

Dalit women: The struggle against their discrimination and exploitation

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Abstract:

Dalit literature is the literature aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to discrimination and economic exploitation. Women over the centuries have been presented as embodiments of pain, hardship, and struggle for their self-identity, dignity and individuality. But Dalit women are doubly oppressed as dalits and as women. Dalit women writers have come forward to express their ideas, their experiences in social violence as well as domestic violence. Dalit women writers such as Baby Tai Kamble the first dalit woman autobiographer in India, Kumud Pawde, Shantabai Kamble, and Urmila Pawar published their biographies and in 1995, Barna, a dalit woman writer published *Karukku* and *Sangati*. Indian dalit women writers have established a permanent place in the field of literature.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Discrimination, Exploitation, Dalit Women, Subjugation, Oppression, Resistance, Identity.

Introduction

Literature written by the members of the Dalit communities or the literature that is specifically written to represent the typical social, historical and cultural aspects of the Dalit communities is described as Dalit literature. Sharankumar Limbale has stated:

“Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief....” (Limbale)

This Evolution of dalit literature has a great historical background in India. It is essentially literature of turmoil against the fossilized caste-system. The word/term Dalit has originated from Sanskrit, *dalita* meaning ‘Oppressed’. It is the literature aimed at promoting

ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to discrimination and economic exploitation. It is the literature that promotes equality and human dignity. Dalit literature has also begun to give space for separate sub-category of women writers from Dalit communities. Indian dalit women writers have established a permanent place in the field of literature, because they have written with a woman's point of view.

Dalit women are considered to be the most underprivileged group left out at the bottom of caste society for centuries. Dalit women believed to be alienated at three levels; caste, class, and gender positions. Dalit women over the centuries have been presented as embodiments of pain, hardship, and struggle for their self-identity, dignity and individuality throughout their life. Dalit women are doubly oppressed as dalits and as women. Being Dalit, they suffer due to caste discrimination and being a woman, victimized by the patriarchal social order both in their homes as well as outside. They are reprimanded and dehumanized not only by upper caste men, but also by men from their own community. Thus, violence against Dalit women is rampant

Dalit women had been trapped in the hands of upper caste, raped, insulted, abused. It is obvious that all women in the world have been degraded to second class citizenship. But dalit women in India suffer more because of their dalit identity. Dalit women are vulnerable to physical, social, economic and domestic violence. She has to strive for upliftment of the family and community as well. They recognized the fact that these women are subjected to such inhuman behavior only because they are dalit women. They struggle for identity, dignity and individuality throughout their life.

Ruth Manorama said, "Dalit women are the 'Dalits' among Dalits", because they are thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender. Dalit women has to face gender discrimination being a women, and economic and caste exploitation of being a dalit and at the same time she is oppressed by the patriarchy from which the dalit communities are not free. Dalit women are the victims of physical violence and torture within the families.

Dalit women writers have come forward to express their ideas, their experiences in social violence as well as domestic violence and thus they struggle for resistance with anger and

anguish. Their feeling of insecurity is the theme of their writings. Indian dalit women writers have established a permanent place in the field of literature. Dalit women's autobiographies are very honest and outspoken about all kinds of exploitation and subjugation that these women had to tolerate both within and outside their society. Dalit women's writing has been published widely in various languages in this period. In Marathi, a number of dalit women such as Baby Tai Kamble the first dalit woman autobiographer in India, Kumud Pawde, Shantabai Kamble, and Urmila Pawar published their biographies. In 1995, Barna, a dalit woman writer published *Karukku* and *Sangati*. In 2003, Gogu Shyamala brought out the first compilation of dalit women writing in Telugu: *Nallapoddu*.

The central theme of Dalit literature is to highlight women as victims of exploitation. Dalit women have rejected their traditional image and have raised their voice against their exploitation.

Baby Kamble

Baby Kamble was a veteran of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. She had been involved with the struggle from a very young age. Baby Kamble's autobiography, *Jina Amucha*, the Marathi original of "*The Prisons We Broke*" is the first work that comes under Dalit Literature that is written by a woman. It is a milestone in the history of Dalit writing in Marathi. The book deals with the two major problems of the society: firstly, the exploitation and oppression of the Dalits by the upper caste Hindus, secondly, the discrimination done towards women in a patriarchal society irrespective of her caste. It is a direct self-assertion of a Dalit woman. Rigid patriarchy and the unjust established caste system is the culprit and cause of exploitation of dalit woman. This autobiography focuses on the plight of dalit woman and dalit community. Baby Kamble narrates the plight of the Dalit women very graphically:

"In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off. You may well ask why. It's because of the *sasu*, who would poison her son's mind. These *sasus* ruined lives of innocent women forever. Every day the *maharwada* would resound with the cries of hapless

women in some house or the other. Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious. But there was nobody to care for them. They had no food to eat, no proper clothing to cover their bodies; their hair would remain uncombed and tangled, dry from lack of oil. Women led the most miserable existence. The entire day, the poor daughters-in-law would serve the entire household like a slave. The sasu, sasra, brothers and sisters-in-law, the neighbours- she had to serve one and all. The household chores were no less tortuous. Many daughters-in-law would try to run away to escape this torture.” (Kamble: ‘*The Prisons We Broke* Translated by Maya Pandit ’)

Sometimes the humiliation is so much that it is biting to the reader with his/ her sensibility. Kamble describes the painful fate of Mahar women during the period of their pregnancy as:

“Of course, it was only the more fortunate who could enjoy the luxury of eating cooked jowar, though this was the cheapest grain available. Many new mothers had to go hungry. They would lie down pining for few morsels while hunger gnawed at their insides. Most women suffered this fate. Labour pains, mishandling by the midwife, wounds inflicted by onlookers’ nails, ever-gnawing hunger, infected wounds with pus oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating-everything caused the new mother’s condition to worsen and she would end up getting a burning fever. On most occasions it was tetanus. The family would have to look after the infant on the one hand and the suffering mother on the other! There would be neither food nor money! Only unlimited grief and suffering! The fever was often called madanvayu.”(Kamble: ‘*The Prisons We Broke*’ Translated by Maya Pandit)

Baby Kamble's Autobiography '*The Prisons We Broke*' highlights the plight of the Dalit Women especially from the Mahar caste of Western Maharashtra. It also depicts the transformation in their life due to Ambedkarite Movement. Dalit Women gave up all the customs and religious beliefs which made them slave for thousand years and they accepted a new way of life which realized their status as Human beings.

Baby Kamble presented a clear picture of dalit women in past 50 years living in western Maharashtra. She clearly showed her anger toward the chaturvarna system of Hinduism as well as against the patriarchal order predominant among Mahars. This autobiography is self-critique of Hindu Social system. Through her narration she brings to the forefront the plight of dalit woman and the plight of dalit community.

Bama Faustina

Bama Faustina is the most distinguished Dalit feminist writer in Tamil. Bama's '*Sangati*' is a unique Dalit feminist narrative. It is mainly concerned with women's movement in India. The theme of *Sangati* is "Subjugation to Celebration." Bama has personally experienced it. She sums up their situations in following lines:

"Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation.....Became we have not been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die, As if we are blind, even though we have eyes". (*Sangati*)

Bama's *Sangati* highlights the gender discrimination and the situation of women in a subaltern community by narrating the life of various dalit women. Bama's '*Sangati*' is based on the community's identity. The novel talks about the Paraiya community who are doubly oppressed. Women are presented as wage earners and it is upon them to bear the burden of the family and on the other side men can spend their money lavishly.

The gender discrimination is shown at every stage of life. Women had to lead a restricted life while men are free to live as they like. They were never allowed to go to watch a cinema.

Similarly, if a girl studies a little they can't stand it. In terms of marriage, men can marry a woman out of the caste but woman cannot do that. If she marries outside the caste then there will be caste riot. Bama recollects the best thing they have in their caste.

Although there are many good things about us, we tend to forget it all and believe that to be upper caste is best. The grass is always greener on the other side, isn't it? The way we wear our saris with the pleats at the back and the way we pull our hair back and knot it to one side-all these have their own beauty. But because others have called these uncouth, we have believed that and have wanted to copy upper-caste ways and customs.
(Sangati)

Towards the end of the novel Bama narrates her own bitter experience as a Dalit woman. In spite of being educated and working she seems to face many difficulties. Above all the biggest problem she faced is being alone as an unmarried Dalit woman. She had to face questions such as

What caste are you? What's your religion? Where do you work? How much do you earn? How old are you? Are you married? Why haven't you married yet? Are you going to marry at all? Why not? They will keep on pestering away like this.(Sangati)

Bama through her novel "Sangati" tries to unfold the oppression of Dalit women. She portrays the events that take place in the everyday life of Dalit women. "Sangati" shows how Dalit women faced the gender biasness from their childhood. Boys and girls have different games to play with. Games like Kabadi and Marbles were meant for boys. Girls play at cooking, getting married and other domestic matters. Dalit girls were hardly enjoying their childhood. The boys are given more respect and they will eat as much as they wish and run to play. Girls must stay at home and keep working. Bama's grandmother was no exception, in the words of Bama,

She cared for her grandsons much more than she cared for us. If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the

grandsons she called first. ..If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin; she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins.(Sangati)

On the other hand, her novel *Sangati* has its theme the growth, decline and culture of Dalit women in the Tamil Paraiya community. Throughout "*Sangati*" one can see the rebellious nature of Dalit Paraiya the hard work that they do both in their home and the field as well. Bama herself stands for Dalit feminism and the emancipation of the Dalit Paraiya community. It is now clear that through Dalit women autobiographies; there is a struggle of women against social injustice, discrimination and their exploitation. There is a hope for better future of Dalit women as shown in the novel. It is said therein: "Women can make and women can break". The precarious financial position of Dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this is a theme that runs through the book: the terrible violence and abuse of women by their fathers and husbands, and sometimes even brothers; women fight back. *Sangati* is primarily about a community's identity; not about the single self.

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