

Caste Turbulence in Dalit Literature: Rise of Dalit Feminism

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Abstract

'Dalit feminism,' also known as women's discourse in literature, is the class that stands for itself within itself, because of its socio political and economic context, Dalit feminism has fallen behind. This class, on the one hand, distinguishes itself from feminism, while on the other, separates Dalit women's thinking from Dalit thought, because they considered that within this whole idea of feminism, they were labelled as second-class citizens due to their so-called caste. And their problems have come to the fore here in a secondary role. Freedom from Dalit patriarchy was another motivation to support Dalit feminism. Dalit leaders, or Dalit discourse leaders, were men who provided central expression to this ideology. Even while women in marginalised societies had the right to some level of decision-making and the ability to protest, they were harassed at home because the patriarchal system existed not only among Brahmins but also among Dalits. This study examines how Dalit women are the most exploited, as well as how their experiences are crucial in comprehending the triple oppression of women.

Index terms: Dalits, Dalit women, Autobiographies, Caste and Class, Discrimination, Oppression, Patriarchy, Untouchability.

Introduction

An autobiography written by a woman is regarded as a triumph. If the woman is a Dalit, the account of her torment becomes much more compelling. Mahatma Jyotibha Phule's founding of the Santyashodhak movement in 1874 laid the seeds of Dalit feminism. Dr. Ambedkar was a direct disciple of the first generation of Dalit women writers, including Baby Kaamble, Shantabai Dani, and Shantabai Kaamble. After the ugly face of modernity was bought up by urbanisation and industrialisation, the second generation arrived. Prof. Kumud Paawde and Urmila Pawar, a creative writer whose autobiography "The Weave of My Life" discusses the struggles of three generations of women. Sharmila Rege who is a prominent writer of Dalit Feminism writes 'Dalit women have long advocated for their rights, but their voices have gone unnoticed. As a result, Dalit women were declared a "Different Voice." Baby Kaamble and Urmila Pawar wrote autobiographies on their experiences of exploitation and injustice. Their memoirs give us a glimpse into the possibility of understanding caste and Dalit women within caste.

Writing women's autobiographies was considered as not only influenced by Ambedkar's ideals, but also to

establish his beliefs in society. This culture was torn between the misery of being a Dalit on the one hand, and the biological function of being a woman on the other. A demonstration of how caste influences a person's life. In their memoirs, Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar portray the village and community, particularly Dalit women. They discuss how being a woman, a poor woman, and then a Dalit woman humiliated them in three ways. Each of the three groups oppressed them. They were first oppressed by upper caste men and women, and subsequently by members of their own society, such as their husbands, brothers, mothers-in-law, and other relatives. "I was an unwanted child because I was a girl," Urmila Pawar writes. My cousin Govind dada wanted to throw me away in the dung heap when I was born. (Pawar.74).

Women's conditions are pitiful, according to Baby Kamble, because they are never allowed to leave the house. Babytai had to hide her autobiography, which she had written on scraps of paper used as shopping wrappers, for fear of her husband abusing her. Her father was a nice man who was affected by the Ambedkar movement, but he was a complete patriarch in the wrong sense of the word "honour," she adds. Her father did not allow her mother to come out of the threshold of the house and wanted her to be confined in the four walls of the house. Sexual harassment and exploitation are also marked in these autobiographies Urmila Pawar writes- "one day some woman from the village came, reporting that widow was found to be pregnant. The whole village knew who the man was. The village panchayat which included all respective male members of the society told her to abort the baby. She did not listen to them. So, she was judged before nine villages and punished in keeping with their verdict. She was made to stand leaning forward, and woman kicked her from behind, till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was the valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they have protected the villages honoured". (Pawar.144)

Caste based remarks are made everywhere. Dalit women here, like Dalit men, suffer from caste discrimination in the society; on the other hand they are neglected by the other women of the society. The relation of caste is not limited only to the social structure of the society, but it has become a mentality today. The same mentality of caste can be seen in these autobiographies. The way in both the autobiographies Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble had shared

the incidents of untouchability during their school days how they were treated by their teachers and fellow students. People humiliated Urmila when she delivered basket at their home due to her caste. Urmila narrates- "some of the people she (her mother) sent me to never allow me to enter their house. They made me stand at the threshold; I put the basket down and they put the sprinkles of water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them. They would drop coins in my hand from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burnt if they had touched me (Pawar.75).

When Marx spoke of the proletariat, he couldn't thoroughly investigate India's caste system at the time. He would not have failed in India if he had realised that the idea of class equality, which he saw as the weapon of revolution, would not have failed. Caste was more important than class in India. A person can ascend above his or her social station, yet caste does not abandon him. Bhimrao Ambedkar himself, in his book, 'Annihilation of Caste', writes while stating the reality of caste, says that - 'Varna system and caste discrimination is not really a division of labour, but a division of workers. (64). Baby Kamble writes – "when Mahar woman, went to sell the firewood, they had to cover their faces and if any person of high caste would come in front of them, they should leave the road by saying- The humble Mahar woman fall at your feet master". (Kamble.52). All the menial and degrading tasks were assigned to the lower caste people.

The upper castes have taken advantage of Dalit society, and its women have been exploited as well. She is a victim of class prejudice, caste discrimination, exploitation, and violence in society because she is a Dalit woman. Males also hide the objects of Dalit women's subjugation, whether by loved ones in the house or by non-caste men outside. These are some autobiographies which have come to the fore but still something is hidden. In relation to women, it is often understood that she has no caste. Then how can exploitation have its own caste? The women of Dalit society are exploited by the men of higher society on the one hand, and on the other they are also exploited in their own society inside and outside their family. Similarly, beatings in the house were normal. Both Babytai Kamble and Urmila Pawar discuss the patriarchal system and depict the husband's dominance and in-laws' power over Dalit women. Baby Kamble writes that "we too were human beings, and we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So, we made our own arrangements to find slaves - our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, we could at least enslave them". (Kamble.87).

Dalit feminism raises its voice against this patriarchy. In *The Weave of My Life* Urmila Pawar writes - "When men progress, they become 'Sahab' but women remain Behenji or Bai. This linguistic class division of society also makes women inferior to men. (Pawar.212). This society today is patriarchal in its structure which can be

seen in its roots i.e., in the family. Linguistic division of society first emerged in the form of gender, then later this division occurred based on gender relations and their characteristics. Both the writers write about how they were victim of their husband's male chauvinistic mentality. Baby Kamble talks about one incident where she and her husband were travelling to Mumbai by train and other male travellers happen to look at Babytai. She writes- "my husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profusely. The same evening, we returned, and he was so angry that he kept hitting me in the train. (Kamble.155). Urmila Pawar called her husband a confused character. When Urmila completed B.A degree he felt very happy but when she talked about studying further his male ego forbidden Urmila to study further. (Pawar.217).

Social behaviour observed from childhood emerges before us in the form of culture. Urmila Pawar talks about an incident where Urmila's younger daughter Manini invited her friend Kishori on her birthday to eat the cake. Kishori and her brother came and ate the cake and went home after celebrating the birthday. Kishori's brother told his mother that he had seen photographs of Ambedkar and Buddha in our house. The next day Kishori's mother came and stood at our door without even stepping inside she started abusing us, she said- we did not know you belonged to this caste. From now onwards don't give my daughter anything to eat we are Marathas; we cannot eat with you". (Pawar.216-217). These rituals and habits that we teach our children since childhood become the means of maintaining the superiority of caste discrimination in the society. It is the social structure that constitutes the personality of the individual, when the society and its policies are full of discrimination, then how far is women's equality possible. Women had to deal with the inequalities for being a daughter, wife in the family, and being Dalit in the society. Dalit feminism speaks of equality against this inequality and raises its voice for itself.

If the Dalit women's autobiographies are examined deeply, then the attitude of the man towards the woman comes to the fore in the form of the Democratic Patriarchy, which Kanchallaiah talks about - 'The Dalit woman works in the fields and takes care of the house'. Even after going to work, she can also fight with her husband. she also has the right to divorce after marriage and remarry after divorce, hence it is called Dalit Democratic Patriarchy. Despite all this, Dalit women are also exploited by patriarchy. While the exploitation of women takes place based on caste, class hidden within the caste, another process of exploitation comes in the form of labour of reproduction. The biological structure of the woman gave her the right to reproduce. The question arises, could she ever exercise this right herself? This right was made a weapon of her exploitation. The ability of a woman to reproduce is given by nature, is it right to take consider it as a machine for reproduction? Dalit feminism also raises the question of female reproduction in the society because it is not limited only to the health of the woman but is also necessary for the health of the family,

society, and the nation today. Ambedkar was familiar with the labour of female reproduction, which is why on July 28, 1928, in the Bombay Legislative Council, he had his views on the Maternity Leave Bill for working women. It is the responsibility of the government to provide maternity leave to the working women. But this idea remained in the context of working women, it is also necessary to consider the status of women within the family. The woman's dilemma, even after giving birth to the child, was described by Babytaias "awful." Many ladies were forced to bind their stomachs and lie down vulnerably. They didn't have anything to eat when they really needed it. Some were fortunate enough to be given jawar, the cheapest grain available in the period.

Motherhood on which the women right has been ensured by the society, even though the woman does not have the right of that motherhood; women are used as a child-bearing machine. Urmila Pawar writes - I wanted to have another son too so that I can get the operation done and stop having children. In those days, after two sons, women used to do the same thing, but I had a daughter'. Harishchandra said that – "I want another son," so took another chance, this time also it was a daughter. In those days it would have seemed easy, like saying let's have one more cup of tea. (Pawar.200). This would be called exploitation of a woman's power of reproduction where she must continuously go through the process of reproduction against her will. Which she cannot oppose because the society considered it to be a natural process of a woman. How great a crime it is to be a woman in the society and then to be born as a daughter can be known from the ever-increasing labour of motherhood which the autobiographies make clear. This problem is not only of Dalit women but of every woman in the society. Reproduction is to live a life working in the midst of all the three conditions of domestic labour and child-rearing and public labour. Motherhood is not the ultimate responsibility and action of a woman's life. It is a biological process, but it does not mean that the responsibility of social motherhood should also be placed on the shoulders of the woman. Motherhood in itself is not a creative act, in the present social situation motherhood often results in the servitude of women. The basis of this unjust division of labour between man and woman was the idea of feminine maternal nature, discovered by men and imposed on women.

The influence of Dr. Ambedkar can be seen in both the autobiographies where Urmila Pawar narrates in her autobiography that how she converted to Buddhism being as an obedient disciple of Dr. Ambedkar. There is nothing mentioned about Baby Kamble converting to Buddhism, but Babytai has made the decision to follow Dr. Ambedkar's path in life. "Ambedkar instilled in us that integrity is the foundation of the institution known as human society," she continues and says- When empathy and ethics are combined with integrity, society reaches its full potential. (Kamble.125). Dalit Feminism is a step taken by Dalit women and marginalized women who demand the same

right to 'liberty, equality and fraternity' which was taken during the French Revolution. Be educated, fight and get organized which was raised by Ambedkar. Today it is being raised again by Dalit feminists against the vision of their society. Urmila Pawar in one of her interviews talks about that the ideals of the constitution are not followed. She says- "There was a time when Dalits were denied the ability to speak, and life was lived according to the Manusmriti. It is necessary for humanity to recognise that a society can only be prosperous if each individual is treated with respect and has access to the nation's wealth. Justice and equality are guaranteed by our sacred constitution. Let's stick with it.

Dalit feminism provides a historical description of how the spirit and power of women's maltreatment differs depending on their socioeconomic circumstances, as well as a debate over the fallacy that all women are equal and equally mistreated. Dalit feminist debates question not only Indian feminism's dominance in claiming to speak for all women, but also Dalit men's hegemony in claiming to speak for Dalit women. Dalit feminists have spoken out against the aristocratic nationalist discourse's centuries-old historical neglect. Dalit feminism conjures the caste and gender tyranny that many Dalit women have experienced. It investigates Dalit women's subjugation as a three-fold threat posed by twin patriarchies, patriarchy of their own caste and an intersecting patriarchy of the higher caste, as well as poverty. It also contends that male violent behaviour unleashed by Dalit men on their own women is manifestation of their own powerlessness. Dalit Feminism emphasises Dalit women's distinctiveness in their intensity, labour, and spirit, and applauds their "difference" from privileged- caste women.

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