

## Abstract

Dalit identity is a caste identity rather than a class identity. The term ‘Dalit’ refers to the formerly untouchable castes of India. Though the term Dalit refers to the formerly untouchable castes, it is not a homogeneous notion because they differ in terms of class, gender, language, region, and educational status. Despite aforesaid differences, it is linked at the level of their caste identity. The Dalit Panthers attempted to expand its scope by referring it to whoever is exploited because her caste, class, gender and religious identity. Though the Dalit Panthers tried to expand the scope of the term, Dalit, they succeeded in making Marathi intellectuals, especially non-Dalit Marathi dramatists take notice of caste discrimination as one of the main issues to be discussed in their respective plays. Before the rise of the Dalit Panthers, the caste discrimination has been discussed in Marathi plays like *Yugyatra* (1955) and *Kalokhachya Garbhat* (1974) by M. B. Chitnis and B. S. Shinde respectively. Nevertheless, these plays remained at the margin because these plays did not enter the ‘so-called mainstream Marathi theatre’ which was dominated by upper castes and middle-class people residing in cities like Pune and Mumbai.

The ‘so-called mainstream Marathi theatre’ has been dominated by upper castes since the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* in 1843 by Vishnudas Bhave (1819-1901). Since its performance, Marathi theatre, mainly proscenium theatre, has remained under the dominance of upper castes who utilized theatre either as an attempt to establish high caste hegemony in Marathi theatre, or exert cultural nationalism, dominated by upper castes. The dominance of upper castes in Marathi theatre was challenged by the *Satyashdhak Jalsa* and *Ambedkari Jalsa* but these performances did not enter upper caste dominated proscenium theatre. Nevertheless, they play a significant role in establishing anti-caste traditions in Marathi theatre. Especially a Marathi play, *Tritiya Ratna* (1855) by Jotirao Phule, a nineteenth century social reformer, challenged the established high caste hegemony in Marathi theatre. All these attempts to

challenge high caste hegemony in Marathi theatre have been looked as an inspiration by Marathi Dalit dramatists in 1980s who opposed the representation of Dalits as opportunists and revengeful people revolting against the upper castes.

Non-Dalit dramatists took notice of Dalit activism due to the rise of the Dalit Panthers but they represented Dalits as opportunists and revengeful. They represent Dalit activism abandoning activism for the sake of personal gains, and they do so as a revengeful act against upper caste characters. On the other hand, Dalit dramatists oppose the view of non-Dalit Marathi dramatists about Dalit activism. Dalit dramatists portray Dalit activists as not compromising with Dalit activism and maintaining good relationship with upper caste characters though they share different opinions about the caste problem.

Apart from the aforesaid difference, both non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists agree with each other as far as linguistic identity of Dalits is concerned. They accept that educated Dalits are linguistically similar to upper caste characters, and uneducated Dalit characters linguistically differ from both educated Dalit as well as upper caste characters. Both, non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists portray Dalit women characters as victims of their linguistic identity as they are not allowed to enter public places which are mainly dominated by language, spoken by educated Dalit as well as upper caste people. Apart from these similarities in respect to linguistic identity of Dalits, the difference is noted between non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists. Dalit dramatists represent educated Dalit characters deliberately speaking in a dialect which is considered as impure and not suitable for upper caste spaces. They do so in order to prove that it is the education system that has made them to use a language of upper castes. In addition to this, they manipulate the Dalit dialect supposedly to irritate upper caste people.

The failure of inter-caste marriage in eradicating caste differences has been depicted by both non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists. Inter-caste marriages are reckoned to be a solution to caste

discrimination because caste is basically an endogamous notion that maintains the caste hierarchy. Hence, inter-caste marriage is looked at as a means to dismantle caste hierarchy. However, it is been looked at as a failure to address the issue of the system.

In *Kanyadaan* (1983), a Dalit character, Arun is reckoned to be responsible for the failure of his inter-caste marriage. He does not forget his and his wife, Jyoti's caste identity, though one is supposed to get rid of one's caste identity after one marries outside one's caste. *Wata-Palwata* (1986), a Marathi play written by Datta Bhagat, seems to stand in contrast to *Kanyadaan* (1983). In this play, failure of an inter-caste marriage between Hema and Satish is located in casteist remarks, made by Dalit as well as upper caste characters against them in the play. It is other characters who keep reminding them of their caste identity.

The representation of rural Dalits also makes the distinction between non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists as the former represents them as subservient to upper castes and victims of caste discrimination which is noticed in *Lokkatha* 78 (1978) by Ratnakar Matkari. On the other hand, the latter depict them as aggressive people against caste discrimination and aware of Dalit activism. The depiction of rural Dalits as aggressive people against caste discrimination is also found in *A Sip of Water* (1978)

In this study, I have undertaken, I have made an attempt to explore how Dalit women are depicted in the selected plays. They are compared with upper caste women in the plays as they are distinct from upper caste women characters at the level of caste, class, education and language. They are shown as victims of caste, class, lack of education and the caste dialect they speak. Dalit women are also portrayed as victims of systemic violence, epistemic violence, brutal violence, and the Dalit patriarchy. Dalit women are prohibited to enter public places and upper caste spaces because they speak a caste dialect which is not accepted at these spaces. Brutal violence against them is also perpetuated against them by upper castes as they are made

victims of sexual violence and physically assaulted during anti-caste demonstration. Apart from violence against them, perpetuated by upper castes, they are also victims of Dalit patriarchy. This intersectionality of Dalit women is an important feature of these plays.