



Voices from the Margin: a Reading of Hira Bansode's Poetry

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Abstract

The age-old mores of caste have corroborated to the marginalization faced by the Dalits and tribals alike; throughout India this marginalized section comes across exploitation and subjugation at the hands of upper caste Hindu. However the oppression faced by women is far more intense than what Dalit men goes through. Dalit women acquire a distinct identity derived from the sexual inequality they experience in their own community as well as the disparities of caste, religion, sexuality, and economic status between them and upper caste Hindu women. Their position is of a doubly marginalized; whose lack of social and economic power endangers their education, freedom and moreover their existence.

The paper focuses on the works of Hira Bansode, a poet from Mahar caste, her poetry originates from her own experiences that made her challenge the repugnant ideas about caste, atrocities and injustices inflicted upon her fellow Dalits. Through the myths of Shabri and Draupadi, she tends to illustrate suppression of subalterns since our remembrance, in other poems she attacks institutions like religion, culture and society who were always biased against them and still they face identity crisis. Bansode's writing questions the oppressive doctrine, and gives voice to the marginalized, particularly women who are considered 'like a drum (of Manu) that is beaten at both ends...and continues to be so'.

Keywords: Caste; Dalit; Marginalised; Oppression; Identity crisis

While narrating one of her life narratives Bansode stated that 'We could not enter the house of a Maratha or touch their water when they came to fill at the well. If a Maratha child played with one of us, he or she would be

beaten'. Her statement ceases to surprise the readers who are familiar with the indispensable presence of caste segregation in the social space of multiple communities; such incidents are a part of our history, and perhaps our present too. Our fallacious actions and views towards dispossessed castes and sub-castes, which found corroboration from the fundamental texts of Hindu dharma, called for the need of basic human rights that were being denied to them by upper castes. Dalit literature thus formed a means for the rejection of conventions and cultural norms which marginalized the Dalit voice and the voice of oppressed communities including women. The writings of Jyotiba Phule, Omprakash Valmiki, Ambedkar, Hira Bansode, Narayan Surve, Arjun Kamble and the likes exhibit a structural pattern exceptional in terms of experience, expression and sensibility

Hira Bansode, a Marathi Dalit poet who survived conventional valuation of caste stereotypes lived and shared by multifarious caste groups, chose poetry as a medium to express her agony and disbelief against such rigid and futile divisions on the basis of caste. Her works reveals the collective consciousness of community whose voice had remained suppressed through the annals of history. Be it Dalits, tribal or women they have always been on the margins, belonging to the unrecognized sections of society through ages. Though in recent times awareness among masses and widespread literature has helped us to curb this practice but to a very minimal extent, blotting it out from our socio-cultural scenario completely has always been next to impossible.

My paper focuses on the works of Hira Bansode, a poet from Mahar caste; her poetry originates from her own experiences that made

her challenge the repugnant ideas about caste, atrocities and injustices inflicted upon her fellow Dalits and women. Through the myths of Shabri and Draupadi, she tends to illustrate suppression of subalterns since our remembrance; in her poems she attacks institutions like religion, culture and society who were always biased against them and still face severe identity crisis. Her poetry carries the themes of alienation, freedom from all sorts of bondage and subjugation, estrangement, search for identity and dignity. Bansode's writing questions the oppressive doctrine, and gives voice to the marginalized, particularly women who are considered 'like a drum (of Manu) that is beaten at both ends...and continues to be so'. She states in a story that, if we are untouchables to god, can't enter the premises of temple, if our presence would defile the holiness of the place, how that God is ours! And further says that, 'if the god is not mine, then the religion can't be mine.'

Bell hooks says 'when black people are talked about focus tends to be on black man while when women are talked about focus tends to be on white women'. Women have always been regarded as the other and in caste system they are marginalized twice on the basis of gender as well as on caste basis. Bansode clearly asserts that 'high caste women are established, but Dalit women must struggle for very basic needs.' She has emerged as a major voice form within the community, known to that struggle, starving and survival or failure. Her writings are the voices of those subalterns, who as Spivak says cannot speak, she tends to give them not only voice but also questions the authority which stops them from speaking. The struggle of a Dalit woman is not on the social front but, firstly, at domestic level which stops women like Hira Bansode to study or avail even their basic rights, they are frequently reported of brutal treatment and in some worst cases they die as unknown, in isolation, fighting myriad of bondages, leaving their tales untold.

We have frequently claimed, and still do, of being 'civilized' or being a part of a society which no more conceives to such stringent system and have also affirmed to discard these

as something practiced by our forefathers. But quite contrarily we impel to indulge in these obsolete conventions, thus propagating it. It comes out as a hard fact that the differences created since millennia in our cultural set up continues to be the foundation of our socio-cultural setup. Our identity continues to be defined by the coarse principles which, directly or indirectly, become the reasons for the inherent differences. The TV show *Satyamev Jayte* that dealt with this issue and came up with an altogether different story, quite contrary to our claims. It was heart wrenching to see a professor of a renowned University going through an exigency for belonging to a lower caste. In another instance an eminent professor of public service commission was forced to quit on the basis of his 'inferior' caste. The institutions for education, knowledge, which are considered by all of us as a source of hope, in extermination of these impediments, if they themselves end up warranting chauvinism it becomes highly difficult for people to overcome biasness.

Hira Bansode's personal struggle has found place in her poetry, both title and content of her poems are piercing through the socio-cultural conclave that has structured our society'. In her poem '*Sanskriti*' she writes

'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...'

(*Sanskriti*)

She attacks the so called 'civilization' which has been boosted often but internally remains apocryphal and hollow, she questions through her lines that how a civilization can be sung of sweet songs which is divided inside and has loopholes, she calls this culture as 'heartless culture'. Her deep agonies are visible in the lines like:

'We've sung our tearful songs
Unsoothed by your lullaby
Our humanity tested again and again'.

In another poem named 'To Shabri' she uses the famous myth of Shabri, who was a low caste woman and her hospitality to lord Rama is well known, she writes:

'Instead of berries

Why didn't you ask of omniscient ram...

About the heart-rending sacrifice of Ecklavya's thumb?

About blameless Sita's exile

If you had revealed the curse of your caste

I would have found fulfillment'

(To Shabri)

Through the myth of Shabri she tries to appeal the subalterns to raise their voices against the power possessors.

The practice of untouchability or caste system appears no different from colonial missionaries, they too, calling it as 'white man's burden' inflicted their customs and laws and governed us, and similarly in the caste system upper caste takes the role of colonizers and exploits the lower caste to further their self-interest. The emphasis on education to change the scenario is not new but Kanha Ilaiah a writer and Dalit activist is of the point that the main barrier in the growth of Dalit is the lack of English education, a still faraway dream for them. He interestingly mentions that still liberal arts is no field of interest for Dalit students and the solution lies in encouraging them to opt for such field because even if 10% of Dalit children could get English education, we can witness a credible change. Society which still has not changed much for Dalit is evident in another poem of Bansode- 'A Bosom Friend'; it reflects the experience of an educated Dalit women. The poem puts forth the problematic alliance between upper and lower caste women, in an urban setting, thus emphasizing the attitude of biasness towards lower caste and the pretense to treat them as equals still prevailing in society. The woman who invites her friend, belonging to an upper caste, initially believes that her friend has come 'bridging the chasm that divides us' and has

'ripped out all those caste things' but she gets a setback when her friend complains 'Truly, you folk will never improve'. This division of caste is also to be extended to the demarcation of high and low class. Thus the woman suffers contempt of friend for her association with the low class and caste.

The position of Dalit women is visualized by Bansode in her introduction to collection 'Phriyad' she writes:

I visualize 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.

Of course the metaphor of white collared woman stands here for Hindu women and tiny point is Dalit women who are lost, invisible in the race. . Dalit women acquire a distinct identity derived from the sexual inequality, disparities of caste, religion, sexuality they experience between them and upper caste Hindu women. Bansode says that, 'we have different problems. Our women don't even know the meaning of *Stri Mukti*.' In poems like 'Ghulam' she expresses the marginalization faced by the whole lot of women; she satirically traces the pages of history and myth with examples of Sita, Ahilaya and Draupadi and says that, 'in that country women is still a slave'. Her deepest agony can be felt in the poem 'Petition', where she writes:

A refugee in my home own home,

Bear the life sentence of neglect.

My father, my brother, my husband-

Under the weight of these well-fleshed relations

My hollow existence gives away
(Petition)

Bansode offers a variety of concern in her poems and her emphasis is equally on the upliftment of Dalit as well as women. . As it has been said that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point

however is to change it' and Bansode's writings are not any interpretations of their suffering but it's a voice identifying itself empathically with those on the margins. She attacks such divisions arguing that these are not mythical or cultural manifestations but something which reflects the interest of dominant class and castes. Her writings offer a space to those lost on the horizons, it appeals them to equalize this uneven race.

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