

Feminism In A Dalit Autobiography: The Study Of *Viramma: Life Of An Untouchable*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to focus various forms of discrimination on the ground of gender, caste and caste. It also highlights the resistance and rejection of existing norms in the society. Dalit women face a different kind oppression, subjugation and humiliation from both upper caste people and Dalit men. The significance of this paper is in that it highlights Viramma's life which is full of struggle and her rejection to exploitative society. The autobiography attracts the attention of the reader and critics. The present autobiography portrays the social, political, economical and cultural conditions of Pariah girl in Indian society. It also focuses on the plight of Dalit women who receive in inhuman treatment and suffer at every front. This paper is an attempt to present the harsh realities of struggle, oppression, exploitation at various levels, subjugation and suffering of Dalit women.

Key words: Caste, gender, discrimination, Dalit feminism, oppression, struggle, rejection

An autobiography is a self-written account of the life of oneself. The word "autobiography" was first used deprecatingly by William Taylor in 1797 in the English periodical *The Monthly Review*, when he suggested the word as hybrid, but condemned it as 'pedantic'. However, its next recorded use was in its present sense by Robert Southey in 1809. In his book, *Inside Out*, E. Stuart Bates offers a functional definition of autobiography as "a narrative of past of a person by the person concerned".

Caste system is a descent-based institutionalized inequality, has been practiced for thousands of years in parts of India. Caste remains a cage for Dalit communities, spreading its tentacles wide and deep. Over the centuries caste has made its presence in the lives of people through religious privileges and prohibitions, descent-based differential socio-economic status and opportunities, power to make both social and personal decisions and violence against those who challenging the caste system. It exists in every sphere of life from pattern of housing food and dinning, rights over water, land and cattle, marriage, choice of occupation to modern day institutions. In India, despite of constitutional provisions and legislations to safeguard the right and lives of Dalit, caste has persisted and transformed itself into a myriad of new forms. It remains a challenge to the ideals of democracy - equality, justice and fraternity.

The literal meaning of the word Dalit is broken or shattered in Sanskrit and Hindi. The term is mostly used for the ethnic groups in India that have been kept depressed by subjecting them to untouchability. Dalit were excluded from four-fold Varna system of Hinduism and were seen as forming a fifth Varna. Dalit now profess various religious beliefs, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Shikhism, Christianity and Islam. The term Dalit was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of Depressed Classes prior to 1935. Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature emerged in the 1960s in the Marathi language, and it soon appeared in the Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories, and autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene.

Dalit literature denounced the then-prevailing portrayal of life by mainstream Indian literature, which lacked mention of the abject poverty-stricken lifestyle of Dalits and the oppression that Dalits experienced at the hands of higher castes. Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit literature as “Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principal of negativity, rebellion and loyalty revolutionary”. Most of the marginalized groups all over the world have a similar system of oppression, but the titles are different as per the class and class divide. In India it was under the pretext of the caste and in Western world, it was under the name of race. Inequality is the main source of this marginality which leads to insecurity, injustice and

exploitation. Marginalized sections were always on the periphery and distanced from the power centers. People who have been deprived of identities through their writing they have been trying to find their identity. Naturally, autobiographies form is an important component. Since the 1970s a considerable number of Dalit poets and writers have been producing poems, short stories and autobiographies dealing with the theme of caste oppression, question of identity, poverty, untouchability and revolution. They are using traditionally denied weapon of literacy and exposing the conditions under which they have survived. Dalit literature questioned the mainstream literature which they identified Hindu literature and challenge this hegemony.

Dalit autobiographies and its significant move in terms of reconstructing Dalit political history through memories of struggle and experience of caste discrimination amongst Dalits, it is women who face the worst kind of violence. They are gendered, sexualized and treated as both polluted and sexually available for the men of the dominant caste under the disguise of religious sanctions. Dalit women face patriarchy at home and the burden of patriarchy with caste outside. Neither the Dalit movement nor the women's movement in India opened up and accepted the issues of Dalit women.

In the 1980s and 1990s Dalit women claimed their issues and their own movement, the Dalit women's movement to fight patriarchy outside and within Dalit households. The movement marked their separate identity outside the unitary category of women and Dalit and their presence in the political sphere. Dalit women's autobiographies are opening up and laying bare the issues that remained close to their hearts. Sharmila Rege calls autobiographies of Dalit women as testimonies. It also emphasizes their faith in justice and transformation in society in the conditions of Dalits and the caste system.

Viramma: Life of an Untouchable by Viramma, Jean-Luc Racine and Josaine Racine. It is thorough study of Dalit women who are doubly suffer. In Viramma: Life of an Untouchable, Viramma rejected the discrimination, exploitation, oppression and sufferings. She describes the misery of Pariah woman through this autobiography. It is collaborative autobiographical work. It describes weave experiences of an illiterate rural pariah woman, Viramma. In her narrative, she mentions two kinds of resistance. One is confrontation with the structure of society which engage women and other is against the caste system. At the start, she narrates the second marriage of her grandfather, Samikkannu. Her grandmother, Kannima without any protest accepts her husband's

second marriage. She has no alternative for the sake of her children she kept leading life without any resistance. It shows her grandmother's helplessness because she was socially and economically dependent on her husband. Viramma's life narrative resists the marginalization of Pariah girl. In Indian society the birth of girl child is undesirable. She recalls the moment of her birth. She says the atmosphere of sadness in her house. Her father was sitting in front of the door, and all neighbors were sitting around him. When Viramma was born that time neighbors uttered, "Hey! Here's another little bitch been born!"

Further she says Pariah girls never enjoyed the childhood. The primary duty of Pariah girls was to serve Reddi community in their fields and houses. She was married off when she was just eleven years old. In our society child marriages are still happening. A girl is always presented as a decorative object by her family members. She also mentions the patriarchal domination in Dalit communities. Viramma's daughter, Sundari made a decision to marry a boy of her own choice that time her brother Anban opposed her decision but Viramma supported her daughter. She felt that woman should select a boy for marriage of her own choice.

Viramma bitterly criticizes the fake morality of upper caste male through her personal experience with the civil servants who try to seduce her by showing money. It is a tendency of upper caste men that Dalit women are easily available for the sake of money. Dalit woman's sexual assault is not considered as rape because of their low status due to their caste identity. It is the reality of our society. She narrates the various incidents of sexual harassment and abuse of Pariah women in government hospitals. Therefore she says they prefer to give birth at home. She highlights superstitions in her community because of illiteracy and ignorance. She gave birth to twelve children but only three survived. She lost other children because of lack of medical facilities. Viramma's life is full of struggle but she never give up. She always feels proud of her Paiah identity. She rejected the word Harijan.

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