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CONTEXUALIZATION OF DALIT FEMINIST THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTION

Dr. SHAMEEMUNNISA BEGUM

Post Doctoral Research Scholar,

Dept. of English, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana



Dr. SHAMEEMUNNISA
BEGUM

ABSTRACT

The revolutionary voice of the Dalits has taken a concrete shape forming a wave of alternative/counter culture and history. The very act of writing about the self and community has become an assertion for independent identity and a device for emancipation. This paper is a study of various aspects of Dalit women which forms a source of struggle and strength in dealing with the question of untouchability, education, patriarchy and representation in the writings of Baby Kamble, Sivakami, Urmila and Viramma. The history of Dalit movement discovers the social position of Dalits in modern-day society, and the scholarship on violence in the categories such as racial violence, communal violence and gender violence.

Key words: Dalit, Women, Caste, Gender, Discrimination, Society

Introduction

Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer, editor, activist writes "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 xi). Dangle traces the origin of Marathi Dalit Literature to Dr. Ambedkar. "His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect, Dalit Literature is nothing but a literary expression of this awareness" (xi). By 1970s, a sufficient corpus of Dalit Literature had developed, here then Dangle observes:

Thinking Dalit critics began to theories Dalit Literature and its role....Dalit Literature is not simply literature. Dalit Literature is associated with a movement to bring about change. At the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them (i.e. Dalit writings); instead there is new thinking and new point of view (xii).

There are two dimensions with which Dalit literature establishes its distinctiveness and social role. On the one hand it depicts the life of the lowly and on the other it establishes the purpose of such writing. Dalit Literature is a distinct writing which primarily differs from the established norms of the mainstream literary tradition. This unique writing rejects the authority of the prescribed norms of writing.

Flowing from the condition of untouchability is a host of experiences that are unique and distinct. A number of questions can be immediately asked. Such as, what is this unique and distinct experience? What is involved in an authentic representation of this experience in literature? In addition, what is the purpose of such representation? The central concern of Dalit literature is how best to represent the authentic experience of Dalits. Literary theory, whether classical Indian with its emphasis on the evocation of emotions and feelings or contemporary western with its preoccupation with the unstable individual identity, is not found particularly useful, given the

purpose as well as the focus of this literature. "The authentic experience that refers to it is that of a people, not just of an individual, and it is seemingly experience, quite unlike that of any other group or community" (Dangle 88).

The revolutionary voice of the Dalits has taken a concrete shape forming a wave of alternative/counter culture and history. The very act of writing about the self and community has become an assertion for independent identity and a device for emancipation. This paper is a study of various aspects of Dalit women which forms a source of struggle and strength in dealing with the question of untouchability, education, patriarchy and representation in the writings of Baby Kamble, Sivakami, Urmila and Viramma. The history of Dalit movement discovers the social position of Dalits in modern-day society, and the scholarship on violence in the categories such as racial violence, communal violence and gender violence.

The privileged castes have been discriminating their fellow human beings to shield their own privileged status in the society. Mahatma Phule, one of the early Indian intellectuals and scholars made out this reality, attempted to widen education to dismantle the hegemony of brahminism. He identified Dalit women as the worst victims of the system and also acknowledged that they would be the agency of change in the system. As a part of his efforts to uproot domineering Brahmin hegemony, he started schools to build up their intellectual power so as to make education accessible to all. Periyar and Ambedkar attempted to liberate the victims of Brahminism from the caste oppression. Periyar, like Phule, recognized women as the organization of change in the social revolutionary movement. He made women to voice their historical pain and agony and to stand against the prejudices and voice their protest. He was considered one of the key persons who let the non-brahmins capture political strength.

Dalit autobiographical and fictional narratives and poetry neither hide nor romanticize anything. The people that inhabit these texts are not objects of pity. Their life is often miserable, humiliating and fills with daily reminders of their impurity and pollution. These are signified by the

wretchedness of their living conditions, their lawless, their internalization of the oppressive ideas and habits of the Hindu caste society. Nevertheless, these are presented in Dalit literature without romanticizing or defensiveness. The experience that Dalit literature represents is not always pleasant, nor constituted in terms of relations with the upper caste only. Dalit literature is unflinching in portraying the seamier side of Dalit life. Life outside the boundaries of the village, this literature seems to say, is marked by a sense of community, sharing, warmth and physicality. However, it is also often wretched. "There is in it ignorance, sexism, violence, internal rivalry and conflict, competition for survival, drunkenness and death" (Limbale 2004: 57).

Dalit women writing is a new genre emerged in post- Ambedkar period. Ambedkar attempted to uproot the age old social and economic system which had been built by social elites. He asked the people to look for solutions through the "Lok sadan" and to forget about the "deva sadan" to create a rational society for everyone. Six decades of sovereignty has also failed to grant basic social amenities to the majority of low caste people and the majority people are still leading an inhuman condition. As long as there is no social interaction and understanding, the caste system gains supremacy and freedom.

Women continue to be the worst victims of this system. People still are denied the basic primary education demanded by Phule and they are still kept away from access to basic amenities like water, food and shelter. Ambedkar emerged as the leader of the lower caste people and recognized the significance of education to the oppressed people. He worked to spread education among the people. He recognised the political power for eliminating social inequalities. He provoked Brahmin Social Order (BSO) victims to toil towards seizure of political power and construct better circumstances for women in the society.

Dalit feminism offers a perception of caste and gender. Dalit women's position in the caste and patriarchal structures of the society is pathetic and Dalit patriarchy and castiest patriarchy marginalizes Dalit women. The emancipatory voice of Dalit women is in its different forms. It also deals with the

contextualization of the moments of overcoming violence, humiliation and exploitation; both in the public and private domain from a Dalit feminist stand point. With the help of select Dalit women's writings from different spaces and time, it mirrors on how untouchability has been addressed by the mainstream society and how it has been the medium of these practices. Dalits work hard in the struggle of untouchability and patriarchy.

Non-brahmin literature traditionally proposed enough training to oppose Brahminism. At the same time this literature has failed in privileging their own women's problems appropriately. Patriarchy in Dalit community also is one of the significant factors which suppress Dalit women as "Dalit within Dalit" in the society. Dalit women's writings fill up that gap and help us construct a more detailed picture of their lives. Their enunciation of their experiences as Dalit women brought forth new means of thinking concerning women's misery in the society. Dalit women stand as evidence to this vicious world for centuries. In the whole record of Dalit struggle, the Dalit women continue to be silent victims of the social tyranny. These women finally gained some voice to speak to the world about their historical agony in the community and in the large society. The words of the Dalit women reflect their mental agony and the body of their work reveals the brutal marks this system has left on their world. As long as the victims continue to be silent regarding their individual rights and responsibility the victimizers will go on with turning this as ecstasy for themselves.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2006) translated from the Marathi *Jina Amucha* (1986) by Maya Pandit explores the Dalit feminist perception of caste struggle vis-a-vis Dalit women's autobiography. It discusses how this writing forms a socio-political critique of the existing power structures in the context of caste struggle and patriarchy. Further, it analyzes the socio-cultural, economic, religious and educational background of the Dalits through different forms in the process of the development of a counter culture and identity. Baby Kamble makes an attempt to present Dalit women's lives through her own life experience. She prefers to articulate the life of Dalits who attempted

to run away from the repressive caste system. The dominant culture and its cultural norms and ethos have a sturdy grip.

The Grip of Change (2006) by P. Sivakami, which is a translation of her Tamil novel *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* (1989) is a study of patriarchy in its diverse forms engaging Dalit women. The caste elements that play a fundamental role in the working of patriarchy to marginalize the Dalit women are in a threefold way i.e. as a Dalit, as a Dalit woman and as a woman in the Dalit community itself. Sivakami tries to highlight the conditions of the Dalits in rural India. She pays great attention to bring to limelight hard facts about Dalit women's lives in Tamilnadu. My study analyzes Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* which attempts to explore the relationship of Dalit leaders with their community and how power pervades these relations.

Urmila Pawar's memoir *Aaydan*, translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*. The book illustrates her childhood memories of life in the village, and her mother's constant struggle to make ends meet, through her school and college days in the town of Ratnagiri, to her life after her marriage, in Mumbai, where she encounters a feminist group and later becomes a writer and organizer of Dalit women. The time span it covers is from India's Independence in 1947 to the end of the century.

Viramma presents the life-history and emancipation as narrated by Viramma, a Tamil illiterate agricultural labourer and midwife from a Pondicherry village. It is an unusual autobiography titled after the name of its 'first' author Viramma evolving the life of a Dalit woman in particular and Dalit emancipation in general in late 90s. It is an unusual autobiography because it is co-authored by Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine-Tamil born ethnomusicologists educated in France to whom Viramma narrates her story in the first person. Struggling between autonomy and her bondage, Viramma is discriminated twice – as a Dalit and as a woman. Viramma provides a first person account of what femininity can be and combines a very traditional perception of a woman—submissive and obedient along with an image of admirable strength

for facing challenges of daily life and her situation in a society. The presentation traces the struggle of the socially excluded Dalits in particular towards their Endeavour to express themselves. Viramma as a Dalit woman does not simply bewail and cry her Dalit identity, but seems to celebrate it so as to perfect it. Dalit songs, rituals, festivals and other community-centric ceremonies are narrated with intimacy; the entire autobiographical account bristles with confidence of an autonomous being.

As part of the process of delving into the alternative experiential livings, four contemporary Dalit Women: Baby Kamble, Sivakami, Urmila Pawar and Viramma, the study examines the perception of these Dalit women from different aspects as Dalit women are located in a caste ridden and capitalist, patriarchal society. They critically examine and represent in their literature the Dalit woman's position in the society. They have made an attempt to build their own identity based on their actual lives. These writings have brought to limelight various stark realities regarding the life of the Dalit women.

The works are crucial manuscripts of Dalit women's experiences as they show how the ideologies of caste oppression operate in defining the conditions of life, explored the perception of the status of Dalits, their perception and analysis of patriarchy within Dalit communities and outside and their perception of the Dalit women as the agency of change. The Dalit women writers have comprised ample Issues that have touched their lives. These works present Dalit women's life experiences in different ways of life and help us to understand various aspects of their lives and highlights how Dalit women traversed a range of social impediments and managed to transform their lives.

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