Literature and Marginalization

Susan Asokan*
Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, India

Abstract

The use of English language by Dalit writers is political as it encompasses a lot of debate about their oppression and marginalization. Dalit writing relies a lot on the use of colloquial terms and does not follow the strict rules of grammar. Their language is impolite and uncouth and it makes use of images and symbols that are appropriate to convey the Dalit experience. The use of their mother tongue grants the writers the sharpness of expression and hence many Dalit writers prefer to write in their mother tongue. But there are also Dalit writers who view English as a language of emancipation and liberation. In the course of this paper I will be analysing Meena Kandasamy’s poems which focus on the power of language and subvert many of the prevailing ideologies within patriarchy as well as feminist criticism.

Keywords: Dalits; Marginalization; Language; Liberation

Introduction

Language has been a means for liberation for Dalits, the English language in particular. English has been a political discourse in India from the pre-Independence era to the current globalised India. On the one hand there is the issue of English being the language of the colonial masters and hence English language brings forth the idea of ‘colonial baggage’ and the resultant loss of indigenous languages, while on the other hand some argue that English is the need of the hour. Along with these debates there are also other issues that arise regarding the status, accessibility and impact, which in turn is related to the question of indigeneity and Westernisation. There is also a fear that with the death of other languages the world will become a homogenized space, each representing a hegemonic language.

While for the privileged class English could be a language of achievement or they could have a choice between other languages, for the Dalits mastering the English language symbolizes liberation. Writers such as Meena Kandasamy believe English to be the language of Dalit emancipation. In one of her poems called “Mulligatawny dreams” she writes, “I dream of English full of the words of my language. An English in small letters and English that shall tire a white man’s tongue and make him an English where small children practice with smooth round pebbles in their mouth to spell the right zha”. She wishes for English that can accommodate her life, her thought and language. It can also be seen as a move towards empowering English as it makes it capable enough to include varied voices, ideas and ideologies. In one of her other poems called “Once my silence held you spellbound” Kandasamy subverts the arguments in feminist literature which states that language is patriarchal and women are unable to express themselves in this male-dominated space. Helene Cixous is the one who talks about écriture feminine (often written in small case) in her poem represents not only her as an individual but women in general which also includes the mythical characters. Through her voice she reflects on the multiple subjectivities in women’s experience which talks about their marginalization and oppression. Her comment on the urgency to deal with caste and gender issues sums up the argument and she considers it to be her prerogative as a poet and a Dalit feminist to speak for the women in the margins.

For the Dalits the mainstream languages are equally oppressive and prejudicial, while English on the other hand affects them as language, culture and politics [1]. Kancha Ilaiah too argues that English has a great potential for the liberation of Dalits from caste-based oppression. English language becomes the language of survival and decolonisation for the marginalised communities like the Dalits. In the nineteenth century it was Savitribai Phule who urged the lower-caste people to embrace English education and throw Brahmin scriptures away. Even Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit intellectual recognized English as a Dalit Goddess and for whom he even built a temple. ‘Dalit Goddess of English’ personifies English as a woman and makes her specifically a Dalit Goddess, thus appropriating a colonial language as a means of decolonisation for Dalits from the caste-ridden Indian society [1]. The fact cannot be denied that the English language is accessible to the privileged and the Dalits see it as a tool to enter into certain arenas of power. English is therefore perceived by the Dalits as a neo-savarna means of oppression and deprivation, and as an insurmountable obstacle thrust by the education system. It is a good example of how a language can empower some, disempower some others, and threaten yet others [1-3].

Dasan on the other hand, finds the idea of Englishing Dalits as the only way to liberate and empower them quite reductive. He acknowledges that the English-educated Dalits have become Dalit elites and have been able to negotiate power with bureaucracy and...
political leadership. He also accepts the fact that knowledge of English has enhanced employment opportunities resulting in increased income levels, yet despite their improved ability and proficiency in English language they are still discriminated against [4,5]. He doubts whether proficiency in English can do away with the inherent vices in the Brahmanical social order- which are primarily responsible for the inferior status of Dalit masses-and can put an end to Dalit suffering. He also questions whether 'Englishing' Dalits is similar to the 'civilising mission' of the colonisers [1].

**Conclusion**

Through the above arguments it can be concluded that the English language cannot necessarily be seen as only colonising or belonging to the privileged. English can also be seen as a means of liberation and emancipation. Empowerment can only be achieved when there is a socio-cultural reversal in the attitude towards the Dalit and they are treated equally. Language therefore could be a medium to initiate this process of liberation. Kandasamy’s quote on the power of language highlights a very important aspect about the role of the poet in the society. She says, "I do believe that languages are biased clearly reflecting a lot of the status quo, reflecting the inequalities and very often reinforcing them. This does not mean that language does not contain the potential for revolution, or to serve as a call to arms. I think language can be used to mask grave crimes, or to send across stereotypes, or even sometimes to denude us of all feeling, all outrage. I think this one reason why the role of a poet becomes important- you are not only saying things but you are also digging out the weapons in the arsenal of language, you are reclaiming love, you are celebrating beauty." Kandasamy’s belief in the poet to be the shepherd to the masses highlights the urgency of Dalit writers to narrate their experiences and bring into light an unseen world.

**References**