

Research Article

Women in Dalit Literature: Voice, Agency and Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with issues of marginalisation of women, their lack of agency and voice, as well as their subjectivity as reflected in Dalit literature. The emphasis is on texts such as Bama's 'Sangati' (2001) and Baby Kamble's 'Jina Amucha' (2008). Using a feminist standpoint, we have analysed how women have been treated and what their roles have been in their social context. As we know, 'Dalit' connotes a marginalised group that has historically suffered exploitation and oppression in the Indian society. This oppression is reflected, to an extent, in the genre of work comprehended as Dalit literature, which delineates their consciousness, experiences and their anguish. We want to understand the lived experiences of women from this canon of work. The discourse analysis of the selected texts (namely Sangati and Jina Amucha) suggests that along with caste, gender is another vector along which the tentacles of oppression can be comprehended. Caste and class are two different social categories, but they seem to be operational together and in consonance with gender for women as represented in Dalit literature. Oppression of, and along, multiple processes makes it very difficult for women to realise their being. Women do not seem to have, as reflected in the two selected texts, appropriate conditions to know and act as subjects. On the contrary, they are treated as objects that are known and acted upon. The cultures of the community in which Dalit women make meaning of their everyday experiences cajole a culture of silence and domination from people and practices higher up in the social hierarchy. We must understand this and other kinds of oppressions as represented in our literature. To know is the first step in visualising social change. We hope that our comprehension and advocacy will help Dalit women fight oppression in solidarity with other marginalised groups.

Keywords: Literature and Society, Gender, Caste, Dalits, Social Change

INTRODUCTION

'One is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman' (Beauvoir 295). Just like the chaturvarna system that created caste and pushed the lower-caste people to grime and denied them the rights of existence, the patriarchal system drew paradigms for women and certain codes according to which they should work and conduct their living in a society, thus making them victims on multiple grounds. Although women give birth to men, it is men who give birth to women's living styles, as they dictate

the code and manner of conduct for a woman who can be their mother, wife or daughter. The system very shrewdly traps the 'other' of the two genders and denies them space, voice and agency. They do everything but can say nothing, bear everything but can do nothing.

Dalits are oppressed not due to their number but due to the traditional culture in India. 'The population of the Dalits are 170 million which constitutes 17% of India's population' (Sooryamoorthy 286). If the population of those Dalits who got converted to Christianity or

Buddhism is taken into consideration, their population increases to 25 per cent. Of the present population of Dalits in India, which is ~200 million, nearly 50 per cent are women. Dalit women are referred to as ‘thrice Dalits’ (Grey 127) due to their triple, in fact multiple, oppressions apart from being a female, a Dalit and being poor. They are denied their rights and voices in society and are treated worse than animals. They are hardly sent to school or even considered for getting any education. They are exposed to various forms of exploitation on various levels: physical, economical, social and psychological. Despite their suffering and exploitation, a new strength is seen in them, which has started to appear in the form of writings and many movements. It has started challenging their caste and gender restrictions, thus affirming a new identity and power they possess. The Dalit female till recently remained a hidden identity, underground amidst a number of problems, her tortured soul crying in pain that no one heard. It is now through their discourses that they have gained a voice and an identity of their own.

METHODOLOGY

We use qualitative research methodology. It comprises observing the data available, reading and evaluating texts and critically analysing it using different tools of theory and discourse analysis. To some extent, this paper will also use discourse analysis, following the works of Foucault, which aims to understand how power and ideology operate through the systems of discourse. No real understanding of the social effects of discourse is possible without closely analysing what people talk or write about. Therefore, text analysis becomes an indispensable part of discourse analysis. These discourses will be studied and analysed to comprehend the different identities and power structures they produce and reproduce in the texts. The research will be guided by feminist theory and will aim to anticipate a social change. This paper aims to bring to notice the hidden facts as well as the role and position of women based on two translated novels, namely ‘Sangati’ and ‘Jina Amucha’ (also, known by its English name *The Prisons We Broke*). It will next look at exploring the nature of the female world and outlook and constructing the lost voice and female identity.

DALIT WRITING AS A PART OF DALIT MOVEMENT

Dalit movement as an organised resistance of the ex-untouchables to caste oppression may be traced before colonial times, but could not gain a proper articulation and front. The struggle of the untouchables paralleled caste history. Anand Teltumbde in his paper ‘Theorising the Dalit Movement’ states that ‘the religious discourse is a common feature of all the anti-caste movements, like the Satnami movement of the Chamars in area of Chhattisgarh, the Dravid Kazhagam movement of Periyar, EVR Ramaswamy Naicker which created a stir by publicly burning the effigy of Rama and celebrating the virtuousness of Ravana; the Nadar Mahajana Sabha in Tamil Nadu and the most pervasive Dalit movement led by Babasaheb Ambedkar reaching its climax of mass conversion to Buddhism’ (Teltumbde 1). The movements signify a deep-rooted hatred for the religious code of Hinduism as designed by Manu and a proposition of an alternate faith for themselves. With the increase of movements in the history of Dalit freedom, a number of writings began to appear. An impressive body of self-writings came into existence, and those that were written in regional languages began to be translated. The autobiographical Dalit literature is by Dalits who came out of their miseries and began to express themselves to the outside world, to those who were powerful and their victimisers. Their writing is an answer to what Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak asks ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’

Literature is the mirror of the society, which is represented as oral and written records in different forms. Apart from the mainstream literature in forms of novels, poetry and short stories, there also exists Dalit literature, considered the literature of the oppressed. Writers make this genre of study a way to express their views about the society, the world they see around with all its follies and foibles. Literature presents both real and imaginary worlds. The growth of literary works has resulted in the production of regional writings. Regional writings are not always in English but are mostly in regional languages. Translation as a result is gaining huge attention due to the bulk being written in regional languages and a need for them to be translated to English for the majority of population to access them. One such genre being translated in bulk is

that of Dalit literature. There are writings described as autobiographies (one by the writer about himself/herself) and biographies (about others). Anderson (7) informs us that Robert Southey coined the term 'autobiography' in 1809 when he was describing the work of a Portuguese poet, Francisco Viera. 'Autobiography has been recognized as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction' (Anderson 1-2). Different critics pose different views about this genre of study. Anderson quotes Gusdorf, 'Autobiography.... requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to constitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time' (*ibid.*; 5). Dalit autobiographies, a part of the huge literature, face neglect and lack of critical approach unlike the mainstream literature.

Dalit literature is a continuum of different struggles on various levels against the oppressions of caste. Dalit literature refers to literature of the oppressed. The starting of writings on Dalits goes to Maharashtra, especially in the late 1950s when it caused a great disturbance there. Writers in this genre welcomed this with great fervour. Dalit autobiographies promote man's greatness and freedom. It portrays the self-pride of the Dalits, which the writings by non-Dalits lacked. These life narratives grounded Dalit literature in the specificities of Dalit experiences and created an ontological difference from all other literary currents. They created a space where experiences and responses could be shared but not universalised. The autobiographies are shaped around the three main issues of caste discrimination, poverty and work. A critique of social hierarchy was provided by the emergent Dalit movement and thought; Dalit autobiographies, being a part of this process, provide a basis for understanding the contradictions involved in this endeavour.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

'Sangati' was originally written by Bama in Tamil, which later got translated to English by Lakshmi Holmstrom and was published in 2008. 'Sangati' is an autobiography of not just one person but of an entire community. The title 'Sangati' means events. It refers to the events and

the incidents of the narrator's life and those she witnessed in her society. Bama is deeply concerned about the women of the community, and three generations of women who presented their different perspectives over the same issue knit the story of the fiction. 'Sangati' is a work by a woman who as a first person has faced all kinds of oppressions, humiliations and pain meted out by the upper castes, patriarchal hegemony and religion. Bama has endowed her characters with special strength with which they could break the shackles that had inhibited their growth and development. The real-life stories the novel brings to the attention of the readers and the inhuman environment in which they are made to suffer is the focus of the story. In the process of narrating their pains, the characters also reflect at their power, challenges, choices and risks they take by successfully handling traumas and oppressions. The title of the novel means events or news, which the narrator shows by looking back at her life. She does not look at her past with a sense of disregard but with pride and a positive anger, which gives her the strength to compose a story of the lively and rebellious culture of the Dalits. As Bama states in the acknowledgement to the story, the aim behind the composition is,

'...about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories' (Bama xvi).

'The Prisons We Broke' is an English translation of Baby Kamble's original work 'Jina Amucha' in Marathi. The work was translated by Maya Pandit and published in 2008. This paper uses different critical discourse analyses for understanding various issues. It highlights cultural practices that build the working of social systems on caste and gender levels. There are a number of texts that highlight discrimination issues from the very lives of the Dalits either narrated by Dalits or by non-Dalits. The two texts chosen are by women writers centring on women figures, thereby highlighting the marginalised women. Baby Kamble's work criticises Brahminical domination and speaks out for the female of the community who stand in opposition bearing the continuous exploitation of patriarchal power and caste factor. The title 'Jina Amucha'

literally means 'Our Existence', which is reflective of the existence of the Dalits, often reduced to absence by the upper castes and powerful people. Their existence comes into action only when they break the prisons around themselves. The prison is of ignorance, lack of knowledge, suffering, caste, class and gender. Baby Kamble brings into focus the Ambedkar movement and Dalits' response towards it. Showing the different rituals they perform and the ignorance behind, the writer gives a different outlook to the story, which makes it different from an autobiographical mode of writing. 'The Prisons We Broke' is an autobiography of the society rather than that of a particular person. The writer deals with the Mahar community and the history of their pain and oppression. The work is to fill the people of her community with a sense of pride as she states in her foreword,

'Today, our young educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar. But what is there to be ashamed of? We are the great race of the Mahars of Maharashtra. We are its real original inhabitants, the sons of the soil. The name of the land also derives from our name. I love our caste name, Mahar- it flows in my veins, in my blood and reminds me of our terrific struggle for truth' (Kamble ix).

This paper reflects at how the caste and masculine system very shrewdly traps the 'other' of the two genders and denies them space, voice and agency. The sexual identity is a 'cultural construct' (Barry 132) and evidences of how the construction takes place is an attempt of this paper.

VOICE, AGENCY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN *SANGATI* AND *THE PRISONS WE BROKE*

'Almost always during the internal stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or "sub-oppressors". The structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity' (Freire 27). John Fiske (1993) states that any form of oppression that begins from the pedestal of social relations finds its representation through the body and its behaviour and affects the conscience. The

movement against oppression as discussed by Freire springs from the conscience that affects the body and its manners and thus finds its representation through social relations. The representation of women in literature was considered to be the most important form of socialisation since it promotes the acceptable forms of roles of both men and women in a society. The mainstream literature generally comprises writings by upper caste men in which the genuine voice of the lower caste people and more particularly that of women is lost. Judith Butler argues for the formation of identity and subjectivity, tracing the processes by which a person becomes subject by assuming sexed/gendered identities. These identities are constructed for people within existing power structures. The mechanisms of patriarchy and patriarchal thoughts have affected the feminist thought and legitimised certain social norms in order to make them gain priority in the social structure. Dalit women's status is that of a beast that carries the burden of the whole family, the household and also the society in a mute and deaf condition almost like a beast of burden. They are paid less than the male for the same nature of job. About 75% of Dalits live below the poverty line.

Oppression of, and along, multiple processes makes it very difficult for women to realise their being. As Dalit literature refers to the literature of the oppressed, these writings do not remain confined to a single person but gives a very graphic description of the entire society to which they belong. Bama Faustina and Baby Kamble focussed on women either by making her the prime narrator as in 'Sangati' or by presenting the world through her vision as in 'The Prisons We Broke'.

They are an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalits for thousands of years. After immense sufferings and tortures, the radical Dalit sensibility was unable to control the outrage which finally erupted through movements and revolutionary actions in the 1960s. Dalit Panthers appeared to be a major cultural happening to rebel against the established literary, cultural and religious dogmas.

Kamble writes with the aim of letting her future generation come to know about the past, the sufferings and the oppressions meted out by the upper caste people.

Apart from this, she brings to focus the state and plight of a Dalit woman, her ignorance, her thoughts, her sufferings and her unheard voice. 'If the Mahar community is the "other" for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the "other" for the Mahar men.' (Kamble xi). The writer demonstrates the double oppression of caste and patriarchy throughout her work.

POSITION OF A WOMAN IN THE DALIT SOCIETY

'We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born in this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get?' (Bama 7)

A woman faces discrimination right from her birth. A girl child is soon left on her own, whereas a boy child is served food first, treated well and cared for because it is believed that it is he who would provide his parents food, clothing and support them in their old age while a girl has to leave her paternal home. The Dalits live a life of abject poverty and hunger. For them, getting food means having leftovers, a piece of rotten, spoiled bread (bhakri) or pieces of meat of dead animals, which would have been attacked by animals if not by them. Women, the kernel of the house, would always have their chance last after the whole family has had their share. If nothing was left, they could not even complain. The dead animal served as a sight of pleasure and opportunity for these people. The men folk and children got good portions like the liver and thighs, whereas the women had to satisfy their hunger without any likes. Women had to clean, cut, dry and preserve the food which the men brought. They had to bring firewood from deep forests, perform all house-hold chores, look after the children, do work in fields and get the minimum portion of food at the very last. The labour they performed at the houses of upper caste people made them gain basket-full of 'leftovers' which served '...their family through till the next morning, for that's what they ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner' (Kamble 40).

The human structure was the only marker of resemblance of the Dalits as men or women, else they were reduced

to the status of mere animals as far as taste, thoughts and living were concerned.

'Sangati' begins with the statement that tells how their community did not discriminate between a boy and a girl child; but, just a few lines below it states:

'But as they raised them, they were more concerned about the boys than the girls' (Bama 3). 'If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer.... if the boy catches an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly' (*ibid.*; 7).

In the name of clothes, they wore rags to cover their bodies. Children, until it was necessary to cover their bodies, did not know anything about clothes. Women used rags of clothes tied together to wear them as saris and cover their bodies. Dress styles varied from caste to caste and there were many prohibitions for a woman of a lower caste in terms of clothing as well. They could not wear a blouse, called a '*chattai*'.

'lower-caste women were not allowed to wear them. My Perimma didn't wear a chattai either. In fact, my mother started wearing one only after she got married' (*ibid.*; 5).

Caste markers were observed in a number of ways both men and women dressed themselves and led their lives. This was a sign to maintain the range of touchability with these folk. There were caste rules even for how one tucked the pleats. Mahar women had to tuck them in a certain manner. Her copper anklets and dress identified her as a Mahar woman.

'*Sangati*' is a story dealing with the lives of not just a single woman but many women of the Dalit society, who lead similar lives focussing on the similar mode and nature of exploitation and pain at all times. It brings into focus, characters like the narrator's *Paatti* who was left by her husband. In the whole story, these women are never heard of speaking about themselves. They lead a public life and their lives are centred on their children and the society in which they live. They are not allowed to move and migrate; they can leave the house just to collect firewood or to earn their living. They lack education and cannot see the outside world and the bigger life outside.

‘Sangati’ also presents cases of sexual exploitation and physical attacks on women.

‘The Prisons We Broke’ gives a different view to the society and women. It deals with a very detailed description of the women folk toiling throughout the day and striving through their miserable situation. The light that appears as Ambedkar enters their lives and the gradual movement into the arena of knowledge from that of ignorance and darkness is what the latter focuses on. Women play a very vital role in the development of the family and the society as did the writer’s *aaaji* (grandmother). She was the lady who as per Ambedkar’s speech stopped the practice of eating dead animals in the village. They came to know the value of education. It was the only means by which they could change their social, cultural and thought processes.

WOMEN AS CAGED BIRDS

By focussing on women and their agency in society through the genre of literature, it is seen that they were seldom granted the opportunity to speak. A woman’s place was considered to be behind the threshold of the house. Marriage acted as an institution to restrict the boundaries for a woman. Right from her birth, she is under the rule of someone or the other. As a child, a woman spends her life under the guardianship of her parents, then her brothers, then her husband and at last her son. Marriage ‘inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy’ (Barry 136).

‘The honour enjoyed by the family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this ‘honour’ became the talk of the town- a byword among the relatives and friends among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her’(Kamble 5).

‘The wives were many times locked in the house, ‘like a bird in the cage’ (*ibid.*; 5).

‘For the sake of kumkum mark, we lay our lives at the feet of our husbands. We believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a

husband, then the world holds nothing for her. It is another thing that these masters of kumkum generally bestow upon us nothing but grief and suffering’ (*ibid.*; 41).

They were made to do whatever their in-laws wanted them to do and even their thought processes were governed thus. Feminism is a way of thought which means ‘not to be governed by the old patriarchal norms of the society’. The situation was even worse when mothers-in-law ill-treated their daughters-in-law and also made their sons to treat them in a similar fashion. She as a woman has always been in control of patriarchal powers and people above her in social ranks and statuses; her only sight of attack is her daughter-in-law, a poor soul who is tormented in all possible manners by everyone. The status of a daughter-in-law was that of a slave to the slaves. Abuses, exploitation and physical violence were everyday tortures they had to face. If the daughter-in-law tries to run away from her in-laws’ house to her parents’ home, she would hardly receive any support from them; rather she is sent back where an even worse situation waits for her. The only way to escape the tortures was to run away, which was mostly an unsuccessful attempt. After such a trial, they were forcefully tied with wooden planks attached to iron chains.

‘She would have to drag this heavy burden each time she tried to move. She was forced to work with this device around her leg. Her leg would get wounded and blood would ooze out every time she tried to move her leg. She was not a human being for her in-laws, but just another piece of wood’ (*ibid.*; 99).

Such women were sights of attention for the people around and treated with disrespect. They were considered sluts and their reputation was washed off due to the wrong impressions created by their in-laws. They were married at a very early age and started to bear children when their bodies were too weak to bear that burden. ‘A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause... Hardly a few of the babies would survive’ (*ibid.*; 82). This reflects the poor neglected health conditions of the women who were made to undergo a number of deaths in a single life. The lives of the Dalit women were shaped by the fires of calamities, which made their bodies strong. Due to continued oppression and tortures, their bodies were used to pain and suffering

and their thoughts, feelings and emotions also got shaped thus. They survive in spite of intense suffering due to the three essences of a woman, as she states, 'we have true power, because we have sheel, satwa and neeti, and they stand supreme in the whole world, but they remain crushed and no one knows the strength and power of their characters' (*ibid.*; 62).

MEN AND WOMEN - BINARIES OPPOSING EACH OTHER

Through her work, Bama brings to light characters like Mariamma, Thayyi, Esakki, Raakkamma and Maikkanni, who lead a similar sort of painful life, suffering humiliations from the masculine society working on caste issues. Mariamma was insulted and accused of having an illicit relationship with Manikkam when she escaped from the ill intentions of an upper caste landlord. She was fined heavily and asked to beg for forgiveness in front of everybody. Nobody listened to her or to what other women had to say about it. They were scolded and sent outside the circle where 'men' were discussing such important issues. 'Do you women have any sense at all? What are you muttering about here, when we men are talking seriously? Go home all of you' (Bama 21). Moreover, Mariamma was asked to keep her mouth shut because if she opened her mouth in front of everyone, she would be called a whore, as no one would hear anything against an upper caste man trying to molest a Dalit girl. In such public meetings, there was no place for women. 'All our men gathered in front of the community hall, and sat down. The women stood about, behind them, here and there, watching' (*ibid.*; 21). Whenever the women tried to speak the truth and save the young girl, they were scolded and silenced. They never enjoyed their fundamental rights and were denied the agency to speak. 'Even as she saying this, four or five of the men got up once again and shouted at us. "Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have stamp on you?"' (*ibid.*; 23).

The men of these communities were Dalits and did not get the chance to exert power in the outer circle of society. They had to obey their masters and do all what was ordered to them without any hesitation. The only soft targets for them were the women of their community who ranked below them in the power ladder. In the case of

Mariamma when she was being accused of illicit behaviour with Manikkam, it was she who was fined and blamed, not the man. This shows the dual nature of justice based on gender. Women are often exploited in the fields and factories by men above them, but they do not speak out and become all the more oppressed due to fear; this fear may be that of losing their job or of losing their reputation and getting blamed both from people inside and outside their family.

Women are made to believe right from their births that whatever the patriarchal system says and does is correct and should not be questioned. This is the basic reason for their exploitation. Bama questions this social belief and says,

'Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren't we also human beings?' (*ibid.*; 29).

CONCLUSION

The issue of making a woman deals with the conditioning and socialisation of women in the society and their representation done in the world of literature, media, popular culture or anywhere else. When one focuses on Dalit society, they appear as Dalits among Dalits. The novel also deals with a number of exploitations. A woman once married cannot even think of escaping the brutal situations even if her husband was a cruel fellow, but the male partner could easily escape from such bonds and marry as many times as he wished. Writings by women about their subjugated and deprived selves are an awakening of their critical consciousness, which leads the way to their expression of social discontent precisely because they are real components of the oppressive structures and forces in the society.

Literature is a means to illustrate facts and highlight the new awakening among women. Its concern for humanisation leads to recognition of the forces of

dehumanisation and searches for historical links. In order to reverse the order, the dehumanisation forces of injustice, exploitation and oppression are thwarted and those who bear them are labelled as 'oppressed' and those powerful people who exert them as 'oppressors'. The oppressed tries to break the destructive forces around and prove their true self and their existence of being a Dalit. In Dalit literature, specifically the voice of the women is one such medium

Space is an area that one can gain with the help of control and capacity of surveillance. Dalits lack this space, be it in any domain. The caste factor and no less the gender factor marginalise them even more. Those through whom power passes become the figure of domination, such as the upper castes. Identity, agency and the idea of existence depend on a great deal on the practices which make its being. These generally come from the powerful group, which is located at the centre. The Dalits can enjoy the fruits of liberty and rationality when there is proper adjustment between space, life practices, values and discourses, which Foucault refers to as 'the practices of liberty' (During 134).

To conclude, the literature produced by these writers who themselves had first-hand experiences of pain, trauma, oppression and marginalisation which brings out the anguish of their bleeding hearts to people. They question the fundamental issues of human life, which embraces every question of society. The cultures of the community where Dalit women make meaning of their everyday experiences cajole a culture of silence and domination from people and practices higher up in the social hierarchy. We must understand this and other kinds of

oppressions as represented in our literature. To know is the first step in visualising social change. We hope that our comprehension and advocacy will help Dalit women fight oppression in solidarity with other marginalised groups.

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