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Folk Art as Resistance: A Study of *Jalsa* as a form of Protest in Sharankumar Limbale's Novel *Hindu* (2003)

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the folk art *jalsa* used artistically in the novel *Hindu*(2003) written by Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi Dalit writer, to protest against the injustice and treachery of Dalits in *Achalpur*, a small town in Maharashtra. The novel presents the failure of an Indian ethos favourable to the mobility of Dalits on an economic, political and social level turned out a mere deception. The expected nobility, justice, honour and brotherhood in post-independent India towards Dalits is not fulfilled. As traditional duties of ignobility and oppressed living were repudiated by Dalits, some of *savarnas* or upper caste Hindus reject the constitutional rights of Dalits. To fight against the condemnation by Hindus of higher strata, Dalits in *Achalpur* arrange *jalsa* a folk art of performance and rebuke the oppressive forces. This leads to a violence against the chief of the *jalsa* troop and charges the social atmosphere with a lot of communal disturbances.

Keywords: Folk Art, Dalit literature Satyashodhak *jalsa*, Ambedkar *jalsa*,

social injustice, Dalits, Upper Caste Hindus, Repudiation, Resistance

I

Sharankumar Limbale's novel *Hindu* first published in Marathi in (2003) and translated in English in (2010) by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi Dalit writer expresses concerns of Dalit community in his literary works. According to Gail Omvedt, "This new literature of revolt, Dalit literature, saw itself as an alternative to the established, dead, middle-class and brahminic Marathi literature...It was a literature which expressed grinding poverty and often misery-and yet it reflected pride in the way in which people had survived and sometimes fought under these conditions" (Omvedtqtd.in Dangle, xiv). Omvedt further observes that prevailing themes in Dalit literature are; oppressed parents insisting on the education of children, the violence and atrocities done to Dalit communities and most significant 'the forced and humiliating labour

RESEARCH ARTICLE

represented by caste-based duties'. Omvedt points out that *jalsa* is a predecessor to Dalit Literature that emerged chiefly in 1970s. Omvedt comments, "First there were the popular communicators. The Ambedkarite *jalsas* or wandering street performances, modeled on the tamasha and on earlier movement from such as *satyashodhakjalsas* which had begun in Ambedkar's own time. Following his death it was above all the balladeer Waman Kardak who took the message of revolt, education and caste-class struggle to the masses" (Omvedtqtd.in Dangle, x).

Milind Kasbe, a critic and researcher of Marathi Literature in his doctoral research mentions the emergence of *jalsa* as a popular art emerged from another art form called of *Tamasha*. However, there is a lot of liberty and modification in terms of subject and form in *jalsa*. *Satyashodhakjalsa* named after the 'Satyashodhak Samaj' founded by the great social reformer Mahatma Phule. Satyashodhak jalsa rejects the spiritual and sensual aspect of tamasha. It concentrates on, as Kasbe observes, "Refuting the oppression of contemporary Brahmin caste and awakening the dalits and downtrodden non-Brahmin caste people. Satyashodhak jalsas educated dalits

through entertainment" (Kasbe, tra.36).Kasbe highlights that the folk-art form of *jalsawas* an easily adaptable art form to reach to the common folk. Satyashodhak jalsa brought progressive change in the traditional form of tamasha. It performed chiefly through powerful dialogues and songs. According to Kasbe, "Ambedkar jalsa was more fervent in the repudiation of upper caste dominance. It attacked the *chaturvarnya* caste system and exploitative religious system in Hindu religion" (Kasbe, tra.37).The jalsas used in the Dalit movements aim at the exposition of caste-oriented hypocrisies. The intensified and furious aspect of Dalit literature looks for justice to all the depressed class. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's dream of a society free of caste hierarchies has been well observed by Raj Kumar, a scholar of Dalit Literature. He remarks, "A radical reconstruction of Indian society, as Ambedkar imagined, cannot come without the intensification of the caste/class struggle. Since Hinduism is founded on scriptures which sanctioned the caste-based social order, a just solution can only be possible through a new edifice that is the annihilation of the Indian caste system" (Kumar, 141). Kumar observes that Dr. Ambedkar, as the chief architect of Indian Constitution, worked for new constitutional based social order of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

justice and equality. However, the various kinds of tortures enacted on dalits are testimonials of total disregard towards Ambedkar's dream casteless society. Kumar comments:

Despite the legal abolition of untouchability in independent India (the Untouchability Offences Act Passed in 1955 followed by the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act in 1976) and official jobs and in Legislatures, Parliament, etc., even to this day the effects of caste discrimination continue—the upper caste having all the power and the lower communities continuing to be subordinated. The untouchables, constituting the lowest strata are naturally in the most disadvantageous situation. (Kumar, 144)

II

Sharankumar Limbale's *Hindu* brings before the readers the struggle of Dalits' against all the unfair and unjustifiable discriminations done to them by the savarnas. Arun Mukherjee observes, "*Hindu's* propelling event is the murder of a dalit activist by a group of higher

caste...villagers because he had become too big for his boots in their eyes and threatening the established order by inciting his caste members, Mahars, to convert" (Mukherjee, xiv). Mukherjee points out that there are two chief reasons that start clashes between Dalits (mainly Mahar community people) and Savarna Hindus. The first reason is the dalits' decision of conversion and repudiation of Hinduism sets the upper caste Hindus on fire of jealousy. However:

...an equally important irritant for them is the dalit cultural assertion and refusal to serve as entertainers of upper castes through performance of old Hindu mythological stories. The revolutionary change in dalit consciousness is signaled by the performance of Ambedkari jalsas and *Hindu* inter textualizes two jalsa as a tribute to this reconfigured popular art form of the dalits. The intertextual jalsas in *Hindu* rework popular folk tales and unpack their hidden caste hierarchies. Ambedkari jalsa, going as far back as the 1930s, like dalit literature, is an art form devoted to educate the dalits about their condition. The

RESEARCH ARTICLE

live performances that we ‘see’ in *Hindu*, help us grasp jalsas potential and power as ideological tool. Limbale shows that through his Ambedkari jalsa, Tatya Kamble passes on Ambedkar’s revolutionary legacy to the dalit youth who carry on the struggle after his murder. (Mukherjee, xxii-xxiii)

There is also third reason of the villager’s hatred towards TatyaKamble who has also caused the anger of Jagannath Pandit because he disclosed Jagannath’s counterfeit of caste certificate and Jagannath had to lose his job. Madhukar Kavle was upset because he thought thatTatya Kamble would grab the post of Police Patil from him. So also Gunvant Patil wants vengeance on account of his having lost the post of *sarpanch* because of Tatya Kamble. Vishnu Pujari the priest is unhappy because he suspects the income of the temple would decrease because jalsas have made villagers to lose faith in the eternal religion. These vested –religious, economical and feudal interests unite the upper caste Hindus against TatyaKamble. The villagers don’t approve the confidence and brave attitude of Dalits “The people who had lived like petty ants and insects were now hissing. They had hurt the savarnas’ pride. Dalit assertions of self-

respect had led to angry savarna reactions, the savarna contention being, ‘They must serve us and feel obliged for whatever we give them’. Dalits had said a resounding no to this arrangement” (Hindu 42-43).(please see the quotation)The villagers are angry before the jalsas of royal swan and the partridges as under the leadership of TatyaKamble unite to fight against the savarnas. They are thirsty of Tatya Kamble’s blood. The rippling effects of jalsas make the villagers disturbed and they want to kill Tatya Kamble.

III

The aesthetic impact of the jalsas can be seen in the reactions of Sonali who is the wife of the Prabhakar Deshmukh, the main suspect of Tatya Kamble’s murder and the villagers. The villagers get angry and confused because of the subject of the performances. The unconventional and non-religious subject causes the villagers dissatisfaction and they leave the jalsa. Sonali on the contrary gives a sensible but unvocal response to the performance as a distant watcher. In the first jalsa she finds a familiar voice in the invocation by Kabir Kamble, the sutradhar (a compare who orders and instructs the actors). In addition to this, she feels like a tamed partridge. Her husband, Prabhakar Deshmukh, the chief suspect of Tatya Kamble’s murder, scolds her for watching the art of Mahar. These reactions exhibit the artistic use of the debate of Dalit

RESEARCH ARTICLE

aesthetic expressed by Limbale in another book titled *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*(2018).The mainstream Marathi literature undergoes the literary measurements through a fixed standard. According to Sharankumar Limbaleas literature is always in flux, the standards should be flexible. Dalit literature, an enigmatic art of the expressions that comes straight from the person that lived a life of torments, requires a critical perspective which is neutral and stable. As Limbale puts it:

Dalit writers give to problems of society over the entertainment of readers. They express their feelings in their literature. They do not create literature with urbane readers in mind. Their effort is to transport the aesthetic-readers to their own level of experience. Because Dalit writers are not focused on the aesthete-reader, traditional aesthetic values, which are aesthete-reader centered, are not applicable to the evaluation of their literary productions (Limbale, 118-119, 2018).

It is significant to mention that jalsas invoke reactions that are parallel to Limbale's argument about Dalit aesthetics. The chief audiences of jalsas are Dalits.

Savarnas and Sonali who watches it from the roof of the bara, that is the mansion which itself is an image of feudalism and dominance. The jalsas make aware the audience Dalits about their exploitation, a threat under deceptive friendly nature of their oppressors. The villagers are, on the other hand, very incensed because of the untraditional and provocative form of jalsas. The attitude of the villagers towards the subject and presentation of jalsas suggest a stronghold of rigid caste-system frame of mind. Sonali who actually belongs to higher caste has a sensible and empathetic mind. She loves art and she dislikes the barricades of caste system. She is also oppressed and marginalized like Dalits in terms of appreciation of the *Jalasa* as a mere form of art. All her cravings of freedom and expression get suffocated in the patriarchal dominance in the Deshmukh family. She is a witness to Taty Kamble's murder but she feels helpless. Thus, presenting various reactions to jalsas Limbale has created a multidimensional artistic effect in the novel.

Thus, jalsa as an art has been used to protest the social injustice in the novel and it also expresses artistic strength of Limbale as a dalit writer. The novel *Hindu* points at the concerns of dalit communities in terms of political, social and artistic strife.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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