

## Reading Rajat Rani Meenu's Early Short Fiction: Laying the Foundations of Hindi Dalit Women's Writings

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### Abstract

In the now established Hindi Dalit literary sphere, several women writers have emerged to contest social and literary erasure, forced silencing and subordination in the last three decades. The emerging writings of Hindi Dalit women authors illustrate their negotiations with the intersectional realities of caste, class, gender and space as well as their inaccessibility to the print culture. This paper examines the early short fiction of Rajat Rani Meenu to understand the epistemic foundations of Hindi Dalit women's writings and their emergence as a politicized and radical entity. While registering the Ambedkarite influences, Meenu has provided a literary architecture to the emergence of contemporary Dalit political icons like Mayawati in her story *Sunita*. Her other story *Ve Din* (Those Days) becomes a rallying cry to foreground the relevance of gender critique in an already activated Dalit literary sphere.

**Keywords:** Hindi Dalit literature, Hindi Dalit women's writings, Dalit feminism, Dalit consciousness, education

### Introduction

Rajat Rani Meenu's story *Sunita* (1995) is a narrative around an eponymous character where a model of testimonial narrative is put to use which almost reminds the reader about the autobiographical mould of literary representation of the early Hindi Dalit writings in the late 1980s and 1990s. It fictionalizes a young Dalit woman's aspirations to get education and having realized the hostility and brutality of the prevalent caste-ridden

social order, she chooses to work for social reforms and social awakening with Dalit consciousness as a mobilized conceptual category. However, Rajat Rani Meenu does not employ the architecture of autobiography, and her varied fictional works seem to move beyond the idea of using testimonies within fiction to incorporation of multiplicity of voices and complexity of representation. The author's attempt to fictionalize the self in this story should not to be seen as a rejection of the autobiography genre for fiction, nor does she propose any hierarchy of literary forms here. Meenu notes the centrality of autobiographies to the idea of emergent Hindi Dalit literature and Dalit literature in general, and argues that testimonies and autobiographies often double up to fill the void created by the mainstream historiography beyond the intended function literary representation of self and the collective around it (Meenu, 2013). The autobiographies while documenting a person's family and ancestry, resourcelessness, slavery-like conditions, and humiliations of life across urban and rural spaces become anthropological sites for Dalits to study the community (Meenu, 2013). In the context of the Dalit movement too, autobiographies serve as articulate and countercultural spaces to caption the marginality, living reality and rawness of oppressive structures of the Indian social order. Meenu's works, in this case, become seminal in the scope of the formulative period of Hindi Dalit women's writings in the first two decade of the twenty-first century as not only as a writer has she made the departure from the autobiographies and testimonies towards poetry and fiction, but also, as a researcher and academic, she charted the terrain of Hindi Dalit literature and made significant interventions by choosing to work on Hindi Dalit poetry and Hindi Dalit fiction as her MPhil and PhD respectively thus arguing for a need of separate epistemological category of Hindi Dalit literature as an independent Dalit intervention. As a part of the early Hindi Dalit women writers and public intellectuals, Meenu's writings provide the ideological and institutional support to help in the countercultural formation of Dalit women's writings in Hindi.

Rajat Rani Meenu was born in Shahjahanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. As a Hindi department academic in a Delhi University college, Rajat Rani Meenu represents the second generation of Dalit academicians and researchers presiding and setting the tone and tenor of the Dalit movement and thereby establishing the Dalit public sphere in the Hindi region. Her academic accomplishments include an MPhil on

*Nave Dashakki Hindi Dalit Kavita par Ambedkar ka Prabhav* (Ambedkar's Influence on Hindi Dalit Poetry of the Nineteenth Century) and a PhD on *Hindi Dalit Katha Sahitya ka Alonchanatmak Adhyayan* (A Critical Study of Hindi Dalit Fiction). Since then, she has contributed to several magazines such as *Hans*, *Yudhhrat Aam Aadmi*, *Apeksha*, *Anyatha*, etc., and published two short story collections and a few academic books. What becomes very obvious here is that Meenu is taking a direct plunge into the Ambedkarite critical conceptualizations while formulating Hindi Dalit literary space. Unlike, the first generation of Hindi Dalit writers who were gradually introduced through meetings and conferences to the idea of Dalit consciousness, Ambedkarite philosophy and Marathi Dalit literature as a part of the larger movement, Meenu is spearheading and reworking these received conceptualizations as a researcher, as a writer as well as an academic. She talks about the near-absence of research material when she began to pitch an idea for her MPhil. Till the late 1990s, the idea of Hindi Dalit poetry was non-existent for many even in academia, and only a few translated works of Marathi Dalit literature were available in Hindi (Meenu 2013). Meenu would have to finally rely on magazines and select poetry collections for her work. The first generation of Hindi Dalit writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Jai Prakash Kardam, Mohandas Namishray and Sushila Takbhore had also individually published fiction and autobiographies by the 1990s. Their works along with Hindi translations of Marathi Dalit writers' poems and stories had also appeared in magazines and journals like *Hans*, *Sarika*, *Yudhhrat Aam Aadmi*, etc.

Kusum Viyogi makes an interesting argument as the editor of a volume of short story collection published in 2012 where he rues the lack of Dalit women fiction writers in Hindi. He posits that there is a salaried class of scholars, teachers, social activists and researchers who moonlight as short fiction writers thus hinting towards a mould of an educated middle class Dalit identity who continue to perform as the chronicler of Dalit subjectivity and life experiences of varying spaces and figures (Viyogi, 2012). He also highlights another section of Dalit women writers who have functioned under the patronage of Dalit patriarchs, and this proximity often leads to stable networks of Dalit writers and publishers (Viyogi, 2012). Reaffirming what Kusum Viyogi says, Meenu notes that most of the literate women in urban India come from the families who benefited from the government employment opportunities and it is

they who are contributing as writers and activists. She also notes that unlike upper-caste women, Dalit women do not benefit from vocations in sciences, business, music and arts, cinema and media, etc. (Meenu, 2013, p. 243). For her, the problem seems to be structural in nature and often emanating from economics, political disenfranchisement and lack of social capital. The legitimacy of academic research in Hindi Dalit writings begins to take shape by the time she begins her PhD research work on Hindi Dalit fiction in the first decade of the new millennium. It will be fair to argue that the discursivity and independence of Hindi Dalit literature has come into being with such academic interventions apart from the early literary interventions. It is therefore also necessary to acknowledge the foundational work that trained academicians and writers like Meenu make in order to provide an epistemic legitimacy to Hindi Dalit writings as well as the research literature that they generate.

### Negotiating Caste

Meenu's story *Sunita* deals with a female protagonist whose multiple marginalizations at the level of caste, gender and class prompts us to understand the interrelatedness and intersectionality of these structures. As a seven-year-old, she is made aware of the family's unambiguous preference for the male child. At the beginning of the story, the writer claims that Sunita's family was an Ambedkarite and Buddhist family. Her house had several signifiers of such belonging in the form of Ambedkar posters and pamphlets. However, the narrative exposes us to the differing ways in which Ambedkar is consumed by the masses. In spite of an ostensible devotion to Ambedkar's emblematic figure, the family is consumed by immediate structures of patriarchy, caste, class and rural belonging in its material life. The author seems to hint at the limitations that Dalit families face to overcome structures of oppression and how Ambedkarite consciousness in itself could be a matter of access and relative privilege. In the story, Ambedkarite consciousness is made to be a function of economic privilege, political enfranchisement, gender and urban belonging in Hindi heartlands. When the reader meets Sunita for the first time, she is about to head for the school to appear in an examination. However, she is stopped by her mother who wants her to help with the chores and taking care of her brother. Sunita outrightly complains but is lambasted by the father figure who wants her to understand that education is not meant for girls and it is the boys of the

house who have to be educated so that the family benefits. “You Sunita, listen carefully, we don’t have to make you a collector, nor will you ever become one. Your education is not more important than the boy...this household and lineage will be run by him.” (Meenu, 2017, p. 29) The author makes no attempt to insulate Sunita from bearing the brunt of being a girl child in this rural setting. The patriarchal structures with complicit mothers do not reflect any Ambedkarite influence at all and are shown to be more conservative and rigid in Meenu’s other fictional works as well. Sunita’s father shows no appreciation when Sunita passes her examination with first division marks and the narrative makes it clear that it is her individual resolve alone which drives her to study further. Sunita’s appreciable effort, on the other hand, invites the attention of the patriarchs of the village and her father who thinks that a Dalit girl should not get any further education and should be married. The upper-caste males of the village scorn her, “It seems this educated *Chamari* will become an officer. Even the upper caste families do not feel the need of educating their daughters; perhaps Chheda Chamar does not know his status.” (Meenu, 2017, p. 30) This overlap of caste and gender exposes Sunita to the double marginalization of being a Dalit woman in this village. Education in this case is not seen as enabling but an obvious transgression against the social and family order which would further create avenues of caste and gender critique and questioning and thus disturb the order and stability of the village.

Sunita is also careful to not report instances of eve-teasing to her parents as in this rural patriarchal setting the episode would effectively stop her from venturing outside the home and subsequently hasten her marriage as the final solution for everything. Her father’s economic vulnerabilities become a blessing for now as he is not able to arrange a match for Sunita. In Rajat Rani Meenu’s other story *Ve din* (Those Days, translation mine), the protagonist Anju has a similar conflict as she is married before passing Class 10. For, Anju too, education effectively becomes a transgression as she has to negotiate with her paternal and in-Laws’s families once she is married before the examination. The normalization of gender-bias, child marriage, denial of education, and denial of agency happens under economic deprivation, caste-oppression, political disenfranchisement and rigid patriarchal structures.

In spite of the author’s introductory claims of Sunita’s family being an Ambedkarite and Buddhist family, the idea of Dalit consciousness and

caste questioning remain fairly distant. An entrenched caste-based social order has an unyielding grip over the thought process of the family and the community. Sunita's mother states, "Daughter, we are poor people, and that too belonging to a lower caste. People indulge in all kinds of gossip that having educated herself, will this Chamar's daughter sit on the throne of Delhi?" (Meenu, 2017, p. 58, translation mine). The internalization of caste and gender oppression is shown to be complete here. The correlation between education and empowerment is also lost on Sunita's mother till Sunita, in a conversation with her, questions the oppressive caste structures which condemn a Dalit for eternity. She also highlights that education is the only possible means of overcoming the caste, gender and class barriers. Sarah Beth Hunt's reading of Hindi Dalit literature as a middle class enterprise forwarding middle class ethos while simultaneously challenging middle class modernity is evident from here onwards as Sunita convinces her mother so that she could enrol herself for higher education (Hunt, 2014). Modern education being one of the few elements of Indian modernity in the reach of the Dalit subject due to constitutional and state interventions is seen as a redemptive force in Hindi Dalit literature. With the help of school and government scholarships, Sunita finishes her intermediate education and later begins to offer tuition to fund her graduation. At the same time, in a spurt of reform, the author abruptly informs us that the village witnesses the opening of an Ambedkar library, founding of Ambedkar Students' Union, and installation of an Ambedkar statue in what can be seen as a contemporariness of Dalit assertion, the arrival of Dalit political forces and reactivation of caste as a political currency at the turn of the century in the post-Mandal public sphere in the Hindi region. This authorial intervention, nevertheless, changes the course of Sunita's life. Not only does she complete her education but also moves to Delhi to work as a teacher after the government hires some teachers. In the course of time, she competes her MA and LLB and becomes familiar with the Dalit and women's movement and thus pursues activism simultaneously while preparing for the civil services examination. In a hasty interference in the narrative by a prominent community leader who is impressed with her oratory skills, Sunita is persuaded to pursue a future in politics which she whole-heartedly accepts as it provides her an opportunity to serve her electorate and community through multiple avenues. The traditional structures of power stand subverted within the

fictional boundaries of the text as Sunita wins her parliament elections in her third attempt in this story.

E. Mini cites Rajat Rani Meenu in the context of this story where Meenu states that the narrative draws a parallel with Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh whose life and political career events resemble Sunita's fictionalized self (Mini, 2016). Like Sunita, Mayawati was also mentored by Kanshiram to join politics while she was serving as a teacher and preparing for the civil services. Sunita is also referred to as *Behanji* (Sister) in the story which is also a term of endearment for Mayawati as she became an icon for the Dalit masses in Uttar Pradesh when she became the first Dalit Chief Minister in India. The author's character construction within the larger and perpetual search for Dalit icons and iconography in the Hindi heartlands does seem purposive here. Meenu states that Mayawati's published interview was the inspiration behind this story where Mayawati's journey symbolizes the struggles of every Dalit woman at the hands of intersecting structures of caste, class and gender (Mini, 2016, p. 139). The narrative, however, evades any direct mention and avoids explicit parallels by dedicating the last exchange between the father and daughter on gender roles and patriarchal suppression of women. Sunita as an empowered political agent serves as a reminder to her father that the gender roles like caste roles have to be seen as social constructs and Dalit women must be seen as the emerging agents of political empowerment, resistance, equality and social justice. The story almost becomes prescriptive while suggesting the consequentiality of social change through individual empowerment. However, these narratives which rely on representational similarity with Dalit autobiographies and biographies have given rise to a hybrid and ambiguous literary form in Hindi Dalit fiction where normative definitions of the genres are reshaped to underline the significance of experientiality as a constituent of Dalit literature. By making a political use of self in fiction, Meenu, and by extension, Dalit women authors have undermined the way fiction is written. Such interplay of genres allows them to foreground the political function of Dalit literature.

### Negotiating Gender

In Meenu's other story *Ve Din* from her short story collection *Hum Kaun Hain* (Who Are We? translation mine), the protagonist is Anju, a young girl from an impoverished Dalit family. The story is narrated using flashback

technique and deals with important ideas of disempowerment, gender discrimination, lack of agency, denial of education and negotiations with deep patriarchal prejudices within the Dalit family structure. Sunita's character is able to circumvent her way to political and individual empowerment as the narrative does not make her deal with entrenched institutions like marriage and family. Anju, conversely, is made to navigate through marriage and family which provides us a different reading of the Dalit women's negotiations with patriarchal institutions of family and marriage. In a rural Dalit family, Anju is characterized by an immense inclination for education and voracious reading. This model of the Dalit protagonist who must excel in her education is also a commentary on the historical denial of education to the Dalits and exposes the reservation vs merit debate within the fictional space. In her school, Anju finds her classmates talking about moving to cities and pursuing higher education. In the story, the writer lends her the cognition to locate the upper-caste belonging of her classmates which also hints at the associated ease and access of social and geographical mobility that they seek. According to the Educational Statistics Report (2018) published by the Ministry of Human Resources and Development, Government of India, Dalit girls have a 19 per cent drop-out rate at the secondary level (Educational Statistics, 2018). In 2015-16, the number of Scheduled Caste girls enrolled at primary level (I-V) stood at 112.4 lakhs at the national level while during the same year only 19 lakh Scheduled Caste female students were enrolled at Senior Secondary level (XI-XII) (Educational Statistics, 2018). Poverty, humiliations, gender-based inequalities, fewer numbers of schools at village level, lack of hygiene facilities, sexual violence, early marriages are seen as the reason for such drop-out rates. In several Hindi Dalit stories, education is not just represented through institutions but it becomes an enabling sensibility which the Dalit subject must acquire to arrive at Dalit consciousness. It is not limited to innate individualistic values but it comes across as a transformative force among several competing social spaces and identity groups. It becomes a necessity for social change, autonomy, and social and economic advancement of a group of people. This societal and individual cognition of education as an enabling force is central in Hindi Dalit writings. In the story, Anju is thankful to her parents who unlike other Dalit families, at least allow her to study till high-school. Before she is able to appear for her final examinations, her marriage is

arranged. Her father quickly settles for the family as the boy happens to be employed and his family does not ask for dowry. After marriage, Anju struggles to continue her education as she conceives for the first time. After finishing house work, she gets to study only Late at night. Meanwhile, her delivery date coincides with her examination dates. Anju pleads with her in-laws, and with the support of her sister-in-law and brother-in-law, she negotiates with agony of pregnant body and stress of examination. Even in the face of patriarchally defined roles and gender-based inequality, there is a semblance of a functional system of family till the time Anju lives with her in-laws. She could reason and plead with her in-laws and develop companionship with her sister-in-law who provided her the nominal agency within an orthodox rural family structure. However, Anju is made to realize the transgressive potential of her pursuit of education when she begins to live with her husband. When she wished to enrol herself for Intermediate school, her husband warns her, "If you have to live with me then live like a wife. I earn enough to feed you...In any case, Intermediate school is beyond you." (Meenu, 2017, p. 42, translation mine). A movement towards urban spaces should have ideally facilitated her access to education but Anju's husband is unable to move beyond gender-based roles and hierarchies. Her education appears threatening and emasculating to him. He becomes increasingly controlling and violent after he finds Anju trying to fill the school form. Her subsequent pregnancies prevent her from pursuing higher education. While he invites Dalit scholars and researchers to discuss Dalit issues at his home, he becomes very dictatorial about her clothes, manners, and gatherings. Once she is late in offering tea to his invitees, he brutally beats and humiliates her. Meenu does not present this marriage in the mould of a balanced and often romanticized Dalit family universe but the embedded hypocrisy is exposed by the author where a conscious and sensitized Dalit male perpetuates sexism, violence, and subordination within his family. This kind of extra sensitivity to the patriarchal oppression and treating the experiential as a legitimate epistemic category augurs well for Meenu as she seeks to expand the conceptual category of Dalit consciousness and foreground the Dalit women's lived experiences as an integral part of the Dalit subjectivity. Gopal Guru in his seminal essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently" acknowledges the uniqueness of Dalit women's social positionality and hence seeks a legitimacy to their "epistemological

viewpoint" when it comes to the theorization of gender experiences (Guru, 1995, p. 2549). Such projections are often projected to be detrimental to the cause of the Dalit movement in the name of solidarity and unity but Meenu seems to be anticipating the need for diverse voices in place of a forced homogeneity while welcoming uncomfortable questions within the Hindi Dalit writings.

### **Conclusion**

By the end of the story, Anju faces a dilemma as she is given a divorce notice by her husband. The narrative does not offer any resolution but towards the end of the story it becomes very evident that it is the gender question that becomes the foreground in this Dalit family plot. Anju, in her quest to undo a historical denial of access to education, becomes a victim of the patriarchal forces emanating from her own family. Rajat Rani Meenu asserts in her interview, "Dalit women's writings have to contest the patriarchal order within the house while taking care of the house and children, and fight against the caste-system outside...all this can be dealt with when the Dalit woman educates herself" (Meenu, 2013, p. 253, translation mine). Dalit writings in general have contested the hegemonic Brahmanism in all its forms and manifestations. Subjugating and oppressive patriarchal social and cultural systems are also seen as ideational legacies of Brahmanism and the savarna ethos itself. However, Rajat Rani Meenu is prepared to acknowledge Dalit patriarchy and provide an internal critique of the Dalit relationships while laying the epistemic foundations of the Hindi Dalit literary sphere. Hindi Dalit feminist writers like Rajat Rani Meenu do not limit themselves to the quest for social justice and anti-caste struggle while functioning within ambits of the Dalit movement but also simultaneously prepare to resist the sites of religion, culture, tradition, rituals, marriage and family even within Dalit spaces where patriarchal norms of subordination and suppression have been reproduced and reinforced over the ages. In this quest, such writings project educating Dalit women as the only panacea in line with Ambedkarite ideas and also archive the social resistance and violence to deny it. Education of the Dalit woman protagonist as a means of assertion, power and resistance has been a consistent theme in Hindi Dalit women's writings which showcases a conscious and mature approach towards critiquing precarious Indian modernity.

## Endnotes

1. *Sunita* is Rajat Rani Meenu's first story that she wrote in 1995 while doing her research work at JNU. This story was first published in a volume of Dalit short stories—*Dusri Duniya ka Yatharth* edited by Ramnika Gupta in 2012.
2. For the complete interview, please refer to Meenu, Dr Rajat Rani. "Dalit Mahilayon Ko Mohara Banaya Jata Hai." *Dalit Shikharon ke Sakshatkar*, By Dr Yashwant Viroydaya, Navbharat Prakashan, 2013, pp. 242-251.
3. Meenu's seminal book *Hindi Dalit Katha-Sahitya: Avdharnayein aur Vidhayein* published by Anamika Publishers, New Delhi in 2010 is based on her PhD research work.
4. Please refer to the report available on the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. "Educational statistics at a glance." [mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/ESAG-2018.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/ESAG-2018.pdf) Accessed February 24, 2020.
5. For a comprehensive critique of Dalit feminism and various responses to it, please refer to *Dalit feminist theory: A reader* edited by Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore published by Routledge, London and New York in 2020.

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