

An Artist Dragged Down by Caste and Patriarchy: A Reading of *Aarpar Layit Pranantik*

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“...turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path”.

-Dr. B R. Ambedkar, in *Annihilation of Caste*, 1936.

Aarpar Layit Pranantik (Through Rhythmic Intense) is a long bio-poem written in Marathi by Pradnya Pawar on a tempestuous personality named Withaa Bhau Maang Narayangaonkar. The poetess has brought to the perception of the world, the obstructed life of a Dalit versatile woman-artist in the field of Tamashaa, a popular folk-art of public education and entertainment in Maharashtra. Withaa, who was a multifaceted personality proved her metal as a dancer, actor and singer. The poem is a tragic tale of a sky-high artist designed by her caste and gender. Simultaneously, the poetess focuses on the determination of a Dalit woman -artist who sprouted under the complete hostile social environment. The endurance of the Dalit woman-artist concentrated is of great relevance and importance to innumerable vulnerable women of the present and of the future. The poetic story and struggle of Withaa the artist, has the ability to help sprout a fighting spirit among the Dalit women and on the other hand, it has the ability to abort the power of caste and patriarchy from the psyche of our caste-ridden society.

Born in an erstwhile untouchable caste called Maang, Withaa, the fourteenth child in the Khude family in Satara district rose to an enviable height of achievement in the field of Tamashaa. Withaa, though was born as a woman and a member of the *declared* low caste, achieved name and fame amidst a horrendous social milieu. Both, her caste and gender, the swirling vortexes, were the curses for the artist. These forces rotted her multifaceted talent. The wrong done by it made the legendary and versatile artist a beggar for mere living. Deprived from all the means of upward social mobility, Withaa had no choice but be a passive victim to the

arbitrary masters. It made her life a daily ordeal. The means, with which she could face and sometimes fight back the mighty inhuman rivals, were her body and its beauty only. Poverty, low social status and the gender made her an easy prey to the vultures of caste and gender. Putting aside her honor and self, the un-awakened Withaa had to compromise in a humiliating manner with the oppressor and his uneven ideology. The poetess, Pradny Pawar aptly sums up the nature of the grammar of anarchy:

“You surrendered
to this shadow sans light,
and tied its hirarchal compassion,
into a knot of the sari-edge.”¹

Tamashaa has long been identified with the formerly untouchable Mahaar/ Maang castes in Maharashtra. The popular proverb states its association with these communities, thus: “Writing with the Brahmin, grain with the Kunbee (a sub- caste in Maratha caste) and song with the Mahaar/ Maang.” And since the art was associated with the lowest rung in the *Chaturvarnya* (fourfold) society it did not receive honor and status, it deserved. Even today, the genre is used in a derogatory way to refer to a disorder or a commotion. The art form and the artists, as a consequence, had to survive under humiliation at the hands of the *mythical* uppers in India. The forcefully awarded social dislocation of the community proved fatal for the woman associated with it. She became an easily *available* woman to the male of the *upper* castes. He could quench his passion forcibly. Choosing a life partner through will and that too, for the Dalit woman artist associated with the mobile natured Tamashaa was a distant dream. Ruchira Gupta, a journalist and activist in her article states: “Historically and even today, many unwed mothers are Dalit or tribal women, who have been forced by an unequal caste system to be sexually available for upper caste men as their accepted destiny”.²

The mobility of the art deprived the artist from the means of a settled life. A glance at the life of Withaa shows how easily men entered into her body and disappeared at their whims. They came simply to make her mother. The temporary husband of her first girl child (Mangala) was a

barber by profession. She gave birth to a son (Vijay) and the temporary husband was a police inspector. A brigadier when Withaa with her band was at the Nefa border to encourage and entertain the soldiers during the India - China war, wanted to be her partner lifelong. Then, there appeared Maruti Sawant, an already married man. He gave her the status of a wife, till the attainment of his physical and economical goals. He squeezed her physically and monetarily. Maruti Sawant had detected the artistic abilities of Withaa, therefore, pretended to be a husband during her heyday. Withaa underwent this epidemic of forced sex throughout her life. The discriminative society at large and the patriarchal forces at home were the weeds that had trapped her life. The caste-curfew outdoor and the phallic havoc indoor did not leave her any space to manifest. Either represents the uncivilized and arrogant exploitative forces. The acts of violence on the weak Withaa, by these have been legitimized in the name *order above*. Sexual violence against Dalit women, in a caste ridden society like India, therefore, sails smoothly. It made Dalit woman a selfless abstraction. Most of the men in our society are akin to the mentality of Maruti Sawant. To them:

“Woman means,
simply container of sexual organs,
fleshy,
erotic,
seductive and
unbalancing (man).”³

Such a commoditized stereotype of Dalit women is legitimized through different modes of public education and entertainment. Under the protection of conservative anti-Dalit woman attitude the oppressor keeps going unashamedly humiliating the lives of Dalit women. Withaa’s art and her body either became the commodities saleable in a society afflicted by caste and patriarchy. It is still alive and kicking. The life of Withaa was at mercy of such an attitude. Men trained as men by the caste – disorder and patriarchy came to quench their desires taking her to be a lifeless combination of female organs. Withaa for the external world exited physically only. The internal world of her unfulfilled desires none could see. The poetess laments:

“Could it be possible?
for a mother’s son,
to comprehend
the aboriginal, ancient

and ever-new wet darkness
of your uterus.”⁴

The pain of being woman and Dalit simultaneously was enormous and ancient for Dalit woman in India. Neither society at large nor the kith and kin of the protagonist could understand the inner longings of the human being. Moments of happiness came her way but only in fragments. Such moments came her way when she was on the stage, possessing the head and heart of the audience through her dancing and singing. The live applause from the audience helped her forget the personal and domestic losses, but momentarily. The moment she was off the stage the varied oppressions would haunt her mind. The unlettered, therefore, weak Withaa could not face the situation sanely.

The devastations at the domestic and social fronts could not weaken her familial, social and professional commitments within. With her band, leaving behind her three-month-old newborn child (Malati) she went to the battlegrounds to encourage and entertain the Indian soldiers in the war against China in 1962. Abandoning the role of a biological mother, Withaa responded to the call of the motherland. The unsucked breast-milk of the mother would grill her physically. To relieve herself from this ordeal she would squeeze the milk from her breasts with her own hands and then would appear to perform. Such an exemplary commitment of nationalism/professionalism is possible with women like Withaa only. Another incident that speaks audibly about her professional commitment took place in 1967 at Shikhar Shingnapoor in Maharashtra. During the show, she witnessed the pains of childbirth. Among one of the exits from the stage she gave birth to a boy (Kailas). Her absence on the stage made the spectators go wild, since she was the only attraction and crowd-puller artist in the band. To give the spectators what they paid for, Withaa, putting the just newborn infant aside, after half an hour, reappeared on the stage. The spectators were tongue-tied to see a complete *different* Withaa. She had reappeared on the stage after delivering a life. Addressing the audience, she said, “for a mother, giving birth to child is a kind of resurrection. Keeping aside all precautions, for the sake of your love, my lords, I have reappeared on the stage. How miserably the birth of a child squeezes the mothers ascertain it from your mother or wife.”⁵ The audience ashamed of its behavior could neither raise its eyelids nor revolve its tongues.

Amassing money was never the driving force of the artist. She would happily donate an entire earning of a certain show for the development of a school or temple. These traits of Withaa's personality gave her and the band a high reverence in the eyes of the society. Her band crossing the barriers of languages enjoyed recognition not only in Maharashtra but also in Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Goa. In 1996, Withaa was unanimously nominated as the president of the *Akhil Bharteeya Dalit Natya Sanmelan*. Her presidential address vents out her mature ideological temperament attained through a life full of hardships. Illiteracy and poverty, to her, were the causes she and people like her were crushed under. Her speech acknowledges the emancipation of Dalits and women by the ways and means shown by Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The paths of liberation shown by them, if adopted by the Hindu- religion -made -downtrodden, she asserts, can certainly assure them an honorable life. The harvest of benefit from education has been reaped by the women of the mythical upper strata of our society but they do not acknowledge its credit to the path showers, she laments. To her, it is a conspicuous example of ingratitude on the part of the beneficiaries. Such a rational assertion of Withaa clears her ideological temperament to which she could not give a forceful vent on the stage. Her artistic *confirmation* to the oppressive ideology was made inevitable by the hunger of her stomach and of the patriarchal society.

Dalit woman, even today, does not belong to the present. She is an *object* as in the past. Her value and worth is determined by her hips and lips only. Her body- appeal, most of the time, earns for her the certainty of existence. Winning *his* attention through body decoration and skills in love making, therefore, becomes her sole activity. Withaa, the artist, adhered helplessly to these standards. Keeping tidy herself and the home of the husband, consumed all her energy. As a result she had to sacrifice all her cherished goals. She became a workhorse for the good of others. It made her life worst. The artist became a freely *available* commodity for everyone outside and at home her presence was an illusion. She was mutilated everywhere. The passion-driven *animal(e)s* of the caste- disorder made Withaa sullen by day and silent by night. Exploitation is the form of existence for Dalit woman. Her name and face keep on changing. The poetess aptly observes:

“What difference does it really make?
Woman is face.
call it Pawala
what difference does it make
when the face is of Withaabai
what difference does it make
when the woman is Mahaar, Maang, Dhor, Chambhaar,
Kolhati
Or
Donmbari.”⁶

Passion of man, however high may be his caste and religion, at moments of gushing emotion, forgets all the barriers of the two forces. It endorses that need moulds every philosophy, rather need is philosophy. The sex-driven attitude of the upper-caste men towards Dalit women shows the hollowness of all the holy and pious rites and rituals they observe in the name of religion and culture. Withaa knew this very well. She might have witnessed the surrender of an elite and erected men many a times in her life. In public life the headscarf, cap or turban, is a symbol of honor of the family. The same would float in the air with Withaa's movements on the stage. The caretakers/ followers of the hegemonic culture would willingly fling in the air the honor and status of their family. At home, the caretakers of culture would pose themselves of noble blood and honest to their wives. The two women on and off the stage, by the custodians of culture were/are befooled with false dreams. To the both women, the patriarchs pretended loyalty. The woman on the stage is exploited through devaluation and the woman at home through fake honor. The cunning caretakers of culture, always men, shaped the content of the Tamashaa genre. Confining their wives within home they would enjoy the feminine thrills on the stage. Thus, the miserable lives of either woman were furthered in the name of culture. Either woman danced like puppets at the tunes of the arbitrary master. The women, at home and on the stage, had no option due to complete dependency, but to respond positively to the arbitrary will of the master. Thus, the gain of the former constituted the lifelong loss of the latter.

All the applause during the performance evaporated on account of Withaa's caste and gender. It was a scheming truce of the calculated applauder. It could not recognize the artistic abilities of Withaa. Verbal abuse and the snide remarks of the audience was part and parcel of her life. Her mind and body underwent all such invisible and painful humiliations. All such

dumb wounds did not find a language in the content for public presentation. Everyday living, for Withaa, therefore became a grueling experience. All her abilities became the mere means for earning the bread. All her creative energy had been consumed by the domestic and social needs. Thus, the caste - based discrimination spoiled her life and career for a humble life. The artist had to bargain with her extraordinary talents for it. To Withaa, the poet aptly observes, “there was no difference between bhakari (bread) and Laavani (a popular folk song in Maharashtra). They remained fundamental to her till her death rattle.”⁷ The glimpse of bread, the sound of the small bells tied above around her ankle and the smell of male passion, drove and distorted her life. This was the ugly agony Withaa the legendary genius had to bear all her life.

Daily survival, for Dalit woman, was/is an ordeal. It deprives her from a respectable life. Withaa’s life testifies it. The caste-based devaluation and the hunger of empty stomach consumed the talents of the versatile legend Withaa. Hunger of her stomach and of the men around, made her completely unaware about the unrivalled talent she had. To the huge and hostile social force, the illiterate and *low* born Withaa could not find a protective defensive mode required for moving ahead in life. To escape the torture of the two forces, the artist took shelter of liquor. It was essential to maintain the inner equilibrium. Sanity easily succumbed to the momentary solace provided by it. It was a momentary escape, but must, for the fragile woman. The intoxication of liquor became the support of the artist. It was a momentary escape but essential. In course of time it became her habit. It gnawed her within in the long run. It pleased either – the artist and the spectator. The gain of the spectator and the loss of the artist either were huge. It swallowed the artist completely, one day. Withaa accepted it as the only mode of survival. This attitude on her part made her retreat and compromise at many occasions in domestic and public life.

The tragedy of people like Withaa in India was/is not due to the wrong deed committed by the person particular, but it was designed by the *Manusmurti*, the text of human partition. The tone of the text commoditized the lives of Dalits’, robbing their human worth. Such mentality eclipsed the talents within the Dalit woman- artist and made her body all attentive. It made Withaa a cheap object in the perception of the society. Withaa could not settle in life due to the

caste and patriarchy controlled admiration of the spectators and the domestic havoc of the husband. To either, she was source of gain and entertainment. Though trapped in these two oppressive forces, she moved on in life just for the sake of her children.

How adversely the policy of liberal economy has affected the lives of the socially weak find adequate space in the poem. The policy of liberalization, adopted by the Indian government in the 1990s provided sufficient space for the systematic exploitation of the segregated groups in progressive India. It is not a new phenomenon to India. Under the heavy hands of caste-disorder the privatization of privileges was confined to the self-declared uppers in the society. Its chief aim, as was in the past, seems to safeguard liberally the interests of the select few in the social hierarchy of the caste-disorder. The introduction of birth and gender related value of a person with the arrival of the Manu-made diktats mark the beginning of social privatization. The spheres governing life such as education and economy were rigidly reserved for the *uppers* only. Such a biased bifurcation made the majority miserable. The old social privatization, now, has paved way to the new economic privatization. It has made the body of the Dalit woman as capital in the flesh market. She has been turned into a mere lifeless body through which maximum pleasure could be extracted by the *upper* male. Such an attitude of the privileged class has stripped off Withaa from the very basic human instincts. Womanhood at such an hour bound to turn saleable. Leading a normal life, for the woman became simply impossible. The woman victimized was forced to perform in tune with this mentality.

“They did not allow you to live,
simple like the soil.
The inevitability of the *civil* culture,
transformed you,
into a commodity.
It snatched you
from yourself”⁸ (My italics)

The purpose of caste-ridden society and patriarchy is to maintain the hegemonic social status quo. It was bound to prove fatal for the erstwhile suppressed groups including women. Life of the socially victimized, now, has been made a commodity. This new frenzy has engulfed life completely. This new temper allied with the arbitrary caste disorder of yesteryear is

ceaselessly robbing the Dalits through new modes. The very lives and the livelihoods adopted by the suppressed have been projected in such a manner that they may appear saleable and mere means of entertainment. The preservation and glorification of the humiliating systems like Murali, Devdasee and Jogtin by the dominant mentality is simply meant to provide the *needs* of the caste and patriarchy. It is sheer humiliation of the artist and of her/his ability. The caste disorder and its natural offshoot patriarchy in the contemporary scenario transformed themselves into varied agencies of exploitation such as:

“the sugerlobby
the cooperative societies of milk producers
the Z. P. (District level Council)

the powerlooms

the MIDC
the panchyat and market committees
are the castles
of money and power
that compel woman to dance
at their tune and passion”⁹

Murali, Devdasee and Jogtin are women from the erstwhile untouchable castes, who, remaining unmarried, dedicate their lives for the service of god. The practice of the Murali and Devdasee was popular in Maharashtra whereas Jogtins could be found in Andhra Pradesh.

These life governing centers, in the present, are wholly controlled by the beneficiaries of the caste-disorder. These centers, as intended, could not fully emerge as the potential tools for the upward mobility of the vulnerable. Rather a close look at them appraises one of their being absorbed completely with the petty caste-concerns of its masters. The persistence of the discriminative caste mentality at the base has gnawed its constructive potentiality. These centers, instead, have turned to be the contemporary centers of exploitation of the vulnerable masses crushed by the havoc of the social segregation. The biased mentality under the frenzy of the

cannibalistic market economy continues to rob the Dalits and women without restraint. Under such uncertain milieu, Withaa, to the poet, stands as a sound ray of hope. Withaa survived against all such odds. Her life, though full of plundering at the hands of caste -created vultures, did not budge to the mountainous oppressions of the time. She, therefore, becomes a symbol of solid determination for Dalits in general and women in particular.

The concluding phase of Withaa's life, however, shows the glimpse of alternate culture deeply embedded in her temperament. It calls for social rejuvenation. The ideology that can reconstruct the rotten social milieu of India is the one shown by Jotiba Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Their humane ideology has the ability to inspire and initiate the creative new minds to work for the socio-cultural upsurge for the complete emancipation of Dalits including women. The human being centered ideology of the duo, neglecting the imaginary god and his worlds, can only annihilate the *Manu* made discriminations from our society, is the firm belief of the artist. She pronounced it at many public occasions, social or literary.

Withaa played a few roles in Marathi films like *Chota Jawan*, *Umaj Padel Tar*, *Kalgee Tura* and *Sangtye Aaika*, however, the silver screen could not drive her away from Tamashaa. The glamour of the film –world, in comparison to the live applause of Tamashaa, looked very trivial to her. Her popular contemporary, Dada Kondke, a veteran actor and producer in Marathi film industry used the language that can certainly be called obscene; still, he enjoyed name and fame. Another contemporary showman, Raj Kapoor made his heroines almost nude; still, he was a celebrity in the eyes of the people. Dada Kondke, in one of his popular songs sings about the very process of intercourse between man and woman but, still neither the genre nor the artist had been denigrated. All these were accepted in the name of artistic need, then, why Tamashaa had/has been labeled as obscene? Why the artist/s associated with it is/are secondary and invisible? The content and context, like all other forms of arts are borne out of the life around. But the art and artist associated with Tamashaa received only ill-will from the recipients. One can't point to a visible/acceptable reason for such an attitude. The invisible and important reason behind it is the caste of the artist and not the form and the content of the genre. Had Withaa been

a member of the so called high caste, she would have been an iconic figure during her life-time itself. Birth in a caste and gender were/are still the determiners of one's upward mobility in India. Withaa's caste and gender dragged her down.

Aarpar Layit Pranantik stresses the need of eradication of the conceptual confusion created by the arbitrary caste disorder in the field of art and culture. It is the mustiness of the time. It will provide a clear vision, with which, one can see the worth of an individual based on her/his artistic ability and not on the basis of one's birth. Caste-based discrimination is not physical but a mental malady that can be cured through egalitarian content of education. Democratization of the social demeanor of the caste-ridden patriarchy is another lesson the poem imparts. The caste –breed ignorant arrogance has resulted in social disharmony on and off the stage. Percolation of humane principles through history, culture, art, politics and education becomes inevitable to save the talents like Withaa in various fields from getting ruined. Such a move will certainly pave a way to equal opportunity for all without caste and gender biases. Under such clean clouds, talents like Withaa would not die due to the man-made discriminations.

The poem in question underlies the ills of viewing woman as a mere body. All ills, a woman confronts in her life, sprout from it. The condition of the woman deteriorates more if she happens to be a Dalit. Dalit woman's body and caste make her personhood invisible and her physic all attentive. In the long run, the victim also starts looking at herself in the similar way. Body, for a woman, then becomes a safe hideout. It is a desperate move on the part of the helpless person. Under the insecure male-milieu temper, body becomes the sole shield of protection and existence for a Dalit woman. Withaa's life is a live example of such a state.

The underlined tones of the poem are: Dalit woman needs to look at herself with her own eyes and vision, barring the social perception. She, on her part, needs to assert her claim on her body and mind. It is an uphill task for her, but must. Next, she needs to wage a war against the biased society around for the assertion of the self. Withaa perished during such an attempt. The vision of victory, to Withaa, appeared distant. Today, it is visible but not easy. Awakened Withaas of today need to take the move closer towards the cherished goal. Many more Withaas need to participate in such a battle to avoid the deaths of innumerable Withaas in future. The

battle needs to be fought with mental vigor, negating the myth of woman's vulnerability based on her physic. Construction of such a solid mental makeup, on the part of Dalit woman is must. To put an end to the terror in life in the name of caste and patriarchy is the need of the hour. Freeing completely the mind and tongue of the woman from the terrors might lead to a healthy dialogue between the male and female. Such a dialogue, at the end, might land us in a world free from all sorts of segregations. These are the clear and audible tones of the poem.

The whirlwind of caste - disorder, even under the rule of the egalitarian Indian Constitution is spreading havoc in all the walks of life. How determinately the ideologies of the social reformers we put into practice will determine the safety of our society. The dream of casteless society can be had with a rationally enlightened mass. Singing about the unsung is an attempt in that same direction. Withaa the vulnerable is exhorting her posterity not to give up hope in the worst situation. Her voice, dance and act on the stage all *en masse* to tug at the head for the similar cause. Here is Pradnya Pawar :

“Let me put words
on the unwritten crisp
page of history,
how the trouble of materialism
leaping hunger
shakes the very base of life.
Let me put in words
a stirring, sore
and lustrous parable
in the name of woman
in the name of dalit woman
in the name of black woman
in the name of Tamashaa artist
in the name of Pawala
in the name of Withaa !10

NB: The borrowed texts have been translated by me.

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