



## **DALIT WOMAN IN DALIT LITERATURE: A CRITICAL STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The portrayal of Dalit women in the works of male writers in contrast to their distinct identity as visible in Dalit female writers, has been less than adequate, thus forecasting the intense impact of gender discrimination. Dalit literature is a literature of pains and agonies. It started from the undocumented oral folklore and takes of the past decades. Dalit literature was established in the 1960's and the 1970's particularly in Marathi and Gujrati. After two decades Tamil Dalit writing started in Tamilnadu. A Dalit woman Dalit amongst Dalits. Double oppressed by a patriarchal and caste tyrannical society. Here a Dalit woman bounce back against all odds. Here the writer not only lamenting but also celebrating spirit of Dalit women. For very long time Dalits were used as commodities used by other now, they realized their self. Dalit literature would have to broaden its base by realigning itself and recognizing the complexity of factors in making Dalit experience such as the presence of sub-jatis, the role of region and the structure of patriarchy in Dalits.*

**Keywords** Tyrannical, Patriarchal, Commodities, Oppressed.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The portrayal of Dalit women in the works of male writers, in contrast to their distinct identity as visible in Dalit female writers, has been less than adequate, thus forecasting the intense impact of gender discrimination in Dalit psyche. It not only renders claims of egalitarianism in Dalit literature ineffective but also tends to make any coherent conception of Dalit aesthetics logically unstable due to the presence of Dalit woman as a subverting

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force. Dalit critics led by Sharan Kumar Limbale and Gopal Guru, while defending the necessity for alternative Dalit aesthetics, base their arguments on Dalit literature's essential separability from traditional literature, its realistic nature, its connection to human life, its evocation of pain in place of pleasure, the kind of audience it addresses and its redefinition of beauty. According to Dalit critics since traditional aesthetics aims at pleasure born of discovering beauty in a work of art, a person who derives pleasure from any work of art must be sensitive enough to appreciate and taste it. It leads to inference firstly that the aim of any work of art is to impart pleasure, secondly that the work of art must possess beauty and thirdly that the targeted audience should be refined enough to appreciate the beauty only then they will be able to taste it. Dalit writings aim at depiction of pain and sufferings of Dalits and the object of study is exploited, suffering mass of Dalits which is not 'beautiful' in the traditional sense.

There are some inherent incongruities in the conception of Dalit aesthetics as a counter value system to traditional aesthetics. Dalit aesthetics faces roadblocks due to caste essentialism- the problems faced in formulating a universally accepted definition of Dalit language and arts- and because of its essentially reductive approach to aesthetics. The claimants of Dalit aesthetics base their arguments on two assumptions- that existing art and aesthetic theory is an unequivocal expression of Brahmanical ideology and that dalitism needs to develop its own autonomous criterion for the production, interpretation and appreciation of art. The seemingly autonomous nature of Dalit aesthetics relies upon some problematic premises: firstly, that there is a universally shared Dalit experience and secondly that art should be evaluated on the basis of its accuracy to depict this experience. The first point is eroded by the presence of Dalit women as a potential sub-category within the overarching Dalit experience, whose experiences have been largely precluded from the norm of educated, city bred Dalit males who determine mainstream Dalit experience. Secondly, the formulations regarding the power of art to correctly represent human experience, which is premised on mimetic theory of art, has been dismantled by recent theories about representational arts. Thirdly, the concept of Dalit identity is itself problematic and it can argue that the primary aim of Dalit literature is to question and subvert the core of beliefs and assumptions around Dalits which has been created by centuries old Brahminic literature, rather than creating an alternate aesthetics. Further, Dalit aesthetics is imbricated not only by questions of gender but also by educational background, profession and locale of the writer. There can be no single Dalit aesthetics because of internal disjunctions in Dalits due to their belonging to different sub-jatis and their location in different local cultures due to spatial distances. To deny alternate Dalit aesthetics is not to say that all aesthetic values are perennial: they fed upon the sup which courses through the fibers of a society in the form of social, religious and cultural postulations. The definition of what is beautiful varies with these drifts in human societies and this transformation is what keeps any culture alive. 'A new beauty is born' every time a momentous incident shakes the social order and human consciousness. The inert,

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monotonous corpus of literary values, represented by Brahminic thought needed a vigorous shake up at a time they had lost their rejuvenating touch with the vast majority of human beings. A revision of literary values becomes exigent when old aesthetics become immune to fresh ideas and experimentation. Universality of experience most often becomes a ploy to be dumb and deaf towards influx of novelty and embodies a deep-seated fear against losing the comforting, conventional order. The monopoly of upper classes on knowledge and its dissemination led to stultification of it and created a claustrophobic atmosphere, as is visibly revealed in their fear of the 'outsiders.' It led to creation of cloistered groups and this fear may be an important factor in their obsessive concern with metaphysics of divine and corresponding neglect of everything human and secular.

The redefining of literary values is required in both Dalit as well as Lalit literature. An examination of the Dalit aesthetical formulations of Limbale makes us aware of a serious lacuna here, nowhere does he talk about differentiations within this apparently homogenous Dalit experience. Dalit literature would have to broaden its base by realigning itself and recognizing the complexity of factors in making Dalit experience such as the presence of sub-jatis, the role of region and the structure of patriarchy in Dalits etc. These issues cannot be pushed away by denouncing them as part of Brahminic luggage. Further, the mistaken notion of considering a single person like Manu or seeing caste as a conscious product of some misguided Brahmins may appeal to the gallery or may be able to produce guinea-pigs, yet is still based on misguided notion about how ideas and institutions emerge in onward march of history, B.R. Ambedkar rightly noticed that it was not Manu who 'produced' the caste system, rather he merely documented and codified the existing socio-cultural traditions. The title of 'law-giver' accorded to him is true in the limited sense of his documenting and commenting upon the prevalent notions. That he did not 'father' the text becomes plausible when we observe that in old literary tradition no single individual is taken as author of the text, he is seen only one of many through whose hands, or let us say vocal cords, the text passes. He only adds a little bit of his own before passing the text to the next generation and the idea slowly emerges as a collective product. The caste system in India evolved due to diverse impacts of domination wars between Aryans and Aborigines, zeal of a particular community to seal itself off from others and the 'purity complex.' The notion of women in this clash of civilizations as vassal to beget sons, who were essential for building and preserving the emerging empires, was important to Aryans. Further, women also acted as a source of comfort and their sexuality needed to be contained. Thus, women as gateways to caste is an important factor underlying the matrix of caste system. Dalit aesthetics will need development of a strong base in distinct narratological style of 'mainstream' literature, but its artlessness must be consciously produced and there should be some 'seriousness' behind it if it is to go beyond being 'the stories of sobs.' Dalit writers and critics need to work hard as mere spontaneity, rationality with a methodical, scientific analysis of caste system. They will have to revisit Dr. Ambedkar's example who developed a cogent, brilliant analysis of the

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origin of caste system: he did not merely cried about his suffering from roof-tops, he entered the fortress of scholarship and showed its real worth in the very language his opponents used. The chaff in Dalit literature will have to be separated from the grain and it can be achieved only when the impulse is governed by reflections.

The tendency to formulate a distinctly tragic Dalit aesthetic narrative must be eschewed as it conceptualizes Dalit's total absence from the history of literature. Rather it must be kept in mind that Dalit ideology in the form of folk artists and Bhakti saints got prominence and acknowledgement in different historical periods, though this Dalit ideology was enmeshed within the dominant ideology of the times. The rise of oppositional stream to hegemonic tendencies in literature as well as in society is nothing new to our country, though sometimes it tends to be neglected. The muted voices of descent traced by Amrita Sen in *The Argumentative Indian* are such clashing ideologies which constantly challenge the mainstream thought. The binaries of opposition and the extraordinary flexibility of Hinduism are some living testimonies of this institution of pluralism. It is quite visible in the presence of dichotomous perspectives of 'brahmani' and 'abrahmani' traditions. Abrahmani perspectives have evolved through ages in various forms such as 'Sankhya,' 'lokyata' 'Shaiva' Tantric' leading to Ambedkar-Phule thought. The caste based, hierarchical and patriarchal Hinduism has been constantly challenged by Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism on religious level and by Dalits, Adivasis, women and Dravidian groups on the social plane. The distinctiveness of Hinduism such as its liberal flexibility and 'orthopraxy' are born of centuries of encounter between divergent thoughts and cultures. Hinduism rose with the decline of Buddhism and Jainism in 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. due to reasons such as absorption and incorporation of many of the gods, goddesses, heroic figures, and legends of local and pre-existing indigenous cultures and of course through royal patronage. Due to the constant presence of this essentially oppositional stance, it would be a mistake to deduce that Brahmanical thought had ever an unchallenged sway. In a way, Dalit literature was bound to happen, as its rise was inexorably linked with our social and economic conditions. Its note of negation was imperative in a society which criticized even the minutest digression from its rigid code of conduct in the strictest possible terms, its rationality was essential in a society which refused to learn anything from its repeated failures to resist invaders. The anger in Dalit literature was required in a milieu where the majority is suppressed by a few through an inverted ideology; its bitterness was a fruit of centuries old repression where human beings are branded from their birth. The unconventionality of Dalit literature is born of its discontent with tradition and its use of naturalistic imagery is essential to shock the dormant conscience of a nation where while animals become sacred, human beings become scum of the earth. Dalit literature arose out of these demeaning conditions and shivered the social consciousness of the readers and artists. Still, after its initial usefulness in emphasizing an alternate set of values, it faces the handicap of becoming monotonous. Dalit consciousness needs to be evolved, take stock of changes taking place in the society and move with times. Once the

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initial phase of shock is over, the value of Dalit literature will be determined by its intrinsic worth, by its adaptation to diverse challenges and by its wider appeal to human persecution and exploitation in social, cultural or religious spheres. Already the society has changed considerably- though it would be presumptuous to say that caste consciousness has disappeared. Caste consciousness is like the insidious virus which has been successful in adapting itself to the changed milieu, it has mutated. The reservations, an essential and successful method, if given in small doses and sparingly, in removing economic handicaps and thus attempting to give a dignified existence to the depressed castes, have unfortunately resulted in accentuating caste consciousness in Dalits as well as in upper castes. It has created a counter reaction by labelling Dalits and has failed in removing caste as a demeaning label for determining human potential, thus nullifying the chief motive behind reservations viz. life of dignity and economic, social and religious parity.

Dalit writers reinvent the image of Dalit women by dismantling the aura around upper caste Hindu women. They raise questions over Brahmanical veneration of married woman as 'Saubhgyavati' and show that it is a form of patriarchal ideological structure. According to them there is no real veneration when Hindu texts praise a mother or 'pativrata' woman highly. It is a covert way of institutionalizing the patriarchal controls over women. By idealizing chastity and wifely fidelity, only ideological controls over women are furthered. It is to put them under prison by making conditions of prison 'natural' to them. Since female sexuality posed a danger to Aryan patriarchal society in its being wild and untamed, it needed vigorous mechanism to control and curd it. As Brahmanical literature and jataka stories make it amply clear female sexuality is uncontrolled. Much of the praise for 'pativrata' and 'stridharma' stem from fear in Brahmanical ideology against chaotic nature of female sexuality and its ability to disrupt the rigid male control of patriarchal society. Since the sexual purity of women was needed for maintaining the purity of caste, the women virtually being the gateways to caste, they were required to be kept under constant vigil. Since any untoward contact with a low caste man might jeopardize the purity of descent. Along with this ideological conditioning of women as indivisible part of the husband, without whom she has got no independent existence- leading eventually to neglect and burning of widows, early marriages etc. – elaborate mechanisms of punishment, social and legal, to erring wives were devised. Manu's dictums regarding keeping a woman in dependence by the males of her family are born out of this desire to keep women strictly under the network of patriarchal kinship. Feminists find three levels of control over upper caste Hindu women to keep them under patriarchal bonds of sexuality. The first one is to keep them under wraps through ideological conditioning, the second one is through coercion and physical violence by the husband and the final one is through kingly authority which was invoked as the last measure to tame a woman who defied the patriarchal norms of society. The enslavement of women was imperative to maintain ritual purity of upper castes. The Brahminic ideology of the subjugation of women worked through consent and coercion. 'Pativrata' and 'Stridharma'

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were used as vehicles of attaining consent while violence sanctioned to male kins and authority of king were used as coercive methods.

The ideological structures used to enslave women are not limited to upper castes, these postulations seep to Dalit society and are conspicuous in Dalit male's appropriation of female sexuality, preponderance of domestic violence in Dalits and the imbalance of household chores. Dalit male writers subscribe to this malady afflicting Dalit life and society wherein women are seen in essential patriarchal terms through the skewed images of Dalit women in their works. The broken images of female characters in Dalit male writers such as Limbale and Macwan are testimony to the neglect of gender question in Dalit literature. Why is that Dalit male writers view females in certain stereotypical images and are unable to view them as human beings with their own concerns? Shantamai and Masamai in *The Outcaste* reflect a ruling fixation of Dalit writers wherein women are seen either victims of the debilities of caste or pieces of pride for Dalit males who glorify themselves in their motherliness, naturalness and unassuming love. Methi and Kanku in *The Stepchild* remain caught up in the 'ideal' framework of Brahminic ideology in their 'Stridharma' towards their husbands – dead or fallen. Along with them, the non-Dalit male writers work shows more obtrusive presence of idolizing streak in whatever little space they give to Dalit women. There is strong inclination to see them as 'natural' against the decadent and conservative upper caste women. In spite of outward veneration, Dalit women remain objects of lust and nowhere do they become capable of attaining an independent status. As against both male Dalit writers and male non-Dalit writers, Dalit female writers draw a different and stimulating picture of Dalit women in their works. Be it *Sangati* or *Vanmam* or *Pan on Fire*, Dalit women betray a strong consciousness of their problems and challenges in a male dominated world. Their marching ahead in life while shouldering responsibilities of home and children is a testimony of their innate strength. Dalit world practically moves on these very hinges. For them good education for their children and freedom from domestic violence is as imperative as liberty from caste restrictions.

The twin repressive structures of caste and gender, which are bane of the lives of Dalit women, have been adequately represented by Dalit female writers in their texts. The fate of Mariama in *Sangati*, who has to face victimization on the hands of the landlord Kumarasami Ayya, is typical of a Dalit woman who lives in the fear of sexual exploitation. Her berating by her own caste council wherein she is fined more than the alleged partner in the crime *Manikkam*, is an outcome of her 'femaleness.' The voices of women straddling the periphery of caste council suitably undercut the assumed notions of male superiority and wisdom. The *Pan on Fire* and *The Prisons We Broke* depict a world of women which constantly challenges and subverts notions of hitherto considered impregnable fortress of male hegemony.



The works of Dalit women writers amply illustrate the thesis that Dalit literature needs to reinvent its aesthetical considerations by reaffirming its matriarchal traditions. The external democracy vociferously demanded and advocated by Dalit critics cannot sustain itself without the internal democracy and egalitarianism. Further, it will have to shed its crusts which are misguidedly emphasized as Dalit. To venerate every custom just because it happens to be practiced by them and to invent imaginary excuses without understanding their implications to the full is not a good proposition. For instance, Sangati questions some of the well-entrenched notions of Dalit aesthetics such as eulogy of greater freedom accorded to women in Dalits by emphasizing that this freedom comes at the cost of physical assaults and persecution. Kancha Illaiah's assertion that 'drinking' and 'smoking' is Dalit because as both men and women indulge in them it showcases Dalit egalitarianism, is to argue with only one eye open for justifications and neglect the real origins and impacts. The contention hoodwinks the reality that drinking leads to wastage of scarce resources Dalits earn through their hard work and it spurns violence in their homes, making Dalit women victims of ill-treatment. It is not seen as a virtue in novels written by Dalit women writers and remains in them a corollary of poverty and unhygienic habits bequeathed from past which Dalits must get rid of. The much-adulated asset of equitability in Dalit life does nowhere exist in the world portrayed by writers such as Sumitra Bhave and Racine. Similarly, the mini parliament of Dalits- Chavadi does not emerge as a symbol of democracy in Dalits in the works of Dalit women writers. Rather, except in Vanmam which shows greater influence of Dalit male ideology than other works of Bama, it remains a metaphor of unemployment and frustration in Dalit youths in Pan on Fire and Viramma. Further, the natural impulses in matters of love and sex, praised by Guru and Limbale come under most severe attack in these novels. The 'natural sex' in these texts becomes beastly and an emblem of power. It rarely demands participation from women who are used as 'relieving pot' by their men and then are left.

The solution to alternate aesthetics claimed by Dalit critics lies not in a disparate, autonomous aesthetic theory based on Dalit experiences but in the awareness of history and culture governed relationship between aesthetics, ideology of caste and Dalit's cultural practices. The aesthetics based on irreconcilable caste specificities represents an untenable position. It is not to deny the position of Dalits to the most downtrodden section of the society and their right to live and speak, rather it points out the inherent contradictions and instabilities in maintaining an unequivocal position while denying the presence of complexities within Dalit aesthetics. This alternate aesthetics will be informed and redefined by concerns for Dalit women. In the identification of a Dalit woman, both the words 'Dalit' and 'woman' define as well as limit her. The epithet 'Dalit' makes her a part of subaltern segment of Hindu society: the nomenclature woman further degrades her in a society of hierarchal power relationships. While due to her being a Dalit, Sohoni faces the same ordeals daily, her brother Bakha faces the same ordeals daily, her brother Bakha faces, her 'femaleness' makes her a victim of the lust of Pandit Kali Nath in Untouchable. This dual

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oppressive structure is discernible in the lives of nearly all Dalit women in Pan on Fire. Here caste deprivations are overshadowed by the violence in their lives perpetrated by their own kinsmen. This physical violence against female body arises out of patriarchal notions of possession and appropriation and the subsequent subduing of female self is claimed as natural. A search for alternative social structures in the larger society does not proceed from a concern for more equitable relationships at home. Gandhian and Ambedkar conflict, by an ironic twist of history, can be felt here in Dalit male's assertion of sacredness of home turf while desiring a change in the outer social circumstances. The point is that external democracy without internal one cannot be sustained for long and will fall of its own weight. Dalit critics venture for redefining of Dalit aesthetics must be consequent on an expansive cognition of Dalit female reality and the vicissitudes they face in a predominantly phallogocentric Dalit society. The search for an avant-garde aesthetics will be inefficacious till they rediscover their essential coequality with this 'thrice- subjugated human segment in literature as well as in society.

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