

**THE 'PUBLIC SPHERE' AS A TOOL TO APPROACH DALIT WRITINGS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Dalit literature in India has witnessed a spurt of publishing in regional languages and in English translations. The past few years has witnessed the publication of English translations of Dalit writings in various collections like No Alphabet in Sight (2012), The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing (2012) and Steel Nibs are Sprouting(2013). Simultaneously the critical output on them has also grown. Scholarship has focussed on drawing comparisons with Afro-American writing; approaching literature through alternate aesthetics; paying attention to the form of Dalit Writing; and even locating the various themes. Among the practices employed, Marxism hasn't found much favour with scholars on Dalit Studies as it took into consideration only the matrix of class. This paper attempts to show that Western Marxism and Critical Theory yet hold out a method which does not separate socio economic aspects with the cultural aspects. To show this Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere and its various reformulations will be used. The paper attempts to show how the ideal of the public sphere has been critiqued and reformulated to include various spheres hitherto excluded. One such reformulation by Nancy Fraser will be adapted and applied to Dalit writings in this paper.*

Recent years have seen a spurt in the publication of dalit writings in regional languages and importantly translations especially into English in India. These include autobiographies, biographies, fiction, short fiction, poetry and non-fiction such as essays. The critical output on dalit writings have also grown treating them as 'resistance literature', as literature providing 'authentic' experiences of dalit life, as literature re-writing the nation and as literature constructing affirmative identities. Scholarship has also moved on to a focus on the form of dalit writings. Among the practices employed, one of the ideologies that haven't found much favour is with Marxism. Yet scholars have freely made use of expressions like 'interpellation', 'counter hegemony', 'organic intellectuals' or the 'public

sphere' without acknowledging the indebtedness to philosophers like Althusser, Gramsci and Habermas who originally used these expressions and who initially drew a lot from Marx (though some of them did move away from classical Marxism). Among the expressions mentioned above, this paper would focus on 'public sphere' as a tool to approach dalit writings. It attempts to show by highlighting a few areas in dalit writings that this Western model can indeed be a tool to encompass marginal writings.

Expressions like 'dalit literary sphere', 'counter-public', and 'counter-public-print sphere' have loosely been associated with dalit writings from India though not often referring to Habermas or his critics who later re-formulated the idea of the 'public sphere'. According to the concept of the public sphere, the matters under deliberation must be matters of public concern or common interest. Interests that were private were inadmissible in these discussions. This ensured that the affairs of women (which were largely domestic) and of the marginalised or weaker sections (who did not count numerically) went often unaddressed. The public sphere which was supposed to be liberal thus merely meant the bourgeois men and hardly the public (Ryan qtd. in Fraser 61). Various theoreticians have utilised the concept of public sphere like Ann Travers use of the public sphere in the field of cyber feminism, Alexander Kluge's concept of 'oppositional' public sphere and Film, and Nancy Fraser's reformulation of the subaltern counter public. The 'public sphere' thus is an ideal that has been critiqued and reformulated by many thinkers to rope in several spheres that were unrepresented. Thus the concept of the public sphere proves to be a flexible tool that can be held against its own idea:

It is ...an ideal that can be used to criticize the ideological aspects of the public sphere as well as its biases and exclusions...Habermas...locates the potential for reason and emancipation in a particular practice and institution within society. That is, he finds a beam of hope in an otherwise criticisable society, a beam of hope that is capable of transcending contemporary society and its injustice because it can show us a way out of them.(Lasse 34)

This paper would focus on one re-formulation of the public sphere provided by Nancy Fraser –the 'subaltern counter-public' and show how dalit writing has formed a counter public and has critiqued the mainstream public sphere.

'Subaltern Counter Publics', a term coined by Nancy Fraser are 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretation of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser 67). The notion of the 'subaltern counter-public' can be used in approaching dalit writings because Fraser has convincingly shown in her article that the discursive space of the 'public sphere' can be expanded by including hitherto excluded areas. She cites the example of feminist counter publics which made deliberations on 'domestic violence', 'marital , date and acquaintance rapes' possible (Fraser 67). These issues were earlier considered to be issues related to the private domestic sphere and hence could not be discussed in the mainstream public sphere serving 'common interests'. Following the same

logic it can be argued that dalit writings form a counter public forcing discussion on issues previously left unaddressed. Thus caste related violence, the nation's discriminatory treatment of dalits and preferential treatment of dominant castes, cultural assertions of dalits etc. form subjects for discussions. This in turn expands the space of the mainstream public sphere. Another reason as to why the public (or counter public) can be used as a tool is because India is a stratified society and Fraser argues that '...the proliferation of subaltern counter publics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies'(67). This means that dalit writings find a space parallel to other contesting literary counter publics like transgender writings, writings by 'ecological refugees' and other such groups.

Fraser has emphasised the 'contestatory function of subaltern counter publics' (Fraser 67) in her essay. If the public sphere in Habermas' view had questioned the State, the subaltern counter public questions even the mainstream public sphere that has become akin to the nation. The mainstream literary writings after Independence had developed the project of nationalism. Individuals rose to the requirements of the nation and the nation in turn helped in the growth of the individual. Dalit writings, on the contrary, reveal the nation's betrayal of dalits. That a linear line of progress regarding the lives of dalits has been made impossible in India is exposed in these works. Most autobiographies by Dalit authors bear testimony to this. Their chequered growth in education, as adults and in their occupations are recorded in these autobiographies. Dalit life writing exposes the hegemonic structure of the caste system that straitjackets the body in a social system that looks natural. The legitimized inequality of the social system is exposed in these works. Through this the elite discourse of a homogenous nation is also contested. The liberal humanist vision of a unified nation enacts the elitist desire to control and regulate the unchartered space of living communities. Dalit writings thus clearly show how dalits have been left out of the nationalist project. To voice this, the mainstream literary public sphere does not offer the platform but it is by regrouping through the counter public that dalit writers have been able to articulate themselves.

The subaltern counter-public figures symbolically as a space in almost all autobiographies and fiction by dalit writers. In conventional autobiographies the home expands into the nation state. The protagonist of the conventional autobiography educates and moulds him/herself to become a part of the nation. This doesn't happen in dalit writings because the literal 'home' is a segregated space pushing one to the fringes, the outskirts or even to the graveyard. Territorial segregation does not refer to mere geographical landscape found in any part of the village. It denotes a 'fixity' of power; a 'frame' that simultaneously makes dalits both insiders and outsiders of the village or the urban space of living. It is the same space that is provided in the nation too.

According to the liberal public sphere proposed by Habermas, people who take part in the discussions had to bracket their differences in economic or class status. Fraser shows that this is impossible in practice and often subsumed the voice of the powerless. The function of the counter-public is to regroup and highlight the differences. In Dalit writings, it is the

‘particularity and difference’ that is highlighted and affirmed. There is a refusal to participate in the given public sphere that is ‘national’. Instead of the ‘subjectivity’ available in the idealized nation, Dalit writings demand the incorporation of subjectivities other than the ‘national’. The issues highlighted in dalit works were issues that could not be voiced openly earlier.

Religion is often considered irrational and therefore never on the platform of the public sphere whose primary importance was to ‘reason’. But as Jürgen Habermas has himself recently suggested critical attention needs to be paid to religion. Religion is very powerful and it can influence the public sphere though it is a vital challenge in contemporary society (Butler *et al.* 2011). They note that Black churches were central to the Afro-American civil rights movement in America ‘providing it with “free spaces” to organise’ (Butler *et al.* 122) and also that black churches remained important to the black public sphere. On the contrary Catholic and Protestant churches lost their voice as an organizing discourse. This was understood as a modernizing secularising process. A similar picture can be drawn of the public sphere in India. Though many theories were put forward regarding the perpetuation and reproduction of caste, one important reason for not critiquing caste is that it could not be talked about in the ‘modern’, ‘secular’ nation. Caste being a core component of Hinduism and later components of most other institutionalised religions in India was only an unacknowledged presence. Habermas insists that incorporating religion should not foreclose any public debate. By voicing about it through dalit writings, religion and caste is incorporated in the public sphere.

Public spheres do not admit irrationality or emotions .Yet, it is by making use of ‘affect’ that the dalit narratives reconfigure the mainstream public sphere. These may include ‘hysterics, stunned silences, grief or irrational outbursts’ (Nayar 6). Just as feminist counter-publics were able to incorporate emotion, sentiment and ‘irrationality’ while voicing about their condition, the counter –public of dalit writings also resort to the use of ‘affect’. This is especially true of dalit autobiographies where there is a recounting of traumatic experiences. The experiences are linked to hegemonic caste practices which could not be resisted earlier. Writing under the rubric of (a politically conscious)Dalit Writing(s), such experiences which bring about physical , cultural or psychological trauma no longer remind one of random instantiation of upper caste practices .Instead the very inclusion of these events necessitate deliberation on human rights violation.

Contemporary scholarship on human rights have highlighted that it is not enough to focus only on the legal or the juridical language of human rights alone to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon. Critical attention has been diverted to literary forms of writing which can supplant the human rights discourse. Joseph Slaughter in his work *Human Rights Incorporation* (2007) points out that the public sphere is central to the genre Bildungsroman and Human Rights (149). Slaughter, taking the example of the ‘non-affirmative Bildungsroman’ (Slaughter 149) and connects it to the ‘dysfunction’ of the public sphere. This argument if it can be extended to literary forms other than the one pointed out by

Slaughter, can be effectively applied to dalit writings too. The counter-public that dalit writings form can be taken as symptomatic of the 'dysfunction' of the public sphere in India. This in turn can be connected to the human rights violations explicated in dalit writings. The writings by instantiating how the personality development of the individual is thwarted at all levels take up one important aspect of the human rights narrative agenda. Slaughter also argues that the conventions of a genre are reworked to achieve the language of dignity that is crucial to the human rights discourse. This is true of dalit writings too. Pramod K Nayar has argued in his article 'Politics of Form' that the writer Bama and Sivagami have made use of several different registers to 'hybridise the novel form'(365) and that this is a political project. This argument can be extended to other writers also

Dalit writings also widen the public sphere by incorporating the 'cultural, linguistic, religious and customary practices that constitute group identity and personality' (Slaughter *Human Rights Inc.* 162). The above statement was made in connection with the national public sphere. In stratified societies, the 'unequally valued cultural styles' put marginalised sections under 'powerful informal pressures' (Fraser 64) by the dominant and privileged groups. Therefore whatever was the 'norm' was the cultural norm of the privileged group which in the case of India is to be read as upper caste. Through Dalit Writings, the subaltern counter public contests the nationalist cultural claims. Cultural signifiers are used by dalit writers with the intention of re-inscribing new values. Such a strategy is important because public spheres are not areas of 'zero degree culture' (Fraser 64). Making visible the cultural markers and practices of dalits constitute a political stance. Thus drums like the 'parai' and the 'thudi'; deities like 'Karuppusamy'; myths of Eklavya, Shambooka and Paakkanar; legends about Essakki; rituals of Matapuja, PottanTheyyam and worship of the pig all figure in Dalit writings. Even food becomes very important in the construction of cultural identity. Giving up leftover food is a very important issue in Dalit literature. It assumes the language of dignity in several works. Food is also used affirmatively to project an alternative culture of a region. Through projecting food practices and cuisines of the dalits an attempt is made to subvert the orthopraxy of the cuisine culture of the dominant.

The 'standard' language is appropriated by dalit writers as a means of 'violating' that language which is yet another political project. Adhering to the 'standard' or 'right' form of any language implies an adherence to the dominant ideology, culture and social structure. Several postcolonial writers have rejected the standard forms of English to articulate their stance. Women have adapted the language to suit/relate experiences unique to them. This kind of abrogation is found in regional Indian writings also. Such language that is not part of the 'dominant receptor system' is used because the 'standard' form of language doesn't offer the scope to encode dalit experiences or beliefs. The linguistic practices employed by dalit writers thus expand the literary public sphere.

How has the formation of the counter public aided the dalit movements? Have Dalit writings along with the other arenas of dalit assertion helped in this cause? This can be

answered by taking a look at the function of the counter publics. Nancy Fraser points out two functions of the ‘subaltern counter publics’ in her work:

On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (68)

Coming to the conclusion of the paper, the question that can be posed is whether dalit writings remain as counter publics or through contestation does the issues projected become a matter of ‘common concern’. What is common interest or what concerns everybody cannot be decided easily. People not part of this public might find that it is not of common interest. As Fraser herself suggests what counts here is the ‘participant’s perspective’. Earlier domestic violence or marital rape was considered to be private matters. It was after ‘sustained discursive contestation’ that the feminist counterpublic succeeded in it becoming an issue of common interest. Similarly an unrelenting line of argument has succeeded in making the tangled web of issues related to caste be a part of the mainstream public and hence a common concern.

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