

A Critical Study of Select Poems of Shankar Painter

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Abstract:

Since Literature displays the social, historical, and political events fictionally, it can be a torch-bearer for human beings. It makes us learners of the anguish and agony of some people who are victimized by the old-age traditions and superstitiously conventional social setup. It can be safely said that Indian society is a traditional society in which an individual's status is determined by his caste and birth. S/he is governed by customs, traditions, norms, and values. The Indian social setup is essentially based on a hierarchy that differentiates the people of the nation in many caste and sub-castes.

Dalit Literature, a new branch of Indian Literature is enriched by many works of Dalit as well as Non-Dalit writers. They express their experiences in the most realistic way by using their native speech. They insist on the importance of living conditions and record case by case what they see as it existed dispassionately. Debating the anguish against caste discrimination, this paper analyses the literary contribution of Shankar Painter in the development of Dalit poetry.

Keywords: Dalit, society, literature, exploitation, poetry, agony, tension

As a reflection of socio-cultural, political, economic, historical, and religious realities, literature plays a vital role in shaping the lives of humans. It can be a vehicle to transmit ideas, ideologies, and ideals. It can be a medium of expressing our deep-seated feelings and emotions. More powerfully, it can be a weapon to voice our oppressions, exploitations, and resistance. Shakespeare in his play, *The Tempest* portrayed the character of

Caliban who resists and proclaims that he can use it to curse the intruder. The great dramatist makes Caliban articulate his resistance and protest. In the Second Scene of the First Act of the play, he exclaims to Miranda and Prospero:

You taught me language, and my
profit don't, Is I know how to
curse.

Since Literature displays the social, historical, and political events fictionally, it can be a torch-bearer for human beings. It makes us learners of the anguish and agony of some people who are victimized by the old-age traditions and superstitiously conventional social setup. It can be safely said that Indian society is a traditional society in which an individual's status is determined by his caste and birth. S/he is governed by customs, traditions, norms, and values. The Indian social setup is essentially based on a hierarchy that differentiates the people of the nation in many caste and sub-castes.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's most influential "Can the Subaltern Speak?" encourages us to examine the texts written on the poorest sections of Indian society. It inspires us to read their literary works to enlighten ourselves about their pain and agony. Subaltern or Dalit Literature is an outcome of the cry and pain, anguish and agony, tensions and conflicts of the writers who faced and experienced discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and marginalization from the mainstream. Indian Literature reflects the nuances of various diachronic paroxysms molded through a diverse range of articulations prompted by the varied contours of the Nation. Dalit literature is one such wing of Indian Literature born out of pain and suffering. The recent spurt in Dalit literature in India is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of

discrimination, violence, and poverty of the Dalit. Often, with the religious and social sanction, these experiences have for long been silenced and marginalized as unliterary. The growing corpus of Dalit texts - poems, novels, and autobiographies- however, seeks to ratify this while describing the nuances of Dalit cultures. Having begun in Maharashtra and Gujarat, Dalit literature has today taken substantial shape in a variety of Indian Languages such as Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, and Malayalam.

Dalit Literature, a new branch of Indian Literature is enriched by many works of Dalit as well as Non-Dalit writers. They express their experiences in the most realistic way by using their native speech. They insist on the importance of living conditions and record case by case what they see as it existed dispassionately. Their concern is to change Indian socio-cultural realities which were badly shaped by blind beliefs and superstitions. They raise their voices against the marginalization of the weaker sections of society. There have been enormous writings on caste by authors from different disciplines in India like Bama and Gunasekaran in Tamil, Om Prakash Valmiki, Mohan Das Naimisharay, Kausalya Baisantri in Hindi, Urmila

Pawar in Marathi.

Munshi Premchand, Amrita Nagar, Mannu Bhandari, Mulk Raj Anand, Salman Rushdie, Om Prakash Valmiki, and many other writers brought out social purpose and criticism rather than mere entertainment in their writings. Mahasweta Devi, Basudev Sunani, Sivakami, Poomani, and Arundhati Roy followed them in their literary works on Dalit. The main themes of their writings are social disabilities, caste system, economic inequality, contemporary cruelties, and the cultural assertion that can be uniquely entitled as the struggle for identity. The writings replicate the resistance, issue of identity, experience of pain, and communal distinctiveness.

Today Dalit literature in Gujarat itself is established as a genre that can never be ignored. Poetry comes first followed by other kinds of writing such as autobiography, drama, criticism, etc. Gujarati Dalit poets attempt all major forms of verse in their work. Though their themes are different from the mainstream poets, more or less, they employ the same forms.

Dalit poets use forms like free – verse, sonnet, bhajan, song, *gazal*, haiku, ballad, etc. to convey their message. It is seen that most Dalit poets generally rely on free – verse. Poets like Dalpat Chauhan, Praveen Gadhvi, Harish Mangalam, Sahil Parmar, Shankar Painter, Neerav Patel, Kishan Sosa, Arvind Vegada, Madhukant Kalpit have been composing poetry in established forms.

Shankar Painter was a prominent Gujarati Dalit poet who died recently in 2020 at the age of 74. He was a significant contributor in the development of Gujarati Dalit Poetry. A well-known Gujarati Writer, Raju Solanki told that “He was not as literate as some of the other known Dalit poets in Gujarati. He started working as a painter in the oil and gas company, and subsequently, he started writing poems by the name Shankar Painter. His poems mark a powerful expression of caste-based oppression; that too in a typical Mehsani dialect (of North Gujarat).”

He expressed day-to-day socio-cultural, religious, and political issues of Dalit life. He had used traditional resources culture in very innovative ways. He was one of those Dalit poets who have been composing poetry before the advent of the Dalit Panther movement in Gujarat. His songs and satirical poems reveal the

social conditions of Dalits and express his concerns in rustic language and folk style. The manner in which he borrows Dalit folk culture makes him a different poet from the whole range of Gujarati Dalit poets. His satiric and double-edged songs expose brutal atrocities on Dalits and offer resistance to a caste worldview. His poetry volumes *Bungiyo Vage* (1984), *Dateda na Devata* (1989), and *Hachche Hachchu Bol ne Fadya?* (2010) are mostly written in folk song style and in typical Mehsani dialect, a language spoken in North Gujarat.

In his poem, *Bungiyo Vage*, Shankar Painter raises his voice against the oppression of the upper caste people of India. He inspires and instigates the untouchables to protest against their marginalization and exploitation. His voice is the voice of protest. His resistance against the psychological, mental, and physical torture by the upper class of India is reflected in this poem. The poem also exposes implicitly that the poor class of untouchables in India were treated in inhuman ways by the traditional and superstitious people of the nation. It is a classic case of local citizens of a nation victimizing their brothers and sisters. Painter also points out how the Dalit women were treated like animals and were exploited and raped brutally by the people of the upper castes. He also mentioned that the Dalits have to protest and economic conditions are not a hurdle for their movement for equality. It is a

poem of revolution for equality and respect.

Articulating his socio-political, cultural, and historical concerns by creatively using the medium of folk, Shankar Painter successfully created a public space through his poems of protest. His poem “Vethiya Mazur”, expresses his protest against the system which produces laborers. He also mentions the poor conditions of these laborers. In his famous poem, “Cham Iya Atlu Fati Jyo Chh” he satirically raises his voice against the physical and mental tortures by the Zamindars on Dalits. He pointed out the tragic conditions them. He mentions that the upper caste people in India are very powerful economically and politically and that is also one of the reasons for the marginalization and exploitation of the poor and lower caste people in India. Commenting on the system of slavery in the Indian social setup, he displays the threats given to the Dalits by the upper caste people.

In his poem “Tod Chapaniya”, he prays the Dalits to leave their age-old beliefs and traditions. He requests them not to beg for bread but work hard and protest against the victimization and exploitation. He suggests leaving the superstitious social trends and beliefs and awaken themselves. Satirically, he also comments on the so-called religious and cultural practices which divide the people and exploit them. The poet also mentions how the Dalits are discriminated in their

own country. He suggests the “othering” of the Dalits by the villagers. In his poem, “Chen Jara Na”, he points out how the fellow traveler inquires about the caste of the person sitting near him. It satirically presents the mindsets of the upper caste people who try to identify the caste of the lower-class people by using intelligent strategies. Painter points out these strategies and humorously describes their curiosity to know about the caste of anyone sitting nearby. He also implies the pitiful conditions of the lower caste people who did not have the right to sit near the upper caste person. The tradition may have changed after the freedom of India but it is also the fact that the upper caste people are not comfortable when they sit near a Dalit.

He portrays a picture of a common and local, rustic and rural, innocent and ignorant musician in the character of Kaliyo in his poem, “Kaliyo Dholi”. He is everywhere. He serves all. He works on all occasions of human life in a village. Be it the birth of a child or the death of a parent, Kaliyo is there to serve. And yet he is the one in the village who is the most abused, accused, blamed, and exploited because he is Dalit. His service and art is needed but he is marginalized and treated like the “other”. The most-felt pity of his life as described in the poem is the event when he has to give one of the shoes back in the hands of a powerful upper-caste man though he has hit him using the same.

To conclude, it can be said that the

poems of Shankar Painter are the articulation reflections and representation of the predicament of marginality, identity crises, oppression, and recognition of the Dalit. Major of his poems pirouette around the burning issues like caste system, identity issue, corruption, violence prevalent in the Indian social structure.

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