

*Negotiations of Dalit Identity in Marathi Dalit Theatre
after the Dalit Panther Movement*

SYNOPSIS

Submitted to:
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In conformity with the requirements
to fulfil the criteria for the Doctor of Philosophy

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November
2021

Marathi theatre, till the rise of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, has been dominated by the upper caste hegemony ^[1] as Marathi plays would be written and performed by the upper castes for the upper caste spectators since the performance of *Seetaswayamar* (1843), which is considered to be a refined performance by Shanta Gokhale. ^[2] It is the rise of the Dalit Panthers that redefined socio-political equations, caused by the prevalent socio-political scenario that seems to have made the upper caste dramatists rethink their representation of the questioning of caste in Marathi plays. The representation of Dalits in plays written by non-Dalit dramatists seems to be prejudiced because they may be looking at the notion of Dalit as an economical category rather than socio-political one. As a result, the post-Dalit Panther plays, written by Dalit dramatists attempt to set the representation straight. Hence this dissertation aims at a critical analysis of the conflict of representations of the caste questions in general and Dalits in particular in Marathi plays, written by Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists, after the rise of Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra.

I feel that the conflict of representation between Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists appears to be limited to the representations of Dalit male identity; therefore in this dissertation, the absence and invisibility of Dalit women is also explored with reference to the works about Dalit feminism. ^[3] Dalit women in Marathi plays, written by both Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists, either appear off stage or are shown as victims of epistemic and systemic violence, exercised to maintain the social structure based on the caste hierarchy by the upper caste hegemony. Therefore, in this dissertation, I have explained the marginalization of Dalit women by both Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists because Dalit women are not only the victims of the upper caste hegemony but something that seems to be Dalit patriarchy also. ^[4]

Methodology:

The dissertation explains the challenge posed by the Dalit Panthers to the upper caste hegemony, which is reflected in Marathi plays, written in colonial India. As one can notice

that till the rise of the Dalit Panthers, Marathi theatre was limited to the upper castes, residing in the cities like Pune and Mumbai, there was no space for Dalits in the so called mainstream Marathi theatre. However, the Dalit Panther movement seems to have created a space for Dalit theatre/drama, which was once controlled by a hegemonic upper castes society. ^[5] Thus, the methodology of research considers a reading of selected Marathi plays written after the Dalit Panther Movement taking into account Dalit identity irrespective of class, gender and regional differences.

In order to substantiate the argument, made in the dissertation, I have selected the following plays as they are considered to be major plays in case of the portrayal of Dalits after the Dalit Panthers: *A Sip of Water* (1977), *Lokktha 78* (1980), *Zhunj* (1982), *Purush* (1983), *Kanyadaan* (1984) *Routes and Escape Routes* (1986), *Passing the Buck on Brother* (1989) and *Bamanwada* (1994). Apart from these plays, I have also taken into consideration plays like *Kirwant* (1981) and *The Old Stone Mansion* (1989) because though they do not depict Dalits, they appear to be useful to look at caste discrimination even among the sub-castes of upper castes.

Proposed Chapter Division:

Introduction

Chapter I: Marathi Dalit Theatre: Challenge to the Upper Castes Hegemony

Chapter II: Politics of Representation and Marathi Dalit Theatre

Chapter III: Dalit Women and Marathi Dalit Theatre

Conclusion

In the introduction, I have reflected upon Dalit identity as a caste identity after considering various definitions including the definition that appears in the Dalit Panthers' manifesto. While defining Dalit as a socio-political identity, the differences among Dalits are also taken

into account as it is not a completely homogeneous identity but it varies in respect of class, gender, region and language to some extent as well. ^[6] Moreover in spite of these differences, one can define it as a formerly untouchable caste.

I have also referred to the idea of representation as it occurs with Dalits in Marathi plays. As the whole chapter is devoted to the representation of Dalit male identity by Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists, the attempt has been made to provide theoretical background of the notion, representation. Along with the notion, representation, I have also explained the notion, Dalit feminism and its differences with the high caste feminism because they differ from each other in terms of caste and class; though they seem to be similar in case of gender. The differences between these two types of feminism appear to be useful to locate the victimhood of Dalit women, depicted in the selected plays.

I have divided the dissertation into three chapters. The first one is an attempt to describe the domination of upper caste plays till the rise of the Dalit Panthers and how it has been challenged by Dalit dramatists after the Dalit Panthers. As Marathi Dalit theatre appears to be dominated by Dalit males, one is expected to devote a chapter to the representation of Dalit male identity in both Dalit and non-Dalit Marathi plays; therefore the second chapter has been devoted for this cause. However, the third chapter analyses the marginalization of Dalit women by both Dalit and non-Dalit Marathi dramatists because they are victims of class, caste and gender.

The first chapter deals with upper castes domination over folk performances such as *tamasha* and *dashawatar*, in which mainly the untouchable castes and real *sudras* would perform respectively. The association between untouchable castes and *tamasha* has been pointed out by Shanta Gokhale (Gokhale, 2000) whereas Tara Bhawalkal (Bhawalkar, 1980) finds real sudra castes such as Devli, Gurav, Bhandari and Kunbi performing *yakshagana* in nineteenth

century. In this chapter, *tamasha* and *yakshgana* traditions have been critically analysed with reference to the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) because the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* marks these traditions unsuitable for the upper castes aesthetic. It is my contention that these traditions have been, at the same time, denigrated and adapted into performances to suit the upper caste aesthetic sense by replacing so called rough and crude dialogues with songs, based on mythologies to suit the upper castes hegemony. I also think that the adaptation of *tamasha* and *yakshagana* was due to the notions of purity and immorality which are associated with the caste identity of performers who would perform in these folk traditions in the nineteenth century.

The chapter also looks at how the upper castes hegemony has been represented in Marathi plays in colonial India. The upper caste plays uphold the upper castes hegemony through valorising the Peshawa regime as an ideal period.^[7] The same Peshwa regime is considered as an unjust and exploitative regime for Dalits because it is evident in a decision by the Peshwa regime that prohibited the physical presence of untouchable castes, especially Mahars, in Chokhamela^[8] temple in Pandharpur and an order by the Peshwa regime to demolish huts of untouchable castes as those huts were located very close to the upper caste homes.^[9] The valorisation of the Peshwa regime is depicted in upper caste plays like *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (1857) and *Narayanrao Peshwe Yanche Natak* (1870) by Vinayak Janardan Kirtane and V. S. Chhatrye respectively. The valorisation of the Peshwa regime might have been made to remind the upper castes, especially Brahmins the privileged status, enjoyed by Brahmins during the Peshwa regime and loss of that status during the British regime in India. It is noted in the beginning of *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* that the narrator in the play reckons the kings under the British regime as subservient and compares them with Thorle Madhavrao Peshwa who was estimated to be a protector of his subjects and an enemy

of Muslims. The narrator appears to refer to Brahmins when he talks of subjects in the Peshwa regime rather than all the castes.^[10]

Besides valorising of the Peshwa regime through the upper caste plays in colonial India, the chapter also covers the role of the challenges, posed by *Treetiya Ratna* (1855), a play by Jotiba Phule (1827-1890) and *Ambedkari Jalse*, a folk performance mainly performed by the formerly untouchable castes, as a response to upper castes' hegemony in colonial India. *Treetiya Ratna* has posed a challenge to upper castes' hegemony by locating the exploitation of *shudra* and so-called untouchable castes in the caste hierarchy and as a result it was rejected by The Dakshina Prize Fund Committee, led by the orthodox Brahmins and therefore it remained in intellectual exile till 1979.^[11]

In addition to *Treetiya Ratna* (1855), *Ambedkari Jalse* also appear to have played a significant role in challenging upper caste hegemony but like *Treetiya Ratna* and *Ambedkar Jalse* were also not recognized by the upper castes therefore it might have remained at the margins.^[12] There is hardly an example of the recognition of *Ambedkari Jalse* by the upper castes except by Shridhar Balwant Tilak (1896-1928), a Brahmin, who had to face the annoyance of his family and relatives for his support to *sahabhajan* (community dinner) and *Ambedkari Jalse*.^[13] Shridhar Tilak might have supported *sahabhajan*, followed by an *Ambedkari Jalsa* programme because he was influenced by the struggle against the caste hierarchy, waged by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) as on the occasion of *sahabhajan* and *Jalsa* programme, Dr. Ambedkar was the guest of honour.

At the end, the chapter also reveals the relationship between the rise of the Dalit Panther Movement and the portrayal of caste in the plays written by Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists. The reason behind the entry of the portrayal of caste on the stage, which was dominated by the upper castes till 1970s, is located in the prevalent political equations in Maharashtra. The

visibly invisible alliance between the socialists and the Dalit Panthers might have paved the way for the portrayal of caste, to be staged in theatre houses, located in cities like Pune and Mumbai. ^[14] Otherwise till then, Marathi plays, written by Dalit dramatists, were performed either in the slums of the cities or at the outskirts of villages and towns where Dalits used to live. This ghettoization of the performances of Marathi Dalit plays seems to be the outcome of the ghettoization of Dalits.

Before the rise of the Dalit Panthers, there are some instances of the representation of Dalits in Marathi plays, written by non-Dalit dramatists like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) who in the play, *Sangit Ushaap* (1927) encourages Dalits, formerly untouchable castes, to acquire education, and maintain health and hygiene to lead a refined life. ^[15] The representation of Dalits in the aforesaid play appears to be a high caste perception of Dalits as uneducated and unhygienic. It seems that it is the rise of the Dalit middle class and the Dalit Panthers that might have caused the change in the high caste perception of Dalits as educated Dalit activists. To substantiate the role played by the Dalit Panther Movement to create a space for Marathi Dalit plays in mainstream Marathi theatre, I have referred to works like *Dalit Rangbhoomi* by Bhalchandra Phadke (1982), *Dalit Panther Chalwal* by Lata Murugkar (1995), and *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre* by Makrandh Sathe (2015).

The second chapter discusses the idea of representation. The idea of representation is based on the assumption that literature is the representation of life. ^[16] The notion of representation is important here because of socio-political documentation of the life of Dalit and sufferings. The contradiction between the ontological exclusion before birth, during life and after life stands in contrast to the world which is called democratic and egalitarian. Their fight to be included as equals into a world of socio-political equality which is a basic tenet of democracy and is guaranteed by the constitution is brought into question. The aforesaid contradictions are being looked into with reference to the notion of representation.

Bringing into focus the difference between the representation of Dalits and non-Dalits by upper castes and Dalit dramatists, the present chapter aims at how the urban Dalit male protagonists are represented in Marathi plays, written after the rise of Dalit Panther Movement, by non-Dalits and Dalit dramatists. Before the Dalit Panthers, Dalits were presented as subservient to upper castes and mere victims of the caste discrimination as noted in *Yugyatra* (1955) by M. B. Chitnis, the first principal of Milind College, Aurangabad. The Dalit Panthers appear to have transformed the upper castes' perception of Dalits as mere victims of the caste system into an educated middle class Dalit activist.

Though the Dalit Panthers made Marathi dramatists to take into account the educated middle class Dalit identity, both Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists perhaps differ from each other as the former, Dalit dramatists refuse to accept Dalit identity as a class identity only as noted by non-Dalit dramatists. It may be observed in case of plays such as *Pass the Buck on Brother* (2013) by Sanjay Pawar in which the very idea of reservation for Dalits in education and employment on the basis of one's economic status has been thoroughly rejected by projecting caste as socio-political notion rather than just an economical one. On the contrary, non-Dalit dramatists are looking at caste as class in plays like *Zhunj* (1982) by Madhukar Toradmal (1932-2017). In *Zhunj*, Toradmal appears to place his views about caste as class through a Dalit character in the play, Professor Gaikwad.

Besides caste as class, Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists also differ from each other in case of how upper castes are perceived by Dalits. Vijay Tendulkar (2011) portrays a Dalit male protagonist as an opportunist and having a prejudiced approach towards the upper caste people which seems to be not justified enough. On the contrary, a Dalit male protagonist, portrayed by Datta Bhagat (1997), a Dalit dramatist, appears to be inclusive in case of the idea of equality irrespective of caste differences as he, on some occasions, appreciates the help received by Dalits from the upper castes as well as he scolds other Dalit characters for

their over aggressive activism that proves catastrophic for them. It can be exemplified by a Dalit character Arjun from *Routes and Escape Routes* (2011) by Datta Bhagat.

Apart from the differences located in the representation of urban Dalit male identity, Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists look like in agreement with each other in case of the representation of rural Dalits as both Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists represent them either subservient to upper castes or victims of systemic and epistemic violence, perpetuated by upper castes in rural areas, especially upper caste landlords. The representation of rural Dalits in Marathi theatre is noticed when the Dalit Panthers was in its initial stage. Once the Dalit Panthers flourished and remained limited to the urban area in Maharashtra, rural Dalits appear to have been replaced with urban educated Dalits, especially Dalit men by both Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists. One can point out the portrayal of rural Dalits in the plays such as, *Lokkatha* 78 (2000) and *A Sip of Water* (2013), written and performed when the Dalit Panthers was in its initial stage.

Besides the representation of rural Dalits, the linguistic representation of Dalits in plays, written after the rise of the Dalit Panthers, is also critically looked into in detail in this chapter with reference to the idea of language from upper castes' perspective that seems to justify a dialect, spoken by upper castes, as the standard language. ^[17] It seems that the Marathi Dalit dramatists might have accepted the so called standard dialect to write about experiences of educated Dalits whose spoken language differ from the language of plays. It may be because the dramatists, both Dalit and non-Dalit, might be catering to a new socio-economic class of spectators, mainly the middle class. In addition to the role of spectators in determining the language of Marathi plays, drama as genre appears to have influenced the choice of a dialect in this case as so far Marathi drama has remained limited to upper castes and class. However, both, Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists are also seen using different varieties of the Marathi language depending on the educational background of characters but it remains occasional

and comparatively less utilized than the amount of the standard language, used by both Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists in their respective plays.

The third chapter deals with the depiction of Dalit women as victims of class, caste and gender discrimination at the same time in the selected Marathi plays. As mentioned by Uma Chakravarty (2013) Dalit women are subject to caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes and as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste. ^[18] In this chapter, an attempt has been made to critically look into the representation of Dalit women, as victims of the caste hierarchy and Dalit patriarchy, in Dalit as well as non-Dalit dramatists' plays.

In this chapter, the depiction of upper caste women in the selected plays is also compared and contrasted with Dalit women. In the plays, written by the upper caste playwrights, upper caste women are shown as victims of upper caste patriarchy, and domestic violence, inflicted upon them by their husbands, mainly the Dalit protagonists. In comparison, Dalit playwrights are of a seemingly different opinion about the representation of upper caste women. In plays written by the Dalit dramatists, upper caste women are shown supporting the struggle for socio-political equality. For instance, Jyoti, an upper caste female character in *Kanyadaan* (2011) by Vijay Tendulkar is the victim of domestic violence at the hands of a Dalit character, Arun whereas one can locate an upper caste woman, Hema endorsing the liberation of Dalits in the play *Routes and Escape Routes* (2011) by Datta Bhagat.

As non-Dalit dramatists are mainly dealing with the challenge posed by male-dominated Dalit activism, they either ignore the life of Dalit women or show them as victims of caste discrimination. On the other hand, Dalit dramatists appear to be in agreement with non-Dalit dramatists but differ from them in the respect of overlooking the role of Dalit patriarchy has in controlling Dalit women. It is quite evident in the absence of Dalit women as protagonists

in the plays, written by Dalit dramatists. It may be because they appear to be too much preoccupied with attacking the caste hierarchy. There is hardly any example of a play, written by a Dalit dramatist showing Dalit woman as protagonist except *Zhada-zhadti* by Shilpa Mumbraskar. ^[19] The reason behind the absence of Dalit women seems to lie in drama as upper caste and class genre rooted in patriarchy.

In the conclusion, I draw insights from the preceding chapters and locate the reasons behind the deteriorating condition of Marathi Dalit theatre in the present socio-political scenario. Moreover, the conclusion also draws a demarcation of caste as an economic category and caste as a political or socio-political category and how the plays discussed in the chapters above ratify the said argument.

Notes:

1. Suvira Jaiswal (2016) explains the brahmanical hegemony as upper castes hegemony because she calls it to be an attempt by not only Brahmins but all upper castes to maintain their supremacy in the caste hierarchy by relating it to purity and impurity, determined at the time of one's birth. See Suvira Jaiswal, *The Making of Brahmanic Hegemony: Studies in Caste, Gender and Vaisnava Theology*, p.02.
2. Gokhale, Shnata. *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000, p.16
3. Jogdand P.G. *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2013, p.02
4. Ibid. 159.
5. Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-Political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015. p.975-976

6. Shah, A.M. "The Dalit Category and its Differentiations." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, issue. 14, April 6-12, 2002, pp. 1317-1378.
7. Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2016. P. 79-80.
8. Chokhamela, an untouchable saint in the fourteenth century Maharashtra. See Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, p.00
9. Fukuzawa, Hiroshi. "State and the Caste System (Jati) in the Eighteenth Century Maratha Kingdom". *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*, vol. 9, no.1, 1968, pp. 42-43.
10. Sathe, Makrandh. A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, New Delhi. p.42-46.
11. O'Hanlon, Rosalind. *Caste Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*. Permanent Black: Ranikhet, 2016. p.122 .
12. Thakur, Bhagwan. Ambedkari Jalse. Pune: Sugawa Prakashan, 2005. p.18.
13. Tilak, Jayantrao. "Shridhar Balwantrao Tilak", Srivatsa Prakashan vol. Diwali Ank (1989): p.48.
14. Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015. p. 976.
15. 15. Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2016. p. 175.
16. Jaaware, Aniket. *Simplifications: An Introduction to Structuralism and Post-Structuralism*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2001. p.279.
17. Nandpure, Ishwar. *Dalit Natak ani Rangbhoomi*. Nagpur: Pimpalapur Prakashan, 1997. p.28

18. Chakravarty, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Calcutta: Stree, 2013. p.142-143
19. Deshpande V. B. *Marathi Natak: Swatantryattar Kal*. Pune: Venus Prakashan, 1992. p.188

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Appendix

List of the Selected Marathi Plays

- Bhagat, Datta. *Whirlpool* (translated by Georg Nagies, Vimal Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot)
published in *Modern Indian Theatre: an Anthology* edited by G. P. Deshpande.
New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2017.
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