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Voice of resistance & quest for emancipation from patriarchy: A study of dalit women writings

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Abstract

From time immemorial women have been the subject of victimization, oppression and subjugation by the patriarchal society which always prefer to see women in the periphery. When the question arises about Dalit women, the situation worsens as the Dalit women are considered the subaltern of the subalterns. They are the oppressed among the oppressed as they are exploited double – by the patriarchal society as a whole and by the Dalit patriarchy. But the history of discrimination and traumatic experiences of the Dalit women has not been effectively heard and represented as it lacks agency owing to the homogenization of the similar experiences of the elite class women. In this regard, several Dalit women writers took the initiative to register their literary presence through autobiographies, memoirs, narratives etc. with the main objective to expose the society which has objectified them, discriminated them, victimized them, stripped them off their identity and always looked upon them with a patronizing stance. The present article aims to highlight the plight of the Dalit women, the multiple layers of oppression and the struggle towards emancipation, as depicted in the literary writings of some selected Dalit women writers.

Keywords: Victimization, marginalization, oppression, dalit, patriarchy, traumatic experience

Introduction

Writing on Dalit life is an emerging field wherein a writer takes up the role of an agent, expresses various dimensions of oppression through literary mediums such as autobiography, memoirs, diaries etc. and urges the crucial need of humane approach towards the deprived section of society, i.e. the Dalits. The term Dalit comes from the word 'dal' which means broken, ground-down or oppressed. Since the beginning of human civilization and the unjust caste system of society, the Dalits have been subjected to oppression of various kinds. In the name of untouchability, they have been marginalized, discriminated against equal opportunities, deprived of basic human rights, relegated, victimized and tortured in diverse ways. These atrocities in the name of age-old tradition forced the Dalits to protest against injustices by means of literary writings and also by forming organization like Dalit Panthers. The following excerpt from Satyanarayana and Tharu evidently proves it:

The real originality and force of Dalit writing, which today comprises a substantial and growing body of work, can be traced to the decades following the late 1960s. Those were the years when the Dalit Panthers revisit and embrace the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar, and elaborate his disagreements with the essentially Gandhian mode of Indian Nationalism, to begin a new social movement. In the following decades, Dalit writing becomes an all-India phenomenon. This writing reformulates the caste question and reassesses the significance of colonialism and of missionary activity. It resists the reduction of caste to class or non-Brahminism and vividly describes and analyses the contemporary workings of caste power. (21)

To break the glass ceiling and to claim a space of their own, to deconstruct and expose the caste system of society, to bring the tyranny and ruthlessness of the so-called higher class into limelight, members of Dalit community raised their voices through speeches, literary works, songs, plays etc. Their endeavour became more assertive, effective and visible with the publication of several Dalit life narratives by writers such as Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan, Laxman Mane's Upara, Shrankumar Limbale's The Outcaste, Bama's Karukku, Urmila Pawar's The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs, Shantabai Kamble's The Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life, Baby Kamble's The Prisons we Broke etc. The Dalit autobiographies primarily emphasised on the significance of education as a major step towards procuring jobs in government offices, thereby leading a dignified life in society.

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This could also be seen as a savage response to those who consider the Dalits as untouchables disrespectfully. Kumar aptly writes in this context:

when the nationalist movement of India was attempting to throw away colonial shackles to achieve freedom, the Dalits during the same time were interrogating the norms, conventions, attitudes and practices of the Hindu society they were part of. (Kumar, 157)

This struggle for identity remained confined to Dalit men only until late 20th century when the women folk of Dalit community raised their voice in quest for emancipation from double patriarchal oppression-by men from their own community and by men of upper-class society. As Beauvoir says: One is not born a woman but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.” (Beauvoir, 249) The above statement is evident of the dominance of patriarchy towards woman who are considered as marginalized and second-class citizen in every aspect. Naturally, the trauma of Dalit women is much worse as they belong to the oppressed among the oppressed. They are victimized and tormented on the basis of caste, class and gender. Dalit women are oppressed and exploited by patriarchy in two ways-that of upper caste men and of their own community men. Although the Dalit Panther movement and some Dalit male writers addressed the issues faced by Dalits in the society, it was in 1990 when the first Dalit woman autobiography *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* by Shantabai Kamble came out with its sharp focus on the distinct voice of Dalit women, an area that was hitherto untouched, willingly or unwillingly. Dalit women’s autobiographies primarily deal with the maltreatment, victimization, oppression and marginalization of Dalit women in their own communities through their own accounts. These narratives grab attention for their authenticity of voices and diversity of experiences as well as they are effective equally in lambasting the elite feminists for their narrow stance and coping with gender issues within their own communities. The present article discusses in detail two Dalit women autobiographies, viz. Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* (2008) and Bama Faustina Soosairaj’s *Karukku* (2012) both of which are excellent in recording the difficulties and distressful life of women in marginalised communities. Urmila Pawar is a renowned Dalit feminist writer, an activist and a prominent voice in Dalit and feminist struggles and Bama, a Tamil Dalit Feminist is known for her autobiography *Karukku*, highlighting the caste-based discrimination experienced by Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu.

The Weave of My Life

Urmila Pawar’s *Aaydan*, an expression from the local dialect spoken in the villages of Maharashtra forms the background of her life. Originally written in Marathi as *Aaydan* and later translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* by Maya Pandit in 2008 is a recent autobiography by Urmila Pawar. “Weaving” has various metaphorical significance. Weaving of cane baskets was an important occupation of the women of Konkan region in Maharashtra from where the author hails (Naikar,3). As the author asserts, “My mother used to

weave aaydans. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of suffering, and agony that links us” (Pawar, 10). Poverty is the fundamental problem of Pawar’s community. For instance, she writes “Dalits had the custom of all people eating from one plate, but that was usually because there were few plates in the homes” (Pawar, 17). The story opens with a description of a village wherein a group of Dalit women walk to the town in order to sell firewood and buy salt and fish on their journey home. These women would carry heavy weights on their heads with bundles of wood, grass stacks, ripe mangoes etc (Rege, 361). They would travel early in the morning, leaving their kids alone and hungry at home. The situation of Dalit women in the village of Ratnagiri brings to the fore the patriarchal culture of the village and also reveals the gender-based division of labour, thereby unveiling traumatizing experiences of the Dalit women. Pawar’s autobiography is an excellent and authentic narrative in which the author weaves the memories of her childhood, her classmates, her community, her various family members and her husband’s family. She brings forth the narrative by weaving all the incidents that occurred in her life and her community. This divulges the daily struggles of Dalits as well as the ways in which dominant castes subdue them. The narrative of *The Weave of My Life* keeps on flashing back and forth between the village and the city. The author recalls her experiences of hunger, poverty, caste discrimination and domestic violence. These harsh experiences are mixed with images of Dalit tradition and culture, wherein disease is warded off with superstition and children’s hunger is suppressed with stories. Pawar negotiates with the trauma of living on the margins by pouring her heart out in a truly incredible narrative. Acquiring education has always been a distant reality for the Dalits and v therefore, one of the chief themes of Dalit literature. The upper castes/ Brahmins hindered the access of the untouchables to public institutions. The caste-driven society believed in maintaining the status quo by limiting the existence of Dalits to serving and performing menial chores. Similar was the case in the village of the author. There was hardly any school for the children of the Mahar community. The upper castes had opened up schools in their houses where the Mahar children were denied entry. Also, wherever the children of the Mahar caste had limited access to the schools, they were humiliated by their school teachers who would partake in maintaining social distance. The author had desired to get educated and was supported by her family. She emphasized that it was because of the support from her family that she got the strength to stand up for her community. Pawar’s aspirations were high, despite the difficulties she faced in her life her spirit for education never died. She successfully completed her higher education even after her marriage. Although her husband did not like the idea of her education, he wanted her to concentrate and help her family instead. This reveals the attitude and mindset of her husband. But she did not pay attention and continued to progress in life. In fact, it was because of her education that she joined elite feminist organizations and also got the opportunity of a government job. In order to escape the caste oppression in her village, she moved to Mumbai with her husband. But there was no end to caste-based discrimination in the city also. She remembers that it was difficult to find an accommodation in the town. They were subjected to indecent abuses and discrimination from

the upper-caste. Pawar wanted to do something to uplift the women of her community and she indulged freely in public speeches and events to arouse the minds of others. It was through this participation that Urmila Pawar understood that there was a need for Dalit men and women to come together for the emancipation of the society.

Pawar moves on narrating the discrimination on food consumption with regard to gender. Male members of the family had priorities over food than female. The first right over food would go to the male, after their consumption the leftover would be taken by the females. Sometimes the women had to stay empty stomach due to paucity of food. As Pawar narrates: "When the men folk went out and women and girls remained at home, they dined at kata. A small quantity was poured in water and cooked as a soup, with chili powder, salt and a piece of mago or maul. This was called saar! Women ate their rice with the watery dish..." (100). In a patriarchal society, Dalit women have to suffer within the four walls of the house. Pawar talks about her mother-in-law who despite battering from her husband remained silent and hid the incidents from others in order to maintain her family's honour. She narrates another incident of brutality of the male members of the society where they do not hesitate to beat their wives on road publicly. The experience of abject poverty, inadequacy of proper nutrition of the children, hunger of Dalit wives are conveyed by the eating and food references. Eating habits like the Mahars eating together from a single dish, serving of jackfruits before the meal only to economize and cut down the quantity of the prepared foods, the storing of 'kaat' that is the water in which the shrimps were boiled only to serve the women of the family or satisfying the hunger of Dalit wives only by left-over are brought out by Urmila in minute details. Urmila Pawar talks in great detail about the position of Dalit women and their participation in the Ambedkarite movement to resist the oppressing social order. Elucidating exactly why and how caste plays a definite role in Dalit feminism and how Dalit woman acts as active agents in introducing changes with their communities, the text shows how the Dalit woman emerges as a separate category in the canon of Indian feminisms by establishing herself in a society where she is being oppressed from time immemorial. Urmila Pawar's memoir comes to represent not the journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness but rather a social and community-based chorus of voices.

Karukku

Bama is one of the finest contemporary Indian writers and a powerful voice of Dalit consciousness. Bama began her career as a writer of the oppressed classes with the publication of her first novel *Karukku*, a semi-autobiographical sketch in 1992, for which she received Crossword Award. This novel was followed by 'Kisumbukkaran' in 1994, 'Sangati' in 1996 and 'Vanman' in 2003. Bama with her experience and exposure to the miserable life of her 'Paraiyar' community tries to expose the perennial issues like caste, religion and gender in all her novels. Her stories and novels give a glimpse into the lives of the subalterns. Bama gives expression to the inhuman treatment meted out to the lowest of the low castes – the Paraiyars. Her work is the powerful voice of a subaltern subject who reflects the vivid experiences of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic

marginalization. Bama records some of her own personal bitter experiences that moulded her character and made her what she is today. The pain and emotional suffering she had been subjected to since her childhood made her write in the preface of her book 'Karukku': "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". She further continued "the driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many steps of my life, cutting me like 'Karukku' (rugged edged palmyra leaf) and making me bleed..." (p. xiii). The afterword added to this autobiography is a kind of suggestion that suggests her zeal for liberation of Dalits and her sympathy for them. She says, "I have met several people who work with zeal for the single objective of Dalit liberation. And it has been a great joy to see Dalits aiming to live with self-respect, proclaiming aloud, 'Dalit enrdu sollad; talai nimirndu nillada': "Say you are a Dalit, lift up your head and stand tall" (106). Bama opines that women writers have another tale to tell as Dalit women writers have double marginalization to narrate.

Bama through her autobiography 'Karukku' reflects how she suffered and being challenged throughout her stages of life as a Dalit. She portrayed the brutal, frenzied and ugly face of the society and been enraged by it. *Karukku* talks about the personal crisis of the author as she leaves the religious order to which she belonged to for seven years. *Karukku* means Palmyra leaves which are like the double-edged swords. In her childhood, Palmyra *Karukku* injures her as she goes to gather firewood. Like Palmyra leaves, life with its unjust social structures and inhuman activities wounds her so much. In the preface to the novel *Karukku* the author says, "There are many congruities between the saw-edged Palmyra *Karukku* and my own life they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book" (xiii). The description of a small village is never complete without an explanation of the communities and caste. "*Karukku*" starts with the line 'our village is beautiful'; Bama narrates the beauty of mountains from the peak and slowly descends to the low caste sufferings add ugly discrimination of castes in the society. This could be evidently seen in *Karukku*, as Bama says, "I don't know how the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities were separated like this in to different parts of the village. The other castes such as Thevar, Chettiyar, Nadar, Naicker, Udaiyaar had their own settlement for themselves were Dalits are not" (6). This clearly suggests that they are discriminated from the society. The main narrative is presented through the eyes of eleven year old dalit girl child/author. The main focus of the novel is the continuous quest for self. Bama discussed the issue of identity crisis through her life story. Her childhood memories bring forth the idea of untouchability and oppression that Dalit community was undergoing she discusses about the incident that left a mark in her mind. When she was in third class, she saw an elderly man carries a packet without touching it: "...He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the strin with his

other hand. Naciker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais" (Karukku, 13). Bama's elder brother suggests her that education is the only path to attain equality. After this Bama starts to watch out for means to uplift herself and her community: "Because we are born into the Paraiya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn." (Karukku 15)

Bama presents the dual aspects of female characters. She describes how the entire village is saved by women against the infuriated police. All the male characters survive just because of their wives: "The women managed to hide their men and save them" (33). At the same time, Bama also describes how the low caste women are under a double patriarchy and bear the double women. Bama pointed out: "My grandmother worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, amid the other day, would call her by her name and others her about, just drank it with cupped hand held to their mouths" (16). Dalit women and children are suffered more by the atrocities of the upper caste. They are suppressed within and outside of their community. Bama says, "Women suffer more than men, even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another men are always paid more" (47). Education is provided by the government for the improvement of Dalits. When they struggle for survival even children happen to go to work to support the family economically. Though they get educated, their identity as a Dalit persists till their death. Bama and her brother realize their importance of education: "Because we are born into Parayajati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities" (15). Bama gives a terrible picture of the female subaltern and the marginalized. They work hard both outside and inside. Individuality, freedom, and even their self-consciousness are lost under the male patriarchal domination both inside and outside at home. Paraiya women are ready to go to any extent make their life peaceful. 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 the 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 husband's torment" (122). In the end she makes her final choice where she sees the advent of change: "But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated; and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion" (Karukku 104).

Karukku gives an account of the sufferings and indignities of a Christian Dalit woman and the main aim of Bama's

writing, as she says, is 'to share with people my experiences. I use writing as one of the weapons to fight for the rights of the underprivileged'. Thus, through her writing, she gratifies self-reflection and inner strength and this is done in the language of the oppressed people, and in the language of the oral narrative, including turns of phrases and proverbs, folk songs and other ritual songs of the people being represented in her writings.

Conclusion

Dalit literature is an arduous endeavour from the canonical to the peripheral, from mega-narratives to micro-narratives, from resistance to emancipation and self-affirmation. Through their writings, the Dalit women writers sum up their mental and physical agony, their domestic problems and issues, brutal behaviour, inhuman treatment, miserable state of condition, in their own style. Karukku is a document of lived experience of poverty, violence, dejection and misery that every Dalit woman experiences in rigid caste hierarchies. It is also a narrative of reconstruction of self that a Dalit woman achieves after going through the traumatic experience of Brahmanic hegemony on the one hand, and Christian religious hegemony on the other hand. The life narrative of Bama details her experiences from childhood to the present time when she attains some kind of understanding of self. According to Lakshmi Holmstrom, Karukku "questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies, and, reaching out, empowers all those who have suffered different oppressions...argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression". Urmila Pawar in her memoir *The Weave of My Life* delineates the interplay of caste, class and gender in the lives of Dalit women for which they are triply marginalized. One of the special features of Pawar's memoirs is her account of patriarchy inside and outside of Dalit society. In her memoir, Urmila Pawar recounts the many forms of oppressions, separation and alienation implemented on downtrodden people. Thus, the Dalit writers bring forth a new understanding about the intersection of caste and gender in the Indian society. They have been able to carve a niche for their unique expression and register their voices through their writings. They have tremendous potential to transform the world of the oppressed people. Their autobiographies are emblematic of the inherent grit and determination Dalit women writers have shown in baring their souls, revealing the trauma of living a peripheral existence and demanding equity as a fundamental human right.

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