



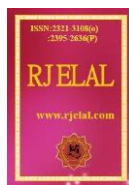
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

TO LIVE UNDER RESERVATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DALIT POETRY AND MIZO POETRY

LALTHANSANGI RALTE

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. J. Thankima College,
Bawngkawn, Aizawl.



Article info

Article Received:11/4/2023

Article Accepted:02/05/2023

Published online:05/05/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.2.32](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.2.32)

Abstract

This paper gives a comparative analysis of Dalit Poetry and Mizo Poetry highlighting on the people who live under “reservation”, people who are called “underdeveloped” and “noble savages”. This paper brings to light the idea of an India in the mind of Dalits and Mizos posing the question “What is India to me?” The paper will give an in-depth analysis of the “wordless protests” of people living under reservation.

Keywords: Dalit, Mizo, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, protest, cultural stereotype, untouchable, reservation, comparative analysis.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt at bringing together Dalit poetry and Mizo poetry and analysing how one is termed an “untouchable” and the other “an ethnic specimen”. The poems selected for study are taken from various anthologies and collections namely *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle and anthologies of writings and poetry from Northeast India. Mona Zote, a poet from Mizoram, writes about her people and about living as person under the reserved category in her poem ‘Rez’ (Rez refers to a North American Indian reservation or reserve). In this poem Zote alludes to the North American Indians and then brings it home to Mizoram when she writes how her “heart is truly Hindoostani” (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2009, 316) She strongly writes –

if they ask you about life on the reservation
if they say they want to hear about stilt
houses and the dry clack of rain on bamboo
and the preservation of tribal ways give them
a slaughter (315)

A Dalit, a member of the lowest caste in the traditional Indian caste system, is also referred to by the term “Scheduled Caste” which is the official name given to them in India by which they are given special concessions in recognition of their status. A group of people who have been termed “untouchable” thus become socially, culturally, politically and economically oppressed. A larger population of the Dalits was illiterate till the beginning of the twentieth century (Dharwadkar, 319). Even though reading and writing has traditionally been restricted to specific high castes, the shudras have their own myths, narratives and songs that have been orally preserved and transmitted through generations, many of which have been put into print. Baburao Bagul writes that the term “Dalit” is “the name for revolution; it is revolution incarnate” (Dangle, 289). Under the colonial patronage, the Dalits have acquired literacy on a significant level. And by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Dalits had people from within their caste who could lead them to organise them politically and socially. The people living in Mizoram,

a remote corner in the northeast region of India, have been labeled in a similar manner, by a cultural stereotype. Even the Constitution of India labels the Mizos as “underdeveloped”. They are considered to be “noble savages” who need to be protected and kept in seclusion from the outside world by law in the form of an Inner Line Permit (ILP). Creating a space of socialisation between the plain and the hill areas was never the intention of the colonial rulers. The tribal areas were sealed off by the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 and declared as excluded areas in 1935 in which the entry of non-tribals or plain inhabitants was strongly cautioned. It is argued that such a policy was designed partly to keep “primitives” bound to their “natural” space in the hills. The Mizos come under the group of Scheduled Tribes under the Indian Government where they are given “reservations” in matters of application to Government jobs and admission to Government institutions. To be named a Scheduled Tribe / Caste brings with it many advantages but being the smaller and socially isolated tribe / caste, they are still the ones denied attention and representation. This paper will compare and analyse two different cultures that may seem to be dissimilar but in reality have related features through a study of the poetry written by the poets of the respective cultures. The poems from both cultures, Dalit and Mizo emphasise the supremacy of those in power. J.V. Pawar asks the ‘others’ to “not underrate them” because “It was possible to dynamite / the prison at its base” (Dangle, 41). Prakash Louis writes that the Dalits and the tribals are the most deprived segment of the Indian population (Louis ix). They have been deprived from their resources like land, water and forest and they are furthermore denied access and control over their resources as their resources have been usurped by those in power. They are denied access to education and access to development progresses and outcomes. In 1990, there was an establishment of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to address specific rights of the weaker sections and also to protect their rights from being violated (Louis, 7). The first part of the paper will give an analysis of the position of the Dalits and the Mizos among the rest of India posing the question “What is India to me?”

The second part of the paper will compare and analyse the lives and struggles made by the Dalits and the Mizos. The third part of the paper will explore lives lived under reservation.

What is India to me?

Arjun Dangle writes that the word ‘Dalit’ means “masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and other factors” (Dangle, 265). The Dalits and the Mizos are members of a closed society. The Dalits live in a society where even “the villages have walls”. The Mizos, on the other hand, live in a free society but they have been living secluded from the rest of India because the British colonisers felt that there was need for them to be protected from the rest of India and for the other regions to be protected from them. During the colonial rule, the Mizos were isolated from the outside world. The colonial rulers convinced the outsiders that the Mizos were a blood-thirsty warring tribe and the requirement for an Inner Line Permit (ILP) was made for the outsiders to enter Mizoram. The Inner Line Permit was again re-enforced in 1935 and was further validated after the Indian independence. The issuing of this law became a marker in the further isolation of the state of Mizoram and its people from the outside world. This explains the feeling of exclusion from the Center by the Mizos. The insurgencies of the 1960s disheartened the Mizos and made them alienate themselves even more. The Mizo poets came to realise the value of their land where “...flowers bloom, the sweet scent of joy blows in breeze” (Khangte, 37). In her poem ‘This is So’ Mona Zote writes about the sound of “...a hundred footsteps / Tramping by...” which becomes a threat for the natives (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2003, 202). It is the “hundred footsteps” which has brought forth the image of “a boy and his gun” which Mona Zote regards to be the image “which will sum up our time” (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2009, 314). In most Mizo poetry, there is a formation of an “intertwined community” (term taken from Dubois) of feeling. This formation of a community of feeling arises out of a shared feeling of nostalgia for the past and for one’s ancestors. A common ancestry becomes the guiding factor for the unity of the

people. We find unity in shared suffering among the Dalits and this shared ancestry becomes the guiding factor among the Dalits. Fred Lee Hord and Jonathan Scot Lee, two well-known theorists of Black Aesthetics and literary theory have written that identity is constructed by sharing beliefs and ideas, set of deeds and the expected outcome. Black thinkers and artists take it upon themselves to write about the collective identity and the problems faced by the Blacks as a race. Hord and Lee have put forth the principle "I am because we are" to explain their views on the notion of collective race / identity which they regard to be the outcome of a notion of culture. The principle of "I am because we are" has been and is still strong in the hearts of the Mizos. The Mizo poets assert that the individual, especially in the Mizo society, can never be separated from the social and cultural atmosphere s/he lives in. The Mizo poets feel the need to revive the traditions and culture which have been lost and buried in the past. In 'An Ultimatum', Dalit poet Yashwant Manohar writes, "I feel a foreigner among the people / bearing the burden of such a bastard life" (Dangle, 15). The words "a foreigner among the people" is a shared identity among the Mizos and the Dalits. For the Dalits, it is their birth which places them apart from "the people" and with the Mizos, it is their physical features which makes them different from "the people". In her poem, 'What does an Indian look like', Cherrie L. Chhangte, a Mizo poet, writes about this feeling like "a foreigner among the people" –

For those who, in a land that professes
To deny the presence of a mainstream,
Still has little rivulets and brooks
Furiously trying to keep pace with the river,
Sidelined, side-tracked, side-stepped,
A minority in a majority world. (Misra, 76)

She furthermore writes about the position of the Mizos, how they are viewed as an "ethnic specimen", how Indians from other regions of the country see only her eyes, her skin, her language and her faith when they look at her. She proudly answers the fundamental question "What does an Indian look like?" with "An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me" (Misra, 76). In her poem 'Mary Winchester'

(Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2003, 199-200), Mona Zote writes about the abduction of a young "white" girl by the Mizos during the pre-Christian era on February 23rd, 1871. The only difference Mary Winchester had from the other girls was that her eyes were not at all "oriental". It is the skin colour, physical features and one's birth which alienates a person from "the people". A Dalit, like a Mizo, is an Indian but is one who is not given a place among the higher caste Hindus. In 'The Stains of Blood', B.S. Hate writes about how Living in India, as an Indian, the Dalits have endured "wounds / that have festered and bled for centuries". Among the Mizos, it was the "Trenchcoat todesengel bringing meaning to life through death" which brings forth the "pictures of war / people getting shot / houses pulled down / heads shorn" (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2009, 314). It is these images of war and death during the insurgencies in Mizoram that has alienated the Mizos from the rest of India.

Wordless Protests

The idea of a homeland is a preoccupation for the writers from the Northeast region of India. Mizoram being in the farthest corner in the eastern region of India and being bordered by Bangladesh and Myanmar often becomes disconnected from the rest of India. A longing for one's homeland and for ancestors is felt by the Mizos. Malsawmi Jacob brings to light the condition of life in her homeland in her poem 'My Land'. Her land, Mizoram, has become a dark land where dawn is much awaited. She mourns when looks at the pathetic condition of her land. Mona Zote looks at her land and sees "a land where babies are ripped out of their graves", where "religion has made drunks of us all". Her land has become "an incestuous land" where "we are killing ourselves". Malsawmi Jacob has brought out the social and political condition of life in her homeland in her poem 'The Dog's Complaint'. The relationship between the Central Indian Government and the Mizoram State Government is clearly depicted in this poem. The poem reads –

My master throws the bones
I thought should be for me
To other dogs. (Jacob, 82)

And when the dog grumbles and growls in complaint, the master punishes the dog because he has the power to do so. Jacob questions, "And how can I, a dumb dog / make him see / how I feel?" (Jacob, 82)

The northeast region of India is still a dense area where the condition of life is still very backward in many places. The Mizos are a people who are still closely linked to their cultural roots and even appear backward to the outside world because of their traditional beliefs which they cannot easily rid themselves of. But they also have a right to having their needs fulfilled. It is sometimes impossible for the natives to make the people in power hear their voice of appeal. They depend on their representatives for their voices to be heard and for their identity to be completed and given a place. The power construction is placed in such a manner that the voice of the natives often tends to be drowned out by the voices of those representatives who wield power in their hands. In the power ladder, the natives are in the lowest position where they are often deceived by false ideologies. In 'White Paper', Sharankumar Limbale shouts in protest –

I ask for
my rights as a man...
I want my rights, give me my rights.
Will you deny this incendiary state of things?
(Dangle, 64)

The basic right of the Dalits to live as humans has been denied of them. J. V. Pawar explained the condition of the life of the Dalits as "birds in prison". Dharmaraj Nimsarkar also elucidated the struggles of the Dalites where their "protests are wordless / and complaints have no voice" (Dangle, 35).

Life under Reservation

The Dalits and the Mizos are both given considerations regarding their "disadvantaged" status. They both belong under the reserved category where seats are "reserved" for the qualified candidates in Government jobs and institutions. Mona Zote clearly portrays the outside world's view of the tribal as the "other", as something to be fascinated with. In the second part of the poem 'Rez', the poet gives Biblical image of

Jacob's fight / wrestle with God, a super-power. The poet continues, "...I can't forget Yacob... man's champ or scapegoat" (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2009, 316). Like Yacob/Jacob who fought with the super-power, the tribals, living on the benefits of reservation in places like Mizoram, who fight those in power while being honoured and praised by their fellowmen have become mere "scapegoats" for the amusement of the powerful. The people with power have gained ultimate authority with the help of degenerating of tribal unity and the dominance of "superior cultures". Edward Said writes about this kind of dominance in *Culture and Imperialism* stating how the power situation between the weak and the powerful is disguised and the dependence of the stronger power on the weaker party is concealed. From the mention of Biblical "Yacob" the poet Mona Zote goes on to mention that, "Your warriors are gone with Billy Bowlegs / and Billy Budd swings from the past" (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2009, 316). Billy Bowlegs Bolek, variously known as Holata Micco or Halpatter – Micco or Halbutta Micco or Halpuda Mikko in Seminole which means "Alligator Chief" was a leader of the Seminoles, a Native American tribe, in Florida during the Second and Third Seminole Wars against the United States of America. He was one of the last Seminole leaders to resist but he eventually moved to "Indian territory" which is now the present Oklahoma. Billy Budd is the main character in Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd* who is accused of initializing a plot among the inferior section of the ship's crew by the ship's master-at-arms. He was then convicted and hanged for the murder of Claghart, the ship's master-at-arms. Mona Zote's use of characters like Jacob, Billy Bowlegs and Billy Budd, fighters and leaders of uprisings gives a clear depiction of life of the underdogs, "scapegoats". Further on, Zote writes, "Swaraj: acid anthem in our veins" (316). "Swaraj", the idea of self-governance has been reduced to "acid" which corrodes and burns the hearts of the people living under reservation. Living life "on a reservation" results in "A mindless year of mindless action" (317).

A Dalit, a person of the lower caste does not stand a chance to be in the picture where the standard values were set by the upper classes and

castes. Baburao Bagul writes that in the caste-ridden society, the Dalit is often viewed as a person who is “mean, despicable, contemptible and sinful due his deeds in his past life” (Dangle, 289). Sharatchandra Muktibodh is of the opinion that a non-Dalit who views and acknowledges the “pitiabale state” of the Dalits need not necessarily have a Dalit point of view. In ‘Birds in Prison’ J. V. Pawar asks of the people not to “underrate them” (Dangle, 41)

The things you have to say, no one can say them for you

The places you have to go, no one can go there for you

The hills you have to burn, no one can burn them for you. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2009, 316)

References

Dangle, Arjun (ed.). *Poisoned Bread Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient Blackswan, 1992.

Dharwadker, Vinay. ‘Dalit Poetry in Marathi’ in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 68, no. 2, *Indian Literature in the Fifth Decade of Independence*, University of Oklahoma, Spring, 1994.

Dubois, W.E.B. (1990). *The Souls of Black Folk*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates Junior and Terri Hume Oliver: Norton, 1999.

Hord, Fred Lee and Lee, Jonathan Scott. Eds. *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.

Jacob, Malsawmi. *Tinkim Dawn*. Mizoram Publication Board, 2003.

Khiangte, Laltluangliana. Ed. *Mizo Songs and Folktales*. Sahitya Akademi, 2002.

Louis, Prakash. *The Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion*. Gyan Publishing House, 2003.

Misra, Tillotoma. Ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India Poetry and Essays*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing and Ngangom, Robin S. eds. *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. NEHU Publications, 2003.

_____. *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*. Penguin Books, 2009.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Book, 1994.

Corresponding Author Bio-note: Lalthansangi Ralte finished her MPhil and PhD from the Center of English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University and is presently teaching at Govt. J. Thankima College, Bawngkawn, Aizawl. Her areas of research include writings from Northeast India, culture studies and gender studies.