

Artículos atravesados por (o cuestionando) la idea del sujeto -y su género- como una construcción psicobiológica de la cultura.  
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## **DALIT LITERATURE IS BUT HUMAN LITERATURE: A READING OF SELECTED POEMS OF APARNA LANJEWAR BOSE**

LA LITERATURA DALIT NO ES MÁS QUE LITERATURA HUMANA: UNA LECTURA DE POEMAS SELECCIONADOS DE APARNA LANJEWAR BOSE

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### **Abstract**

Refusal to be pigeonholed in categories forms one of the distinct features of Aparna Lanjewar Bose's poetry. The annoyance and fury which is prevalent in many of her poems bear the imprint of her frustration at the extremely divided way of thinking in India. Still, she is definitely a poet of the world; she defamiliarizes her subjects rather consciously, withholding personal even in her most intimate poems, she projects a worldview that breaks free from the parochial, localized- casteist identities of India. This paper focuses on selected poems of Aparna Lanjewar Bose where she finds her voice not just in Anglophone poetic space but in the broader field of Dalit poetry also. I will also look into her delicate handling of 'Dalit' as a category that is neither reductive nor merely rhetoric. Caste oppression is no longer limited to the Indian context, it is a humanitarian crisis that has been and needs to be continuously addressed at the international level. Hence, Aparna's subject suffers not particular Indian suffering, instability, and slippages; but an entirely humane quandary that needs to be addressed at all levels.

## Resumen

La negativa a ser encasillado en categorías constituye una de las características distintivas de la poesía de Aparna Lanjewar Bose. La molestia y la furia que prevalecen en muchos de sus poemas llevan la impronta de su frustración por la forma de pensar extremadamente dividida en la India. Aún así, definitivamente es una poeta del mundo; ella desfamiliariza a sus temas bastante conscientemente, ocultando lo personal incluso en sus poemas más íntimos, proyecta una visión del mundo que se libera de las identidades parroquiales y localizadas de castas de la India. Este artículo se centra en poemas seleccionados de Aparna Lanjewar Bose, donde encuentra su voz no solo en el espacio poético anglófono sino en el campo más amplio de la poesía dalit también. También examinaré su delicado manejo de 'Dalit' como una categoría que no es ni reduccionista ni meramente retórica. La opresión de castas ya no se limita al contexto indio, es una crisis humanitaria que ha sido y debe ser abordada continuamente a nivel internacional. Por lo tanto, el tema de Aparna no tiene el sufrimiento, la inestabilidad y los deslices particulares de los indios; es totalmente un dilema humano que debe abordarse en todos los niveles.

**Palabras Claves:** Aparna Lanjewar Bose; Literatura dalit; Poeta dalit; Poesía IWE; Poeta dalit inglés

**Keywords:** Aparna Lanjewar Bose; Dalit literature; Dalit Poet; IWE Poetry; Dalit English Poet

## Introduction

In recent times, Sahitya Akademi hosted its first ‘Dalit Indian English Poets’ Meet’ where Dr. Aparna Lanjewar Bose along with a few others was invited as a Dalit English poet. Though she had earlier been on the Sahitya Akademi forums as an invited critic, poet, and member of the SA delegation of writers to Moscow and Istanbul during the Moscow International Book fair 2009. Coming again in 2018 as a Dalit poet who writes in English, showcased the progressive and inclusive approach of Sahitya Akademi as an institution. Interestingly, more than a century ago Savitribai Phule called the English language, the mother language of the downtrodden, then Dr. Ambedkar the progenitor of Dalit literature, gave a clarion call to Dalits ‘Never leave English at any cost’. Though poetry as a genre is revered for being the voice of the voiceless, it seems, the voiceless in India; Dalit ignoring even the clarion call of their savior, sighed or sang songs/ poetry, not in English, but in all other available vernacular languages namely-Marathi, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali, Kannada, Gujrathi, etc. In fact, they did not just sigh but roared. The rise of Dalit literature(s) was thunderous, from burning *Manusmriti* to calling mainstream literature *bhusa* and *brahminic*, shocking readers’ sensibility by exposing them to ‘venereal sore in the private part of language’, it became a constant and irrefutable category in all stream of Indian literature since the 70s. But somehow it seems that for almost a century Dalits did not write any poetry in English. One can easily reason that English, not actually being a mother tongue of Dalits, did not come easily to Dalits and they couldn’t create poetry in it. But then writing poetry in their own mother tongue(s) was also not an easy task. The high caste-proprietors accused Dalit writers of contaminating their chaste and pure mother tongues and did everything possible to keep them out. Despite that Dalit poets not just reclaimed these mother tongues but

enriched them further by forcefully bringing new dialect, new diction, separate speech; a Dalit speech into them. This then leaves us with one plausible explanation that, for almost a century either Dalit poets thought English, was not worthy enough to be (re)claimed like other languages or the resistance here proved much stronger.

Whatever the case, today the poetic force in Dalit poetry is already seeking to break out from the boundaries of the label of Dalit itself to become far greater a force than it is now (Jaaware), so Dalit English Poets are already latecomers in the field. In this light reading and interpreting the poetry of a Dalit Indian English poet is challenging indeed. The first problem is to situate them; if we put them in the canon of Dalit poetry as a whole, then there is the danger of eliciting comparison with legendary figures like Namdeo Dhasal, and as a result, they soon lose their luster, but if the touchstone is the canon of Anglophone poetry itself, they instantaneously became radical and pioneering just for their content and subject matter. As it is no secret, that IWE is the domain of a few beau monde who act as 'literary monopolizers and proprietors' and who are "neither conscious about social transformation nor do they find it necessary to depict the pain and suffering of the oppressed marginalized Dalits" (Dhasal, Foreword 15). So in this domain, even being a Dalit poet or talking about caste itself becomes a matter of much speculation, conjecture, and sometimes insincere praise. This hints at the second challenge these poets face which is; however tempting it may be they must not resort to mere copy, following, and transportations from the established canon of Dalit poetry as 'which was once fresh and revolutionary has over a period of time (about 30 years), become the tradition and the norm, that yesterday's neologism has become today's cliché'. (Jaaware 280). In this light, Aparna Lanjewar Bose's poetry is an important intervention, as her poetry occupies a delicate position without

succumbing to these pitfalls. She has established herself in a powerful niche among contemporary poets. She has authored two books of poetry collections *In The Days of Cage* and *Kuch Yu Bhi* and published several translations, reviews, and critical essays. Along with being a poet, she is an excellent scholar, critic, academic, writer, and translator who works in Marathi, Hindi, and English language simultaneously. Her poems defy characterization and encompass a wide range of themes ranging from art, love, gender, caste, personal, political, relationships, etc. This paper focuses on selected poems of Aparna Lanjewar Bose where she finds her voice not just in Anglophone poetic spaces but in the broader field of Dalit poetry too. The attempt of this paper is to look into her delicate handling of 'Dalit' as a category that is neither reductive nor merely rhetoric.

'*A Truth (This is for Real)*' is a brilliant narrative poem and is among the few poems of Aparna that are revealing, personal and autobiographical in nature, though on simple reading it does not seem so. A reader, entirely unfamiliar with Indian caste structures may wonder who are 'they' and 'me' in the poem. While for the readers more attuned to the caste system, it is easily discernable that the binary of 'they' v/s 'me' or 'they' v/s 'I' is the age-old binary of 'brahmins' v/s 'a dalit' and the poem following the topos of traditional Dalit poetry is a vitriolic critique of the repressive Brahminic gaze that pigeonholes Dalits in the moribund, lifeless category of lifelong 'oppressed', 'victim'; a subaltern who will never speak.

*They think that they Have the right to write about me to speak  
about me to look at me  
to name me*

*They will probably write*

*A 'natural' romantic story*

*Of a girl full of 'concessions' whose enslaved forefathers slogged  
door to door who was fed with the sun, water, air, and earth*

*Whose parents forsook her in the land of strangers*

Reading from this lens poem becomes an autobiography not just of the poet but of the Dalit community as a whole, here 'I' could easily be replaced by 'we', the poem is personal but like most Dalit autobiographies it speaks of the collective pain of a community. As Namdeo Dhasal wrote about her poetry, "Even in her most intensely personal poems, I hear the collective weeping voices of countless many. In the ebb and fall of the oceanic roars—the collective cries and in the white flurry of the waves—the collective pathos." (Foreword 16)

It is true that Caste did not fade away as Marx prophesied (in 1853) with the advent of technology, moreover it has now surprisingly gone global (Durban conference, CISCO, Isabel Wilkerson). While in local spaces, it is still the ubiquitous monster though it has transmogrified into something new and gruesome. It has seeped into modern, post-constitution structures of Indian society, and Dalits now face newer modes of marginalization, discrimination, and dehumanization.

*And in the name of a tolerant culture With hatred, they will spare*

*'Two select days' of the year*

*And then taunt my entire tribe*

*With erratic economics*

*As beneficiaries of governments' unrestricted pity*  
*They will watch*  
*Holding hand-grenades*  
*My going and coming hence*  
*While blood-shooting eye will rain*  
*Vesuvius fireballs*  
*Their caltrops gaze will then shower*  
*Innumerable 'calling of names'*  
*And their obsolete ancient look*  
*Would scrutinize my attire*

'A Truth (*This is for Real*)' is about a poet's upbringing, but unlike the other canonical poems; 'Background Casually' by Nissim Ezekiel, 'Biography' by Arun Kolatkar, or 'Growing Up' by Eunice De Souza there is no individual here who is speaking.

The poet is a collective of Dalit identity. She ends her poem with a declaration '*Life has been so beautiful/And I have no complaints*' which is significant, as she is not just reclaiming her identity of 'Dalit' from the repressive gaze, but redefining it anew. Dalit here is someone who is joyfully living with the philosophy of 'Revolt and Revolution' and is capable of asserting that she has no complaints. This makes Aparna's assertion of her collective identity unique unlike the 'stringent identitarianism' of Dalit literature which often resorted to a rhetorical binary of 'brahmin' v/s 'Dalit.' She does not participate in what Gajarawala calls the 'radical act of to name names' which 'casteizes what for too long had passed as a secular space'. Nonetheless, Aparna's poem



manages to dent into this 'secular space', precisely by not explicitly singling the oppressor as a brahmin. She shows that the repressive gaze is not a prerogative of a particular caste but of the 'self' that name, talk, and write on behalf of someone else, which easily can be a 'secular self'. This is increasingly true as moving into the post-liberalization and globalization era, this 'secular self' dominates the intellectual discourse, and serves as an excuse to eschew any discussion about caste. Vivek Dhareshwar writes, "A large part of our intellectual discourse has in fact been an autobiography of the secular— read: upper-caste— self, its origin, its conflict with tradition, its desire to be modern" (115, Quoted in Gajarawala)

'Growing Up' is another important poem. It is a short poem but complex one, it has an existentialist underside, the poet wonders what it means to grow up amidst the meaninglessness, and the poet longs to 'mean something'. By prioritizing her 'nugacious side', waging 'bread battle', and harboring faith in intellectuals the poet 'understood what it meant to grow up' and shooed away meaninglessness but very soon it struck again, this time the overwhelming communal and castiest violence surrounds the poet and concluding her poem, she sighs with resignation declaring that 'growing up' for her ultimately meant sitting at home battling domestic duties *Instead of being the real person/ Who ought to strike back/ And get ready— to shoot at sight.*

This lifelessness and inertia of existence, discontinuity and dissonance mark the very nature of the poetry of Aparna. She is one among the new generation of Indian poets who are scathing in their denouncement of earlier conventions, codes, and privileges. These codes are the implicit norms that govern a person's whereabouts and the poetry of Aparna works hard to break these shackles of tradition that dictate our



consciousness. Her poem 'Wish I Was Not Born At All' asks if we are even human mere beings or machines functioning according to the casteist and capitalistic force.

*We pray we know not to whom*

*We live we know not for what*

*We martyr we know not the cause*

*We sustain we know not how to retain* (Wish I Was Not Born At All)

The crisis that Dalits face is of the castiest structure which controls every sphere in the Indian context and puts them in the least desirable position. India is a country ravaged by difference, demarcation, and division to such an extent that to be merely a person here is a revolt. The poet strikes at the root of this issue, and refuses to be embroiled in this business of 'groups, subgroups-species, and genus',

*'If born a certain way is where it all begins Let the world raise a toast*

*And celebrate*

*As for me*

*I am done with the celebration.* (If I Could Be That Which I am Not)

Gopal Guru in his essay *The Politics of Naming* comments that "the current debate about categories, particularly one like Dalit, undoubtedly signifies the suppressed and the exploited groups in various social formations. But it also hinges upon whether a given category represents a monolithic historical reality or whether it refers to the multiple,

polycentric, polyphonic, and dynamic relations of life.” We find an echo of this debate about the category of Dalit in Aparna’s works. Her main concern lies in extending the ontological base of the category ‘dalit’. Recently presenting her poems at the POP festival; an online platform of *Padshala*, she remarked with particular emphasis that she does not like to be boxed into categories and sub-categories, for her categorization of a poet as ‘Marxist poet’, ‘Ambedkarite poet’, ‘Dalit poet’, ‘Women poet’, etc, is limiting, segregating, and rigid. This is also reflected in Guru’s essay when he writes.

In contemporary politics, most explanations indicate a hierarchical use of categories – the assumption being that the conceptual space may only be occupied by a single dominant category or one set of categories. Such essentializing or freezing of categories creates a sort of ‘patent’, making a particular category an individual’s property. This process of monopolization or commodification tends to locate these categories within the realm of the intentionality of any group or person, or their enemies. This freezing of categories, thus, tends to artificially place people in a box as a given category.

This is one of the main issues the poet faces and forms one of her poetry's central themes. While her counterparts embrace available categories easily, she is constantly at a loss, negotiating between two worlds; modernity and the carcass of the past. Most Anglophone poets can be categorized as modern vs traditional poets, some embrace modernity without any compunction about its onslaught, others yearn for the nostalgia and romanticism of India’s supposedly glorious past. On the other hand, Dalit poets are extremely doubtful of these categories. MSS Pandian says Dalits are outside modernity but ahead of it, proving this right Aparna’s poetry is constantly evaluating democracy with her ideals of Begumpura, () a kind of utopia where man is actually free from

the onslaught of caste. According to her, poetry has to cut across race, caste, community, and gender, and transcend these boundaries to embrace humanity by putting the oppressed at the center. Poetry needs to become an agent of social change and transformation, not just for a few but for all.

*My eyes search a free man Whose religion is not state chosen*

*Nor by nation with ownership right*

*Persuading ethics in immoral proportions*

*Whose death is not forecasted by community feuds*

*No quietus signed for non-affiliates . (In This Democracy My Eyes Search)*

Growing up in Maharashtra, inheriting the legacies of the radical Dalit-Buddhist movements, Aparna moved into the academic world to make her mark and a little optimism about the future was indispensable. She grew up amid the heyday of dalit literature and the Dalit panther movement. Learning from the best, including her mother; the famous poet and activist; Jyoti Lanjewar, she was ready to wield language as an anti-caste tool. But the world she moved into increasingly became more fragmented, sectarian, communalist, and castiest. Aniket Jaaware writes “Dalit literature might have been revolutionary—but it should not be confused with the revolution itself. For the revolutionary to be elaborated into a particular revolution (spontaneous or otherwise) requires large amounts of intellectual and political and social elaboration: Literature itself, however revolutionary, cannot perform this elaboration”. (Jaaware 132).

Aparna's poetry thus embodies her existential tryst to deal with this immediate fragmented reality. This created a sort of an intellectual conundrum and haunts her poems, This is reflected in Aparna's poem *Dalit Power* where she writes,

*We witness the horrendous growl turn to cats— meandering cry*

*We search frantically-amidst rubbles*

*The stern legacy of 'Dalit power'*

*And the local zoos and circuses*

*Report now and then Of Panthers missing.*

In a caste-ridden society, art is unknowingly intertwined with oppression. Being a Dalit poet who writes in English right now is something sort of unaccepted by caste proprietors. Dalits arrive in the world as creatures to be hated and face the life-long battle against caste discrimination. Caste then became their own responsibility and they became the carrier of caste. Despite its repeated claims of inclusivity Indian English writing is largely urbane, upper class, upper caste. But what is surprising is that Indian English Poetry as a genre is even more castiest than its counterpart; Indian English Novels. As one sees some tussle going on over 'caste' in prose, but for all the veneration of poetry being the genre for the voice of the voiceless, Indian English poets miss the mark completely. Even a cursory glance at anthologies of Indian English Poetry confirms this. Anglophone poetic space projects an image of a space that is utterly devoid of caste and is in fact, a casteless space, here the extreme form of division that exists, mysteriously ceases to exist. Under the buzz words of mysticism, alienation, self-subjectivity,

existentialism, diaspora, and nostalgia, only the plight of upper caste/class is depicted, reading them one feels there is no lynching, communalism, and casteism happening in the real world. Just like the often paraded statement that there is no caste in corporate culture, English poetic space in India also takes a selfcongratulatory stance on its supposed 'castelessness'. This forms the context of Aparna's poem, 'In Response to What a Known Poet Said to an Unknown'

*And for me 'Sorry sir  
My creative prowess has been stifled  
By centuries of labour  
Rubbing my back on your backyards  
My palms have chaffed  
Praying to unknown gods  
When you read and interpreted  
I waited outdoors for leftovers  
When you indulged in poetic leisure  
I was making both ends meet  
So, sir if I write poetry  
This is my take  
I will present images only of the world known  
To you and to me. (What a Known Poet Said to an Unknown)*

Aparna's poems are critical of the literary stalwarts who set limits on who can be a poet and who cannot. Aparna herself an academician is

keenly aware of the ‘scratching one another’s back’ tendency in academia, how even when Dalits poets are being read now they are read only for their own subversive element. In Aparna’s poetry, the world of the second generation of Dalits who are relatively well off comes alive. Her poems describe how the world they inhabit is physically different from what their previous generation inhabited and the world their counterparts in rural India still inhabit. She talks about the anguish and confusion they suffer mentally and the guilt with which they need to cope.

The history of Indian English Poetry is roughly 150 years old. Yet there is hardly any systematic study done about how caste features in the literary imagination of Indian poets who write in English. Caste, even as a literary or analytic problem is often overlooked by critics. Bruce King in his book analyzes the socio-political background of contemporary poets but does not make much of the fact that nearly all of them are upper caste/class. He discusses the broad religious and ethnic identities like Goan Christian, Indian Jewish, Parsis, Tamilians, and Diasporic Indian, but caste; the exaggerator of division is thoroughly absent. These identities are seen as casteless, with hardly any suggestion that historically these categories owe a lot to caste and in fact, they are subsumed within the caste context completely. Many such identities (Parsis, Jain, Sindhis, catholic Christians) have found their comfortable place in the upper block of this caste matrix of graded inequalities. In one such rare incident, Nissim Ezekiel in his poem ‘Background Casually’ there is some interrogation of one’s identity.

*I knew that all was yet to sing.*

*My ancestors, among the castes,*

*Were aliens crushing seed for bread*

*(The hooded bullock made his rounds). (Background Casually)*

Yet modern anthologies of Indian English poetry are littered with self-conscious but assertive statements defending it from the charge of elitism. Poetry in Indian English is just murmur and musing of a miserable upper-caste mind. The conclusion of such debates is that now Indian English poetry has established itself as a genre, which is representative of Indian ethos and is not a domain of elitists or ‘poetry of few’, and is but a welcoming genre. The coming of poets from Dalit, identity should not be understood simply as a result of modernization, chronological development, or positive development in the genre, rather it should make us question why the dominant literary trends and tropes failed to accommodate the subjectivity of ‘lower castes’. Why were poets like Neerav Patel and others who wrote in English never canonized? In the end, one should question the art of criticism itself.

*After all doesn't all poetry require*

*To be 'chewed and digested?' (Sorry Mr. Francis Bacon)*

*Like the way many poets are swallowed these days Doesn't it  
require to be advertised in biased magazines?*

*Or doesn't it require being subject to an audience poll?*

*Only then can it come in a book form.*

*And the person gets christened as poet. (In Response to What a  
Known Poet Said to an Unknown)*

She protests against the visible reality of the creative industry itself with remarkable certainty. Her poetry then becomes a critique of canon and its mode of production. The English departments in India, still, ostensibly swear on the Eurocentric syllabuses and this is one of the



reasons why English has not been sufficiently Indianized. What is literary is decided by the closely guarded walls of the academic English departments that derive their strength and authority from the west. Therefore it is important that we contextualize Aparna's poetry in this canonical criticism first. She is one of the few Dalit poets and writers who through their doggedness were able to gauge and seep into this closed demarcation of 'mainstream literature' and reading her poetry is an enlightening experience. As an Indian woman poet, she is conscious of her identity in the traditional society and raises her voice against this eurocentrism with a great sense of vigor and involvement.

*They have hired a pigeon for some lakhs  
To Negotiate Business with  
Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Addison  
Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron,  
Eliot, Yeats, Auden, Hopkins,  
Shakespeare, Shaw, Webster, Milton.  
To critique  
Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Barthes, Derrida, Fish  
Habermas, Bodkin, Iser, Lukas, Eagleton  
Jacobson, Lyotard, Hall, Bhabha, Fanon  
To communicate English to  
Moore, De Beauvoir, Wollstonecraft,  
Woolf, Showalter, Rich, Spivak, Millett, Mitchell,  
Morrison, Giovanni, Walker, Angelou,*

Roy, Desai (When I Announced Today)

Nonetheless to read Aparna's poetry merely because she is a Dalit poet will be to fall into a pitfall. Though one understands that Dalit as a category and label is potent with radical ideological potential in dismantling Brahmanical hegemony, one must understand that excessive focus on it can be counterproductive and limiting when it comes to opening up the avenue for more humanitarian and egalitarian possibilities. As a poet, Aparna is aware of the excessive commodification of 'Dalit' as a category, its pitfall, and its limitation. Unlike some of the other Dalit poets, she refrains from explicitly stating, referring, and reverting to her 'Dalitness'. It is reflective in her choice of words, in her poems she uses, "my tribe" and 'they vs us', instead of binaries of 'Dalit' vs 'Brahmin' as is often the case with other poets. Yet it is not that she is reticent about caste or that her writings lack 'Dalit consciousness', but it seems she can see beyond the hashtag 'Dalit'. In *The Days of Cage* with its intensely succinct, fiercely crafted verses established Aparna as a significant voice in Anglophone poetry. Not feeding the hydra-headed monster called Brahmanism, she focuses on the tender images of family, love, Buddha, and the community in which she grew up, keeping 'Rhyme—rhythm—figures—imagery—intact. (19), she pens down poems that are simple, direct, personal, and confessional. She delves into art and philosophy that influence her worldview and poetry. She asks Derrida if he is listening, guides painters to paint, laments about the pathetic state of the literary departments in India, and uses epigrams from Sartre and Rainer Maria Rilke, resulting in a work that is profoundly unique. Her poetry covers a wide expanse. Her travels across the globe and her experiences of plurality of cultures and lends her poetry a

conscious and ideologically strong voice. The meaning and significance of words is not missed on her when she says

*Why do words need words  
To shield themselves  
From the chaos  
Created by words  
Why do words spell  
Confusion of words  
And then sit  
To vindicate  
By more confusion  
Of words  
And its still  
Only words  
That we have between us. (Words)*

Dr. Sutinder Singh Noor, the renowned literary critic had rightly pointed out that Aparna, creates “tensions, oppositions and binaries”, making her poetry more expressive. “words become more powerful, thematically conscious of reality” further they not just do this but much more “they satirize and make us conscious of what is missing what we lack

*In this wasteland  
Of dead and impotent  
No polestar shines  
Nor music one hears by the ocean light  
No caresses come from the winds  
Nor lull from the springs  
No beauty lingers anymore on lips  
Nor strength prevails in fists*

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*In this wasteland  
Birds are blissfully unaware what the future holds. (In This  
Wasteland)*

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, as Baburao Bagul said “A human being is not inherently, neglected or untouchable. It is the system that degrades him in this fashion. When the system is hanged, the human being regains his human essence. Therefore, literature that portrays the inhuman being is, in fact not Dalit literature at all. ‘Dalit’ is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate”. (Bagul 294). The dissection of people into artificial and rigid categories has constituted traumas for the Dalit, increasing awareness of the mechanism perpetuating injustice has made them extremely careful of adopting any categories that participate in the dehumanization of people.

Namdeo Dhasal saw in Aparna the direct heir of “new artistic creativity, aesthetic value and style” that emerged out of sustained literary

movements of Dalit, Bahujan, and tribals. Aparna's poem exemplifies this increasing awareness of humanness and breaks from the ravages of categories/identities that had earlier reduced their existence to nonentities.

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