

Dalit Feminism: A Transformation of Rejection into Resistance

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Patricia Waugh says:

Women writers are beginning to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified self hood, a rational, coherent, effective identity. As male writers lament its demise, women have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history, and agency in the world. (Basu 123)

For the upper caste woman, her family is her world and argues for self-modification centered on individual liberalism. On the other hand, for the Dalit woman, her community is her family an aimed towards the upliftment of the community. In short, her family centered on communitarianism. It is a widely held perception that Dalit woman considered as 'Other' and it is the impact of the centuries-long alienation and loneliness created by patriarchal and Brahmanical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, structured and domestic violence which every Dalit woman experiences throughout her life. Thus, even among women, she is perceived as 'Other'. She belongs to the 'lowest' category manifested in her condition of social, physical, economic, and political vulnerability.

This is clearly evident in her struggle for basic needs such as food or water and in her submission to sexual and domestic violence. "There is no girl in our cheri who has not been coerced or raped by the dominant caste men when they go to the fields to fetch water or for work", confided a young girl from Southern Tamil Nadu to a Dalit woman activist recently". (Basu 124) 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 series of questions regarding representation, resistance, cultural subjugation of the perspectives of marginalized, exploited, 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 woman gear not only the personal and social dishonor but as well as the physical safety. Within the 'home', Dalit woman 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, domestic and sexual violence. They simultaneously dishonored outside in public realm forced, unpaid in the economic sphere and often compounded by sexual harassment and a real risk to physical life.

Dalit women constitute and comprised about 16 % of India's total female population and 8% of the total population and most of them feel disillusioned and alienated. 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)

What was clearly needed is an articulation based on the consciousness of the Dalit women themselves, their experiences of humiliation, deprivation, isolation by virtue of gender, caste, and class. An attempt should be made to break down the fixed polarities between the upper caste/lower caste and men/women especially in Dalit context. In the Indian context, caste, class, and patriarchy are of course the three hierarchal axes of social structure which are very essential for the understanding of caste Hindu, Shudra and Dalit women. It is caste which shapes the integral part of the gender status and identity of Dalit women. For example, a derogated Dalit female laborer/slave, doing a menial service work constructed as polluting and inferior. This dualistic construction of Dalit women in gender ideology legitimizes the sexual subordination and subjugation of them. Caste oppression, gender subjugation and class exploitation, all are interlined together. Caste uses gender to construct caste status, power relations and cultural differences and thereby oppressing lower caste women. Thus, three interlocking systems of caste, class, and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity, and intensity of oppression, which is destructive to the experiences of Dalit women.

Dalit women have the right to be seen as subjects and not as objects, which played an active role for the betterment of not only their family but also for their whole community. Their voices have been muted and kept in silence. Hence need arise to articulate their vision and build their own praxis and theory:

We have been denied the right to articulate our own visions of emancipation. Our energies have been co-opted to working out the visions of dominant others who have shown scant respect for our world-view or philosophy of life, by not enabling us to articulate them or work towards achieving them. (Prasad 47)

Therefore, it was required to have a development of Dalit feminist theory and to define this state of being through Dalit female language. Thus, a new word was coined, "*Dalit womanism*" (22) to understand Dalit woman's life in a better manner and try to transform them. The term "*Womanism*" (23) was coined by Alice Walker in 1893. Womanism defined as a consciousness, incorporates 'racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic and political considerations' whereas Feminism places priority on women. The Womanism of the Dalits will be entirely based on the lives, experiences, and consciousness of Dalit women. Thus, Dalit women are slowly attempting to speak out their traumatic experiences as well as theorizing their pain, their anger in their autobiographical writings.

There is a need to examine and evaluate Dalit women's historical experiences from the perspective of caste, economic class, politics, and patriarchal angles, aimed towards the transformation in work, wages, and family life. Not only patriarchy and caste but also class divides Dalit women by bringing the embourgeoisment and Sanskritisation. Dalit feminism must respond to the complexity of salience of class and the differences create by the caste-ridden society. They should make an attempt to emphasize the unity of caste, class, and gender and rejects the efforts to bifurcate their identities. At the same time, they should challenge the over-

determinacy of caste. In posing the fundamental challenges to the existing polarities between Dalit and non-Dalit women, linkages between knowledge and power, Dalit critical theory must continue to analyze the caste and patriarchy through social structural perspective that can be seen or evident in the writings of Phule and Ambedkar. Feminist theories' rejections of totalizing, universalizing, and homogenizing the frameworks of patriarchy have already paved a way to deconstruction. Now, it is required to develop a Dalit feminist theory to uncover and analyze the cultural, societal specificities which constructed the Dalit woman and recover them from the oppositions. This Dalit feminist theory aimed towards social justice and against all sorts of exploitation and oppression towards Dalit women.

The articulation of their experiences came to be known as '*Stri Dalit Sahitya*' in Marathi. Generally speaking, Dalit women considered to be the most underprivileged group left out at the bottom of the hierarchal caste society for centuries. In centuries to Dalit men, they suffer more to their dual oppression: being Dalit and being woman. Being Dalit, they suffer due to caste discrimination and being a woman, victimized by the patriarchal social order both in their homes as well as outside. Dalit women believed to be alienated at three levels; caste, class, and gender positions. Thus, violence against Dalit women is rampant.

Dalit women have been misrepresented in Indian literature and Indian English literature. Most of the upper caste male writers are biased towards Dalit women. They are portrayed as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men and never as rebels to fight against the injustices perpetuated upon them. Even in the writings of the progressive writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand and so on- Dalit women are either molested or raped by the upper caste men. By depicting such pictures, writers gained sympathy for the victims but such routinely kind of treatment is not enough. They have completely ignored the fact that Dalit women can also resist and fight back like any other victim of social oppression to guard their dignity. Thus, in these literatures, a Dalit woman is never a fighter but always a victim. In order to counter- struggle the misrepresentations of Dalit women in Indian English literature, the first generation of Dalit writers constructed Dalit women in Dalit literature writes:

The female characters in Dalit Literature are dynamic and not static. Dalit writers do not look upon widows, prostitutes, deprived women, as Dalit, the exploited, with compassion alone; but they make them towards radiance. In the stories and novels of Annabhau, Shankar Rao Kharat, Baburao Bagul and others, though the nature of the struggle of woman in the beginning is individual, later it becomes class conflict... As a consequence of this, Dalit female characters end the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise... They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self-respect... The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centered but society-centered... That is why Dalit writers do not portray Dalit women as hollow identities, overflowing with love as embodiments of sacrifice. (Prasad 46)

Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies, their narratives of pain. Most of them have been written in regional languages and they have hardly been translated into English. The position of Dalit women is as marginalized in Dalit literature as they are in their community. Education gave them the chance to narrate their voices of distress, and sorrows in their autobiographical writings. The contribution of Dalit women writers to Dalit Literature is significant. From the onset, the writings of Dalit women represented their own experiences and burning indignation. Muktabai, an Untouchable girl considered her essay

regarding the problems and sufferings of Untouchables in the school established by the great reformer Phule, in 1852, was the first example of the emancipation of Dalit women through their autobiographical writings. After a period of century, Dalit women started awakened and giving literary expression to their sufferings.

The Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst Dalit. She has suffered and still suffering. She should walk through the burning desert of casteism in search of their true identity. Mrs Bansode says that it is due to casteism that Dalit women are being dishonored and molested. In one poem, she lodged a complaint in the People's court in search of justice, but at last she attacked the inhuman game of oppressors:

This complaint of mine is against the orthodox culture which has imprisoned us in a sealed room, which has given us the charity of life completely boycotted. Where the wind treats us as strangers, where the Monsoons give us only famines where the water plays with us the most inhumane game of mirage. We are rejecting this unclean and poisonous life. And to escape from these cruel curses will you give me a bright and auspicious moon? My countrymen, to your court I have brought a complaint. Will you give me justice? (Ahmad 129)

Brutal patriarchy is a major issue discussed repeatedly in Dalit feminist discourses. However, the viewpoints of some Dalit male intellectuals are contradictory. Illiah compares patriarchy in Dalit community with that of Hindu community and regard former as more democratic. How can any oppressive structure be democratic at all? Dalit feminism is considered as the '*discourse of discontent*', '*a politics of difference*' (130) from the mainstream Indian feminism, which often been critiqued for marginalizing Dalit women. Dalit feminist discourses not only question the mainstream Indian feminism's hegemony in claiming to speak for all women, but also the hegemony of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women. In such scenario, Dalit writers like Bama, Gunasekhran, Urmila Pawar and many more Dalit women writers themselves taking pen in their hands articulating and recording their experiences of humiliation and hurt subverts centuries of old historical neglect and a stubborn refusal to be considered as a subject. Bama Faustina is the most distinguished Dalit feminist writer in Tamil. Her autobiographical novel "*Karukku*" was the first Dalit Tamil text. According to K. Geetah and K. Srilatha:

The first of its kind in Tamil, *Karukku* was not only the first Dalit autobiography but achieved a specific identity, having written by a Dalit Christian woman... As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and suffering of Dalit women... The English translation has enabled *Karukku* to cross linguistic and regional boundaries, and reach the global readers... *Karukku* is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation, and education, etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the catholic church itself. (Ahmad 144)

To Bama, Dalit literature is not merely literature on Dalits but a critique of the Hindu social order. Bama's *Sangati*, her novel explores the idea of transformation of rejection into resistance. In *Karukku*, there was more emphasis on the relationship between the self and the community but on the other hand, *Sanagti* is based on the community's identity. The novel talks

about the Parajya community who are doubly oppressed. Women are presented as wage earners and it is upon them to bear the burden of the family and on the other side men can spend their money slavishly. In addition to this, women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment. Therefore, the novel creates a Dalit feminist perspective and explores the impact of discrimination – compounded above all, by poverty – suffered by Dalit women. The economic precariousness of Dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this is a theme that runs through the book: the terrible violence and abuse of women by their fathers and husbands, and sometimes even brothers; women fight back. *Sangati* is primarily about a community's identity; not about the single self.

'*Sangati*' ends pointing out how Paraiya women are always the most vulnerable, even when educated, economically independent and choosing to live alone. This novel is written in colloquial style, which overturns the decorum and aesthetic of upper caste, Tamil; the novel seeks to tease out a positive cultural identity as Dalit and women who can resist upper caste norms. It gives an account of Dalit women's dual oppression on account of gender and caste as well as other discriminated situations of womanhood in Tamil Dalit culture. "*Sangati*" explores the female subjugation and subordination in a great way. Bama says about Dalit feminism in an interview:

All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture..... The hard labor they have to do all their lives. Other problems are the same for all women. The Dalits particular caste.....more agony and hard labor can be attributed to them. Dalit women have to put up with a triple oppression, based on class, caste, and gender. They die in order to live. (Limbale 116)

The book "*Sangati*" encapsulates the author's experience of working within a heterogeneous and oppressed society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news, and events as narrated in the book, from an autobiography of a community. Bama clarifies her acknowledgement of the work:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about lively, rebellious culture their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide..... About their hard labor. I wanted to shout out these stories. (Limbale 119)

The economic inequality plays a major role in the life sphere of Dalit women-hood. The characters presented in "*Sangati*" are as wage earners as much as men are, working as agricultural and construction laborers, but earning less than men do. Though men get more earnings than women, they spend it as they please. They do not even care for the family, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family, often singly. Those females are also constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work. The power structure of their society mainly concerned with men or patriarchy. The caste courts and churches are male dominated and rules for sexual behavior are very different for men and women. She writes about the violent treatment of women by father, husbands, brothers, and other higher caste patriarchal. Above all, she describes a violent domestic quarrel, which is carried on

publically. Even if the Dalit are converted to Christianity the prevalent system in Christianity did not practice what Christians say of equality before God. It is against this caste practice of Catholic Christianity's partiality, that Dalit converted Christians fight. Bama describes in "*Sangati*" how deeply the Christian church and its hegemonic power as well as the class discrimination play on Dalit converted. Bama substantiates this through the character's speech that:

Sothipillai shouted angrily, just look at what goes on in our church as well. It is our women who sweep the church and keep it clean. Women from other castes stand to one side until we have finished and then march in grandly and sit down before anyone else. I have stood it as long as I could, and at last I went and complained to the nuns. And do you know what they said? It seems we will gain merit by sweeping the church and that God will bless us specially. (Bama 23)

Even in front of God the Dalit female becomes marginalized. They are the cleaners for the higher class or caste people. But Bama makes clear the resistance that emerges in the minds of Dalit women. "See how they fool us in the name of God! Why, don't those people need God's blessing too?" (25) This is the realization of Dalit women. Bama mainly speaks about the gender discrimination, which unabatedly takes place in converted Dalit Christian Paraiya's culture. Paatti says:

We have to labor in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women what good we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vagina shrivels. (64)

Bama shows the gender discrimination meted out to them throughout the lives of Dalit women. "If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girl. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breastfed longer. With girls, they wean them quietly, making them forget the breast". (69) Everywhere women have a second rate position and men a higher position. Viewed thus, we find a multiple oppression as well as marginalization. In the case of a boy, they give wholehearted support while a girl child will have only half hearted support. Everywhere boys are given more respect than girls. Boys can play any time they like and any game. But the girls must stay at home and keep working all the time. Here is a narration of how girls are abused: "If they play boys games they will get roundly abused. People will say 'who does she think she is? She's just like a donkey, look. Look at the way she plays boys' games". (Bama 19)

The Gender, Caste, Class and Sexual discrimination always predominate the life of the Paraiya community. The traditional female figure says that: "Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. It is the same throughout world: women are not given that kind of respect". (62) The Paatti, however, speaks dejectedly and the narrator Bama herself becomes much more questioning.

Why cannot we be the same as boys? We are not allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes..... even

when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we must not eat first we are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. (64)

Bama again speaks about the toiling and suffering of female hood that:

From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a Kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then cannot go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. (22)

Then Bama gives a terrible picture of the female subaltern and the marginalized. They work hard both outside and inside. They become real animals and work restlessly. No one cares for them and they become mechanical in every corner of life. Individuality, freedom, and even the self and self consciousness are lost under the male patriarchal domination both inside and outside at home.

In the case of Paakkiraj and his wife Raakkamma we see the resistance, even if in a very obscene language. Obviously Bama uses the language of the Dalit in a very realistic manner. Such a language can be seen in the resistance as well as the struggle which happen in Dalit marital life. Here Bama gives a clear picture of that society. Paakkiraj says: "Don't try all that here or I will crush you to pieces with a single stamp. Remember that! Then he dragged her by her hair, pushed her down, and kicked her lower belly". (Bama 123) Then Bama describes:

Raakkamma got up after kick and wailed out aloud. She shouted obscenities; she scooped out the earth and flung it about. How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy every day, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood? And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there. That was when Paakkiraj walked off, still shouting. (120)

This is the way some terrible resistance takes place in that community. This resistance shows the hard life they endure or suffer in their whole life. The Paraiya women are ready to go to any extent 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 explains:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they to go their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands torment. (Bama 122)

On the other hand, her novel *Sangati* has its theme of growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women in the Tamil Paraiya community. Throughout "*Sangati*" one can see the rebellious nature of Dalit Paraiya the hard work that they do both in their home and the field as well. 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. Second last line of the novel represents the optimistic end of the novel towards desires for a better future for women. "Women can make and women can break". (123)

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