

The Voice of Double Subjugation: Dalit Telugu Women's Writing

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Abstract

Indian society has always been a caste-based society. Caste has formed the very base for all its rules, regulations, codes and conventions as a result of which, Indian population unfortunately till date is divided into 2 groups: The Upper Caste and Lower Caste. High caste population tend to get everything, be it property, voting rights, land, wealth, education etc. not because they deserve it but because *Vedas* and *Puranas* have got their back. On the other hand, maximum number of lower caste people are destined to struggle throughout their life for even the basic necessities like water, clothes, food and shelter. We Indians, thanks to the struggle and fight from lower caste section most important weapon for which was Dalit Literature, have somehow managed to use

„maximum number of lower caste people“ instead of „all the lower caste people“.

Dalit Literature which technically emerged during Bhakti Tradition with the voice of many Untouchables like Chokhamela, Dadu Dayal, Ravidas etc. gained a modern outlook with Marathi Dalit Panther Movement. It spread to almost all the corners of the world from there and Telugu Dalit Literature is no exception. It received its impetus to go beyond the conventions from Dalit Panther movement only.

But in this whole struggle against caste, did we ever try to focus on a voice which comes from a place where subjugation is not just at hands of caste but gender too? Did the writers or readers of Dalit Literature ever try to think that Indian Society is not just a caste biased but a gender biased society too? Did we ever give a thought to the fact that, *Vedas* and *Puranas* not just back Upper Caste Brahmins but mentoo? Almost all the Literature no matter to which region it belongs, tries to brush the voice of their women under the carpet. They are never identified for their work and Telugu Dalit Literature is no exception.

My paper aims to talk about the emergence of Women's writing in Telugu Dalit Literature. It will explore the identity and work of various efficient but not so famous women writers to bring in the notice of general readers the voice of double subjugation, to highlight how Dalit women of India are fighting not just against caste but against gender too. My paper includes work from authors like K. Durgadevi and B. Vijayabharthi. It aims to include the work of Telugu Dalit Women to acknowledge their participation.

Key Words: Double Subjugation, Vedas, Puranas, Gender, Caste, Telugu Dalit Literature, Patriarchal society, Downfall of Women, Dalit Women

Telugu Dalit Women's Writing: Introduction

“I was born in a backward caste in a backward region, that too a girl.”¹

Urmila Pawar in her autobiography *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, explained her position in a caste based patriarchal society through the above- mentioned quote. She successfully encapsulated her pain of not just being a Dalit in a casteist Indian society, but being a Dalit woman in a casteist patriarchal Indian society too. She has incorporated incidents where she not just faced discrimination on the basis of caste

¹Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*

but situations where she was denied opportunities by people belonging to her own caste, because of her gender .

Almost all the Dalit women, just like Urmila Pawar, went through double colonization and subjugation. They were pushed and exploited not just in the name of caste but gender too. They struggled for a very long time to detach themselves from the clutches of caste and sex & Dalit Literature witnessed this. It has actually served as a very important expression for the feelings of Dalit Women writers who were struggling hard to gain equality. But Dalit Literature's doors were not open for women since the beginning. Women had to fight against the sexist shackles to make way for them in the canon. They struggled to raise their voice against the double exploitation they were going through which was not a region-specific process but a universal phenomenon.

Like any other place, Dalit Literature in Telugu has also gone through several twists and turns. The first question mark in the minds of people here came with the education imparted through the Christian Missionaries. The first educated Dalit generation started posing questions on the caste subjugation, example for which could be seen in the writings of Gurrām Joshua (*Mahakavi* of his time). He was joined and supported by BoyiBheemanna, Kusuma Dharmanna, JalaRangaswamy to exemplify the scope of Telugu Dalit Literature.

Telugu Dalit Literature witnessed participation of a lot of women writers, details of which were also full of uncertainties. Atukuri Molla, from a potter's family, is considered the first woman poet in Telugu. She in Telugu wrote *Ramayana* by the name of *Molla Ramayanam*. She because of her lower caste, faced immense amount of opposition from the society. She was subjugated not just on the basis of caste but gender too, though she was a true rebel. Molla wrote her *Ramayana* not just in a conventional manner. Her portrayal of Sita's character invited attention from a lot of people. Sita in her book was not presented as a helpless escapist, rather she was shown as a strong character who questioned Rama harshly before joining the mother Earth. Another eminent Telugu women writer was Utukuri Lakshmikantamma. She wrote a very important book by the name of *Andhra Kavayitrulu* (Women Poets of Andhra). It was published in 1953 and contains more than two hundred women writers over ten centuries in Telugu.

It is a well-known fact, that Bhakti Tradition proved a pumping force for Dalit Literature as a change was noticed during this time. Finally, through Bhakti Tradition, voice of Untouchables like that of Chokhamela, Kabir, Dadu Dayal, Ravi Das etc. were heard. This tradition had a similar impact on the unheard voices of Telugu Women Writers. They expressed their suppressed voices, resistance, revolt, agony and helplessness through the Bhakti and love for god. Following Telugu women writers were heard during Bhakti Tradition.

NAME	TIME PERIOD
Tallapaka Thimmakka	15 th Century
Chanamma	13 th Century
Prolamma	13 th Century
Rangajamma	17 th Century
Madhuravani	17 th Century
Krishnamba	17 th Century
Muddupalani	18 th Century
Janakamma	19 th Century
Ramabhadramba	16 th Century
Madhuravani	16 th Century
Rangajamma	16 th Century

Rangajamma was a famous figure in the Vijaya Raghava's Kingdom in Tanjore. Her *UshaparinayaPrabandham* is a beautiful artwork, where she writes from a point of imaging herself as King's wife who is presented as the hero. She presented the entire work in a very beautiful manner. Unfortunately, she fell into the trap of royal conspiracies.

Work by Telugu Women Dalit Writers have always been brushed inside the carpet. It has always been made sure that no one talks about women's participation in Telugu Dalit Literature. But works like GoguSyamala's *Nallapoddu* highlights the fact that how lower caste women writers like Kalavva, Lakkamma, Mallamma etc. were present in 12th Century. It talks about how Dalit Women started writing from 1890's but most of the writings are not available now.

Nallapoddu, the first comprehensive book of Dalit women's writing in Telugu, cites Philip B. Gnanaratnamma (1890-1960) as the first Dalit woman writer, who wrote and translated songs into Telugu. (Rani 15)

To talk about Telugu Dalit Women Writers and not mention about Muddupalani is next to impossible. She is a very important figure from the 18th century who wrote *Radhika Swantanam*, a poem concerning the conjugal relationship of the deity Krishna, his aunt Radha and his new wife Ila, and the jealousy of Radha. Muddupalani was a dancer, singer and poetess in the court of Pratapsimha.

In 1910 Bangalore Nagaratanamma, herself a courtesan, decided to edit and reprint *Radhika Swantanam*. In his entry on Muddupalani in his *Andhra KavulaCharitramu*, Veeresalingam, a renowned social reformer who fought for women's education and widow remarriage and against child marriage and bride price, refers to her as "that woman" throughout. While he accepts her scholarship in music, literature and other fields and that the flaws seen in her writings can also be seen in men's writings, he condemns her writing by saying that most parts of this book are not to be heard or spoken by women; because she was a prostitute by tradition, she shed the womanly shame and filled the book with sexual descriptions. He juxtaposes her with other women poets to establish that the others are family women and she is a prostitute. (Rani 14)

Telugu Dalit Literature witnessed participation of women but their participation was not recorded properly. Their names were most of the times intentionally brushed aside and sometimes women writers were hesitant to reveal their identities. *ChikkanavutunnaPaata* (1995) considered one of the first remarkable anthology of Dalit writing, incorporated zero women writers. Dalit Anthologies which followed, had some women writers registering wave of change experienced by Telugu Dalit Literature. Women writers tried to fill in the gaps by talking and mentioning things which were either intentionally or unintentionally ignored by male Dalit writers. 20th Century Telugu Dalit Literature witnessed many powerful women's participation. There were women like Panchadi Nirmala, Vimala, Ratnamala, Volga, Nalluri Rukmini, Geetanjali, R. Shashikala etc. With the mid 20th Century some serious, powerful and impactful women emerged in the picture of Telugu Dalit Literature like Latha, Ranganayakka, IllindalaSaraswatidevi, KoduriKausalyavedi etc.

Women's Participation has always been successful in bringing fruitful changes to Telugu Dalit Literature. They have posed a question on society as a whole from a broader point of view. They have not just taken into consideration caste but gender too and have

successfully highlighted how, women first have to fight against the ruthless society and then on coming back home, they have to wage a greater war against their own men. Work from a woman's pen received less attention, but slowly and gradually their voices started to get registered. Telugu Dalit Literature encapsulates voices from Dalit Women who have definitely through their work made a difference.

This paper takes into consideration two well know Telugu Dalit Women Writers and their selected work to highlight the active participation of women in literature, their status in society, their point of view to perceive things, their sufferings, their ways to handle situation, in short their own world which has been ignored not only because they belonged to a lower caste but because they were women.

K. Durgadevi (Prasadinidevi)

K. Durgadevi was born in Vijayawada. She is a retired Telugu lecturer with a M.Phil. in Telugu Literature. She possessed great interest in literature because of which she started with short story and essay writing. Her stories and essays mostly consist of critical thoughts about religion restrictions and traditions. She very confidently and fearlessly wrote about the subjugation which religious scriptures and Vedas initiate and support. Her writing takes into consideration angle dealing with oppression of women. "The Ladder to Salvation" & "Everything is in the Vedas, it Seems...The Women's Downfall too", are two of her many works that could be cited to present the finesse with which K.Durgadevi wrote about the subjugation that women have been facing since ages.

The Ladder to Salvation

"The Ladder to Salvation", a short story by K. Durgadevi presents Rajeswari a crippled poor girl as a strong & powerful protagonist. The story talks about Rajeswari's life through narrator's lens, how the narrator was provided with home and immense amount of support in the form of a crippled girl, who was struggling herself, not just at the hands of society but her family too. A very beautiful female to female bond has been shown in this story where narrator is able to understand the things which Rajeswari's own family wasn't able to and Rajeswari could decipher the problems which narrator doesn't even say out loudly. Rajeswari helped narrator in each and every way possible. She made curry for her every day, never let her cook food, accompanied her in a new city, vacated a room for her so that she doesn't have to face trouble searching a new room.

Rajeswari had her own set of problems where it seemed that her family never considered her a member. They were not empathetic towards her and considered her a money venting machine. She was a constant source of money for all her pampered good for nothing brothers and sisters.

Her younger brother Mohan was about twenty, twenty-two years old. Failed three times in intermediate, resolved that education did not suit his body and gave up studies. He did not listen though Rajeswari goaded him to learn typewriting at least. His routine was to wear patterned shirts and bellbottom pants, grow long hair, smoke and loiter all through the day. Subhadramma was very fond of him as he was her only son. Saroja stopped her studies with tenth class. She did not have any other knowledge but was very conscious of her beauty and more than that she had the desire to adorn her beauty. She wanted expensive creams and powders. When she didn't get anything, she threw tantrums, didn't eat and harassed everybody at home. Her mother was in a hurry to marry her off. Fulfilling the needs and desires of all these people to the extent possible, Rajeswari silently bore the burden of that family like Adiseshuvu. (*ibid* 102)

And when Rajeswari announced that she is going to marry „Ismail“, each and every person went against her, even the narrator though she didn’t protest outrightly. Rajeswari still didn’t give up. She answered all the questions and didn’t fail to mention how selfish her family is and how irrespective of the fact that she is crippled she too has needs and desires. Desires to have a house, a man, children and family. She accepted that like every perfectly functioning human being, she too wants to shift her responsibilities in old age. She had the audacity to look beyond caste. Ismail understood her problem sympathetically and this was all that mattered for her. She overlooked not just his religion but also the fact that he already had a wife and children. She had the power to accept non-conventional points to lead a life full of bright opportunities.

Durgadevi has beautifully portrayed a powerful mind and soul in a crippled body. Maybe she was trying to make a point that, at the end of the day it is your mind and dedication which is the biggest support system. Rajeswari has not been presented as a typical classical heroine for whom everything just by default, falls in the right place. Rather she is presented as a modern woman who, irrespective of all the flaws, obstacles, thorns in her way, knows how to make up to the finish line.

Even after her marriage, Rajeswari’s life was full of challenges. She had multiple miscarriages after which doctor gave up the hope that she will be able to conceive. But she was determined to take the risk and finally after multiple attempts delivered a healthy baby boy. Her husband supported her in innumerable ways. He got himself operated instead of Rajeswari because her body couldn’t allow any further pregnancy. She got a reliable, caring, trustworthy and loving husband. He actually loved and cared about her more than her own mother. Maybe he was her reward for looking beyond the crippled conventions.

Rajeswari was rewarded not just in the form of her husband but her son too. Shiraj (Rajeswari’s son) was the epitome of love, care and respect. He loved and respected her mother more than anyone, helped her in every way possible. The attitude of both the husband and wife to never bow down in front of useless conventions were passed on to their son who too got married to a girl from another caste in court. The girl was not even asked to change her name as Shiraj considered the act “UNNECESSARY”.

Everything is in the Vedas, it Seems...The Woman’s Downfall Too

K. Durgadevi tactfully impactful essay, “Everything is in the Vedas, it Seems...The Woman’s Downfall Too”, highlights how Vedas and Vedic period significantly contributed in framing a society full of rules, regulations and conventions which aimed to push women down, right at man’s feet. Durgadevi with her research and study, presents how it is absolutely necessary to reexamine the status of women in Vedic times impartially. She brings forward through her essay, how before the advent of Aryans, Indian Society was matriarchal in nature. The findings of excavation from Harappa and Mohenjo- Daro prove through the idols of women and mother goddesses that there was prevalence of matriarchal culture before the Aryans. She criticized the Aryans and their use of religion to disintegrate the strong matriarchal structure.

When a new system originates and nullifies the old (previous) system, the old system, its customs and traditions will not get obliterated instantaneously. It takes some time for the old system to fade away completely, for the new system to replace the old system completely and establish itself firmly. Such a transitional age witnesses an inevitable development of simultaneous existence of both the old and the new systems and a conflict between the customs and the values of the old and the new systems. The Yamauyami debate in the Rigveda reflects such development and conflict. On this basis it is clearly proved that Vedic age, especially Rigvedic age, was the time of transition and both matriarchal and

patriarchal systems existed in this age. As such it was the historical responsibility of the Aryans of that age to completely eliminate the matriarchal system and firmly establish the patriarchal system. In this attempt the religion (Vedic religion) assisted the man to completely eliminate the matriarchal system with its basic characteristics of women's liberty and to bring her to man's feet. (. *ibid* 112)

Durgadevi highlighted the fact that the Vedic religion made it a point to merge the identities of women with men. Women were not provided with space, rather they were shown as a product which was created by the supreme figure to be completely dependent on man. She brings into the notice of her readers that the Vedic Marital System is just a sexist institution which at each and every step aims to subjugate and crush woman. Through rituals like *Kanyadanam*, where authority of a woman is transferred from her father (a man) to her husband (another man) and *Pativartya*, where woman's only dharma is to be a dutiful wife, women are constantly subjugated.

The author also highlights the cruelties exhibited by Rigveda by promoting rituals like that of purdah system, Sati, burying wife with her husband because customs says that all of man's belongings are to be buried with him and the denial of Vedic education to women. Durgadevi by analyzing in details the Vedas and Vedic period concludes that the origin of women's oppression was in the Vedic age and it reached at its extreme level during the Smriti Age through rituals like Purdah system, child marriage etc.

B. Vijayabharathi

A renowned personality of Telugu Dalit Literature, she was the one who introduced Jyoti Rao Phule to Dalit Bahujan Movements in Andhra Pradesh and to Telugu Literature. She has played multiple roles as far as her professional field is concerned. She has been a teacher at variant levels, Deputy Director and Director of Telugu Akademie. She has been an active participant in writing and publishing books. One of the very important books by her is *Babasaheb Ambedkar's Life Story*. She has been an influential compiler, translator and editor for Dalit Telugu Literature. She has edited Ambedkar's writing translated in Telugu.

Vijayabharathi also wrote *Puranalu-Kulavyavastha*, which in English means „Epics-The Caste System“. Through this book she has highlighted and criticized the role of *Puranas* in protection of the caste system. This book was published in 2002 by Hyderabad Book Trust in multiple volumes, 2 stories from which have been taken and talked about here in this paper.

The Dasavataras: The Puranas

„The Dasavataras“ refers to the ten primary (I.e. full or complete) incarnations (avatars) of Vishnu, the Hindu god of preservation which has Rigvedic origins. Vishnu is said to descend in the form of an avatar to restore cosmic order. The word Dashavatara derives from dasameaning „ten“ and avatar, roughly equivalent to „incarnation“. ²

Vijayabharathi by borrowing the word Dasavataras from Puranas surprisingly went against Puranas only. She through this piece of writing seems to criticize the very existence of *Puranas*. She outrightly and fearlessly critiques the fact that how for the convenience of human beings living on the face of earth, *Puranas* are manipulated time and again. Things are added and subtracted time to time and the conventions which *Puranas* pretend to put forward for the sake of society and its residents actually benefit few selected sections.

²<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dashavatara>

Vijayabharathi highlights how the writers of *Puranas* have immense amount of convincing skills because of which they manipulate minds of millions of people. They have been able to preserve the rotten subjugating caste system because of their manipulating capabilities. Vijayabharathi puts a question mark on many things and institutions by the end of her work.

Caste, family and village- isn't it true that these three have regulated the individual and the society from the ancient times? Isn't it true that those who didn't follow these regulations were excommunicated and punished in this world and were told that there will be more dreadful punishments in the other world? Isn't it a bitter truth that some sections were pushed away from education and knowledge? Isn't it true that even today it is considered a crime to discuss the issues of oppressions? (*ibid* 69)

Now one thing which enters into every mind which reads Vijaya Bharathi's "The Dasavataras: The Puranas" is what is the purpose of the title then? When all she had to do was to criticize the very base of *Puranas*, then why did she even bother to borrow a strong term from the same *Puranas* which she is criticizing from the very start of her essay? The answer to this maybe lies in a very short word called „pun“.

Vijayabharathi by borrowing „*Dasavataras*“ which literally means ten forms or ten types of incarnation, passed a tongue in cheek comment on the characteristic of *Puranas*. Since Puranas set up conventions, rules, regulations and the very structure of the Aryan Society, they are supposed to be everything except manipulative and fickle. They should not change their forms with the change in the power set up of the society. In the formula of operation of society, *Puranas* should be constant and not variables.

But here what we observe is the changeable nature of *Puranas* and these changes are not for good. The change here comes to benefit few creamy & privileged sections of society. *Puranas* actually work and change to make their life easy. They just like Vishnu, have *Dasavatars*, the only difference is here it is not for the benefit of society.

Incarnation of the Tortoise

Kurma (: कूर्म; Kūrma, 'turtle', 'tortoise'), also known as 'KurmaRaja' ('Tortoise King') is an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. Originating in Vedic literature such as the Yajurveda as being synonymous with the Saptrishi called Kasyapa, Kurma is most commonly associated in post-Vedic literature such as the Puranas with the legend of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, referred to as the Samudra Manthan. Also synonymous with Akupara, the world-turtle supporting the Earth, Kurma is listed as the second incarnation of the Dashavatara the ten principal avatars of Vishnu.³

B. Vijayabharathi in "Incarnation of the Tortoise", through the story mentioned in Puranas about *Kurmavatra* explains the helpless situation of Dalit in society. She draws a comparison by narrating the story of „*Samudra Manthan*“ (churning of ocean) where both „*Asur*“ (devil) and angels participated in order to fetch nectar out of the ocean. *Asurs* knew the art of medicines, whereas angels didn't have the skill in this field. On being instructed by Brahma to take help from *Asurs*, angels moved forward cleverly and asked for their help.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurma>

After all the hardwork the nectar came out. Now what happened to this nectar is not an easy question to deal with. There have been different stories in different *Puranas* about it. According to one *Purana*, the angels took everything and *asurs* took *Varuni* (a virgin who emerged from churning). On the other hand, another *Purana* claims that both the groups relaxed after the *manthan*(churning) and with Vishnu's help by tricking Asurs, most of the wealth and nectar was handed over to angels. Vishnu transformed into *Jaganmohini* and tricked *Asuras* through her beauty and skill. Rahu was beheaded by Vishnu as he was found sitting in the row of Angels, but he was somehow provided a space in solar system as a planet by Brahma.

Though Rahu was saved and given the due respect, what about other *Asurs* ? What about their hardwork and struggle? Does Brahma even took that into consideration? This situation could be linked to contemporary circumstances where few Dalit are provided with respectable position in society and are used as examples for a slowly emerging casteless society whereas the truth is that maximum people from lower caste struggle to live an unbiased life in a biased society.

The pathetic situation of *Asurs* could be compared to Dalit. They toiled hard for the nectar, worked in an equal manner as that of angels, but at the end what did they get? Most of them were not even ready to form an alliance with Angels, but were somehow lured in the deal by the help of Brahma. They trusted Angles and worked for the benefit of all, but what did they get? Answer is quite simple, exploitation at the hands of the so called „Angels“.

Similar thing take place with Dalit on daily basis. They are lured in some kind of deal where they are promised most of the time, equal status by the high caste people. They use votes, resources, capabilities of Dalit and in return they don't even get a peck of what they promised. Dalit usually get stuck in this viscous trap of exploitation time and again.

In the story of *Samudra Manthan*, angels drank and hid maximum amount of nectar. They made sure that none is left for *Asurs*. A parallel can be drawn here too. Upper caste people through religion and in the name of conventions snatch away productive sources like education, money, property, land, jobs etc. from the lower caste people. They hide it from the eyes of lower caste people claiming full ownership of each and every kind of opportunities. Lower caste people are exploited at each and every level. Conventions provide a helping to high caste Brahmins everywhere, every time and everyday but they make sure to cut all kinds of support from the life of lower caste people. Vijayabharathi very beautifully concluded her essay.

Stories about the power of Kurmavantara were propagated. Kurma Purana came into existence with methods and ways of pleasing Kurmadeva. Other puranas also made these methods popular. If we worship him on ShuddhaDvadasi in Pushya month, we can get the blessing of kurmadeva, it seems. Doubtlessly, the charity in this worship goes to the good brahmin. (. *ibid* 73)

Conclusion

Telugu Dalit Literature saw its emergence after the influence of Maharashtra „Dalit Panthers Movement“. Initially Telugu Dalit Literature was all about Gandhian thought and imitation of mainstream form and content. But slowly and gradually from the mid 1980's Dalit anger, protests, voice for equal status and demand for unbiased society started reflecting in Dalit Literature. It soon gained momentum and like any other literature had its ups and downs. It managed to successfully impact society and its resident by talking about the subjugated people. They started talking about the life of colonized I.e. the Dalit.

But somehow, they forgot to include women in this colonized status, maybe they also knew that women were not just colonized rather they were doubly colonized. Dalit

Women waged an altogether different war against not just caste-based subjugating society but also against the society which worked on patriarchal conventions. They struggled against all the odds and managed to raise their voice strongly against the double subjugation they were going through.

Dalit Telugu Women through their beautiful writing style registered a powerful impact on the hearts and minds of people and made it a point for all the successive generations that Dalit Telugu Literature is incomplete without their writing.

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