



## Dalit Feminism in Telugu Literature A Study of Challapalli Swaroopa Rani's Poetry

Dr.G.Sheela Swarupa Rani, Dept. of English, SPMVV, Tirupati, AP

**Abstract:** Dalit men hardly present the problems of Dalit women. They can never understand the problems of Dalit women hence may overlook them and may treat them insignificant (there may be exceptions). Margaret Swathy who has made an outstanding contribution to Dalit feminism shows this difference. The present paper tries to present a Dalit woman writer of the present generation, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, who exposes the atrocities on Dalit women.

**Key words:** Dalit women, caste hierarchy, patriarchy

### Narration of the concept

Postmodernism is an era where there are no absolutes. Nothing is absolute or fixed. Everything is relative. This has given rise to questioning the centre. The age old concepts of patriarchy and caste hierarchy which have been considered as the absolutes are questioned. This resulted in moments like Feminism, Dalitism, Minority writings, and Gay literature. In Telugu literature now comes on to the scene - Dalit feminism.

Dalit feminism can be defined as a movement that expresses the oppression of Dalit women represented by Dalit women themselves. Dalit men also have written about Dalit women, but they could not give the picture of Dalit women as genuinely as Dalit women could. Only a Dalit woman can express the oppression faced by her. This is the argument of Dalit feminists. Dalit feminism questions the oppression faced by Dalit women outside and within her community. Though Dalit feminism has drawn inspiration both from Dalitism and feminism, it cannot group itself with either of this as neither feminism nor Dalitism can represent the problems faced by Dalit women.

Dalit men hardly present the problems of Dalit women. They can never understand the problems of Dalit women hence may overlook them and may treat them insignificant (there may be exceptions). Margaret Swathy who has made an outstanding contribution to Dalit feminism shows this difference. For example, the Dalit ideologues like Katti Padma Rao, Gopal Guru and Gaddar seem to be less sensitive to the internal patriarchy of Dalit communities. They maintain that all women are Dalits. (Swathy Margaret)

Dalit women writers though acknowledge that their writings have drawn inspiration from feminists, never like to identify themselves with the upper caste feminists. Their aspersion is that the feminists who cry for their rights, who revolt against the patriarchy and gender discrimination do not touch the problems of Dalit women. As the feminists in general consist of women from upper castes, they hardly know the problems of Dalit women. Vinodini in a personal interview has stated,

Though Dalit women writers drew their inspiration from feminists, they hardly yoke themselves with feminists because there is a world of



difference between exploitations feminists present and Dalit women writers present.

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani a Telugu Dalit woman writer opines, "when the socio-economic conditions of women vary, the nature of oppression implemented on them also varies." (Introduction, **Mankenapoo**)

Dalit feminism is gaining momentum now in Telugu literature. Showing the problems of women, fighting for their rights, questioning the injustice done to them, discrimination shown to them, encouraging self-assertion do not find expression in the writings of modern Dalit women writers alone. They are more or less there ever since Dalit women started writing. Bhushi Annapurna's ((1925) poem "Shanthamma Sapadam" (The Pledge of Shanthamma) encourages the women who are vexed in their marital life.

Namburi Paripurna (1931) reflects the gender discrimination and patriarchy in her story "Inspiration". She concludes the story with the protagonist's decision not to be exploited by her husband any more. T.N.Sadalakshmi (1928) a social activist, active in politics who served as state minister and Deputy Speaker asserts her position as a woman, a position which she is not ashamed of. She hopes for equality of men and women. The only difference between the first generation Dalit women writers and the present day Dalit women writers is that the former hardly present the discrimination and exploitation exists within the community.

The present paper tries to present a Dalit woman writer of the present generation, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, who exposes the atrocities on Dalit

women. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani is working as Associate Professor in the centre for Bhudhist Studies, at Nagarjuna University in Andhra Pradesh. She likes to identify herself as Telugu Dalit woman writer. Sikhamani says, "Challapalli Swarupa Rani is the first one to give Dalit woman's point of view to Telugu Dalit Poetry" and Lakshmi Narasaiah says "she is not only the first one to proclaim to Telugu literature that there is Dalit feminism but she also has given a culture and body to it". She writes about oppression on Dalits in general but most of her writings concentrate on the oppression on Dalit women. She is not confined to her community alone, she even talks on behalf of tribal women. In her poem "Child Sacs", she tells how the Lambadi woman due to their poverty turn their wombs as money generating organs in producing children that can be sold.

In depicting the life of Dalit women she has seen, she describes what are the problems, humiliations, loss, and exploitation a Dalit woman faces. Though the poet would be speaking about various persons and her own experiences, they altogether in general portray the journey of an average Dalit woman from a child through girlhood, womanhood, wifehood, motherhood. Besides these she also reflects the problems and feelings of a Dalit woman who is humiliated in educational institutes, hostels, and in work places. She points out poverty, gender and caste to be the three major reasons for the exploitation and humiliation of Dalit woman. The following poem shows the three fold exploitation a Dalit woman undergoes.

As a wife

Being a commodity at home,



In the street  
A low caste donkey  
That carries piles of humiliations  
With a slap either side  
Is it not your life that is hurt!  
(My Mother)

The society around the Dalit woman sees her potentiality as a worker, labour and an object that gives them pleasure. She is never looked at as a human being or a woman with brains. If Dalits are exploited because of their caste and class and robbed of their sweat, a Dalit woman is robbed of her body too. The tradition of turning Dalit women into prostitutes is not new. It has been there since ages. The traditions of *mathangi*, *devadasi* and *basivini* - dedicating a Dalit girl as soon as she is born to god, thereby making her public property – seem to be ordained for Dalit women alone. Neither the Feminists nor the Dalit men writers reflect these problems in their writings. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani as a Dalit feminist voices out this exploitation of Dalit woman in the name of religion and exposes the inhuman attitude of the society.

Identified as a prostitute as soon  
as I was born  
Thrown into foolish traditions  
And dust bins of superstitions  
I became a prohibited one  
(Prohibited History)

In "Pothu Rani" the poet depicts the custom in the villages towards Dalit women.

I too have a husband, but what  
for...?

.....  
It seems, if the villages here  
have to be lively with greenery  
my life  
has to be smeared like a black  
charcoal  
if their festivals have to be  
jubilant  
my birth  
has to be  
like a *chittakarthe's* fair.

A Dalit woman faces humiliations and exploitations for being a Dalit woman outside her community and for being a woman inside her community. She cannot enjoy oneness with upper caste woman because she is a Dalit.

Not looking you as a fellow  
woman  
Calling you *ase, ose*  
If they don't cut you into pieces  
The caste prestige  
Gets dwindled  
(My Mother)

At home her condition is much worse. Most of the time, she has to subjugate herself to the internal patriarchy that clings to men irrespective of their caste.

When every one in the village  
takes lenience of my father  
My father takes lenience of my  
mother  
Sharpening the wifhood in you  
He cuts your sky high soul  
Into pieces



With the axe borrowed from  
Aryans.

(My Mother)

Exploited both outside and within her  
community for the writer, the situation  
of Dalit woman looks like the plight of a  
bird caught in a thorny bush.

I am the bird  
Caught in a thorny bush  
In whatever direction I move  
All the thorns prick me only...  
These are not the thorns of today  
They are the shackles of slavery  
Piled up over the years...  
With the danger  
Around me always  
In fact when did  
I live my own life...?  
If the patriarchy at home  
Slaps one cheek  
The caste hierarchy slaps another  
In the street

(Mankena poovu)

The poet presents how the  
poverty dries out all the tender feelings of  
a Dalit woman. Ever since she was born,  
her fight would be for a morsel of food for  
herself and for her family. This subverts  
the romantic images of woman as a child,  
a young woman, a wife, and a mother in  
a Dalit woman's life.

You lost your feminine touch  
Along with your breath  
For the sin of being born  
On this land

Blinded by colour darkness

Handicapped by male partiality  
(paralysis)

(My Mother)

Her whole life will be a battle field and  
she remains a fighter till her last breath.  
As a child, she struggles hard to earn  
bread for the family and also to fulfil her  
small, small desires like buying a ribbon,  
side pins so on and so forth.

By nature they have the  
skill

To mould their organs

As grains of rice

Body frocks, and ribbons  
for plaits

The struggle for survival continues as she  
grows up into a young woman, wife,  
mother and grandmother. The poet  
presents, how the poverty and internal  
patriarchy squeezes Dalit women.

With two rupees earnings

With lot of hope she lands at  
home

To feed the children

Husband will be ready

To drink her sweat as an arrack.

Exposed to rain and sun

Receiving the beatings of husband in the  
evening

Giving birth every year

Her marigold flower like body

Paled like withered stem of green  
leaves

(Earthen Hands)



Education which is supposed to be the cure for this condition doesn't have any positive effect in the life of a Dalit woman. Very few poor Dalit girls would get the chance of getting educated. If by chance, the Dalit girl gets educated, in the process of getting education again she is exploited and humiliated. As her mind opens and awareness dawns on her, as she becomes aware of the exploitation on her, now the exploitation much more humiliates her. The poet talks about the hungry looks of the warden who tries to exploit a Dalit girl student when she joins a hostel to get educated.

For the long deprived education  
When I came to the hostel's lap  
I felt like taking my body into  
fists  
And throw it away  
When I couldn't bear the  
Hungry looks of  
The warden fellow there.

(Mankena poovu)

This hard earned education doesn't win her any respect. In the eyes of the upper caste uneducated men in the village she is still a Dalit woman. This deeply hurts an educated woman. The poem "Mankena poovu" narrates the feelings of an educated Dalit girl who goes for work into the field due to her poverty.

I wanted to bury myself  
In the earth like a seed  
When along with my sweat  
the land lord  
Waited to rob me  
As I went to field

For daily wages

(Mamnkena poovu)

A Dalit woman is not fit to love an upper caste man. For the upper caste men a Dalit woman is useful for enjoyment but not for marriage. Even the education doesn't bring any respect to Dalit woman. Upper caste men using her in the name of love, withdraw themselves when it comes to marrying her. The latent casteism lifts up its hood there.

I wanted to hide myself in  
a canal

When I, that was useful  
for love

Was unworthy for  
marriage.

(Mankena poovu)

For her love, instead of mangalasutra she gets a rope to hang herself.

Keeping his hands round my neck

He gave me hanging rope

Instead of a turmeric thread

(Postponement of Love)

The poet also shows how, anything that happens to Dalit woman goes unnoticed and how the government and media view them as insignificant issues. In her "Untouchable Rape", (based on a real incident that happened in University of Hyderabad) she describes, how the rape of untouchable woman becomes forbidden news for the news papers. As they are not published, they can never be discussed in the parliament. The reasons are – caste and influential people try to support the one who exploit these women. She writes:

I am the untouchable Suneetha



Whom you have forgotten  
Is speaking  
Why am I addressing myself  
Untouchable, you know  
I swear on my love for Yogeswar Reddy  
Mine is an untouchable suicide only...!  
Otherwise, without being buried behind the newspapers  
I too would have been smelled like thanduri  
On the parliament dining table  
These suicides and murders either wont be brought into light, if are brought into light they are clothed in a different version. The poet feels that this is because of the casteism that is pervading education, love and marriage. A Dalit woman can never be free of these things.  
Here, as the education  
love and Marriage  
smell and taste of caste  
yesterday our Nirmala's death  
came as 'natural death'.  
Neither the education, nor the job she gets gives a Dalit woman respect. Her caste always comes with her like a millstone round her neck. The only difference is, in the place of her caste a very sophisticated word -'reservation category' comes.  
Swimming against these humiliations  
When I learnt a few alphabets  
Got job and went to office  
I felt like pouring lead into my

ears  
Not able to hear  
The whispers of  
'reservation category'  
(A Dream)  
The poet doesn't limit herself to just portraying the problems of the Dalit woman. She questions the sections that humiliate and oppress Dalit women. She questions the Hindu society, the feminists, the press, the government and Dalit men too.  
My hindu step mother  
Tying a bag to my mouth  
Hanging broom on my back  
.....  
Being a mother  
Starving me without food,  
Labeling treachery  
And manhandling me  
When I said I would beg,  
What should I call your dual morality  
That anoints me with petrol...?  
( Step mother)  
She questions the feminists for not touching the problems of Dalit women.  
My Blue cloud that taught me how to rain!  
Your showers of questions  
Came only up to the well furnished kitchen, but  
Why it hasn't stepped even the threshold



Of my three stoned hearth  
That doesn't have even a house?  
As your crops, while fighting for  
the chairs  
Hold the collar of the patriarchy  
that hindered,  
Our finger print's mud bangles  
Stopped at counting  
cow dung cake moons  
with palm imprints.

(The Brand New Era)

She questions the men of her own  
community.

Have you given me any status  
Keeping my foot unhurt  
To dominate me  
Like the village  
That drank *Manudharma*

("Eve's Question")

She even questions the press and the  
government that takes the atrocities on  
Dalit women for granted as she has done  
in "Untouchable Rape."

Whether she is an uneducated woman, or  
educated woman or working woman, a  
Dalit woman is a Dalit woman. Her  
attire may change but her status doesn't  
change. Her caste and gender haunts.  
The poet declares that they have given a  
long rope to the society. Now it is the  
time for the Dalit women to revolt.

When patience dies  
Even a blade of grass

Pierces like a bodkin  
I don't have patience to run any  
more  
I will bloom like *Mankena poovu*  
Purging my life  
In the flames of these troubles  
I will jump like a stream  
Crossing the forest of problems  
(Mankena poovu)

She revolts, she gets pruned and jumps  
like a stream and asks other Dalit  
women to join hands with her in purging  
the streets, villages and educational  
institutes that emit the smell of caste,  
class and gender discrimination,

It is no gain dreaming day  
dreams

Sitting under the roof

Gather neighbouring  
Emangelammas

Surrounding Suvarthammas

Take the broom in the corner...!

We are already used to 'paki'  
works, you know!

Let us sweep

All the roads of this country

Rotting with caste smell

Into Bay of Bengal!

Let us clean

The pavilions of the village

That measure the untouchable  
bodies

With scales of desire

On one hand saying *mala, madiga  
mundas*.



With that golden hand only  
Let us wash  
Your capital husband  
Who is using you  
As his own property  
From top to bottom with  
phenol....!  
(My Mother)

Nobody can fight for a Dalit woman. She has to fight herself. She should learn self-protection skills. She has to be like a Phoolan Devi amidst the society which looks at her like an organ to be enjoyed and exploited. She calls all Dalit women to be like *walking arsenals* amidst the exploitations.

In the system where  
We are seen as  
thieves...witches  
Or else *mathangis*  
But not as human beings  
.....  
Just as the blind rose wears  
crown of thorns  
For self protection  
The *Phoolans*  
Or *maddikera Marthammas*  
here  
Should become walking  
arsenals  
(Flowers and Thorns)

Swaroop Rani 's depiction of the various atrocities a Dalit woman faces at various stages spring from her own experiences and the experiences she has seen around her ever since she was a child. It is a voice of the helpless but not

a helpless voice. It is a ferocious voice of a tigress that has been caged and whipped for a long time. It is the voice which calls other similar voices to join her and fight with her for the freedom that is denied them. It is the questioning voice that directly questions the injustice they have met in the hands of Nation, Hinduism, Government, feminists, caste hierarchy, society of high caste women and men. It doesn't leave even Dalit men. This spirit makes her present a Dalit woman as an indomitable fighter. Jyoti Lanjewar in his "Dalit Literature and Dalit Woman" observes,

With the exception of a handful of Dalit writers, the rest have portrayed Dalit woman as competent, as capable of overcoming the situations, as far removed from the habit of day-dreaming, and as conscious of subjective reality. (191)

The courage to fight, resoluteness, and rebelliousness are the very essence of their life. That is why Dalit writers do not portray Dalit women as hollow idealists, overflowing with love, embodiments of sacrifice. (193)

A change in Dalit woman's fate leads to change in the society as she is the centre of the society. Jaideo Gaikwad in his "The Dalit Women's Dual Fight" observes,

They want to bring about a change in the entire system because they realise that they cannot gain liberation for women until other inequalities remain in society.... The existing social and familial conditions have taught them to fight, and they are seen battling on these two fronts





simultaneously.(204)

Rachel Bari says, "The image of the Dalit women that is emerging is that of a strong women, capable of running any show single-handed" (477 ). In portraying their problems, Swaroopa Rani establishes a sisterhood and speaks on behalf of them. Answering a question, she said,

We don't have scope for pleasure. We have many struggles in our life. We will not have space in the society , whether it is poverty wise or something else. They (dalit women )have to fight their own fight. Nobody does for them.

#### References

1. Bari, Rachel."Dalit Feminist Experiences" Growing up as a Woman Writer Jasbir Jain (Ed.) New Delhi : Sahithya Akademi , 2007.
2. Gaikwad, Jaideo. "The Dalit Women's Dual Fight" Dalit Women in India : Issues and Perspectives. P.G. Jogdand(Ed.) New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995
3. Lakshmi Narasaiah, G. "The Perfect Poetic form for Dalit Feminism" Mankena poovu, Anupama : Hyderabad, March, 2005
4. Lanjewar, Jyoti. in his "Dalit Literature and Dalit Woman" Dalit Women in India:Issues and Perspectives. P.G. Jogdand(Ed.) New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995
5. Margaret, M. Swathy. "Dalit Feminism" Counter Current.Org 03 June 2005
6. Sikhamani. "First Dalith Feminist Poetry – Mankenapoovu" Mankenapoovu. Anupama: Hyderabad, March 2005.
7. Swaroopa Rani, Challapalli. Mankena poovu Anupama: Hyderabad, March 2005. (All the poems by Swaroopa Rani quoted in this paper are from this edition and my translations.)
8. Syamala, Gogu.(Ed.) Nalla Poddu Dalita Streeela Sahithyam 1921-2002 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Hyderabad, 2004. (all Dalit women writers except Challapalli Swaroopa Rani and Bama are from this edition.)

[Insight16Feb.2009>http://www.countercurrents.org/feminism-margaret030605.htm](http://www.countercurrents.org/feminism-margaret030605.htm) <