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## THE MARGINALIZED VOICES OF INDIAN FEMINISM: READING SOME MAJOR DALIT WOMEN NARRATIVES

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### Abstract

From time immemorial women have been the subject of victimization, oppression and subjugation by the patriarchal society which always prefer to see women in the periphery. When the question arises about Dalit women, the situation worsens as the Dalit women are considered the subaltern of the subalterns. They are the oppressed among the oppressed as they are exploited double – by the patriarchal society as a whole and by the Dalit patriarchy. But the history of discrimination and traumatic experiences of the Dalit women has not been effectively heard and represented as it lacks agency owing to the homogenization of the similar experiences of the elite class women. In this regard, several Dalit women writers took the initiative to register their literary presence through autobiographies, memoirs, narratives etc. with the main objective to expose the society which has objectified them, discriminated them, victimized them, stripped them off their identity and always looked upon them with a patronizing stance. The present article aims to highlight the plight of the Dalit women, the multiple layers of oppression and the struggle towards emancipation, as depicted in the literary writings of some selected Dalit women writers.

Keywords: Victimization, Marginalization, Subaltern, Oppression, Dalit, Patriarchy, Traumatic Experience

### Introduction

Writing on Dalit life is an emerging field wherein a writer takes up the role of an agent, expresses various dimensions of oppression through literary mediums such as autobiography, memoirs, diaries etc. and urges the crucial need of humane approach towards the deprived section of society, i.e. the Dalits. The term Dalit comes from the word 'dal' which means broken, ground-down or oppressed. Since the beginning of human civilization and the unjust caste system of society, the Dalits

have been subjected to oppression of various kinds. In the name of untouchability, they have been marginalized, discriminated against equal opportunities, deprived of basic human rights, relegated, victimized and tortured in diverse ways. These atrocities in the name of age-old tradition forced the Dalits to protest against injustices by means of literary writings and also by forming organization like Dalit Panthers. The following excerpt from Satyanarayana and Tharu evidently proves it:

... the real originality and force of Dalit writing, which today comprises a substantial and growing body of work, can be traced to the decades following the late 1960s. Those were the years when the Dalit Panthers revisit and embrace the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar, and elaborate his disagreements with the essentially Gandhian mode of Indian Nationalism, to begin a new social movement. In the following decades, Dalit writing becomes an all-India phenomenon. This writing reformulates the caste question and reassesses the significance of colonialism and of missionary activity. It resists the reduction of caste to class or non-Brahminism and vividly describes and analyses the contemporary workings of caste power. (21)

To break the glass ceiling and to claim a space of their own, to deconstruct and expose the caste system of society, to bring the tyranny and ruthlessness of the so-called higher class into limelight, members of Dalit community raised their voices through speeches, literary works, songs, plays etc. Their endeavours became more assertive, effective and visible with the publication of several Dalit life narratives by writers such as Bama's Karukku and Sangati, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, Shantabai Kamble's *The Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons we Broke*, Palanimuthu Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, Gogu Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* etc. The Dalit autobiographies primarily emphasised on the significance of education as a major step towards procuring jobs in government offices, thereby leading a dignified life in society. This could also be seen as a savage response to those who consider the Dalits as untouchables disrespectfully. Their works do not offer a holistic and unified vision of Dalits' plight and claims. On the contrary, they question the patriarchal Dalit communities they portray and address the double burden of caste and gender Dalit women suffer without confining the latter to the role of victims they are traditionally conferred. This struggle for identity remained confined to Dalit men

only until late 20<sup>th</sup> century when the women folk of Dalit community raised their voice in quest for emancipation from double patriarchal oppression—by men from their own community and by men of upper-class society. As Beauvoir says: One is not born a woman but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." (Beauvoir, 249) The above statement is evident of the dominance of patriarchy towards woman who are considered as marginalized and second-class citizen in every aspect. Naturally, the trauma of Dalit women is much worse as they belong to the oppressed among the oppressed. They are victimized and tormented on the basis of caste, class and gender. Dalit women are oppressed and exploited by patriarchy in two ways—that of upper caste men and of their own community men. Although the Dalit Panther movement and some Dalit male writers addressed the issues faced by Dalits in the society, it was in 1990 when the first Dalit woman autobiography *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* by Shantabai Kamble came out with its sharp focus on the distinct voice of Dalit women, an area that was hitherto untouched, willingly or unwillingly. Modern Dalit literatures only became mainstream in India in the 1990s through the English translation of Marathi Dalit writing<sup>1</sup>, and notably thanks to two anthologies: *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* (Mulk Raj and Zelliott 1992) and *Poisoned Bread: Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Dangle 1992). Dalit women's autobiographies primarily deal with the maltreatment, victimization, oppression and marginalization of Dalit women in their own communities through their own accounts. These narratives grab attention for their authenticity of voices and diversity of experiences as well as they are effective equally in lambasting the elite feminists for their narrow stance and coping with gender issues within their own communities. The present article discusses in detail some of the major Dalit women writings, which are excellent in recording the difficulties and distressful life of women in marginalised communities.

**Pawar's The Weave of My Life**

Urmila Pawar's Aaydan, an expression from the local dialect spoken in the villages of Maharashtra forms the background of her life. Originally written in Marathi as Aaydan and later translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Maya Pandit in 2008 is a recent autobiography by Urmila Pawar. "Weaving" has various metaphorical significance. Weaving of cane baskets was an important occupation of the women of Konkan region in Maharashtra from where the author hails (Naikar,3). As the author asserts, "My mother used to weave aaydans. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of suffering, and agony that links us" (Pawar, 10). Poverty is the fundamental problem of Pawar's community. For instance, she writes "Dalits had the custom of all people eating from one plate, but that was usually because there were few plates in the homes" (Pawar, 17). The story opens with a description of a village wherein a group of Dalit women walk to the town in order to sell firewood and buy salt and fish on their journey home. These women would carry heavy weights on their heads with bundles of wood, grass stacks, ripe mangoes etc (Rege, 361). They would travel early in the morning, leaving their kids alone and hungry at home. The situation of Dalit women in the village of Ratnagiri brings to the fore the patriarchal culture of the village and also reveals the gender-based division of labour, thereby unveiling traumatizing experiences of the Dalit women. Pawar's autobiography is an excellent and authentic narrative in which the author weaves the memories of her childhood, her classmates, her community, her various family members and her husband's family. She brings forth the narrative by weaving all the incidents that occurred in her life and her community. This divulges the daily struggles of Dalits as well as the ways in which dominant castes subdue them. The narrative of *The Weave of My Life* keeps on flashing back and forth between the village and the city. The author recalls her experiences of hunger, poverty, caste discrimination and domestic violence. These harsh experiences are mixed with images of Dalit tradition and culture, wherein disease is warded off with

superstition and children's hunger is suppressed with stories.

Pawar negotiates with the trauma of living on the margins by pouring her heart out in a truly incredible narrative. Acquiring education has always been a distant reality for the Dalits and therefore, one of the chief themes of Dalit literature. The upper castes/ Brahmins hindered the access of the untouchables to public institutions. The caste-driven society believed in maintaining the status quo by limiting the existence of Dalits to serving and performing menial chores. Similar was the case in the village of the author. There was hardly any school for the children of the Mahar community. The upper castes had opened up schools in their houses where the Mahar children were denied entry. Also, wherever the children of the Mahar caste had limited access to the schools, they were humiliated by their school teachers who would partake in maintaining social distance. The author had desired to get educated and was supported by her family. She emphasized that it was because of the support from her family that she got the strength to stand up for her community. Pawar's aspirations were high, despite the difficulties she faced in her life her spirit for education never died. She successfully completed her higher education even after her marriage. Although her husband did not like the idea of her education, he wanted her to concentrate and help her family instead. Pawar wanted to do something to uplift the women of her community and she indulged freely in public speeches and events to arouse the minds of others. It was through this participation that Urmila Pawar understood that there was a need for Dalit men and women to come together for the emancipation of the society.

Pawar moves on narrating the discrimination on food consumption with regard to gender. Male members of the family had priorities over food than female. The first right over food would go to the male, after their consumption the leftover would be taken by the females. Sometimes the women had to stay empty stomach due to paucity of food. As Pawar narrates: "When the men folk went out and women and girls remained at home, they dined at kata. A small quantity was poured in water and cooked as a soup, with chili powder, salt and a piece of mago or

maul. This was called saar! Women ate their rice with the watery dish..."(100). In a patriarchal society, Dalit women have to suffer within the four walls of the house. Pawar talks about her mother-in-law who despite battering from her husband remained silent and hid the incidents from others in order to maintain her family's honour. Urmila Pawar talks in great detail about the position of Dalit women and their participation in the Ambedkarite movement to resist the oppressing social order. Elucidating exactly why and how caste plays a definite role in Dalit feminism and how Dalit woman acts as active agents in introducing changes with their communities, the text shows how the Dalit woman emerges as a separate category in the canon of Indian feminisms by establishing herself in a society where she is being oppressed from time immemorial. Urmila Pawar's memoir comes to represent not the journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness but rather a social and community-based chorus of voices.

#### **Bama's Karukku & Sangati**

Bama is one of the finest contemporary Indian writers and a powerful voice of Dalit consciousness. Bama began her career as a writer of the oppressed classes with the publication of her first novel *Karukku*, a semi-autobiographical sketch in 1992, for which she received Crossword Award. This novel was followed by '*Kisumbukkaran*' in 1994, '*Sangati*' in 1996 and '*Vanman*' in 2003. Bama with her experience and exposure to the miserable life of her '*Paraiyar*' community tries to expose the perennial issues like caste, religion and gender in all her novels. Her stories and novels give a glimpse into the lives of the subalterns. Bama gives expression to the inhuman treatment meted out to the lowest of the low castes – the Paraiyars. Her work is the powerful voice of a subaltern subject who reflects the vivid experiences of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic marginalization. Bama records some of her own personal bitter experiences that moulded her character and made her what she is today. The pain and emotional suffering she had been subjected to since her childhood made her write in the preface of her book '*Karukku*': "In order to change this state of affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as

God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights and battle for them". She further continued "the driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many steps of my life, cutting me like '*Karukku*' (rugged edged palmyra leaf) and making me bleed..." (p. xiii). The afterword added to this autobiography is a kind of suggestion that suggests her zeal for liberation of Dalits and her sympathy for them. She says, "I have met several people who work with zeal for the single objective of Dalit liberation. And it has been a great joy to see Dalits aiming to live with self-respect, proclaiming aloud, "*Dalit enrdu sollad; talai nimirndu nillada*": "Say you are a Dalit, lift up your head and stand tall" (106). Bama opines that women writers have another tale to tell as Dalit women writers have double marginalization to narrate. *Karukku* gives an account of the sufferings and indignities of a Christian Dalit woman and the main aim of Bama's writing, as she says, is 'to share with people my experiences. I use writing as one of the weapons to fight for the rights of the underprivileged'.

*Sangati* (Events) was first written by Christian Dalit author Bama Faustina in Tamil in 1994, but it was only published in English in 2005. It is a sequel to Bama's first novel *Karukku*, an autobiographical novel written in 1992 (first translated into English in 1999). *Karukku* and *Sangati* have come to become classics of Dalit literatures in India. In *Sangati*, Bama further develops these themes. While being written like an autobiography, *Sangati* adapts the conventions of the genre. Traditionally, the autobiography privileges the voice of one protagonist. Yet, in Bama's narrative, the voice of the community imposes itself upon the voice of the individual. She also changes the quality and style of canonical narratives considered as literary to accommodate the stories of silenced people. In fact, *Sangati* reads more like a collection of life narratives than an autobiography. The structure of *Sangati* reflects the struggles of an individual within and against the life scripts provided by the Christian Dalit culture. The subject 'I' is constituted through an unnamed reflexive voice – who is first identified as a young girl then as an adult narrator –. Her comments

on the plight suffered by Dalit women pepper the narration. In the course of the narrative, restoring the female subject 'I' appears as an arduous process through which the anonymous narrator progressively steps towards reclaiming agency and subjectivity, but also towards gaining political inclusion and taking political action (Zecchini 2016, 66). Sangati also challenges received notions of what a novel should be since it has no plot in the classic sense of the term, but it is merely composed of the powerful stories of several memorable protagonists. Bridging experience and analysis, the narrative ends with a practical call for socio-political action from a Dalit feminist viewpoint (Holmström 2017, xvi).

### **Sivakami's The Grip of Change**

The Grip of Change is the English translation of Pazhayani Kazhidalum (1988), the first Tamil novel by a female writer. It is comprised of two books: Book 1: Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change and its sequel, Book 2: Gowri: Author's Notes. Palanimuthu Sivakami wrote the first book when was twenty-six and the sequel ten years later. The protagonist of Book 1, Kathamuthu, is a charismatic Parachi leader with two wives<sup>7</sup>. The novel opens as a Parachi woman, Thangam, finds refuge at Kathamuthu's after having been seriously beaten up by the relatives of her upper caste employer because her in-laws spread rumours about her having an affair with the latter, a married man. Kathamuthu uses his influence within the village caste hierarchy to obtain some sort of justice for Thangam while still looking down on her as an inferior being since she is but a woman. In the second book, Gowri, Kathamuthu's daughter, that the readers see grow up in the first book, compares the town of her memories which inspired the writing of The Grip of Change to what she observes as a thirty-one-year-old woman. Gowri is the fictional author of The Grip of Change – though the question of whether or not she is to be understood as a younger Sivakami is left open –. The sequel contrasts what happened in her family and community to her interpretations of those events and thus points to the gaps in the narrator's knowledge and understanding of past events. This undermines her authorial reliability, while also pointing to her gained maturity and autonomy at the end of the narrative. In this book, it is Thangam's

body which takes centre stage. Thangam is rejected by her in-laws who refuse to give her the land she should receive. She is raped and exploited and is almost beaten to death at the beginning of the novel. She is considered as a useless woman since she is childless and widowed. Her broken up body shows how vulnerable Dalit women are to male sexual assault and harassment. Since the narrative hinges on Thangam's body and the abuse she suffers, a mute woman whose existence was marginalised becomes central to the plot and, in an amazing turn of events, her ordeal can even spark a caste riot (Meena Kadasamy 2005, 194). Eventually, Thangam obtains justice; her in-laws are forced to give her some land. She repays Kathamuthu by physically yielding to his desires, but she also manages to use the very body which had been subjugated and oppressed to gain power in Kathamuthu's house and dominate his first two wives.

The novel is also an expression of Dalit youth's eagerness to work for change and socio-political progress. The first book ends with an enumeration of vast economic, social and political changes with which the elderly cannot keep up. Kathamuthu's wives, accustomed to the patriarchal system in which they had evolved till then are unable to envision any changes when Gowri eagerly evokes the women liberation movements: "Gowri constantly goaded Kanagavalli and Nagamani with talks of women's liberation. However, both women were used to bending to Kathamuthu's demands. They were happy for Gowri, but felt it was too late for them" (125). The novel concludes on an optimistic note for the younger generation as Gowri defies her father and refuses to marry. She manages to win her independence by completing her studies, she gets a doctorate and then a teaching job. The novel thus ends on the long road ahead for women Dalits to obtain full and equal rights.

### **Shantabai Kamble's The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life**

Maja Janmachi Chittarkata (A Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life) is considered as a prominent women Dalit autobiography that explores the suppressed lives of Dalit women in India. The book is

a group of pictures which when put together, take into account the life lived as a Dalit woman. Shantabai Kamble wrote this work at a time when several Dalit men's autobiographies had been published and discussed. She felt that her experiences also needed to be told. The book recounts her life as lived in the community and the caste. In this memoir she narrates the bitter experiences and severe humiliation in society at school, working place and even at home. In her memoir she talks about caste, culture, labour and humiliation. Though, it is her own life narrative, she presents the collative voice of her community too. It speaks about the sexual division of labour and the ingrained cultural experiences to life after her marriage to Master Kamble. She talks about food and hunger as faced by her throughout her childhood. Caste system in India is one of the world's most discriminatory and exploitative systems. It not only degrades the individual but also deprives from human rights and the right to live as an independent human being in society. Shantabai explores the brutality of caste discriminations in her experience; she recalls her childhood memories about poverty and suffering in her family only because of her caste. At that time the people from mahar caste were compelled to perform the village duties like sweeping the village, decomposing the dead castles of the village and to guard the village at night etc, in return to leftover food served in mercy by upper caste in the village. They had to perform the village duties as a slave with no excuse in returns of some jawar and corn at the time of harvest which is known as taralki. It was mandatory to perform the village duties to Mahars. This book is one of the first autobiographical accounts of women to come in the forefront, centring the specific experiences Dalit women faced inside and outside the house.

#### **Baby Kamble's Prisons We Broke**

Babytai Kamble ran a small provisions store. The only contact she had with books were the old books and newspapers used as wrapping paper to pack groceries. She wrote her book hiding from her husband. Her book has detailed descriptions of a life lived in the poverty of Maharwada. Her descriptions of the houses "decorated with eternal poverty" in the 1920s is emblematic of the hunger, labour and

caste ingrained in the lives lived at margins. Her book is also important because even a hundred years after Mukta Salve's essay voicing the dire conditions of the reproductive health of Mang and Mahar women, Kamble talks about the skewed division of labour in her community. Babytai Kamble's book is an extremely important read to understand the sexual division of labour that the women in the Dalit community take up, where they are expected to work at home as well as work outside to support the family, even as their reproductive and domestic labour goes unrecognized as real work.

#### **Gogu Shyamala's Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...**

*Father May be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* by Gogu Shyamala is a collection of twelve stories translated from Telugu by nine individual translators, men and women alike. In her back-cover review of the 2012 Navayana edition, Susie Tharu argues that Shyamala's collection of short stories could be the prototype of a new genre that might be called not "short" but "little" stories after the "little magazines" written by the Telugu press since the 1960s. The term "little" refers to the Dalit subaltern customs that the stories give access to as opposed to grand Hindu national traditions. The stories are autobiographical since they are based on the writer's childhood memories. The title of the story derives from this old saying which suggests Dalit women are the main breadwinners and providers of the family and, despite being seemingly weak, they are needed when a family could survive without a man. Patriarchy is doubly undermined since the father does not dare stand up to his mother, and his wife turns out to be the vital force of the family.

#### **Conclusion**

Dalit literature is an arduous endeavour from the canonical to the peripheral, from meganarratives to micro-narratives, from resistance to emancipation and self-affirmation. Through their writings, the Dalit women writers sum up their mental and physical agony, their domestic problems and issues, brutal behaviour, inhuman treatment, miserable state of condition, in their own style. The

Dalit women writers whose works are examined in this article gained international visibility through English translation. Though the translation might lose some of the force and subversiveness of the original Dalit Tamil and Telugu idioms, English translation made these texts available to a larger audience and the socio-political struggle of Dalits and Dalit women was given broader scope and recognition worldwide. These works wonderfully documented lived experience of poverty, violence, dejection and misery that every Dalit woman experiences in rigid caste hierarchies. They are also a narrative of reconstruction of self that a Dalit woman achieves after going through the traumatic experience in society in the hands of both patriarchy on one hand and the upper-class society on the other hand. According to Lakshmi Holmstrom, such Dalit literature "questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies, and, reaching out, empowers all those who have suffered different oppressions...argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression". Thus, the Dalit writers bring forth a new understanding about the intersection of caste and gender in the Indian society. They have been able to carve a niche for their unique expression and register their voices through their writings. They have tremendous potential to transform the world of the oppressed people. Their autobiographies are emblematic of the inherent grit and determination Dalit women writers have shown in baring their souls, revealing the trauma of living a peripheral existence and demanding equity as a fundamental human right.

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