stage of human personality development" (Slaughter, 2007, p.270) who can participate in the deliberations of the public sphere. Most Dalit Writings have questioned the "natural" impediments to participatory parity in education. Education in Dalit Writings is filled with humiliating and revolting experiences. The intensity of caste, in all narratives, is seen at the school. This is a time when children are most vulnerable and unable to answer back. Dominant caste teachers and students are shown to rally against the dalit children. In dalit narratives, the earliest and strongest imprint of casteism is imprinted in schools. The child in almost all life narratives are epitomes of victims of trauma. In Dalit Writings, it is at the school where the child goes out from the household and realises that the dominant castes look at them with different eyes, that the trauma is the acutest. Louis Althusser had famously described what children learn at school, "children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour...the rules of the order established by class domination" (1971, p.132). Whereas Althusser spoke of children's learning in a class based society, dalit writers

expound how it has been a struggle to even get access to the word because of caste. Instead of the rules of “good behaviour” it is the denial of the word, dignity and the right to be considered as a human being that is at the core of these writings.

It is not only the denial of the right to be a part of education that has been critiqued in Dalit Writings. The history of the nation imparted at the schools, oblivious of the history of dalits or of dalit leaders like B R Ambedkar is also pointed out. Hence autobiographies and fiction by dalit writers have deliberately projected organic intellectuals and leaders who have never found a mention in dominant nationalist historiography. In *Joothan*, Valmiki details the discovery of the writings of Ambedkar. In the Malayalam novel *Chorapparisham* (2007) by Raghavan Atholi, leaders like Ayyankali and Poikayil Yohannan who were part of the dalit movement of Kerala figure. Student strikes which have been a part of education in Kerala are seen from a new perspective in this work. Here children of government schools, a large majority of who belonged to dalit communities, are influenced by political parties and are commanded to take part in strikes. By the end of tenth standard most of them drop out from school and are failures (Atholi, 2007, p.147). Madhavan, a character in the novel, notes how he took part even in strikes that did not have any relevance to his life. On the other hand children from dominant castes are sent to schools where strikes are unheard of. Through this strategy dalit children are turned indirectly into Eklavyas by foregoing their education. Thus even when the doors to free and compulsory education are opened to all, a segment of the society is indirectly kept away from the right to learning.

Territorial Segregation

Dalit writings point out the topographically segregated spaces within the nation that are demarcated for dalits. Residential segregation is a common strategy of perennial social boycott by members of other communities. Such segregation is a common form of untouchability practised in India in the villages, with clear cut geographical boundaries. This is equally practised in urban settings too. It constitutes of collective trauma or a form of racism, similar to the apartheid or segregation of the African-Americans. This form of exclusion as exemplified in dalit writings show how social citizenship is denied to dalits. Though India proclaims to have abolished untouchability, this form of segregation continues to exist:

The most visible and long-standing form of caste discrimination in rural India, and also the most taken-for-granted aspect of untouchability in the public sphere, is the residential segregation of Dalit households....The starkest form of locational sanction is the social banishment- expressed in palpably physical-spatial terms- of the Dalit settlement to beyond the boundaries of the village. (Shah, Ghanshyam, Harsh Mander, Sukhadeo Thorat, Satish Deshpande & Amita Baviskar 2007, p.73)

Dr Ambedkar in his writings mentions that the view that the Indian villages were a separate social unit was put forth by Sir Charles Metcalfe, a civil servant of the East India Company (Rodrigues, 2002, p.324). This view had been carried forward in the early literary writings from the regional languages where the segregation on the basis of caste was either untouched or made invisible by writers. Dalit writers, on the other hand, focus on this form of untouchability very vehemently in their writings. In Tamil novels like Bama's *Vanmam: Vendetta* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, the Western and Eastern parts of the village do not imply mere geographical landscapes. It denotes “fixity” of power. The dwelling of the upper castes, cultivable lands, government offices, schools, temples, church, shops, bus stop and even the road lie in the western part of the village.

For the dalits who live in the very end of the eastern part of the village, riots are a cause of deep concern as they would be cut off from the rest of the village. The fear of moving through the western part of the village during an Easter procession immediately after a violent riot is portrayed in *Vanmam*.

Dalit Feminist Counter Public

Many studies have pointed out how women belonging to dominant castes and the middle class were treated as representatives of the nation. It was dalit women with whom they were contrasted to highlight the difference. Even though mainstream feminism made lip service about “sisterhood” that was not an ideal that was realized. It is this division and the need for better solidarities among women that is articulated in a novel like *Sangati*. Feminism has demonstrated that the discursive space of the public sphere can be widened through the inclusion of terms like domestic violence and marital rapes which were earlier, issues related to the private domain. Nancy Fraser has suggested that the public sphere can be treated as a public arena where social identities could be deconstructed and reconstructed (p.79). In reconstructing a positive identity, dalit women are shown to be proud in being hardy and not pampered. They are also full of pride in being able to withstand hardships, use the “knowledge” that they have gained with their observation or close relationship with nature and in the process having a new identity.

Feminists across the world have questioned the “inferior” position of women and linked it with discourses on the body. Menstruation was associated with the idea of “pollution” in India. Relentless engagements have linked this with ideology and the questionings thus served to de-link the body with “pollution”. This is done by writers like Bama in her novel *Sangati*. In addition, she also engages with a few other relevant questions relating the “impurity” associated with the dalit female. Feminist counter publics are kept alive by relentlessly interrogating the various forms of oppression that women are subjected to in different cultures. Moving from inequalities in monogamous relationships on the basis of class or finance, the counter publics in India were able to incorporate factors like religion, region, tradition and caste. Spirit possession was considered merely as a superstition and no one understood it in the way that Bama understands it. Similarly the “*chinnaveedu*” (literally a small house but metaphorically stands for a mistress) or the *chakkalathi* (the mistress) which were at most made fun of in movies or brushed aside as the “mischiefs” of men, come under scathing criticism at the hands of Sivakami. It is such engagements that catapult the works by female dalit writers to the platform of the feminist counter public.

Widening the Public Sphere

Dalit writings do not stop with mere recounting of trauma and being victim stories. Along with the foregrounding of the suffering, many writings advocate a strong sense of freedom and affirmative identity. There is a “writing back” to the cultural scripts that help in gaining agency. There are shifts in moments from the status of victimhood to that of agent. In *Karukku* there is a new understanding of history and political consciousness:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going

to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (2000, p.25)

Through this advocacy for acting, the narrative adopts the language of human rights and pries open a space in the public sphere. Dalit narratives enable a re-ordering of the space in the public sphere where the hitherto 'un'-voiced is voiced. Joseph Slaughter in one of his essays points out that a discourse on Human Rights is bound to provide the "public, international space that empowers all human beings to speak" (1997, p.415). The very act of speaking about these denials signifies an arrival at a point of "voicing." Human Rights discourse is also about the freedom of choice. Though Dalit Writings focus on the denial of choices, the authors "choose" to act for themselves by refusing the pre-ordained choices made available to them. This choice of "controlling" their future turns them into subjects. There is the possibility of forging for themselves and by instantiation, for others in similar positions, an alternative world. The narration of an adult protagonist reveals a disjunction and a discontinuity from the past. The present of the narration or narrator's life reveal a change. Hence the Human Rights discourse is both about the denial of freedom and hopes for the future.

The public sphere is widened by incorporating the "cultural, linguistic, religious and customary practices that constitute group identity and personality" (Slaughter, 2007, p.162). The above statement was made in connection with the national public sphere. What dalit texts do is to highlight the practices, customs and conventions sometimes with a celebratory tone. By doing so, cultural citizenship is assured to the historically subjugated dalits. Dalit Writings achieve this by foregrounding the cultural capital of dalits. This is important because one of the misconceptions about dalits was that they did not have any "culture." Nancy Fraser points out that, due to the asymmetrically valued lifestyles in societies that are highly graded, unjust pressures are put on people. One consequence of this on dominated communities is that the culture of the dominant group is considered superior. By regrouping themselves under counter publics, subjugated groups often highlight their cultural practices. Cultural signifiers are used by dalit writers with the intention of re-inscribing new values. Such a strategy is important because public spheres are not areas of "zero degree culture" (p.64). Therefore it is usually the cultural markers of the privileged groups that are valued.

Making visible the cultural markers and practices of dalits constitute a political stance. Such an approach would help in building alternative social identities. Dalit Writings thus detail about festivals that are not considered "national" festivals. They focus on deities like Karuppusamy, Munisamy or Madurai Veeran (as in Tamil Dalit Writings) and shamanic revelations known as *velichappedal* (in Malayalam Dalit Writings). *Chorapparisham* makes use of the *velichappedal*, where individual and family experiences are narrated along with the experiences of the ancestral fore fathers. Through such narrations history becomes pieces of shared knowledge. This is a counter discourse to dominant historiography that has neglected, muted and made invisible the dalits in mainstream history. This kind of narration becomes a shareable social drama which is imprinted on the minds of the collective. Even food becomes a cultural marker and is inscribed a new value. While on the one hand, the stigma of having been forced to eat left-over food is described, on the other hand they also highlight the culinary practices among various dalit communities that have never found a mention in any recipe book.

Wrenching away the tongue is a violence of human rights. Dalit writers have made use of dialects in their writings. The choice of dialects in the articulation of experiences in Dalit Writings must be treated as a conscious choice where the authors make the deliberate attempt to speak in one's own "voice." Such a choice is the authors' affirmation of the rights of the dalits, as one of the

important ideas of the human rights discourse is to be able to speak in one's own voice. Standardisation of any language takes place when the written and the print form develop. Since economic capital was a determining factor in the control of the print sphere, it was the language of the dominant castes that became the norm. The conscious choice of dialects by the authors can be then seen as an attempt to entrench their respective dialects. What other function does the choice of these dialects have in a work? Pramod K Nayar has demonstrated with the example of two Tamil dalit novels that the form of the novel is important. He points out that the hybridisation of the form of the novel brings about a "radicalisation of the political unconsciousness" (2011, p.366). The choice of dialects by the writers is a choice to create a space for their respective communities in the social world around them. In an interview given to Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, the Malayalam dalit writer Raghavan Atholi mentions thus:

There are multitudes of books and not one of them has people from my community. I believe that there is a need to inscribe them. I believe that to be my assignment as a poet. All I am doing is to verbalize the inner agitation of a people who have been silenced for so long (cited in Satyanarayana & Susie Tharu, p.344).

Using specific patterns of communication, the authors group a set of events to form a large system of cultural meaning. The individual instances of utterances can be extended to macro systems of meanings called culture.

Conclusion

Dalit groups in various parts of India have organised themselves under various political, social and cultural organisations. Political organisations have engaged with questions related to political and economic power, and land reforms. Cultural organisations have utilised the platforms of performing arts, fine arts and literature to build affirmative identities of dalits. Social groups have built extensive discussion platforms in the real and virtual space engaging with hitherto unasked and unanswered questions concerning dalits. Subaltern counter publics face the danger of being labelled as separatist. A public turns into a counter-public when it contests the mainstream public. Yet, as Fraser herself argues, as long as there is a "*publicist* orientation" (emphasis in original, p.67), a counter public only contests and does not aim at truncating a public sphere. Dalit writings do exactly this. It questions the privileges of the dominant groups and demands the eradication of inequality and unjust practices. This paper had treated Dalit Writings as vehicles of culture that supplant the discourse on Human Rights. As a counter public print sphere, they have reinforced the subaltern counter public and supplemented their engagement with the mainstream public sphere.

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