

Analysis of *Sanskriti* by Hira Bansode and *Bury Me in a Free Land* by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

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ABSTRACT

Dalit women and African-American women share a lot of similarities as well as differences. Both inhabit the lowest rung of the social hierarchy and are doubly marginalised (Spivak) firstly due to their gender and then by their caste and race, respectively. Both Dalits and African Americans are subject to biological determinism. Their location as marginalised women also puts them in precarious positions as to how their nation treats them and how they experience their nation. This paper will analyse the relationship between these marginalised women and their nations through the poems *Sanskriti* by Hira Bansode and *Bury Me in a Free Land* by Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. The major point of historical difference is that India is the homeland of the Dalits, but African American people have been brought and sold off as slaves in America from their homelands. Many scholars have aimed to compare the conditions of both communities to decide which is worse off, but that is not the aim of this paper. In *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a postcolonial and transnational feminist, advocates that intersectionality, transnationalism and decolonization of established pedagogies and practices are the key factors for building cross-cultural feminist solidarity. Mohanty's idea informs the comparative approach, emphasizing the importance of transnational solidarity while recognizing differences. The paper aims to advocate for a transnational feminist lens that acknowledges differences while fostering solidarity between women across borders. It corresponds with Elaine Showalter's view of building feminist criticism. This paper will explore how these poets resist patriarchal literary traditions and nationalistic discourse that construct women's roles and bodies in specific ways. This research will aim to look at these two poems from different spatiotemporal contexts and see the multiple historically-driven experiences of women in their nations.

Keywords: Dalit, African American, women, nation, body politics

"As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country." Virginia Woolfe.

SANSKRITI BY HIRA BANSODE

Hira Bansode was born in 1936. She was born in the Mahar community in a small village in Pune. Her father was an employee in Bombay municipality, and her mother, Ganga, was an illiterate and simple housewife. Bansode represents the first generation of Dalit women who were educated after tremendous efforts. The poem *Sanskriti* was originally written in Marathi and translated by Christian Novetzke with Sucheta Paranjpe and Christian Conelly. In the poem,

Bansode rebels against the great 'culture' of India. She invokes the idea of 'Mother India' and says that this mother has been a stepmother to the Dalits. The initial quote by Woolfe and Bansode in this poem attempts to call into question nationalism and for whom the nation exists.

According to Fanon, the idea of a nation was very important to colonised countries - "to formulate the desire for a unified nation that could bind the people together and indoctrinate their minds with the ideas of national history and collective destiny." In this spirit, the idea of the 'Mother India' was born. She became the preserver of the so-called Indian culture and its repository. Her body adorned every map. India, like many nations, will always be a mother because, as in patriarchal societies, women are the carriers of culture, caste, race, et cetera. They are intrinsically tied to the ideas of purity and honour. Mother India is based on the restrictions imposed and exploitation suffered by women. She becomes the icon of national pride and Brahminical patriarchy. Brave Indian men are imbued with a responsibility to protect the Mother. Through Hira Bansode's poem, the question of Mother India's caste can be asked. She says that this Mother is not a Mother to the depressed classes. This Mother is only the aspiration of the upper-class Savarna people. She embodies the body of the ideal, pure, honourable Brahmin woman. By extension, Bansode shows how the Dalits feel '*orphaned*' in the country. Ideas of nurture and care are associated with motherhood and, by extension, with the nation. But Bansode has never felt that from the nation, like most marginalised people of India due to the brahminical patriarchal nature of this Mother. The nation has always tried to exclude socially and legally (through acts like CAA). Bansode challenges this idea of nationalism and motherhood that is shoved down the throats through the ideological state apparatuses and betrays the majority of the population.

Hira Bansode also challenges the idea of the great culture of India that is propagated. Especially during the independence movement, the pre-colonial myths and traditions of India were invoked to make people feel patriotic and nostalgic about how things were better in the past. But that was not the case as things were only better if you were a feudal savarna man; everyone else was objectively worse off. The Indian state reinforces the logic of Brahminical patriarchy by venerating a history that has been that of oppression and humiliation for the Dalits. Bansode curses this Brahminical culture that is being venerated in collective memory. B.R. Ambedkar's book *The Riddles in Hinduism* attacks many such myths and Gods in a logical way to dismantle the Brahminical hold over society. Bansode does the same by invoking the character of Kunti from Mahabharata. She compares the Dalit community to Karna, who had to suffer the indignities of discrimination due to the identity of his lower caste adoptive parents. Bansode says that they are abandoned by the nation, just like Karna was abandoned by Kunti. The use of a metaphor from Mahabharat is an attempt to subvert the Brahminical hold over the myths of the nation and the language of Sanskrit.

Therefore, the poem serves as a Dalit Feminist response to the harmful archetype of Mother India. It attacks the nation on the surface, but at a deeper level, it also attacks the idea of the pure Brahmin female body of the mother that represents the nation. Through the poem, she

aims to not give in to the propaganda of great Indian culture but bring back into public memory how this is the same culture that has marginalised the Dalits for ages.

BURY ME IN A FREE LAND BY FRANCIS ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

Francis E.W. Harper, born in 1825, was an American abolitionist, suffragist, poet, temperance activist, teacher, public speaker, and writer. She was one of the first African American women to be published in America. She was born free in Baltimore, Maryland, at a time when slavery was not yet abolished in the southern states. One stark difference between the oppression of the Dalits in India and African Americans in America is that in America, slavery was state-sanctioned for a long time. At the same time, in India, the caste system took its legitimacy from Hindu scriptures, which were believed to be sacrosanct.

Harper, like Bansode, is disappointed in her country. Harper, in her 1858 poem titled - *'Bury Me in a Free Land'*, establishes America as a cursed nation because of the existence of lawful slavery. The image of the "land" is very important in the poem. In her poem, 'The Masachessetts Fifty-fourth' she states how African Americans have played a vital role in building the nation. Yet, this nation does not give them equal rights. This sentiment is reflected in contemporary times as well, decades after slavery has been abolished. According to a study by the New York Times and Sienna College - "Just one-quarter of Black voters describe themselves as "proud" of the state of America today, compared to nearly half of whites." African Americans have reported that they have very conflicting feelings about patriotism and nationalism because America is the only home they know, but they feel like second-class citizens. These sentiments are heightened in Walker's poem.

W.E.B Dubois, in his 1934 speech, said that - "...Negroes can develop in the United States an economic nation within a nation, able to work through inner cooperation to found its institutions, to educate its genius, and at the same time, without mob violence or extremes of race hatred, to keep in helpful touch and cooperate with the mass of the nation." He came to this conclusion after being a strong integrationist in the earlier years. Walker still holds on to the hope that America can be a free land and give equal rights to the blacks. The free land she speaks of becomes an almost imagined land she believes is her home.

This poem can also be imagined as Walker taking agency of her body in death. As a black person, she must have witnessed many lynchings. In life, she has no agency over her body (and the black body) in America; it is captured, slaved, called ugly, killed, not given rights, et cetera. But in death, she wants to take back the agency and decide where to be buried. It is a very powerful statement to make in the age Walker was alive. The poem also reflects Angela Davis's idea of radical incommensurability. The struggles of a black woman's body cannot be compared to white woman, and there needs a radical reconfiguration in perceptions to understand the struggles she goes through, along with her brothers and sisters.

Walker's poem is an elegy to all those who had suffered the evils of slavery and racism. Like Bansode's poem, it also evokes the idea of a mother. However, the mother in Walker's

poem symbolises something completely different. Her body is the site of exploitation; babies are taken from her breasts, girls from her arms. The father is not mentioned, but the mother is the one who suffers the most, as a black woman and as a mother who has to see her children fall into the same vicious cycle. She not only suffers the evils of slavery but the oppression that comes along with being a woman. A young woman is sold for her “charms”. Many authors like Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde have shown how black women are oppressed not only by white people but also by black men who aim to assert their lost masculinity at home. The absent father may signify that.

The theme of disjoint body parts runs throughout the poem, akin to the imagery in T.S. Eliot. The slave is dehumanised due to slavery, and we only hear his steps or the mother’s scream. Walker’s poetry reflects remorse and sadness and the defiant stance of African Americans not to accept slavery as the norm and reclaim their body and nation.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the two poems portray a doubly marginalised women’s relationship with the nation. They also dabble with themes of body, agency and motherhood. They also portray how these women perceive the society around them from their unique positions. Bansode curses her oppressive nation while Walker imagines a free one. Though they differ in their treatments of the said subjects, both act as poems of resistance against the dominant patriarchal order.

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