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Questioning Subjugation and Decolonizing Patriarchy in Dalit Women Narratives

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Abstract:

The present paper aims to locate the dislocated destiny of Dalit Women. In relation to women, it has been emphasized that sexual oppression, economic exploitation, and socio-cultural subjugation are the sources of unequal gender relations. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak categorized women, non-whites, non-European and oppressed castes and frames them in the subaltern description in her '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' She brings forward a series of questions regarding representation, resistance, cultural subjugation, perspectives of marginalized, exploited and oppressed. Dalit women suffer the triple subjugation: remain absent in the conversations of gender disparity in Feminism, misinterpreted in the literary texts of mainstream writers and texts and manipulated in the hands of Dalit Males and their writings. The paper also highlights and conform that the text not only reflect the accentuating contemporary caste and gender struggles in India but also delineates the transformation of the Dalit women under the leadership of Ambedkar. Both the writers raise certain foundational questions such as caste discrimination and women' subjugation. Dalit women writers inclined to define themselves and not be trapped in framed images that others, including Dalit male writers, had created for them. Also, Kamble's resistance through writing can be seen as an attempt to manifest the contribution of Dalit women in the Ambedkar movement, something that is not always acknowledged in historical and literary texts written on the subject. It also endeavour to investigate the concept of 'Decolonization' and how it is contributed to liberate Dalit Women from the age old subjugation and humiliation.

Keywords: Subaltern, Resistance, Subjugation, Marginalized, Ambedkar Movement.

Caste plays a very important role in manifesting the subjugation of dalit women. Whenever dalit women come in contact with either any male of their own community or with

higher caste men and women, they had to bear abuses, pathetic conversations, loss of their identity as a human being and so on. It becomes a terrible experience to live with such thinking. At their own homes, they are treated no more than a sexual object to satisfy the sexual desire of their husbands. The way dalit women wrote about their sufferings clearly indicate that they are aware of the patriarchal system exist within their own community which becomes a hurdle in their freedom. Successfully, they are able to project the mental and physical tortures they had to undergo throughout their lives.

In relation to women, it was emphasized that sexual oppression, economic exploitation, and socio-cultural subjugation are the sources of unequal gender relations. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak categorized women, non-whites, non-European and oppressed castes and frames them in the subaltern description in her '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' She brings forward a series of questions regarding representation, resistance, cultural subjugation, perspectives of marginalized, exploited and oppressed. She centers the debate on the women as Satis on the husband's pyres absent as subjects and constructed as property and objects in the lengthy discussions of the representatives of the society. She says: "The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as pious item. Representation has not withered away". (Spivak 4)

R.S. Khare clearly argued that Dalit women bear not only the personal and social dishonor but as well as the physical safety. Within the 'home', Dalit women often suffered from verbal and physical abuse at the hands of their fathers and brothers, raped by their father-in-law, or brother-in-law, forcefully subjugated to fulfill the pleasures of their husbands. Professor Gopal Guru in "*Theoretical Brahmin and Empirical Shudra*" said: "This exclusion of Dalit women from the mainstream women's movement is not such a bad thing after all: it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity, and agency". (Basu 145)

Jeena Amucha, the Marathi original of '*The Prisons We Broke*', is a milestone in the history of Dalit writings in Marathi. It is considered as the first autobiography by a dalit woman not only in Marathi but also in any Indian language. '*The Prisons We Broke*' is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalits for thousands of years. An important aspect of the autobiography is Kamble's Dalit feminist critique of patriarchy. She describes the physical and psychological violence dalit women have to undergo in both the public and private

sphere. If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men. It is more a socio-biography than an autobiography of a single individual.

In an Interview with her translator Maya Pundit, she says: "I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community". (Kamble 136) Baby Kamble lived in such social structure where woman considered being subordinate to man, her husband. She always subjected to husband's desires, his doubts, abusive language, harsh behavior and continuous beatings which in a way responsible for the plight of Dalit women. Thus, her novel '*The Prisons We Broke*' is a sort of protest writing. According to the translator of her novel, her autobiography is regarded as the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman in Marathi. Most of the Dalit autobiographies written by Dalit men consist of different viewpoints. This autobiography engages with the oppression of Dalit women.

Kamble while mapping the caste and gender exploitation witnesses Dalit women's struggle and their fight sometimes become a part of Phule and Ambedkar writings too:

When the Mahar women labor in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish! Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute your then?... and you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all that your selfish religion has given to us. But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is.... (Kamble 56)

Such kind of experience narrated in the novel to draw attention to the history of the miserable and vulnerable condition of Dalit women is important. It also underlies the basic structure of the society that uses the Dalit women's body as a symbol of lust. The narration in the novel deals with the historical background of the family, village customs like worshipping deities, various superstitions, Mahars and Yeskar duties, experiences of subjugation, marriage customs, humiliated attitude of in-laws towards new bride, Dalit culture, exploitation of the upper castes etc. The main theme of the novel is experiences of Dalit women charred by insecurity, domestic violence and social violence. The patriarchal system in India made Dalit women feel very insecure and dependent on their men. When a child is born in the family,

from his/her infancy, people have started discriminated on the basis of gender. She enthusiastically explored this idea in the novel. Critiquing the importance of sons in a family, Kamble writes:

The eldest son was the pride of the house. He would be offered to the deity as vaghya or potraja. Fathers had a lion's share in preparing their sons for this role. To offer the son as vagya or potraja was considered a great honor and prestige for the family. The father very diligently saw to it that his son was properly trained. (18-19)

The sons got more respect than girls in the family. She describes in detailed manner about the clothes, customs, and differentiation in viewpoints when a girl reached puberty. People were of the view that as soon as a girl has attained a maturity level, she should be covered from the eyes of the upper caste men and men of their community as well. Dalit women were not allowed to come out of their houses etc and in this concern, she writes:

When girls reached puberty, their mothers would pull out some dirty rags from a bundle and put them on their bodies to somehow cover them. That was all, by way of clothing. A rag would be tied around the waist; its ends pulled between the legs and tucked up at the waist. The traditional khun blouse pieces offered to goddess Mari Aai would be assiduously saved for such purpose. They would be brought out from a bundle and with huge stitches would be somehow made to resemble blouses. That was the uniform for grown-up girls. (8)

Baby Kamble's novel '*The Prisons We Broke*' in its basic idea a narrative of the subjugation of Dalit women in the hands of men. Rights from the household work, rituals and customs, everywhere women are at forefront. Baby Kamble's considerations of women can easily be seen in her interview where she brings out the hardships of Dalit women in a male dominated society. She also talks about an incident of her married life where she was hit by her husband in the train because some young men stare at her. Her description of suspicions refers to various caste specificities and also some inherent gender disparities:

He would beat me up for some flimsy reason. Actually he used to be very suspicious. I tried very hard to prove my innocence. I used to cry, explain, plead with him. Then for a few days everything would be normal. Then again after a week or so, something would happen and suspicion would raise its head once again... In fact this was the life most women led. Every woman knew it by heart. Every woman tried to negotiate her way out of these hardships. (155)

Kamble's novel is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography of an individual. It encounters the transformation of the Mahar community under the leadership of Ambedkar. It is a narration of a gendered individual watching the whole world from her location within her caste but ready to transcend herself. It also shows the transformation of a girl from a rural area to a metropolitan independent working woman. Another example to support the subjugation of Dalit women is Faustina Bama's novels. In her autobiographical novel, *Sangati*, she captured the voice of Dalit women. To Bama, Dalit literature is not merely a literature on Dalits but a critique of the Hindu social order. She talks about the struggles, frustrations, travails and tribulations of Dalit women's life. It covers the life of the author completely from infancy till womanhood. Dalit women seem to be destined to get married as soon as they attain puberty. Bama recollects:

In our streets the girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the house work, taking care of babies, going out to work for daily wages. Yet, in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter. (75)

When Bama's teacher noticed her growing sexual maturity, he asked her mother to make her wear a half-sari in school. Her grandmother urges her mother to get her married. Even the tales told by her grandmother when she was a child regarding the subordination of women specifically Dalit women made her surprised. She critically examines the two tales where the loss of the freedom of Dalit women portrayed by the writer. The first tale is about a ghost named Esakki who possesses one of a girl of the village. According to her grandmother, this ghost was once a girl who was murdered by her own family just because she fell in love with a man of another lower caste. Villagers were of the view that she is wondering just to get a proper cradle. Another tale is also of a group of ghosts who overheard two women talking about some jewelry and one of the ghosts impersonates and snatches away her jewelry but later on her husband retrieved them back. From her examination, it becomes clear that Dalit women are only the victims of possession. According to Bama, Dalit women are merely subjugated people who are subordinated in this patriarchal system. She interprets possession as a symptom of fear and miserable condition of Dalit women:

Once a girl comes of age she has no freedom. They tell us all the stories, take away our freedom, and control our movements. And we too become frightened, we gaze about us in terror, we're afraid of every little thing, we shiver, and die. It isn't for

nothing that they say to one who is terrified, that anything dark is a *pey* (ghost). Is there isn't courage in our herats, we lose our strength and become good for nothing. If we are brave enough, we can dare to accomplish anything we want.

Even her mother too is a symbol of exploitation as her father killed her mother through continuous beatings at home. Wife-bashing considered being a birth right in the eyes of Dalit men. Her grandmother justifies:

She was killed by the ceaseless beatings she received from her husband. He would demand his quota of sex from her every night. She worked day and night, at home and in the fields. How could she put up his demands night after night? He was a beast. If she dared to refuse, he would break her bones. Any object would serve him as a weapon, even an iron pestle. When she died, her last-born was barely four months old.
(10)

Though they were not considered as human but with the passage of time, with the emergence of Ambedkarite movement, gradually their conditions too changed. Earlier, they lack in confidence to voice their pain but sooner or later they felt some spark embarked from their suffering. The Paraiya women are ready to go to any extent to make their life peaceful. Here Bama shows a rebellious character against male oppression on women and the patriarchal domination culture, social, economic, religious, and familial life of Paraiya womanhood. Bama herself stands for Dalit feminism and the emancipation of the Dalit Paraiya community. It is now clear that through Dalit women autobiographies; there is a transformation of women's rejection into resistance.

Baby Kamble's '*The prisons We Broke*' is considered as a narrative of the suppression and humiliation of Dalit women. She has projected the problem of Dalit women and then provides certain solutions too for solving their conditions. The impact of Dr. Ambedkar, Phule and Shahu Maharaj was very vast. Kamble too raises certain foundational questions such as caste discrimination, women subjugation and influence of Dr. Ambedkar by educating them of their rights. She talks about the speeches of Ambedkar against the exploitation of Dalit women. As Ambedkar said about worship of god Khandoda in Jejuri:

The stone steps in front of the god's temple have been worn away by hapless people beating their heads against those steps in utter supplication. But has he ever taken mercy on you? What good has this god ever done to you? Your people have served the village, the upper caste communities, for ages. You clean all their dead

filth. And what do they do for you? They feed you with their dead animals. Even then this god does not take pity on you. Do you know something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance!

Generations after generations of Mahars have ruined themselves with such superstitions. And what have you got in return from this god? (64)

He further said:

From now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god. Teach them good things. Send them to schools. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your conditions will start improving. Your family, your life will improve. Your children will bring you out of this hell. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. Your children will make you aware of this. (65)

The effect of the Ambedkar speeches can be seen in the later part of the novel where she narrated the movement organized by Ambedkar in the favor of Dalits. Thus, the novel draws attention towards the development of Dalit women from pre-Ambedkar days to the modern through education and mass conversion. In some ways they were successful, especially in the spread of education and in defying the caste system, but in other ways, especially in gender relations, the results were mixed. Dalit women writers wanted to define themselves and not be trapped in framed images that others, including male Dalit writers, had created for them. Also, Kamble's desire to write can be seen as an attempt to show the role of rural women in the Ambedkar movement, something that is not always acknowledged in historical and literary texts written on the subject. Thus, in the above given Dalit women narratives, one can mark out that the subjugation of Dalit women has been questioned and this leads to the decolonization of Patriarchy.

The modification in the history of feminist writing by including the voices of Dalit women is not only a revolution on the part of all Dalit women but also a Decolonization of Patriarchy. In Colonialism, there is a term 'Subaltern' which is majorly emphasized and introduced by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her text 'Can the Subaltern Speak'. Subaltern is a term originated from Army which means the lowest strata of people. In the similar sense in terms of Colonialism, Whites are superior and Blacks or Asians are Subalterns. In the case of Feminism, Man is the Centre and Woman is Subaltern or in the Margin. Hence the need is evolved to change the mentality of the whole generation of people and paved a new path to the upcoming one by decolonizing this whole arena of subjugation and humiliation of one strata of society by another. Decolonization is a Post Colonial term in which it not only

subverts the colonialism in the physical way by pushing Colonizers from the land of Colonized people but also revolves around the decolonizing the mind as well. The phrase 'Decolonizing the Mind' has been introduced by Ngugi Wa Thiongo's text with the same phrase as its title. It means to eradicate the after effects of Colonialism from the mind as well. It has a special significance when it is used in history of Feminism.

Conceptually, 'Decolonization' refers to undoing of colonialism where a nation establishes its domination over its territories. But here it encapsulates the similar idea. Patriarchy maintains supremacy over women, somehow colonize them and render them to utter discrimination. Therefore, Decolonization can also be a project protected from constructions of the past or ideas of today that are used to dominate and oppress women. Dalit women specifically underwent a triple subjugation: first in the hands of the upper castes, second by their own men and third; in the arena of feminism in general. Hence the urge is needed to decolonize this whole mentality of people in oppressing Dalit women in an animalistic way.

The overall observation of the texts highlights and conform that the Dalit women writings not only reflect the accentuating contemporary caste and gender struggles in India but also delineates the transformation of the Dalit women under the leadership of Ambedkar. Dalit feminists believe that promiscuity is the result of the injustices inflicted by Savarnas on Dalit women. Both the writers raise certain foundational questions such as caste discrimination and women' subjugation. Dalit women writers inclined to define themselves and not be trapped in framed images that others, including Dalit male writers, had created for them. Also, Kamble's resistance through writing can be seen as an attempt to manifest the contribution of Dalit women in the Ambedkar movement, something that is not always acknowledged in historical and literary texts written on the subject.

Dalit women suffer the triple oppression: remain absent in the conversations of gender disparity in Feminism, misinterpreted in the literary texts of mainstream writers and texts and manipulated in the hands of Dalit Males and their writings. Therefore, Dalit feminist writers thus come forward to express their ideas, experiences of social and domestic violence, questioning their traditional terms of existence with anger and protest and decolonize their subjection.

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