



## BOOK REVIEW

### Defiant Whispers: A Dalit Woman's Poetic Odyssey

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**Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Poems of Chandalini: Poems by a Bengali Dalit Womanist*, translated and edited by Zaini Mitra and Jaideep Sarangi, Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, Bolpur, West Bengal, 2023, Pages 88, Rs 275.**

*Poems of Chandalini* by Kalyani Thakur Charal offers an unapologetic portrayal of the layered injustices endured by Dalits, particularly Dalit women, in Bengal. Through its fierce and resonant voice, the collection transcends mere literary expression, presenting instead a manifesto of resistance as much visceral as it is eloquent. Thakur's work is a profound reckoning with caste, class, and gender, where every poem thrums with raw urgency, invoking the unspoken histories, lingering traumas, and audacious hopes of a community too often muted in the wider cultural discourse.

Kalyani Thakur (b. 1965), a notable Dalit woman poet, is a powerful voice in Bengali literature, documenting the struggles of Dalit women through her writings. Winner of the Sparrow Literary Award for her autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* ("Why I Write Charal"), Thakur has published four poetry volumes, essays, and stories under the title *Chandalini* ("Untouchable Woman"), drawing from her caste-based discrimination. Through her magazine *Nir*, she amplifies Dalit women's experiences. Thakur views her poetry as an activist endeavour, suggesting that writing poems is participating in a "cultural movement" (70) that goes beyond the literary boundary.

Thakur's poetry vividly re-imagines Dalit womanhood, simultaneously proud and defiant. It reveals an intimate but piercing glimpse into the lives of Dalit women, whose experiences are doubly obscured by both caste and patriarchal structures. In this collection, Thakur transforms pain into power, wielding her words with the

precision of an insurgent, a disruptor, and a witness who stands firmly within the gaze of casteist and patriarchal Bengal. Her voice is unyielding, bearing both the weight and light of Ambedkarite resistance, which insists on dignity, self-worth, and collective action. Thakur embodies the Dalit womanist spirit, broadening the landscape of Dalit literature with a textured, nuanced critique that intersects with the multiple marginalized identity fault lines.

A poem (41) worth quoting from the collection—"My grandfather was prohibited / From stepping into the tol premises. / My father became literate / Using palm leaf and ink of charcoal / After a long struggle"—is a powerful encapsulation of the generational trauma that Dalit families endure. The poem is rich with imagery that speaks to the dehumanization of Dalits experience, as seen in the line, "Oh! God! Cow dung is holier / Than the touch of a dalit!" This stark image articulates the painful reality of untouchability, wherein even the most abject substances are considered purer than the human bodies of Dalits. Thakur's language is sharp and exposing, making visible the everyday humiliations that Dalits face. The poem also critiques the continued use of casteist slurs by her colleagues, such as "Chamar, Charal, and Dom," highlighting how casteism is not an artefact of the past but a pervasive reality in contemporary Bengal.

Thakur's poetry challenges the myth of Bengal as a caste-free society and critiques the failure of Bengal's intellectual and political strata, casting an unforgiving eye on the hypocrisies embedded in nationalist and leftist discourses. With unwavering clarity, she dismantles the notion of Bengal sans caste-hierarchies and discriminations, progressive haven—a saga that has only worked to conceal entrenched social hierarchies. In perhaps one of her most provocative lines, "Marxism and Manuism are mixed together here. The vote is yours, and the ruling mine" (50), she brings to light the uncomfortable paradoxes of Bengali political consciousness. By positioning Marxism alongside Manuism (the ancient caste codes), Thakur critiques the double standards within leftist and nationalist ideologies, exposing how they subtly perpetuate casteist structures rather than dismantling them. This linguistic strategy, pairing an imported philosophy of class with an indigenous doctrine of caste

hierarchy, is a powerful indictment of the contradictions that lie beneath the veneer of egalitarian rhetoric.

The translators' decision to label Thakur a "Dalit womanist" is particularly significant, as it places her within a framework that goes beyond traditional feminist ideologies. Womanism, as a concept, is inherently dialogic, open-ended, and rooted in the lived experiences of women of color. In the Indian context, Dalit womanism addresses the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender, offering a more nuanced understanding of social justice than mainstream feminist movements. Thakur's poetry is deeply aligned with these principles, as she slams the patriarchal structures within Dalit communities. In one of her more striking poems, she writes, "Reading the morning news / The virtuous wife laments loudly. / Thinned alta is left uncared. / Vermillion red head / Is rubbed with the thumb of the dead body" (60). This critique of the "virtuous wife" exposes how patriarchal ideals of purity and chastity continue to oppress women, even in death. The poem exposes the hollowness of that ritual, revealing how these societal roles entrap women within a cycle of purity, obedience, and self-sacrifice. The text speaks Thakur's complex critique of patriarchal mores within Dalit communities themselves, suggesting that the realization of freedom needs both an internal and external uprising.

The translators' choice to frame Thakur within a "Dalit womanist" lens adds another layer of depth, situating her poetry within a global discourse that addresses the unique oppressions faced by marginalized women of colour. This conceptual positioning is significant, as it places Thakur in a lineage that dialogues with but also diverges from mainstream feminist paradigms. Her critique of caste and gender is sharp, but her poetic devices are drawn from everyday Dalit life, situating her work in a language that belongs to the community, resisting the cultural aestheticization often imposed by mainstream literary institutions. Here, we see the emergence of a "counter-aesthetic" where each poem defies the expectations of polished Bengali poetics, replacing them with the gravel of lived experience and the rough edge of unembellished truth.

Thakur's poetry is radical not only for its content but also for its form, which pushes against the sanitized conventions of Bengali

literature. Her metaphors are grounded in the material realities of Dalit life, from cow dung (ironically more revered than Dalit bodies) to broken utensils and thin reed mats. These images are unrefined, and they signal a shift in aesthetic values, suggesting that beauty in poetry need not be divorced from the embrace of social struggle. Her work challenges Bengali literary tradition to accommodate these voices, thereby asserting that literature itself must evolve to reflect the diversity of human experiences.

The volume's inclusion of an introduction and interview adds further resonance to her work, framing it within a larger discourse while allowing Thakur's own voice to emerge unfiltered. However, the absence of footnotes for certain Bengali terms used in several poems—like *Dhaak*, *Fatna*, *Grambarta*, and *Tol*—poses a challenge for non-native readers unfamiliar with these cultural references. These terms, if briefly explained, would enhance accessibility and deepen the readers' engagement with Thakur's cultural nuances.

In closing, *Poems of Chandalini* reads like a declaration—a sustained, fearless testament to resilience, dignity, and the audacity to dream beyond the shackles of caste. The poet's invocation, "Wake up black men and women! / Thousand-year-asleep men and women / Wake up! (63)," is a clarion call, one that pulsates with a deep-rooted hope despite the odds. This awakening, as Thakur envisages it, is a reclaiming of history and identity that defies both silence and submission. Hers is a poetics of survival, of re-imagining oneself in the face of a society that insists on invisibility.