
UNIT 3 JYOTI LANJEWAR

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

- understand Women and Dalit Writing;
- analyse critically two poems of Jyoti Lanjewar.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will acquaint you with the debates around Dalit writing. It will provide you with a theoretical methodology to understand the evolution of writing by Dalit women and Dalit feminist writers. You will also be familiarized with the terms “difference”, “Dalit feminist standpoint” and “diversality”. This will be followed by an analysis of Jyoti Lanjewar’s work with special reference to the poems “Caves” and “Leadership”.

3.2 WOMEN AND DALIT WRITING: SOME DEBATES

The discussion around the discourse of women’s writing acquired new significance with interventions from Dalit writing. In the recent past, questions regarding writings by Dalit women and those by feminist orientation have appeared leading to a reformulation of the structure of Dalit feminist thought. The most pivotal article in this context is Gopal Guru’s “Dalit Women Talk Differently” that appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1995.

3.2.1 Dalit Women and the Feminist Movement: Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege

This section will introduce contemporary debates around Dalit feminist theory—Gopal Guru’s idea of the distinctness of Dalit women’s voice, Sharmila Rege’s

critique of this uniqueness and suggestion of a Dalit feminist standpoint as well as Nivedita Menon's idea of "diversality". Gopal Guru's article, "Dalit Women Speak Differently" brought to the fore the specific context of Dalit women. It triggered a debate about the relationship of the oppressed women to the feminist movement, and reconstituted it on the lines of "difference". In his argument, Guru distinguishes the voice of Dalit women from all others and presents it within a distinct context—this he labels as "different" from other constructs used for feminist discussions. In his article, he also interprets the issue of the women marginalized along caste lines as a consequence of both external and internal factors in our society. In the case of the former, a non-Dalit framework of feminism claims to explore Dalit women's issues, but really speaking does so without understanding their socio-economic and political context. The internal factors refer to the exploitation of these women by patriarchal social structures. Consequently, Dalit women's writing needs to be analysed along coordinates that must be distinct from those usually employed to understand women's concerns. The feminist movement does speak for them but according to Guru, it lacks an understanding of the specifics (socio-political) of their context; in his opinion, therefore, it remains non-Dalit and middle class. As one sees, writing by Dalit women articulates exploitation within patriarchal structures such as the family. He explains:

The claim for women's solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste and Dalit women. The latent manifestations of these contradictions involve subtle forms of caste discrimination as practiced by upper caste upper class women against Dalit women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of Dalit women in rural areas... They consider the feminist theory developed by non-Dalit women as unauthentic since it does not capture their reality. This comprehension gets clearly reflected in the 12-point agenda adopted by the NFDW and in several papers presented by the Dalit women at the Maharashtra Dalit Women's Conference held in Pune in May 1995. Dalit women define the concept of Dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting the claim of upper caste women to Dalithood. Dalit women activists quote Phule and Ambedkar to invalidate the attempt of a non-Dalit woman to non-Dalit identity. (EPW 2548)

For Guru, there are various reasons for understanding the distinctiveness of the Dalit women. The first is the "ultimate subordination" of the woman's voice to other powerful voices in the peasant movement. The second reason is that the "moral economy" practiced by the upper class did not apply at all to the case of the Dalit women for various reasons. In the case of the third factor, as cited above, Guru mentions how the contradictions between Dalit women and upper castes are not taken into account. The relationship between the two is skewed in favour of the privileged and this aspect needs to be interrogated. Therefore, due to a combination of reasons, the Dalit woman's voice gets subsumed within other voices and what we have is the non-Dalit woman speaking on her behalf. He further explains the internal factor of marginalization by Dalit patriarchy:

In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit leaders have always subordinated, and at times suppressed, an independent political expression of Dalit women. This political marginalization has been openly condemned by Dalit women at the regional conferences of Dalit women and at the

Delhi meet. It is not only in the political arena that Dalit women face exclusion. In the cultural field, for instance, Dalit women have criticized their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene. Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of Dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in Dalit literary conferences and institutions. (*EPW* 2549)

Guru explains how the question of the Dalit woman must be examined from her point of view which would necessitate a re-articulation of the frame of reference itself. According to him, such a position contains “emancipatory potential”, and has a more “encompassing view of reality”. When looked at from within the context of “difference,” the identity of the Dalit woman finds expression and articulation. It is this “talking differently” that forms the identity of the Dalit woman in Gopal Guru’s theorization.

In response to this argument, another contemporary theorist and scholar, Sharmila Rege who has recently written, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios*, argues the matter differently. In her article, “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position”, Rege gives another dimension to the discussion. The article was initially presented as a paper at a seminar on Dalit visions organized by the Vikas Adhayayan Kendra in Pune in March 1998. In it, Rege raises a crucial point about the act of constituting the Dalit woman question as distinct since it separates the cause of Dalit women from the larger feminist movement. The Dalit woman question, when considered as particular, could then be raised only by the Dalit woman. Rege cites the example of the black woman in Western feminism. Arising out of a confluence of literary theories like Post-structuralism, Deconstruction and Postmodernism, the black woman is situated within a distinct politics and as a result both feminism and the white woman remain silent on the race question. Rege analyses the complexity of the question of the Dalit woman and the way in which it is addressed both by the women’s organisations of the Left and the feminist movement. She elaborates:

Thus in retrospect, it is clear that while the left party-based women’s organizations collapsed caste into class, the autonomous women’s groups collapsed caste into sisterhood—both leaving Brahmanism unchallenged. The movement has addressed issues concerning women of the Dalit, tribal and minority communities and substantial gains have been achieved but a feminist politics centering around the women of the most marginalized communities could not emerge. The history of agitations and struggles of the second wave of the women’s movement articulated strong anti-patriarchal positions on different issues. Issues of sexuality and sexual politics which are crucial for a feminist politics remained largely within an individualistic and lifestyle frame. Issues of sexuality are intrinsically linked to caste and addressal of sexual politics without a challenge to Brahmanism results in lifestyle feminisms. (WS-43)

Mainstream feminism is therefore seen as wanting and limited in scope by both the scholars. But where Gopal Guru places the recovery of the lost voice within a structure of “difference”, Rege rightly challenges it and presents an alternative problematic for the Dalit woman question and for enhancing the larger concerns of the overall women’s movement. As Rege avers:

Though Guru's argument is well taken and we agree that Dalit women must name the difference, to privilege knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience on claims of authenticity may lead to a narrow identity politics. Such a narrow frame may in fact limit the emancipatory potential of the Dalit women's organizations and also their epistemological standpoints. (WS-44)

Rege also explains how it will be valuable to actually present the concerns of Dalit women through what she calls a "Dalit feminist standpoint"—one that will be located within the lives of these women on the margins and will hence be emancipatory.

This position argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group. It is obvious that the subject/agent of Dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory, i.e., that the category 'Dalit woman' is not homogeneous — such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of Dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality—all construct each other. Thus, we agree that the Dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions. The Dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit woman, we recognise, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and Utopias and the struggles of the marginalized. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-Dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' Dalit women but they can reinvent themselves as 'Dalit feminist'. Such a position, therefore, avoids the narrow alley of direct experience-based 'authenticity' and narrow Identity politics'. For many of us non-Dalit feminists, such a standpoint is more emancipatory in that it rejects more completely the relations of rule in which we participated (i.e., the Brahmanical, middle class biases of earlier feminist standpoints are interrogated). Thus, adopting a Dalit feminist standpoint position means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning the 'voice' that we as feminists had gained in the 1980s. This process, we believe is one of transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects. (WS-45)

The important point to take away from Sharmila Rege's argument is that any positionality that speaks about the lives of Dalit women must be located within their specific context. As a result, this construct should be analyzed as one that is "heterogeneous" and "contradictory". Thus the anxiety of the woman oppressed by caste has to be understood from within her social construct and should not be seen as unique and hence isolated. Further, it should not mean that the Dalit feminist standpoint is based on lived experience alone. Rege recreates the feminist

field to articulate the Dalit feminist standpoint and allows for a rethink in feminist discourse. According to her, one must explain the way in which the Dalit feminist standpoint will be interventionist within the feminist field and create a wider theoretical and practical expanse for both Dalit and non-Dalit women.

Feminism must expand its frontiers to speak about the question of the Dalit woman. Anupama Rao points out how this debate has been extended with Chaya Datar's critique of this argument and a focus on "the centrality of economic exploitation and market fundamentalism in disenfranchising women" (Rao 4). Rao elaborates the way in which writings by Dalit women have challenged the "masculine register of *dalit sahitya*" (Rao 30). The feminist scholar Nivedita Menon presents on a positive note the point that "diversality" is a more inclusive term to address the concerns of Dalit women than "intersectionality". The latter is a term used frequently in feminist discourse. "Intersectionality" has been used to analyze identity as constituted at the intersection of a plurality of discourses. The understanding being that identity and the woman question need to be analyzed from the point of view of caste, class and other factors. However, the feminist scholar Nivedita Menon finds this to be a term that has limitations. According to her, it emerges within the construct of law and deals with issue of race and gender. However, in the context of India the vectors to determine women's identity are many. In place of intersectionality, she advocates the idea of "Diversality". Combining Rege's Dalit feminist stand with the idea of diversality gives us a methodological tool with which to place the discussion around Dalit women and their work. Menon explains how feminism must take cognizance of the idea that "women" is neither a stable or homogeneous category and nor are "caste, race or class" (Arya 25). She cites the example of western theories and identifies in them a kind of unidirectionality by which 'their' theories apply to the contemporary reality in general. But 'our' theories are not cited as an example to understand the feminist discourse in the west. In her critique of the idea of intersectionality, Menon states:

Feminist solidarities as well as disjunctures in solidarity must be seen as conjunctural, fluid and radically negotiable. No universal nature can capture the conjunctural nature of political engagement; and (2) I suggest that as we saw with the governmentalisation of gender, the easy acceptability of intersectionality for international funding agencies should give us pause. The term intersectionality seems to work not for feminism, but for state and international funding agencies...Feminism is heterogeneous and internally differentiated across contexts. This recognition makes it impossible to articulate a simple feminist position on any issue, and alerts us to what Walter Mignolo has termed 'diversality'—the recognition of diversity as a universal condition (2000). Analyses that begin with the assumption of a unified and homogenous category of 'woman' may well be productively opened up to other identities by the intersectionality framework; but analyses that begin with the understanding that identity is provisional and conjunctural, would find, I have argued, that the intersectionality framework freezes notions of pre-existing individual, woman and other identities. (Arya 38)

Menon's postulation of 'diversality' as a methodological tool helps us understand that the universal frameworks are limited and wanting. It is therefore important

to reorient the feminist movement by looking at it from the perspective of Rege's idea of the Dalit feminist standpoint and Menon's idea of diversity. This will help us understand how at any given point in time, things can clash in contradictory ways. The Dalit woman's standpoint is a considered move towards diversity to understand how at any given moment, the issues of caste, class identity, and patriarchy clash to raise questions we would have otherwise ignored.

3.3 MARATHI DALIT POETRY

Marathi Dalit writing can be traced back to the Bhakti movement of the fourteenth century and the reform movements of the nineteenth century. Writings by Jotiba Phule in the nineteenth and by B.R. Ambedkar in the twentieth century articulated the context of the Dalits in literary expression. In the post-Independence period, Dalit writing in Marathi gained impetus with the work of Baburao Bagul in the 1960s with his short story collection *When I Had Concealed My Caste*. Poetry by writers such as Narayan Surve combined a Marxist outlook with the Dalit context giving new directions to this writing. Articles in the magazine *Asmitadarsha* introduced debates around Dalit issues and their representation in writing. The 1970s saw the beginning of the Dalit Panther movement with Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar in the forefront (Dangle xl). Dhasal's poetry collection *Golapitha* (1972) shook people out of their complacency with an unabashed expression and a totally different style of writing. The bold images and vocabulary used by the male poets around the time made their writing an anathema for many in the field. Where the spotlight remained on the works by the Dalit panthers, the writing by women had emerged around this time in a powerful manner and begun to speak in new ways. In the article, "How three generations of Dalit women writers saw their identities and struggles?" translator of Dalit writings, Maya Pandit has pointed out how Dalit women entered the domain of the written word around the 1970s—

From Baby Kamble, the first Dalit woman to write her autobiography, to the new generation women writers like Pradnya Pawar, Chaya Koregaonkar, Shilpa Kamble, one can see a clear progression in the way they have interpreted and re-constructed the realities of their gendered existence... The most significant aspect was their indomitable spirit, which took pride in their being Dalit Mahar women and which protested strongly against Hindu religious doctrine and the caste oppression it had generated. Their portrayal of the graded patriarchy among the Dalit communities reflected a rare and humane maturity. They did not denounce their men, but tried to explain the violence directed at them as the only outlet available to their men suffering under the yoke of caste oppression. Significantly, they were markedly different from their male counterparts, both in the perception of gendered inequalities and a sense of agency.

Pandit also poses the question of whether the writing of the women was different from that of men. According to Pandit, writing by women was more sensitive and nuanced. It made use of the cultural practices of their lives which were known to them. This was unlike the position held by the men who rarely saw them as agents of transformation in society. In *Dalit Personal Narratives*, Raj Kumar has explained how most upper caste writers of Indian literature have ignored the interventions made by Dalit women and have restricted their

understanding to women as victims. However, women have at all times made their presence felt. Lack of education, knowledge of the written word might have prevented clear articulation but this does not diminish the struggles of women who refused to remain passive. Like Pandit, Kumar, too, traces many generations of women writers from those that lay “emphasis on women’s rights” in the first phase to the second phase of “emphasis on women’s liberation and autonomy” (216). Raj Kumar stresses on the need for a more unified Dalit women’s movement. According to him lack of education is one of the primary reasons for the absence of a concrete Dalit women’s movement—

Despite nearly five decades of literacy programmes and formal educational facilities available in independent India, the number of literates among Dalit women is abysmally low. A majority of them strive to lead a simple and ordinary life due to rampant poverty in their families. Poverty forces them to abandon education and work hard to find ways and means to survive. Illiterate women cannot write their autobiographies. But, as there are examples, these women, given a chance, can narrate their joys as well as sorrows to someone who can help document their narrative voices. (210)

Raj Kumar’s argument combines the theoretical with a more practical approach taking into account the complexities of lived life. He also traces the Dalit women’s movement to E.V. Ramasamy Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement, one that helped women deal with “self-respect, marriages and measures of birth-control” (214). The Ambedkarite philosophy and way of life gave confidence to the women. These ideas are reflected in Lanjewar’s poetry.

3.3.1 Jyoti Lanjewar (1950-2013)

Jyoti Lanjewar was a Dalit feminist poet from Maharashtra. Born to a middle class family in Nagpur, Lanjewar did her PhD in Marathi. She taught in Shree Binzani City College, Nagpur University. She was a member of the Republican party of India (Athawale) and presided over the women’s front. She participated in the Namantar Andolan (1978-1994), a struggle launched to change the name of Marathwada University, Pune to Babasaheb Ambedkar University. It was finally changed to Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. *Disha* was her first poetry collection followed by *Jhep*. Lanjewar was deeply aware of the issues of caste, class and gender and the way in which women were exploited due to a combination of these factors.

Jyoti Lanjewar’s poetry

Lanjewar belongs to the second generation of Dalit women writers. Like her contemporaries Kumud Pawde (1938-) and Urmila Pawar (1945-), she wrote with conviction. According to Pandit, these women came into an urban and industrialized world that gave them a “fractured modernity”. On the one hand, the aftermath of the green revolution compelled migration to the cities and on the other, conversion to Buddhism gave them “a rare self-confidence”. In this context, Dalit women evolved their own style of feminism as against the Savarna feminism of the 1980s that ignored the caste question. According to Maya Pandit:

They (Dalit women) were quite “different” from their predecessors in the way they saw their lives constructed by a fractured modernity. Their

voice is modern, intensely individual, acutely sentient and deliberately audacious. They challenged the Varna system and proposed a critique of patriarchal ideologies and practices in their own communities as well as in the society around them. They were strongly ‘feminist’ and in that they were distinctly different from their men; but at the same time, they were quite ‘different’ from the upper class/ upper caste women in the feminist movement who demanded reforms in rape laws and in the family institution as their political agenda. But did not see caste as one of the foundational principles of social structures that generated that violence. This is where the Dalit women’s consciousness registered a strong protest. Their incisive critique of the Savarna feminist movement of the eighties exposed the inadequacies, and emphasized the organic connection between caste and gender oppression. They provided alternative perceptions of the construction of Dalit women’s identities in post-Independence India, where the nexus between caste, and patriarchy dominated.

Jyoti Lanjewar has written many poems such as “Disha”, “Why were you born?”, “Sting”, “Mother” and many more. The exploitation of the woman at the level of caste, class and patriarchy are the subjects of her poetry. Her poems express the impact of the Ambedkarite movement on Dalit thinking. She is deeply aware of the battles to be fought by Dalit women at many levels. “Mother”, is one of the most powerful poems that present this idea. She remembers the ‘mother’ who derives strength and fortitude from Ambedkarite thinking and tells her daughter to follow the same path. “Mother” has been described by Eleanor Zelliot as a “social and revolutionary” poem. Descriptions of the life of a Dalit woman in “Mother” disturb the reader. Take a look at this excerpt from “Mother”:

putting a five paise coin
on a little hand
saying ‘go eat candy’
taking the little bundle from the cradle to your breast
saying “Study, become an Ambedkar”
and let the baskets fall from my hands...

...

I have seen you
on a crowded street with a market basket on your head
trying always to keep your head covered with the end of your sari
chasing anyone who nudged you deliberately
with your sandal in your hand...

I have seen you working until sunset
piercing the darkness to turn toward home,
then forcing from the door
that man who staggered in from the hooch hut.....

I have seen you
at the front of the Long March
the end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist
shouting “Change the name”
taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised hands
going to jail with head held high.....
(Anand and Zelliott 100-102)

“Mother” describes the travails of a Dalit woman as also her participation in the “Long March”. It was a march that took place in 1979 after the government’s reversal of the decision to rename Marathwada University in the name of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. According to the translators, Martinez, Thorat and Zelliott, “Jyoti Lanjewar’s entire poem is a pain of praise to the hardworking Dalit women who in spite of illiteracy and many forms of back-breaking labour give great strength to the dalit movement begun by Ambedkar” (Anand and Zelliott 103). At the same time, the poem’s vivid descriptions of a Dalit woman’s life leave on us strong impact. This voice of protest characterize her other poems also such as “Caves”.

3.4 “THE CAVES”: AN ANALYSIS

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
in the rock of my heart
I must tread this forest with wary steps
Eyes fixed on the changing times
The tables have turned now
Protests spark
Now here
Now there.
I have been silent all these years
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
of human rights
How did we ever reach to this place
this land which was never mother to us?
Which never gave us
even the life of cats and dogs?
I hold their unpardonable sins as witness
and turn, here and now.
a rebel.

This poem is an example of protest poetry and must be read against the background of Dalit oppression from the Dalit feminist standpoint. It is the voice of a Dalit

woman speaking against the oppression and subjugation taking place at multiple levels. The poem questions the atrocities inflicted on Dalits by a society regulated by powerful people. There is also a lot of pain that is visible in this poem as can be seen in the lines:

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
in the rock of my heart

In the opening lines, the poet speaks of “inhuman atrocities” that have carved out caves in the poet’s heart. The atrocities refer to the violence inflicted on the Dalits and their marginalization. We need to interrogate “their” in the first line. Who or what does “their” refer to? It refers to the upper caste, the society, in short, the powers that oppress. Likewise, “Inhuman” indicates the brutal manner in which Dalits are treated; it is a sort of behaviour that would not be meted out to a human being in normal circumstances. It also says a lot about people who inflict violence. What kind of people are they? Their insensitivity and barbaric nature come to the fore. Strangely, they are considered to be civilized. But Lanjewar’s citing of the inhuman atrocities exposes how they are barbaric and cynical in nature. Lanjewar’s is a woman’s voice and, therefore, a hidden implication about the atrocities inflicted on the Dalit woman gets stressed. The poem works at two levels—the oppression of Dalits and the exploitation of Dalit women in particular.

In the poem, the poet refers to the woman’s journey in life as a walk in the forest. She needs to walk carefully. It seems as if she is worried about an impending danger. Each step has to be taken with caution. One is tempted to ask as to why caution is required. The poet observes “change” around her and looks out for it. As her gaze remains fixed on the changing currents, it appears that the poet wants to see what change will mean for her in the time to come.

The idea of change is mapped at this juncture. The tide has turned and the shift in situation is marked as one where the existing system has been toppled. The oppressed people have found a voice—that of protest. The resulting change is that of protest against the inhuman atrocities the oppressed were compelled to bear. The poet also maps Dalit histories by mentioning how they have been quiet all these years. They had been fed on what was traditionally thought to be right. Clearly, who decides the right? The answer quite obviously is: it is the people in power. The present statement might work at two levels. It is the entire upper caste Brahmanical practice that conditions the Dalits into believing that the upper castes are superior to them. The Dalits are trained to accepting and giving consent to the ‘assumed supremacy’ of the upper caste people. Lanjewar’s poem is a protest poem resisting this idea. At another level we need to bring in the Dalit feminist standpoint. This will help mark the oppression of the Dalit woman—she is doubly marginalized as compared with the male. Her oppression as Dalit is coupled with instances of beating and torture both within the family structure and outside of it. That is why the Dalit feminist standpoint discussed in the previous section needs to be thought over.

Here, we might remain conscious of the fact that the writer is a woman. She takes a decisive leap as she plans to fan the flames of “human rights”. Lanjewar uses the idea of human rights as a point of entry into the structure of protest. Human rights will destroy the structure of the said right created to a whole section

of the productive lot. The poet challenges the atrocities committed on the oppressed by using the framework of human rights.

The question to be raised is—why do the socially oppressed not question the given rubric of the right and wrong? The poet expresses her disappointment and anger at the fact that this land where they remained was never the motherland it was meant to be. It did not nurture them or provide them with a full life. She rejects the land, and the nation in which they are placed, and asks—how can a land that treated the Dalits inhumanly belong to them? It makes the reader question the boundaries of the nation-state and its complete marginalization of the Dalits. A nation has to be constructed on the idea that it belongs to all. Each of its citizens should enjoy equal rights in the country. If that were to be the case, how is it that one section exercises control whereas the rest are treated as of a lower status? Lanjewar's is the voice of rationality and humanity as she asks pertinent questions.

Lanjewar considers atrocities inflicted on Dalits as “unpardonable sins.” The treatment meted out to the Dalits will bear testimony to their oppression. The poem culminates on a note of protest as in the final lines the poet declares her opposition to the oppression. It is also a moment of the Dalit woman speaking and asserting herself in the social domain. The poem is a mark of protest against the savage treatment meted out to the Dalits.

3.5 “LEADERSHIP”: AN ANALYSIS

“Leadership”

Trees should not make
 Any assurance to anyone
 Clinging to old objects of devotion
 Should not be leaders to hypocrites
 Trees should remain like a “tree”
 Quite unnecessarily
 Trees grow as tall grasses
 Calling themselves rebels
 Caring for their own camps
 Few have built secure fences around
 Constructed limits for themselves

Sometimes Trees turn providers
 Not to one but several birds
 With them
 Indulge in child play
 Help them
 To built nests

For others
 Protect their younglings
 Provide warmth of leaves
 Gradually as the birds come of age
 The trees also teach them
 To change the nest
 And not just so
 On convenience
 Bid them to fly.

In “Leadership” Jyoti Lanjewar has used the example of a tree to elaborate her views on the idea of leadership and what it should entail. The poem’s tone and style reminds us of Gieve Patel’s poem, “On Killing a Tree”. A simple idea from nature is used to comment on the current scenario and to make the reader think about that which leads to a better world.

The poem’s title, “Leadership” elaborates the qualities needed in an able leader. This can be understood to mean a true leader who will take the Dalit movement forward. It draws a direct parallel between trees and leaders as both are supposed to serve the people. Lanjewar uses the example of the tree to advise the leaders about employing discretion in giving assurances to people. According to Lanjewar, the tree remains rooted at one place, standing solid. But its strength should not be associated with a tendency to adhere to old ideas—”old objects of devotion”. The trees should not provide assurances to anyone based on traditional ideas. The trees provide shelter but these facilities should not be extended to “hypocrites”. Lanjewar uses this idea to elaborate the role of the leaders in giving them new and dynamic ideas. The tree should follow its natural course and grow in the direction it thinks fit. The growth of the trees is not altered or is not incumbent on any “assurance” to anyone. The leader should not play to the gallery and be hypocritical in his utterances. The beauty of the tree lies in being in its natural state. Leaders, too, should just be themselves. They have a job to perform and they should continue to do this irrespective of the many influences around. The sense of discrimination is what they require.

The growth of trees as tall grasses is seen in contrast to the solidity mentioned previously. The similarity of the tree to tall grasses is seen as an unruly, uncontrolled growth, and is likened to leaders who call themselves rebels. Lanjewar considers this as problematic. When people start moving only their specific line of thinking, they would “care for their own camps”. The poem’s tone changes in the next two lines. The idea is that there are only a few people who have built “secure fences” around. This could mean two things. One, the poet could be referring to the integrity of the leader that will prevent a person from falling prey to the designs of the powerful people. Without such secure fences, people end up serving the interests of the rich and mighty. The idea of determining one’s limit is important. How far will one go? There will be temptations and pressures of many kinds, but the leaders have to create a secure chain around them so that they have the strength to follow their own convictions. The poet is quick to point out that there are very few who are able to follow convictions. There is also a subtle suggestion of negotiation in this poem. It is

mentioned that leaders should remain alert about lure of the times. As Lanjewar describes her own work in the following lines:

My poetry is about humanity and its seemingly endless struggles for survival, for change, for justice and sometimes humanity happens to be the oppressed marginalized... it's a wonderful process of all these voices coming out of me. (qtd. in Vitthal)

In the poem, Lanjewar explains the role of the leader as a provider. According to her, some trees turn providers but they are not selective about this role. The leaders, too, are to serve the cause not of any one group of people but of other groups as well so that the benefits reach the people at large. As trees provide shelter and help the birds build their nests, leadership might be genial to the people. The idea of building a nest is not to indicate just the four walls, but the need to build lives. Leaders have to take it upon themselves to help people protect those the weak and insecurely placed. When translated to the context of leadership, the younglings are people who are underprivileged and require tending to. The trees also teach the birds to change their nest once they have learnt how to fly. From the leader in the political world to the one at home, all must imbibe these qualities. The general tone in which Lanjewar writes prevents this from being a sermon.

The dominant idea that surfaces in Lanjewar's poetry is about leaders extending their leadership benefits to people irrespective of caste, class or gender. Her poetry is a voice of protest denouncing inequality. Her emphasis is on human rights and equality, on an egalitarian world in which all enjoy the rights and privileges of the country.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has presented an understanding of the debates around Dalit feminism. It acquaints the readers with a variety of views elaborated by scholars of Dalit feminism and explains terms such as Dalit feminist standpoint and diversity. The unit has also positioned Jyoti Lanjewar in line with Dalit women's writing as belonging to the second generation of Marathi women writers whose work was wide-ranging and nuanced. Here, the poet's larger social concerns are in focus.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Diversity : A new coinage. It calls into question the tendency to put in one basket the many identities in a society. Instead, it emphasizes the need to protect the given cultures and life-patterns by analyzing them in terms of the specifics of their context.

Black Panther : It is a Dalit movement that started in 1970s with the writings of Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar. On 9th July, 1972 the Dalit Panthers group was established in Bombay. (Dangle xl)

Egalitarian : A term rich in ideological associations. It stresses the importance of equality in a society divided into classes with prejudices and oppressive tendencies.

Jyoti Lanjewar

3.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a note on the debates around Dalit feminism.
- 2) Write a critical note on Dalit women's writing.
- 3) Comment on the title of the poem, "Caves".
- 4) Critically comment on the qualities of a leader as expressed in the poem, "Leadership".
- 5) Analyse Jyoti Lanjewar's poetry as the voice of protest.

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