



WOMAN IN DALIT LITERATURE : A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Dalit writings was actually started in Maharashtra from 1960's to 1970's, after two decades Tamil Dalit writing started in Tamilnadu. A Dalit woman Dalit amongst Dalits. Hence the issue of caste oppression faced by Dalit women is in sync with Dalit protest against untouchability and is shared by them with Dalit men. Here, Dalit women become victim of violation of human rights and gender discrimination, which was written by Dalit women writers in their books. The immediate concerns such as domestic violence sex as instrument of subjugation, menstruation, family relations, sustenance of children and their education etc, become more important. Dalit women writers wrote about their experiences about violation of human rights and gender discrimination through their books. This paper shows violation of human rights and gender discrimination in the life of Dalit woman. Dalit literature would have 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

Dalit women wrote their poems, autobiographies and novels, though small in output, explore vexed questions of their position in the society, their apprehensions and disquietudes in a forceful way. become more important. The emphasis is on continuity and flow of life and not on its dissection into tiny bits to emphasize a preconceived notion about society or life, instead of vitriolic hate, there is a shift to improvement and gradual change. In Tamilnadu, Paraiyar's

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account for nearly 59% of Dalit population, while other major Dalit communities such as Pallan and Chakkili are pegged at 21% and 16% respectively. Various theories are mooted regarding the origin of the Paraiyar's. The traditional view is that Paraiyar's are the descendants of people expelled from the caste system for their transgression of the caste regulations, children born out of hypogamy, mixed caste marriages and illegitimate relationships. The second theory is that the word 'Paraiyar' is derived from Tamil word 'parai' meaning drum. Thus, Paraiyar's were those people whose occupation was drum beating. The third hypothesis is that the word Paraiyar has its roots in word 'palaiyar' which means 'ancient' or 'original people.' This view posts Paraiyars as the original inhabitants who were displaced to the lowest margins of society with the influx of Aryans. Sangati by Bama is a seminal Dalit feminist text which, through tales of different women, explores the ill effects of caste victimization and patriarchal disabilities on Dalit women. The questioning voice which belongs to the narrator seeks to probe and emphasize the calamitous effect which the unholy nexus between caste and masculinity produces on the lives of Dalit women. The book is marked by a violence of language which, while capturing the spoken language, also acts as a suitable vehicle to ventilate the anger and frustration arising out of physical and verbal assault on Dalit women.

The principal issues raised and discussed during the course of the novel are the oppression of Dalit women by upper caste landlords, contrast between upper caste and Dalit women. Violence and discrimination suffered by Dalit women and the attitude of Christian nuns and priests towards Dalit women who got converted to Christianity. All these concerns which find a place in the narrative sometimes overlap each other. Hence the issue of caste oppression faced by Dalit women is in sync with dalit protest against untouchability and is shared by them with Dalit men. In the same way the issue of religious conversion which is discussed with much penetration, is also not the exclusive concern of Dalit women but has far larger dimensions and some of its effects are shared by dalit men also. The other problems are what make Dalit feminism part ways with Dalit movement and feminism proper. They make Dalit women more oppressed as compared to her male counterpart and a large part of the narrative is devoted to the prevalence of strong male superiority complex in Dalits and the resultant violence and disabilities Dalit women have to suffer.

Dalit women have to constantly face victimization on the hands of upper caste landlords in whose field they have to work for their livelihood. Since most of the cultivable lands in the village are possessed by upper caste landlords, they unquestioningly control the manual employment of Dalit men and women in their fields. Dalit women have to walk daily to the

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fields from their own 'bastis' for their agricultural work. Though the world is given to them through a mediatory, who is usually a dalit man and woman, the landlords make it amply clear who is the master. This is done through making them walk from their street to their landlords' homes for begging work and collection of wages, sometimes even "ten times a day, like a dog" (S.8). Together with it, dalit women live in the constant fear of sexual assault while working in the fields of collecting firewood from forests. Patti, narrator's grandmother, advises the narrator to be beware of the danger lurking in the dense growth and tells her never to come alone in those parts: . Mariamma is caught in sexual embrace by Kumarasami Ayya while she was trying to drink water in the fields. When she resists the attempt and runs away. She is warned by her caste fellows not to tell anybody about the incident as "that landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He is upper caste as well. Ironically, it is the Ayya who complains before the headman with a fabricated charge that Mariamma was seen in an indecent position with Manikkam. The result is that poor Mariamma was fined Rs. 200 and had to bear insults and beatings for the crime she never committed. Another noticeable fact is that while Mariamma was repeatedly abused and was told to behave in proper manner. Manikkam, her victim partner in the imaginary crime, was spared of all such humiliations. Further, while Mariamma was fined Rs.200 for transgressing the moral rules, Manikkam was fined only Rs.100. Thus, the price for the same crime is double in case of a woman in addition to slaps and physical assaults. The burden of being the torch bearer of the family's honour is heavy indeed!

Dalit women are not allowed to attend the meetings of the community and the decisions are solely taken by male members of the community. The voices of women standing at the periphery of the village council, subvert dalit male notions of reputation and their attempts to show off manliness before helpless women. 'There is no way of convincing them of the truth, even when we are sure of it. The notion that it is only women who get polluted out of any sexual advance and men are free of its contamination, is advanced as a justification of male licentiousness and is used as a ploy to control the sexuality of women: "They say he is a man: if he sees mud he will step into it, if he sees water, he will wash himself. The issues of caste and gender come together to make Dalit women stand at the lowest position thus making her suffer more vehemently the disgraces from the hands of upper caste men who use their authority and position of power to dishonour them whenever they get any chance. The economic dependency on the field labour causes them ignore such misdeeds: "The landowners get up to all sorts of evil in the fields. Can we bring them to justice, though? Naattaamai's advice to women of his caste centers on the acceptance of male hegemony by the society when he cautions them to be wary, since they shall

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have to carry the burden of any sexual misadventure: “It is your female chicks who ought to be humble and modest.

Though caste discriminations faced by Dalits make an important drive in Sangati. It is the discomfiture faced by Dalit woman for being Dalit as well as woman. i.e. the patriarchy operating in Dalits which is the thematic center of the novel. Dalit woman is discriminated against on several counts. Firstly, Dalit women have to face great hardships as compared to Dalit men to get education. Since they have to do all household chores along with the nurture of babies, they find little opportunity to educate themselves. The result is that first they are deprived of the benefits of learning and then are seen as ignorant fools and are abused for their lack of knowledge. Secondly, there is intrusion of patriarchy in matters of nutrition and health care where the balance is tilted more in favour of boys than girls. Here dalits show traits normally considered upper castes domain in which males are preferred and pampered species. The author finds this imbalance even in dalits where if a male child weeps, he is picked up quickly and is given milk while the girl child can cry to its full before any attention is paid to her. Patti rues this male preference in the society where female is seen as appendage, an extra growth: “A boy is breast fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly. Making them forget the breast. Further the girls are restricted to play only certain kinds of games which are thought to be proper for them. If they dare to play ‘male specific games’ they are criticized for trying to be manly.

The male specific values begin to be inculcated in women soon after their birth and they are made to conform to a certain kind of behaviour sanctioned by patriarchal ideology. The complain of the narrator to Patti is a protest against all such discriminations faced by women all over the world. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we must not eat first. The advent of modernity has brought with it further overburdening of dalit women who now find no free time to even care for their children. In addition to the childcare and household chores, they have also to work in the factories which leave with them little time for recreation or care for the children. The liberation of dalit women will have to become a liberation movement for Dalit men also. Dalit family life is male oriented. The biggest hurdle is man. A man is dominating over his own family. These husbands, brothers and fathers need to be freed first if Dalit woman is to be freed. (S. Sharma. Dalit and Backward Women 225). She points out, as if in afterthought, “It was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home” (K 45). Though the outdoor work is shared equally by dalit men and women, the household work is left entirely to women who, together with their work in fields and factories, had to take care of children and food also. With it, there is another inequality in terms of payment for the same kind of labour.

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Like Sangati, in Karukku too, the writer speaks highly of the greater freedom accorded to dalit girls as compared to upper class girls and considers if the distinguishing characteristic of dalit society. Dalit girls are free to move and mingle with the boys of their age without any consciousness of the gender. In case of upper castes, the freedom of girl child is curtailed at a very young age. She is constantly reminded of her vulnerability and thus is not free to partake in outdoor games.

Vanmam, the latest novel by Bama, is primarily concerned with the inter caste rivalry between two groups – Christian Parayars and Hindu Pallars. While the Christian Parayars are depicted as progressive, educated and imbued with a true spirit of dalitism, the Hindu Pallars are seen as ignorant and gullible mischief – makers who are easily led into trap by the wily upper castes, particularly Naickers. The story, beginning with the depiction of educated Parayars who are imbued with a spirit of change, moves on to the depiction of sufferings and hardships the community has to face when Pallars and the police collude to inflict murders and humiliations on them. The enmity between the two castes leads to killings of youth from both sides and the writer valorizes Parayars while denigrating the Pallars.

Baby Kamble appears to be lending credence to the view that the subordination of Dalits may have been achieved initially by force, but their ultimate surrender was secured with their ideological conditioning. The humility and fatalism slowly became the hallmark of dalit life and with time these attributes were internalized. The concept of ‘dharma’ produces and sustains certain gestures and attitudes in the hierarchically low castes and manufactures willing slaves who echo the ideology of their masters and submit to them. The centuries of subordination of Dalits makes it very difficult for them to break out of this prison. Baby Kamble’s feminism is not passive. Fueled by the revolutionary zeal of Ambedkar, she does not take insults lying down. In her school she, with her companions from Mahar community, is more than a match for the Brahmin girls who fling abuses on her. In the school the scheduled caste girls face humiliations and are treated as “lepers. as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh” (PWB 108). The writer’s quarrels with upper caste girls reveal her struggle for more humane treatment. Her acceptance of being inspired by the film ‘Sati Savitri’ not for any religious or ideological reason but because of her identification with the trials and tribulations undergone by the heroin bespeaks of her active feminism.” Again, this confidence borne out of revolutionary zeal to change the conditions of women is revealed in the incident wherein the delegates of Dalit women are not given seats during a meeting. Thakubai, the leader of these

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Dalit women shakes the shoulders and demands seats for them: “Your women are not allowing our women to sit on the chairs, Our Ambedkar has told us to demand our rights. Needless to say, the threat worked and they were given chairs in the front. Like Bama, Baby Kamble also traces the cause of domestic violence in Dalits to the male ego, along with the humiliations they have to bear day in and day out on the hands of upper castes. Since they were constantly oppressed by powerful people around them, their suppressed anger and frustrations were revealed in their assertion of their male hood on their women.

Pan on Fire by Sumitra Bhavé persuasively depicts Dalit female experience from the point of view of dalit women who are mostly illiterate and have lived a life full of vicissitudes. The book foregrounds an essential dalit female experience without being overshadowed by cerebral engagement of a dalit writer with issues which the narrator had not experienced herself due to difference in her educational and social position viz-a-viz, the more downtrodden masses. Dalit women in Pan on Fire do not seem to treat narration of sexual experience a taboo, at least when they have a female enumerator, as in Pan on Fire. If Pan on Fire enunciated some young dalit woman’s sensitivities and priorities in their own voice, Viramma brings to life the lost world of Dalit way of life as seen from the eyes of a dalit woman belonging to an elder generation. The testimonio portrays the world view of Viramma, a Pariah woman, as revealed in her conversations with Josiane Racine during the period of 1980s. The narration is replete with songs and rituals as narrated by Viramma and presents an interesting picture of the Pariah life. Though admittedly lacking in verve and revolutionary message normally come to mark Dalit male autobiographies, the book is an invaluable document of dalit culture as seen and hankered for by traditional generation. Further, the book through the voice of a Dalit female seeks to express those aspects of female experience.

Viramma as a testimonial of a Dalit woman, gives adequate representation to female sensibility and female experiences. The ceremonies attached with menstruation are described in detail in the book. When a girl gets her first period, she is given a gruel made of green lentils, rice unrefined sugar, sesame oil and eggs, This brew is supposed to “strengthen the uterus and the brain, allows women to fight illness and tiredness all their lives and makes sure they have safe pregnancies and births” (Vi 30). Then she is given bath by seven married women with beats of drum. After taking bath and drinking the gruel, she is taken into the partition ‘tinnai’ made especially for her for spending her days there during menstruation. The enclosure is kept small and dark so that even sun-rays may not reach the woman: “The sun mustn’t come into my little room. He is a male God who is unlucky at this time: He can make woman sterile” (Vi 31).

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The bond between mother and daughter is celebrated in most of the Dalit writings by female Dalit writers. This attachment becomes stronger with the spatial distance between the two after the marriage of the daughter who becomes a mirror image of her mother 's own exile from her maternal home. The near absence of 'Electra Complex' in these rural Dalits is a phenomenon which needs critical scrutiny and perhaps an alternative theory is needed to explain the existence of a distinct attachment between mother and daughter while being impelled simultaneously by patriarchal culture to love the boy child. Viramma refers to this bond while talking about her own mother's death. The presence of mother in the parental home remains, most of the time, a mooring which binds a girl to her native village and the death of her mother makes that setting alien to her: "It's never the same after your mother dies, you are never received in the same way.

Viramma is different from other autobiographies written by Dalit male writers not only in its emphasis on female experiences but also in the spirit of life which flows through it, the festivities, the songs overshadow the stringency of life which is too stark in Dalit male writings. Life here is an endless procession of specific religious celebrations and these festivities carry on in an endless procession as if in a fair. The caste question remains mooted to some extent and the emphasis lies more on revealing the traditions and traditional world order. Though there is distinct presence of rebelliousness in the voice of young generation which acts as antithesis to the voice of Viramma, yet on the whole, the book deals with a Dalit woman's or rather an older Dalit woman's version of things. While describing the sacrifice to Periyandavan, their community deity, the tone and description betray nostalgia for the lost time.

While most of Dalit autobiographies see relationship between Dalit female and upper caste male invariably in terms of rape or inducement, Viramma gives it a human form. It doesn't mean that the book denies the role of power in these relationships, but it refuses to give a status of mere 'object' to Dalit woman by making her a victim without any trace of resistance in her.

The novels and testimonials discussed above viz. Sangati, Karukku, Vanmam, The Prisons We Broke, Pan on Fire and Viramma sketch Dalit female experience in their own individual way. The peculiar experience of being born a woman and a Dalit are movingly explored here. These works offer a critique of the highbrow feminism of upper caste women as well as restrictive caste-based theorizing of Dalit male writers. Though an affinity with Dalitism with its attendant degradations and exploitations is strongly present in them, yet it is constantly undercut and

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subverted by the writer's identity as women. Most of these testimonies by Dalit women end on a message of hope for women, Dalit as well as upper caste and still there is agony over the way women have been treated throughout the human history, as an appendage, as a servile being whose purpose of life is not to live happily but to serve some other being, even at the cost of her own life and feelings: "When everything is added up and calculated, it seems to me that society is arranged as if God created women only for the convenience of men. It is this blurring of the boundaries between Dalit and upper caste women, of seeing woman in a Dalit woman that gives writers plea for equality between the sexes a greater urgency and force. Though they are undeniably Dalit writers, their dalitism is never static and abstract, it changes and transforms and retains with the essential dalithood, a soul print of a lived life. Hence it would be an exaggeration to deduce that Dalit women writers' presentation of the pathos of being born a woman in a patriarchal society is amply illustrated in the autobiographies and novels they have written. It is revealed in their taking up of women related issues as the prime concerns of their testimonials. Though sometimes, such as in Vanmam, caste issues tend to eclipse the protagonists' identity as women, the narrator's position as women inadvertently gives even such narrations a feminist angle. These issues are an integral part of their existence as women and as Dalit. Their dalitism defines their feminism and their feminism informs their dalitism.

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