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Topic : Gender and Caste in Urdu Prose Literature in the First Half of the 20th century

Findings

The journey from textbooks in the late 19th century did see a change in portraying women. The roles ascertained to women were first relegated to inner domains but the writings later, especially after the 1930's started portraying women differently. Some women writers were expressing themselves through magazines, editorials etc. Within a patriarchal framework, we see women being divided at both horizontal and vertical levels: on one hand, women who have wealth and belongings like the rich *tawaiifs* and *bais* were equal or even better placed than men in terms of material domain which is the 'outer' domain: they were looked down as compared to women of regular 'sharif households'. On the other hand, there was a vertical division in the society in general whereby the rich and the 'middle class' women were confined to the 'inner' domain whereas the poor and the marginalised; belonging to poor households and 'lower' caste backgrounds could not choose to be exclusively in the 'inner' domain, she navigated both between the 'outer' and the 'inner' domain.

In terms of upward mobility in the society, the 'middle class' women had started reading and writing. They also contributed to the magazines and debated about matters of education, profession and household matters. Though the number of women who were able to read and write was still a very small portion of all women in the society. There are also debates about whether women were really the ones raising their voices in the magazines and editorials or was it written by men as part of the exercise of showing that their women had rights amidst debates of social and political space for women, also popularised by the colonial narratives. The women of the 'lower' caste were not given much opportunity to move up the social ladder through education or marriages.

In terms of representation and structure of caste in the society through Urdu literature, we see that in a society depicting Muslim milieu, the characters from the lower caste are non Muslims. Similarly in novels like *Dilli ki sham*, *Mirat ul Uroos*, we see usage of words related to caste when talking about people performing manual labour. Words like *julaha*, *chamarin*, *mehtarni*, *sabza pharos* etc.

have been used in the stories without assigning a name to the person or when the names are assigned, the person belongs to Hindu community. The usage of names like *Muliya* for *Ghas wali*, *Kalu* for the *bhangi* show that the caste characters in Urdu stories were depicted to be from the Hindu society. The probable reason for the absence of Muslim lower caste characters from the Urdu works of the Muslim authors can be the denial of existence of caste in Muslim society based on birth based occupations.

After reading texts in Urdu, Hindi, Marathi and Bengali belonging to the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, we are able to understand the similarities in differences in how each vernacular language tackled the question of caste and hierarchy. The primary and secondary reading of Marathi and Bangla text show that these are the languages which have stories, novels and non-fictional texts, journals etc. discussing the question of caste, inequality and rights. We also have the writing from the marginalized people from the lower castes writing in these languages whereas the case of Urdu and Hindi is different in this context. Both these languages not being confined to a region did not speak for the spirit of any linguistic community or region like in case of Bengal and Maharashtra. Writing anti- caste prose as protest is negligible in Urdu and Hindi prose of the late 19th and early 20th century. In the late 1930's, some writers from the elite section wrote about the existence of untouchability or stigma being existent in the society through fictional prose. Same is the case with Hindi where we have some painful and vivid description of caste based discrimination. The reason for the difference in representation of social questions differently by these languages is a topic of further research, the trend being noticed; one cannot make a concrete statement about the reason for the existence of such a difference. Unlike caste, the question of women has comparatively been somewhat evenly addressed by the 20th century writers in almost all the languages mentioned above.