

The swearword is not the last word in Dalit poetry

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– Jilukara Srinivas

Can profanity be poetry? True, all critics agree that only impassioned poetry has the power to move the reader. There are many instances where the use of intemperate language has been justified as righteous anger. What is righteous anger? Which caste can rightfully express it? When Sri Sri wrote ‘donga-lanja-kodukulu-asale-mesile (sons of whores) they said it was righteous anger. When a Dalit poet wrote those same words, they challenged it asking, “How can you use such language and call it poetry?”

There are many ways of expressing anger. Anger can be expressed through violence, it can also be embodied in a swear word. Why does one feel anger? A person feels anger when she realises she has suffered injustice. On the other hand, she can be unaware of injustice and still be angry. The intensity of the anger depends on the context and moment in which the realisation occurs – the realisation of an injustice against one or one’s society. The poet searches for words and signification that capture the intensity of such anger, but words that can convey these emotions with sophistication are hard to find. The poet then draws on her cultural background and chooses ‘swear words’ to aptly express her anger.

Ferdinand de Saussure said that ‘signs’ are cultural constructs. Hegemonic culture has imposed several ‘signs’ on Dalits, placing the Dalit body at the centre of these constructs. Swear words are also cultural constructs, and are often anchored on the human body, particularly the female body. Classical poetry comprises of descriptions of the female body. Descriptions of sexual bodies in Dalit poetry are considered vulgar, profane. The written language of the ‘cultured’ is the only acceptable language for poetry. It is the unwritten edict that the language of poetry must be the language of the upper castes. Many Dalit poets have demonstrated the unparalleled beauty of the Dalit language. The ‘Nishani’ poets, Madduri Nagesh Babu, Paidi Teresh Babu, and Khaja have fittingly responded to upper caste critiques of Dalit

poetry. Telangana Madiga writer Vemula Yellaiah, who has used 'swear words' in creative ways in his novels 'Kakka' and 'Siddhi', is continuing the same tradition. Whites have committed several atrocities on the Blacks. They have erased all Black culture. Language is the symbol for culture and civilization. Franz Fanon has famously argued that by forcefully classifying Blacks as 'uncivilised', White culture ensured that Black language would always be different. The difference was marked by the humility, fear, hesitation, lowered-tone and stammer of the Black voice. Black language spoken amongst fellow Blacks takes on a different tone and content, drawing heavily on the 'swear words' of their cultural background. These 'swear words' are omnipresent in Black poetry. You never see a Black character in a Hollywood film who doesn't cuss or swear. White heroes on the other hand speak sophisticated, 'conceptual', language. In most films, it is common for Black voices to be loud and White voices mellow. We see the same representation of upper castes and depressed communities in literature here.

Dalit politics has rejected classical literary principles and poetic devices. This Dalit movement cannot be contained within the classical aesthetic framework. Dalit poetry cannot use the poetics of Manu to achieve their goal. Brahminical language can never represent Dalit life. If life experiences define language, Dalit experience alone can define Dalit language. This is why Dalits have drawn on their own tone and tenor. The limits imposed by classical literary standards have been abandoned by Dalit poetics, which desires freedom and self-determination. Critics have been unable to understand this shift. Can the language of poetry use 'swear words'? Dalit poets have skilfully foregrounded the dilemma of whether profanity can be instrumental in impacting the reader's understanding, and bringing about social change.

What is the language of poetry? In the middle-ages Sanskrit became the language of poetry, and the official language of the Brahmin community. It was also the device of 'cultured' people, used solely by Brahmin priests. What came to be identified as Telugu was a Sanskritized language created by the Brahmins. The Brahminical idiom has dominated language from the time of the Mahabharatam to the present. The Brahminical language of the prabandha era literature presents obscenity in the form of erotica. Prabandha descriptions of nayikas are appallingly obscene. Critics have been very broad-minded in their reading of these works, while dismissing jaanu-telugu and accha-telugu(people's Telugu) as lesser languages. Even the metred couplets of the Telangana poet Palkuriki Somanath have only been

considered as inferior literature. Whether a language is respected or humiliated depends on who speaks it and the grammar that guides it. Literature was evaluated not only on the basis of the language, but also on the subject of the text, and the caste class status of the hero-heroine. The respect a written work received was based on the caste of the author. The world of Telugu literature was directed and ordered by the aesthetics of Manu. These dictatorial principles of literature were challenged by Dalit politics, and a new aesthetics were presented through its poetry. Dalit politics has thrust the Brahminical language of literature aside and brought to light its own similes, metaphors and symbolisms.

The beginnings of Dalit poetry focussed on attacking the enemy, targeting the upper caste reader. The Dalit poet had decided that there could be no camaraderie with the (upper caste) reader. It is an absolute wrong to want to write poetry in the language of the respectable – in the language of your pindakudu Brahminism – after knowing that the upper castes murdered Kanchikacharla Kotesh, that they tortured and paraded Mahadevamma naked for the sake of 5 rupees, when they butchered Dalits like sacrificial animals in Karamchedu and Tsundur. Upper caste society has enjoyed filling Dalit lives with violence and verbal abuse. When the abuse was forcefully shot back at them, they were stunned and launched a counter attack – “profanity is not poetry”. They claimed that the Dalit poet’s only goal is to abuse upper caste society. No Dalit poet has claimed that society can change only through abuse. Dalit poetry has moved beyond its early content, and has acquired a mature perspective. It has presented the world of Telugu literature with new values. Dalit poetry has broken the shackles of classical aesthetics, foregrounded several ideological issues and created a new craft of poetry. The refusal of Manuvadi critics to engage with the hidden implications of this new craft, or the aesthetic contributions of Dalit poetry, amounts to a blatant conspiracy. This Manuvadi perspective cannot contribute to literary democracy.

Translated by **Diia Rajan**

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