

The Poetry of Re(z)sisters: First Nations Women and Stri Dalit Poetry: A comparison.

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If we who are not white, [upper castes] and also women have not yet seen that here we live in a prison, that we are doing time [serving a prison sentence], then we are fools playing unenjoyable games with ourselves. I want go so far, however, as to say that we deserve what we get

(Himani Bannerji *doing time*)

History of colonization reveals innumerable instances of indigenous people being displaced and destroyed. They were coerced, abused and forced to serve the purpose of building the empire. They were bought and sold like chattels and suffered many indignities. The experiences of indigenous women were bitter than their men. These degraded “beasts of burden” continued on the move from camp to camp. Colonization has taken its toll on Native peoples, but perhaps it has taken its greatest toll on women. While all Natives experience racism, Native women suffer from sexism as well. Racism and sexism found in the colonial process have served to dramatically undermine the place and value of women in aboriginal cultures, leaving them vulnerable both within and outside our communities (La Rocque 11). As colonial subjects, the Canadian Native women and Dalit women in India suffered many things in common. Discrimination, disempowerment, sexual abuse, non-recognition of their role in society are only a few of them.

The writings of these “doubly marginalised” groups in postcolonial countries like Australia, Canada and India are attempts to rewrite the histories from their perspectives. Their writings are attempts to resist the many-sided “invasion” of the imperialism as well as forces of internal colonialism. In this sense, they are also “righters” of history.

As the writings of Native women in Canada and Dalit women in India are also part of a feminist writing, it should be made clear that these writings differ from White women writings as they take into consideration the question of race and caste also. The flourishing of cultural productions by Aboriginal women in Canada are transforming the theoretical presuppositions of Post colonialist and feminist critique. They also have criticized the imperialist assumptions of “self identified” First Worldist Feminist practices. Though Canadian Native women writers are aware of the risk involved in a feminist analysis that

limits its discussion exclusively to the issue of gender, Dalit women has not yet been able to assume the Fourth World feminist position. Patricia A. Monture, a Mohawk belonging to the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy says: "You cannot ask me to speak as woman because I cannot speak as just a women. This is not the voice that I have been given, Gender does not transcend race".

White women in America, Canada or Australia remains British, American or Canadian and enjoy the privileges of that status, howsoever much they claim that they are just women. African-American, Native, Aboriginal and Dalit women on the other hand, cannot be unproblematically American, Canadian, Australian and Indian respectively—as those with privileged ethnicities claim to be—because their other identities (race and caste) put them at a disadvantage in racist/casteist Nation state.

Aboriginal women fare worse than aboriginal men do for they are victims of both racism and sexism. This doubly oppressed position of aboriginal/Dalit women is neither completely understood by their own men nor by White/Upper caste feminists. "Like other women of colour, aboriginal women feel that feminism must be contextualised; one cannot assume a commonality among the interests and objectives of all women" (*Viviana* 264). Emma La Roque also argues: "I as a native women am compelled to pursue and express my scholarship quite differently from the way my non-native counterparts do" (13).

Both Native and Dalit woman writers are in fact women "righters" and like Toni Cade Bambara, they are also creators of "art for survival". They are appreciated by their people who maintain that writing is perfectly legitimate way to participate in the struggle for survival and liberation.

Before European contact, Native women played an essential economic role and men did not enjoy greater status or prestige but rather the work of men and women was complementary. Native women's skills were very much appreciated and they were symbols of traditional strength and power. Only through the involvement in the European fur trade were a woman placed in an inferior position to males. Between wife and husband in aboriginal families, there exists a loving relationship based on shared work that plays a positive role.

Since majorities of Dalits do not have property reserves and every individual must therefore work for the family, women are thoroughly integrated into their productive labour system. Dalit women possess enormous skills; they are excellent soil examiners, planters, breeders and selectors of seeds. They are also huge stores of traditional systems of knowledge.

Women's role in aboriginal families continues to a great extent as before, providing security and stability. As they are not only creators of life and culture but also perpetrators, women were perhaps more essential to family and band survival than ever before. Even in those days of great destitution and upheaval, the women kept alive traditions of communal activity and sharing of resources. Women on reserves lost this position of authority in family matters such as how the food resource was to be distributed to the Indian agent and to the Christian missionaries.

Except for a few isolated examples, First Nations People of Canada and Dalits in India have been systematically excluded from attaining high education and thus prevented their entry into the professions. Yet they have articulated their problems and issues powerfully in their writings for the past few decades. Native literature in Canada and Dalit literature in India though made their debut in the thirties it became strong during the later part of the Sixties and Seventies. Just as the voices of indigenous people as a whole remain excluded from the official/colonialist/mainstream systems of knowledge production in the dominant discourses, the voices of aboriginal women also suffered exclusion and the voices of Canadian Native women and Indian Dalit woman was heard through publication of their works only in the seventies.

Unlike Dalit women in India, Native Canadian women had produced a vibrant body of literature—poems, tales, autobiography, novels, prose pieces and plays. They have their own publications and journals now. But Stri Dalit Sahitya has joined the malestream Dalit writers only recently in India with atleast a dozen women poet from Maharashtra. A couple of autobiographies, several books of short stories, essays, an illustrated book on what women contributed to the movement of untouchables under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar are now available. Unfortunately, this is more or less confined to the Marathi-speaking area of India, as Eleanor Zelliot points out (65). She argues that the fourteenth century Bhakti movement, the nineteenth century Reform movement and the twentieth century ability of women to create meaningful literature are part of the background of the emergence of Stri Dalit sahitya (66).

These writings emerge out of an experience of their resistance to the "colonized" and constitutes an important representation and were the result of the need to confront the racist/casteist assumptions. Hence texts by aboriginal women demand to be read in the context of resistance, in particular, resistance to the structures of internal colonialism in Canada and India. Aboriginal texts from Canada and Australia also resist normal conventions of literary classifications. They not only resist replacement in the categories "minority" or "ethnic" but the conceptual borders that line the pockets of genre are also blurred. A kind of interfusion or hybridity is the result. For instance, Beth Brant's *Mohawk Trail* (1985) is a miscellany containing autobiography, short stories, poems and a reconstructed American

Indian myth. Lee Maracle's *I am Woman* is another example. Hence, these texts can be described as "writings" rather than literature. But Dalit women writings in India has not yet reached that stage. Whereas the contemporary Native writings are a product of seventh generation, Dalit writings are the impassioned voice of the third generation of Ambedkarite movement (Dangle xiv).

Though Native women writings and Stri Dalit sahitya are feminist in impulse, the colonialist assumptions in academic feminist theory make it difficult for these writers to align themselves with this and other dominant forms of feminisms. Kate Shanley's explanation regarding the difference between Indian feminism and White/mainstream feminism in her article "Thoughts on Indian Feminism" is also true of Dalit women. Academic feminism (theoretical feminism of the University) constitute something different from the "grass-root" feminism of "Other" women. Though key issues to the majority women movement affect Indian women as well, equality per se, may have a different meaning for Indian women. (1) On the individual level, the Indian women struggle to promote the survival of a social structure whose organizational principles present notions of family different from those of the mainstream and (2) On the social level, the people seek sovereignty as a people in order to maintain a vital legal and spiritual connection to the land, in order to survive as people (214).

The desire on the part of mainstream feminists in both India and Canada to include Indian/Dalit women represents tokenism, and they are seen more as artifacts than as real people to speak for themselves. Given the public general ignorance about Indigenous peoples, First Nations/Dalit women's real-life concerns are not relevant to the mainstream feminist movement in a way that constitute anything more than a representative façade. This problem raises important questions about the formation of collective resistance among women when the cultural and political interests and experiences of "Other" women are either ignored, dismissed or simply taken for granted. Though Aboriginal women writers placed feminist theory in the 1980s as a self reflexive process of examining its own racism and ethnocentrism, it failed to consider what Aboriginal women said about their particular concern within the movement.

In fact, both in their characterization and as writing subjects, aboriginal women are writing themselves and their people into history as subjects to and of their own making. As agents of their own historical traditions, they are claiming an unambiguous self-determination to tell their own stories, and are doing it in their own way. As Dionne Brand says: they do not write from the margins of colonial tradition but from the centre of Aboriginal tradition. Because, though the deprivations, exploitations and oppressions suffered by Native and Dalit women are almost identical in Canada and India, there are basic differences in the value systems and historical circumstances in which they are pitched. Aparna Basu and

Mcenalochana Vats who enumerates the "vast social, economic and cultural dissimilarities between Canada and India" also reminds us that "there is much in common between them in terms of experience of patriarchy and challenges to it" (xviii-xix).

Despite similarities, the creative expression of Native Canadian women is far better in quantity and quality than Dalit women writing in India. Whereas Native women writing has emerged as a vibrant body and has become unavoidable in any discussion of Canadian literature, Dalit women writing has not yet reached that status in the discussion of Indian literatures. The educational and economic backwardness among Dalit women has precluded them from producing works comparable to *Half Breed* (Maria Campbell), *In Search of April Rain Tree* (Beatrice Culleton) *Slash* (Jeannette Armstrong), *I am Woman* (Lee Maracle), or *Honour the Sun* (Ruby Slipperjack). Much of Sri Dalit sahitya available now is in the form of autobiographies, short stories and poems. However, what is attempted here is a comparative analysis of the poems of Canadian Native women and Dalit women in India.

Because of the collective trauma experienced by the native people, the majority of authors lament the loss of lives, land and language in their poems. Some contain nostalgia for the past hatred for European settlers who caused that loss, rejection of dominant society, relationship with Earth and Native's struggle for self-determination. Their poems also speak of the spiritual relationship between Native people and their surroundings, something, which is summed up in the phrase "All My Relations". Native Women's poems are the result of a growing pride in nativeness, and their contents and message reflect the process of growing socio-political and cultural emancipation of First Nations people in Canada.

The poems of Jeannette Armstrong, prominent among contemporary Native women writers, express a conscious seeking and offering as well as an unconscious renewal from contact with the past. Her "Blood of my people" courses through veins of her family, her tribe, her race, binds them, raises them for one intense moment to whirl, to dance, before settling quietly back in to soil (Kudchedkar 26). Images of past injustice and a suggestive irony of diction characterize her "history lesson" in which she recalls the history of Canadian "discovery" and settlement. This poem emerges as an indictment of European conquest and colonization.

Meena Gajbhiye one of the pioneers of Sri-Dalit Sahitya in her poem "Light Melted in Darkness" also speak of similar experience:

... I melt
in the empty space of darkness . . .
I am entangled in Python-coils
For ages (Dangle 53).

In "Dark Forest" Armstrong laments the untimely death of a young political activist

of the American Indian Movement in a warm and loving tribute. Hira Bansode's poem "O Great Man" is honour of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the unquestionable leader of the Untouchable's Movement who fought against the denial of human rights to Dalits. She writes:

It is clear that nature belongs to all
but these people bought that too
Every drop of water in Cawdar Tank
was stamped with their name,
the alert watchman of this culture
guarded the imprisoned water
They roared that your touch
would poison the water and
they anointed you with your blood
when you were dying of thirst. (Anand 33)

Armstrong is a woman of strong sympathies and warm passions. Her poetry is direct, unequivocal, assertive and even aggressive. Her poems grapple with the grim realities of the contemporary native Canadian experience and tell the uncomfortable truths (Petronne 163).

Hira Bansode, "and ebullient feminist" criticizes Indians' treatment of all women. Her poem "Slave" portrays the enslaved position of Indian women thus:

where Sita entered the fire to prove her fidelity
where Shilya was turned stone because of Indra's lust
where Droupadi was fractured to serve five husbands
in that country a woman is still a slave (Qtd. in Veena Deo and Zelliott 44).

The poet who has worked all her life to earn her livelihood also asserts that since "Woman do equal work" "They should have equal rights" (Qtd. in Zelliott 71). Her poem "Yasodhara", which deconstructs the image of Yasodhara, wife of Buddha, as an inspiration to him, could be written only by an Indian feminist: She writes:

... He [Buddha] went, he conquered, he shone.
While you listened to the songs of his triumph
your womanliness must have wept.
you who lost husband and son
must have felt uprooted
like the tender banana plant.

But history doesn't talk about
the great story of your sacrifice.

.....
I am ashamed of injustice
you are not to be found
in a single Buddhist Vihara
were you really of no account? (Qtd. in Dangle 32)

Beth Cuthand's "Post-Oka Kinda Woman" also projects the Canadian Native feminist position who is "done with victimisation, separation/degradation, assimilation/devolution [and] coddled collusion". She continues:

Post-Oka woman she's strutting her stuff
Not walkin' one step behind her man.
She don't take that shit
Don't need it! Don't want it
You want her then treat her right (*Gatherings* 262).

Like the activist Native women poets (Jeannette Armstrong and Beatriace Culleton) who fight for their traditional cultural and landrights, Dalit women poets also identify completely with grassroots level Dalit women and are in the forefront of Dalit movement and struggle for human rights—temple entry and drinking water and against Devadasi (Temple Prostitute) system. For instance, one of the "Revolution" poem of Jyothi Longiwar titled "The Nameless Ones" says:

Begging won't get anything here
not sympathy, not love,
a suit in court wins injustice,
tears are of no value
Getting water is a struggle (Qtd. in Zelliot 79)

While both Canadian native women and Dalit women write about contemporary issues from a Fourth World Feminist position, they do keep their inspiration from Mothers and Grand Mothers who are the creators of their culture. Both these groups of writers yearn to learn from their elders and from ancient oral traditions. Armstrong dedicates her volume of poetry *Breath Tracks* to her Okanagan grandmother. "Whose blood and words live inside [her]".

Mark Sky Blue Morin makes her poetry chiefly out of the tradition and ceremonies of her people. She writes:

I Dream of Buffalo Days

Sweet grass

The women's sweet lodge

A Healing Time (Petronne 164)

Her poems though modest and slight, convey a strong sense of cultural values from which she obtains strength (Petronne 166).

Lonjewar's "Mother" also acknowledges the struggle of Dalit mothers for survival:

I have seen you

at the front of Long March

at the front of your sari tucked tightly at the waist

shouting "change the name"

taking the blow of the police stick on you upraised hands

going to jail with head held high

... I have seen you

saying when your only son

fell martyr to police bullets

'You died for Bhim, your death means something'

saying boldly to the police

'If I had two or three sons, I would be fortunate

they would fight on' (Qtd. in Zelliot 83)

Marie Anne harte Baker's "Moon bear" merges both the metaphors in the title (Moon and Bear) important to Native Indians—menstrual time is known as "Moon time" and Bear is the archetypal mother figure—to express her power as a woman and as a source of life.

To conclude, the past five hundred years of colonization have seen a subordination of these colored women. Attempts by the dominant cultures in both Canada and India to wipe out these native voices have met with stiff resistance in different forms. Their writings is one of the major tools for the empowerment of these doubly oppressed people.

In recent years, the Native women in Canada and Dalit women in India have broken their silence and raised their voices to provide solace to the thousands of young indigenous peoples who have been struggling to survive. What holds them together is the feeling of sisterhood—commonness as "Other" women. They came from different nations; their stories are not the same; their dress is not the same; their colour is not the same. Yet, they are the

same. Their poems spread the message of resistance against dominant cultural hegemony by recreating their own history, tradition and affirm their distinct cultures.

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