
ANTIQUITY OF A NATION'S PREJUDICE

I. VINITHA CHANDRA

Abstract: Life at the moment is history in future. The ticking clock is the silent witness to the day to day events .With the power of knowledge we can articulate the current happenings in order to record them for future generations. Thus we can immortalize an era of cultural, political, socio –economic governance. Such historical recordings are indeed texts called literature. This is the simple link between history and literature. In historical context literature becomes the language and the text communicates. The writers' thoughts and emotions bear the significance of the time at which the text is written. It helps to analyze that particular period of time. In the term History, 'story' can denote stories of mankind passed on from generation to generation where background is as important as the characters. The prominent figures from all spheres of life that we know today attribute their growth from ordinary to extraordinary through historical texts. This explains our present day narrative, be it nation, culture or humaneness.

Texts literary or non – literary exposes a nations past, thus the interconnectedness of history and literature attains prominence on various accounts. Such record becomes the touchstone for our present and future. Reform can be measured based on these records which in turn can help the government to change its policies for a better society. Being denied education, the Dalits early literary outbursts were oral which owing to many reforms has gradually been penned down. With their sweat and toil they have cultivated a genre of literary experience which is more collective than individual. This paper seeks to analyze an over view of the turbulent journey undertaken for the cause of the oppressed through literature in emancipating a community which history had long ignored.

Keywords: History, Casteism, Gender Oppression, Patriarchy and Marriage.

Introduction: Life at the moment is history in future. The ticking clock is the silent witness to the day to day events .With the power of knowledge we can articulate the current happenings in order to record them for future generations. Thus we can immortalize an era of cultural, political, socio – economic governance .Such historical recordings are indeed texts called literature. This is the simple link between history and literature. In historical context literature becomes the language and the text communicates. The writers' thoughts and emotions bear the significance of the time at which the text is written .It helps to analyze that particular period of time. In the term History, 'story' can denote stories of mankind passed on from generation to generation where background is as important as the characters. The prominent figures from all spheres of life that we know today attribute their growth from ordinary to extraordinary through historical texts. This explains our present day narrative, be it nation, culture or humaneness. Texts literary or non – literary exposes a nations past, thus the interconnectedness of history and literature attains prominence on various accounts. Such record becomes the touchstone for

our present and future. Reform can be measured based on these records which in turn can help the government to change its policies for a better society. "New historicism accepts Derrida's view that there is nothing outside the text, in the special sense that everything about the past is only available to us in textualised form: it is thrice – processed', first through the ideology, or outlook, or discursive practices of its own time ,then through those of ours, and finally through the distorting web of language itself. Whatever is represented in a text is thereby remade."(Beginning theory,p.169)

This statement reinforces that facts are available enormously, but we need to apply logic while investigating literary or non - literary texts. Education attains real purpose when wisdom is gained. The ability to comprehend truth, understand in depth the meaning of life so as to judge people, environment and our actions is true wisdom. The universal truth is that humanity is above all race, religion and any class divisions which are man-made. To achieve harmony all that we require is a realization of this divine gift of life .To respect this divinity you have to make space for others to live with dignity. Caste system was the

resultant effect of human ego. The need to feel superior created the notion of inferior.

Dalit literature is the painful flow of thoughts that has erupted from the mental landscapes affected by the drought of neglect and injustice. Deemed as untouchables, they lived a life in invisibility. History of our nation often excluded their presence. M. Dasan in the book *"The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit writing"* cites an old folk song which questions the purity and elitism that a birth in upper caste community guarantees,

"To play the drum in the temple, the cattle hide is okay
To pluck the flowers for worshipping in temple,
Paraya's basket is okay What is purity,
Brahmin? What is impurity, Brahmin?" (Introduction-xxvii)

Being denied education, the Dalits early literary outbursts were oral which owing to many reforms has gradually been penned down. With their sweat and toil they have cultivated a genre of literary experience which is more collective than individual. This paper seeks to analyze an over view of the turbulent journey undertaken for the cause of the oppressed through literature in emancipating a community which history had long ignored. Dalit literature is a genre of literature which is intertwined between social, political and literary history of our nation. The question remains, can we claim to have a liberal democracy, when the spirit of a nation is dissolved in the darkness of oppression? From such a perspective we shall study the short story *"Ponnuthayi"* written by Bama and translated into English by Ravi Shanker. Firstly being a Dalit and moreover a woman Bama carries the double burden of promulgating a narrative of class and gender oppression.

Bama (Faustina Soosairaj) was born in 1958 in Puthupatti village of Virudunagar district in southern Tamilnadu and named Faustina Soosairaj. A landmark book in the history of Tamil literature was Bama's *"Karukku"* published by Ideas in the year 1992. The works that followed were *"Sangati"* (Events, 1994; published in English in 2005), A collection of short stories *"Kusumbukkaaran"*, *"Vanmam"* and *"Oru Thathavum Erumayum"*. Satyanarayana and Tharu quotes Bama's introductory speech to a university audience in Hyderabad in 2007

"Though I was born into a Dalit family, I did not experience the utter misery of a real Dalit women. I did not experience untouchability. My father was in the Indian Army. I had the privilege of education. So I

am able to come here and talk to you. Had it not been for that, I would not have been here, speaking to you. I would have been working in the fields along with my sisters in the village. Education is the greatest privilege a dalit woman can have," (91).

Ambedkar's belief that Dalit society can be emancipated only through education proved true and not by blindly following the existing Hindu tradition. The question is how can a human be penalized for something irrelevant as caste, or even gender as these factors are beyond one's control. He believed that, to build the strength of the working class, the mental hold of religious slavery would have to be destroyed; caste eradication was the precondition of a united working - class struggle (*janata 25 june 1938*)

Sharan Kumar limbale's *"Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature"* translated by Alok Mukherjee quotes Arjun Dangle, the Marathi dalit writer, editor and activist "Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality". Mukherjee opines that Dangle traces the origin of dalit literature to Ambedkar and says "His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness". (1)

The degree of disparity in a society results in peace or violence. Thus the role of a leader becomes indispensable in collecting together a largely distorted community in want of justice and freedom. Ambedkar can be called a true leader in every sense as his spirit of nationalism was evident throughout his works, his educational policies and his untiring fight for the downtrodden people, against casteism and for women's rights. India as a nation is deeply rooted in a religious tradition which till date has been the source for many social evils. When most of the leaders worked within such a frame, Ambedkar stood far away from it to attain a liberal society. Gail Omvedt in her book *"Ambedkar Towards an Enlightened India"* quotes

"...such discrimination - being forced to sit separately, unable to study the courses he wanted, ostracized by other students and unable in a city like Baroda to find a place to live and work respectably- was experienced as an outrage and not as an expected part of a long-ordained place in society. It became clear to Ambedkar that such caste discrimination was

all-pervasive, that it involved both economic cost and personal humiliation and that this prejudice extended from the lowliest villages and urban slums to the most sophisticated arenas of Indian life. Untouchability, and the cultural- religious force that generated it, became the defining framework of his life and its eradication the focus of his career” (19).

Gail cites that Mahars were the first in Maharashtra to organize themselves under the patronage of Shahu Chhatrapati, the maharaj of Kolhapur, an anti-Brahman who while touring Europe issued a government order to fill 50 percent of posts by non-Brahmans, beginning the system of reservation in India. The personal rapport shared by Ambedkar and Shahu was an epoch in the history of reforms that benefitted the untouchables. The battle for independence against the colonialists and that of equality and dignity by the oppressed class ran parallel in the nation. The untouchables had to fight two enemies, the Britishers’ as well as the upper class nationalists. “*Annihilation of caste*” an undelivered speech written and published by Ambedkar in the year 1936 can be called one of the bold literature texts that bind a nation’s history, politics and culture. Prior to that in 1920 “*MookNayak*” (weekly) was launched by Ambedkar. Thus a new genre of revolutionary writings was born. Bandhu Madhava, Shankarrao Kharat, Annabhai Sathe and N R Shende were the pioneers of such propagandist literature. This genre of literature was defined as “point of view” writing as it was chiefly concerned with exposing a particular problem. Its purpose was to inform and make a social awareness.

Early Dalit writings began appearing in little magazines. The world of literature was held sacred. It was a very difficult task to break the monopoly. In Tamilnadu few journals began publishing Dalit works like “*Nirapirikai*”, “*Manavosai*”, “*Pirachanai*”, “*Tamarai*”, “*Kavitharasam*” and “*palam*” to name a few. The irony is that Ambedkar’s struggle to create a nation without any discrimination that started prior to Independence is still a distant dream as the social setting in Bama’s *Ponnuthayi* depicts the society around the year 1996 when the story was published. Things haven’t changed much as caste, class, gender are of much significance today as of yesteryears.

“*Ponnuthayi*” is bildungsroman in plot as it explores the journey of a woman who despite being uneducated stands up for her rights when she is pushed to the extreme by tyranny of a male

dominated society. Like any other girl of her age, when she is married off, dreams of settling down with her husband into life of domestic bliss. Hitherto when she realizes that her life has turned sour owing to her husband’s unruly and loveless behavior towards her, she rebels against the entire cultural construct which time and again asks women to be submissive. She is bold enough to question the patriarchal views which have laid down a set of rules according to which women should conduct herself in society. It goes against the very nature of law where all are equal. Oppression is a state of mind where one feels their basic freedom is at stake and sense of self is being destroyed. The Thali, an ornament tied by the man around the neck of a woman, while solemnizing the marriage in a ritual is symbolic of the power of a man to control or tame the women according to his whims and fancies. For a few, it is a rigid tradition where rules can be bent to largely accommodate male interests and has become a license to justify domestic violence.

(...)“She sat on top of the chicken coop in front of the house, and taking the blade, slashed the wedding-knot around her neck and removed the thali...ponnuthayi put the gold thali in her waist-fold, picked up her basket and went to town. The next day she put up a small shop in front of the chavadi and started her business. The thali that had lain around her neck for ten years occupied the entire shop now, in the form of goods to be sold.” (99-100).

Ponnuthayi did not feel any kind of self doubt or remorse when she did such an act which had an entire village stand up against her, including her parents. Her rebellion is justified as she did not only stand up for her dignity but for an entire women community who lived in the darkness of shame, bereaved of desire to live life on one’s term due to gender anarchism which has become part of a nation’s history, as well as, history of mankind. Thus her revolt is collective in every sense.

“One of the most important forms of ‘socialisation’ is the representation of women in literature. It provided role models for the acceptable versions of feminine goals and aspirations. In nineteenth century fiction very few women work for a living, unless due to dire necessity. A heroine’s ultimate social position and happiness and fulfillment in life were based on her choice of marriage partner”. (see *Beginning Theory*, Barry Peter.2012). Even today marriage determines a woman’s social position, an imaginative constraint

created by culture. It has become a commercial market where the saleability of women is based on her assets, mainly physical appearances. The notion of beauty of a woman being fair skinned with a detailed sketch of even how each and every feature should look like is an example of colonizing a woman's body by a patriarchal society.

Ponnuthayi is described as dark skinned and her children like baby crows. The size of her lips is often mocked at. Her physical attributes personify her character as unusual and unwomanly. Her running a business is looked down upon as she has broken the barriers of her caste which has allotted her status as a wage labourer for landlords. Her determination to change her identity can be explained by the theory of Marxism wherein to achieve a classless society, the exploitation of one social class by another can be stopped, only if individuals recognized their skills, stuck to the craft which they knew best and had a direct contact with the buyers. Ponnuthayi's life was changed for better after she realizes her worth despite all the negative perceptions instilled in her by her social environment. If an uneducated woman like Ponnuthayi can alter her life following the mere

intuitions of a human, whose psyche is deprived of justice and equality, so can many. Through her protagonist, Bama instills a sense of awareness in the society where the hierarchies are constructed without logic.

Conclusion: To quote Gail ... 'building a castle on a dung heap'. What Ambedkar considered dung heap was of course the cultural and social inheritance of varnashrama dharma against which he posed the enlightenment values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The present situation in our country, where issues of casteism have become more aggressive, increased incidents of violation of rights of women, unleash of terrorism all are evident that we have learned nothing from the past. The process of nation building should be done on a strong foundation of secularism. If there is any disparity among its citizens, the structure will collapse, thus disintegrating its base. To conclude each one of us is responsible to gift our future generation a history that would make them proud of their ancestors and not be haunted by the memories of atrocities that we commit today.

References:

1. Bama. "Ponnuthayi." Trans. Shanker, Ravi. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India Dossier I: Tamil and Malayalam*. Eds. Satyanarayana, K. and Taru, Susie. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. 91-100. Print
2. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books private Limited, 2012. print.
3. Dasan, M, V. Pratibha, Pradeepan and C.S. Chandrika, ed. *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. print.
4. Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*: Trans. Mukherjee Alok. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2012. print.
5. Omvedt, Gail. *Ambedkar Towards an Enlightened India*: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.

I. Vinitha Chandra/Ph.D. Research Scholar/Department of English/
Ethiraj College/ Chennai/ Tamilnadu - 600008