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Dalit Iconography and Modes of Resistance: Defying ‘an Aesthetic’

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The term Dalit literature can be traced back to the first Dalit literary conference in 1958 which passed a resolution defining the term. Dalit literature was born out of anguish of unjust social systems based on caste and class inequities and has become an expression of the agonies suffered by these deprived groups for ages. Dalit literature is also marked by the theme of protest directed against the existing intellectual and social system. One can see the strong inspirational influence of the predominant ideologies of Dr. Bheemrao Ambedkar and Jotibha Phule in Dalit writings. The dominant mode of expression of Dalit literature continues to be poetry but there has also been a spate of autobiographies and short stories.

Recently, there has been a significant development in forms of pictorial representations of Dalit through paintings and sculptures that has given a new birth to the dynamics of Dalit resistance both in terms of literary as well as a cultural movement. Modern art has been gradually creating a niche in terms of its representations of Dalit experiences amidst various other forms of resistance. Recent trends in Dalit literature and Art reflect that Dalit politics is moving beyond the co-opted means to ‘statist’ and the legal framework of politics and aesthetics which is visible in Savindra Savarkar’s paintings and few autobiographical samples of Dalit writings. The paper intends to focus critically on the relationship between art and literary aesthetics as the mode of resistance for a subaltern group, along with the comparative analysis between the Dalit pictorial representations in modern Indian Paintings vis a vis dalit literary representation in texts. Savindra Sawarkar, who is a well known modern Indian Dalit painter, has been vividly placing Dalit subjects and their culture on the canvas that brings out subtle nuances pertaining Dalit lives in both urban and rural India. By critically interpreting few of Sawarkar’s paintings and comparing it with an autobiographical narrative of a Dalit writer Om Prakash Valmiki, I would be forging an inextricable link between his paintings and the text. In this paper, I would argue that both the author and the painter share a common ideological ground that manifests Dalit literary and cultural empowerment.

Savindra Sawarkar, one of the pioneering Dalit artists, has strived to project the Dalit pain and anguish in the visual culture by using various techniques such as graphics, colour drawings and oil paintings. Savindra has numerous exclusive paintings and graphic shows to his credit held in India and abroad. He has participated in several national and international exhibitions including National Art Exhibition by Lalit Kala Academy. Sawarkar had to face considerable challenges from the mainstream modern Indian artists in order to carve out a corner for his art works in the realm of the art gallery that allows exclusive space to the artists representing mainstream cultural ethos and aesthetic.

Dalit miserable lives and their plight have always been untouched on the broad canvas of artists and painters who have often ignored it presuming it to be unaesthetic. They have just been portrayed to arouse the patronizing sentiments of bourgeois art connoisseurs; a presumed impassive response that lacks critical gaze to see obscured raw angst beneath the facade of weakness and vulnerability. Being a Dalit, Sawarkar’s graphic sketches and

paintings of Dalit lives on canvas can be studied as a form of a radical protest against the caste inequities prevailing in the social structure of India. Sawarkar succinctly puts it in a radical statement on his website, “My pictorial idiom draws its energy from the anguish of untouchables, from the plight of Devdasi and her kin-people i.e. the Jogtins, Jogtas, Zhulvas, Potrajs. My idiom also draws upon the tribulations of minorities in Indian society. I stand firmly by social justice and a just attitude towards the first settlers of this land.”

Sawarkar’s distinct ways of addressing the issue of untouchability through a popularly known elite medium of art is singular in itself as it registers the protest against the upper caste cultural hegemony. Sawarkar’s remarkable paintings, graphics and sketches portray communicative figures narrating their own being in the Brahminical social order. According to Gary Michael Tartakov, “Sawarkar’s intention is not only to achieve acceptance into the celebrated precinct of high art display, but to do so while denouncing the identities of the very social and economic elite upon whom this art world depends.”

Albert Camus in one of his essays compiled in a book popularly known as *The Rebel* expresses his contention that art itself contains in its core a form of rebellion. Camus argues that an artist seeks to produce an alternative reality by denying what is evident and yet he cannot “get along with reality”. In the identical process of founding, the artist transforms reality. This impulse for an alternate construct by the artist is the urge to represent what reality lacks. “Rebellion can be observed here in its pure state” This transformation, this negation of reality, in its essence is a kind of insurrection. In Sawarkar’s paintings, one could visualize this transformation.

Camus further borrows Karl Marx’s perspective on art which states that art doesn’t belong to all times; it is determined on the contrary, by its period and expresses the privileged values of the ruling classes. Marx prefers the form of art “which is, art dedicated to the service of the revolution” over other forms. Given the context of our discourse, class question, perhaps can be misleading here unless we associate the statement with caste hegemony. Since caste inequalities have never been foregrounded through visual art forms, the potential of such a rebellion has never been imagined. This revolutionary potential of art was first realized in the European modernist movements. Modernist art forms and expressions provided more space for social and political protest than modern. Modernist art very often generates its form to come in terms with the concept of the protest. In Indian context, modernist era dates back to 1940 that witnessed social and political upheavals. Artists of this generation registered social and political protest both in form and content.

This trend got more refined and elaborated in works of the painters of the eras 1950 and 1960. As Mrinal Ghosh in her article “Painting as Social Protest by Indian Artist of 1960s” argues that the “social and political conditions for them were running through a dilemma, oscillating between positive and negative reality”. The Second World War brought devastating phase in the history of mankind. Artists in colonized India had already seen the decay of human values in the western world. Freedom at the cost of partition of India turned out to be a nightmare as followed by riots and massacre. Subsequent exodus, famine, war and corruption were picked up as themes for the contemporary painters. Despite surviving trends of protest painting, it is unbelievable that caste based issues have never had any space on canvas since the introduction of neoclassical trends in art.

A brief venture in the historical verity of caste system would certainly help to explore an unequal relationship between Dalits and upper castes. The historical conflict between the Aryan and non Aryan population around 1500 BC led to the stratification of society in four

gradations popularly known as *chaturvarna* system. Arun Prabha Mukharjee, a renowned scholar, speculates that after the conquest got over, they allowed certain groups to enter into the *varna* system through the strategic alliance, while on the other hand poor and the hostile groups were placed into the *Shudra* category, the lowest of the *chaturvarna* system. Shudras were denied the basic right to education and thus remained ignorant to the conniving ideologies of Brahmins. Upper castes and *shudras* were later associated with notions of “purity” and “impurity” respectively partly by the virtue of their castes’ placement in the hierarchy; partly on the basis of the work performed by the castes. According to Tapan Basu “this value loaded characterization entailed the strict social segregation of the “pure” upper castes and the impure lower castes as the “outcastes” who had been rigidly demarcated among the Shudras by the 2nd century AD”. Brahmins, being first placed in hierarchy, were certainly at privileged position. They had the undisputed authority of interpreting *Vedas* and *upnishads*, educating others about notions and concepts of *Dharma*. Dalits, by virtue of their lowest position in the caste hierarchy as interpreted by Brahmins, did not raise any objection which led to their complete subjugation in the later *vadic* period. By the time, Brahmins had deliberately started practicing untouchability to maintain strict segregation between Dalits and non Dalits.

Brahmins have always been portrayed as pious, poor and honest in Hindu religious scriptures. Nevertheless, in the painting titled as ‘Brahmin and Ganga’, oil on canvas, 2006 by Sawarkar, one can observe how deceptive they are. Sawarkar’s pictorial account looks beyond traditional cast conceptions. Apparently, the Ganga, the most sacred river of Hindus, at the background bears witness to the sheer exploitation of Dalits by Brahmins. It further implies how the river is being misappropriated by Brahmins to uphold and sanctify their unjust social practices. Ganga is literally consumed by a looming sketch of a domineering Brahmin. His arrogance and haughty temperament can be noticed in his menacing and condescending gaze with a big vermilion mark on his forehead and the pointed rear end of the tuft touching the river. Sawarkar has painted it all in crimson which perhaps symbolizes/ signifies oppressive violence. The threatening portrait of the Brahmin is an inversion of the projected image of the pious priest witnessed in the temples or at the river’s *ghat*.

According to Sawarkar, during the colonial rule, “nationalism had a systemic Hinduistic agenda, to regroup the society so as to oppose the British rule without affecting the nature of Indian society.” The parochial nationalism surely aided in mobilizing masses for liberating the nation. However, it could not liberate minds of people from caste based discrimination. The power of cultural hegemony earlier ascribed to colonizers successively passed on to the upper caste native imperialists whereas the Brahmanic code of conduct became the acceptable norms to govern parochial societies. This has prevented the articulation of a Dalit self against all forms of oppressions so far. Sawarkar observes that “many who had gone to study in art schools under the colonial rule and after independence could hardly think beyond their caste formulation and therefore romanticisation and exoticism was added to the pictorial expressions while painting the natives and their nature of existence”. Brahminical norms embedded in the social structure had contoured and dominated the Modern Art to such an extent that the themes of dissent in the paintings could have never become the critique of caste inequality. “The high modernism was translated more in themes related to the mythologies rather than in actual society.”

A number of paintings express bloating, stretching, crouching, agonizing and labouring bodies of untouchables. Dalit writer Apoorvanand locates Dalit’s body as a crucial site of physical as well as mental exploitation where “the pain seems to originate from the guts of

the body itself, from the misfortunes of being physical". Sawarkar's paintings reflect Dalit's physical and mental agony is an effort to look beyond the traditional ways of depicting. In the oil painting entitled as 'Waiting for You' an untouchable is squatting on haunches. The contorted and acutely tilted face resting on his hands has benign sobriety that touches the very heart of mankind. Waiting amid dark and filthy backdrop, the eyes appears to be patient reflecting the dwindling anticipations of redemption from the evil of untouchability. The title is indeed suggestive. 'You' in the title undoubtedly refers to non –Dalits/upper castes. A brilliant combination of grim and red colour underlines the pain and torture inflicted on the body. Dark and filth pervade the painting, projecting terribly poor conditions under which untouchables survive. Predominant caste hierarchies have not only been firmly entrenched in the social structure but also in the psyche of individuals. Dalit writers claim that reconciliation between Dalits and non Dalits is not possible until people are liberated from the feudal mind set.

Sawarkar's figures in the paintings do not suffer from their physicality, but from the fact of their being Untouchable or a Dalit. The pain, therefore, is not just physical but it also has a 'caste' and gender, a fact repeatedly emphasized here. It is not only the body is exploited, but besides the self brings into the clutches of the forced inferiority complex which leads to loss of self esteem. This forced consciousness brings out the contradictions in the Dalit perception of himself vis a vis the other non Dalit self. Bhikhu Parekh in his essay entitled "logic of Humiliation" theorizes institutionalized humiliation. He argues that "humiliation involves violating an individual's self respect and demeaning or belittling her in her own and/or others' eyes. Organised or institutionalized humiliation exists when social institutions and practices embody disrespect for, and systematically violate the self-respect of, group of individuals". Indeed, humiliation and lack of respect have been some of the cardinal reasons for Dalits to raise their voices in protest against the cast oppression. Sawarkar's paintings remarkably portray this urge to claim respect. In paintings Dalits are portrayed carrying menial jobs such as manual scavenging or carrying carcass of dead animals. Sawarkar's paintings unabashedly delineate the torments of living hell. Through deft use of color and line, Swarkar saves his figure from being subsumed by the "folk" category. His, colours are not just bright; they are garish. Instead of appearing playful, they seem severe or anguished. Yet they don't scream. The overall ambiance is one of muteness which gets heavily oppressive from one work to another. Untouchable communities are meant to perform filthy jobs; there is hardly any truth in the statement. Rather, they were subdued and coerced to earn their livelihoods by these means.

Sawarkar's painting of a Dalit carrying the carcass of a dead cow connects well to the episode narrated by Om Prakash Valmiki in his autobiography 'Joothan'. Valmiki narrates how the community has to depend on the meat of diseased animal specially cow to quench their hunger. Sometimes the meat was put out to dry in the sun for later consumption. Valmiki fascinatingly narrates his childhood days. He would chew the tender tendons carved out of cow meat cooked in spices. Valmiki also claims that the people of his community were rigorously sincere and honest to whatever laborious task they were assigned by upper castes. Sharan Kumar limbale's autobiography, Akkarmashi has the same dominating theme throughout the book: Dalit's constant battle with hunger. Although Limbale is allowed the privilege of going to school, he had to watch the higher caste children eat lavish meals and could only hope that they would be generous with their scraps. When he devoured those precious morsels, his mother would yell at him when he got home for being so selfish and not saving any for her or his sisters. His grandmother would eat *bhakari* made from the corn she had dug out a pile of manure so that her grandchildren would have what little good flour she

had left. She made incredible sacrifices, but her house still went hungry until they were able to beg on a market day or until a good friend received the contract to remove a dead animal. A titled portrait by the name Potraj is another unique painting to look at. The Potraj is a nomadic tribe hails from western Maharashtra. People who belong to the tribe gets alms for displaying what must be an extremely grueling profession. The women balance a small platform with their deity perched on their heads and play a drum to a foot-tapping beat while the men dance, twirl and smack themselves with heavy whips made out of woven coir or leather. Children are thrust into this profession at a very early age so that they may grow up and be able to bear the crack of the whip on their backs. Young boys may start as early as the age of six with lighter whips till they reach puberty and their teens and graduate to the heavier ones. Apart from the gruelling treks between cities, nights spent exposed to the elements, unrelenting sun above their heads the entire day and the unforgiving rope whip on their backs, the members end up living a hand to mouth existence on what can only be described as meager charity.

Few paintings are rather ambiguous in terms of what is manifest and yet unclear which may surprise the way they open up perceivers' imagination to new possibilities. For instance, in one of his untitled paintings a man with a tilted head seems to be lying prostrate on the ground resembling post crucifixion Christ's image. Unlike the Christ's crucifixions, the portrait of Christ like figure has his hands lowered down to the bottom of the painting with no other physical attribute. Thither is a vacuum, a nullified space filled with red at the heart. This painting resembles another entitled painting 'Revolution'. The painting has an image of Christ with raised finger in the direction of perhaps bringing revolutionary change in the social structure. One can observe Dalit masses obscurely located throughout in various patterns and shades along with Buddhist symbolic artifacts. In one of his interviews, Sawarkar talks about the idea of 'Ambadkarite saint', the reformer and the representative of all Dalit communities. The painting strongly reminds of the conversion of religion by Dalits with Ambedkar when he decided to quit Hindu religion and adopted Buddhism. It seems that the portrait seeks to fuse multiple images in a concretised ideal form addressing Dalit revolution. It has both, a glimpse of Ambedkar who is emblem of Dalit enlightenment and a directing figure in the image of Buddha, the philosophical anchor.

In another painting entitled "Centre of Rudra", a Brahmin seems to be inattentively crushing untouchables beneath his giant foot. The untouchable seems to be originating from each and every nook of his body implying the discriminatory relations between the two. The subtle complexities involved in the relation are quite troubling. It is conveyed through the Brahmin's contorted face in disgust suggesting condescending attitude of the *Savarna* or a higher caste person. It is written in *Manusmriti* that shudras have emanated from the feet of the *Brahma*, the Hindu God of creation. And so does apparently here for the feet of the Brahmin explicitly implying or generating the notion that Dalits are born slave. The trouble is that people's minds are governed by religious norms, and it has been unwittingly forced into people's psyche over thousands of generations by the Brahmins. It has almost convinced people to believe it to be one of the reasons for caste based physical segregation.

Obsessive penchant for Purity and pollution in the upper castes was more pervasive in the western part of India as compared to the others. In some areas of Maharashtra, in fact, the "untouchables" castes such as 'Mahars' were forced to maintain prescribed distance- varying with the "lowliness" of the caste- from caste Hindus. One of the paintings titled 'Akkarmashi', a Marathi word meaning 'bastard child' powerfully manifests it. Shiv Kumar Yadav in his essay "Comapartive study of untouchables by Mulk Raj Anand and Sharan Kumar Limabale's *Akkarmashi*" clarifies meaning further. He says "meaning of Akkarmashi

is love child, illicit child, offspring born out of socially unacceptable relationship” In the painting an eye is glaring at other’s face implying the later to be escaping from the first’s sight. Both the eyes are contoured by a circle resembling the third eye. The image confounds to the very core of its appearance since it deals with the perception and perceived. The subject in the paintings has no identity, no home or place of belonging that raise certain doubts about his identity.

The paintings conveying expressions of dalits have undeniable universal appeal since it refers to the exploitation of marginalized. S. Santosh, who contributes an essay to the catalogue writes, “These paintings counter-pose the mutable body, the passing of one from into other, reflecting the ever incomplete character of being”. In many of his untitled paintings, here referred as painting no. 6 to 8, bodies seems to be melting or evolving or emerging from nature. Figure with heads and legs and no bodies indicates that the realities of caste have erased the bodies of huge mass of people all together. This collective experience of an absent, lost body is another recurring theme.

In Dalit autobiographies this collective experience is often highlighted. Since I and we are inextricably linked, writer does not isolate the individual from his whole historical environment, family, community and society at large. From the rearing of the live stocks to the eating of carcass, Valmiki uninhibitedly in detail narrates all unconventional and unexpected instances which may affect the aesthetic sensibilities of the upper caste readers. Alok Mukherjee states that “there is in it (Dalit Literature) ignorance, sexism, violence, internal rivalry and conflict, competition for survival, drunkenness and death”. Often Dalit writers are accused of “writing in crude, impure and uncivil language”. However, this is precisely to reproduce a counter literature to convey the “essence of Dalitness”. One of the major occupation of Valmiki’s community was rearing the pigs. He had the responsibility too as any other member of the community to “graze the pigs in the afternoon”. He says “the pigs rooting in the compound were not the symbol of dirt to us but of prosperity and so they are today.” Valmiki makes an effort to give a precise testimony and show in details how his community was simply following the diktats of upper caste and yet they were happy with their lives.

Dalit women’s portrayals too have occupied significant space on Sawarkar’s canvas. Apart from domestic dalit women’s portrayal the artist has given special attention to the plights of *devadasis* and *jogtins*. Sawarkar’s portrait of a Devadasi quintessentially captures the coerced aloofness of her deteriorating body with reflections of wretchedness in the eyes, unwittingly asking questions to her current plight. The devadasi system has been part of southern Indian life for many centuries. A veneer of religion covers the supply of concubines to wealthy men. Trained in classical music and dance, the *devadasis* lived in comfortable houses provided by a patron, usually a prominent man in the village. Their situation changed as the tradition was made illegal across India in 1988, and the temple itself has publicly distanced itself from their plight. Girls from poor families of the “untouchable”, or lower, caste are “married” to *Yellamma*, the goddess, as young as four. No longer allowed to marry a mortal, they are expected to bestow their entire lives to the service of the goddess. When they reach puberty, as per the dictates of devdasi tradition, their virginity is sold to the highest bidder, later sent to the red light areas of metropolitan cities for prostitution.

Dalit women largely remain unheard of until the arrival of women autobiographies. Dalit women are often victimized by upper caste men to appease their sexual appetite. In their personal accounts, they often narrate how they are threatened with dire consequences if not

surrender their bodies to the carnal appetites of upper caste male. Another painting portrays a young woman sitting naked, eyes downcast, loose hair with chewed fish lying around. A male's inverted face is lecherously gazing at the woman. Gopal Guru (1998) in his article 'Dalit women talk differently' argues that it is imperative to understand the desire in Dalit women's self narration of her predicaments differently in order to delineate both the internal and the external factors that has a bearing on her constitution. Patriarchal domination within Dalits is one of the major internal factors that emanates from upper caste male dominated society. Valmiki's autobiography has not much to offer about Dalit women's trials and tribulations. Patriarchal domination is visible at few instances. Over all the narrative bear no sight of women except Valmiki's trial with his first love. The external factors have their roots in the fact that non dalit forces have been continuously attempting to homogenize the issues related to Dalit women. With the emergence of new wave in feminism in 1980s, it was strongly felt that an emphasis on the independent identity of Dalit woman is prerequisite to counter the generalized universalization of experiences of women belonging to different castes and classes. Also, the upper caste educated activists could not represent their grievances in their entirety as they were not the ones who actually went through the trauma of being a woman and moreover a Dalit woman. Sawarkar's depiction of Dalit women's physical and mental exploitation in varied forms is a historically verified fact which has positioned them as doubly marginalized. Even till the date, Dalit women are paraded naked in the villages by upper caste men for petty reasons. This is simply to satisfy the upper caste male gaze coupled with the intention to teach lesson to the Dalit woman that no matter what, she must conform to the stereotype of a prostitute.

Sharan Kumar Limbale characterizes Dalit literature as 'purposive' and 'describes' its purpose variously as 'revolutionary', 'transformational' and 'liberatory'. Sawarkar's art forms undoubtedly express the discontent beyond the textual representations. It disapproves of the Brahminical aesthetic. Countering it with new forms is an attempt by both the author and the artist to create and establish a unique kind of aesthetic born out of the lived realities of people.

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