

Dalit Consciousness and Voice of Resistance in Pabitra Sunar's *Yugako Āwāj*

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Abstract

The article explores how Nepali literature written on Dalit subjects and issues portrays the socio-cultural, political and economic disparity and injustice experienced by Dalits; and, how the literature expresses dissatisfaction, resistance and protest against it. The article basically aims to explore Dalit consciousness and voice of resistance expressed in poems. For this purpose, the researcher has studied Pabitra Sunar's anthology of poems "Yugako Āwāj [Voice of the Era] from the concept of class consciousness connecting with Dalit consciousness. Her poems mainly express the agony, pain, suffering, inequality, injustice, discrimination, exploitation and oppression; and, also expresses hope, expectation and revolt for rights, equality, justice, freedom and dignity of Dalits. Fundamentally, the poems portray Nepalese society, socio-cultural, political and economic status of Dalits, and, present the right path for socio-cultural liberation of Dalits. The poems also plea the entire Dalits to revolt against caste system for overall transformation. Moreover, the binary appositions such as pessimism and optimism, dark and light, rejection and acceptance, fear and braveness, discrimination and equality faced by Dalits in society; and, Dalits' wish for liberation and dignity are the tenets in Sunar's poems. The researcher has adopted qualitative approach with explorative and analytical methods while studying the poems.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Consciousness, Injustice, Resistance, Liberation, Socio-cultural transformation

Introduction

The article illustrates Dalit consciousness, voices of resistance and struggle portrayed in Nepali literature written on Dalit subjects and issues known as Dalit literature. Dalit literature speaks the voices of Dalits' multiple problems and expresses their wish for complete solution through social liberation. Regarding Dalit literature, Sharankumar Lambale argues, "it is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers" (33). Dalit literature develops Dalit consciousness which speaks for the socio-cultural equality, justice and caste liberation.

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Dalit literature has prominently been raising issues and problems of Dalits for long. It upholds rights, equality, justice and liberation of concerned people through its themes, messages and writings. Moreover, the literature has become a resistance literature to establish Dalits' issues and agenda in the society. The literature as part of Dalit social movements in general and literary movement of Dalits in particular has generated a synergy of hope and enthusiasm for dignified lives of Dalits in socio-economic, cultural and political system. Hence, the paper has critically analyzed Pabitra Sunar's *Yugako Āwāj*, the anthology of poems to explore Dalit consciousness, and to assess the development of literature as resistance literature.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions:

Dalits have not been able to survive dignified lives due to the rigid caste system as depicted in literature and literary works over a long span of time. Their pursuit for rights, equality, dignity and justice—the driving forces of Dalit social and political movements—has been consistent till today although the Dalit movement apparently started eight decades ago with the social and political agenda including equality and liberty. The literature and writings have still been raising the same issues and agenda till today. The selected poems such as “Byunjha Aba Shoshit Ho”, “Jātko Parkhāl”, “Achut Mero Parichaya”, “Khullāmanch Bho Dalit”, “Setiko Mānavadhikār Kahān Cha”, “Deško Kendrabindumā Ubhiyera”, “Jāli Prem” and “Anyāko Thappad” portray bitter experiences of Dalits in caste system. Dalit literature has distinct socio-political values as Limbale argues, “[...] literature rest on three things: *first*, the artist's social commitment; *second*, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and, *third*, the ability to raise the readers' consciousness of fundamental value of life like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity” (34). Thus, Dalit consciousness have become crucial subjects for analysis in this article. Moreover, the article seeks the answers of these questions: what have the selected poems underscored to foster Dalit consciousness? Why have poems prioritized caste consciousness in their subject matter?

Methodology

The study has employed a qualitative research design to explore Dalit consciousness and voices of resistance by analyzing Pabitra Sunar's *Yugako Āwāj*, an anthology of poems, which have underscored Dalit consciousness through themes, message, issues and subject matters of the poems. The researcher has adopted exploratory and analytical methods to examine and interpret the poems. The poems are studied from the Marxist concept of class consciousness connecting with Limbale's Dalit aesthetics and consciousness.

Discussion

Dalit literature is developed as resistance literature against societal hierarchy and caste system. It illustrates that the poets have carved the context and characters who seek revenge in the caste-based society, and endeavor to possess power to overcome the caste-

based problems. In this context, Robert Lanning asserts, “[...] the development of class consciousness must begin before working class can reasonably expect to attain power...” (2). Working class people develop the consciousness to attain the power to eradicate the inequality and injustice of the society. Hence, Dalit poet Pabitra Sunar attempts to spread the consciousness amongst the Dalits to overcome all the problems related to caste and caste system. She appeals to the brave people to break the walls of caste system by raising voices against misdeeds in her poem “Byunjha Aba Shoshit Ho”:

The morning glory is already spread
 It has already been morning
 Why are you unknown about it?
 The morning glory of Eastern region,
 Why do not you see
 the rays of sun?
 Because,
 Your eyes
 are tied with bandage. // (trans. Sunar 47)

In the given excerpt, the speaker nurtures the voices of Dalits who have been struggling for their identity, dignity and justice. As Dalits’ voices have been suppressed for centuries; they want equality and liberation. The feudal caste system has dominated them based on caste identity. The poet expresses pain, grief and agony together with appeal for struggle. She pleads to Dalits to be united against inequality and injustice. She conveys the message for equality, justice and liberation which are possible only through joint struggle of both Dalits and non-Dalits. Besides, she spread consciousness against the exploitative system. To Georg Lukacs, system that “[...] was to chart the correct an authentic class consciousness to the proletariat distinguished from ‘public opinion surveys’ ... (a term not yet in currency) and to confer upon in an indisputably practical objectivity” (“Preface” xviii). The class consciousness is not directly connected to currency but to the practical objectivity.

The Poet Pabitra Sunar questions the socio-cultural position of Dalits as if they are prohibited in the temples and sacred places. Her poem spreads the consciousness for social cause. Limbale claims, “Dalit consciousness is a revolutionary consciousness motivated by the desire for freedom from slavery” (77). Dalits feel the discrimination, and they wish for liberation from it, as Sunar bitterly expresses in “Jātko Parkhāl”:

There is desire in the heart,
 There is heartbeat,

But,
 Between us
 There is a wall of the caste;
 A huge wall of the caste,
 Wall made by human beings! // (trans. 38)

Caste system does not allow Dalits to connect or develop relations with people of other caste group. The caste, itself, is a barrier to having intimate relations, marriage and happy conjugal life. The speaker dreams of casteless, classless and secular social order where he/she cannot feel any discrimination and exploitation based on race, caste, gender and religion. The speaker expects the complete transformation of the society. In this context, Barbara Harlow critiques, “the social and political transformation from a genealogy of filiation based on the ties of kinship, ethnicity, race or religion to an affiliative secular order” (22). Thus, the poet, Sunar strategically presents social and political resistance to challenge malpractices imposed upon Dalits. She further appeals to a rebellion:

Therefore, if you can,
 Oh, brave man!
 Make a brave decision to collapse
 the murderer of true love,
 To the wall of the caste!
 Make a decision to collapse,
 the wall which made us cry
 the huge wall of the caste! // (trans. “Jātko Parkhāl” 39)

The speaker of the poem calls to a man who can challenge casteism and social problems which has divided the people in different hierarchical categories. The wall of casteism stands like a Berlin wall which has created a huge gap to separate the lovers from different castes. The speaker appeals to the modern hero who can demolish the walls of castes, and creates equity-based society. Hence, Brueck argues, “[...] contemporary Dalit critics rethink the significance through the lens of Dalit *chetna*” (43). Dalit consciousness is a suitable lens to look into society, and to create literature as protest for equality and liberation. The excerpt exhibits the speaker’s consciousness.

Dalit writers demonstrate their social reality through literary writings. Their writings are based on personal experiences of their lives. In this context, Brueck contends, “Dalit writers and critics have emphasized realism as the dominant narratives structure for depicting the ‘truth’ of the social, material, and emotional circumstances of Dalit life”

(85). They present ground reality of caste system and casteism based on their personal experiences. They express their own feelings and sufferings. Here, Sunar expresses this in “Achut Mero Parichaya”:

Your lord! ‘Untouchable’ is my identity,
 I am an untouchable of twenty-first century,
 There was misdeed of my forefathers
 Doing the works and staying hungry every day. // (trans. 66)

The excerpt presents bitter reality of caste-based untouchability which is believed as a consequence of misdeeds of their forefathers. Is it true? How can it be true? Dalits are dying every day in the name of caste. These questions are posed to the society. Their forefathers worked hard and stayed hungry day and night but they are still treated as untouchables. The social reality makes Dalits unhappy, and, it encourages them to raise the voice against caste system.

Dalit literature stands as a medium for social transformation. It is a form of literary movement where Dalit have been making efforts. Limbale also agrees with it that “Dalit literature is the literary movement of the Dalits” (97). The literary movements of India have supported to the Dalit movements so as in Nepal as well. Because of the same socio-cultural problems in both Nepal and India, the literary movements have also contributed gear up the social movements. Yashwant Manohar argues, “Establishing democratic socialism and determining the purpose of literature consistent with this is precisely the rationale for Dalit literature” (39). The literature has been used as a weapon for liberation.

In terms of power, position and governance, Dalits’ position seems as subalterns. Subalterns always desire for equality and dignity but the socio-economic and political system appear as hindrance in front of their desire. Every subaltern’s voice is a representative voice of the entire subaltern people. Thus, Spivak argues, “the subalterns are trying to uncover the (singular) ‘consciousness’ of the (plural) subalterns, thereby looking for and ultimately establishing through...positivist subaltern consciousness” (qtd. in Brueck 67). Dalit poets raise pluralistic voices of consciousness. As Sunar writes in “Byunjha Aba Śoṣit Ho”:

Not darkness,
 but we should bring the happiness,
 Not prohibition,
 but we should get the liberation,
 Oh ruled! Wake up
 but we should see the rays of light

Wake up, Oh Dalit!

We should get the path of liberation. // (trans. 48)

The speaker of the poem appeals to the entire Dalits to move ahead for happiness, rights and liberation. It is a right time to fight against and acquire liberation. She also suggests them to wake up on time for eternal happiness. Dalit writers aware the concerned community that they should not be used by at any cost for others' prosperity and success. Regarding the context, Karl Marx contends, "Human beings are capable of activity of a distinctive kind, quality and pace. It is the ability to control activities through consciousness and distinguished from animals" (qtd. in Ritzer 50). Human beings are different from other creatures that they can analyze right and wrong. They use their conscience to work and involve in activities for their betterment. Here, Sunar writes in "Khullāmanch Bho Dalit":

Therefore, I feel nowadays

Dalits are being made *Khullāmanch*

Where all are playing freely

doing their capricious! // (trans. 56).

The statement exhibits bitter realities of Dalits that they are made as open space to play freely. Nepalese society uses them and plays with their desires and emotions. They get hatred, boycott, discrimination and exploitation instead of happiness, equality and justice. Furthermore, Sunar, in her next poem "Setiko Mānavadhikār Kahān Cha" satires the human rights of Dalits on the very occasion of "International Human Rights Day" where the minister delivers a powerful speech on equality and human rights. Meanwhile, Dalit women are beaten in accusation of touching well and water tapes, touching the idols of Gods and Goddesses, getting replacement for inter-caste marriage, or entering the temples. It is a paradox between the speech of state authorities and human rights of Dalits. Therefore, Sunar interrogates:

The route of the discrimination is strong, dear minister!

You are giving speech on equality;

At the temple of religion,

The humans are sacrificed there,

in the name of upper and lower!

Tell us, where is your God?

Where are the human rights of Seti and Bire? // (trans. "Setiko Mānavadhikār Kahān Cha" 81)

The speaker expresses the veracity that speech and reality of politicians and authorities are totally opposites. The state/nation is completely failure to protect the human rights of Dalits. They are discriminated and murdered in society due to their caste and caste system. But the state mechanisms have been reluctant to control it. The speaker raises a relevant question as to where human rights of the voiceless people have been. In Spivak's words, subalterns cannot speak themselves, neither the state nor the society speaks for them.

The Dalit writers think and raise voices on the issues including equality and liberation of Dalits. For that, consciousness level in them has increased faster, so that they speak against injustice and domination. Guha states, "The task of the 'consciousness' of class or collectivity within a social field of exploitation and domination is thus necessarily self-alienating..." (342). Dalit writers speak against exploitation and domination. Hence, Sunar as Dalit writer expresses her agony of exploitation and discrimination in "Deško Kendrabindumā Ubhiyera" but still she loves the nation more than her life. She explores her identity and position in the nation. The given is her representative statement:

To whom I regard as my country
 To whom I regard as my birth-land,
 Right there, I am humiliated,
 Right there, I am prohibited!
 The discrimination from my own mother,
 Right there, I am non-civilian!
 Discriminated in my own country,
 the human constructed...
 painted with the stigmatized color of caste,
 I am ugly and my country is also ugly! // (trans. "Deško Kendrabindumā Ubhiyera"
 101- 102)

The assertion expresses patriotic feelings of speaker; as if Dalits are not citizens of the country. They love the nation more than their lives. However, they get humiliation, hatred, stigmatization, discrimination and social demarcation in this nation. The literature expresses the bitter experiences of Dalits' problems and consciousness against it. In this context, Limbale defines, "Dalit literature is that literature...which is filled with rebellion and rejection, and which gives expression of Dalit consciousness" (105). The literature spreads the consciousness for rights, liberation and the question of identity. Caste system and discrimination are always questionable in Nepal. Where my human right is and where justice is! Sunar again states:

Where the country is dying every-day,
Where people are dying every-day,
In between the upper and lower,
in accusation of love...,
Ajit Mijars are being died,
Yes, I am pondering deeply right now. // (trans. “Deško Kendrabindumā Ubhiyera”
103).

The poet through speaker claims that the people die because of casteism. Dalit’s death is metaphorically used as the death of nation, failure of state and the backwardness of Nepalese society.

Love affairs between Dalit and non-Dalit appear as hindrance in Nepalese society. The poet raises the issues of inter-caste relations and its possible consequences. As Alok Mukherjee believes that “Dalit literature is unflinching in portraying the seamier side of Dalit life” (13). Dalit speaker of the literature trusts to the loved one and surrenders for everything but gets mistrust, betrayal, deception and fake love from partner. Poet Sunar metaphorically captures such pseudo love in her poem “Jāli Prem”:

A beautiful house of dream,
With the wall of your discrimination,
Has be fallen like the brutal earthquake,
Flown from my heart,
Being the smoke of disgrace! ...// (trans. 92)

The speaker of the poem expresses the bitter experiences of fake love and its tragic ending due to caste system. The fake love has not only broken the soft heart but it has also broken the concept of true and pure love. It has flamed the fire against the Nepalese social system and discriminatory practices. The poet further states:

The history of your dishonor,
The form your discrimination,
Has been raising as flame of protest,
Raised within me as storm...// (trans. 93)

In the extract, the tragic end of love has underscored many things to the speaker. The unequal love always gets the trauma, betrayal and deception. In the same time, it has taught the speaker to speak against the caste system as well.

The society treats the people according to their caste and socio-cultural status. In the labyrinth of caste hierarchy, Dalits are always suppressed, oppressed, discriminated and exploited in socio-cultural, economic and political activities. To Judith Misrahi-Barak et al. argue that “The Dalit perspective redefines caste as a contemporary form of social and cultural inequality and power relations that affects the whole...society” (3). The practice of socio-cultural inequality always affects the power relation of entire society. Dalits stand in the same socio-cultural arena where they encounter with injustice and dishonor, discrimination and suppression and negligence. Therefore, Poet Sunar captures the same context in “Anyāko Thappad” states:

If you can, still throw
 The injustice and dishonor
 Net and discrimination,
 Being strong, I still
 Want to stand in this Era...// (trans. Sunar 100).

The speaker expresses her strong determination to fight against the social and cultural discrimination faced during her life. The discrimination and dishonor what she gets from the society and characters of the society are really inhumane and brutal. The discrimination and dishonor fuel to develop the protest and disobedience against the brutal society and its non-Dalit characters.

In these poems written on Dalit issues and context express the agony, pain, suffering, discrimination, exploitation and oppression and, also express hope, expectation and revolt for rights, equality, justice, freedom and dignity of Dalits. The poems not only express the reality of Dalits, but also show the right path to the readers, people, leaders and other stakeholders for Dalits’ socio-cultural liberation. The poems encourage people to revolt against caste system and to achieve eternal liberty. Pessimism and optimism, dark and light, rejection and acceptance, fear and braveness, discrimination and equality and wish for liberation and freedom are the tenets in her poems. The poems are based on social experiences and realities of caste system. In this regard, Brueck asserts, “Dalit literature... emerging as Dalit counter-public sphere reveals a particular narrative perspective resulting from a strategic project of self-theorization...” (82). Sunar’s poems are forms of self-theorization of Dalit issues. They speak as a weapon for anti-caste literary movement by narrating and theorizing the strategic project for liberation of Dalits in Nepalese society.

Conclusion

To sum up, Pabitra Sunar’s anthology of poems portrays the socio-cultural, political and economic problems of Dalits and their caste consciousness. The article illustrates the issues of social hierarchy, cultural discrimination and economic disparity. The article

explores that the Dalit liberation is possible through Dalit consciousness. The primary focus of the poems is to uphold the rights, equality, and liberation of Dalits. It also implants the issues of Dalits such as social justice, identity, dignity and right-based approach in state mechanism. Furthermore, the poetry as Dalit literature develops as the resistance literature to liberate Dalits from all forms of socio-cultural, political and economic barriers and problems. The literature also illustrates the picture of Dalits and their various facets of problems connected to their lives, society and economy. It has developed as a voice of voiceless people which is possible through class and Dalit consciousness. The article concludes that Dalit literature works as the catalyst of resistance literature for equality and liberation.

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