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The meaningless motherhoods of Dalit women: A perspective in Dalit literature

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Abstract

This paper explores the Dalit women and their motherhood through the traumatic experiences they have suffered for being, firstly a woman, secondly, a Dalit woman and thirdly, a Dalit mother. The paper also explicates the meaningless motherhood of Dalit women through select poetry which portray the Dalit social psychology.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Dalit social psychology and Dalit motherhood

Introduction

Dalit literature is a discourse on the lives of untouchables, dehumanization, trauma, humiliation etc. Dalit literature depicts the revolutionary struggle for social and economic change in India. Dalit writings originated in Marathi literature and include several writers of rebellion and revolution. The writings of Dalit reveal the pains and struggles of injustice in society. Dalit literature mainly includes autobiographies which express the agony and absurdity of Dalit lives. The representation of women in Dalit literature mirrors the narratives of sufferings, trauma and helplessness. The Dalit women are placed at the dead end of periphery. Having no existence and identity these women live in shadows of meaningless lives. The Dalit motherhood posits itself in a different space compared to the other spaces of power. A Dalit mother is an epitome of consistent poverty, exploitation and burden. The Indian women and Indian motherhood are hyped ideologically but degraded pragmatically. All the Indian mothers suffer but the Dalit mothers suffer for sure. There's a wide gap of differences in terms of status, space, acceptance and treatment on the platform of society. These aspects are the ground realities of Dalit literature.

Dalit Literature

Every literature has its own aesthetics and when it comes to the aesthetics of Dalit literature, Arjun Dangle, one of the prominent writers mentions the following ideas.

Dalit Literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Dangle traces the origin of Dalit literature to Ambedkar. His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness. By the 1970s, a sufficient corpus of Dalit literature had developed so that, according to Dangle, thinking Dalit critics began to theorize on Dalit literature and its role. (Mukherjee 1) ^[6].

Dalit literature exists in the form of autobiographies, stories and poems. It is not just a discourse on pity and trauma but also of grit and guts. It represents the survivors and their struggle. The very conscience, language, narration and content of Dalit literature are different when compared to other literatures. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Bandhumadhav, Limbale, Baby Kamble, Namdeo, Baburao Bagul etc, revolutionized the Dalit literature. The contemporary Dalit writings discuss the Dalits in diaspora, Dalits in India, rapes of Dalit women, the caste politics etc. Nevertheless, the Dalit literature has a lot of space and scope to experiment and explore.

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Dalit Women

Dalit women are a pariah from the periphery, double traumatized and in consistent existential crisis. Their status was and most of the times, is null and void on the social platform. Even after all the revolutionary changes brought in through law and order, the women and specifically Dalit women are situated in the corners of injustice and exploitation. The Dalit women have to counter patriarchy, degradation, exile, alienation etc. in several layers. To substantiate,

Dalit women in India are 'unique social organisms.' They have unique lived experiences because their identity is rooted in the intersectional oppression of two groups: 'Dalits' and 'women'. Their doubly marginalized status makes them a separate category; their experience as Dalit women cannot be understood simply from the position of just being 'Dalit' or 'women'. Their identity includes the interrelations and interactions of these two identities that reinforce each other. The awareness of Dalit women's issues has been submerged under the logic of universal sisterhood propagated by the Indian feminist movement. The Dalit literary movement has also been largely patriarchal; Dalit men are at the center of most prominent works. Thus, the issues of Dalit women did not have a place in the agenda of the Dalit movement or the Women's movement. They remained outsiders-within. (Sharma 26) [7].

However, the Dalit women have struggled hard to claim their space in the society through their writings, protests and education. Gopal Guru, in his article "Dalit Women Talk Differently" opines about the identities of Dalit women that, "Dalit women's claim to 'talk differently' assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, 'talking differently' can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of Dalit woman to speak on behalf of Dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of 'talking differently' foregrounds the identity of Dalit women". (Guru 2549) [1]

Social Psychology and Dalit Women

Society is a patriarchal construct. It frames and outlines the psyche of women and Dalit women. The urge of social inclusion is dominant in all the social beings and for women it has been an issue of identity. Her existence pendulums between gender and caste, leading her to a nowhere destination. The psychology of Dalit women is certainly and deliberately different. It is dependent on the aspects of her birth, environment, caste and gender. To comment,

It is critical to understand factors influencing Dalit women's social identity because; it gives important directions for examining the mediating roles of caste identity in Dalit women's psychosocial disability experience and social exclusion. Furthermore, the core assumption postulates in this model was that the ethnic identity as a discredited and stigma inducing social identity of Dalits. It induces self-perceived and enacted stigmatization while it leads to both perceived and actual experience of discrimination in basic social institutions such as families, communities and in society. This was found to result in a range of psychosocial disabilities imposed by individuals themselves, by their own families, community and other social institutions. This would in turn lead to social isolation and exclusion (Jose 167).

Dalit Motherhood

The Dalit motherhood is different in its own terms as it is candid and rustic, delineating the in-depth truth of being a Dalit and a mother. Motherhood is a very serene phase, representing the sense of belonging to a child. But the Dalit mother and her existence are invisible and don't matter in the society. She is not bothered and is unaware of her own existential crisis amidst the chaos of her life. These concepts are expressed as they are in most of the writings of Dalit literature. The poems like "Mother" by Waman Nimbalkar, "Ancient Mother Mine" by Shiva Ingole, "To be Born or Not to be Born" by L.S.Rokhade and "Labour Pains" by Baban Chahande depict the meaningless motherhood of Dalit women.

The poem "To be Born or Not to be Born" by L.S.Rokhade denotes the futile birth of a Dalit. The mother and her labour pain epitomize the brutal reality and the dilemma of the child. Her body represents generations of dire poverty, constant need and emptiness of a beaten track and earth. The mother here symbolizes the Dalit race shedding blood for generations, for a palmful of water. The poet as a child, narrates that he doesn't want to be born. He as a child questions the very existence of his mother and motherhood which are neither valued nor respected. The mother and her motherhood do not belong to this land as she cannot call it as her own, and so feels discarded in the society. To quote, "And you one of the human race/must shed your blood/struggle and strike/for a palmful of water./ I spit on this great civilization/ Is this land yours, mother,/ because you were born here?/ Is it mine/ because I was born to you?" (Rokade 4).

The above lines substantiate the bitter reality and dilemma of the Dalit lives and motherhood.

"Mother" by Waman Nimbalkar witnesses the darkness of Dalit lives. The poem symbolically portrays the empty huts and stomachs as a part of Dalit life. It is the mother who slices this empty darkness as a ray of hope. She looks burdened and heavily shadowed. The poem depicts the helplessness of a Dalit mother, who collects firewood for the survival. The mother's death because of the snakebite is heart wrenching as the poet narrates,

"Mother is gone. We, her brood, thrown to the winds./ Even now my eyes search for mother. My sadness grows./ When I see a thin woman with firewood on her head./ I go and buy all her firewood." (Nimbalkar 43-44)

The last lines express the trauma and pain of the child who has lost its mother.

The poem "Labour Pains" by Baban Chahande, denotes the unvalued motherhood of a Dalit woman sarcastically, that the pangs of pain the clouds bear are far better than the pangs of pain the mother bears. The clouds appear happy when they copulate. But the mother's woes are all over the sky. She barely knows and remembers that she's conceived. The mother here showcases the Dalit woman, whose motherhood is considered to be cheap and unpleasant. Intense hunger, anxiety for food and poverty accompany her motherhood. The birth of her child is compared to the clouds which merely subside in a moment. The birth of a child and motherhood are meaningless as they are compared to the passing clouds. The lines below express the agony of the Dalit mother who fails to enjoy the motherhood like the other mothers.

“Thus she delivers, and her hands/ set fiercely to work again. Like the clouds, whose pangs/ take just a moment to subside.” (Chahande 55)

The poem “Ancient Mother Mine” by Shiva Ingole explicates the motherhood in a different way. The poet calls himself a revolutionary for teaching the songs of liberty and defiance to the Dalit mothers. The mother here doesn’t conceive in the name of the sun and moon. The poet reveals the society as a polluted atmosphere of Vedas, where all Dalit women, like Draupadi, are auctioned in the bazaar. The symbol of school for the bastardized mothers and sisters shows the importance of education and freedom the Dalit women need. The word ancient mother denotes the age-old meaningless motherhood of all the women who were degraded for being a mother. The poet concludes that today his ancient mother still scrapes hard for the rags of freedom to cover her shame, which indeed is realistic. The last lines of the poem explicate the complicated present times where the Dalit mothers still brawl hard to survive. To quote, “I run a school for bastardized mothers and sisters/ Since then, my ancient mother/ scrapes together/ rags of freedom/ to cover/ her naked bosom.” (Ingole 79)

Conclusion

The Dalit women and mothers have come far ahead, yet have a long way to go. The new dimensions in Dalit literature and lives have been blossoming, yet haven’t bloomed to the fullest. The Indian Constitution is the sacred book for Dalit women and they stand on par with all other people on the platform of society. Yet they haven’t accomplished the center. They are positioned in the periphery and are struggling to claim liberty, equality and fraternity. Unfortunately, the society hasn’t embraced them completely. The society still witnesses rapes of Dalit women, harassment, victimization, honor killings, caste politics etc. The Dalit women have a lot to confront on the issues of societal space, both internal and external. As Gopal Guru, claims, “However, the issue of representing dalit women, both at the level of theory and politics, has erupted time and again in the discourse on dalit women. Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits).” (Guru 2548) ^[1].

To conclude, one needs to revisit the quotes of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, which stand as solutions till date and beyond. Firstly, “I measure the progress of a community, with the degree of progress women have achieved” and secondly, “Unity is meaningless without the accompaniment of women. Education is fruitless without the educated women and agitation is incomplete without the strength of women”. The society needs to rethink and rectify the above quotes to decipher the reality about Dalit women in society.

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