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Notions of Caste, Gender and Class Hierarchies: Reading Postcolonial Indian Literatures and Cinema

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Fictional interrogations of accepted socio-historical truths often seek an active intellectual engagement with the past and present socio-cultural situations where writers question the ways of imposing certain norms on certain sects of society. Instead of just narrating reality through an imaginative realm of any particular art form such as fiction, poetry and cinema, postcolonial Indian literatures and cinema invoke a revisionist attitude towards the past as well as the present forms of history and the hegemonic undertones in it. While these literatures and other art forms represent the past traditions or customs, it also stimulates the reader to reflect on it, and on its links with the present situations. This essay focuses on multiple ways in which gender intersects with other social structures that enunciate power relations within individual's lives, such as the hierarchies of caste, class and religion.

Taking the modern Indian society into consideration, an obvious social division incomprehensibly lies at the core of each Indian society. Though in several overlapping ways, the society is often divided according to its individual's caste, class and gender apart from the religious and linguistic and other forms of divisions. To take for instance, Hindus constitute a large majority of the entire population of our country, but traditionally divided into castes and sub castes. It is still an undisputed fact that the caste hierarchies and the practices according to that are a national reality for us even after the relentless efforts on the socio-cultural and economic reformations initiated by various governments and other social leaders.

Though Islam and Christianity are supposed to be egalitarian religions in principle, among Indian Muslims and Christians, because of their ancestral lineage and some complex historical upbringing in Indian tradition, still the remnants of caste division appear. A detailed analysis of such caste discrimination is to be discussed in this essay later when discussing how Dalit writings, particularly Bama's *Karukku* responds to the issue of caste in India.

According to the Manu script, the Hindu society is customarily divided into four caste-groups, namely Brahmins which consist mostly priests, scholars, etc.; Kshatriyas which includes warriors, kings, etc.; Vaishyas who are mostly merchants, traders, bankers, etc.; and Shudras who are supposed to be servants, peasants, and laborers. There is another section of society that did not figure in this category of four tier caste-groups, they are called "untouchables" who supposedly include garbage-removers, cremators, barbers, tanners and cobblers, etc. These sects of people are believed to be inherently "polluted" by their birth and occupations. Though our country tried to outlaw all types of discrimination through a written constitution, our nation and its people still outlive all such restriction on practicing discrimination. In recent times, many of

the people who are labeled as untouchables attempted to overcome the stigma and oppression they are subjected to often by asserting their Dalit identity and converting to other religions such as Islam, Christianity and Buddhism.

The dimensions of the debates and discussions on caste and gender have to be explored in the context of some of the groundbreaking critiques from the margins of the society. Dalit writings, especially autobiographies always reflect on the various hierarchies in the society through powerful modes of literary expressions. It exists at the peripheries of mainstream literature, representing those who are not represented or misrepresented, who are excluded from the society as well as from the main stream writings. For instance, *Karukku*, which appeared in Tamil in 1992 and in English in 2000, details the life, sufferings and struggles of a Dalit woman revealing the castism of Indian civil society. Through a powerful critique of Indian educational system, the church and the bureaucracy, it highlights the complicity between class and caste in the contemporary India. In this fictional autobiography, Bama inscribes the reality of a Dalit community life in a village in Tamil Nadu. Though there is a specific Dalit voice in the novel, it's not just an individual life story, but a reflexive response to the society's caste and gender discrimination from a heightened consciousness that thinks beyond the reflexive responses it suggests. Bama binds her community together by invoking the fact of caste discrimination, "because of this one issue of caste alone, we are forced to suffer pain and humiliation" (*Karukku* 24).

Karukku exposes the practices of untouchability that exists within Christian convents, where Dalit children are discriminated against and treated with contempt, "this convent too was not without its caste division" (22). The upper caste students enjoy a better status and are treated with respect by the nuns, while Dalit children are assigned jobs like sweeping the premises, washing and cleaning the lavatories. Bama talks about how deep rooted the discrimination is in the society. In the convent "they spoke as if they didn't even consider 'low-caste' people as human beings" (22). The nuns feel that "low caste people are all degraded in some way. They think we have no more moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture" (23). In the next sentence Bama explains how traumatic is to listen to things people talk about Dalits "I sat like a lump of tamarind, listening to all this and dying several deaths within" (23).

What is significant about this quote in particular and the text in general, is that it not only documents the sufferings of Bama but also takes up the issue even beyond her personal matter. As a fictional autobiography based on real life situations, it enables Bama to share her lived experiences with the reader, so that her personal experience becomes accurate historical proof of an oppressive social structure. Bama talks about the importance of 'lived experience' criticizing those who just sympathize over Dalits, "you can sit on your chair ... and say what you like about the struggling masses, about justice and the law. You can pray for the good of this group while continuing to live in comfort. But in that place you can never experience other people's pain" (102). Bama points out to an explicit societal hierarchy where there are people who sit and comfortably watching while the other people struggle to survive. Bama's writing urges towards a dismissal of these caste hierarchies.

The realization that the caste system in India has its religious sanction from the 'ideology of Brahminic Hinduism' must have led her to reject her religion and join Church as a nun.

Bama's position as a Christian nun allows her to unfold the caste prejudices that exist even in the convent which eventually leads her to denounce the Church. Like many other Dalit intellectuals this disillusionment with the institutional form of religion makes Bama an iconoclast. Her realization of the need to struggle enables her to be the first Dalit woman in India to write an autobiography.

Focusing specifically on the context of Dalit women, a social discernment of their situation is essential which can only be properly apprehended when experiences specific to their caste which oppress, humiliate, and disempower them are taken into consideration. In India, caste system operates through practicing gender inequality and untouchability. Caste system is legitimized and sanctioned by religion, thus closing the scope for interrogations. It brings about all possible divisions down the hierarchy in society including class division. Lower caste and lower class are more often spelled synonymously. The only difference is that unlike class, caste is inherent and thus unchangeable and hard to transcend, its having been determined at birth.

Dalit women writers respond not just to the evils of the caste system in the Hindu society, but its nexus with gender perpetuating women's oppression and discrimination. Here, Bama demonstrates the ways in which hierarchy is maintained in the society by following various rituals of purity and pollution and the divisions of *Varna* and *Jati* under the hegemonic dominance of Brahmanism. She asserts on the fact that women are the worst victims of this caste system. The Hindu religious society based on the four-tier caste system sees the untouchables and women as similar; both have to be kept under control and surveillance by the upper-caste and upper-class men. In order to maintain this segregation, various binaries like the rituals of purity and pollution are put to use. Cultural ideologies on traditional womanhood such as *Stridharma* and *Pativrata* have always been reiterated to perpetuate the control over female sexuality, especially that of upper-caste women so as to ensure their complaisance and conformity to the traditional concept of 'good woman'.

Autobiographies and fictions, especially those written by women, are helpful in a better way to comprehend the complexities of lives that the Dalit people are subjected to. Dalit women writings are not just a critique of the caste system or the society they live in or the experiences they undergo, but also the oppression Dalit women suffer at the hands of both their own men and that of the so-called upper-caste patriarchal society at large. Dalit literature especially by women, thus become "double voiced" for myriad reasons. When a Dalit woman writes she writes with the double consciousness of being a woman and a Dalit. She, then, can write not only on caste discrimination, but also on gender issues. Since literature can influence its readers, and sometimes even to control the society at a certain level, these writings can be considered as a social activity that reflects on the various hierarchies of gender, caste and class. Thus Writing *Karukku* could be seen as an instance of a Dalit woman's Participation in social change. Dalit women also have certain social functions to perform towards the emancipation of women and their community.

Dalit narratives in general and Bama's *Karukku* in particular become a kind of resistance writing. It questions the hegemony of the so called upper caste people. Bama asserts in her preface: "They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double edged *Karukku*, challenging their oppressors" (13). Her words that "among human beings there are

none who are high or low” strike a blow at the axiomatics of casteism. She thus dismisses the usage of “lower caste” and “upper caste”. There is no high or low caste; there is only the ‘dominating caste’ and the ‘oppressed caste’.

Bama understands her life as well as her community’s and then vocalizes it: “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” (xiii). These words in her preface presage that *Karukku* is about this *re-assertion* of the self and identity that were destroyed by the atrocities Dalits have gone through. In Bama’s narrative, sufferings become a structure that induces trauma on Dalit self and provokes a reconstruction of the once destroyed self. It is this self assertion and occupation of space that, I suggest, the purpose of Dalit writing. The self realization among Dalit community makes them understand the need to struggle for their survival. Thus Dalit literature becomes purposive as well as reflexive on the society. It has a very real and political function. Its purpose is to redefine certain social norms and stereotypes. Unveiling the unfathomable depths of the hegemonic power that it made the society believe that Dalits are degraded, Bama asks the reader to revisit the history and to interrogate the accepted truths about the country and its people.

Similarly, in her Booker Prize winning novel, *God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy problematizes the issues of caste and gender from a different perspective. The notion of caste and the practice of untouchability are explored at two levels in the novel. On the one hand, there are the socially untouchables, or to say the caste, *Paravas*, who are denied of even basic human rights. On the other, there are metaphoric untouchables among the so called upper castes where discrimination exercises itself in marginalizing women from their personal and public life. Arundhati Roy critiques the underlying patriarchal power structure that exhort in the society, for instance, Ammu's mother, Mammachi, is severely beaten and abused by her husband, it is on her body that he vents out his anger and frustrations of failure in the world outside their house. Ammu hardly has any room to grow as an independent and confident individual in her house. This life in a complete closure of freedom narrows down her objective to find a “reasonable husband” and to live as his dependent the rest of her life. Her dreams are so much restricted to being a good girl and finding a good husband. This is the case of most of the average Indian women who have their dreams expiring at the thought of their marriage. Women are often incapable of or denied of the possibility of dreaming to have a life of their expectation after marriage. Their life is mostly conditioned by their family’s life and situations.

This reminds me of a recently released Malayalam movie “How Old Are You”. Directed by Rosshan Andrews, the movie not only critiques the gender stereotypes attached to women, but also problematizes the idea of women being the sole carrier of cultural and familial baggage through putting certain provoking questions forward, such as, is on the expiry date for a woman’s dream and if yes, like in many women’s case, who decides the expiry date? Do women stop dreaming once they get married? Or after having kids? Does she have a choice? Through the depiction of Nirupama Rajeev (Manju Warriar), who works as an upper division clerk in the revenue department, the movie implies on the point that family is a set up of male exploitation of women. Though facing hard challenges in life, Nirupama emerges by the end of the movie as an

epitome of a powerful woman who proves that there is no expiry date for a woman's dreams and age is never a barrier if there willpower.

Discussing the cultural or familial burden on women, I would again like to draw examples from *The God of Small Things*. Indian families always pay attention on privately policing the religious and caste politics, shaping one's personal love relationships through this accepted political code which operate within the limits of caste and religion. The incident of forging a rape accusation on the lower caste should be seen in the continuum of caste discrimination. Such an attraction from a woman of 'high born' to a man of lesser social strata is considered a taboo that it threatens the confined parameters of women's political and sexual power. Women's sexuality is properly limited and put under boundaries by the patriarchal powers. The family restricts Ammu's sexuality by incorporating her 'transgressions' into a criminal charge that can only be judged and executed through the family's internal policing.

The novels and the movie discussed in depth the predicament of Indian women especially the tragic plight of Dalits and socially deprived people. These writers upheld the spirit of resistance against the oppression whether it is gender or caste through their writings and movies.

As a result of such kind of assertions on cultural and self identities, Dalit people and their art forms like folk songs which used to be shown in mainstream movies as sung by people of inferior ranks or (if at all a hero sings it) any upper caste outside his Brahminical space (e.g., by being drunk) are being popular these days. There are many folk songs that are available in mainstream media like You Tube. The *Nadan pattu* groups who sing the community songs of *Parayas*, *Pulayas* and that of *Adivasis* are being more popular than ever. A.S Ajith Kumar says that this kind of a growing reception for Dalit art forms are the result of a political consciousness and a dalit assertion in cultural fields which he thinks eventually will result in developing a distinct dalit identity.

Certain policies on which modern Indian society or the governments still run are the outcomes of problematic colonial remnants carrying the hierarchies of gender, class and caste. Many of our cinema and other media reflect on the problematic nature of caste and gender discriminations though there are voices against it.

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