

# Dalit Feminist Poetry- Subtleties of Identification

Dr. Bincy Dominic

*Assistant Professor, St. Peter's College, Kolenchery, Kerala, India*

**Abstract-**Dalit feminist writings depict the collective consciousness of the caste system and identity crisis and critically analyse the doubly marginalization of women. This paper is rooted in the new shade of women poets in Kerala, revealing their experiences and explores the different images of women that portray self-esteem in the light of poetic forms. It addressed patriarchal ideologies such as caste, race, class, and occupation and examined gender and caste-related factors related to the consequences that bring to light various levels of social structure, and figured out traditional disenfranchisement. Thus, it also try to explore four poets from Malayalam Dalit Feminist poets Vijila. It also delve into four poets from Malayalam Dalit Feminist poets Vijila Chirapatt, Sathi Angamaly, Ammu Deepa, Sunitha Thoppil and try to analyse how they redefined their self images through their writings and how to used their voices to current scenarios uplift their legacy. This study marks an awakening of consciousness and an approach to social change in Dalit community.

**Keywords:** Marginalized community, Dalit Feminist, Women Poets, Collective consciousness.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is not only a portrait of a person's feelings. It is often an expression of a life which mirrors the reality of the collective mind. It elucidates the intricacies of their lives with the complex rubric of other women in their community. Dalit women writers are drawn to feminist issues because their experiences are not rooted in caste alone and exist at the intersection of caste and gender. There are gendered and class-based social practices that lead to the oppression and exploitation of women. Narratives by Dalit women writers are not just tales of sob stories, they are stances and resistance against patriarchal intricacies. So as long as caste and gender discrimination persists women cannot raise their voices for their needs. The aim of Dalit feminism is to create awareness about the root causes and solutions to the problems faced by women in their daily lives as women and lower castes.

Recent feminist literature demonstrates that the internal rhythms of life are not distinct from the external. Literary forms, especially poetry, are powerful forms of expression. It articulates the layered effects of racism and sexism. Self-empowerment leads Dalit women to resist and oppose any form of oppression. Women are different in expressing their feelings in unrestricted language. A unique linguistic order distinguishes feminist ideology. The language of experience cannot be different from the language expressed by those who experience. Dalit language is different from elite language because their life situations are different from mainstream culture. Dalit literature has indeed created its own alternative aesthetics by redefining the map of literature in the doubly marginalized state of living a fragmented life.

## DALIT FEMINIST LITERATURE IN KERALA

Dalit literature focuses on the plight, suffering, poverty and degradation of a large section of the society. They were considered the lowest caste in the social hierarchy. Dalit literature emerged as a disaffected community engaged in caste discrimination and using literature to express their sense of identity and protest. It is generally assumed that Dalit writings are meant to convey social exploitation, humiliation and ostracization of their community.

The Malayalam literary scenario has seen celebrations of plural voices particularly of the marginalized and oppressed caste and race groups. Folk songs, poems and autobiographies are forms of expression of the invisible oppressions and humiliations faced by the marginalized. Folk songs were the first form of Dalit literature in Kerala. It carried the emotions, joys and disappointments of a time in a unique rhythm. A myriad of verbal musical forms eventually recorded themes such as sexual abuse and poverty. Folk songs explored the living conditions of Dalit women. Folk songs are an account of atrocities that people once

suffered. The plot of most folk songs is about a challenging body, work, and exploitative hierarchical power system.

Recent Dalit poets are careful to stay away from grievances and discover a unique world of ideas and narrative contexts. They focused their agenda on finding a unique space for them. New poets believed that history was a predetermined agenda determined by political hierarchical power structures. So we have to create our own space, and that realization changes concepts. This provided an opportunity for simultaneous reconstruction of Malayalam poetry and Dalit poetry. New Poems explores unmarked Dalit life within unwritten history. Postmodern Dalit poetry attempts to present public life through personal experiences. This approach to public consciousness through personal experiences is evidence of the experiential expression of the new Dalit poetry. When we say that poetry moves into micro politics, this mode of expression is also included. Recent poets are bringing closed structure poetry to the outside world. Dalit cultural politics is working behind it. New Dalit poetry sheds light on the formality of language and reveals its politics.

Literature written by Dalit women is few in number. Dalit feminist literature in Kerala has its roots in a strong corpus of oral and ritual literature through folk literature. The lives of women depicted as exploited. Whether in the workplace or in the community, Dalit women are always treated as working puppet or sex symbols. They always go through oppression in the workplace and its frustration. They were denied the privilege enjoyed by elite women. Mainstream society abuses them physically and mentally.

Dalits are marked as working class in mainstream literature. But Dalit women began to write themselves and explore labour histories and how they became marginalized labour groups. Women poets reveal the fervour of soul experiences through their poems. By historicizing experiences, different depths of poetic taste were revealed through their poetry. All these make the subject of Dalit women's writings. They were just beginning to speak, so few literary forms from their account and achieved a lot in the short span of time they have flourished. Their first major advantage is their educational opportunities, and the second is their consistently progressive writing skills.

#### NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

While mainstream poets talk about love, patriarchy, equality, aesthetics, religion etc., Dalit women poets are fighting for their identity in their poems. Dalit poets are more liberal and autobiographical than other modern poets. There are many strategies that women employ in their actions to emancipate or defend themselves. They have gained considerable recognition from it. Dalit literary strategies are,

- Visualizing color as power symbol
- Body writing
- Critique of authoritarianism
- Reconstructing the language

Through these strategies, Dalit women construct an aesthetic for their poetry. In their writings, a new poetic language blossomed in form and practice. These writings are very subtle and use sarcasm and irony in elucidating the Dalit dilemma. These poems are full of transcendent images.

#### VISUALIZING DALIT IDENTITY AS POWER SYMBOL

Dalit writers, especially female writers use their identity to deconstruct social hierarchy. Through literary forms they shed light on the monotonous and impoverished conditions of Dalit life, imbued with social critiques rooted in color and gender contradictions in turbulent moments of recognition. They share common experiences of caste violence, poverty and discrimination. The themes of women's lives suffering the ravages of male dominance in the family and workplace are handled with extraordinary skill.

One of the Dalit Poetess Vijila Chirappad poetry has a distinct resonance of Dalit sentiments unlike the usual styles. She speaks about the marginalization that a race has been experiencing for generations and the radical transformation that needs to be brought about in the social system.

Vijila Chirappad's poem "The Waste Land" exposes the hypocrisy of the system. It marks the life of the maid destined to enter only through the back door.

"Chandrika chechi  
of the Waste Land,  
talks/ about the homes  
one enters /only through the back door  
Entering through the very same route  
While hearing the television  
Blare the pledge aloud on August 15-

All Indians are my brothers and sisters”

The irony here is the mockery of the Independence Day pledge on TV, "All Indians are my brothers and sisters," heard by Chandrika Chechi, who is destined to travel only through the back door.

Vijila's poem "She Who Fly Efore" conveys a similar emotion.

In our home/ There is TV/No Fridge/Neither mixer/  
Nor grinder

No LPG/ Not even an iron -box/ Yet my mother/  
Knew

How to operate these /Much before/ I did

Because/ Like in Madhavikutty's stories

And the novel of MT/She is Janu-/The servant ( U  
Shaji 630)

The housemaid has only one face in the writings of elite writers. They are nothing more than an impersonal object that goes by conventional names. Here 'Janu' is not a name but a representation. Here the irony in which the poet reveals that the mother is that maid who knows how to operate all the modern devices before the new generation understands them, and not even a name is relevant, is noteworthy here.

In her poem "Autobiography of a Bitch"," we recognize a Dalit woman shedding light on her fellow women and witness her dedication to alternative self-definitions.

Sathi Angamaly, one of the notable Dalit women writers approaches poetry from a different perspective. Her poem discusses the estrangement due to long-standing oppression. Caste division is recognized as an interrelated system in which Dalit women are treated as victims of constant oppression and exploitation by male hegemony. Her attitude towards the problem of otherness is suggested in her poetry "I Will bring it back"

"To leap means .....

From the clouds / which end up as waterways

A river like girl/ never finite and infinite

with scars of ancient pains / A melting dream

Beyond the clouds, beyond the rivers, the poetic imagination lurks in the lines that travel the endless paths of dreams. A leap into her dreams is enough, says the poet, to heal traditional wounds. Unlike the usual repressive path, what emerges here is the release of the individual consciousness that longs to fly and jump. There is firm recognition, and the intensity of the thunder is visible in those words. It is this consciousness that gives energy to poetry. It prompts

deep questioning of the identity crisis and confirms that strong words can break any system. Here words stand as a rejuvenating and purifying agent.

#### BODY WRITING

Body writing is not monolithic for women, but encompasses the myriad possibilities of the female experience. It breaks traditional metaphors. It Create new metaphors by destabilizing fixed forms of characters. This principle is also followed in the writings of Dalit women. This principle is also followed in the writings of Dalit women. A case in point is the lines in Ammu Deepa's poetry that see the body as a symbol of power beyond conventional aesthetic considerations. When Dalit women's bodies are exchanged as cheaply available sexual bodies, they are assaulted, killed, denied the right to life, abused and exterminated. The politics of body language is thus subversion with multiple implications from every bond

"In the abdomen of mom

A leopard curled up" ( Ammu Deepa)

It's a coinage trying to charter the hitherto unexplored.

These lines are examples of how she goes against traditional gender stereotypes. The poem is written in the style of modern feminism, which presents the female body as a symbol of power. In aesthetic concept, abdominal stretch marks, which were considered a sign of inferiority and ugliness, are here presented as a symbol of strength. When you lie with your head on that stomach, you are not afraid of anything. The poem shares the comfort of lying in the comfort of the assurance of saving something in danger. The poem shares the comfort of reassurance and faith in a mother's safe bosom in any danger.

In the poem 'Early Morning'

Raising the sun/ In her palm

With the hawk knife/ In the right hand

Cracked it open/ Right at the centre

#### CRITIQUE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

All who have to 'conform' themselves to the needs and desires of their powerful male owner can be hunted for trivial reasons. The awareness of racism and sexism as a social construction is reflected in Sunitha Thoppil's poem 'Triple Lockdown', is a social satire.

"Out of all the crowds

Just need to stay distance

Locked up indoors ...

Quarantine rules

For any female gender in this country

Not going to be brand new at all...

... The first to be quarantined

It's just over which one

Corona virus as well'.

This is a satirical poem from the point of view of women who have historically lived in this situation, which is a new experience for the male society that has been experiencing the lockdown for ages.

The anger of the Dalit who works on the street is expressed in the poem. The servant is a strong figure and a symbol of social injustices, she is strong willed and determined despite working long hours and being neglected along with the vulture. The poem is about plight

"We in the street

Amidst garbage

Hungry, hungry" (Dasan 39)

#### RECONSTRUCTING THE LANGUAGE

Languages are the best tool for the marginalized to defend themselves, because conventional language is constructed by and for mainstream power structure. So, this language is obviously against women and backward society. They will have to reconstruct a new language to express their experience and feelings. That may be unconventional or colloquial.

Vijila's poem 'Kitchen Rags' represents the story of a race's survival as it presents a woman who has to live on clothes within the four walls of the kitchen. A clear picture of the oppressed society emerges as the poet presents her personal experiences. The poem describes the plight of women. It marks lives that become like dirty rags. Here language and syntax are so abbreviated and pregnant with meaning, but thought-provoking. The women in the kitchen suffer a lot and do not get time even to attend to their personal needs like taking proper baths. Life becomes harder for the women who are trapped inside the kitchen

"Before us/ No human

Appears to be great at all!".

Sathy Angamaly's "The Street Dog" has powerful language that ridicules the follies of the social system.

"Do not say a word

I have something to say

In the word scrubbed clean

The truth that smells of blood" (M. Dasan)

The voices of the hitherto silenced smelled of their blood.

"The thorns we put out to dry

The flowers have become"

The hopes of those who have been lost for a long time became,

"The loudest Pullankuzhal,

A rainbow without colour"

Words are powerful weapons that reveal conditions here. Those who have been silenced so far often struggle to get the words out.

In the poem Meikkattukari ( Meikkattugirl) poet talk about meikkattu girl (helping hand women . Malayalam poetry never marked Meikkattukari . Referring to the wisdom of her ancestors, Sunitha marks the intentional marginality in women's life. What makes this poem different is that it tries to present self-conscious women who react differently to a social system that treats the female body and labour as a cheap commodity. She explains why race and gender can be a trauma for Dalits, who define themselves as women who are too strong to face a world of discrimination and racism with the identity of woman to resist injustice and oppression. Along with self-esteem, it can change the way of thinking to see self-beauty which becomes powerful empowerment of women. With the changes and resistances women make, it helps them to be independent and appreciate a multi-faceted poetry. These poems are inextricably linked to her sense of origin, her sense of belonging to a community outside of caste, and to her sense of identity.

#### CONCLUSION

Dalit women's poetry is more liberal and autobiographical than that of other modern poets. The language in these writings places the non-canonical writings in their social, historical, and cultural contexts and provides readers with a conceptual framework to better appreciate the discourse. They expose the contemporary chaotic and miserable state of Dalit life due to its history of oppression, alienation and drive for revival .Dalit feminist writers have been agents in defining and constructing a body of literature, women's powerful but hidden histories, creating a literary revolution based on Dalit women's subjective self-formation and expression. It is visible here that

poetry evolves from the subtlety of individuality to the subtlety of sociality.

#### NOTES

- Vijila's Autobiographical works find an identity through the experiences works have been published in three collections : *Adukkal Illatha Veedu* (A Home without Kitchen, 2006), *Amma Oru Kalpanika Kavitha Alla* (Mother is not a Poetic Figment of Our Imagination ,2009), and *Pakarthi Ezhuthu* (Copied Notes, 2015). Her three poems have been selected for the Dalit Anthology by Oxford University Press. There is a heartfelt rendering of Dalit predicament in the poem “A Place for Me”  
"Kaikkalathunikal'.This poem is translated to English by Rakhi Raghavan.
- Sathy Angamaly is a Dalit Malayalam poet, influenced by the Ambedkarite ideology of Indian Dalit Federation (IDF) from childhood. Her first book, *Trees of Fire* was published in 2011 and ‘The Street Dog’ is an award winning poem. She is the organizer of Dalit Women’s Collective and a trainer for personality development of Dalit children. She is pursuing a Diploma in Journalism, is an Associate Editor in *Aura* and contributes articles to various periodicals.
- Ammu Deepa is from Pattambi, Palakkad. Has been publishing poems in various periodicals in Malayalam for a decade. She has published a collection of poems titled ‘Karimkutti’ which has received much critical acclaim. She is a painter too. She is a teacher by profession.
- Sunitha Thoppil is an author at "Sanghaditha Magazine".Sunitha Thoppil has been contributing articles to sanghaditha magazine.

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