

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

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## 1 Research Questions

**I have put forward four key arguments.**

1. Dalit identity is a caste identity and it refers to the formerly untouchable castes who are also called Exterior Castes by the census officials, the Depressed Classes and Harijan in colonial India. Presently, they are officially known as the Scheduled Castes, a term introduced in colonial India which referred to ex-untouchable castes. Moreover, all these identities are assigned identities whereas Dalit is a self-assertive identity of the formerly untouchable castes and their descendants.

2. Marathi theatre, since the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) has remained under the dominance of upper castes, especially Brahmin caste. Even the introduction of English education and liberal ideas in the nineteenth century did not change the scenario as the upper caste hegemony in Marathi theatre is concerned. History plays, modelled on English history plays were written, in support of the upper caste hegemony which is also called as Brahminical hegemony. The play, *Tritiya Ratna* (1855), Satyashodhak and Ambedkari Jalsa challenged upper caste hegemony but all these attempts remained limited to anti-caste activism and did not enter upper caste space. It is the Dalit Panther Movement that challenged it by making Marathi dramatists to take notice of Dalit activism in Marathi theatre.

3. After the Dalit Panther Movement, Dalit identity is represented by Marathi non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists. They differ from each other as the former one considers it class identity whereas the latter as caste identity. The distinction is also noticed in their perception of Dalit activism because non-Dalit dramatists reckon it to be an opportunist a revengeful while Dalit dramatists portray it inclusive of all castes.

4. Dalit women are victimized because of their caste, class and gender as they are exploited by upper castes for being Dalit and as they are deprived of basic resources, they go to work as wage labourers where upper caste men exploit them for being Dalit, economically poor and woman. They are also exploited by Dalit men as well because Dalit women remain at the margin in political and literary programmes, organized by Dalits, especially Dalit men. It is found in Marathi Dalit theatre. There is not a single Marathi play in which Dalit woman is represented as an educated and activist except *Zhada-zhadti* by Shilpa Mumbriskar. The victimization and marginalization of Dalit women is reflected in the selected Marathi plays, written by both non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists. ,

## **2. Research Methodology:**

The research work is primarily concerned with how Dalit identity has been perceived in the selected Marathi plays: *Lokkath 78* (1978), *A Sip of Water* (1978), *Purush* (1980), *Zhunj* (1982), *Kanyadaan* (1983), *Wata-Palwata* (1986), *Kon Mhanta Taka Dila* (1990) and *Bamanwada* (1991). These plays are selected as they are published by after the rise of the Dalit Panther Movement. These plays are divided as per the caste identity of dramatists into non-Dalit and Dalit. The depiction of Dalit identity has been looked at from caste perspective which is different from the definition of the term, Dalit, proposed by The Dalit Panther Movement.

In this thesis, the idea of representation has been looked into from the Western perspective as the literature is perceived as the representation of life. The term, medieval humanism from the Western perspective is looked as the foundation of the idea of representation as medieval humanism has emphasized the introduction academic which justifies the representation of classical ideas and literature. Especially, the idea of representation from Derrida's perspective has been critically explored because it challenges the medieval idea of representation by creating the provision for various ways of representation of same object as it challenges the

idea of representation as repetition. It is this view of representation that created an atmosphere, suitable to the rise of different socio-cultural identities in 1960s. It is this idea of representation that has been studied to explore Marathi literature in general and Marathi Dalit literature in particular. Along with the Western idea of representation, Dalit feminism has been studied in order to locate distinctiveness of Dalit women who are victims of epistemic, systemic and brutal violence.

### **3. Key Findings and Conclusion:**

#### **Chapter-1 Introduction**

In the introduction, I endeavour to locate caste as an endogamous notion. Before establishing caste as an endogamous notion, an attempt is made to explain how caste was perceived by the colonial census officials and anthropologists who paid attention to occupation and physical features of people belonging to different castes. In the introduction, Dalit as a caste identity has also been justified by referring to Vinay Srivastava, Padmanabh Samarendra, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and Dipankar Gupta. The idea of representation is also explained with reference to Marathi Dalit theatre. The contribution by Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Barbara Freedman is considered to explain the idea of representation. At the end of the introduction, distinctive identity of Dalit women is elaborated on with reference to the works of Sharmila Rege, Shailaja Paik, Uma Chakravarti and Chhaya Datar.

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

In the first chapter, an attempt has been made to locate upper caste hegemony in Marathi theatre, especially through the performance of *Seetswayamwar* (1843). Even the introduction of English education and liberal thoughts in colonial India did not make any difference to upper caste hegemony in Marathi theatre. It was maintained through adaptation of English plays and translation of Sanskrit plays. It was challenged by *Tritiya Ratna* (1855), a play by Jotirao Phule,

Satyashodhak Jalsa and Ambedkari Jalsa but it remained till the rise of the Dalit Panthers. The activism of the Dalit Panthers seems to have made upper caste Marathi dramatists take notice of caste discrimination.

## **Chapter II: Politics of Representation and Marathi Dalit Theatre**

The second chapter deals with the representation of Dalits by non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists. They differ from each other because non-Dalit dramatists depict Dalit activism as opportunist and revengeful. On the contrary, Dalit dramatists portray Dalits as liberal and inclusive in their approach towards upper caste characters. Non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists are also different in respect of the representation of inter-caste marriage, linguistic identity of Dalits and portrayal of rural Dalits.

## **Chapter III: Dalit Women and Marathi Dalit Theatre**

In the third chapter, the difference between upper caste and Dalit women characters is noticed in respect to caste, class, education, a variety of language they use and how they are represented. Besides this, the distinctive identity of Dalit woman is illustrated along with systemic, epistemic and brutal violence against them. Victimization of Dalit women characters are located in their caste identity and lack of education. They are also seen to be victims of Dalit patriarchy that does not allow them to enter public places like a college quarter and upper caste localities.'

## **Conclusion**

In the conclusion, the argument in the dissertation is summarised in order to provide an overview of the dissertation. The attempt is also made to locate why Marathi Dalit theatre is in decline after 1990s and the reason is detected in the decline of Dalit activism and repetitive nature of Marathi Dalit theatre.

My study has largely been dramatic relying on dramatic texts rather than performance texts. I would agree that there is a lot of work to be done taking the performance text into account. However, I hope that this work has opened a rather important area of culture and life of the Marathi Theatre.

It is important to note that the post Dalit Panther Marathi plays happens when there is a scramble for stage space and we have movements and experiments which perhaps influence this genre of Marathi plays. My reading of the plays has been intrinsic and it is an interdisciplinary area of study which focuses on culture, language, political assertion, identity and history.

A large part of this work has bordered on woman as Dalit and non-Dalit, upper caste women with insights from western feminism and movements in theatre and drama that changed the consciousness of the world. India and Maharashtra were not untouched by the changes that happened in theatre. This movement in drama and theatre is important in as much as it is an appendage of the caste movements all around India.

As a movement one of the organs is theatre/drama. This reinforces the insights of the political movement so as by repeating the theme it also brings about awareness. The awareness of the feminists and Marxist is not alien to this movement and in many ways this movement has gained from these movements. However, I have showed how drama differs in the hands of different dramatists who are educated by the movements of the twentieth century. Post Dalit Panther Drama has a place in movements of identity across the country and is not a movement that one could take lightly as it was a cultural movement which also involved the rethinking of positions of marriage.

Thus, a rethinking of cultural practices and space too have been examined in the plays I have examined. It is not just the Dalit identity which is at stake but there are at least two worlds

#### **4. Suggestions and Recommendations:**

1. As the study mainly deals with Dalit identity as caste a identity, its intersection with class has been briefly touched upon so that one can explore it from class perspective in detail.
2. The research is limited to Marathi Dalit theatre and therefore folk theatre like *tamasha* and *powada* are not considered because it is recommended that one can locate the relation between these folk performances and Dalit activism after the Dalit Panther Movement.
3. The study has not covered Dalit activism between the death of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1956) and the rise of the Dalit Panther Movement which may be studied critically because in this period Dalit activism assimilated with other political forces which used Dalits as tokens.
4. The present research work has also not covered Dalits and their representation in films which may be covered in further research on Dalit Studies.
5. So far Dalit activism, to some extent, has remained confined to the descendants of the formerly untouchable castes therefore one can scrutinize its failure to align with other social movements.



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