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Indian Woman as Dalit and Diaspora: A Comparative Study of *Sangati* and *Coolie Woman*

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The paper attempts to study Indian women in literary narratives on the basis of their representations. The analysis of women in dalit and diasporic narratives explains the way Indian women are comparatively recognized and represented. Yet diverse in the social setting, the study helps to groom similar nature of representation of women. Such an understanding confirms the similar cultural and social mooring of Indian women in the two diverse contexts. Although along diverse social trajectories, nevertheless, the socio-cultural grooming of women keeps them connected. The representations of dalit women like Bama and Mariamma in “*Sangati*,” and Indian diasporic women as characterized by Sujaria in “*Coolie Woman*” have different as well as similar connection. With the help of such connects and similarities one can comprehend the way similar portrayals are contested in diverse societies, of dalit in India and diaspora at its onset. It further sets ground of study for tracing similar connections in diaspora of contemporary times.

Introduction

The paper is divided into two major sections which focus on the differences and then the similarities between the portrayals of Indian women in the select genres of literary writings, hence the respective societies as well. The paper focuses on the major women protagonists and their lived experiences. The study of the experiences and representation shows the process which the oppressed realize, resists, and, thereafter gains emancipation (Freire: 1996). The paper comparatively studies the way in which voice, agency, and subjectivity of women, as dalits and coolie women, get constructed through gender attributes. The paper aims at bringing awareness of diverse representations and existence in multiple contexts through literary genre.

Dalit and diasporic women: difference in their representation

This section attempts to study the differences between dalit women and diasporic women in terms of their literary representations. These dissimilarities appear obvious because of the different social contexts women get groomed in, for example- while dalit women feel the trauma due to caste and gender, the diasporic texts do not show women affected by caste. While the dalit women are located in India throughout the narratives, the diasporic women migrate in their twenties. The represented dalit women, unlike diasporic women who migrate, stay in closed locations of their villages. The narratives portray them as restricted in terms of space and movement. This hints at the comparatively less freedom of movement due to stringent social conditions in dalit societies. Dalit women narrate a collective story of pain and humiliation through their writings, while the diasporic women depict one of individual concern and growth.

The institution of marriage affects women in dalit and diasporic contexts differently. When one looks at it from a superficial level, all women appear confided by the rules of marriage especially in a traditional setting as represented in Indian mooring. While most of the dalit discourses, as

the following depict, reflects that a dalit woman's life is focused around her family and community. Therefore, defying the marital bonds and socio-cultural laws is difficult for her. Even when rebuked and exploited dalit women, as the narratives show, seldom leave their families and children. The lives of the dalit women were shaped by calamities which made their bodies strong. Their lives were denied of happiness, love, and acceptance. Social conditions were even worse and humiliating for those women who were left by their husbands. Still, separated and single, as depicted through *Paatti*, the women lived and never left their children. Even in such denial and dejected conditions, the mothers stand as a support for their young ones. The emotions, concern, love, care, and sacrifice are some important features of Indian women, which are strongly suggested through the portrayals of dalit women.

While the dalit women do not break ties of marriage, in spite of the abject conditions and humiliating attitudes of their husbands, coolie women, in diaspora had to follow the norms the officers made for them, and therefore, stay with the new partner. Their choice to lead their lives in such manner can be comprehended as a signal of renegotiation of the patriarchal relations when a man and wife settle in a foreign land (Abraham: 2005), which would have been difficult if they were in India.

Pregnant and without a husband, Sujaria migrates to the new land. She is represented strong and bold enough to support herself, in a state of motherhood. Sujaria's marriage or relationship, in India is not mentioned but as the discourse in the narrative suggests she migrated pregnant and without the name of a husband. "*Pregnant 4 mos... On the line for husband's name, there was only a dash...*" (Bahadur: 18). Sujaria's pregnancy, without a husband probably a marriage, may be interpreted as the reason for her migration. A Brahmin woman in such situation was hardly imagined or spoken. The social customary rules, designed for women, more so, a Brahmin woman, oppressed her. This can be further construed that society did not impose rules of behaviour for dalits, who suffered due to caste system but also enforced set of laws on higher castes. Due to such conventions, Brahmin women struggled to adjust with the ideal like situation. By following such socio-cultural traditions, Brahmin women were treated as virtue personified, were positioned for admiration and achievement by the lower caste women. If the upper caste women failed to one such, they suffered badly both in their own community as well as others. Sujaria is one such representation, and she rejects the practices to gain autonomy in the new land.

Women, in diaspora, appear freer and gain more agencies when compared to women in dalit context. This can be attributed to the strict social conditions in India. When one moves beyond the borders they observe less stringent conditions in the host societies. Without, such restrictions imposed by family, society, and gain of one's space the women migrants feel free to execute their desires. They adjust and negotiate to the new roles, which would rather have been difficult in India. Owing to a space where women can exist as individuals, Sujaria prefers to stay, and not return to their homeland. She presents a strong dissimilarity with dalit women, the narratives focus on. Bama takes pride in their roots and never leave the village they belong even in adversities.

In order to study the gender relations from other sides, discourses on social customs and rituals focusing on women have also been analyzed. While dalit narratives present an elaborated insight of the rituals performed in the dalit context, a glimpse of it is given in *Coolie Woman*. It is interesting to see the discourses concerning such socio-cultural rituals being performed mostly

by women. Elucidating it in dalit context, the narratives unfold a series of religious and social customs which are ritually performed by women. The dalit household performs a specific pattern of worship of Gods, which are not seen in upper castes houses. While the women would do the cleaning, arranging, and worshipping part, men remained absent from the scene, as the discourses in the narratives illustrate. Man appears only as *Potraja* in the rituals dalit follow. Through this ritual, they earned money and food, which sorted out the problem of earning a livelihood. Women were included in every other ritual but *potraja* was for men, which again prioritizes men as earning members.

The represented diasporic women like Sujaria belong to rural setting. The narratives do not depict them performing any rituals or religious worship, as dalit writings hint at. *Coolie Woman*, indicates the acculturation of religious norms, in the following lines- “*On the top shelf rested framed prints of the gods: elephant-trunked Ganesh, the remover of obstacles; Hanuman, the monkey with a mountain in his palm; and Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge*” (Bahadur: 5). The discourse represents Bahadur’s mother trying to identify and connect with the socio-cultural norms. The practice of the Indian worship of Gods is done by the mother, and every Sunday. The differences mentioned above show striking characteristics of the representation of Indian dalit women and diasporic women. The remarkable attribute of the study lies in tracing the similarities which exist between their portrayals in the literary narratives. It helps to recognize the position of women, as affected by the experiences, charred by insecurity, domestic and social violence. Groomed along similar social relations, women of the two genres depict parallel in terms of marginalization, vulnerability, and oppression in different milieus. The section below helps to comprehend this in details.

Dalit and diasporic women: similarities in their representation

Both the dalit and diasporic narratives focus on women who belong to lower middle class and groomed in rural setting in India. Their cultural and traditional mooring is almost on similar grounds irrespective of caste differences. The analysis suggests that in spite of caste discrimination, which dalits face, the making of all of the women characters is done along similar socio-cultural patterns. Due to this, women are first seen as in gender relations and then along other social categories of caste, class, or race. This can be further illustrated with example from the narratives, where women are discriminated by their caste men and women as well. This making of women, as Beauvoir (2009) writes, is perceived when the girls are young and practiced all their lives.

In similar nature of impoverished conditions, humiliation, and pain, the girls of both the genres are illustrated as burdens for their families. Their dehumanization, for instance Bama cites girls being referred as donkey (23), represents their dehumanization which is discursively produced by men. Dehumanization, according to Freire (1996), is a change of the situation of being fully human. Drawing from him, conditions of injustice, exploitation, and oppression dehumanizes the oppressed. In such conditions, the women and oppressed instill in them lack of dignity and respect.

The experiences the women, of the selected narratives, grow up with commences in form of discrimination. The narratives portray the discrimination mostly on grounds of gender. To illustrate all the women characters at some or the other point, narrate their tale of discrimination.

This prejudice women face, as the novels unravel, can be analyzed at three basic levels- home, society, and village at large. At home, women are further discriminated on the levels of marital relations, as daughter-in-laws, wives, and mothers. When single and unmarried, they undergo a different nature of intolerance, although all of the above are mostly done on the basis of gender relations and roles they are expected to perform. For instance, the experiences Bama narrates as a girl show the discrimination she faced by her grandmother. She was discrimination in terms of food, play, and education and is common for other pivotal characters as well. Bama is never discouraged by her parents for education. However, her grandmother was highly objectionable to it. Bama resists the dehumanizing attitude towards women and asks: “*What, Paatti, aren’t we also human beings?*” (29). The girls, as discourses suggest, were not considered worthy of education. Bama’s learning is dejected by her grandmother. Both Sujaria and Bama symbolize the “new women” (Beauvoir: 2009) who reject and resist the rejection in different ways.

Through the representation of dalit and diasporic women, it is seen that they are often depicted as targets of gruesome gaze and sexual abuse by men. They are sexually abused at some or the other time. In addition to discrimination and humiliation faced due to gender, the women of dalit and diasporic narratives illustrate parallel existence in social conditions which denies them voice, agency, and subjectivity. Owing to such and similar situations, the women appear vulnerable on grounds of their gender relations, position, and roles. While for dalits, the major cause of susceptibility is due to caste, for diasporic women it is receptiveness owing to migration and circumstances. In spite of diverse and distinct conditions, their existence and marginality bear a close proximity. Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman*, helped to unravel the link between dalit women in India and in diaspora. The coolie women, as represented through Sujaria and similar women exist in a similar manner like the dalit women like Mariamma, and others. They experience same nature of pain, humiliation, and suffer physical, sexual, and economic exploitations. While dalit women illustrate a contemporary picture in India, the coolie women depict those in colonial times.

The following discourse hints at the stringent social conditions in India in relation to the coming back of migrant coolies. There was a difficulty in acceptance and it is reflected in these lines-

“Hundreds reported that they could not touch the village well, or share in smoking a hookah, or consider marrying their sons and daughters to anyone without the specter of pollution being raised.”
(Bahadur: 169)

After the coolie returned home, their societies treated them like untouchables. They were not born with the stigma of caste in form of untouchability, yet crossing sea, living in a foreign land, and sharing same space with men and women of other castes were bold reasons to segregate them as impure. Such discourses draw a parallel between dalits and coolie as targets of pollution and purity. On such grounds, they felt separated from their kinsmen, and worse than the untouchables who were at least a part of their community. The condition indicates them as an outcaste, as represented by Sharankumar Limbale in his famous novel *The Outcaste*, where he is depicted as an illegitimate child born to Masamai, who was neither a part of dalit nor the upper caste. Such discursive representations draw coolie and dalit women along parallel lines where they are categorized along vectors of segregation and alienation.

Women, due to alienation, poverty, caste, migration, and single are targets of physical and sexual abuse. Coolie women like Lachminia, Mariam, were often exploited at the hands of their employers and officers. They were allured for sexual favours with food stuffs, and “puddings” (Bahadur: 51). The other genre also supplements with numerous such discourses which highlight the sexual vulnerability of woman and her body. Dalit women like Mariamma and Masamai are physically and sexually exploited. Similar cases, dispersed throughout the narratives, depict the women of dalit and diasporic narratives as victims of multiple oppressions- patriarchy, caste, and migration. Each of the narratives describes the way women are forced to succumb to conditions that snatch their voice and dehumanize them. Most of the time, due to lack of agency and stringent conditions, women cannot resist and become victims, or become empowered beings.

Examples of physical oppression can be traced in different ways. While coolie women lived with physical tortures as lack of food, health care facilities, and hygiene, a similar scene is depicted for dalit women. Due to such conditions, most of the pregnant women either died or gave birth to a dead child. The representation of pregnant coolie women and their lived conditions again connects a link between the dalit women in India and as portrayed in the narratives. Both of them lack food, money, and basic health care facilities. Other than this, they are oppressed on economic grounds. The narratives discuss experience of the women characters which relates to their economic victimization. Most of the central female protagonists are represented as working women. In spite of this they lack the control on their earnings. Similarly, dalit women earn money but their earning is controlled by their husbands.

Coolie women like Lachminia and Mariam also contest for a space of their own. They represent resistance to their superiors and are brutally treated. Similar struggle is represented through the narrative of Bama where women figure their existence in pain. Discourses which reveal *Paatti's* roar at the men of the village, or Bama questioning the codes designed for woman, her education and existence mark resistance and their demand for a space of their own. It marks their “moving beyond” the parameters of caste and gender. They demand for an agency where they act as subjects. The representation of these women characters present oppressed women who were victimized but gradually succeeded in asserting their self (s) and gained their voice and agency.

Apart from similar nature of discrimination, subjugation, and rejection, the women live in alienation, as the narratives reveal. Due to such experiences their existence is similar to that of exile. The representations of the women characters bear strong similarities in terms of alienation, both at home and abroad. They appear foreign in their own societies. They are not just separated from the society but also from “their own selves.” Their dehumanized existence, loss of pride, lack of voice, and identity indicate their loneliness even when they are at home. Women, after moving beyond the geographical borders feel alienation of being distant from their nation, home, and family. While the diasporic women feel alienated from their homeland and past, the dalit women feel alienated in their own family, society and appear as mere objects. Both dalit and diasporic women get distant from their own selves. This distancing is due to fear of repression. This ironically pulls them in the oppression even more. The alienation slowly transcends in them silence and passivity. It makes them appear as observers. Nevertheless, it affects them in a dual manner. While it creates a sense of disturbance and pain, it also gives them strength to liberate and resist the dominating forces.

The narratives delineate substantial description of the silenced subsistence of women. Silence does not indicate an absence rather it denotes a long process of subjugation and oppression that has created it. *“The relative silence of the coolie women, in the sum total of history, reflects their lack of power”* (Bahadur: 32). The silence of coolie women epitomizes their desiccated lives and existence. Silence contains a truth of their existence. The silence of women is always mistaken as their passivity. As Spivak (1988) suggests even if subalterns try and speak they are not heard. The way the women appear throughout the novels and are seldom heard until they resist and break the culture of silence (Freire: 1996). Drawing from Freire (1996) the structure of the thought of women has been accustomed by the contradictions of the existential situation which shaped them since the time they are born. The nature of female world from a woman’s perspective helps to construct the lost voice. The representation of girls and women in both the genres bear similarity and as Bama admires and applauds-

“... not only the traditional Tamil ‘feminine’ ideals of “accham” (fear), “naanam” (shyness), “madam” (simplicity, innocence) and “payirppu” (modesty) but courage, fearlessness, independence and self esteem.” (Bama: 123)

Undergoing conscientization (Freire: 1996), the women characters assert their selfhood and question their status, role, and reality behind the existence in specific ways. As in *Sangati*, Bama asks her grandmother to go and talk to the men in the village council and inform them the reality behind Mariamma’s humiliation. The narrator feels her grandmother to be an important woman because she helped many of the births in the village. *Paatti* replies to this-

“Big woman, small woman, nonsense! Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four or five men? Should you even do it? ... From your ancestors’ times it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don’t you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you’ve learnt a few letters of the alphabet” (Bama: 28-29).

The contrast between two generations of women, as illustrated in the discourse above, helps to understand the opinion of different generation of women on the control of woman on her agency. While the grandmother feels that it is the fate of a girl and it a normal thing to happen, Bama questions them and demands justice. Bama questions the agency of men. For instance Bama asks if *“... the men are bound to be right? And that whatever women say will always be wrong?”* (29). The resistance for a voice and agency of one’s own springs from the desire of being treated on equal terms with the boys. *“Why can’t we be the same as boys?” and voices against the dual treatment by women to other women. “It’s you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other.”* (Bama: 29).

Writings provide them a space to exist, and an agency to articulate. It is only when one realizes the dehumanizing effect and tries to break the culture of silence, one resists for a better existence. The resistance of each character varies from time to time in each of the narratives. In dalit genre, women like Bama resist to social relationships and lead single lives as independent women. Bama instils agency and realization among the women of their society by telling them the rights and wrongs. The resistance of women also appears in discursive forms as interrogations, ironies,

and subtle remarks. Similarly, Sujaria acclaims herself the title of a hero through the resistance she shows. She performs a heroic deed by leaving her village behind. She was a high caste Brahmin woman, quite young, twenty seven years old to undertake a “forbidden” (Bahadur: 21) passage without any male counterpart. The endeavour that she puts in makes her the hero of the novel.

“She did, after all, leave a village in the most conservative corner of India. At that time, she was twenty-seven ... As a member of Hinduism highest caste, Sujaria had the most to lose by crossing the Indian Ocean.” (Bahadur: 21)

Sujaria resists all the patriarchal and cultural norms at that time and crossed the seas pregnant, and without any support.

To sum up, the analysis suggests that in spite of the stark differences, all the major women protagonists appear as fighters. The representation of these women ponders over the fundamental issues of human life. The mores of the community where dalit women make meaning of their everyday experiences cajole a culture of silence and domination from people and practices higher up in the social hierarchy. The comparative study of the representation of women, in dalit and diasporic literary narratives, helps to raise awareness of the existence and portrayal of women in different marginalized groups.

Implications of the Study

Indian women, of the dalit and diasporic literary genres, as the analysis confirms, exhibit some striking similarities which is limited not only to literary writings, but reveals the real lived condition in society. Most of the women in Indian context, as *Mary Kom*, the female protagonist of *Aakhir Kyon*, or dalit girls like *Achhut Kanya* reflect a process of their making by the social-cultural definitions and as they grow they realize the oppressions. With a desire of autonomy which comes with one’s access to voice, agency, and subjectivity, they resist the powerful forces that victimize and suppress their being. The analysis also validates that both Indian dalit and diasporic women indicates a transformation from rejection to resistance. Their experiences hint at the same nature of oppression and social conditioning which shape them. With varying nature of resistance, they reject the odds that chain them and desire for a space and identity of their own. The existential representation helps to focus on women in India and abroad, along with the discursive production of woman as subjects. Although the priorities of women of each of the two societies differ, they reflect and examine similar nature of feminist concerns.

The study describes the varied marginalized existence of women and the manner in which their gendered experiences get defined. A parallel is observed in terms of the roles of women and their access to social resources from the perspective of relationship they share in social institutions like family and marriage. The women undergo evolution by realizing the conflicts, and try to undo what they have lost. The study further examines that all the women, portrayed in the narratives, start as overpowered by the traditional roles. But as the narratives progress, these women appear as epitomes of transitional women, representing both the traditional and modern approaches of social conducts. They become agents of change for themselves as for others.

The similar existential marginality of women which exists between dalit and diasporic women will help generate similar solidarity among other marginalized groups globally. Thus, it constructs a universal approach in comprehending the vulnerability of Indian women at home and abroad in underprivileged conditions. The study is significant because in the process of unravelling, it generates awareness and raises consciousness, which marks a step ahead in knowledge production. The paper is pioneer in tracing the link between dalit women and Indian coolie women in diaspora, and sets background to study Indian diasporic women in contemporary times as portrayed through literary writings.

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