Mapping the Body Politic: A Critical Study of Dalit Women's Poetry in Post-1947 India

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled, "**Mapping the Body Politic: A Critical Study of Dalit Women's Poetry in Post-1947 India**", submitted by me towards the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University, Kolkata is based upon my own original work carried out under the supervision of **Dr. Nilanjana Deb**, Associate Professor, Department of English, and that there is no plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me in part or in whole for the award of any other degree/diploma of the same Institution where the work is being carried out, or to any other Institution. A paper out of this dissertation has also been presented by me at an international conference at Pondicherry University, organized by the Department of English, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, and Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, New Delhi, thereby fulfilling the criteria for submission, as per the M.Phil Regulation (2017) of Jadavpur University.

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On the basis of academic merit and satisfying all the criteria as declared above, the dissertation of Ms **Debakanya Haldar** entitled "**Mapping the Body Politic: A Critical Study of Dalit Women's Poetry in Post-1947 India"**, is now ready for submission towards the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University.

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SYNOPSIS

So far as Dalit studies are concerned, the field has managed to appeal to specific readership only. Having allowed a confined space to Dalit studies, there is a common notion that this space is enough to translate all the nuances of the marginalized identity. The practice of casteism, of course, is not an isolated form of oppression and yet the recognition of the impact of other possible identities go unnoticed. Since the present study focuses on gender and caste dynamics, the opposition presented by Women's studies must be briefly mentioned. Perhaps the predominant ideology behind popular discourses on feminism is the idea of a sisterhood shared by those who challenge a hyper-masculine patriarchy. It caters to a very limited notion of sisterhood that generalizes the nuances that might be present in one's identity. This essentially means that if one's politics demands a more radical approach, it is either subsumed or excluded. Thus, mainstream feminism in India has been, for a long time, quick to exclude Dalit feminists from their politics. While it reeks of a privileged savarna culture, the logic has been this –to divide Dalit identity into sub-identities is a challenge to the notion of a unified, singular Dalit community. Thus, at any given moment, the political ideologies of a person is forced to be limited either to a genderless caste or a casteless gender. However, there is a need to question the productivity of such an exclusionary politics.

The present thesis will be focusing on the poetry of Dalit women writing within a post-Independence timeline. The study has been limited to four vernacular regions: Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Bengali. To talk specifically about modern Dalit women's poetry is to invoke a specific type of consciousness that goes beyond a simplified notion of a unified community. Their writings is significantly different from a purely elitist feminism since they specifically question caste-based Hindu patriarchy. Thus, their poetry offers a new lens of analyzing Dalit poetry because it merges the narratives of discriminations against two identities –that of being a woman and a Dalit.

Since the works of the poets in consideration encompass different approaches to Dalit feminist literature, the main analytical viewpoint of the thesis is that of a literary engagement with body politics. The politics of the body is ripe with potential since throughout the course of history, it has been a significant agent of revolution. Of course, this symbol of the body as revolutionary stems from the constant colonization of it –the hegemonic power dominating the

social, political, cultural, economic, sexual and biological aspects of the weaker bodies. Narrowing it further down to the ambit of Dalit women's identity, the status of marginalization becomes more prominent and hence, the oppression on the body and the consequent resistance becomes more acute as well. Thus, through this nuanced lens of the body and its specific significance in the Dalit women's social context, the thesis aims for a critical study of Dalit women's poetry post-1947 –a timeline that witnessed extensive linguistic experimentations among these Dalit poets.

The basic aim of the thesis is, thus, to contribute to the growth of Dalit research in a privileged academia, to question the ghettoization of Dalit feminism from the mainstream quarters, and to open a discourse that simultaneously interrogates and revises contemporary theorizations on the body through the alternate politics of the Dalit woman's marginalized identity.

Introduction

> "To understand the significance of brahmanical patriarchy we need to recognize that it is not merely a routine variant within the framework of the subordination of women but is a structure unique to Hinduism and the caste order. The term 'brahmanical patriarchy' is a useful way to isolate this unique structure of patriarchy, by now dominant in many parts of India. It is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher and lower than others. Further, brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the higher castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and pativrata women who are valorized, and a structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion." (Nur Yalman, "On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 93 (1962): 25-28)

Understanding Caste

The caste system in India is one of the longest surviving oppressive hierarchical structures in existence in the world today, with its origins heavily debated upon by anthropologists. The term 'caste' finds its closest approximation in the term '*varna*' and sub-castes in '*jati*'. These two concepts, which go back to the Vedic periods, provided for the systematic classification of labour and hereditary occupation and simultaneously upheld the stratification of castes. The ostracized section of the society who found themselves beyond the classification of the four 'varnas' were the *avarna* castes and were regarded as the 'untouchables' and the 'panchamas' –the fifth order. Mahatma Gandhi attempted to overwrite this idea of untouchability by calling these marginalized people 'harijans', a rather romanticized term. The British, however, called them the "Depressed classes" and with the Census Report of India, 1931, these marginalized sections of people were clubbed as the 'Exterior classes'. This interchangeability in the understanding of the terms 'caste' and 'class' can be regarded as an example of the common practice of equating the caste system of India with the social class structure. For a seminar in Columbia University, Ambedkar himself tried to explain the caste concept to a western society by defining the caste system as an endogamous "enclosed class".[1]

The Marathi term 'Dalit' was initially used by Jyotirao Phule in his *Dalitodhar* programme and in 1930, the Pune based newspaper *Dalit Bandhu* used the term as a translation for the "Depressed Classes". It was made popular only in post-Independence India in 1973 by the Dalit Panther manifesto "as a constant reminder of their age old oppression –it literally means 'oppressed' or 'broken', describing both the state of deprivation and the people who are

[1] Quoted by Arundhati Roy in her speculations of Ambedkar's various definitions of the caste system. Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint", *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2014), 24.

deprived."[2] Although Dalits and the 'Scheduled Caste' (a term introduced by the Simon Commission and incorporated in Section 279 of the Government of India Act, 1935) do not completely merge in their politics, sociologists and writers alike have taken to the dynamic term 'Dalit' to collectively describe the "veritable chamber of horrors" that Hinduism is to the outsider.[3] As Arundhati Roy points out, "the official nomenclature of prejudice is a maze that can make everything read like a bigoted bureaucrat's file notings."[4] Hence, the term 'Dalit' has the potential to dismiss the difficulties and constraints of technicalities and becomes a powerful resistance to the oppression.

For the definition of such an intricate structure, sociologists have always turned to Brahminical discourses instead of taking into account the perspectives of the outcasts themselves. Scholars like Louis Dumont and Michael Moffat, for example, present it as a necessary religious structure, with an emphasis on its ritualistic importance. What this enables is a fabrication of consent –a lie that upper-caste Hindus have maintained in their narratives. Even within the specific ambit of Dalit studies, the more 'liberal' responses have been summed up by the sociologist Gopal Guru as being those that talk of 'social mobility', 'reference group' and 'relative deprivation'.[5] However, as Guru points out, these modes of liberal outlooks are insufficient in delineating Dalit history since they only project Dalit struggles as relative deprivation within a purity-pollution matrix that can be resolved through a "Hinduisation of the Dalits". This sense of relativity also does not allow one to view the deprivation as complete oppression or "total alienation and exclusion." It is interesting to note that the so-called solution that stems from this "Hinduisation of the Dalits" is also an approach that the upper-caste Hindu

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[2] Ruth Manorama, "Dalit Women: The Downtrodden among the Downtrodden", *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*, ed. Mary E. John (Haryana: Penguin Books, 2008), 447.
[3] Quoted by Roy from *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, a series published by the Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. Roy, *Annihilation of Caste*, 20.
[4] Ibid., 21.
[5] Gopal Guru, "Dalit Movement in Mainstream Sociology", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 14 (April 1993): 570.

took upon themselves to systematically erase the cultural norms that the non-Hindu Dalits had. Thus, what this approach essentially does is that it narrows down the politics behind Dalit protests as only a need for upward mobility within the religious and cultural realm of Hinduism. What such a view fails to understand is that the very concept of a higher status within the caste dynamics will only strengthen and accept the caste system without challenging the hegemonic forces at play. Ambedkar's call for a complete annihilation of caste can be seen as one of the many radical protests that contested the dominance of a Brahminical hegemony. Ambedkar notes that "the outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system."

Caste and Class

When the caste system is viewed from a lens other than the dominant viewpoint espoused by a Brahminical hegemony, one begins to correlate it with other identitarian politics. As Gail Omvedt observes, "Caste is a 'material reality' with a 'material base'; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today."[6] Thus, to look beyond ritualistic specifications is to take into account the glaring factor that the Dalits lack material resources enjoyed by the economically privileged, land-owning upper castes. This also provided the dominant castes with social and political power to strengthen a culture of exploitation wherein rigid bonds of servitude and debts lasted for generations.

Thus, the history of Marxism as an emancipatory project for the oppressed communities cannot be ignored when mapping the Dalit struggles in India. The manifesto of the Marathi

[6] Gail Omvedt, "Caste, Class and Land in India: An Introductory Essay", *Land, Caste and Politics in Indian State*, ed. Gail Omvedt (New Delhi: Authors' Guild Publications, 1982), 14.

Dalit Panthers recognized Dalits as "members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion." Under the British colonial rule, the Dalit agitation in Tamil Nadu centered around their grievance of not owning land resources in spite of the extortion of the community's agrarian labour. A similar struggle, of course, was witnessed all over Bengal when the marginalized caste and tribal communities decided to reclaim their right to material resources through radical, militant politics. The shift to left-wing politics among the lower caste peasants and labourers during the Telangana agitation is another instance of how the core of lower caste politics were often found in class struggles.

However, with the consideration of class dynamics within the caste structure, the two were often seen by sociologists to collapse into each other. Ramkrishna Mukherjee has stated that there is no longer the reality of the 'dominant caste' since "class structure has cut across the caste hierarchy, forming new alliances and antagonisms." Mukherjee goes so far as to say that the idea of caste in itself has become obsolete in modern India and that one should instead look at caste in class structures –"Today, casteisation of society is proceeding at the level of *hoch politk* with the help of some academics."[7]

Such simplification ignores the durability of the caste system, limits the scope of caste studies and "invisibilizes" the Brahminical ideologies that need to be critiqued –a criticism that is seconded by activists such as Arundhati Roy who are against a "force-fitting" of caste into "reductive Marxist class analysis," which makes "seeing caste even harder." To say that caste as an exclusive entity has been wiped out of existence is to deny the socio-political history of the Dalits and their struggles that continue even today. Thus, it is imperative to not subsume

[7] Ramkrishna Mukherjee, "Caste in Itself, Caste and Class, or Caste in Class", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 27 (July 1999): 1761.

one politics into the other but to carefully recognize caste and class as two distinct ways of defining social identities that also interact with each other to determine the labour of an individual.

Gendering Caste Studies

Much like the interaction between caste and class determines the unique identity stratification in India, the concept of gender furthers the complexity in determining the power structure. The control over female sexuality has been a central agenda in the subordination of women. This has been true especially for lower caste women whose community was strongly limited by the practice of endogamy. "Caste cannot be reproduced without endogamy and it is for this reason that endogamy has been regarded as a tool for the manifestation and perpetuation of caste and gender subordination."[8] Thus, it is imperative that Dalit and Women's studies merge to form a specific inter-disciplinarian pedagogy that questions the hegemonic control over systems of production and reproduction with respect to caste and gender.

There has been, however, resistance from Women's Studies and this opposition must be explored. Perhaps the predominant ideology behind Women's studies is the idea of a sisterhood shared by those who challenge a hyper-masculine patriarchy. Such a sentiment is also reflected by Helene Cixous in her essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*. In the concluding line of her seminal feminist essay she writes, "In one another we will never be lacking."[9] In her vision of liberation, she hopes for the increased discourses by women about their own body and sexual politics. But what does Cixous mean when says "one another"? How broad is the periphery? How inclusive is the definition? Lastly, do they write about the same body?

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[8] Uma Chakravarti, "The Axis of Gender Stratification in India", *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (New Delhii: SAGE Publications, 2018), 26.

[9]Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* Vol. 1, No. 4 (1976): 893.

The answers to these questions are obvious from the discourses available to us – privileged discourses of feminism cater to a very limited notion of sisterhood that generalizes the nuances that might be present in one's identity. By privileged feminism in India, I refer to that feminism that is dominated by a bourgeois, Brahminical ideology that represents the concerns of only upper caste women instead of representing the experiences of women en masse. This lack of engagement with "the non-Brahminical renderings of caste and gender" in women's studies is, according to Sharmila Rege, an influence of "mainstream social sciences" that reflect a similar trend.[10] Hence, the discourses of elite, upper caste women are largely considered to be the discourses of "mainstream feminism" while the militant resistance of marginalized women were pushed to the limits of an alternate politics. Thus, mainstream feminism in India has been, for a long time, quick to exclude Dalit feminists from their politics. While it reeks of a privileged savarna culture, the logic has been this –to divide Dalit identity into sub-identities is a challenge to the notion of a unified, singular Dalit community. Thus, at any given moment, the political ideologies of a person must be limited either to a genderless caste or a casteless gender. The differences between Dalit politics and mainstream feminism seem to be difficult to reconcile and the Guru-Rege debate is only one example of it.

The Dalit woman's narratives do not follow the trends of popular culture and neither does it use the vocabulary of privileged discourses. They are based on experiential anecdotes and frustrates the logic and methodology of theoretical academic pedagogies –and rightly so. Her politics is subaltern as she finds herself outside the ambit of cultural superiority and political hegemony. Her narratives are in fact, doubly marginalized –she is the "downtrodden among the downtrodden".[11] Thus, these alternate narratives reveal that the Dalit woman speaks and she speaks differently and it is important to acknowledge this "difference" in her voice.

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[10] Sharmila Rege, "Introduction", *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), 6.
[11] Manorama, "Dalit Women", 445.

Guru's skepticism about the Dalit woman's politics being homogenized and "whitewashed" by external factors such as non-Dalit women's movements is elaborated in his essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently".[12] While Guru feels that the representation of Dalit women's issues cannot be founded without the subjective experiences in that particular social location, Rege argues that instead of isolating Dalit women's issues from the ambit of mainstream feminism, the larger body of feminist politics "must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalized" and must constantly interrogate their privileged position.[13]

However, there is a need to question both these stances and engage with them dialectically. While Guru's theorization might promote an exclusionary identitarian politics, Rege's theorization ventures into the domain of essentializing Dalit feminism for the sake of non-Dalit feminists to "reinvent themselves". What I propose is a one-way non-flexible 'strategic essentialism'[14] –that is, while Dalit women must be allowed to create a space within non-Dalit feminism, non-Dalit feminists must not tamper with Dalit subjectivity to "reinvent themselves" as that dilutes the distinct, different voices. It is a radical approach that counters Rege's critique of "naming differences" without siding with Guru's position of exclusionary politics.

What really needs to get underlined here is the presence of the alternate politics of Dalit women whose feminist voice of dissent, albeit different from the elite counterpart, speaks to challenge their existing conditions of subalternity.

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[12] Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 30, No. 41/42 (1995): 2548-2550.
[13] Sharmila Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 33, No. 44 (1998): 39-46.
[14] A concept developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to underline the cultural negotiation a particular minor identity might engage in to represent their politics. She later repudiates the concept as it has the potential to subsume subaltern politics. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

Dalit Poetry and Dalit Consciousness

The history of Dalit literature of India is a long and complex one for the political nuances that shaped these narratives were never constant for every geographical region. The Marathi Dalit literature started within the traditions of Bhakti saint movement of 14th century whereas the Bengali Dalit voice of the *Charyapadas* can be traced to the Pala dynasty. The late Aryanization of the Dravidian belt also changed the fabric of caste politics in that region which affected how the lower castes were writing before and after the Vedic stratification. While each regional Dalit politics took different courses to form their present political activism, the entire corpus of Dalit literature is unified by that one singular notion of the need for liberation.

Modern Dalit Sahitya has always been about translating the radical notions of the contemporary political activism of their community. Such a specific mode of writing was imbued with what we now term as Dalit consciousness. Sharan Kumar Limbale writes, "By Dalit literature I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus."[15] The resistance to a dominant Brahminical literary culture was challenged in the Dalit writer's thematic expressions, aesthetic sensibilities and linguistic experimentations that subverted the normative.

For the purpose of the present study, the overview will be limited to the discussion of Dalit poetry which has been a vital part of this literary movement since it established a rhythmic synchronization with "the grunt, the grumble, or the gush" of Dalit labour.[16] Since poetry also allows for the economic use of words and space to get the message across to the readers, the

[15] Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*: *History, Controversies and Considerations*, trans. Alok Mukherjee (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 19.
[16] Mulk Raj Anand, "Some Words by way of Preface to Dalit Poems", *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, ed. Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2018), x.

Dalit poets felt more at ease in subverting this particular literary form. The new language formed the crux of Dalit discourse and it was in this language that "virtually every Dalit who could write became a poet before becoming an activist."[17]

The aesthetic of Dalit poetry cannot be subsumed under the generic qualities associated with poetry as a genre –beauty, pleasure, idealism, sophistication and erudition. Dalit poetry was meant to agitate the mass. The vocabulary is dominated by the larger idea of Dalit consciousness that encapsulates experiences of exploitation and helplessness which ultimately culminate into rage and the need for revolution. The language is unpolished, heavy with specific regional dialects and it does not recognize the cultivated grammar of elite literature. Thus, Dalit poetry propagated the creative license to break away from the normative definition of appropriate poetic discourse and allowed the poets to shape a subversive vocabulary that is suitable to their politics.

Some of the notable collections of Marathi Dalit poetry are *Golpitha* (Namdeo Dhasal), *Kondwada* (Daya Pawar), *Chavni Halte Ahe* (Arjun Dangle) and several others. Other regional Dalit poets, writing about their own culturally specific experiences, have also contributed to the vastness of Dalit poetry. Some of the Telugu collections include *Pancham Vedam* (Satish Chander), *Muvvala Chetlikarra* (K. Sanjeeva Rao) and *Kotha Gabbilam* (Yendluri Sudhakar). Some of the notable Tamil Dalit poets include N.D. Rajkumar, Mathivannan, P. Mathiyalagan and Bharathi Nivethan. Bengali Dalit poetry, which encapsulates the experiences of the Namashudra and Matua Dharma, are indebted to poets such as Jatin Bala and Manohar Mouli Biswas and Manoranjan Bypari.

[17] Janet A. Contursi, "Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (May 1993): 325.

Situating Dalit Women's Alternate Literature

At this juncture it is important to bring in the various axes of social stratification to locate how Dalit women in India were participating in the literary movement. An absence of caste from these feminist politics led to the exclusion of Dalit women's narratives from the privileged feminist umbrella. Valid depictions of Dalit women's struggles were also absent in the writing of Dalit men who were not able to include the nuances of Dalit woman's lived struggles in their narratives. However, this did not deter the Dalit women from engaging in their own counterculture politics. Their narratives, both oral and written, and the performances of their politics were a subversion not only of Brahminical codes but of patriarchal norms as well.

The Dalit women of Maharashtra, for example, moved beyond the literary movements as they engaged in subaltern "mudhouse activism", singing their narratives, political messages and Ambedkarite ideas. Marathi Dalit women kept their caste and gender identity at the forefront of their *bahujanvaadi* feminism. Such an identitarian politics is, however, not the primary agenda of Tamil Dalit feminist writings. Instead Tamil Dalit women poets actively centralized a discourse on body politics and sexuality in their poetry in an attempt to reclaim their space in feminist literature. Such discourses were seen as a violation of the high Tamil culture upheld by high caste men and women and generated vitriolic responses. Giving significance to the politics of the body, the Dalit women were challenging the State's authority over the subject's body. The caste-oriented feminist politics of Telugu Dalit women originated from the peasant's and the adivasi's struggles right after Independence. Like their Tamil counterpart, they too critiqued a savarna feminism through organizations such as Matti Poolu and Maalo Memu and through their narratives that subverted the aesthetics of elite feminist writings. Bengali Dalit feminism, of course, is a completely different ambit that has not been engaged with much due to the different socio-political climate of the Dalit community in

Bengal before and after Independence. However, the space of the Bengali Dalit woman has been made prominent since the 1980s with a distinct literary style that not only critiques the Brahminical Hindu texts but also incorporates modern literary sensibilities to reclaim the language that have been largely denied to them.

While the realm of Dalit poetry is largely dominated by male writers, women poets have made their marks as well. A distinctly recorded Dalit woman's poetic voice can be traced back to the 14th century Bhakti movement in Maharashtra. Within the ambit of modern Dalit women's poetry, there was a strong emphasis on an unapologetic voice. Their writings, it must be noted, is significantly different from a purely elitist feminism since they specifically question a caste-based Hindu patriarchy. Thus, their poetry offers a new lens of analyzing Dalit poetry because it merges discriminations against two identities –that of being a woman and a Dalit. In the present thesis, the works of the following poets will be analyzed.

Hira Bansode (1939-) is a prominent Dalit poet who was born into the Mahar community. Despite the obstacles presented by her mother-in-law, Bansode had managed to complete her schooling and went on to complete her Master's degree in Marathi. Her most well-known collection of poetry is *Phiryad* (1984). Her poems are also included in both Dhasal and Zelliot's anthologies of Dalit poetry. Some of her poems have also been translated by Christian Novetzke which will serve as primary texts.[18]

Jyoti Lanjewar (1950-2013) was a well-known poet, critic, social activist and an advocate for women's rights. She has authored several books, out of which four are poetry collections and seven are other critical works. The poems that will be considered in this thesis are taken from several anthologies, namely, *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* and *No Entry for the New Sun: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry*.

[18] Christian Novetzke, "Twice Dalit: The Poetry of Hira Bansode", *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 1/2, Miscellany (1993): 279-295.

Meena Gajabhiye was born in 1957, a year after the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956. Her poems are regarded as fierce as those of Namdeo Dhasal's, even though the choice of language of both the poets are strikingly different. Her original works are in Marathi and hence, translations by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliot will be considered.

Sheetal Sathe (1985-), a folk singer, poet and Dalit rights activist, is known for her works with Kabir Kala Manch, which is a cultural organization that performs protest poetry and plays to address socio-political issues. Sathe's art and activism were popularized the Anand Patwardhan documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* which highlights the reality of caste violence in India. Accused of promoting Maoist ideologies, Sathe, her husband and other members of Kabir Kala Manch were forced into hiding for two years in 2011. After finally getting bail on humanitarian grounds, Sheetal and her co-activists continue to perform their protest poetry. Her works will, thus, be a slight deviation from the rest, since the primary source materials are not published as texts but as multimedia which I have compiled from YouTube.

Chhaya Koregaonkar, Mumbai based contemporary poet, writes in Marathi to articulate her feminist politics. Like Saathe, she too performs her poetry and is active through Ambedkarite movements and Women Empowerment programs in Maharashtra. *Akantpriya Majhaa* and *Ek Avakash Maajhhi* are her published collections of poems. The poem in consideration have been sourced from the website of *Hakara,* a bi-lingual journal of creative expression.

Meena Kandasamy (1984-) is a Tamil poet based in Chennai. She is noted for her championing of the caste annihilation movement and her poetry is well-known for its distinct feminist perspectives. As a translator, she has translated the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumavalavan, chairman of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katch (Liberation Panther Party). Kandasamy's works are a fierce reminder that the poet's politics regarding her identity as a Dalit and as a woman are always interconnected as she presents caste oppression from a

feminist lens. She has published two collections of poetry namely, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010).

Sukirtharani (1973 -) is another Tamil poet who was born in Lalapet in Vellore district. Hers was one of the ten Dalit families living in that area. She has written extensively on her Dalit identity and chooses to write in her mother tongue. Her poetry has an incredibly tactile quality as she pursues the themes of sexuality alongside the nuanced oppressions inscribed on the Dalit woman's body. Her poetry collections include *Kaippatri En Kanavu Kel* (2002), *Iravu Mirugam* (2004), *Avalai Mozhipeyartthal* (2006), *Theendapadaatha Muttham* (2010), *Kamaththippoo* (2012) and *Ippadikku Yevai*. Due to language barriers, this thesis will be looking at her translated works. The translation project has been taken up Lakshmi Holmstrom and has been published in the collection *Wild Words: Four Tamil Poets*.

S. Thenmozhi (1974 -) is a poet and short-story writer from Tiruvarur. She has played a key role in establishing a literary forum called Ilakkiya Cholai in the Thanjavur region. Her poetry collections appeared as *Thuravi Nandu* (2008) and her compilation of the writings of transgenders appear as *Maadavappilai*. Some of her translated works have been included in *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*.

Ku. Umadevi (1983 -) is a poet and a theatre activist whose poetry collection appeared as *Thisaigalai Parugiavargal* (2006). Like Thenmozhi, some of her works appear in *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*.

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani (1970 -) is an important poet and critic writing about Dalit politics in Telugu. As an advocate of the Dalit woman's voice, she writes, "The poetry by Dalit women from the Dalit women's perspective and experiences as Dalit women is far more powerful and has far greater impact than the poetry of Dalit men or dominant caste women."[19]

[19] Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, "Dalit Women's Writing in Telugu", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 17 (1998): 21-24.

She has published an anthology of her poetry entitled *Mankenapuvu*. Her poem "Wild Flower" has been included in *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*.

Nadakurthy Swaroopa Rani is considered to have originated the genre of haikus in Telugu literature. She has not only established herself as a poet but has also written short stories, novels and critical articles. Her poem is included in *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing* and has been translated by Afsar and Michael A. Collins.

Putla Hemalatha (1962 -) is a Dalit Christian poet who is noted for establishing the literary forum Manogya Sanskitika Sahitya Akademi. With three novels, thirty poems and twenty stories, her works are important within the domain of Dalit women's literature.

Teresa Devadanam belongs to the Madiga caste of Guntur and like Hemalatha, she too has incorporated the Dalit Christian voice in her works. The poet too active part in the Karamchedu agitation of 1985 and has composed several Telugu Dalit songs.

Joopaka Subhadra (1963 -) has been published in Telangana periodicals such as *Bhumika*, *Nigha*, *Mulki*, and *Soyi*. Belonging to the Madiga caste, she has emerged as an important voice in Telugu Dalit literature by drawing on her experiences in rural Telangana and the associated Dalit movements.

Kalyani Thakur (1965-) asserts her identity as a Bengali Dalit feminist by adding the title of 'Charal', a synonym for *Chandal*, at the end of her name. Born into the Matua community, Kalyani Thakur's works are profusely influenced by Harichand Thakur. She tries to locate the nuances of the Bengali Dalit experiences in her works which include an autobiography, four books of poetry, a collection of short stories and a collection of essays. This thesis will be looking at some of her poems from *Chandalini Bhone*, *Chandalinir Kobita*, *Je Meye Aadhar Goney*. I will be attempting to translate her poems while keeping the essence and linguistic politics intact.

Manju Bala (1954 -), the editor of *Ekhon Tokhon*, is an integral voice in Bengali Dalit

feminist literature. Her two collections of poetry *Churna Samudrer Dheu* and *Ashwarohir Apekshay* elaborates on her Dalit feminist sensibilities in a fierce poetic language.

Smritikana Howladar provides a different aesthetic to Dalit poetry by constantly challenging the limits of language in her works. Poems from the collection *Barne Barne Marma Katha* have been included in the present study.

The inclusion of these various poets for the current study is meant to diversify the idea of what Dalit feminism entails and to read the different modes of establishing a counter aesthetic that challenges the larger structure of Brahminical patriarchy.

Survey of Literature

With a growing critical interest in the nuances of subaltern feminism in the last quarter of the twentieth century, sociologists started engaging with the alternate politics of Dalit feminism that was quite methodically erased from the dominant narratives of India's socio-political history. A survey of the scholarly works, both past and present, is necessary to trace how politics of caste, class and gender interacted to form the basic crux of Dalit feminist politics.

Dipankar Gupta's *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society* (2000) provides an efficient entry point into caste studies. Gupta interrogates into the pre-existing caste ideologies which draw heavily from Brahminical narratives and stresses on the importance of an objective analysis of the hierarchical structure. It is also essential that one looks into the theorizations on the Dalit subject's subversive politics in resisting hegemonic power. Chinnaiah Jangam's *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* (2019) is the most recent addition to the study of subversive Dalit politics that upset dominant nationalist narratives enforced by Hindu Brahminical ideologies. The idea of subverting the Brahminical normative becomes the central theme in Partha Chatterjee's 1989 essay "Caste

and Subaltern Consciousness" where he elucidates how Hinduism is the common identity shared by both the elite and the subaltern alike but how it is also subverted and reinvented by the subaltern to create a discourse of resistance against what is essentially a "Brahminical religion". While Chatterjee's essay espouses the general line of thought of most academic writings on Dalit studies, counter arguments against such simplification have also emerged in recent Dalit studies. The necessity for a cautious rhetoric while positing Dalit politics against the hegemonic state power is present in Kalyan Das' 2015 essay, "Tracing Heterogeneity in Dalit 'Subalternity': Subaltern Historiography to Dalit Historiography". Das posits that while Dalit Studies must look into the theorizations related in Subaltern Studies, there must also be a dialectical ambivalence when situating Dalits against "statist ideology". Gopal Guru's works in Dalit studies are also fundamental in understanding the critical discourse of caste studies in India. Some of his important essays on Dalit studies include "The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on experience and theory", "The Language of Dalitbahujan political discourse" (2004), "Archeology of Untouchability" (2009) and "Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity" (2000).

Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India (2014) by Gail Omvedt situates the Dalit movement in both the Bombay Presidency as well as the Andhra, Hyderabad and Mysore region. Omvedt traces the importance of Marxism in developing the anti-caste movements of the nation. She also notes the difficulty of bridging the two axes through the politics of Phule and Ambedkar who, despite having written on "economic radicalism" were not able to implement it in the real socio-historical struggles. Ambedkar himself has written on his views of Communism in the book *India and Communism*. Anand Teltumbde, in his introduction to Ambedkar's book, has tried "bridging the unholy rift" between caste and class by locating the Marxist strain of thoughts not only in Ambedkar's writings but also in the social realities of land satyagrahas of Maharashtra. The sentiment however was not shared by Dalit politics all over the country and

a sharp critique of the Left in diluting caste nuances is present, for example, in essays by Telugu writer M.F. Gopinath (translated into English as 'The Marxist Mask').

A more complex study of the axes of caste, class and gender has found recent critical interests and largely help to shape the main political discourse of the thesis. The collection of essays in Manoranjan Mohanty's edited *Class, Caste, Gender* (2004) complicate and problematize a monolithic view of caste politics. A more direct and elaborate study of Dalit feminism is present in the collection of essays *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*. Edited by S. Anandhi and Karin Kapadia, the essays explore the alternate politics of Dalit women with respect to the State, labour, urban-rural dynamics, sexuality and subaltern counterpublic. It is imperative to mention the works of Uma Chakravarti who has conducted empirical studies to document state repression and caste violence along gender lines. Her book *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2018) is a recent addition to the studies on caste and gender in colonial as well as contemporary India. Within this intersectional study, the most well-known work has been that of Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Apart from including important subjective narratives of Dalit women all over the country, Rege's introductory essay on the significance of Dalit women's 'testimonios' sheds light on the importance of articulating women's question in critiquing the caste system. *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, originally published in Marathi in the year 1989, is a seminal work that not only theorizes Dalit women's struggles in the early decades of twentieth century, but also provides exhaustive accounts of Dalit women activists' interviews to situate the social reality of their politics.

Extensive studies on the socio-political history of the Dalit movements throughout the country need to be mentioned in this survey of literature. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* as well as Arundhati Roy's introduction to it as "The Doctor and the Saint" are important in understanding the development of caste politics in Maharashtra. M.G. Bhagat's critical records

are important in extracting data about the Dalit struggles in pre-Independence 1930s Maharashtra. *The Untouchable Classes of Maharashtra* (1935) can be taken as a starting point in locating the Marathi caste struggles. *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (1992) by Eleanor Zelliot covers Ambedkar's movement in Maharashtra through an objective sociological lens. In *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*, she categorically discusses the role of the Mahar caste in bringing about a social reform movement that would ultimately culminate into the Ambedkarite Movements of Depressed Class politics. Zelliot heavily refers to Ambedkar's published and unpublished writings as well as published Parliamentary papers and reports to locate the Maharashtrian Dalit politics of the time. To contextualize the Dalit struggles post-Ambedkar, there is a need to look at the ethos of Dalit Panthers which has been extensively elaborated by J.V. Pawar in his book *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History* (2017). Pawar situates the politics of the Panthers in the historic struggles of Marathi Dalits right till they got disbanded. When it comes to contextualizing Dalit women's literature within the Marathi language, Eleanor Zelliot needs to be mentioned for creating a discourse around their different voice. Zelliot has elaborated on Dalit women's poetry in the section "Stri Dalit Sahitya: The New Voice of Women Poets" in the book *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Literature and Religion*. Through her analysis, Zelliot deconstructs the language used by Marathi Dalit women poets, thus providing a convincing comparison with their male counterparts.

An authoritative study of the Dalit agitation in Tamil Nadu is present in Hugo Gorringe's *Panthers in Parliament: Dalits, Caste, and Political Power in South India* (2017). It traces the Dalit mobilization in Tamil Nadu and their growing participation in the electoral processes and the decline of the radical politics as a result. S. Anandhi has also provided extensive studies of Tamil Dalit politics through a gendered lens in essays such as "Sex and Sensibility in Tamil Politics". Along with J. Jeyaranjan and R. Krishnan, she has also

conducted field studies in rural Tamil settings which can be found in "Work, Caste and Competing Masculinities: Notes from a Tamil Village". *Land Reforms in India: Tamil Nadu* (2003) presents several cases of the panchama land struggles in Tamil Nadu which was an integral part of Dalit struggles in colonial India. *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012) not only provides an array of literary texts by Tamil Dalits but is also able to carefully situate their literary politics within the need of their specific caste politics.

The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing (2016), like the Tamil counterpart, is important in understanding the nuances of Dalit politics in the Telugu-speaking regions. The editors have provided concise accounts of Dalit nationalism, communist politics and gender studies with respect to Telugu Dalit politics. They have also provided a critical understanding of the politics of language that was essential to the Telugu-speaking Dalit community in challenging the dominant Sanskritized literature of a Brahminical Hinduism. K. Satyanarayana, an important theorist of contemporary Dalit studies, criticizes the mainstream Telugu literary platforms for neglecting the narratives of Telugu Dalits. Anne Vaugier Chatterjee has looked into the difficulty of political representations of Telugu Dalits in the Andhra region in her essay "Two Dominant Castes: The Socio-Political System in Andhra Pradesh". Thummapudi Bharathi provides a methodical study in *A History of Telugu Dalit Literature* (2008) where she traces the Telugu Dalit literary history as well as the changing social conditions within which it is contextualized, right up to the first decade of the twenty first century. *Black Lotus*, the anthology of Telugu Dalit women's poetry follows, like Arjun Dangle's *No Entry for the New Sun*, the important trend of categorically recording the voices of regional Dalit literature. This trend is also witnessed in the Bengali Dalit literary movement, through the efforts of Manohar Mouli Biswas.

In order to locate caste politics in colonial and post-colonial Bengal, one must interrogate into the complex politics that led to the partition and refugee crisis after

Independence. Dwaipayan Sen has provided the realm of Bengali Dalit studies with such an exploration in his book *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (2018). *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal* (2017) is an important collection of essays that discuss the history of caste struggles in modern Bengal, the Bhodrolok resistance to Dalit politics in the colonial period, the politics of the Matua Mahasangha and the class-caste dynamics of the contemporary anti-land acquisition struggles of Singur. Geier Heierstad provides an interesting study of Dalit politics in the culture of Kolkata's Kumartuli by linking the Kumars' marketing strategies with a commodification of caste identity. Critics such as Jaydeep Sarangi, Manohar Mouli Biswas and Manoranjan Byapari have been essential in establishing critical discourses on Bengali Dalit movement and its literature. Byapari's autobiography provides an important testimony to the caste struggles in Bengal. *Dalit Sahityer Digboloy* (1992), *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* (2007) and *Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* (2011) have brought the literature of various Bengali Dalit writers under proper anthologizations. Jaydeep Sarangi is a crucial voice to contemporary Bengali Dalit studies as he not only expands the horizon of the particular domain but also translates the works into English for better accessibility. Sarangi is also noted for his efforts in bridging the glaring gap between Dalit narratives and privileged academic discourses.

An Overview of the Thesis

The main concern of the thesis is to conduct a study of Dalit women's poetry in Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Bengali languages from a post-Independence timeline. The main analytical lens is one that involves body politic in the specific linguistic sensibilities and politics of these poets. The politics of the body is ripe with potential because throughout the course of history, it has been one of the major agents of revolution. Of course, this symbol of the body as revolutionary stems from the constant colonization of it –the hegemonic power dominating the

social, political, cultural, economic, sexual and biological aspects of the weaker bodies. Diana Coole's essay on "The Body and Politics" in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* is a good introduction to the idea of a gendered body in political thoughts.

When we try to locate body politics within the Dalit sociology, it becomes important to understand how the Dalit body has been perceived in the course of history and what has been the implications of its performances and actions. Narrowing it further down to the ambit of Dalit women's identity, the status of marginalization becomes more prominent and hence, the oppression on the body and the consequent resistance becomes more acute as well. To theorize on such a nuanced body and then to implement it in literary analysis is a difficult task and requires an approach espoused by Spivak's strategic essentialism. This concept within subaltern studies encourages a sense of solidarity by temporarily essentializing one's marginalized identity with another to cause a social reaction against the larger biopower at play. Thus, when engaging with the Dalit woman's body, one must begin by drawing from authoritative discourses on the body as present in the works of Western sociologists. The keyword in 'strategic essentialism', however, is the word "temporary" since the socio-political agendas of all identities cannot merge at every given point of time. Thus, while looking at Western discourses on the body's subjection by a State biopower, one must be careful to not subsume Dalit feminist politics to justify these theories. The sociologists the thesis will be looking at are Michel Foucault and Judith Butler and their works have been essentialized for the close textual analysis of the poems to map how the body has the potential to provide a subversive discourse that challenges the hegemonic normative. Attempts have also been made to situate the primary texts within contemporary socio-political struggles for a better understanding of what provides the structure to these alternate poetic aesthetics.

The first chapter of the thesis concentrates on Marathi Dalit women's poetry. The chapter begins by tracing the struggles of the Mahar castes, starting with the Bhakti saints'

devotional appeal for equality to the Dalit struggles of the colonization period with respect to Phule and Ambedkar. After a discussion of post-Ambedkar Dalit Panther movement and the literary aesthetics they espoused, the discussion shifts to Marathi Dalit women's alternate politics in post-Ambedkar Maharashtra. With that, the chapter opens into a discussion of the poetry of Hira Bansode, Jyoti Lanjewar, Meena Gajabhiye, Sheetal Sathe and Chhaya Koregaonkar that are heavily situated in contemporary Dalit struggles of Maharashtra.

The second chapter is dedicated to the study of Tamil Dalit women's poetry. Being different from the Dalit politics of the Maharashtrian region, the chapter begins with an overview of Tamil Dalit politics from the pre-colonization era to post-Independence politics. An important aspect of this introduction is to locate the Brahminical mindset within the non-Brahman non-Dalit castes who greatly hampered the Dalit struggles by diluting them. Locating the institutionalizing of radical Dalit politics in this region, the introduction then shifts to Tamil Dalit women's alternate politics that was concerned with upholding the radical mindset necessary in Dalit agitation. With a brief history of post-Independence Tamil Dalit literature, the chapter then focuses on the highly stylized linguistic experimentations of Tamil women poets such as Meena Kandasamy, Sukirtharani, S. Thenmozhi and Ku Umadevi.

The third chapter focuses on Telugu Dalit women poets who, like their Tamil counterparts, write from within the socio-political realities of the Dravidian movement. The chapter begins with an overview of the Adi-Hindu movement that was imperative to the construction of Dalit identity within the Andhra regions. It then moves into a discussion of how Left politics both shaped and diluted the Telugu Dalit struggles and the need for a specific Dalit consciousness. With this discussion, the chapter provides a brief history of Telugu Dalit literature after which it moves on to a discussion of the poetry of Telugu Dalit women, namely, Nadakurthy Swaroopa Rani, Teresa Devadanam, Putla Hemalatha, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani and Joopaka Subhadra.

The final chapter discusses the poetry of Bengali Dalit women whose literary history shares a fairly recent timeline. Since the politics of the Dalit communities in Bengal has been glaringly different from the rest of the country it is important to trace the reasons for the same. The chapter begins with a brief history of Dalit movement in Bengal, tracing it back to the Pala dynasty. The chapter also provides a criticism of the *bhodrolok* culture that was largely responsible for the opposition to a Dalit consciousness in Bengal. With an overview of the Matua alternate discourses, the chapter moves onto a discussion of the violence inflicted on the Bengali lower castes post-Partition that greatly changed not only the essence of Dalit identity but also created a great skepticism towards Left politics. With a summary of the literary movement, the chapter then discusses the poetry of Smritikana Howladar, Kalyani Thakur and Manju Bala who, through their works, have reclaimed a space for themselves in both Dalit and feminist literature.

The concluding chapter aims to reflect on the difficulties of capturing the specificities of alternate narratives when translated into a different language. The discussion is drawn, not only from the anecdotes provided by the various translators of regional Dalit literature, but also from personal difficulties in translating the nuances of the Bengali Dalit poems discussed in the final chapter. The chapter also asserts the importance of these translated works as they have the potential to spread the reality of such alternate narratives beyond a niche audience. The conclusion ends with the articulation of the main aim of the thesis which is to contribute to the growth of Dalit research in mainstream academia and to question the ghettoization of Dalit feminism from privileged discourses.

Chapter 1

Dalit Movement and Literature in Maharashtra

Eleanor Zelliot notes that "Dalit creativity in all its phases is closely tied to the movement begun by the Mahar caste before the turn of this [20th] century." The Mahars, a caste-cluster, are avarnas and were originally not part of the Hindu varna system. They constitute about nine percent of the Marathi speaking population and are found in every village throughout Maharashtra. Although they are socio-economically well above the Mangs and Chambhars, the discrimination faced by all the avarna castes is the same. A detailed socio-anthropological study of the Mahars is present in Eleanor Zelliot's book, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*. From the 14th century, Chokhamela's is the only recorded voice of a Mahar who protested against untouchability within the religious tradition of the Bhakti Saint movement and this is regarded as the first step towards the Dalit liberation. His son Karmamela, brother-in-law Banka, sister Nirmala and wife Soyarabai were also known for their protests against the caste system. Other saints of lower castes include Ravidas, Kanaka and Nandnara. The protests were, of course, subdued by their religious temperament. Chokhamela, for example, accepted his low caste as a result of past sins and hoped for equality and brotherhood in his *abhangas* or devotional poems.[20]

While remaining heterodox and inclusive in philosophy, the Bhakti saints could not bring about any radical change in the social structure through devotion. In fact, any effort made by subsequent rulers of Maharashtra, if at all, to put an end to casteism, was only superficial. It involved army recruitment and religious conversion at its best and failed to provide equal opportunities in all other aspects. Even though the British hoped to abolish casteist exploitations, they never ventured deep into the problem.

[20] Alpana Gupta, "Historical Journey into the Dalit Past", *Dalit Consciousness and Dalit* Poetry (Jaipur: Yking Books, 2013), 7.

In 1873, Jyotirao Phule, the social reformer who first introduced the word 'Dalit', founded the Satyashodhak Samaj, an important organization that gave shape to the later Dalit movements, to liberate the ostracized Other –women, Shudra and the *Atishudras*. Even though he belonged to the Mali caste, Phule was undeterred in his organization of the Mahars and their first conference was held in 1903.[21] Gail Omvedt notes, how Phule "sought to unite the Shudras (non-Brahmins) and Atishudras (Dalits)" for he believed that together they represented "an oppressed an exploited mass."[22] Phule was a prolific writer himself and have several published works to his name. Some of his major works include "*Gulamgiri* which mainly focuses on caste; *Shetkaryaca Asud*, describing the oppression of the peasants; *Sarvajanik Satya Dharm*, an effort to outline a new, theistic and egalitarian religion."[23] His wife, Savitribai Phule, regarded as one of the first female teachers in India, was not only an educationalist but an established Marathi poet as well. Two books of her poetry were published posthumously – *Kavya Phule* (1954) and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* (1982). From within the Satyashodhak tradition, Tarabai Shinde critiqued the Brahminical patriarchy in her seminal text, *Stri Purush Tulana* (1882).

Unlike the Bhakti saints, Phule's efforts to bring about a social change was more than just ideological. Having started eighteen schools between 1848 and 1852, he was actively organizing and providing education to the Dalits. His works were subsequently taken up by Sahu Ji Maharaj, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Bhau Rao Patil, Gopal Baba Walangkar, Shivram Jambha Kamble, Kisan Faguji Bansode and Kali Charan Nand Gavli.[24] Phule's insistence on expressing the oppressive nature of the caste system was seen as a betrayal to the project of a nationalist modernity and this savarna logic was carried forward by upper caste Hindu

[21] For an extensive discussion on Phule's politics, see Dhananjay Keer, *Mahatma Jotirao Phooley: Father of the Indian Social Revolution* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1997).
[22] Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006), 19.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Alpana Gupta, *Dalit Consciousness*, 12.

nationalists into the timeline of the Ambedkarite movement and even beyond it.

Around the time when Kisan Bansode was presiding over the Mahar Conference at Badnur (in 1924), Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar had already made his mark as a public spokesperson for the Dalits. Although Bansode and Ambedkar shared common interests, which involved the liberation of Dalits from ostracization, their methods were inherently different. Bansode, who frequently invokes Chokhamela, was comfortable only within the religious ambit of Hinduism and regarded Ambedkar's political move to convert to Buddhism as a mistake. Ambedkar, however, knew better than to work from within a Sanskritized hegemony. Despite staunch criticism, Ambedkar announced his decision to "not die a Hindu" at the Bombay Presidency Depressed Classes Conference in 1935.[25] Ambedkar's careful decision to convert to Buddhism and simultaneously denounce Hinduism was a radical statement meant to save the Dalits from their current predicaments. Ambedkar's 'Navayana Buddhism', became the source of inspiration for Dalits all over Maharashtra and consequently, Buddhism became an important theme in Dalit literature. His major work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, was published posthumously in 1957 and has been translated into several languages. It provides Ambedkar's interpretations of Buddhism and focuses more on the philosophical than on the mythological.

Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* was self-published in 1936, at a time when a sense of nationalism was already rising in the country. His text is a remarkable juxtaposition to the works of contemporary Marathi sociologists who were writing about caste through the discourse of a Hindu nation.[26] While Ambedkar felt that it was imperative to reject Hinduism, the varna order and the shackles of the caste system for Dalit liberation, writers such as S.V.

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[25] Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2004), 147.
[26] Sharmila Rege, "Debating the Consumption of Dalit 'Autobiographies'", *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, 34.

Ketkar, S.M. Mate and G.S. Ghurye felt that the lower castes should change their ways and strive to be pure for the sake of a strong, united Hindu nation. As Rege points out, the anti-Brahmanism movements of Phule and Ambedkar were seen by the upper-caste reactionary nationalists as a submission to the British policy of divide and rule. Thus, Ambedkar, through his political writings and speeches, was also claiming a public space where one could criticize Hinduism and talk about the complete annihilation of caste based solely on ethical grounds. Ambedkar's political achievements were also imperative in the surge of the post-Independence Dalit movement. Eleanor Zelliot summarizes the three political parties that were formed with Ambedkar's aid:

> "The first party, the Independent Labour Party, was intended to become a workers' political alliance. The second, the Scheduled Castes Federation, founded in 1942, was an effort to draw together Scheduled Castes all over India in a united attempt to win recognition as a political minority from the British before the granting of Independence. The third, the Republican Party, was planned to bring the Scheduled Tribes and the other Backward Castes into the Scheduled Castes movement to form a large political bloc of all the underprivileged."[27]

It is clear from the party agendas that Ambedkar hoped to provide a political platform not only to Dalits but to workers and *adivasis* as well. Even though the parties managed to politicize the masses, the radical aims failed to materialize within the legislature of the Indian democracy. With Ambedkar's demise and the political failures, the Dalit movement in Maharashtra reached a hiatus that was to be broken only in 1972 with the formation of the Dalit Panthers. A detailed study of the socio-political conditions that led to the movement's development is presented in Lata Murugar's book *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* with well-researched data placed in the socio-historic context.

By 1972, the educated Dalit youths of Bombay, with their newly inculcated political

[27] Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World*, 177.

consciousness, were able to break away from the failing Republican Party to form the Dalit Panthers, inspired by the Black Panther movement of the United States. They popularized the term 'Dalit' that was initially introduced by Jyotirao Phule. Their manifesto recognized Dalits as "members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion." It is important to note here that while acknowledging this definition as one that encompasses a large section of the bodies oppressed by a privileged biopower, one must also be dialectically critical of how such a generalization might impact the space of caste politics.

As a post-Ambedkar Dalit movement, the Dalit Panthers laid emphasis on equitable distribution of resources and positive discrimination like reservation in politics and workforce. They carried forward the Buddhist ideologies and encouraged religious conversion as an alternate way of living. Drawing upon Phule-Ambedkar's structuring of a Dalit modernity, the Panthers focused on Dalit emancipation while attacking the cultural hegemony of the upper castes.[28] Apart from organizing demonstrations, *morchas, gheraos* and *dharnas*, they also took to militant and anti-establishment literature through Marathi magazines such as *Vidroh*, *Magova* and *Aamhi*.[29] This resistance to the dominant Brahminical literature came to be known as the Little Magazine Movement and was critical in establishing the Dalit voice in the literary history of Maharashtra. The new language formed the crux of Dalit discourse and it was in this language that "virtually every Dalit who could write became a poet before becoming an activist."[30]

These poet-activists who provided the foundational structural integrity to the Dalit

[28] See Gopal Guru's essay "Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity" for an insight into Dalit modernity and its role in the struggles for emancipation. Gopal Guru, "Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity", *India: Another Millennium?* Ed. Romila Thapar (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000): 123-127.
[29] Janet A. Contursi, "Political Theology", 325.
[30] Ibid.

Panther movement were Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Arun Kamble and Raja Dhale. They simultaneously spearheaded the Dalit Sahitya movement in Maharashtra which produced a wide range of Dalit literature in the form of poetry, short stories, novels, plays, autobiographies and critical writings. The aesthetic of these writers were immensely different from the subservient discourse of the Bhakti saints or the religiously proper language of Kisan Bansode and his likes. The Dalit Panthers were radical and subversive. The language was not so much melancholic and distressed as it was angry and violent. The purity-pollution matrix associated with caste oppression was appropriated through language and thrown back at the monopolized Brahminical erudition. The images used are shocking and are thus, effective in producing a genre of political modern poetry. A good example of the shock effect is present in Dhasal's famous poem "Man, You Should Explode" from *Golpitha* (1972), translated by Dilip Chitre –

> "Man, one should tear off all the pages of all the sacred books in the world
> And give them to people for wiping shit off their arses when done
> Remove sticks from anybody's fence and go in there to shit and piss, and muck it up
> Menstruate there, cough out phlegm, sneeze out goo
> Choose what offends one's sense of odour to wind up the show
> Raise hell all over the place from up to down and in between"[31]

Dhasal deliberately uses an obscene and unapologetic language to claim a space in the Marathi poetic traditions. As Limbale points out, "Dalit writers began to write their literature unconcerned about any literary theories."[32] The deliberate violent language reflects the Dalit Panthers' militant belief in violence as a necessity for social change. It is also important to contrast here the differences in the works of these Dalit writers from the writings of liberal middle-class, upper-caste writers who would portray Dalits from a distant and sympathetic lens, devoid of any realistic representation of Dalit consciousness. The violent voice of these

[31] Namdeo Dhasal, "Man, You Should Explode", *A Current of Blood*, trans. Dilip Chitre (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2010), 10.
[32] Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, 26.

Dalit poets stems from what can be assumed to be a rejection of the shackles of an oppression closely linked to social emasculation. The rapidly growing Dalit Sahitya movement, however, also saw the rise of important women writers who, although were writing unapologetically about their Dalit identity, were not quite following the quintessential language of their male counterparts.

Dalit women's politics in post-Ambedkar Maharashtra

The Dalit women's voices have, of course, been present since the Bhakti saints. They have been recorded since Nirmala and Soyarabai to the writings of Savitribai Phule, Muktabai and Tarabai Shinde. Within the Ambedkarite counterpublic, the Dalit women's politics was gaining a momentum as they placed themselves in stark contrast to the discourses of non-Dalit women writing in the early decades of the twentieth century.[33] For example, in the autobiographies of socially privileged Marathi women that were published during this time, there was never a stress on the writers' caste politics. The idea of "caste" was closely and almost singularly associated with the Dalits, an idea that is still thriving today. "Caste is the other of the modern as if it belongs only to dalit women."[34] An absence of caste from these feminist politics led to the exclusion of Dalit women's narratives from the privileged feminist umbrella. The Dalit women of Maharashtra, however, did not neglect the politics of their dual marginalizing identities. They were organizing conferences and their narratives have been documented by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, as a collection of critical memories in "history making".[35] The Dalit women's politics also moved beyond the literary movements as they engaged in the subaltern "mudhouse activism"[36], singing their narratives, political

[33] Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, 67.
[34] Ibid. 66.
[35] Ibid. 69-70.
[36] Gopal Guru has coined the term "mudhouse activists" to denote the Dalit subaltern cultural movement, as opposed to the Dalit Sahitya movement. Quoted by Rege, 70.

messages and Ambedkarite ideas. Both Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege have conducted empirical studies that record the vocal participation of Dalit women in post-Ambedkar movements through Buddhist mahila mandals, *gaayan* parties or singing troupes and cassette culture.[37] The cassette culture of the Marathi Dalit women was an interesting alternate to the print propaganda as the recordings dealt with a series of political themes from The Pune Pact of 1932 to Ambedkar's Constitution, the critique of Gandhi and the importance of Ramabai and Savitabai Ambedkar to their feminist agenda. Their political lashes at society were fierce without having the distinct crude sensibilities of the radical male voices of the Dalit Sahitya movement. These women activists were writing "differently" and from within their relationship with not only the Ambedkarite ideas, but also the feminist consciousness which formed the foundation of their struggles. In fact, Ambedkar himself stressed on the alternate modernity of Dalit feminism when he stated at the 1927 Mahad Satyagraha that "the task of ending Untouchability is a woman's question" for the woman is located at the gateway to the caste system.[38]

There is often an *a priori* assumption that within the Dalit movement, there is a homogeneity of interest. To extend the argument of the assumption, it would also mean that to challenge this homogeneity is to challenge the idea of Dalit unity between Dalit men and women. While such an assumption seems obvious at the very first glance, it renders other identity factors such as gender as invisible. Intra-caste patriarchies exist and a refusal to engage with it feeds into the mechanics of a biopower that disables caste from gender politics and gender from caste politics. Such a stealth attack can only weaken the political movements.

Unlike the savarna women who chose to remain "unmarked" by caste in their writings,

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[37] Guru's study is centered on the radical cultural politics in the Akola district of Maharashtra. See Gopal Guru, *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra* (Mumbai: Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, 1997). Rege mentions her findings in "Debating the Consumption of Dalit 'Autobiographies'", *Writing Caste/Writing* Gender, 79-83.

[38] Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender,* 70.

Dalit women kept their caste and gender identity at the forefront of their discourses. Being the "downtrodden among the downtrodden", they formulated a voice that was theirs and gave structure to *bahujanvaadi* feminism. This voice of Dalit feminism was meant to challenge not only the Brahminical hegemony but also casteless feminism and intra-caste patriarchy. Thus, the Dalit women were talking "differently" and it is important to acknowledge the difference in their voices. Guru's skepticism about the Dalit woman's politics being homogenized and "whitewashed" by external factors such as non-Dalit women's movements is well founded. As he reflects in "Dalit Women Talk Differently", the representation of Dalit women's issues cannot be founded without the subjective experiences in that particular social location.

Although Guru makes an important observation, his viewpoint must be engaged dialectically as it ventures into an exclusionary identitarian politics that might limit the emancipatory possibilities of Dalit feminist politics. Rege's dialectical response in "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position" suggests that instead of isolating Dalit women's issues from the ambit of mainstream feminism, the larger body of feminist politics "must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalized" and must constantly interrogate their privileged position. In short, Rege hopes that the inclusion of the "different" voices of Dalit feminist discourses will historically locate the "real struggles of marginalized women" beyond mere subjective experiences. However, Rege's counter discourse too requires a dialectical attention, which will be taken up later in the chapter.

Thus, in order to locate the *bahujanvaadi* feminist politics in the writings and narratives of these Dalit women poets, it is imperative to keep in mind not only the socio-historic Dalit struggles against Brahmanism in Maharashtra, but also the gender struggle from both inter and intra caste ambits and the othering imposed by women writing from privileged quarters. As has been discussed in the introductory chapter, the lens with which the works will be looked at is

that of the politics of the marginalized body within the institutions of biopower –latent or manifested. It is interesting to point out here an odd similarity with the politics of punishment as has been elaborated by Foucault in his essay, "The Body of the Condemned". The Other is no longer punished within the realm of public spectacle but the punishment of the body exists nonetheless through intricate private practices. Is this not similar to the practice of casteism? Untouchability has been legally abolished (although it has not been wiped out completely)[39] and the Dalit body no longer has to tie a broom to sweep away the footprints. But it exists, in the private discourses of modern Brahminical hegemony. The religious and caste supremacy of Brahmanism is required to maintain the project of a Hindu nation and therefore all forms of oppression and social punishments were directed into the private and ideological spheres instead of being put to an end. "Democracy hasn't eradicated caste. It has entrenched and modernised it."[40]

Analysis of Post-Independence Marathi Dalit Women's Poetry

This acute persistence of casteism within the intricacies of the personal space is presented in Hira Bansode's poem "Bosom Friend" (translated by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliot).[41] Bansode is a Kamble from the Mahar caste and since childhood, she was aware of the social boundaries that limit her.[42] In the poem, Bansode's critique is directed towards a woman who disguises her perpetration of Brahminical ideologies behind her apparent camaraderie. The woman is the 'bosom friend' that the Dalit narrator has invited over for dinner. The acceptance of the invitation is a welcome surprise for the narrator as it implies a willing suspension of caste identity and social inequality, traits which are, according to the

[39] See "India's Dalits Still Fighting Untouchability", *BBC News* (June 27, 2012). https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-18394914
[40] Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint", *Annihilation of Caste,* 37.
[41] Hira Bansode, "Bosom Friend", *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 27.
[42] Christian Novetzke, "Twice Dalit", 282.

narrator, hard for a woman to forget. This can be seen as a demonstration of the palpable tension within the gendered politics –

> "You not only came, you forgot your caste and came
> Usually women don't forget that tradition of inequality"

The poet introduces Hindu mythology to contextualize her socio-political position –a trope that was particularly associated with the second generation Dalit feminist poets. She compares herself to Shabari, a lower caste elderly woman, known for her endless *bhakti* for Rama, and it is through this devotion that she reaches her salvation.[43] In the poet's language it becomes apparent that the narrator sees herself on a socially lower platform while the guest is on a pedestal with savarna figures as Rama. While remaining unmarked by caste politics in the manner of the Brahminical feminist discourse, the woman makes her implicit casteism apparent –

> "With a little smirk you said Oh My—Do you serve chutney koshimbir
> this way?
> You still don't know how to serve food
> Truly, you folk will never improve"

Bansode reflects on the explicit stigmatization of Dalit food culture that has pushed it into the limits of the alternate. While untouchability of the Dalit body remains legally abolished, the practices of the Dalit culture remains unchartered by the Brahminical hegemony, creating a more explicit othering. Self-conscious of her marginalized identity, the narrator was left "ashamed", "silent", "sad" and "numb". But Bansode writes, not in the tradition of the Bhakti saints, but through the fierce ideologies of Ambedkar. The narrator claims her identity, elaborating on the socio-historic struggles of her community –"My mother cooked on sawdust she brought from the lumberyard wiping away the smoke in her eyes". The memories of the

[43] Shabari also appears in Bansode's poem 'To Shabari' that is addressed directly to her. In this poem, the poet is quick to critique Shabari for not discussing the marginalization that she faced as a result of the caste system.

struggles is enmeshed in the lives of these second generation Dalit feminist writers who find it difficult to escape the vilifications that still exist in the fractured modernity of their contemporary society. The Dalit cuisine was not made out of choice but depended on the resources available to the community. An elaborate study of the correlation between food and caste is available in the book *Isn't This Plate Indian? Dalit Histories and Memories of Food* co-authored by Sharmila Rege, Deepa Tak, Sangita Thosar and Tina Aranha.[44]

The narrator firmly reminds her guest of the deceitful politics of the feminism that she subscribes to. Savarna feminism has failed to include the politics of marginalized community –"You have not discarded your tradition/ its roots go deep in your mind." The reiterative interrogations in the last two lines is powerful, fierce and reflects the tone of the entire post-Ambedkarite Dalit feminist movement –

> "Are you going to tell me what mistakes I made?
> Are you going to tell me my mistakes?"

The poet is not afraid to locate the hypocrisy in the upper-caste woman's fixation with the Dalit narrator's alternate existence. What is considered by Brahminical hegemony as "mistake" is a social condition that has been imposed on Dalits by Brahmanism itself. The double reiteration is intended to reverse the question back to those who participate in the oppression, to remind them of the social wrongs that they commit against the marginalized.

Bansode's criticism of Hinduism comes not only from her Dalit identity but also from her identity as a woman. In the poem 'Slave' (translated by S.K. Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot), she reflects on the struggles of a woman living within a country that bases its national identity on Hindu patriarchy.[45] Bansode presents the cases of Sita, Ahilya and Draupadi –women whose hardships were only subtexts within the larger context of the central patriarchal figures. They

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[44] See Ashwaq Masoodi, "A Story of Culinary Apartheid", *LiveMint* (16 Sept 2016), https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/wJzDhGEE4csaX2BjhjHMsL/A-story-of-culinary-apartheid.html
[45] Hira Bansode, "Slave", *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 30.

remained “in the shadow of someone else’s light”. Like in ‘Bosom Friend’, the frustration is echoed in the double reiteration –“to be born a woman is unjust”. With a shift from Dalit feminism to a sisterhood that defies patriarchy, Bansode’s perspective in this poem is reflective of Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”, a body of thought in subaltern studies that encourages a sense of solidarity by temporarily essentializing one’s marginalized identity with another to cause a social reaction against the larger biopower at play. The keyword, however, is “temporary” since the socio-political agendas of all identities cannot merge at every given point of time. In a sense, Rege too subscribes to this policy for she believes that the inclusion of one marginalized politics within the struggle of another parallel one can effectively strengthen the movement. In her essay, Rege focuses on the importance of non-Dalit feminists to “reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists” without taking away the agency of Dalit women, i.e., to allow the essentializing of Dalit narratives to further the liberating scope of feminist politics. However, this vantage point is questionable when seen from within the marginalized sector of Dalit feminism. Bansode’s address to all women under the singular aim to critique patriarchy works because this strategic essentialism does not hinder her autonomy as a Dalit woman who is more marginalized than a non-Dalit woman. Thus, while it is important to not exclude or ‘other’ the politics of the autonomous Dalit women’s movements from feminism, it is also important to ensure that the autonomy itself is not compromised. In fact, here, it is important to quote Guru –“Dalit women define the concept of dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting the claim of upper caste women to dalithood.” Thus treating both Guru and Rege’s arguments dialectically, it comes to reason that the essentialism of Dalit feminism into mainstream feminist politics must not be made flexible to work both ways –while Dalit women must be allowed to create a space within non-Dalit feminism, non-Dalit feminists must not tamper with Dalit subjectivity to “reinvent themselves” as that dilutes the distinct, different voices. It is a radical approach that counters Rege’s critique of “naming differences” without siding with

Guru's position of exclusionary politics. The marginalized political discourses must retain the autonomy to voice its "difference" while the more privileged strands (in terms of caste and class) of feminism must focus on an ethical interaction between the two. This enables the marginalized community to formulate sustainable methods of emancipation while simultaneously enabling feminist politics to keep revising itself. Thus, as Bansode and several other Dalit women writers and activists suggest, the nuances of Dalit feminism must be kept alive in the writings and activism, for the essentializing of the sisterhood is only temporary.

It is clear that in Bansode's politics, her identity as a woman is the locus of a struggle that is just as crucial to that which arises from her Dalit identity. Bansode's poem 'Yashodhara' (translated by Jayant Karve and Philip Engblom), provides a representation of the constant sidelining of women in history.[46] However, in this poem, Bansode derives her narrative from Buddhist theology, the religion that was responsible for the emancipation of Dalits. Since Ambedkar, Buddhist references have become more frequent in Marathi Dalit poetry as the community internalizes the new identity. The poet empathizes with Yashodhara, Siddhartha's wife before he left in search of Enlightenment to become the Buddha. Buddha, the epitome of peace, is challenged by Bansode's imagination of Yashodhara's plight –while Buddha was seeking the light under the Bodhi tree, Yashodhara was containing "the raging storm" in her "small hands", comparable to the "screaming waves dashing against the shore." Bansode brings into focus two issues that Dalit women write about –the lack of importance given to the women in theological narratives (Hinduism and beyond), as well as the patriarchal potential in the peaceful religion that the Dalits have chosen as their own –"you are not to be found in a single Buddhist *vihara*." The second point brings attention to the intra-caste patriarchy that limits the Dalit struggle. While the tenets of Buddhism have saved the converted Dalits from the systemic

[46] Hira Bansode, "Yashodhara", *No Entry for the New Sun: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1992), 31-32.

oppression of the Hindu caste system, in this movement where Dalits strive for emancipation, the Dalit feminist voices are often overstepped by their male counterparts. Thus, while the neo-Buddhist Dalit Panthers have established themselves in history, the Dalit women's alternate mudhouse activism is not well-explored –"But history doesn't talk about the great story of your sacrifice". The poet, however, feels a sense of kinship towards Yashodhara and believes in the liberating aspects of Buddhism which is why she ends the poem on a hopeful note –"you are between the closed eyelids of Siddhartha".

Bansode also references socio-political events to contextualize her poems. "O Great Man" (Translated by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliot), is a poem dedicated to Ambedkar and his struggles for the rights of Dalits.[47] The poet alludes to the1927 riot in Mahad where Ambedkar led his supporters to the Chawdar Tank to drink its water. Bansode compares him to an elephant –an important symbol in the Dalit movement as it was taken up to signify the strength of the Dalit community. In "Sunrise" (translated by Christian Novetzke, Philip Engblom and Christopher Connelly), Bansode emulates Ambedkar's organizing voice –

> "See your shining form.
> Seize the victory of your courageous liberation
> O friends!"[48]

Her politics of sharing a doubly marginalized identity attains a fierce language in the poem "Petition" (translated by Christian Novetzke, Philip Engblom and Christopher Connelly). The proposed aim of her petition has been clearly articulated –the poet wants "justice" for the Dalit women community. Comparing her identity to "a refugee in my own home", Bansode makes it clear that the space of safety that one ascribes to the concept of "home" is lost because of the intricate intra-caste patriarchy where her "father", "brother" and "husband" have rendered her "hollow existence" to fade away. Sociologically speaking, this is specifically true

[47] Bansode, "O Great Man", *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 32.
[48] Christian Novetzke, "Twice Dalit", 292.

for the Marathi Dalit women. Karin Kapadia, in her reading of the testimonies in Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, notes that unlike the Tamil Dalit women, with whom she has worked in the 1980s and who are more assertive about their sexuality, Marathi Dalit women "often survived only at the mercy of their husbands, who, despite extreme poverty, followed upper-caste notions of family 'honour'".[49]

The Dalit woman's body is wounded and it weeps and her "musky fragrance stays crammed in a closed phial". Her body is treated as a "lump of clay to be fashioned into any image" that the Brahminical oppressor deems fit. The poet uses the image of the Dalit woman's body to communicate the marginalized identity. It is devoid of the brute strength of the male body and the refined quality of a privileged woman. The Dalit woman's body is considered more "polluted", more "hide-bound" by a Brahminical patriarchy. These are deliberate phrases that have been used to expose the goal of a hyper-religious, Brahminical and patriarchal discourse of history which is, to draw from Foucault's understanding of history, the destruction of the marginalized body.[50] Through these "binarism and its implicit hierarchy"[51], the Dalit woman is further ostracized from society. Bansode rejects this humiliating image, and against all odds and "pre-arranged plots", she searches for the strength that will carry forward the struggle for freedom –

> "With the flame of the present
> Dynamite the evil past,
> And the aeons of insult it carried.
> Let the dying, helpless minds,
> Accepting of centuries of slavery, burn."

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[49] Karin Kapadia, "Reading Dalit Women: Memories of Rural Lives in Maharashtra", *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 42, No. 50 (December 2007).
[50] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 148.
[51] In *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler discusses the politics of the body in gender discourses where culturally accepted significations are inscribed to the gendered body. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 176.

In "When there is a Tremendous Explosion of Poetry" (translated by Christian Novetzke, Philip Engblom and Christopher Connelly), Bansode resorts to striking imageries in defending the art form as one that can be astoundingly political –

> "Poetry's honey flowered noose
> Strangles the evil and their rotted minds,
> Garroting them like a pearl necklace
> Poisoned by their vanity."[52]

The poet also reverses the logic of the pollution-purity matrix and ascribes to the oppressors "rabid bodies" and "obscene swollen heads". While this reversal is attained through the poet's "imagination", it must also be remembered that the real act of transgressing the limitations set down by history can only begin with a discourse that firmly rejects it.

Combining caste, class and gendered struggles within the context of post-Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra, Jyoti Lanjewar articulates her politics in the poem "Mother" (translated by Sylvie Martinez, S.K. Vimal Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot).[53] The poem is about Dalit women who have to take up labour-intense jobs to sustain themselves and their family and who simultaneously participate in the struggles of their community's movement. Right from the beginning of the poem, Lanjewar juxtaposes the Dalit woman against the upper class Brahmin woman through an image of the former's body and the differences are striking –

> "I have never seen you
> Wearing one of those gold-bordered saris
> With a gold necklace
> With gold bangles
> With fancy sandals.
> Mother! I have seen you
> Burning the soles of your feet in the harsh summer sun
> Hanging your little ones in a cradle on an acacia tree
> Carrying barrels of tar

[52] Christian Novetzke, "Twice Dalit", 286.
[53] Jyoti Lanjewar, "Mother", *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 99.

Working on a road construction crew…"

Unlike Bansode who uses these images to counter and subvert the Brahminical and patriarchal discourse, Lanjewar uses her language to expose the atrocities committed against her community. Even when hungry, "parched" and "pregnant", the Dalit woman must, as a result of her class and caste, sell her labour. This clear enmeshing of caste and class politics along with the gender struggles is complex and perhaps one that benefits from strategic essentialist discourses. Caste-based patriarchal codes are related to production relations in the Indian society where the biopower, with all its capital, backs patriarchy and the caste system. While Lanjewar's images evoke a sense of empathy, the poet also inscribes a certain sense of pride in the Dalit woman as she "rejects the scraps of food offered" to her.

As in Bansode, Lanjewar too professes her Ambedkarite ideologies in her poetry. She portrays the Dalit woman taking pride in Ambedkar whom she lovingly calls "Bhim" and "Baba". She believes that her tripartite marginalization will be broken through his figure –

"…taking the little bundle from the cradle to your breast
Saying 'Study, become an Ambedkar
And let the baskets fall from my hands'…"

The strength that Ambedkar's ideologies provide to the Dalit movement are presented through a poetic narrative of the "Long March" of 1979. Also known as the 'Namantar Andolan', the march was a culmination of a sixteen years campaign to rename Marathawada University in honour of Ambedkar. When the resolution to rename the university was finally passed, it led to riots all over Marathawada, especially in the districts of Aurangabad, Nanded and Parbhani –districts that had witnessed the rise in education for the Dalits in the last couple of years. Violence was sanctioned by the Hindutva public and resulted in mass killings, rape, burning of houses and colonies and destruction of cattle. This biopower sanctioned violence against the Dalit community has been recorded in several Dalit poems, including "The Weeping Wound of Centuries" by Meena Gajabhiye. Gajabhiye's poem unearths the traumatic

memories of Marathawada through the image of a broken and sutured body –"those stitches are all ripped out, ripped out by Marathawada". Gajabhiye's sentiment, of not wanting to "live like a dog" and of living only to die, is a rejection of reliving the trauma that has been passed down in every Dalit body over the centuries.

This acute frustration within the Dalit body politic led to the Long March which was organized by members of Dalit organizations, socialist individuals and members of communist parties. According to Omvedt, "the upsurge, turmoils and frustrations of the 'long march' campaign have brought the movement to a new turning point. The readiness for action shown by Dalit masses have provided a new demonstration of their powerful urge for revolutionary change."[54] The movement is also noted for the active participation of the Dalit women, a fact that Lanjewar highlights –

> "I have seen you
> At the front of the Long March
> The end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist
> Shouting "Change the name,"
> Taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised hands
> Going to jail with head held high…"

The poem "The Nameless One" (translated by S.K. Vimal Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot) begins with the same sentiment of pride that rejects any sense of sympathy –"Begging won't get anything here/not sympathy, not love".[55] It is an intellectual poem as it inspires critical thinking, judges every order of oppression allowed by the biopower against the Dalit woman. Lanjewar is aware that the faulty politics of a dying movement cannot work anymore – "wrapping yourself in smoke from a dead fire won't work". It is quite likely that Lanjewar is critiquing the failed politics of the past Dalit organizations including the Scheduled Castes

[54] Gail Omvedt, "MAHARASHTRA -Leaderless March", *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 14, No. 49 (December 1979): 1190-1191.
[55] Jyoti Lanjewar, "The Nameless One", *An Anthology of Dalit Literature,* 104.

Federation and the Republican Party. Instead she calls for a revolution that is tactile and present –"the cinder of revolt" which is preferable to an effervescent idea –"smoke from a dead fire". These concrete ideologies, Lanjewar states, must be incorporated throughout the body –"You have to plant the cinder of revolt in your own body". This statement reifies the importance of the body as political in the struggles of marginalization because it is the idea of the body that keeps the ambits of marginalization in place. If one takes into account Foucault's observation in *Discipline and Punish* that the law of the biopower is executed through the subject's body and never as an external force, the same logic can be used to counter this very law –the reality of revolution can be produced within the body that is punished by the biopower.

In the second stanza, Lanjewar continues her critique of the movement, and interestingly, rejects the literature produced in her community for not being able to keep the Dalit revolution alive. The intra-caste attack here is clearly directed against the educated Dalit men who were single handedly dominating and restructuring the Dalit literary movement of the country. The critique is grounded in cultural reality –"Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it."[56] Lanjewar's attack then comes from the position of mudhouse activism that the Dalit women would take part in. The line "But poetry does not live by making revolution" is a complete contrast to Bansode's "When there is a Tremendous Explosion of Poetry", and the line is a significant one because it attempts to shatter the pretenses of hollow words donning the garb of political. It implies that the poetry that does survive, is one that follows the tenets of the literary ideologies of a privileged society -"palaces of words" that only education can provide. It is a telling statement for while the Panthers revolutionized a new language for themselves by subverting the Brahminical one, there were also politicians, both Dalit and non-Dalit, who would use this very language to "find the convenient words to cut the wings of others". It must also be remembered

[56] Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently", 2549.

that most Dalit women, who had to sustain themselves and their families by working both inside and outside the domestic spheres, did not have the resources for this privilege. However, as Lanjewar puts it, their active participation, in events such as the Kala Ram temple and the Chawdar Tank entry, is what reflects the "history of pain" of the Dalit struggle.

This notable apprehension regarding the literary form of poetry in arousing political consciousness among the uneducated Dalit mass is also present in Meena Gajabhiye's "Both are Useless" (translated by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliot).[57] Cynical in tone, Gajabhiye is skeptical of both the manners in which one may react to Dalit marginalization –the sympathy of the upper-castes or the literary re-imagination of the Dalit community –"who don't quite live and don't quite die" –by the Dalit and non-Dalit poets. The poet's pessimism culminates into the last two lines –

> "Whatever you do –
> It'll be useless."

Such a distrust towards the efficiency of the written literature as a mode of Dalit revolution was tackled in the counter discourses of the alternate activisms. Kabir Kala Manch (KKM), originating in Pune, is one such cultural organization that promotes political consciousness among the Dalits by bringing together the ideologies of Ambedkar through spoken poetry, songs and theatrical performances. This form of political expression is also known as the 'Ambedkari jalsa'. Sheetal Sathe, one of the lead folk singers and poets of the KKM, combines Dalit feminist agenda and socio-political struggles in her works. Her radical voice has even forced her to go underground to escape the state-sponsored terror. In the prologue to her performance of "Majhi Mai" or "My Mother", she states –

> "…even in our movement, there are women but few in leadership. I'll use a common saying to illustrate this –'Yes I support women's liberation… no one opposes that. Women's liberation is fine but my wife shouldn't be part of it.'

[57] Meena Gajabhiye, "Both are Useless", *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, 78.

> Urban women get educated and are living with dignity –at least some of them are. But women who die in places like Khairlanji like Surekha and Priyanka also inhabit this country. These mothers who live in our hamlets and villages even in our cities, what is their state?"[58]

Khairlanji in the Bhandara district of Maharashtra has now become a political synecdoche for violence and torture meted out against the Dalits, especially the Dalit women. It references to the 2006 rape and murder of Surekha and her daughter Priyanka –Dalit women who aspired to stand up for their rights despite the caste tensions in their village.[59] The vicious mutilation and destruction of the Dalit body is perpetrated by the vigilantes of social boundaries and the violence arises from a sense of blind duty towards a society that is structured around binaries. In Foucault's discussion of the power regime in the modern society, the biopower that regulates these violent practices is a product of the dominant narratives of history. Surekha and Priyanka refused the significations allotted to their Mahar bodies and such a transgression is punished by the literal destruction of those bodies. In the poststructuralist reading of bodily transgressions, "the boundaries of the body" becomes "the limits of the socially *hegemonic*."[60]

Sathe questions the power regime and questions the state in which the Dalit woman finds herself. Like Lanjewar, Sathe too brings out the struggle through the maternal figure in her folk song "My Mother. In the evocative lines, "When I was an infant, there was a drought and the milk dried in my mother's breast," Sathe reimagines the maternal body as a metonymy for nature. The drought, signifying the dearth of produces and resources within the Dalit community, is reflected in the breasts that have dried up and can no longer feed the infant. The breasts, an integral gender-demarcating part of the body, is also a localized space on the body that serves as a constant reminder of the female gender roles. Butler, in her poststructuralist

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[58] Excerpt from the documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* by Anand Patwardhan. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7JRWE64CEw&list=PL6PiG3x2kwjzIS0HqGoHE4rt35npbazvx&index=2&t=100s

[59] Arundhati Roy presents an account of the incident in "The Doctor and the Saint". Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint", 18-19.

[60] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.

study of the signification of the maternal body, states that such gender-differentiating laws can only push bodies towards a melancholy or "suspended grief". Sathe's song then becomes doubly poignant for it imagines not only the inability of the mother to nourish her child because of social deprivation, but also the inability to escape the gendered struggles marked in her body. The inference is reified in the line "father drinks as mother sleeps on an empty stomach" –a reminder of the reality of intra-caste patriarchy. However, Sathe goes beyond the melancholy to celebrate the strength that Dalit women have shown despite all the atrocities committed against them. Her tone and the rhythm of the song reflects a sense of unity and there is a prominent pride taken in the fact that such a Dalit maternal figure had given birth to the likes of 'Ambedkar, Annabhau Sathe and Savitribai Phule'.

It is important to reflect upon this sense of pride that becomes central to both Lanjewar and Sathe's poems. This reluctance to be victimized has been a persistent sentiment throughout Dalit feminist writings. However, male Dalit writers, like Daya Pawar, Laxman Gaikwad hardly ever saw their women as agencies of socio-political transformation.[61] For example, a quick comparison between Lanjewar and Sathe's poems on the maternal figure and Waman Nimbalkar's "Mother" reveals the difference in the voices of the female poets and their male counterparts. In Nimbalkar's poem, the figure of the mother is subjected to acute victimization that ultimately culminates in her death. This lack of agency on the Dalit woman's part is a sentiment that most Dalit men expressed. Thus, there was a need on the Dalit women's part, writing especially from the later generations, to reclaim that agency and to voice their resistance more ferociously.

In her political narratives, Sathe rejects the physical defeat of the Dalit body at the hands of the State machinery that manifests itself in every ambit of the subject's life. According

[61] Maya Pandit, "How Three Generations of Dalit women writers saw their identities and struggle?" *IndianExpress* (December 27, 2007). https://indianexpress.com/article/gender/how-three-generations-of-dalit-women-writers-saw-their-identities-and-struggle-4984202/

to her, the opening line "even if they destroy the body, they can't destroy thought", from the song "You Can Destroy the Body" (originally "Sampavila Deha Zari"), is the ultimate principle of the Dalit revolution.[62] It reinstates the importance of the "thought" which is Dalit consciousness and it is this very thought that presents itself through the Dalit body at the site of the revolution to defeat caste slavery. This slavery, as Ambedkar puts it, "does not merely mean a legalised form of subjection. It means a state of society in which some men are forced to accept from others the purposes which control their conduct."[63] For Sathe, this form of slavery is the "untruth" that the "religious mercenaries" propagate in the name of "progress" and that it is only through an Ambedkarite revolution will the "untruth turn to dust".

The strength that Sathe and her generation of Dalit feminists found in the neo-Buddhist ideologies is well recorded in their writings and performances. Chhaya Koregaonkar, a Mumbai-based poet, articulates her strong Dalit feminist politics while looking back at the atrocity of the Khairlanji massacre. She is blatant in her criticism of the violence required to sustain the terrain of the Brahminical and patriarchal nation-state –

> "Battlefields are made of women's bodies
> And the histories of impotent masculinity are written
> With the blood of Khairlanji."[64]

Since "Dalit" is a term that was originally meant to define the "oppressed" or the "broken", it is only logical that this new generation of Marathi Dalit feminists express their need to revise their identity as "Neo-Buddhist" and "Ambedkarite" feminists –it is "a distinct 'political' assertion of being equal and even better."[65] However, that does not necessarily mean

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[62] "You Can Destroy the Body", performed by Sheetal Sathe and written by Sachin Mali. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDo86TTa9Nc

[63] B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 261.

[64] Poems by Chhaya Koregaonkar, trans. Sanika Dhakephalkar. https://www.hakara.in/chhaya-koregaonkar/

[65] Maya Pandit, "How Three Generations of Dalit women writers saw their identities and struggle?" https://indianexpress.com/article/gender/how-three-generations-of-dalit-women-writers-saw-their-identities-and-struggle-4984202/

that they reject the alternate modernity and struggles of the Dalit women that have been carefully mapped so far through the counter discourses of Dalit feminists. Instead, the Ambedkarite feminists are hoping to open up new discussions along the caste-gender nexus that involve contemporary issues dealing with urbanization, class exploitation and sexuality.[66]

[66] Ibid.

Chapter 2

Tamil Dalit Politics from Pre-Colonization to Post-Independence

Unlike the Marathi Dalit movement, the history of Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu has been significantly different. The advent of the Aryan hegemony of Vedic Brahmanism was a belated event since Buddhism and Jainism were the prevalent religious faiths in the region. Ravikumar, Tamil scholar and activist, cites various anthropological, archeological and historical studies to suggest that Buddhism and Jainism lingered in Tamil Nadu till the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[67] This delay of Brahmanism also changes the dynamics through which the practice of untouchability was introduced in Tamil Nadu. The origin of it is, in fact, a matter of debate among historians. While some non-Dalit scholars regard it to be present since the Sangam period, other scholars, such as Ravikumar, oppose this notion by analyzing the lack of authenticity in the archived resources and conclude that it reeks of caste prejudices. He provides a comprehensive analysis of the same in the general introduction to *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*.

The politics of margins was also thus affected. The Dravidian Buddhists and Jains were pushed into the pariah settlements after they were defeated by the Aryans. The historian Burton Stein notes the violent suppression of both the Buddhists and the Jains by "devotees of the new devotional worship of Siva" and the pride of the new kings of Pallava and Pandyan kingdoms that had slaughtered the Jains.[68] The systematic marginalization was accentuated further "when certain non-Brahmin castes accepted the supremacy of Brahmins and became caste Hindus"[69]. Those who had resisted the Brahminical colonization remained outside the limits of Hinduism

[67] Ravikumar, "General Introduction", *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*, ed. Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan (New Delhi: OUP, 2012), xv. See *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline Reports of Anti-Dalit Violence in Tamil Nadu (1995-2004),* ed. S. Viswanathan, trans. S. Anand (Chennai: Navayana Publishing, 2005).
[68] Quoted by Ravikumar, "General Introduction", xxiv.
[69] Ibid.

and were relegated to the position of the untouchable Dalits. Thus, the institutionalization of untouchability, which was already prevalent in north India, started to take a more concrete shape.

Citing Stein, Ravikumar also points out the significant role the converted Hindus played in propagating the violence against the Buddhists and Jains. Through an alliance with the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins participated in the strengthening of the caste system to keep the untouchable Others out. The coalition persisted into the 1800s in Tamil Nadu and the shift in the politics occurred only with the British colonial rule. This uncomfortable territory of the non-Brahmin Hindu castes' association with the Brahmins is often left unchartered but it is important to reflect upon it since it exposes the layered violence inflicted upon the Tamil Dalits –an identity that includes Others who did not belong to Hinduism.

During the British colonial rule, education and property were mandatory for gaining a share in political power and thus the Dalits and other lower castes were deprived from it. R. Ahuja provides a study of the Paraiyars' struggles for land in his essay "Expropriating the Poor: Urban Land Control and Colonial Administration in Late Eighteenth Century Madras City". He states that the advancement of the Dalits would be a setback to the production that depended on agrarian labours, which is why the British always tried to work around the petitions put forward by the Dalit movements. The empathy of the Christian missionaries towards the Dalit cause changed the dynamics of the dispute. Hugo Gorringe in the essay "Institutionalizing Caste Politics in Tamil Nadu", notes how "caste had forcibly intruded itself into the missionary agenda with the mass conversion of Untouchables to Christianity through the 1870s."[70] With the pressure from the missionaries and with J.H.A. Tremenheere's report, the Government orders for the allocations of "panchami land" to the Dalits in 1892 were passed. However,

[70] Hugo Gorringe, "Institutionalizing Caste Politics in Tamil Nadu", *Panthers in Parliament: Dalits, Caste, and Political Power in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 42.

much of these lands are not accessible to Dalits even today.[71]

Inspired by the new dynamics of anti-Brahmanism in the colonial period, the non-Brahmin collective focused on a movement that would resolve such socio-political problems. With the formation of the South India Welfare Association in 1906 and the launch of the 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto' in 1916 in Madras, the non-Brahmin movement of the South took a prominent shape. In *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai provides a comprehensive study of this non-Brahmin movement and the resultant Justice Party in a more empathetic light by focusing on both the convergences with and divergences from the contemporary Tamil Dalit agendas. However, it is important to notice the movement in its instances of empty representational politics as well. The non-Brahmin welfare did not include all the non-Brahmin castes. Gorringe notes that the Justice Party "mobilized a regional elite of non-Brahmin professionals, merchants, and landlords to demand admission into the British administration and representation in incipient forms of representative politics." This posed as a great hindrance to Dalit mobilization since the Dravidian movement incorporated non-Brahmin identities of the South under its politics but was more biased towards the other Backward Castes only – "If the Dravidian movement was a sincere one, the Dalits would have benefitted by it… The Dravidian movement was essentially a movement of the Backward Class. The Backward Class in Tamil Nadu would rather kill than let a Dalit rise."[72]

In 1923, M.C. Rajah, an important contemporary Dalit leader, submitted a petition to the governor against the Justice Party.[73] In 1925, E.V. Ramasami, popularly known as Periyar, launched the Self-Respect Association (SRA) that was more radical in its approach to bring

[71] Ilangovan Rajasekaran, "How Dalit Lands were Stolen", *Frontline* (May 12, 2017) https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/social-justice/how-dalit-lands-were-stolen/article9662667.ece
[72] Vasanthi, *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars: The World of Tamil Politics* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006), 199.
[73] Ravikumar, "General Introduction", xxix.

about social changes than the Justice Party. Periyar propagated the radicalism of Dravidian thought, serialized Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* in the party journals and critiqued the Brahminical interests of Congress.[74] When the Justice Party was collapsing, he merged it with the SRA to form the Dravidian Federation or *Dravida Kazhagam* in 1944. Like Ambedkar, Periyar attacked the traditional social structures that undermined the indigenous lifestyle of the marginalized Dalits. Understanding the Brahminical hegemony of caste orders as also a linguistic conquest, Periyar attacked the idea of imposing Hindi as the national language of the country.

However, as scholars such as Gorringe and Ravikumar notes, the collective Dravidian identity that was in opposition to a forced Aryan hegemony was only an "imagined fraternity". The caste oppressions never stopped and Periyar himself noted that "the caste oppression we [non-Brahmins] perpetrate is greater than that practiced by Brahmins."[75] With such complex inter-caste tensions and changing dynamics within the non-Brahmin movement, the autonomous Dalit movements began to mobilize and articulate their concerns against such injustices. In fact, V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai present the autonomous Dalit political voices that precede the non-Brahmin Dravidian movement through the politics of late nineteenth century Tamil Dalit intellectuals such as Ayothidas Pandithar (also referred to as Iyothee Thass), M. Masilamani and others. Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) rejected the politics of the Dravidian non-Brahmins since they were working from within the limits of Hinduism. Like Ambedkar, Thass also argued that the Tamil Dalits were originally Buddhists ostracized by Aryan invaders. He established the Dalit organization *Dravida Mahajana Sangha* and in its first conference the concern to "revisit history and retrieve a more honourable past for

[74] V.Geetha and S. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 2011), 350.
[75] Ibid., 354

themselves" was articualted.[76] While the Marathi Dalit magazine movement started with the Dalit Panthers, in the Tamil discourses of Dalit politics, several magazines were launched by Dalit intellectuals between 1869 and 1916. "*Suriyodam* (Sun Rise) has the distinction of being the first Dalit journal and was launched in 1869, but more prominent publications include the *Dravidian* (initially *Dravida Pandian*) in 1885, *Paraiyan* in 1893, and *Oru Paisa Tamilan* (One Penny Tamilian, later amended to just *Tamilian*) in 1907."[77] These magazines were also responsible for publicizing Tremenheere's report to the mass. They would also regularly question the nationalist project and the role of Dalits in it.

Post-Independence, however, the non-Brahmin struggles gained a momentum while a lot of the Dalit pioneers became overshadowed. This was largely due to their collective majority which elevated their political status in the democratic parliament. Periyar's Dravidian Federation broke into Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949 which then fractured into All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in 1972 and "the overall non-Brahmin non-Dalit bloc became even more powerful."[78] However, Periyar's radicalism became a source of inspiration to anti-caste campaigners and the renewed Dalit mobilization post Independence. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the renewed efforts of the Tamil Dalit parties such as the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panther Party) to reclaim a position in the political front. However, the Liberation Panther Party, although significant as an autonomous Dalit party, was marked by a significant alienation of the Dalit female cadres.

At this point, it is important to locate the agency of Dalit women in the alternate politics of Tamil Nadu. The first organization to take up the agenda of Tamil Dalit women's liberation was the NGO 'Society for Rural Education and Development'. In the 1990s, several Dalit women collectively formed a federation that was separate from the Tamil Dalit political parties

[76] Hugo Gorringe, "Institutionalizing Caste Politics in Tamil Nadu", 44.
[77] Ibid., 43.
[78] Ravikumar, "General Introduction", xxx.

like the VCK and called it the Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement (TDWM). There was a need to recognize the Dalit women's agency as an alternative politics that resists casteism and patriarchy. In her interview with S. Anandhi in 2010, Santhanamary notes the difference that a gendered politics brought to the Dalit movement –"the male leadership of the movement not only excludes Dalit women but articulates the particular interests of particular [Dalit] castes, whereas the Dalit women's movement, by contrast, is anti-caste and therefore inclusive of all women across castes." [79] For example, this is reflected in the collective efforts of the Adidravidar women in alleviating the deplorable conditions of the Arundhathiyar women who were not only worse off socio-economically, but also were victims of a ritualized sexual exploitation. In her essay, Anandhi further traces the collective activism of Dalit women in rural Tamil Nadu who, as "political subjects", contested the Brahminical claims to authority. Their struggles for land rights was meant to be an alternate political discourse that challenged the hegemonic biopower that refused them their needs. The fact that they were challenged by inter and intra caste men and the dominant Naidu women is a stark commentary about the multifaceted oppression that they were subjected to.

Having situated the Dalit woman's politics within the larger understanding of the post-Independent Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, it is now important to locate the rise in post-Independent Tamil Dalit literature within the new political consciousness.

Post-Independence Tamil Dalit Literature

With the rise of the Tamil Dalit movements in 1980s and the centenary celebration of Ambedkar in the 1990s, the Dalit voice was slowly creating a space for its own literary and cultural expressions. So far, the representation of Dalit lives by non-Dalit writers has either

[79] S. Anandhi, "Gendered negotiations of caste identity: Dalit women's activism in rural Tamil Nadu", *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*, ed. S. Anandhi and Karin Kapadia (New York: Routledge, 2017), 97.

been inadequate or has been cast in a pitiful light. These narratives were often clubbed together with the narratives of other non-Brahmin, non-Dalit Dravidian castes. However, since the Dravidian ideology had taken up a larger space of the autonomous Dalit struggles, the emergence of the Dalit consciousness was slow in formulating itself. A lot of these literary works reflect the complex dynamics shared between the Dalit and non-Brahmin movements of the recent past. For example, much of the Dalit politics were expressed from within Marxist ideologies only and it "reduced the interpretation of Dalit literature to an expression of class oppression".[80] The anti-Hindi sentiment espoused by the non-Brahmin literature was also reflected in the Tamil Dalit texts. Despite these similarities, the Dalit critique of the non-Brahmin Dravidian movement is staunchly recorded in Tamil Dalit literature. An early example of such a critique is present in Poomani's novel, *Piragu* (1979). Cho Dharman's novel *Koogai* (2005) is important since it provides an account of Dalit people living in Chitthiraikudi village in a post-Independence Tamil Nadu. It has also been translated into English as *The Owl*.

Like the Marathi Panther and Post-Panther literature, the tone of Tamil Dalit literature is more than just a discourse about victimization. Even the Dalit women's narratives, which have been gaining critical speculations only in recent times, express a sensibility that is not limited by their victimizations. Sharmila Rege's defense of Marathi Dalit women's autobiographies as important testimonies is shared by Meena Kandasamy's explanation of a similar notion about Tamil Dalit literature–

> "Like all other Dalit literature, Tamil Dalit literature too has an excess of autobiographies. Critics condemn these literatures of lament, but they too have a central place within the creative core. Tamil Dalit literature is characterized by the call for self-identity and assertion. It tramples all conventions with its intensely personal expression; is concerned with the life of the subaltern, and deals out a stark brutality. This literature should be viewed not as a literature of

[80] Ravikumar, "General Introduction", xxxi.

vengeance or a literature of hatred, but a literature of freedom and greatness."[81]

The politicizing of the "intensely personal expression" is captured in Bama's *Karukku* (1992), the first Tamil Dalit autobiography based around a Christian Catholic Dalit community. She explores her intersecting identities of being a Dalit, Catholic and a woman and narrates the nuanced marginalization that she faced growing up. Bama's account can also be juxtaposed against the narratives of converted Pentacostal Dalit women of Tamil Nadu who were reclaiming a liberated identity for themselves. An empirical study of such narratives is found in Karin Kapadia's "Improper Politics: The Praxis of Subalterns in Chennai".[82]

The scope of Tamil Dalit poetry further stretches the potential of personal experiences by experimenting with language. The shocking phrases which were characteristic of the Marathi Panthers' poetry, is toned down in the Tamil counterpart. For the Tamil Dalit poets, the literary form was more about challenging the limits of proper high Tamil diction. For example, N.D. Rajkumar's poetry is deeply seated in his *Kanniya* caste identity with which he counters the hegemony of Hinduism –

> "Look, it's heading this way, that holy cow
> they've sent here to knock us down.
> Here, lay it down in the central bay
> of our house, tear open its belly, pull out
> its entrails, and place them in a row
> of small heaps. O the mother-goddess
> of my malankaadu: I, ruler of this jungle, am here.
> Lay out the votive feast of meat today for our
> primal gods, incarnated in these totemic stones"[83]

Thus, the aesthetics of such a form of literary protest is blatantly radical as the Tamil Dalit

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[81] Quoted by Bhupinder Singh in the article titled "Tamil Dalit Poetry". See Bhupinder Singh, "Tamil Dalit Poetry", *A Reader's Words* (September 10, 2006) https://bhupindersingh.ca/2006/09/10/tamil-dalit-poetry/

[82] Karin Kapadia, "Improper politics: The praxis of subalterns in Chennai", *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*, 305-334.

[83] N.D. Rajkumar, "You, My Demon Who Delights in Dancing", *Tamil Dalit Writing*, 16.

poets "moved rapidly towards subverting, even dismantling, the literary experiments that had been the hallmark of mainstream magazines."[84] This need to defy the semantics of classical high Tamil literature found the Tamil Dalit poets pushing the boundaries of the language with specific local dialects. It makes the project of translating the "slash-and-burn protest rhetoric of most modern Tamil Dalit poetry" a difficult one, as has been expressed by Tamil translator Anushiya Sivanarayanan in the essay "Translating Tamil Dalit Poetry".[85]

Analysis of Post-Independence Tamil Dalit Women's Poetry

Unlike the Marathi Dalit women poets who were actively engaging with Dalit political struggles in their poems, the Tamil Dalit women poets were not looking to contextualize their works in the socio-political movements of their community. Instead Tamil Dalit women poets actively centralized a discourse on body politics and sexuality in their poetry in an attempt to reclaim their space in feminist literature. Such discourses were seen as a violation of the high Tamil culture upheld by high caste men and women and generated vitriolic responses.

While a dearth of caste politics might seem to dilute the agenda of Dalit feminism, it is important to problematize the concept that Dalit women writers must only talk about caste politics to be relevant. Acknowledging the reality of subaltern politics of caste and gender among contemporary Tamil Dalit women, Kutti Revathi suggests that they must also be enabled to write poetry with "an aram, a universal ethic, not a morality that is caste-bound and, therefore, relative."[86] Giving significance to the politics of the body, the Dalit women were challenging the State's authority over the subject's body. This extends the ambit of Dalit women's poetry and provides a diverse critique of the oppressive systems that have been

[84] Ravikumar, "Poetry", *Tamil Dalit Writing*, 1.
[85] Anushiya Sivanarayanan, N.T. Rajkumar, "Translating Tamil Dalit Poetry", *World Literature Today* Vol. 78, No. 2 (2004), 56-58.
[86] Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Translator's Note", *Wild Words: Four Tamil Poets*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom (Noida: HarperCollins, 2015), 114.

methodically enabled in the nation-building narrative of India.

In the introduction to her collection of poetry *Ms. Militancy* (2010), "Should you take offence", Meena Kandasamy critiques the oppressive masculine figures of Hinduism and defends her politics of subversion: "I work to not only get back at you, I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write into patriarchy… The criticism that I embark on, like your codification and like my cunt, is beyond all culture."[87] Kandasamy's preface sets the tone for the poems in this collection that question the limitations imposed on women by a Brahminical patriarchy. The first poem "A cunning stunt", intelligently combines the politics of language and the body as one uninterrupted struggle.[88] In the introduction of the nameless (and thus, un-signified) figure as the "man of words", and the narrator who is "bound" and "blindfolded", Kandasamy posits a certain power structure from the very beginning of the poem. The lines "he says a cunt by any other name/would smell as complicated" further pronounces the authority he holds and the difference between him and the female subject. His act of naming and hence, giving significance to the sexual organ of the female body reduces the female boy part to a set of signifiers –"*yoni*, the womb, uterus, vulva, vagina, the female organs of generation." The connotations provided by the "word-monster" stretches further. From "place of birth" it becomes "a receptacle to his erection". Thus, all of the signifiers refer to the female body's biological and sexual functions only. Kandasamy, at this point, is stretching the limits of poetic language to uncomfortable territories. The act of sex and signification becomes one singular act of pain –"he is tearing away to make the meanings fit in". In this poetic narration of the significance provided to the female body, it is important to reflect on what Foucault theorizes about power relations with respect to the materiality of the body. The "materialization" of the prisoner's body, as described in *Discipline and Punish*, is the space in

[87] Meena Kandasamy, "Should you take offence", *Ms. Militancy* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2010), 8-9.
[88] Ibid., 11-12.

which power can execute itself in controlling the body. Kandasamy's female narrator is caught in a similar prison where her body is subjugated by an amalgamation of different power structures through the agency of the male phallus–

> "…and I am torn apart
> To contain the meanings of
> Family, race, stock, and caste
> And form of existence
> And station fixed by birth
> And I can take it no more."

Just like the male phallus pins down the female body during sex, so too does the set of oppressive signifiers pins the narrator down into a marginalized space. In the face of such atrocities, Kandasamy snatches victory through a "cunning" use of her poetic language. The last line of the poem, "I turn faker", comes as a direct result of the oppression that the female body is subjected to. The use of the word "fake" as a response to the sexual assault carried out by the agent of biopower is to deny the very pleasure that the authority seeks out of the assault. The female body's performative power to "fake" nullifies her bondage in the beginning of the poem and thus, gives her a stealthy power over the patriarchal figure.

Kandasamy's terrific poetic diction and linguistic experimentation reaches a peak with the poem "Once my silence held you spellbound".[89] It begins with a parenthetical statement "on reading bell hooks". The reference to the African-American feminist sets the tone of Kandasamy's politics. Hook's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) advocates for the political voice of women who are marginalized from mainstream feminist discourse. The discourse of privileged feminist theory must then be questioned and dismantled to make space for those who speak from within the space of the Other. Contextualizing hooks within the struggles of Dalit feminism, Omvedt comments on it in an interview with Kandasamy –

[89] Ibid., 39-40.

"…people at the margins, the edges, can actually see the farthest and the best. I think she's [bell hooks] right. So who else but Dalit women?"[90] Kandasamy applies this radical notion in her poem, not only in the larger thematic framework but also in the semantics.

The poem begins with an unpunctuated long attack on the machinery of the State biopower. In her sharp, uninterrupted critique of the hegemony, Kandasamy notes that the "manipulating machinery of the state" and the harassing patriarchy are part of the same biopower that regulates the marginalized politic out of a "fear of exposure and the terror of betrayal". The intricacies of such a complex power structure forces marginalized sections to erase parts of their identities to dilute the struggle –"condemned to remain voiceless speechless tongueless incapable of any transgression". This enables an essentialism that is counter-productive and Kandasamy breaks the 'stream of consciousness' effect to retort against it –

> "You wouldn't discuss me because my suffering
> Was not theoretical enough. Enough. Enough.
> Enough. Now I am theoretical enough.
> I am theatrical enough."

In theorizing about the performativity of the body, Judith Butler writes about the challenge that the "domain of abjected bodies" needs to force upon "a symbolic hegemony" – "a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as 'life', lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving"[91]. The poet provides this "radical rearticulation" in the sense of pride that she shares with fellow Dalit women who have stood up against the exclusion that they face from mainstream socio-political discourses. The performance of their body politics exudes their rejection of the Brahminical culture and this productive theatricality of their politics has finally produced a radical theorization of Dalit

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[90] Interview of Gail Omvedt by Meena Kandasamy. "In Conversation: Dr Gail Omvedt", *Ultra Violet* (February 29, 2008). https://youngfeminists.wordpress.com/2008/02/29/120/#more-120

[91] Judith Butler, "Introduction", *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 2011), xxiv.

feminism. This alternative discourse challenges the language of Savarna patriarchal culture by subverting it –

> "I can misuse them. I can refuse them.
> I can throw them about and one day,
> I can throw them out."

It is a powerful statement since Kandasamy offers a new method of radical political writings for the Dalit women –to subvert the hegemonic traditions and to create an alternative cultural writing that is not dependent on the high languages of the privileged. The marginalized Dalit women thus, must reclaim the space of the central from the margins by actively challenging the normalized discourse of the privileged vigilantes of the margins. The poem ends with a sense of anger directed against the oppressors. Kandasamy notes that even though she has claimed the power to abuse the oppressor's language in the manner in which her community is abused, the "anger" and "swearing" have not stopped.

This anger that Kandasamy expresses is not always explicit. The poet manages to merge feelings of desolation and hopelessness with a subtler sense of anger as well. For example, the poor woman's struggle with starvation in "Eating Dirt" is significantly different from the poems of hunger written by Bansode and Lanjewar, specifically because of the dissolution of syntactical concerns of language to reveal the bare essentials. The memory of a sated self comes only in the form of fogged memory where the woman's "famished tongue feasted on dreams". Kandasamy captures this essence of acute confusion that accompanies burning hunger by offering a poetic hotchpotch of edible and non-edible items –

> "green mangoes clay cloying chalk
> Citrus soap crusty coal raw rice
> Crushed ice cubes crayons ash
> Powdered glass pickled garlic
> Salt sieved rain-scented soil."

Much like the marginalized identities that are imposed at birth, the woman's son

inherits her hunger and like his mother, "he was caught eating mud" –

> "a son taking after his mother
> a son inheriting her tongue"

Thus, that which shapes the materiality of the mother's nourishment is as vacant as that which her son consumes. He is an extension of his mother's body –an inescapable truth that is revealed to the mother in the final section of the poem. In his act of eating mud, she sees their inevitable destruction that Kandasamy poignantly captures through the use of the word "sand" –

> "she saw in his cloudy mouth
> the truth of the three worlds –
> sand everywhere, everything
> turning to sand."

Like Kandasamy, Sukirtharani is also noted for breaking the normative codes of language in establishing her political voice. In the poem "Infant language" (translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom), she calls for a nascent linguistic expression, one that lacks any prior speech or semiotic significance.[92] This shared sentiment that Tamil Dalit women poets expressed is crucial as it questions the effectiveness of the dominant discourses in elucidating the nuanced politics of Dalit feminism. The Dalit woman speaks and speaks differently. In this new language, the political thoughts of Dalit women "will not be taken for complaints" and will be successful in alleviating the "sorrow" that their identity entails. The poet reflects Kandasamy's tone in "Once my silence held you spellbound" as the new alternative language of Dalit feminist politics challenges the existing power dynamics of privileged discourses – "You will read there my alphabet, and feel afraid." The poet's unapologetic stance is made clear in the final lines –

> "And I shall write about that too, bluntly,
> In an infant language, sticky with blood."

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[92] Sukirtharani, "Infant Language", *Wild Words,* 77-78.

Sukirtharani often turns to the sensibility of the senses to capture the Dalit experience in her poems. In the opening stanza of "Portrait of my village", there is a synesthetic arrangement between the olfactory and gustatory as the poet provides a visual representation of the beaten Dalit body –

> "The thick sour smell
> Of the fermented gruel
> Paid as wages for grass cut and bundled,
> Received with palms cupped and raised,
> Hands already ripped by ulundu plants –
> Still pervades the body, like a ductless gland."[93]

The fragmented descriptions branch out in the final two stanzas to provide a more complete picture of the Dalit struggle in the rural setting –the memory of a "tormenting hunger" and dried paddy fields and the drenched bare feet "standing at an untouchable distance", away from the vigilante watch of their village. The othering thus becomes pronounced through the spatial and cultural distinction between the Brahminical oppressor and the oppressed Dalit.

This binary, however, is not left unchallenged. In the poem "A faint smell of meat" (translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom), the politics of claiming the center from the margins is attempted by the poet through a delineation of the Dalit body's politics.[94] She begins with the odour that is a direct consequence of the occupation of skinning carcasses forced on a Dalit individual –

> "I, who smell faintly of meat,
> My house where bones hang
> Stripped entirely of flesh"

The 'polluted' description is meant to disturb the 'pure' sensibilities of Brahmanism. The "meat", "bones", "flesh" and "skin" are all tactile realities of the Dalit identity –an identity which is marginalized away from the central purity of the Brahminical order. As Sukirtharani

[93] Ibid., 82.
[94] Ibid., 80.

states, their alternate culture resides "at the furthest point of our town". However, in the final line, she reiterates her subversive politics that inverts the center-margin binary –

"But I, I keep assuring them
We stand at the forefront."

The poem "Translating her" is important in situating the politics of translating subaltern identity politics.[95] With visual cues, the poet pans into the setting of a bedroom from where the "sound of a tuneless song" can be heard from outside. From the very beginning, Sukirtharani sets the reality of margins with the inside-outside dichotomy. The song belongs to a Dalit woman, her identity defined by the distinguishable "small drums" of the Tamil Dalit community known as the *thappu*. It validates the cultural truth that "*songs remain the sinew of Dalit protest in almost all its configurations"*.[96] Those within the limits of the inside are curious about the inexplicable song that they do not know how to translate or comprehend. The act of translating the woman's song is taken up by the poet herself for she shares her identity politics –

"I translate her poverty
The hunger she eats,
The hunger she expels,
Her dwelling place
Whose air is sprinkled with untouchability
Her oppressed community.
I speak the words, becoming her."

In translating her song, the poet reflects the reality of her community and embodies every Dalit woman of her community. Their 'difference' and the difficulty of translating that difference stimulates a discussion central to the narratives of marginalized subaltern communities and their translations. Here, it is important to cross-refer to Anushiya

[95] Ibid., 81.
[96] Krupa Ge, "The Female Dalit Voice, In Tamil Verse", *Firstpost.* https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/politics-of-dalit-identity-revealed-through-poetry-3483287.html

Sivanarayanan's essay who has expressed her ethical concerns in attempting to translate voices with which shares no cultural similarity –

> "All the men I met were professors of English in city colleges who had translated Tamil Dalit writing before. Except for one, none of them were of Dalit origin, but then, neither am I. In fact, one of the initial reasons I felt uneasy about even trying to translate Tamil Dalit poetry was my uncomfortable awareness that I was attempting to take on the task of interpreting and illuminating voices of a culture that had for centuries been silenced by those belonging to my caste groups and class."[97]

Sivanarayanan suggests that there must be sensitivity to the specific "cultural registers" of the Dalit community. Such a politics also corroborates with the dialectical readings of Guru and Rege attempted earlier. The Dalit woman's voice cannot be left at the margins –it must be translated and brought into major discourses without, of course, essentializing it for the benefit of the already privileged.

The poet S. Thenmozhi continues the experimentations of the contemporary Tamil Dalit women poets by pushing the limits of language in her works. The poem "Urn" (translated by Vasantha Surya) juxtaposes the memories of the narrator's childhood with the act of cooking food into one lucid experience –

> "Groping in that tiny mortar and pestle
> Looking for times that once
> Pounded down on her
> She peers at the ground-up batter
> Of memories,
> Scoops it up
> From flat-stone and deep-stone
> Flips a dosai
> Of not-quite-done thoughts
> On a small griddle."[98]

[97] Anushiya Sivanarayanan, "Translating Tamil Dalit Poetry", 56.
[98] S. Thenmozhi, "Urn", *Tamil Dalit Writing*, 33-34.

The phrases like “scattered babble” and “not-quite-done thoughts” as she attempts to reflect on her past reveal not only the struggle of remembering it but also the difficulty of formulating cohesive, structured thoughts. This can be seen as a subtle attempt on the poet’s part to dissect the scope of language and revealing its inadequacy in capturing every essence of life.

The narrator radiates a childlike innocence as she speaks to her “*marapaachi* doll”, an important Dravidian cultural item. She speaks to it of love and there is an atmosphere of tenderness in it as one might expect from a poem of nostalgia. The dream-like status of the poet, however, breaks suddenly with the mention of her grandson passing by and the reader is suddenly exposed to “an old terror” that “suddenly comes back” –

> “an old familiar voice
> Falling on her ears,
> She looks around
> For her thatha
> In his old familiar shirt.”

The juxtaposition of the absence of her “thatha”, the unexpected eruption of his memory, her own withered self and the presence of her young grandson all cohere together to reveal the imminent reality of life. This thematic expression is also explored in Thenmozhi’s “Refusal to Return” (translated by Prabha Nair), a poem about the generational difference between mother and daughter. These poems, lacking the traces of identitarian politics, are nonetheless important for they reflect on the manner in which the Dalit woman poet can write modern verses with effective metaphors and stylizations; to talk about themes that generally find a place in the literary works of the normalized popular culture.

The poet Ku Umadevi problematizes this notion of Dalit women writing only about Dalit women’s politics. In an interview by Krupa Ge, Umadevi notes,

> “There is this general perception that women are only great at writing poetry about the body. I want to shatter this myth. I want to prove, through my poetry

> that women, when they write about politics and feminism, are not merely capable of writing powerfully but also effecting societal change."[99]

While it is an important statement regarding the efficiency of women's voices in the larger socio-political discourse, it must be problematized as well. In an attempt to broaden the scope of women's poetry, the poet inadvertently implies that the body cannot be political enough. This is a setback to the careful formulation of the resistive voice that uses the marginalized body as a map for the socio-historic oppressions inflicted on it. Thus, there needs to be a revision of the manner in which the 'body' is perceived in women's poetry, specifically within marginalized communities.

Having said that, Umadevi's poems are necessary to the discourse of Tamil Dalit women's poetry. The question of caste and gender are intrinsically linked in her poems to create powerful subaltern narratives. In the poem "Deities" (translated by Krupa Ge), the poet distinguishes between the "ferocious" gods of Hinduism who actively help the Brahminical caste system endure, and the female deities who are "mere placeholders", controlled by the agency of "male spirituality".[100] Thus, from the onset, Umadevi establishes the patriarchal oppression that exists within the folds of Hinduism where even the goddesses are subjected to the wills of men.

In the second half of the poem, the poet powerfully inverts casteist stereotypes to express her political statement. In her subversion, she makes the distinction between the Dalits and the non-Dalits clear. In her unabashed attack, she compares the caste Hindus to loud, obnoxious dogs –

> "When dogs bark,
>
> Brave gaits disappear,
>
> And so disappears,

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[99] Krupa Ge, "The Female Dalit Voice, In Tamil Verse". https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/politics-of-dalit-identity-revealed-through-poetry-3483287.html

[100] Ibid.

Our haughtiness

When we cross

Dead

Bloated

Maggot-infested

Dogs, we stop

Breathing

When we hear the loud noises from

The barking

The night howls

From your crying,

We shut our ears"

The sensory cues in the descriptions are oppressing, a stark reminder of the terms used by the savarna logic in describing the Dalits. In her inversion, Umadevi also rebukes the caste Hindus for being "bound by the shackles of caste". The Dalit struggles of the nation reveal the truth in this statement as one of the primary agendas of these movements was to convert out of Hinduism. Thus, in that sense, the Dalit community, through the movements, is much more emancipated.

In the poem "Those Who are Protecting this Country" (translated by Prabha Nair), Umadevi continues her attack against the hegemonic standards of Brahmanism. Here, she uses sharp syntax to provide stark juxtapositions –

"To every single person

Who is protecting our country

Sacred

Like our doctrines

Are excrement and water"[101]

In marking the "supremely important" figures as "consecrated wastes", the semiotics of the Brahminical discourses are reversed. The poet does not spare the "middle castes" in her criticism either for they too "cannot tolerate our refusal to obey". It thus becomes evident that what Umadevi strives for in her poems is an acute radicalism that not only challenges the normalization of the casteist patriarchal narrative of the nation but also subverts it to bring the marginalized discourse to the center. She mocks the caste Hindus' obsession with stirring "shit in caste frenzy", the ultimate rejection of the humiliation that comes with the labour forced upon Dalit individuals. The resilient language of these poets is thus instrumental in shaping the political discourse of the Tamil Dalit women's struggle and also in providing a more nuanced approach to the corpus of Dalit literature of India.

[101] Ku Umadevi, "Those Who are Protecting this Country", *Tamil Dalit Writing,* 32-33.

Chapter 3

Andhra and Telangana Dalit Movement in the Colonial Period

The sociologist Chinna Rao Yagati has traced the Dalit movements in the Telugu speaking regions of Andhra and Telangana regions from the beginning of the twentieth century in works such as *Dalits' Struggle for Identity: Andhra and Hyderabad 1900-1950*. K.Y. Ratnam too situates his study of Dalit struggles in these regions from a colonial timeframe, with the subheading "The Early Phase of Dalit Movement in Telangana and Andhra Regions".[102] This is not to suggest that Dalit voices were non-existent pre-colonization. Like the Marathi Dalit movement, the Telugu counterpart started within the Bhakti movement of questioning the Brahminical practices in the tradition of Ramanuja, Nimbaraka and Basava.[103]

The oppression that the Telugu Dalit community was subjected to within the Nizam state of Hyderabad has been elaborated by P.R. Venkatasamy in his book *Our Struggle for Emancipation*. Besides the feudal practices of the *jagirdari* system, the added "caste-based extra economic coercive exploitation" in the form of the *Jajmani* system intensified the oppression on the Dalits. This involved the upper caste landlords forcing the Dalits into unpaid bonded labour called *vetti*. There was a need to resist such oppressive systems and the Dalits who could escape the *Jajmani* system "came to the cities, educated themselves, and diversified their economic activities especially in Hyderabad and Secunderabad."[104] As for the coastal Andhra region of the Telugu-speaking belt, the landless Dalits, who were known as *Paleru*, were forced to toil in both the agricultural fields as well as the domestic spheres of their oppressors.

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[102] K.Y. Ratnam, "The Dalit Movement and Democratization in Andhra Pradesh", *East-West Center Washington Working Papers*, No. 13 (December 2008): 2.
[103] Braj Ranjan Mani. *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2005), 168-69.
[104] K.Y. Ratnam, "The Dalit Movement and Democratization in Andhra Pradesh", 4.

However, the growth of a specific Dalit political consciousness was able to develop only in the nineteenth century colonial epoch with the strengthening of structural and educational reforms. K. Purushotham notes that the introduction of modern infrastructure blurred the confinements of rigid social confinements that not only permitted Dalits to enter certain areas but also encouraged their employment in "army, mines and railways among others".[105] In 1893, the Madras Presidency sanctioned proposals that promoted the education of Dalit children. The educational reforms were also largely attributed to the Christian missionaries, much like their involvement in the reconstruction of Dalit identity in the Tamil region. The health and educational reformations that were made accessible to the Dalits helped them to reject their identity as "untouchables". Yagati notes that "conversions to Christianity occurred in Andhra at a faster rate than in almost any other part of the South Asian region."[106] He provides a detailed account of the conversions, the subsequent reactions and the archival importance of the missionary papers in his article "Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh: A Historical Outline of a Hundred Years". However, it is important to reserve a skepticism regarding the colonial project since it was not devoid of the political interests of the dominant upper caste Hindu landlords. Ratnam is careful of a monolithic gratitude as he notes that the colonial modernization also permitted the feudal elites to empower themselves and reinforce their social dominance.[107] Having said that, the efforts of the missionaries in uplifting the social position of the marginalized need to be complemented by the efforts of other non-Hindu alternatives in the south, that include Nasaraiah sect and the Pothuluri Veerabramham.

What largely accelerated the Telugu Dalits towards a political consciousness were the social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that were actively

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[105] K. Purushotham, "General Introduction", *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*, ed. K. Purushotham, Gita Ramaswamy, Gogu Shyamala (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), xiii.
[106] C.R. Yagati, "Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh: A Historical Outline of a Hundred Years", *Indian Historical Review* Vol. 42, No. 1 (June 2015): 116.
[107] K.Y. Ratnam, "The Dalit Movement and Democratization in Andhra Pradesh", 2.

campaigning against the oppressive Brahminical practices. These not only include the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj, but also the anti-caste struggles in the neighbouring states with which the Telugu movement had a very organic relationship –Phule and Ambedkar's Dalit struggles in Maharashtra and Periyar's non-Brahmin movement of Tamil Nadu. Drawing from these anti-caste reformist principles, Telugu Dalit leaders like Bhagya Reddy Verma[108], Arige Ramaswamy and B.S. Venkat Rao –the "Great trinity of the movement" – organized Dalits to concretize the "Adi-Andhra" Dalit self-respect movements. Venkat Rao, obtained the sanction of several socio-economic benefits for the Dalits while working in the State ministry as the Minister of Education. Focusing on the advancement of the Madiga caste, Ramaswamy formed the Arundhatiya Association for their welfare. Bhagya Reddy, on the other hand, founded the Jagan Mitra Mandali in 1906 and established the Manya Sangam in 1907 with M.L. Audaiah which was later renamed as the Adi-Hindu Social Service League in 1921.[109] These organizations were crucial in helping the Dalit community reclaim its identity, and thus these first few years of the twentieth century marked the start of the 'Adi-Hindu' Dalit movements of the Telangana region and their first conference was held in 1917. Reddy was instrumental in starting the Telugu weekly *Bhagyanagar* which was later renamed *Adi-Hindu*. Other periodicals like *Adi-Andhra, Veera-Bharathi*, *Harijana* and *Jeevana Jyothi* were published to create a cultural movement that specifically critiqued a Brahminical Hinduism.[110] All of these political actions were meant to reinstitute the Dalit identity as 'Adi-Andhras' or the "original sons of the soil".[111]

This newly conscious identity rejected not only the Brahminical dictates of the Vedas but also criticized the colonial administration which, as has been discussed in Chapter 2, denied

[108] As K. Purushotham notes, Bhagya Reddy Verma had disowned the tag of 'Verma' that was conferred to him by the Arya Samajists. Thus, the thesis will refer to him as Bhagya Reddy hereafter. See K. Purushotham, "General Introduction", *Telugu Dalit Writing,* xiv.
[109] Ibid.
[110] C.R. Yagati, "Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh", 120.
[111] K. Purushotham, "General Introduction", xv.

the Dalits from accessing the "panchama*"* lands. The concept of Dalit nationalism was thus forming itself around anti-caste and anti-colonial sentiments. Ratnam notes the nexus between the British colonials and the native upper caste rulers –"both descended from the Aryan race, to exploit the non-Aryan, Dravidian Sudras, and Ati-Sudras."[112] This statement provides an interesting approach to the study of the Aryan-Dravidian conflicts and provides a racial angle of interpreting the violence inflicted against Dalits.

Post-Independence Telugu Dalit Movement

The formation of the state of Andhra Pradesh in 1956, nine years after India's Independence, was rooted in an acute discontent with the Dravidian Tamil movements, the need to separate Telangana from the Urdu-dominated Nizam state and most importantly, the need for a separate administration for the Telugu speaking community. In his study, Ratnam elaborates on the nuanced dynamics of the political climate during this time, providing a clear insight into the factors that played their part in the formation of the separate state.

It was also around this time when Left politics was taking a central stage in the alternate political movements to reclaim and redistribute lands among the peasants. Although in 1960, efforts were made to reduce the upper caste landlords' claims over lands, a lack of official records and the loopholes in the State machinery ensured the defeat of the peasant class movements. Explicit State authorized police violence also erupted in curbing the oppressed class communities' demands. It is also important to note here that the "Green Revolution" of the 1960s benefited only the upper class landowners and increased landlessness and unemployment among the agrarian community of Dalits.[113] The Dalit community, that formed a large section of the peasant class, suddenly found themselves in the midst of class struggles.

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[112] K.Y. Ratnam, "The Dalit Movement and Democratization in Andhra Pradesh", 3.
[113] K.Y. Ratnam discusses at length the unrest that the Green Revolution had caused among the rural Dalit communities of Andhra Pradesh. Ibid., 8.

This created a serious blow to the Dalit politics of the Andhra region and it was with the growing radicalism of the Panthers in Maharashtra in 1972, that there was once again a resurgence of Dalit politics in the Telugu Dalit community. The song "Communist landlord" by the Dalit writer Gyara Yadaiah articulates the criticism of the Communist exploitation of the Dalit community –

> "The Communist landlords
> Owe their red colour to the blood of the Dalits,
> The beauty of their marble palaces
> To the work of Bahujans"[114]

A Leftist-Ambedkarite political platform was attempted at in 1985, the year of the Karamchedu massacre where six Dalits were killed in a conflict with the Kamma landlords during the rule of the Telugu Desam Party. The incident was one of the pivotal moments of Dalit politics in the Andhra region because it led to the complete shedding of passivity for a more radical approach. Bojj Tarakam and K.P. Rao, both Marxist-Leninist, were instrumental in organizing the Madiga community post-Karamchedu. Their political ideologies were also enmeshed with those espoused by Ambedkar and thus, they called for a dialectical criticism of existing Left politics.

This new mode of constructing Dalit consciousness with undertones of class consciousness was considered to be the "new Dalit democratic revolution".[115] The All-India Dalits Coordination Committee on Karamchedu coordinated a "*Chalo Assembly protest rally*" that was meant to challenge the State's oppression of the Dalits. After the Chundur incident of 1991, the Dalit Maha Sabha (DMS) was organized for building Dalit culture as an alternate mode of politics and it was also responsible for making the word "Dalit" popular among the Telugu-speaking lower caste community. Recognizing the reality of caste-based atrocities, "it

[114] Gyara Yadaiah, "The Communist Landlords", *Telugu Dalit Writing*, 18.
[115] C.R. Yagati, "Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh", 129.

promised to create counterhegemony of the oppressed against the dominant castes landlords."[116] Thus, despite a communist strain, the Dalit organizations were creating an independent, autonomous space for themselves. Commenting on the new politics of these autonomous Dalit organizations, Rao notes,

> "This was significant in terms of both the proximity the independent Dalit movement wished to have with the Communist party of India, Marxist-Leninist, as well as its firm resolve to maintain autonomy by projecting Dalit leaders and intellectuals and conceptualizing the discourse specific to the caste problem."[117]

As Rao notes, the intensification of sub-caste stratification among the Telugu Dalit communities towards the end of the twentieth century has been a departure from a collective Dalit identity that reeks of internal hierarchical sentiments. The difference was noted not only between the Madigas and the Malas but also within the other fifty seven sub-castes present in that geographical belt. The vulnerability and shifting alliances that the stratification has led to have been exploited by political parties for diluting the Dalit voice. However, the surfacing of the nuances of the Telugu Dalit identity has become an important aspect of their political discourse as it does not simplify or homogenize the concept of Dalit identity. It goes on to enunciate the importance of politicizing "the plurality of people, life experience, literary voices, and perspectives".[118]

The Alternate Politics of Telugu Dalit Women and an Analysis of their Post-Independence Poetry

Owing to their gender, caste and class, the Dalit women suffered under the oppression of a bourgeoisie Brahminical patriarchy and found themselves entrapped in low-paying, unskilled jobs in the unorganized sector. Discussing the plight of the Dalit women in general

[116] K.Y. Ratnam, "The Dalit Movement and Democratization in Andhra Pradesh", 23.
[117] C.R. Yagati, "Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh", 129.
[118] K. Purushotham, "General Introduction", xxix.

and of their nuanced sufferings in Andhra Pradesh, Ratnam observes, "Dalit women in Andhra Pradesh rarely own the land on which they work, and so they rarely benefited from the land improvement projects like mechanization, fertilization, and modernization of irrigation through the Green Revolution."[119]

In high Telugu culture, honour and purity translate into the integrity of the Telugu people. By extension, the purity of the Telugu woman essentializes her "Telugu-ness" and thus, promiscuity strips her off her "Telugu-ness".[120] In the Brahminical patriarchal discourse, promiscuity is correlated with sexual exploitation –an availability of the Dalit woman's body to be subjected to sexual violence, as if she is 'asking for it' as a result of her low caste. Thus, the sexual exploitation of the Arundhatiyars, as mentioned in Chapter 2, remained a prevalent practice in the most impoverished parts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh and has been systematically normalized. Clarinda Still notes, "Upper-caste stereotypes of low-caste, *adivasi* and Dalit women as 'simple', loud-mouthed, vulgar, 'hot-blooded' and, above all, promiscuous serve to physicalise and sexualise Dalit women and to justify their sexual abuse in the minds of their abusers."[121]

However, their vulnerable social position does not deter them from adopting a militant alternate politics. When Padmao Rao of DMS was arrested, the Dalit women had marched to Hyderabad to stage a *dharna* protest for his immediate release. Protest gatherings during the Telangana Movement of 1969 also witnessed the participation of several Dalit women. Eshwari Bai, who was deeply inspired by Ambedkarite ideologies, would actively participate in the protest movements and she has established herself as a crucial figure in the Telugu Dalit women's movement. As the president of the Republican Party of India, she has consistently

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[119] K.Y. Ratnam, "The Dalit Movement and Democratization in Andhra Pradesh", 12.
[120] Clarinda Still, "'Culture', 'Civilization' and Citizenship", *Dalit Women: Honour and Patriarchy in South India* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 217.
[121] Clarninda Still, "Dalit women, rape and the revitalisation of patriarchy", *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*, 209.

raised her voice against caste-based oppressions and has looked into the socio-economic developments of women and children.

It was only in this post-Independence timeline that the alternate politics of Telugu Dalit women was recorded as an integral part of the Dalit movement. In their discourses, they also carried forward the Dalit criticism of Left politics as the sole axis of studying gender roles. For these women, it was important not only to critique Brahmanism as well as patriarchal oppressions but also to incorporate sub-caste identity politics in their activism and literature. For example, the collection of short stories *Nallaregati Saallu* (Furrows in Black Soil), published in 2006, is significant in recording the narratives of sub-castes such as the Madigas. In poetry, a good example of Telugu sub-caste politics is narrated by Teresa Devadanam in her poem "I Am a Poet, My Name is Devadanam" (translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao).[122] Devadanam focuses on the caste politics, more specifically on the sub-caste identitarian politics of the Malas and the Madigas. In the poem, she exposes the hypocrisy of Brahminical practices that ostracize the Malas and the Madigas while simultaneously depending on their services. The sentiment becomes evident right from the title of the poem where Devadanam proclaims both her caste identity and her identity as a poet. The implication of such a deliberate juxtaposition is based on a savarna presumption wherein a Dalit subject is incapable of writing 'high' forms of literature such as poetry. Thus, the significance of the title is present in the poet's radical trespassing of the literary limitations that a savarna logic advocates.

Thus, this alternate feminism which reclaims the Dalit identity, with all its nuances, is also meant to be an attack on the 'mainstream' feminist discourses of India that were based on a privileged caste-class structure. There was a need to critique organizations such as *Manalo Manam* (Among Ourselves), which were created to address women's issues across Andhra Pradesh but had quite conveniently looked past the nuanced issues of Dalit women. As a

[122] Teresa Devadanam, "I Am a Poet, My Name is Devadanam", *Telugu Dalit Writing*, 38.

retaliation, Dalit feminist forums like *Matti Poolu* (Earth Flowers) and *Maalo Memu* (We, among ourselves) were organized to create an autonomous space for themselves.[123]

While the Tamil Dalit women's writings witnessed detailed discussions on the importance of mapping the Dalit woman's body within the larger feminist discourse, the Telugu Dalit woman focused more on their identity that had been forgotten or distorted for too long by an elite Telugu culture. T. Sai Chandra Mouli critically analyses this difference in the voice of the Telugu Dalit women through a study of their poetry. His edited anthology called *Black Lotus* is particularly important since it brings the writings of several Telugu Dalit women poets under a single collection, thereby concretizing their alternate poetic narratives within the ambit of both Dalit and feminist poetry. Writing on the importance of the Dalit woman voicing her narratives from within her subjective space, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani notes, "the poetry by dalit women written from the dalit women's perspective and based on their experiences as dalit women is far more powerful and has a far greater impact than the poetry of dalit male poets or upper caste women poets."[124]

While Swaroopa Rani focuses her attention on Telugu Dalit women's poetry, the crux of it was similar through all the genres. Her essay is an important one for it provides a researched overview into the literary history of Telugu Dalit women's poetry, tracing it way back in the 13th century with the poet Molla's *Ramayanam*. The trend of subverting patriarchal Hindu narratives continued in the modern Telugu Dalit woman's literature with demonized mythological characters such as Surpanakha and Thataka re-envisioned into the central space. Since the call for a revolutionary Dalit feminist literature intensified only in the last few decades of the twentieth century, the linguistic politics was already enmeshed with a fierce Dalit consciousness that gave primacy to the marginalized dialects of the Dalits.

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[123] K. Purushotham, "General Introduction", xxviii.
[124] Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, "Dalit Women's Writing in Telugu", 21.

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani's contribution to Dalit feminist literature is not limited to critical articles. She is also noted for providing a significant poetic voice that expands the scope of both Dalit and feminist literature. Her poems are situated in social realities, drawing the reader into the subjective experiences that come with her marginalized identity. Her poem "Wild Flower" (translated by Vasantha Kannabiran) provides a stark example of the Dalit woman caught in the midst of the casteist and patriarchal oppression that methodically condemn her life.[125] The opening line "When has my life been truly mine?" questions the uncomfortable reality of the lack of agency in a woman's life, specifically when she also bears the identity of a low caste in a Brahminical society. The poet unravels this lack through the subtle description of the violence that her body is subjected to –

> "In the home male arrogance
> Sets my cheek stinging,
> While on the street caste arrogance
> Splits the other cheek open…"

The home-world dichotomy has been a crucial topic of discussion within the elitist feminist discourse. For them, the question is about the agency to choose to venture out of the traditional realm of the domestic and into the male-dominated realm of the outside social reality. However, for the Dalit woman, the possibility of such a mobility is bleaker, owing to the interaction of her gender, class and caste identities. Swaroopa Rani captures the subjugation through the images of violence meted out to the Dalit woman by oppressive figures –both the patriarchal and casteist figures attack her body as a symbolic move of power.

The poet's controlled, albeit powerful, language continues in the second stanza where she elaborates on the oppression of the upper caste "manuvadi" culture that has denied education to the Dalit women for centuries. This denial has been made normative to such an extent that when she is finally able to chase "the faraway distant hope of an education", she is

[125] Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, "Wild Flower", *Telugu Dalit Writing*, 50.

subjected to the uncomfortable male gaze that questions her presence in the privileged ambit. The sexual predator's gaze is described by the poet as "hungry", which is symptomatic not only of the "lust" for the female body but also for a marginalized one that lacks and socio-economic or cultural capital. This notion of the Dalit woman's body being "good enough" just for "lust" and not for "family" is situated in the reality of the high culture espoused by the Telugu Brahmin community as explained by Clarinda Still.

The lines "I long to gather my body into a fist and fling it into the distance" reflects the poet's angst at the social shackles that follow her in both public and private quarters. This longing for the freedom of the woman's body that is otherwise defined by a limiting essence is pronounced by the poet through an act of escape –to "fling" the body "into the distance". This idea of alienating the self from a Brahminical patriarchy is also expressed in the final lines of the poem –

> "I feel like hiding my face
> in a stream."

The impulse to flee and hide, which can be seen as a defeat of radical politics, is nonetheless a real mode of coping with a Brahminical patriarchy, within which the Dalit woman is at the receiving end. The lack of discourse about this systematic hegemonic oppression is made explicit by Swaroopa Rani in the poem "Nishidda Charitha" (translated by Vasantha Kannabiran) –

> "In which chapter of the volumes
> Of famous history of your country
> Do you intend to write it?"[126]

The poem "Forbidden History" (translated by T.S. Chandra Mouli), presents a more uncomfortable, albeit real, depiction of sexual violence that becomes a normalized aspect of a

[126] Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, "Dalit Women's Writing in Telugu", 22.

Telugu Dalit woman since childhood.[127] Here, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani makes explicit the practice of "Basivi", wherein young Dalit girls are forced to provide sexual pleasures to the men in their rural communities. Thus, in the opening lines of the poem, the poet is not only depicting the inheritance of untouchability as a result of ancestral caste identity, but is also portraying the oppressive legacy of a persisting sexual violation as a direct consequence of the tripartite caste, class and gender identities.

> "As a babe in the womb
> Depicted as an untouchable
> Stamped with a low caste, I was born.
> That day itself branded a slut
> Amidst senseless rules
> In the cesspools of superstitions
> Cast away, I became forbidden woman."

Thus, in her observations, the oppressions of an acute Brahminical patriarchy go beyond the materiality of the woman's sexual body –the "babe in the womb" that is supposed to betray no signs of caste, class or sexualized physicality, is already marked as a "forbidden woman" who is forced to have no agency in her sexual rights. In explicitly describing the oppression that is particular for a rural Dalit girl, the poet provides a sharp commentary against the normalized hegemonic violence through a performative imagery –

> "my infancy that should bloom into adolescence
> With the deity in the shrine as witness
> Gets unveiled as a doll in a shop."

The comparison between a Dalit girl and a doll is a striking one as the poet reproduces her lifeless existence, where her body is treated as a sexualized object that is to be played with through a ritualistic "unveiling" carried out by the patriarchal figures. In this "strange" narrative where a forcefully sexualized body is "paraded" naked, Swaroopa Rani presents the

[127] Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, "Forbidden History", *Black Lotus: Telugu Dalit Women's Poetry*, ed. T. Sai Chandra Mouli (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2014), 43-44.

horror and the hypocrisy of a national "modernity" that is obsessed with the Hindu notion of "karna".

In the final few lines of the poem, the poet furthers her critique of the country's apparent progression. She questions the elitist discourses that have systematically denied the Dalit woman her rightful space of articulating her narratives. She attacks their complicity in allowing the ritualistic abuse of Dalit women and children. In this vehement rebuke, the poet demystifies the pretention of progress and modernity that the dominant national narratives claim to have achieved.–

> "In the annals of this Country's history
> In which canto will be inscribed
> My story that demands
> All cyber revolutions to lower their heads
> At once into stone ages?"

In the poem, "Puzzling Verses for Married Women" (translated by Afsar and Michael A. Collins), Nadakurthy Swaroopa Rani continues to probe into the oppression that women are subjected to within the domestic realm.[128] In this criticism of rigid patriarchy, the poet showcases her modern poetic sensibilities that her contemporary Dalit feminist literary movement aspired to achieve. The poem begins by denouncing the "marital life" that exerts an intense surveillance over a woman through the figure of the patriarchal husband, who is noted for "raking hell over petty issues" and "making a mountain of every molehill". Within this shackled life, the woman loses her own individual materiality and is considered only to be a posterior extension of the man –"'Oh, there goes a tiger; oh, here is its tail,'".

In her radical tone, the poet proclaims that the threats that the marital institution directs at her are empty –there's "nothing". Exposing it as just another method of ensuring complete power over the female subject, the poet shifts from the prototypical symbol of the 'snake' as

[128] Nadakurthy Swaroopa Rani, "Puzzling Verses for Married Women", *Telugu Dalit Writing*, 36.

powerful and manipulative. Describing the man as the phallic snake "squirming in the folds of your sari", the image created is sexual. The deliberate choice of the word "squirming" also robs the male figure of his assumed power position and the layered "folds" of the attire that guards the woman's body adds to this shift in power dynamics. The importance of the politics of the sari as a protective layer to the Dalit woman's body is made more explicit in the poem "No Guard for My Bosom" by Joopaka Subhadra that will be discussed later in the chapter.

The last three stanzas is a reiteration of the various "issues" that the patriarchal institution has with the female subject. It reeks of the acute surveillance that was hinted at in the opening stanza. It is not only limited to the physical aspects of the woman –"movement", "walking", "smile" and "the slightest lift of an eyebrow" –but also veers into the social and the semantic.

> "Mingling with neighbours is an issue,
> Meeting relatives is a huge issue,
> If you say a word,
> That is another issue,
> Embarrassment is also an issue."

The silencing of the Dalit woman's voice is not a new practice as her narratives have always been methodically erased or pushed outside the ambits of recognized feminist discourse. The issues recounted in the final four lines are from the perspective of the woman's predicament. Her "inability to decipher the code", which can culminate in her "escape", can be traced to the restricting patriarchal laws that not only repress the semiotic needed for the theorizations on liberation, but also act as the governing principles that culturally construct the available vocabulary in the first place.[129] Thus, the poet implies the need for a new language that has not been tampered with a patriarchal discourse. It is only then that one can "solve" the original issue –that of being a woman, specifically a Dalit woman, in a Brahminical patriarchy.

[129] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 123.

The poet Putla Hemalatha has become one of the most prominent voices in the Dalit feminist movement of the nation. Advocating for a platform that addresses both Dalit and women's issues, her politics is reflected in her literary works as well. Her poem "The Neighbour" (translated by Raj Karamchedu) is a brilliant example of the Dalit woman surpassing the limits of language to narrate her nuanced politics.[130] In the poem, Hemalatha utilizes her creative impulse and modern aesthetics to capture the life of a prostitute. The tone is not sympathetic –as is the case with most male writers writing about female destitution –but it is one that exudes empathy for the woman who chooses to sell her sexual body for survival.

The poem begins with the nocturnal image of the bat, setting the spatial and thematic tone. The poet slowly discloses the "desire" to live as a "necessity" that has its roots in cross-generational needs. The slow-pan to the sleeping figure of the daughter reveals that she is not "tied" by the "*thaali*" –the nuptial knot –and this serves as a burden of its own, much like the sentiment shared by Challapalli Swaroopa Rani in "Wild Flower". Using a sharp simile, Hemalatha writes –

> "the *thaali* tied by no one
> Stabs her heart like a lodestone."

It is only in the second stanza that we are exposed to the insidious setting of the red-light district –"On the door front the red lamp throbs like a blistered boil". Hemalatha's experimentations with the poetic language becomes acute as she unravels the static ambience of time lying "wrinkled between the eyelids" with images of mobility that depict the rushing of desire within this specific ambit that is soon forgotten by daylight. What seems like an Eliotian description is contextualized in the third stanza within the reality of an impoverished prostitute striving to drive away hunger –

> "The hungry stomachs of tomorrow
> Confront the wasted nights of the present.

[130] Putla Hemalatha, "The Neighbour", *Telugu Dalit Writing*, 43.

Hiding her shrunken stomach in the folds of the sari,
She sets up shop in the dark,
Next to the garbage bin in the street.
She ruminates each night to quench
The burning bellies of her children."

The pain of hunger is captured in the physical phrases of "shrunken stomach" and the "burning bellies" and this socio-economic oppression on the body is 'quenched' and alleviated through the selling of sexual labour. The body is thus always roped into the struggles of female politics, especially when its social space is set within the marginalized quarters. Hemalatha, writing from her Dalit identity is able to portray the angst within this struggle for she shares her identity with a community that has always been at the receiving end of the Brahminical and patriarchal sexual discourse. The obsession with "the morals" and "the unblemished chastity" of a woman's body as espoused by the high Telugu culture crumbles when faced with starvation –they "cannot fulfil daily needs". These virtues created by a patriarchal language do not intersect with the realities of the marginalized woman –they "appear to her as wildflowers of no fragrance." The separation of the material from the essence reflects the rift between the reality of the woman's politics and the discourse that controls her.

The poet projects the unflinching attitude with which the woman, in spite of all the odds, labours through the night, selling her body without discrimination –

"Whoever the man
Cursed, diseased, or amorous
Writhes like a snake in the embrace of her arms."

The indifference with which she works is her defiance of the normative binary logic that juxtaposes the pure body against the polluted. Even though by the morning, her body is "crumpled like a wastepaper", she mocks the society's prejudice against her sexual performances –"spitting at once at the questioning looks of the neighbours". The poet makes her politics clear through the woman's "dissenting smile"–the rigid savarna patriarchy is blind

to the sufferings that form the crux of the rationales behind marginalized women's actions. Since their narratives cannot sustain nor justify these alternate discourses, the oppressed must continue to express her politics through her body, her actions and her discourses.

Joopaka Subhadra's poem "No Guard for My Bosom" (translated by K. Purushotham) continues the literary sensibilities of combining the socio-politics of the Dalit woman under one discourse.[131] The poem sets the tone for the contemporary Telugu Dalit women's struggle for liberation in a caste stratified society. The first line posits the difference of the alternate politics of the poem by referring to "Maisamma" –a goddess not from the Hindu mythology but from the mythology of the tribal community of the Banjaras. Whereas in Hemalatha's poem the pangs of hunger is enmeshed with the social reality of sex work, in Subhadra's poem, it is Maisamma and the *pallu* of the sari that are politicized in the opening lines to introduce the idea of the Dalit hunger.

In a fierce poetical expression, it is the sari that becomes the central focus of the poem as the poet expresses the politics of the Dalit woman's body through the apparel that clothes it. The bodily performances that are required from her labour are integrated in the notion of the sari that doubles not only as a clothing item but also as the object that provides relief to the body –"my pallu wipes off the sweat on my face like a breeze" and "doubles up as a sheet for napping on the bare floor".

The protection offered by the sari is compared to the one offered by the maternal figure, thereby elevating its significance –

> "my soiled pallu,
> Like a mother taking me into her bosom,
> Wipes my tears."

This maternal role is not only limited to the protection of the body that it covers but is also extended to take on the role of the mother to the woman's child –

[131] Joopaka Subhadra, "No Guard for My Bosom", *Telugu Dalit Writing*, 76-78.

"While at work in the fields with my child
She holds my child like the niche holds the earthen lamp,
My child playing all day in the dust,
She clears her streaming nose,
She cleans the dust of her body,
As a cow would lick its newborn calf."

With every stanza, the poet adds a new layer to its politics. The pallu covers "the red of menses" that the Dalit woman cannot contain otherwise with the privilege of menstrual napkins. The sexual violence to which a woman is subjected to, both "within and without the house" comes from both intra and inter-caste spaces. In this inescapable situation, it is this guard of the sari that protects the female body and becomes "the first casualty in the hands of men". In this potential of the sari, the poet finally refers to it as a female and not as a disposable material object –"Pallu, she is a rag".

Throughout the stanzas, the poet unravels the intimate relationship that the sari shares with the Dalit woman's body. It offers itself to become one with the daily performances necessitated by the body it drapes. Subhadra captures this closeness with a poetic exactness –

"While sweating, while asleep,
In work and at leisure,
In sorrow and in happiness,
In prosperity and in difficulty,
Like the dust on my feet
She is close to me"

It is only in the final stanza that the poet addresses the concern made explicit in the title of the poem. Like the Dalit woman, the sari also works "ceaselessly, as a slave". As a result of this, the pallu finds no time to drape itself over the woman's bosom –a traditional method of wearing sari, adopted by the women in a privileged caste-class structure. The tiring labour of the Dalit woman's sari finds its physical manifestation in the soiling of the pallu –a stark contrast to the image of the sari worn by the elite woman. The poet's inability to defame and

burn this material of respite in the final lines is situated in a criticism of contemporary feminist politics that must be looked into.

The enquiry into this socio-political reality within which Subhadra was writing reveals the poem as a retaliation to the feminist ideologies that were being promoted at that time by mainstream Telugu writers. Jayaprabha's poem "Burn the Sari" situates the attire as a symbol of conformity as she argues that the sari plays into the limiting gender norms as dictated by patriarchy. The sari was important to the image of the ideal woman who functioned from within a traditional space and for the evolving feminist movement, it was important to critique this monopolized notion of the "ideal woman". However, Jayaprabha's call to set saris ablaze is a political performance that can be attempted only from a position of privilege. Subhadra's rejection of this sentiment in the defense of the sari is an important statement for it asserts the difference of the Dalit woman's voice, politics and body. A detailed study of the differences between Jayaprabha and Subhadra's politics is present in Bonnie Zare and Afsar Mohammed's essay "Burn the Sari or Save the Sari? Dress as a Form of Action in Two Feminist Poems".[132]

The necessity of such alternate ideologies is explored by Butler in her discourse on the "delegitimated" body's politics. She advocates for the challenge that the "domain of abjected bodies" must force upon a hegemony through symbolic acts. When contextualized within the socio-political nuances of the Dalit women, these "symbolic acts" are translated in their defense of the sari that protects their oppressed bodies. In Butler's words, the defiance can be seen as "a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as 'life', lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving"[133].

[132] Bonnie Zare and Afsar Mohammed, *"*Burn the Sari or Save the Sari? Dress as a Form of Action in Two Feminist Poems*", Ariel: a review of international English literature*. Vol. 43, No. 2, Pp. 69-86.
[133] Judith Butler, "Introduction", *Bodies that Matter*, xxiv.

Chapter 4

Locating the History of Dalit Movement in Bengal

There is a general assumption that the Bengali Dalit literary movement, much like its Tamil counterpart, is a nascent phenomenon, gaining a proper Dalit consciousness only in the last two decades of the twentieth century. One can approach this assumption in two ways –use the statement as a basis for a socio-political interrogation into the causes for such a delay of Dalit consciousness; or to view it with cynicism and question the dislocation of narratives of the Dalit struggles of Bengal. Both the methods require an extensive probe into the nuances of the Dalit struggle in Bengal. The political climate of Bengal, specifically the one concerned with caste identity, is more nuanced compared to the rest of India and thus, it significantly contributes to the difference in the Dalit literary movement of Bengal.

In the chapter "Bengali Dalit Poetry Past and Present: A Critical Study", Manohar Mouli Biswas articulates the possible reasons for the delay and difference of Dalit consciousness in Bengal.[134] The Buddhist Pala dynasty that ruled Bengal from 750 A.D. to 1155 A.D was in direct opposition to the notion of the caste system propagated by Hinduism. Thus, during this time casteism was not a prevalent practice in Bengal and the religious culture changed only when the Pala dynasty was dethroned by the Hindu dynasty of the Sena Empire. A more extensive study of the possible factors that have gone into creating a different caste politics of Bengal has been conducted by Joya Chatterji in her book *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*. She discusses conversions to Islam, the spread of heterodox sects such as Vaisnavism that challenged the Brahminical hegemony.

Within the pre-Independence context, Manohar Biswas notes, the renaissance of

[134] Manohar Mouli Biswas, "Bengali Dalit Poetry Past and Present: A Critical Study", *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic, Theory and Movement: Through the Lens of Ambedkarism* (Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia, 2018), 84.

Bengal in the nineteenth century played an important factor in curbing the "religious prejudices and other ill practices of the society".[135] The Bengali intellectual class did strive for social reforms through liberal humanism and cultural progression. However, the limits from within which they worked staunchly followed the caste system. For example, in her study, Joya Chatterji notes that when the Untouchability Abolition Bill of 1933 and the Depressed Classes Status Bill of 1934 were introduced, the *bhadrolok* community of Bengal "clung firmly to orthodoxy in matters of caste" and firmly opposed the Bills.[136] During this opposition, M.C. Rajah had commented–"It is surprising… that the bulk of the opposition comes from a province, Bengal, where they say that there is no untouchability."[137] Thus, in the nationalist discourse of Bengal, the *bhodrolok* politics nourished a cultured, albeit oppressive, Hindu ideology. In *Bartaman Hindu Mussalman Samasya*, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay observes that the advancement that the Bengali *bhodrolok* hoped for could only be achieved if the practice "that has long distorted Hinduism" was eradicated.[138]

It is then important to bring into discourse the alternative politics of Bengali Dalits, known then as 'Chandals', which became prominent at this point in history but was very conveniently left out from the dominant political narratives of Bengal. Though considered a Hindu caste, the Chandals did not take part in the nationalist sentiments of the high caste *bhodrolok* community precisely because of the lack of empathy that the high caste Hindus had for them. In 1873, they launched a general strike against the upper caste Hindus as well as the economically well-off Muslims in the Faridpur district of Bangladesh and refused to provide any form labour. This had an impact on the economy of the times as a large section of the agricultural labourers and boatmen were from the lower castes. The Faridpur Chandals were

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[135] Ibid.
[136] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 192. She cites some of the Legislative Assembly Debates on the Untouchability Abolition Bill in *Bengal Divided,* 40.
[137] Ibid., 40.
[138] Quoted by Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided,* 191.

joined by the lower castes of Barisal, Jessore and other districts. A.K. Biswas, in his *Forward Press* article, notes that about 74% of the then Chandal population took part in the agitation.[139] Although the six months long strike was not able to eradicate caste oppressions, the struggle must be seen as an important instance in the timeline of Dalit struggle in Bengal, especially because it was taking place at a time that has been recorded by dominant historical discourses as a period of profound renaissance. The last decade of the nineteenth century also witnessed the transition of the Chandals to the Namasudra identity that provided them with the avenue to escape the social humiliation associated with former. The social protests of the Namasudras that followed this 'general strike' have been explored in detail by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*. Bandyopadhyay, in his book, traces the Namasudra movement through the various stages of mobilizations against the dominant discourse of Bengali *bhodrolok* culture and the simultaneous formation of a separate community identity.

From the 1870s onward, the socio-political struggles of the Namasudras intensified and there was a widespread movement all over Bengal to encourage fellow lower castes to take up the privileged cultural roles enjoyed by the higher caste Hindus. The caste Hindu communities, of course, viewed these movements with suspicion as they challenged the established caste order.[140] However, it must also be remembered that these movements were only able to mimic the politics of caste hierarchy and thus, did not bring about the annihilation of caste oppressions. In fact, even the alternate religious practice of Vaisnavism suffered a Brahminization and those belonging to lower castes were hated as '*Jat Vaishnava*'.[141]

This Sanskritization was significantly challenged by Harichand Thakur (1812-1878)

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[139] A.K. Biswas, "Bengal's unsung Namasudra Movement", *Forward Press*, (November 29, 2016) https://www.forwardpress.in/2016/11/bengals-unsung-namasudra-movement/
[140] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 192.
[141] Manosanta Biswas, "De-Sanskritization and Social Mobilization: An Alternative Socio-Religious Movement of 'Matua'-Namasudras of Bengal", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 76 (2015): 370.

through the introduction of the 'Matua' religion which brought a sense of cohesion to the Namasudra community. "The lower caste Namasudra got the path of self-awakening through Matua religious ideologies. And as a result of that, the Namasudra in large numbers accepted Matua as their religion."[142] Harichand's agenda, which was later propagated by his son Guruchand Thakur (1847-1937), was to ensure the liberation of the outcast community from the shackles of a Brahminical hegemony. Thus, the Matua sect also attracted members of marginalized communities like the Chamars, Mahishyas, Malis and Telis. The principles of the Matua religion, noted in '*Dwadash Agnya*', are in direct conflict with the ones postulated in the Vedas, "the publicity machine of the Brahmins".[143] A more extensive study of the theological differences between the Vedic Brahminism and the non-Vedic Matua sect is present in Manosanta Biswas's "De-Sanskritization and Social Mobilization" essay.

The lack of a Hindu nationalist fervor intensified when the Namasudra, the Rajbansis and other lower castes rejected the Swadeshi movement and supported the 1905 British proposal to partition Bengal along religious lines. Threatened by the fragmentation of a consolidated Hindu identity, there was a mobilization for a wider Hindu support. Joya Chatterji notes –"From the mid-thirties onwards, Bengal witnessed a flurry of caste consolidation programmes, initiated chiefly under Hindu Sabha and Mahasabha auspices. In 1931, the Mahasabha invited aboriginals to take on caste Hindu names and to register their caste as 'Kshattriya' in the coming census."[144] This created a significant rift between the Namasudra and the Muslim community. While Chatterji provides a more general overview of the communal conflicts, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay provides a more detailed study of the 1911 Namasudra-Muslim riot in the Jessore-Khulna region of East Bengal in his paper, "Community

[142] Ibid., 370.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 194.

Formation and Communal Conflict: Namasudra-Muslim Riot in Jessore-Khulna".[145]

The Bengal provincial branch of Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation, headed by Jogendra Nath Mandal, was, thus, opposed by other Namasudra political organizations because of its pro-Muslim League stance. These organizations include the Depressed Classes League, led by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, and the Depressed Classes Association, led by Birat Chandra Mandal.[146] The political protests were not only determined by religious and caste identities but class factors as well. Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury cite the example of the 1946 communist-led Tebhaga movement in Bengal where "class had clearly overtaken caste as a mobilizing force and divided the identity politics of the Rajbansis and the Namasudras."[147] The changing dynamics of the political climate only intensified the communal tension and the aftermath of the 1947 partition is a testimony to the resultant violence. While Manohar Mouli Biswas suggests that the influx of refugees from East Pakistan to West Bengal was without any significant discrimination, it is important to probe into the nuanced politics of migration post-Partition.

With the territorial division that followed the partition, the Namasudra and other lower caste communities realized that the social security that they had hoped for was far from attainable. Migration was a complicated and painful affair for the economically stunted lower castes as "the first wave of refugees mainly consisted of the more wealthy classes, mostly upper caste Hindu gentry and the educated middle classes with jobs, including many of the Namasudra middle classes as well, who could sell or arrange exchanges of properties."[148] The lower castes who could not migrate, because of a lack of resources, stayed back in East Pakistan and were categorized under the Hindu minority identity. Thus, the 'othering' that the lower

[145] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Community Formation and Communal Conflict: Namasudra-Muslim Riot in Jessore-Khulna", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25, No. 46 (Nov 17, 1990).
[146] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition", *Policies and Practices,* Vol. 59 (Feb 2014): 2.
[147] Ibid., 3.
[148] Ibid.

caste communities hoped to escape from, was inflicted upon them through the rigid Islamization of the Pakistan nation. The aggravation of the post-Independence rioting led to the resignation of Jogendra Nath Mandal from the Pakistan ministry in 1950 and the steady rise in subsequent Scheduled Caste migration has been recorded in Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury's study.

Some of the worst instances of post-Partition upsurge of violence have been recorded since the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. This is particularly because of the fact that the lower caste refugees who wished to migrate back to West Bengal were met with serious oppositions from the state. The Left Front, who had promised complete rehabilitation of the refugees from Bangladesh, refused to work on said promise once they came to power in 1977. The settlements established by the refugees in the Marichjhanpi island of Sunderbans were destroyed by the state police force and the resisting public were tortured and the women were raped.[149] The state terror unleashed by the "caste Hindu communists" results in Marichjhanpi becoming a synecdoche for caste oppression, much like Khairlanji of Maharashtra. The massacre at Marichjhanpi also challenges the general assumption that the communist class politics can carry forward the activism of caste politics. The atrocities were conveniently erased from the nationalist memory for a long time until it was vividly captured in Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel, *The Hungry Tide*.

Post Marichjanpi, the Dalit struggles of Bengal have witnessed the organization of various movements like the one following the suicide of Chuni Kotal, a tribal girl of Midnapur district, in 1992. Chuni Kotal's death was like an explicit reminder that Dalit oppression exists, subtle or explicit. As Manohar Biswas notes, her death followed a proliferation of Dalit writings in Bengal.[150] However, there first needs to be a general discussion of the literary

[149] See Dwaipayan Sen, "How the Dalits of Bengal became the 'Worst Victims' of Partition", *The Wire* (August 10, 2017) https://thewire.in/history/partition-dalits-bengal
[150] Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Dalit Literature Aesthetic Theory and Movements*, 85.

history of Dalit narratives in Bengal that goes further back in history.

An Overview of Bengali Dalit Literary History

In order to trace the history of Bengali Dalit literature, there is a need to look back at the Pala dynasty. The Dalit communities such as Savara, Chandala, Sundi, Kapalik and Doma were creating a literature for themselves, mainly through the form of poetry known as *Charyapadas*.[151] Indranil Acharya, in his essay, provides a brief, albeit important, synopsis of the progression of Bengali Dalit Sahitya from *Charyapada* to the *Mangalkabyas* tradition and the *Dharma Mangal* of the Doma community.

The Matua Sahitya of the nineteenth century propelled Bengali Dalit literature into a modern direction. The Matua literature generally composed of three forms –'*kathakata*' or story-telling, '*jatra*' or folk plays, and '*kobi gaan*' or rhymed couplets that were performed orally. Since a lot of these narratives were specifically oral in nature, much has been lost from the corpus of early Matua Sahitya. However, some verses, such as those by Harichand Thakur, were compiled posthumously and are available in print. The Matua Sahitya, originating from the non Brahminical Matua religion, must thus be seen as the first instance of organized Dalit literature in Bengal.

The Dalit literary scene of twentieth century Bengal witnessed a changed dynamics. Those who chose to write about their socially and economically deprived conditions were criticized for mimicking the thematic presentation of "progressive" writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhusan, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay. However, to use Gopal Guru's theorization of the Dalit voice into the argument, without sharing the social space and the "felt experience" of Dalit lives, the upper caste writers could not have covered the entirety

[151] Indranil Acharya, "Search for an Alternative Aesthetic in Bangla Dalit Poetry", *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (2014): 95-106.

of the nuanced politics of Dalit lives. The exclusion of the Dalit writers from major magazines such as *Desh* only made the Brahminical suppression of the Dalit voice more evident. [152] However, the alternate literary modernism of the little Dalit magazines would record the Dalit politics of Bengal. Manoranjan Byapari notes some of the significant pre-Independence startups –*Namahshudra Suhrid* (1912), *Pataka* (1914), *Jagaran* (1943). He has also provided a systematic survey of the available Bengali Dalit literature in his essay, "Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla?" (Translated into English by Meenakshi Mukherjee).[153]

The already scattered Dalit politics of Bengal aggravated into a sense of fragmentation and displacement post-Independence. Byapari observes that since there was "no collective life to speak of", the act of writing was like an unaffordable luxury.[154] However, the late 1960s and 1970s saw a revival of the Dalit magazine culture with *Nabaarun*, Nabarupa, Bahujan Darpan and others. The Bengal Dalit Writers Association was established in 1987, which boosted the production of more journals in the 1990s. Manjubala, a prominent Dalit woman writer, has been editing *Ekhan Takhan* since 1996.[155] In contemporary times, *Chaturtha Duniya* has become an important magazine of the Dalit politics in Bengal.

The number of Bengali Dalit novels are significantly less when compared to the output of poetry and short stories. Advaita Mallabarman's *Titash Ekti Nodir Naam* has earned its position in the corpus of important Bengali literary works. When he was criticized for writing on a similar theme as that of Manik Bandopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi*, Mallabarman voiced his political opinion –"The son of a brahman has written from his point of view. I will write from mine."[156] Thus, he voices the most crucial agenda of marginalized literature of any province –the importance to challenge the cultural hegemony of the privileged through the

[152] Manoranjan Byapari, Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 41 (2007): 4116-4120.
[153] Ibid., 4117.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid., 4119.

alternate voice of the marginalized community.

Poetry was the most popular form taken up by the Dalit writers of Bengal and, as Byapari notes, "the list of published poets runs into hundreds." The beginning of the twentieth century was marked in Bengali Dalit literary history with poetry collections on the Matua religion. In 1921, Raicharan Biswas published *Jatia Jagaran*, a collection of poems on caste consciousness.[157] Binoy Majumdar, popularly known for his association with the Hungry generation of the 1960s, was a Dalit poet who wrote extensively against the oppression inflicted by the state machinery. Although he did not stress much on his Dalit identity, the marginalized identity of the Dalit community has been an important part of Bengali Dalit poetry in general. The anger resulting from the social ostracization has been a persistent part of Dalit poetry that is usually expressed through simple languages and realistic images, that negates the high aesthetic sensibilities of mainstream Bengali poetry. The history of Bengali Dalit poetry and its anthologization has been attempted by scholars such as Manohar Mouli Biswas in *Dalit Sahityer Digbalay* and *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha*. In recent times, Bengali Dalit women's poetry has claimed a separate space for itself within the corpus of Bengali Dalit literature. Before the poems can be analyzed to understand their nuanced politics, there must be a brief discussion on their nuanced feminism with respect to the one espoused by the privileged Bengali women.

To position Bengali Dalit feminism, one must bring into the discussion the politics of Bengali upper caste, middle class women who were instrumental in shaping the discourse on the '*bhodromohila'*. It is important to note that while the lower caste men challenged the dominant modernism of the upper caste Hindu *bhodrolok*, the Bengali Dalit women's politics can be seen to present an alternate narrative by challenging the image of the *bhodromohila*. The identity of the *bhodromohila* is largely associated not just with her cultural capital but also with her physical appearance. Of course, the upper caste, middle class women's agency in the

[157] Manohar Moul Biswas, *Dalit Literature Aesthetic Theory and Movements*, 87.

creation of this identity is questionable. The *bhodrolok* was responsible for redressing women to express and construct their overall class culture.[158] As an extension of Victorian sensibilities, the women were caught in the subservient side of the world-home dichotomy and thus, largely oppressed by a patriarchal culture. The Bengali Dalit women, because of their socio-political and economic standings, had to stand up to a Brahminical and patriarchal hegemony that was perpetrated by a machinery that has systematically been violent towards their community.

Analysis of Post-Independence Bengali Dalit Women's Poetry

Since the Dalit feminist poetry was a late event, there is a dearth of critical works on it. A lot of the writings project the troubled memories of the previous generations and their sufferings that the contemporary Dalit have had to inherit. In her introduction to *Barne Barne Marma Katha* (*The Essence in Every Letter*), Smritikana Howladar writes –

> "My childhood was spent in a joint family. In happiness. However, I heard my grandmother's anguished cries for the land she had to leave behind and for her country's agonizing split. She used to say, 'With our treads, we're suffocating our own soil.' I never understood this soil that she longed for."[159]

Howladar's colletion of poems though not explicit about her Dalit identity, is an important anthology because it focuses on the poet's ability to stylize the language according to her creative sensibilities. Each poem in the collection starts with a particular alphabet and the trend continues in the first word of every line in the poems. This makes Howladar's poems difficult to translate for the focus in the poems is not about thematic significance but about the poet's grasp over the language. Witty and playful, Howladar's poetic sensibilities also reflect the poet's active choice to not limit herself to her Dalit woman identity but to move beyond.

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[158] Himani Banerji, *Inventing Subject: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 101.
[159] Smritikana Howladar, *Barne Barne Marma Katha* (Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia, 2012), 3. Translated into English by Debakanya Haldar.

Thus, there is an active problematization of the general assumption that those writing from the margins will write only about the margins.

In the poems where Howladar does critique the Hindu social order and its oppressive structure, the poet does so while simultaneously exhibiting her stylizations. The poem, "Ekalavya" continues the rejection of the Brahminical hegemony that Dalit literature subscribes to. Describing him through his lack of literacy, and his one piece attire, the poet situates the "puny boy" in his socio-economic lacks. The sense of solitude that Ekalavya found in the space of the forest is quickly disturbed by the sudden entrance of Dronacharya's higher caste disciples. The entrance mimics an obtrusive colonization where the agents of hegemony pushes the marginalized individual further away from a centralized space. The line "Ekalavya alone could surpass their cunnings" is a proud proclamation of the Dalits claiming the knowledge that is exclusively controlled and manipulated by the Brahmins. The poem ends with an exposition of the injustice that was meted out to Ekalavya for defying his specified caste role –

> "The one-sided trial demanded as donation
> A single thumb
> And the tyrannical Drona commits
> A grave mistake."[160]

The chopping off of Ekalavya's thumb is significant for a Foucauldian reading of the body-power dynamics as it exposes the constant fear that the hegemonic machinery feels when its power is challenged. Ekalavya's performance at archery defied the caste order that Brahmanism specifies. Thus, in order subjugate him, it was necessary for the agent of the Brahminical order to punish him by taking away that part of his material self that gave him the chance to rebel against the rigid system. Taking away his thumb was a crucial act of "visible intensity" and the maiming made sure that the marginalized stays beyond the accepted social

[160] Smritikana Howladar, "Ekalavya", 12. Translated by Debakanya Haldar.

periphery. In this pre-modern setting it is the spectacle of the "theatrical representation of pain" that is necessary for the restoration of the oppressor's power.[161]

"Ghritachir Angikar" (Ghritachi's Promise) is posited in the same mythological context but from a different lens. The narrator of the poem is Ghritachi, an *apsara* who was also Drona's biological mother, and her address is directed at the revered Brahmin *rishi* Bharadwaja –who had raped her when he was "overcome by that primitive desire". The opening lines set the angered tone of Ghritachi's address –

> "Look at me Rishi Bharadwaja
> For I've come to you after a long time.
> I am Ghritachi, heaven's divine dancer
> This despised life is my misfortune."[162]

Ghritachi's vivid description of the rape serves as a painful reminder of the alternate narratives of violence that are generally erased when constructing the history of powerful patriarchal figures. While the violence inflicted on Drona's mother is an explicit display of the power dynamics, her subsequent displacement back to her original occupation is the ultimate move to remove any trace of Bharadwaja's crime. It is also reflective of the marginalized position that a woman must be limited to. However, Howladar's Ghritachi voices her anger and reminds her oppressor not just of the crimes done to her but also of the crimes committed by his son, Drona. Instead of imparting knowledge to his son, he passed on his vile nature –

> "Liar, torturer, sinner –shame on you!
> You failed to teach Drona anything."

Ghritachi reflects that Dronacharya's mistreatment of Ekalavya is a result of Bharadwaja's failure as a father figure. Through these lines, Howladar manages to weaponize the notion of caste inheritance to critique the Brahmin logic –that is, she focuses not on the

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[161] Michel Foucault, "The Body of the condemned", *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 9.
[162] Smritikana Howladar, "Ghritachi's Promise", 63. Translated by Debakanya Haldar.

marginalization that a lower caste individual inherits but the oppressive mindset a Brahmin individual does. Howladar ends the poem with her Dalit politics voiced through Ghritachi –

> "You will learn the day when thousands of Ekalavyas unite
> Together with a sword in one hand and a pen in the other
> The original countrymen will reclaim their rights."

This emphasis on the Dalit individual with a pen signifies the importance of literary expression in challenging the hegemonic forces. This is a key element in the literary politics of the Dalit poet Kalyani Thakur. Aware of her marginalized identity, Thakur deliberately chose to make it more explicit by adding the suffix "Charal" to her name which signifies a Chandal. In the preface to the collection *Chandalinir Kobita,* she writes, "When I cannot raise my hand or my voice to express my dissent, I resort to my pen. How can I live if I'm not even able to do that?"[163] This intense need to write personal poetry is made explicit in works such as "Auctioning Poetry" where she presents the act of baring herself for poetry's sake.[164]

Thakur Charal's careful choice to number her poems in *Chandalinir Kobita* instead of providing titles can be read as a political move where each poem, when viewed from a savarna gaze, lacks a significant identity. It is only when the poems are explored in their specific cultural capacity, that the socio-political criticisms become evident. Poem number 33 (translated by Angana Chakrabarti), one of the longer poems in the collection, is acutely personal where the poet explores not just her present identity, but the nuances that her ancestors have passed on to her as a result of their caste.[165]

The first stanza makes explicit the generations of discrimination that the Dalits have had to face. When talking about her mother, the poet describes the practice of forcing lower

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[163] Kalyani Thakur, "Introduction", *Chandalinir Kobita* (Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia, 2011), 5. Translated by Debakanya Haldar.
[164] Kalyani Thakur, "Auctioning Poetry", *Je Meye Andhar Gone* (Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia, 2008), 12. Translated by Debakanya Haldar.
[165] Kalyani Thakur Charal, "Five Poems", trans. Angana Chakrabarti, *Poetry at Sangam* (2017). I've revised and edited some of the translated words to capture the essence of the original poem better. http://poetry.sangamhouse.org/2017/02/five-poems-by-kalyani-thakur-charal/

caste individuals to carry cow dung when stepping into Brahminical territories. The very next sentence suddenly addresses the upper caste reader. Here, the poet mocks the savarna community's lack of knowledge about such practices –

"You have certainly not understood why –
The spot on which she stood
With her dung-filled left hand
Had to be covered."

The lines are also effective in critiquing the hegemonic normalization of a Brahminical culture that pushes the alternate practices of the marginalized communities to the point that these narratives are no longer visible. Thakur Charal ends the stanza with biting sarcasm that exposes the farcical nature of Brahminical principles –

"Oh! Compared to the touch of the Dalit's feet, the faeces of a cow
Is holier."

The poet continues her critique by contextualizing Dalit politics within the contemporary Bengali cultural specifics. She brings in the figure of the "*bhodrolok"* through her office colleagues. She points out how a Brahminical influence on the Bengali culture has specifically rendered lower caste nomenclatures –"chandal, chamar, dom" –as synonyms for abuses. The poet notes that this has been normalized to the extent that the privileged castes forget that these are all caste identities in the first place. These instances of forced invisibility culminate into the next two lines where the poet discloses this systematic erasure –

"Even then I have to remember that
In Bengal there is no such thing as a 'Dalit'
Even if Dalits exist everywhere else in the world, here there are none
Everywhere in India there may be castes
But here there are none"

These are powerful lines because Thakur Charal exposes the complex position of Dalit politics in an ethnography that focuses on its savarna cultural capital and its class politics. Thus, the marginalized status of Dalits are often overlooked because the state machinery has actively

appropriated caste politics into its class propaganda and the alternate narratives into the sympathetic ones offered by popular mainstream writers. Thakur Charal probes further into this violence by associating it with a metaphorical suffocation –

"I am gagged
And taught to say –we
Are all one, there is no divide here"

In the present day contextualization, she talks about the Dalit struggle for reservation –a topic that remains debatable even today. The poet provides a striking criticism against the concept of 'merit' which is weaponized for the "Indian elite" who have had the privilege of generations of capital and resources that have been denied to the subordinated castes. Arundhati Roy reflects on this quota-merit dichotomy –

> "The presumption is that 'merit' exists in an ahistorical social vacuum and that the advantages that come from privileged-caste social networking and the establishment's entrenched hostility towards the subordinated castes are not factors that deserve consideration."[166]

This presumption, of course, becomes more normalized with the savarna community's lack of engagement with the politics of Dalits. The threat to the already sidelined narratives of the Dalits is made more severe when the poet exposes the Brahminical need to erase such narratives –

"They smother our throats and say – if in non-government jobs
You ask for reservations then we will make you forget
Your fathers' names"

Thakur Charal overtly exposes the violence of such a kind of subjugation as she continues with the imageries of suffocation. The invisibility of the punishment that, according to Foucault, comes with the gradual democratization of the state machinery, is made visible through a description of the physical torture inflicted on the body and is thus materialized. The coercive

[166] Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint", *Annihilation of Caste,* 34.

statements in the final two lines captures the careful subjugation of the Dalits in a post-untouchability society –

"Say that you no longer require it that you
Have everything you need"

In poem number 27 from *Chandalinir Kobita* (translated by Angana Chakrabarti), Thakur Charal uses allegory to vividly describe the state sponsored Brahminical terror that is inflicted upon the lower caste communities. She rebukes the Brahmins as the "sons of pigs" who control the state-machinery of the police, referred here as "dogs", to keep the lower castes within their limits –

"These sons of pigs have the dogs
All riled up
Elephant after
Elephant walks silently"[167]

Very significantly, the poet alludes to her community as the "elephants" for the symbolism is important to the Dalit identity and its politics. As it is closely associated with Buddhism, Ambedkar had aptly chosen it to be the symbol of the Scheduled Castes Federation of India. The allegorical implication refers to the Dalits as powerful individuals who are, despite their strength, defeated by the terror of Brahminism. For Thakur Charal, this terror is state sponsored for it is carried out through the agency of the police. The resultant "sudden lull" poignantly alludes to repressed historical narratives such as those of the oppressed Marichjhanpi community. The poem ends on a note of recognizing the resultant Dalit anger.

This prominent anger becomes an important notion in the poetry of Manju Bala, which reeks of revolutionary politics in every line. The poet makes the deliberate choice to write with the sensibilities of modern poetic language to incorporate the aesthetics of modern poetry. She

[167] Kalyani Thakur Charal, "Five Poems", trans. Angana Chakrabarti, *Poetry at Sangam* (2017). Original in *Chandalinir Kobita*, 35. http://poetry.sangamhouse.org/2017/02/five-poems-by-kalyani-thakur-charal/

molds her works into weapons meant to criticize the "ever smiling civilization's degenerate history." –

"Poetry is no luxury,
It is nothing but
A piece of fire taken from
Centuries old
Grave hidden splinters."[168]

Her imageries and metaphors test the limits of language and are effective in creating a foreboding atmosphere. However, such careful structuring of the Bengali language makes the project of translation a difficult one. The titular poem in *Ashwarohir Apekshay* (Waiting for the Knight) is a great example of powerful imageries used to create a sense of unabashed poetic richness –an aspect that is found mostly in the works of privileged upper caste writers.

"The whole world is busy with conspiracy today,
Still the days pass in a gluttonous revelry.
In the pale moonlight floats in
The canon's roar.
There's blood on the rose.
Grotesque insects
Seek secret refuge in blood-sucked navels –"[169]

The opening stanza exposes the finesse with which Manju Bala aims to express her politics. With ruthless cynicism, she exposes the charade of society that engages in "gluttonous revelry" in the face of crisis –an instance of a convoluted 'Mardi Gras'. Bala very carefully combines the tropes of beauty with those of violence into a single unit –"moonlight" with "canon's roar", and "rose" with "blood". The mis-en-scène of the fragmented images culminate into the uncomfortable horror of "grotesque insects" taking shelter in distorted bodies. Thus,

[168] Manju Bala, "Corrupted History", *Churna Samudrer Dheu* (Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia, 2013), 14. Translated by Debakanya Haldar.
[169] Manju Bala, "Waiting for the Knight", *Ashwarohir Apekshay* (Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia, 2007), 7. Translated by Debakanya Haldar.

she incorporates the idea of a grotesque body politics in her literary sensibilities where the body is deformed and degraded to reflect on the ‘’grotesque’ conditions of human society. It is reminiscent of the expressionist body horror of parasitism and disease.

Bala brings in a tone of optimism when she says, “the tune of freedom rings in the blood”. Personified as the unidentified knight, Bala toys with the idea that this figure will bring salvation to a plagued society. However, the darkness that has spread all over the world, defeats the coming of the savior figure –“but in the path lit by endless starry shadows, he gets lost”. It is a telling commentary on the hopeless situation of those who suffer at the receiving end of society’s “conspiracy”. However, the search for the figure of liberation is not dead. The sentiment is reflected in the final two lines of the poem as the poet describes the relentless eyes of the oppressed who waits –

> “And in the silent night two eternal eyes
> Still waits for the knight…”

Politicizing the ancestral identity by articulating it, Bala’s short poem “Untouchable” is a call for revolution that once again stresses on the importance to keep the dissent alive through political poetics –

> “Untouchable, start your song
> Express the tune of your birthright
> From your very core.”[170]

The body which is untouchable, which lacks the resources to protect itself is called to revolutionize that which it already has –“warm that shivering cold body with the anger in your heart.” The Dalit’s lack of resources and control over production, which translates into a criticism of the class structure, is intertwined with the politics of reproduction, which is controlled by a Brahminical concept of endogamy. In the reproduction of the marginalized caste identity, Bala, however, does not focus on the oppression that will be inherited but the

[170] Manju Bala, “Untouchable”, *Churna Samudrer Dheu*, 15. Translated by Debakanya Haldar.

anger that will form the core of a new body –from the embryo within the womb will “sound the roar of the demon”.

Conclusion

The Politics of Translating Dalit Women's Poetry

As has been discussed through various regional contexts, the Dalit movements all across the nation were meant to challenge the oppressive practices of a dominant Brahminical culture that have inhibited the social mobility of the Dalit communities for centuries. The movements were also meant to defy the idea of a homogeneous Brahminical Hindu identity that was projected as the national identity during the struggles for an Independent India. The literary outputs from the Dalit movements contested the elitist monopolization of the mainstream literary platforms and thus, these narratives are significant in recording the dissent. A greater nuance to the Dalit rebellion was added in the latter half of the twentieth century with the articulation of the "different" voices of the Dalit women, who were contesting both savarna and patriarchal discourses. For them, their politics was centered on their pragmatic and every day experiences –the nuances of which were largely ignored in both male dominated Dalit party politics and liberal feminist platforms.

The works discussed in the thesis are but a fraction of the coterie of Dalit women's poetry that have been written so far since the Independence of India. While the vernacular regions, in their English translated versions, that have been covered in the thesis are limited to Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Bengali, Dalit women from all across the country have been writing their specific socio-political narratives in both poetic and other literary forms. A compilation of these other genres within which the Dalit woman expresses herself expands the Dalit feminist literary ambit. Of course, such a general survey limits itself to written records and a parallel study of oral political discourses would reveal that the Dalit woman's voice is not just qualitatively significant but quantitatively as well.

This significant part of a literary culture is, however, ignored or forgotten, owing to its

alternative status. The Dalit woman's 'different' voice is not only politically different but the language of her discourse is also centered on a dialect-heavy vernacular, loaded with cultural specificities that cannot be easily decoded through savarna interpretations. It thus becomes easier for mainstream literary platforms to dismiss these narratives by not only denying them their share in the literary movement but also by denying their existence completely –'Dalit women do not write'. Influencing the general perceptions of the common people, this uninformed elitist notion persists as a given truth.

It also does not help that established publication houses seldom make efforts to make these narratives more accessible. A large section of Dalit literature in English or English translation is published by specific publication houses with a niche audience –Navayana and LeftWord to name a few. It is true that Routledge, SAGE, Oxford, HarperCollins and some other international publishing brands have, in the past few decades, made efforts to bring out critical essays and anthologies pertaining to Dalit literature and critical sociological studies. However, one cannot help but note the significant discrepancy in the pricing of the books –for example, while the Oxford anthologies of translated Dalit poetry are beyond five hundred, the Bengali poetry anthologies published by Chaturtha Dunia are well within one hundred. Marketing too, among other factors, are grossly different for the mainstream and the small-scale publishing houses –the tiny stall of Chaturtha Dunia in Kolkata is open only once a week for a few hours. It is evident that there is a considerable lack of capital resources among publishing houses like Chaturtha Dunia and Samyak Prakashan (Delhi based) which makes it difficult for them to create a space for vernacular Dalit literature within the mainstream literary platform. This barrier, coupled with the savarna presumption that Dalits (specifically, the Dalit women) cannot write, prevents the mass from engaging with these alternate narratives, thus, pushing them further into their marginalized status.

While a conscious effort must be made to preserve the dissenting politics of Dalit

women in their original vernaculars, efforts must also be made to translate them into other languages so as to involve more people into the discussion. A translation project involving the narratives from marginalized quarters is a daunting challenge because the risks of appropriation run high. In the specific context of Dalit women's poetry, the difficulties faced in the translation projects become more layered –the protest rhetoric of Dalit narratives are lost on those who do not share the same subjective social space; most of these translators who can bargain between the vernaculars and the English language are men from privileged social quarters with no real perceptions of Dalit women's cultural registers which are doubly, if not triply, marginalized; and finally, the task of translating poetry has always been a difficult one since the interactions between the semantic and the creative are markedly different for different languages. Considerations of prosody, rhyme and rhythm accentuate the challenge in transposing the essence of the poetic form from one language to another. While the translator has the scope to take liberties with the linguistic rules while keeping the poetic essence intact, any kind of deviation from the original runs the risk of facing an acute skepticism, mirroring Nabakov's rather rigid definition of translation –"a profanation of the dead."[171]

Nonetheless, it is also important to realize that an attempt at literal translations that completely mimic the linguistic flair of the original texts is not the ultimate aim of a project that tries to incorporate marginalized literature into the folds of critical discourse. When such texts with specific cultural significations are translated into a language with which it shares no common semantic rules, it is important to imagine what the poetic construction might have entailed in this new language. Of course, an important factor that serves to make this translation more culturally accurate is the social space from within which the translator works. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, this ethical concern has been brought up by the translator Anushiya Sivanarayanan in her essay "Translating Tamil Dalit Poetry". In her interrogation,

[171] Vladimir Nabakov, "On Translating Eugene Onegin", *The New Yorker* (January 8, 1955), 34.

she questions her capability to translate poems with which she shares no common identity, owing to her "particular kind of upbringing" and a "carefully constructed cosmopolitan identity." For her project of translating Tamil Dalit literature, she maps her familiarity with Tamil rural folk songs and proceeds into the speculation and subsequent translation of the original Dalit poems through this lens.

A good example of why a thorough understanding of the cultural registers is important can also be witnessed when one looks into Angana Chakrabarti's translations of Kalyani Thakur's poem number 33 from the collection *Chandalinir Kobita*. She incorrectly translate "*thakurbari*" as "grandfather" which changes the social context of the previous line about the Dalit mother carrying cow dung to purify the Brahminical space of the "*thakurbari*" that she has polluted with her presence. "*Thakurbari*" as such does not have an English counterpart but is understood as a reference to a household space dictated by the savarna culture of 'Thakur' family –a high-caste signifying title. Even the caste politics within the workspace that Thakur refers to in the third stanza has not been accurately translated, most likely because the translator was aiming for a literal interpretation. This issue, coupled with the glaring deficiency of translated versions of Bengali Dalit women's poetry, had provided me with the task of translating these texts into English. Within the context of Bengali Dalit women's poetry, the significant poetic experimentations, along with a conscious modern aesthetic sensibilities prevented a verbatim translation which would have rendered a lot of the original essence sterile. Another important consideration I had to make was to ensure that the rage that is characteristic of Dalit poetry was not diluted in the translations and this entailed me to once again shift my focus away from a literal rendition of the original poems. An acute judgment call was required when translating the poetry of Smritikana Howladar, more specifically, the poem "Ekalavya" from her collection *Barne Barne Marma Katha*. The poem, like the rest of the poems in the first section of the anthology, starts with a particular Bengali alphabet and the trend continues

in the first word of every line. It was not possible to mirror such linguistic experimentations when translating the poems into English while simultaneously preserving the thematic and poetic concerns.

In spite of such linguistic difficulties, lack of resources, dearth of adept translators, and a general critical skepticism, translation projects pertaining to such marginalized literatures are necessary to ensure that these alternate voices are not lost in the surge of mainstream and popular literature. To tackle the methodical silencing of Dalit women's discourses, the first steps can be taken by the academic spaces by revising their elitist positions. The study of Dalit literature must go beyond the specific readership, which when inspected, is found to be largely bound by university-prescribed syllabi that just skim through some of the more popular Dalit texts. In fact, an inter-disciplinarian approach, coupled with translation projects can significantly help to bridge the glaring gap that exists between academic concerns and the alternate politics of the Dalit community. For example, empirical studies of grassroots Dalit women's political discourses can also be considered as translation projects that convert socio-political rural activisms and performances into written records and analytical surveys. These studies are important to not only preserve the various alternate modes of challenging the Brahminical patriarchy but to also incorporate nuanced understandings of the socio-political context within which the Dalit woman voices her dissent. Scholars such as Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege and Uma Chakravarti among others have made distinct efforts in such gendered caste studies, thereby, providing valuable critical insights for further research scopes.

It is precisely in this interpretative scope of translations that the present thesis has hoped to expand the academic potentials of Dalit studies. By studying the English translated versions of the poems, the thesis also brings the original texts into the folds of academic speculations. To concretize their position in such an academic space, the interpretations of the poems go beyond close textual analysis to incorporate not only the socio-cultural politics within which

the poems have been written but to also start a dialogue with discourses that have been safeguarded within a very privileged ambit. I refer, of course, to the discourses on body politics, specifically the body politics of women, as have been theorized by sociologists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. This too can be considered as a translation of Dalit women's narratives as the critical lens provides newer modes of interpreting the narratives of women who are marginalized within the tripartite class, caste and gender structure. It is important to mention here that throughout this careful translation project, the Eurocentric theorizations have only been secondary to the Dalit woman's political voice. This was to ensure that at no given instance the Dalit feminist politics was compromised for personal academic endeavours. This concern, which has been articulated by Spivak in her criticism of the western discourses' epistemic violence on subaltern narratives, has been a crucial reminder of the ethical considerations while structuring the literary analysis.

Having said that, it is important to note that a focus on the Dalit woman's body, whose political nuances are shaped by her spatial position, socio-economic condition, labour and sexual agency, provides a new method of analyzing not only Dalit women's narratives but also a new method of looking into the field of body politics itself. For example, it opens up the scope for interesting cross-cultural comparative studies with the body politics of black women whose marginalization by a white hegemony pertains to a more *visible* discrimination. Through such similar pedagogical endeavours, it thus becomes possible to aim for that revision of academia that Rege had hoped for. The newer methods of critically engaging with Dalit women's narratives have the potential to rewrite elitist theorizations and, at the same, they can successfully deconstruct the Brahminical and patriarchal myths that suggest that Dalit women lack the agency to articulate themselves. The diverse nature of Dalit women's voices across the nation, defeats the jargon of a rigid academia and thus, has immense potential to dismantle the hegemony of a savarna logic.

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