

Writing as Agency to the Caged Birds

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Abstract

In this article, an effort would be made to establish how writing helps women, especially the downtrodden ones, forge their identities. The paper will follow the lives of three women who belong to different cultural and social background and attempt to show how these women, who fought against all odds, asserted their self by the act of writing

Keywords: writing, agency, women writers, protest, voice.

The written word is undoubtedly one of the most powerful tools that mankind has ever created. By putting pen to paper and writing about one's feelings and emotional turmoil writing almost becomes curative. It heals and soothes as it offers individuals to express their dilemma and quandaries about which they cannot yet speak. The power of the written word cannot be denied as it allows the silenced tongues to share their memories, stories and other facets of their human experience thus opening up avenues for self-expression, self-discovery and creativity. Writing, therefore, becomes a way to freedom; it has a cathartic effect and helps us to find our unique voice.

A question of vital importance then arises that if writing is such an influential and therapeutic medium for individuals, a mode of self-assertion then why do we not come upon texts written by women before the eighteenth century? The bookshelves of libraries abound in a plethora of texts written by male authors, but the tradition of women's writing does not exist. Virginia Woolf in her pathbreaking book *A Room of One's Own* throws light upon the British literature of Elizabethan period which was extremely prolific in nature and was marked by a great output in literature. This was a time when the male dramatists and poets were most active, but the women were curiously absent or silent. "For it is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed was capable of a song or a sonnet" (Woolf 64). Woolf looks into history to make an inquiry as to why women have not contributed intellectually and economically to the society. History is primarily the history of the male and not of the female. Feminists reinterpret history as 'his-story', something which records and covers only the accomplishments of the males. A woman influences the lives of heroes and is generally the subject of majority of fiction but there is a huge chasm between their representation in fiction and reality. In reality they lack an identity of their own. We have a substantial knowledge of our fathers' lives, their professions and distinction. But of our foremothers we know nothing except their names, the husbands who had been chosen for them and

the number of children they gave birth to. A few women who might have dared to venture into writing would have been stalled and thwarted by people, ostracized by the society, termed as witches all of which lead to their imagination and literary skills being bulldozed.

At the end of the eighteenth-century women began to write again, with increasing frequency and met with extraordinary success. Women writers searched for a language and style of their own which would set their work apart in a discipline which was largely male dominated. Their works often found expression in autobiographical and confessional modes, sometimes in angry, emotional or denunciatory tones. In the earlier phase of their writings female authors concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practices which often took the form of demonic stereotypes of women, representing them either as angels or as madwomen and the omission of women from literary history. The later years lead to the discovery of women having *a literature of their own* (Showalter) whose historical and artistic value had been curbed by the patriarchal society. This led to an inquiry on women's writing which resulted in a massive rediscovery of texts, journals and letters written by women, out of a consequence of which "the continuities in women's writing became clear for the first time"(Showalter 6).

Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* underlines the anxieties of authorship of nineteenth century women writers, as writing was regarded as an unwomanly and monstrous activity. So, in order to veil themselves from society and out of a "sense of chastity that dictated anonymity" (Woolf) women authors like Charlotte Bronte, Mary Evans resorted to male pseudonyms. Charlotte Bronte in her novel *Jane Eyre* described women's feeling of imprisonment and their desire for freedom and equality by saying:

...Women feel just as men feel, they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brother do [...] and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings[...] It is thoughtless to condemn them or laugh at them if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.(109)

In the past, writings of Indian women authors were obliterated because of the patriarchal values that dominate our culture. The writings of male authors and their perceptions were prioritized over female experiences which usually addressed issues of domestic arena. The nineteenth century witnessed an active participation by women against the British rule. They wrote on the country's freedom struggle which resulted in women's literature.

After having examined in brief the nature of writing and the hindrances faced by women in realizing their literary potential, I would now review texts written by women, who belong to distinct race, cultural backgrounds and different time periods and see how writing helped them to attain their subjectivity and assert their identity in a male dominated society.

Indian Women's Writing

The first text under consideration is a woman's autobiography from late nineteenth century Bengal, Rassunderi Debi's *Amar Jiban* (My Life, 1868) which R. Radhakrishnan calls "narrative of identity" as in it the author turns to writing in order to recover her lost voice. *Amar Jiban* is the story of an ordinary upper-class woman, who was married off early according to the customs of her time. Driven by her desire to read *Chaitanya Bhagwat* (hagiography of saint Chaitanya) she taught herself to read and write in secret while doing her daily household work in the kitchen. In her autobiography are present elements of protests against the caged lives of women and laments over their powerlessness. Her account describes her strenuous battle to escape the yoke of domesticity and her desire for learning.

In those days, women generally did not take to learning; the spare time that they could manage after everyday grueling of the household they had to spend attending to the karta of the house. As if women did not have anything else to do." (*Amar Jiban* 29)

She was extremely close to her mother but could hardly visit her natal home after marriage. The few occasions when she did get permission she was like a "prisoner on parole" (*Amar Jiban* 38) as her servants would surround her like prison-guards. She was profoundly embittered when she was not allowed to go and serve her ailing mother.

Among all the mortal lives on earth, human life is the most precious one. But even after acquiring that precious life, I am nothing but a wretched human being. Why was I born as a woman? My life is of no worth. Who is there on earth as precious as the mother; she is in fact the representative of the almighty on earth. But I could not serve my mother. Alas, I cannot bear this grief anymore. Had I been a boy, and I had known about my mother's serious condition, I would have flown like a bird to her side. But I am a caged bird. (*Amar Jiban* 39)

In her narrative she emphasizes and reiterates her self-recognition as a caged bird. "People put birds in cages for their own amusement. Well, I was like a caged bird. And I would have to remain in this cage for life. I would never be freed" (*Amar Jiban*). After marriage, the kitchen and the various household duties became her 'sansar'. Her sexual body of a young woman also becomes her cage. Rassundari's first child was born when she was eighteen and till the age of forty-two she gave birth to eleven more children. She instinctively identifies the root of all her woes, which is her life as a woman. "Is this my fate because I am a woman?" (*Amar Jiban*). After this realization, "she reintroduces her desire for knowledge, which [...] seems to be the only way out from this cage" (Bhattacharya 34). She eventually emerges successful in her ambitious attempt - Her desire to educate herself was "nothing short of bold transgression" (Bhattacharya 34). Attainment of knowledge, which culminated in her autobiography, helped her to find her identity and assert herself.

Dalit Women's Writing

The writings in regional language have concentrated substantially on caste. Uma Chakravarty has remarked "There is [...] a crucial relationship between caste and gender in the working of the caste system."(qtd. In Lal, Panja and Satpathy 5). Though both women and the Dalits are downtrodden, when seen separately the Dalit women are doubly oppressed by forces of the caste system and subjected to gender exploitation. Since they were denied educational opportunities, Dalit women found it difficult to articulate themselves. Swarupa Rai, a Telegu Dalit woman poet says, "If there is any soul in this country who is subjected to all kinds of oppression and exploitation, it is the Dalit woman"(qtd. in Sridhar 99). The texts that later emerged by Dalit women writers are seen as providing a subaltern challenge to caste hegemony and oppressive patriarchy.

The text I would now focus upon is the poem '*Bosom Friend*' written by Hira Bansode, one of the best-known Dalit women in Marathi. Her poetry today inspires and gives voice to the hopes of Dalit women who are doubly oppressed "like a drum of [Manu] that is beaten on both ends and continues to be so...". '*Bosom Friend*' reflects the experience of an educated Dalit woman at the hands of her high-caste friend. The title and poem evoke the conflict between expectation and reality at various levels. The poet invites her friend to home for dinner.

You not only came, you forgot your caste and came
Usually women don't forget that tradition of inequality [...]
I thought you had ripped out all those caste things.
(Bansode 49)

But a simple incident makes her realize the harsh reality of life that her 'friend' has not forgotten she belong to a low caste. The worm cocoon of their friendship is also shattered when the poetic persona realizes that her supposedly high- class, broad-minded friend is actually narrow- minded when it comes to caste practices. The speaker's friend on seeing the arrangement of food said in patronizing, judgmental tone "Truly, you folk will never improve" (Bansode). The poetic persona felt ashamed of her expectations and background- The guests condescending words smacked of arrogance, sense of superiority, lack of grace. indifference and deep prejudice towards the lower castes.

Nevertheless, the speaker was resilient enough because the next moment she "came back to life"- In the beginning of this poem she was a person with a rather strong streak of awareness of social inferiority but now she seemed a different version of herself- defiant and aware of the different circumstances she grew up in as a result of caste and class hierarchies. She is also mindful of the inappropriateness and unfairness of her 'dear friend's' criticism. Indignantly, she told her friend that she was not as lucky as her when it came to the enjoyment of finer things in life- In the poem she questions her upper-

caste friend as to what right she has an upper-caste entity to question her arrangement of food. She indirectly interrogates what they as an upper caste people had done for the betterment of society.

Dear Friend- You have not discarded your tradition
It roots go deep in your mind
And that's true, true, true (Bansode 50)

She is able to subtly critique her friend's thinking and deep-rooted caste prejudice and traditions. Through her poem the poet shows that perhaps the guest's cast biases and the social inequalities perpetuated are more open to question than the arrangement of food. There is no portrayal of passive victimhood and unquestioning interpellation, in fact the transformation in the poetic persona from shame to questioning defiance presents the possibility of Dalit agency and interrogation of caste norms.

Black Women's Writing

The writings by black women arose in order to render voice to black women who had been rendered invisible because of the sexism they faced within their community and the racism they confronted in general. The writings addressed their existence and needs which were being ignored and also attempted to bring to light the racial and class discrimination they experienced.

The highly acclaimed novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker exemplifies the power of writing. The book is a series of letters written by a southern black woman Celie who is brutally raped at the age of fourteen by the man she believes to be her father. Celie reveals the horrors of her life in her letters addressed to God because she has been forbidden to tell her story to anyone else

You better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. (Walker 3)

The letters give voice to a downtrodden woman while at the same time give her an opportunity to write herself into existence. Likewise, her sister Nettie religiously writes to Celie even when she has no hopes that her letters will reach Celie.

In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* Walker notes "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read and write?"(403). Walker seems to be very much aware of the role "writing, and by extension, literacy' plays "to preserve and value one culture while destroying and devaluing other."(Babb 3). Also present is her concern which "focuses on the particular

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experience of black woman under a system in which writing is used for cultural devaluation.”(Babb 3). Both Nettie and Celie are shown to be aware that literacy will provide them an escape from the exploitative world and strengthen them to fight male domination.

Helping me with spelling and everything else she think I need to know. No matter what happen, Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world. [...] try to git us to think. (18)

The important breakthrough comes when Celie replaces God with Nettie as the addressee because she realizes that he too is like other men "trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (Walker 173) .From this point onwards, Celie speaks in her own voice without the agency of God. Initially Celie was a silent, passive victim but later when Mr._ tries to belittle her by calling her a "Goddam [...] nothing", Celie retaliates "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly [...]. But, I'm here."(Walker 187) She is now no longer a passive subject but someone who can boldly assert her sense of self. Anne Hermann writes:

What happens when women resort to epistolary not for an amorous but for a dissident discourse; when they no longer seek to retrieve a male lover unchanged but seek to change the exclusionary practices of a male —dominated culture; when letter no longer finds its inscription in a repetitive structure of desire but in a unique opportunity to advocate social change?

Both Celie and Nettie resort to the written word to challenge the racist and sexist forces of their society. The letters serve a cathartic function as they enable them to distance themselves from their trauma and eventually help Celie to reunite with "Everything".

The recent times have seen a significant change in the writings of women. They are no longer bitter or resentful. Women writers have moved away from the traditional depiction of women as self- sacrificing beings to characters who are searching for their identity, have the potential to assert themselves and are no longer defined in relation to the men in their lives. Having found a room of their own they now have the courage and intellectual integrity to write what they really think and believe in. They now "write of women as women have never been written of before"(Woolf). Writing becomes a mode through which women authors reflect their agency and affirm their subjectivity. Writing traverses, the boundaries of time and space, connecting the readers intimately with the authors. It almost becomes a legacy in which the female authors leave behind an immortal record of themselves and which also enables them to be the authors of their own lives. Writing becomes a mode of self-articulation through which the caged birds learn to sing.

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