

JOTIRAO PHULE'S SLAVERY: SHUDRA PERSPECTIVE ON PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Abstract

Marginal Literature has always focused on a deconstruction and reconstruction of History to ensure a proper and legitimate space for the oppressed in the present through an overhauling of what is considered the norm by mainstream literature. Jotirao Phule's *Slavery*, published in 1873 is a work that falls in this category. However, what makes it unique is the fact that it was produced at a time when the theory behind Dalit Writings was not even conceived and what more, he gave a progressive model of the alternative social order that, rather than calling for a rejection of the oppressor, focuses on equal, valid voices. The paper tries to explore how, thematically and structurally, Phule, creates his utopia and how he restructures and re-constructs the past from the perspective of the 'other'.

Keywords:- Jotirao Phule, Marginal Literature, Dalit Writings, *Slavery*

Dalit, a derivative of the original word '*dal*', means "ground", offers a completely different meaning and space to the experience of the social outcastes by placing them at the receiving end of the Social and Literary structure. Dalit Literature, hence, deals with the hitherto economically, socially, racially, on the basis of caste, etc, oppressed and downtrodden, by offering them a space to express 'their' voice and represent 'their' side of the story. Dalit Movement in literature emerged with clearly defined agendas: first, a representation 'of' the voice of the marginals; secondly, a 're'-construction of the social order and its values as visible from "their" side; and thirdly, through it, deconstruct and reconstruct that entire historical representation that has led the Dalits to their present plight. The abrogation of the colonials' ideology, in favour of their own, is the hallmark of Dalit Movement.

The Movement and its ideology, evidently polemical to many, owe their genesis to 'the one' factor that has had an overwhelming presence in the Indian Context: Hinduism, a force so evident in India that it appears to a 'regular' feature, that, opines Gail Omvedt, "has been a taken-for-granted concept" (*Dalit Visions* 1). The proponents of Dalit literature affirm that Hinduism, an "oppressive...caste...force" (DV, 5), has an hierachal order, creating a social

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order that gave nothing to the outcastes and in a rigid manifestation of its principles, permanently relegated them to the bottom of the social ladder with no legitimate aspirations left for them. As Gail Omvedt affirms, when he opines that Hinduism asserts a hardcore dominance over the ones lower in the religious hierarchy and this situation has almost led to “*Hindutva*—militant Hinduism, Hinduism as nationalism” (*DV*, 2). This relentless and sustained order of Hinduism, over the centuries, has claimed the undivided attention of Dalit literature because they see it and its manifestation in the Caste System as the primary factors that oppressed their ancestors and is suppressing them even now. Gail Omvedt asserts, “It [Hinduism] has given birth to rampant and unjustifiable social inequalities...” (*DV* 1) and the Dalits were at the bottom of this order.

Dalit Movement stresses on the social and practical repercussions of Hinduism that has made them not only religiously oppressed but also the lowest in the practical social structure. The birth of postcolonial India, chronologically, gave a fresh lease of life and hope to Dalits as till then it were the ones ‘in power’ that mostly represented and constructed their identity. A ‘voice’ to the Dalits heralded the advent of a hope for the marginals as it accepted and acknowledged, not only their existence, but also their essence.

Entering into the literary canon with Postcolonialism, it has become a means of ‘striking back’ at centuries of oppression behind the social outcastes. The anti-caste and anti-brahmin movement of the 1920s grew in the 1970s, into the Radical Dalit Movement, the “*Dalit Panthers*”. However, the banner of Dalit Movement was hoisted much before its ‘formal’ beginnings in the 2nd half of the 20th century, under the leadership of Jotirao Phule, the founder of the *satyashodhak samaj* and generally accepted to be the one who used the term *dalit* for the first time. A *Mali* by birth, Phule took it upon himself to raise the voice of the Dalits against their age-old oppression by the Brahmins, the upper caste Hindus. His was an ideology that was nothing less than revolutionary because he practiced the postcolonial tenets at a time when postcolonialism as a Movement was not even conceived. To start with, he completely rejected the Hindu model of religion and life by expounding an alternative order that was Marxist in principle. He divided the society into a twofold structure comprising the Brahmins and the *shudratishudras*. Secondly, it was Phule who stressed on an alternative Educational System to change the prevailing social system and advocated active British’s participation in it. Thirdly, he gave an “alternative history” to Hinduism and Hindu way of life and in the process questioned the validity of the long sustaining scriptures and the mythologies therein.

In *Slavery*, originally published as *Gulamgiri* in 1873, Phule articulates his “alternative history” and relates his re-construction to the plight of the outcastes. It begins with a journey back into history to the time when the Aryans came to the Indian mainland and thereafter traces the way they suppressed the aborigines and made them *shudras*. Phule says in the “Introduction” to *Slavery*:

The sole intention of this treatise is to direct the attention of all these oppressed people towards their own plight and make them consider their situation properly...It has been conjectured that the brahmans have ruled this country for more than three thousand years” (36).

It is through a historical re-reading from the times of the arrival of the brahmans and representing it in connection with the present that he strives for a social upheaval in favour of the Dalits. In *Slavery*, Phule not only re-constructs history and myth but also finds in and through

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them the reasons for the society as it was apparently ‘mirrored’ in traditional and mainstream literature then. Phule, in his seminal work connects and inter-relates history with the contemporary, thereby constructing the present ‘reality’ in a completely new light and perspective.

The prevailing social reality, opines Phule, is one where the brahmans have completely dominated the *shudras*. He emphatically says that the Brahmans have reduced the *shudras* to complete misery by their policies of “slavery”. The reason for this is primarily religious in whose name the Brahmans continue to assert their ways on the *shudras*. Says Phule, “...these pen-wielding butchers still enjoy great domination over the shudras because of their cunning religion” (Phule, *Slavery*, 80). He vociferously asserts that it is through religious hegemony, rather than coercion, that the brahmans exploit the shudras. This hegemonic suppression works through the religious books and the fear these invoke and Phule says, “...they [shudras] still remain ignorant and captive in the mental slavery which the brahmans have perpetuated through their books” (*Slavery*, 45). The “books” being referred to here are the “books to legitimize the caste system” (ibid) and these put a stranglehold on the *shudras* through a successful hegemonic discourse wherein the *shudras* dare not complain against their subordination.

Moreover, Phule uses the term “Pen-wielding butchers” (ibid) for the Brahmans sitting in government offices and governing the *shudras*. Presenting *Slavery* as the ‘actual mirror’ to the social reality, Phule projects that the brahmans also divided the shudras to make their job of governing them easier. “They [brahmans] realized that they could sustain themselves and their domination only if they divided the shudras and atishudras and antagonized them against each other” (Phule, 44-45).

This implies a two-fold oppression of the *shudras* by the Brahmans: first as religious superiors and secondly as administrative superiors. The impact of this dual oppression is evident in that it leads to a state of complete hopelessness for the *shudra* who is left with neither religion nor government to address his grievances. The implication says Phule in *Slavery*, is that “the shudras are mortally scared of the brahmans” (80).

Phule, without mincing words authoritatively foregrounds the sorry state of affairs in the contemporary times and offers solutions to the rampant oppression. Phule was of firm conviction that the shudras need to be united to resist the Brahmin hegemony and oppression and hence he gave the concept of the *shudratishudra* wherein anyone who is not a brahmin is oppressed, a *shudratishudra*. This attempt at a unity, in Phule’s terms, will ensure that no one can dominate them, thereby leading to their freedom.

In the narrative he also foregrounds language as a device to counter the Brahman hegemony. He uses English and Marathi for his purpose and the choice, more than linguistic, is social. English gives his work a larger scope and also asserts his knowledge and ‘authenticity’ to speak ‘of’ the shudras in spite of being one amongst the “mortally afraid” shudras. The “Preface” of *Slavery*, summing up the text in a few pages, was originally composed in English, and begins with a quote:

The day that reduces a man to slavery
Takes from him the half of his virtue (26).

The Homeric quote, in addition to revealing the implications and destructiveness of slavery, also highlights the stature of the person attempting to speak ‘of’ the shudras. His choice

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of composing only the “Preface” in English and starting it with Homer, highlights the validity of a shift of the power of representation from the brahmans to the shudras.

The use of Marathi, on the other hand, connects Phule intricately with his people. Rumi says in *Masnavi*:

But he who is parted from them that speak his tongue,
Though he possesses a thousand voices, is perforce dumb.

Phule, hence, gives greater validity to *Slavery* by shifting from English to Marathi for the major part of his text. By virtue of his choice of two languages he imparts greater force and thrust to his cause and offers greater hope to the shudras to attain what he did. Phule’s use of language, English and Marathi, then, stands as a symbol of an ‘escape’ from the rigmarole of caste and oppression, through education. In the prevailing social scenario, Phule’s choice of languages emerges as the silver lining, though at the far end of the tunnel, but nevertheless a silver lining.

But, asserts Phule, that there is a lack of education, and this scenario has been perpetrated by the brahmans who assert it to be the natural and legitimate way the society works. As a result of this misrepresentation, oppression has validated itself in the society. He says, “...it would be difficult to find even one educated person among the mahars, mangs and chambhars. Finding a person who is a university graduate or has a Master’s degree is next to impossible” (81). He adds how this lack of education opens avenues of misrepresentation and oppression of the *shudratishudras*:

The kulkarnis catch some illiterate shudras who cannot
read and write’ they lend money to him and, while writing the
mortgage deeds, incorporate terrible conditions... (*Slavery*, 81)

Phule opines in *Slavery* that the weight of ages behind the slavery of today, multiplied by the consistent lack of education and subsequently awareness, has adversely affected the *shudras* who have become non-receptive to any alternative opinion and re-construction, if and when it comes to them. He asserts that “...the oppressed people choose to remain resigned to their despicable state of existence; they proclaim that they have no complaints about their circumstances and resist the very people who are willing to help them and fight for their rights” (38). What makes matters worse in the present times is that “shudras and atishudras are virtually torn asunder at the thought of the suffering undergone by their ancestors whose blood flows through their veins” (*Slavery*, 40-41) but in the absence of awareness, education and consistent oppression they are directionless as to their liberation, their birth right. So, says Phule, the lack of a proper education is what ails the present and leads to all the troubles of the shudras.

He adds that in addition to the lack of Education, there is another drawback in the education system: the kind of education system in place. He strongly says that the system of education in place promotes an ideology that keeps the *shudratishudra* where he historically is. So, suggests Phule, like a true revolutionary, solutions which center around a restructuring of the entire Education system. To start with, the over-dominance of the brahmans in the Education Department needs to be reduced and space created for the *shudras*, but opines Phule, it should be done through a proper examination. However, even before that, opines Phule, the school system will have to be modified and shudras schools opened with non-brahman teachers because the brahman teachers pull the shudras back into the pit of illiteracy through ‘their’ version of history and knowledge. He sums up the entire argument as:

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[Such schools should be] near the Collector's bungalow, provide them [shudras] with simple food and clothing, impart instruction to them and after they complete their education, conduct examinations for selection to the jobs of patil and kulkarni and appoint them to these posts" (*Slavery*, 81).

Once this kind of an education system is in place, the shudras will emerge, like Phule, in command of their faculties. Then, he asserts, the ages old social and religious system of oppression and coercion will be overturned.

Phule, here, to many's surprise, puts the onus for creating such an Educational System on the British because they are the rulers, and more importantly, because, for Phule, they are the representatives of the aboriginal king, Baliraja, the one who re-incarnated as Christ. What he does in the process is the shattering of the mythological stronghold of the brahmans on Hinduism and society. Rather, abrogating it, using 'his' side of the story, of Christ being Baliraja reincarnate, he counters the Brahman hegemony through their weapon, myths. So Phule says that "...God took pity on them [shudras] and the British Rule was established in India. The Shudra heartily thank the British for this and are exceedingly grateful to them" (*Salvary*, 44). So, British are projected as the tools to end the brahman domination because they are the representatives of the original savior of the aborigines, Baliraja. Valerian Rodrigues affirms this as he says, "...Phule saw a glimmer of hope in the opportunities that colonialism had opened up for Shruderatishudras, i. e. shudras and untouchables, the masses, to assert their freedom and rights" (99).

But he affirms that, the British, though liberal by nature, have been misguided and this is why, in spite of their good intentions, education is suffering. Says Phule, "Alas! How the *bhat* teachers have blackened the white face of our Education Department" (*Slavery* 81). Hence Phule emphatically says that it is necessary to 'enlighten' the British first to effect a change in the Educational System because the removal of the brahmanical veil will enable British to see the things in the prevailing perspective and, being generous as they are, they will themselves rectify it. However, it is important that, in doing so, he does not accept the perennial presence of the British in India. He sees them as temporary residents in India who will eventually leave and hence, to liberate themselves while the British are here is the only way out for the *shudras*. He says, "Let me tell you, the English are here today, but who knows whether they will be here tomorrow? They won't be there till eternity. Therefore, all the shudras should make haste to free themselves from the ancestral slavery of these *bhats*" (*Slavery*, 89).

Slavery is not merely a 'mirror' to his times, but also a re-construction of history leading to the reasons, as the 'other' see it, behind the contemporary oppression of the *shudras*, religious and intellectual; social and administrative. His "mirror", then, is the 'magical mirror' that not only mirrors contemporary reality but also the historical, as he sees it. In his historical reality, Phule, by re-constructing the past and presenting "his story", the *shudra* side of the past, questions and counters the popular mythology and history as merely falsely concocted stories. Gail Omvedt says in "Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India" that Phule "simply treats them [mythologies] as legends which may offer some insights into past Indian history and as products of a group (Brahmans, Aryans) seeking to establish control over the minds of the people" (1970).

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'His story' begins with the labeling of brahmans as "outsiders" and goes on to reduce the divine religious texts and mythologies to fabricated stories composed to wipe out the 'reality' of a violent oppression of the aborigines. 'His story' also narrates how, by giving the *shudras* names like "*rakshasas*", any struggle by the latter against the Brahmans was reduced to the good vs bad dichotomy, with the *shudras* being the 'bad forces'. The argument starts with the creation of the binary of "insider-outsider" or the "colonizer-colonized" with the brahmans actually being the invading Aryans coming into India with settler intentions and conquering the Indian aborigines, pushing them to the other end of the binary. "...Brahmins were not the aborigines of India. At some remote period of antiquity more than 3000 years ago, the Aryan progenitors of the present Brahmin Race descended upon the plains of Hindoo Koosh, and other adjoining tracts" (*Slavery*, 27). The better and more fertile Indian soil forced these invasions from the Aryans who eventually settled here, as the rulers, after a long hard fought battle with the aborigines.

This relationship between the two got concretized with time through the titles given by the brahmans to themselves and the aborigines. "Such self-gratulatory, pride-flattering epithets as Arya and bhoodev, etc. with which they designated themselves...[and] opprobrious terms, as sudra 'insignificant', mahari 'the great foe', antyaj, chandaal, etc with which they designated them..." (*Slavery*, 27) clearly hint at the hierarchy at play historically. In addition, the meaning of the titles also reflects upon the kind of relationship the two shared with one another. *Mahari*, 'the great foe', as Phule says, is how the brahmans called the aborigines and it reflects the enmity between the two and consequently hints at the wars that must have ensued between the two when the Aryans arrived in India. Philip Constable argues the same when he opines that "Phule had argued that the creation of the Mahar jati and untouchability was a punishment for those Dravidian inhabitants who had most persistently resisted Aryan authority" (322). The representation of these battles was constructed into the mythological warfare between the Gods and the Demons by the victorious Aryans as they established themselves at the top of the social hierarchy as brahmans.

Phule asserts, "...from the mythological legends contained in the sacred books of the Brahmans, it is evident that there had been a hard struggle for ascendancy between the two races" (Phule, 28). Accordingly, opines Phule, there must be a phase of domination by force and then, after vanquishing the *shudras*, a religious one where coercion was replaced by hegemony. He divides the history into two parts: the warfare and the religious domination and in his 'reconstruction' of history, the domination started with wars followed by a glorification of the war by promoting them to the divine canon. The stories, then, became myths, the Aryan leaders, Gods, and the *shudras*, demons. In the process, they unleashed a more potent weapon of religious domination over the vanquished aborigines. As the 'fear of God' settled amongst the aborigines, coercion turned into hegemony and since then it has stayed that way. He says in the "Introduction", "The brahmans established their domination [through wars] over these [aboriginal] people and, in order to eternally perpetuate that domination, they composed several treatises which they claimed to have obtained directly from God. Thus they managed to thoroughly convince the poor ignorant people that their slavery was justified even in the eyes of God" (*Slavery*, 37).

Phule uses the Socratic Dialogue to deconstruct such popular myths and then reconstructs the Indian past through 'his voice' which he affirms to be the 'real' representation of things. He

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creates a dialogue between him and Dhondiba on the lines of the Platonic dialogue between Socrates and various other characters in *The Republic*. The choice of the Socratic Dialogue becomes very significant in *Slavery*. The Socratic Dialogue is the epitome of the literature of ancient Greek civilization where Plato uses it to defend his utopia in *The Republic*, a state based on the ideas of justice and freedom. Its use in *Slavery* offers an insight into what Phule desires his utopia to be. It reflects his desire for a social order where the *shudras* have a ‘voice’ and that too a valid one, but the Brahmins are not rejected but are the carriers of another ‘voice’, fully valid and equally legitimate. The Dialogic Method, then, becomes the representative of the order Phule desires in his ‘alternative world’: one based on justice and freedom.

He says, “It is very essential for human beings to be free. When man is free, he can clearly convey his thoughts to people through writing or speech. But if he does not have freedom, then he is unable to communicate his thoughts, however beneficial they might be to the others, and consequently, they just evaporate into thin air. A free man will never hesitate to claim his rights which are granted by God to all humans...the purpose behind free man’s struggle against slavery is, to liberate the slaves from the tyranny of oppression and injustice of the oppressors, restore their freedom to them and make them happy” (*Slavery*, 38-39). The use of the Dialogic method here, offers a symbolic resistance to the slavery of centuries, rampant today, leading to various problems, not only for the shudras but for India as a whole. Phule says, “To this system of selfish superstition and bigotry, we are to attribute the stagnation and all the evils under which India has been groaning for many centuries past” (*Slavery*, 31).

Phule, unlike the principle of faith on which myths work, places “his story” on actual grounds. He exemplifies several prevailing customs and traditions that are in tandem with his ‘alternative history’. He says for Dussehra, “...it has become a custom in the kshatriya families to perform this ritual on the tenth day of Ashwin, that is Dasara day, whereby the womenfolk perform the ritual of waving earthern lamps around their husbands’ faces and wish for the kingdom of Bali to descend again” (Phule, 60). In Phule’s mirroring and subsequent re-construction, Bali, the aboriginal king, becomes the hero of Dussehra instead of Rama, the Aryan king. This shift is very crucial as it offers much needed support to the self-respect to the aborigines. Philip Constable, in “Early Dalit Literature and Culture in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Western India”, “If Mahar and Chambhar liberation was to be brought about, the Mahar and Chambhar communities needed to be made conscious of their oppression and social exclusion by Hindu scripture and society, and they had to be confident of the independent validity of their own beliefs, practices and cultural heritage” (319) and Phule, by his alternative history offers this belief to the present shudras.

Hence, it becomes evident that Phule creates a comprehensive discourse in *Slavery* to reclaim the past that was obliterated by the Brahmin ‘stories’ of myths. In this re-construction of the past, he creates the idea of a utopia where the brahmans and the *shudratishudras* live together in harmony. What he strongly purports is a rejection and abolition of the order that places the brahmans and their scriptures as superior and divine. He argues:

...denounce[ing] all the main books of the *bhats* which decree us their slaves as well as other books which claim so, and embrace that book...
which propounds that all human beings have a right to enjoy human rights in equal measure (Phule, 98).



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In addition, the other person in the dialogue, Dhondiba reiterates the words of Phule and says, “I have resolved to behave accordingly. I rejoice my release from the age-old prison house of the false and wily *bhats*” (Phule, 99).

Phule, in *Slavery*, reclaims the past and the present through a rejection of brahmanical religion and way of life. His mirror traces not only the contemporary social reality but also reconstructs the past to pave the way for the future as well. His is a complete overturning of the established tradition and culture as he sees it as oppressive and his counter-culture is based on a revolutionary deconstruction and re-construction of the entire history and a re-looking at the present in its wake. M. H. Jadhav, in his review of J. R. Shinde’s *Anti-Caste Movement in Maharashtra Dynamics of Cultural Revolution: 19th Century Maharashtra* asserts that “Unlike other social reformers of his time, Phule did not believe in re-forming Hindu religion and society, for he considered it to be a pointless waste of time and energy” (740) and hence he countered it with a complete historical overhaul and subsequently a restructuring of the present. What emerges is a roadmap to an order where equality and freedom are the salient principles and oppression and exploitation have no place.

Phule, hence, to put it in a Post-colonial terminology, abrogates the colonial’s concept rather than appropriating it. His is a Counter-discourse to the traditional one and interrogates the Essentialist notions of the brahmans that put them in an elite category, higher to all others who became the feminine and the oppressed. Phule compromises the gait of the Other, the imperial Other, that defined the ‘other’ in its glamour. The *Grand-autre*, as Lacan calls it, “the great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity” (Ashcroft, 170) for Phule was the brahmanical tradition and hence he counters this Other because the identity that it gave to the subjects, i.e. the shudras, was one that made the “colonized subject..to understand the world” (Ashcroft, 171) as a place where he is the inferior and a slave.

Valerian Rodrigues affirms this radically distinct approach of Phule and opines that, “the kind of system he proposed markedly varied from those of his contemporaries” (99). He places the present plight of the dalits in a historical perspective but his historical perspective is the reconstruction of the popular myth in terms of ‘what actually happened’. Phule was a revolutionary in the true sense of the word, one who was not satisfied with merely mirroring the social reality, but was also creating alternatives after assessing the reasons, historically, that led to a particular picture of the present being reflected in the mirror. Phule’s side of history is a quest of the dalits for a space in contemporary times through a re-structuring of the past.



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