

## Dileanation And A Role Of Mainstream To Dalit Feminism

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**Article History:** Received: 11 January 2021; Accepted: 27 February 2021; Published online: 5 April 2021

**Abstract:** Dalit women have long occupied marginal positions and been excluded from two major Indian social movements: The Feminist Movement and the Dalit Movement. The researcher examines how Dalit women have made creative use of their marginality—their ‘outsider-within’ status—and have represented their lived experiences. The study scrutinizes select life narratives of Dalit women writers: Bama's *Sangati: Events* (2005), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2015), and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) to discuss and explore the sociological significance of three characteristic themes in these narratives: (1) the interlocking nature of Dalitwomen's oppression, (2) endurance and resilience, (3) their role in the transformation of the Dalit community. Thus, the perspectives of Dalit women writers create new knowledge about their lives, families, and communities. Their perspectives may well provide a preparatory point for the development of the Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

**Introduction** Indian Dalit Literature is an articulation of the unrepresented painful past of former ‘untouchables’ of the Indian subcontinent. They were kept outside the four Varnas<sup>3</sup> of the Hindu social order. Another term for ‘Untouchables’ is the ‘depressed classes’ (Ambedkar), ‘Harijans’ (Gandhiji), ‘Scheduled Castes’ (Article 341, Indian Constitution), and ‘Dalits’; the last being their self-chosen terminology. According to Zelliot, “Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution”. Dalit literature is a quest for identity and social equality and mainly articulates the oppressed history of a community; documenting atrocities and discrimination done to Dalits by the hegemony of upper-caste people. However, Dalit literature has its internal limitations. The gender question has either not been comprehended or was excluded from mainstream Dalit literature: “Dalit women's issues did not have any place on the agenda of the Dalit movement and the Women's movement. Even today things have not changed” (Pawar 2015: 260). Seemingly Indian feminism has not broadened its perspective to encompass the concerns of Dalitwomen who are ‘Dalit of Dalits’ (Manorma: 2008). Appropriately, as noted by the Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde, “[I]t is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences” (Lorde 1984: 122). Dalit was explained in a broad way to denote the oppressed and marginalized, not simply the erstwhile untouchable castes. Ghandy quotes the subversive poetry of Namdeo Dhasal, the foremost Dalit poet of those times, whose images of flaming suns, blood, and fire along with the use of expletives and obscenity for the first time in Marathi poetry shook the middle-class morality of the time. This generation laid the foundation of what was to be termed Dalit literature and cleared the terrain for writers like Kamble and Pawar.

Another contemporary social movement that has influenced at least one of the writers, Urmila Pawar, is the urban women's movement in Maharashtra of the 1970s and 1980s. Influenced by the feminist movement in the US and UK in the 1960s, and like this Western group comprising different political and feminist strains, this movement centring around Bombay and Poona took up campaigns such as “Equal Pay for Equal Work”, reproductive health, dowry deaths, domestic violence, and rape. Activists tried to change the cultural milieu in which they lived by breaking tradition. Giving up the *mangalsutra*, to which Pawar refers in her autobiography, was one such symbolic act (2008: 116, 179). This chain of black beads is a sign of marriage to be worn only by Hindu women, while men need not have any kind of indication of their marital status. The drawback of these feminist groups was that they attracted women from intellectual, upper-caste backgrounds, while the majority of lower-caste women were influenced by mainstream political parties that did not have a feminist agenda. After working with such groups, Pawar came to the realization that these feminists were quite untouched by caste, whereas the Ambedkarite movement to which she belonged was extremely male dominated. It is this double bind which she grapples with in *The Weave of My Life*. Hence, Dalit women have felt the need to transform Dalit consciousness, to represent their perspectives and lived experiences. The central problem addressed in this article is how Dalit women made creative use of their marginality and learning from their ‘outsider-within’ status to bring about this consciousness

transformation. The current study illustrates the sociological significance of the select Dalit women's life narratives.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION OF DALIT WOMEN'S**

The deprivation which Dalit women face is also reflected in their autobiographies and their stories. These autobiographies indicate that there are real differences between the situation of the upper-caste woman and the lower-caste woman in India. It is true that both are oppressed by caste patriarchy or what has sometimes been termed Brahminical patriarchy; but the caste nature of this patriarchy can remain hidden to the upper-caste woman even when she takes up a feminist stance. The Dalit woman, on the other hand, will never be unaware of this. The Dalit women's writings reviewed in this report illustrate the fact that a Dalit woman's rights of freedom of her person, of control over her body and her sexuality, cannot be protected; neither by the Dalit caste panchayat nor by the political power accruing to Dalits at certain moments in the system of electoral democracy. This should be seen as a serious limitation of the rights of citizenship that are supposed to accrue to every Indian, of the nature of a democracy that is supposed to afford space for the expression and redressal of grievances. This evidence indicates that there are similarities and differences in the problems faced by women belonging to the Dalit social group and rest of the women. Like all women these women also suffer from subordination due to patriarchy experienced within the family, at the place of work, and in society. Like their poor counterpart from other female groups, they also suffer from lack of access to income earning assets, education and resultant high poverty. However, Dalit women differs from rest of the women in so far as their performance with regard to human development indicators is lower compared with their counterpart from rest of the women and that the causes of more deprivation of these women lies in social exclusion.

The women belonging to social grouping of low caste suffers from social exclusion and discrimination due to their cultural identity, which rest of the women do not. It is this **"exclusion –induced deprivation"** which differentiates excluded women from rest of the women. Low caste women faced denial of equal rights in the past, which continued in the present in some spheres, if not all. They also become the victim of social and religious practice such as Devdasi resulting in sexual exploitation in the name of religion. Thus excluded women are not 'just like' the rest of the women. They are also disadvantaged by who they are. They suffer from social exclusion which deprives them of choices and opportunities to escape from poverty and denies them a voice to claim their rights. There is a close inter-face between patriarchy and social exclusion which enforce each other. The women from discriminated groups suffer from triple deprivation – gender, poverty and social exclusion. The report presents selected evidence on the nature and forms of caste – based discrimination suffered by Dalit women in access to sources of livelihood and social needs. This evidence however, very limited and there is a need to study the nature and forms of discrimination faced by Dalit women as a woman, as a Dalit woman and as poor women. The challenge is to capture the interface of these three dimensions of caste, class and gender and to analyse the consequences of social exclusion and discrimination on their rights and citizenship. This would help to conceptualize inclusive policies to address the problems of Dalit women more effectively.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF DALIT WOMEN'S**

**"Life's been tough, but I've been tougher. I beat life at its own game."** – Zohra Sehgal

Many Dalit autobiographies show us a movement from village to city; tracing a life transition made by the author; Ambedkar too had exhorted Dalits to leave the villages, where they could never be free of the markers of caste, to the city, where they could get an education and find better jobs. Of course, many persons making such a transition find that residential areas in cities are still mapped by caste prejudice; that discrimination prevents them from getting jobs that they are qualified for, and so on. The women's writings also often talk about experiences of this kind. However, they are also richly descriptive of life in the village, with its caste hierarchies and segregated spaces, its allotment of the most menial tasks to the Dalits and especially the women, the role of religious festivals, the nature of the women's backbreaking toil, and the extreme poverty of the Dalits. Several scholars, including Gopal Guru and M.S.S. Pandian, have noted that Dalit women's writing, in contrast to autobiographies of Dalit men, place their community rather than the self at the centre of their narrative: according to Pandian, it is a depletion of the 'I'. So it is not so much the personal trajectory or life narrative that is focused on: the women display a keenness to depict their world 'as it is', or was. It is interesting that Maya Pandit, the translator of Jine Amuche by Baby Kamble (literally "The Life We Live(d)", but rendered as "The Prisons We Broke" in English translation) carries an interview with the author at the end of the book and begins by asking her: "In your autobiography, there are very few references to your personal life. Can you tell us a little more about yourself?" But Baby Kamble answers, "Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering." And she proceeds to speak about women's striving for their own and their children's education, their

belief in Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement. Speaking about her own marriage, she describes how Ambedkar's followers simplified the marriage ceremony and states proudly that hers was one of the first weddings to be performed in the new way. ("The Prisons We Broke", p.136) Similarly, as the famous Tamil writer Bama says in the interview appended to her third 'novel', Vanmam, "Before 1993, I was unknown. Today, when I say "I", it includes people like me. All these things together form our collective identity and help us all to act together. I cannot claim for myself the identity of an individual, a Dalit woman. I am part of a collective awareness. I carry their voices."(Vanmam, p.151)

**"This anti-social spirit is not confined to caste alone. It has gone deeper and has poisoned the mutual relations of the sub-castes as well" – Dr.B.R.Ambedhkar.**

It is true of Baby Kamble and Bama, is true of most of the others. This is an important contribution of Dalit women to the genre of autobiography. All these writers give meticulous records of life in their communities. The life narrative of Kamble, the first Dalit woman in Maharashtra, and probably in India, who wrote an autobiography, was serialized in a Marathi women's magazine in 1982, and published in book form in 1986. The English translation appeared in 2008, appended by a translator's introduction, an interview with the author, and an afterword by Gopal Guru. Urmila Pawar's autobiography, Aaydaan, was published in 2003 and translated into English by Maya Pandit together with a translator's introduction and an afterword by Sharmila Rege. It has been recently republished by Columbia University Press and is to be used for undergraduate teaching. Bama published her autobiographical account, Karakku, in 1992 and it was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. Viramma, is a prolonged interview with an aged Dalit woman, since deceased, who lived in a village near Pondicherry, conducted by an upper-caste Tamil researcher married to a French anthropologist. It was published in French in 1995 and in English in 1997. All the translations carry glossaries; some of the words are specific usages of the Dalit community and would not be easily intelligible even to the urban, non-Dalit reader of that language.

#### SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST DALIT WOMAN

**"Religion is a bludgeon in the hand of the oppressor to suppress the oppressed" Jahanshah Safari** One of the most pernicious forms of violence suffered by Dalit women in caste society is sexual violence; in their case this is not something they face in certain dangerous situations, but an ever-present threat. This is because the hierarchical order of caste is defended by patriarchal control by the men of each caste over 'their' women. But a sexual liaison between a man of an upper caste and a woman of a lower caste is not seen as a transgression of the social order; the man is exercising a right, and through this reminding the woman's father/husband/brother/ caste fellows of their inferiority. Thus sexual violence against Dalit women is a naked expression of caste power. Dalit communities joined with the state machinery in suppressing the facts of the case and preventing the perpetrators from getting their lawful punishment. Dalit women are seen as active protagonists, remarkably strong and resilient even when they are living in the most deprived and harrowing circumstances. They are down-to-earth, not given to euphemism. They take joy in their sexuality--- this most clearly seen in Urmila Pawar's "The Weave of My Life" and in the conversations with Viramma. They negotiate for their dignity in situations where others would feel humiliated and crushed. As such, they can be seen as role models for Indian feminists who are, in the last resort, oppressed by the same patriarchal caste order that is so brutal towards the Dalit woman.

#### INJUSTICE, HUMILIATION AND EXPLOITATION ON DALIT WOMEN'S

**"Caste pride is behind this centuries-old custom. The deep chasm that divides the society is made even deeper by this custom, a conspiracy to trap us in the whirlpool of inferiority".**

Bama in Sangati describes several instances of marital conflict. Husbands regularly beat their wives, and the situation is not improved whether the wife submits meekly or, as is often the case, retaliates or answers back. There is a sense that these conflicts are not hidden within the four walls of the home as they would be in a better-off community. The neighbours witness what is going on, and sympathise with the woman to some extent, but generally agree that husbands beating their wives is commonplace, and only to be expected. After a pregnant woman is mercilessly kicked and beaten by her husband, her neighbours go to the woman's parents and ask them to intervene; but they refuse, saying that this marriage was her own choice. The people who have tried to help then say, "There is only one thing the girl did in any case, to deserve all this. She started the fuss and argument by asking him to give her his wages. If the wretched fool had let him keep his wages and not asked, she wouldn't have been beaten up in this shameful way.

**"If a man goes off with the money he has earned, drinks as much as he likes, and eats at coffee-stands and food-stalls, then how can a woman go out to work and earn enough money to fill her children's bellies and do whatever else is necessary in the house? How can she manage everything with just her wages?"**Mukta Sarvagoud in Mitleli Kavade describes how the Dalit men not only spend much of their earnings on

drink or gambling, but also sit around in groups gossiping while their wives labour inside and outside the home. Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar also describe the ill-treatment meted out to a new daughter-in-law ; she is mercilessly forced to work at the behest of her elders, scolded and punished if she does not obey. Baby Kamble tells us how suspicion about the wife's fidelity was often the pretext for beatings or more violent treatment like cutting of the nose.

Dalit women's writing about oppression by Dalit men is tempered by their knowledge of the injustice, humiliation and exploitation that these men have to suffer, even though they do not say so explicitly. The values that consider daily beatings by men of their wives to be routine do not arise from a separate 'Dalit patriarchy' --- rather they are a part of an exploitative caste system in which the men also face unemployment, or have to perform the most menial and repulsive kinds of work, face caste-based insults in the public sphere generally, and where their women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation by other men is a daily challenge to their masculinity.

**SUBALTERN THEORY OF DALIT WOMEN “Women are strong. Women can do anything. Come out and struggle for your rights; nothing can happen without your voice. Do not wait for me to do something for your rights. It's your world, and you can change it.” – Malala Yousafzai**

A subaltern study is a branch in postcolonial theory. The concept of the subaltern was mentioned by Italian Marxist political dissident Antonio Gramsci in his article “Notes on Italian History” which published in his most recognized book “Prison Notebooks” written between 1929 and 1935. The term subaltern means “folks belonging to the inferior rank” Gramsci chose this term to relate to group of the society who are being marginalized under authoritative clique. There were various theorists like Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Dipesh Chakravorty who on the footing of the term subaltern have formulated their own theories. Spivak has become predominant agent in post Colonial studies. Spivak has borrowed the term subaltern from Gramsci to relate to the subaltern group of Indian society. “Can the subaltern speak?” was first title as “Power, Desire and Interest” (Spivak 217) but later the title was transmuted. This essay is most controversial essay where Spivak tabulate women, non-white and lower caste as subaltern. Spivak in her essay promulgate that the white European have created the binary of self and “others” where the populace belonging to third world countries are appraise as “other”. Identically “the women of third world are even more deeply shadow” (287). Spivak in her essay try to reinvigorate women's agency. She talks about the widow-self-immolation in India. Where male dominate society who suppressed them and the Britishers who tried to abolish this practice for their own political entail. Here Spivak want to ratify that women are always treated as “other” since they are subordinate to men under patriarchal order as in the introduction to “the second sex”, Simone de Beauvoir talks about the concept of the “other”, but Spivak also depict that condition of third world women is even more poignant. As they are double isolated by their men and also by white upper class. Expatriating about lower caste people in India they are also subaltern under caste hierarchy where they are “other” they are marginalized as Third world people as well as lower caste being. Whereas Dalit women are thrice removed as they are of Third world country, under patriarchy and also due to their caste. Spivak also say that subaltern cannot speak not because that they cannot speak but rather that others did not know how to listen or whenever subaltern tried to speak his voice was mute. Even while writing the chronic subaltern perspective was never taken into consideration they were jostle at the periphery. Shobhaa De in her theory of subalternity considers subalternity as an “absolute ideology” of dominant group. These dominant groups foist their ideas on subservient group. Shobhaa De disseminate this as a lust for power where omnipotent want to control impotent, it is politics of authority. Prevailing groups escalated their ideologies through repressive Apparatuses or through Ideological State Apparatuses as coined by French Marxist Philosopher Louis Althusser or even through hegemony. As the Brahmin caste or upper caste put forward the mythological scriptures like Manusmriti or Dharma-Shastra to validate their concepts. Where lower cast people willingly started to accept those ideologies and started considering themselves as subaltern, marginalized and inferior to upper caste. Under the hegemony their been camouflage and bare all oppression. Such hegemony was also spread by the colonizer in Third world countries so they could dexterously control this people.

#### **DALIT ASPIRATIONS AND ANNIHILATION OF CASTE**

**“Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace. Annihilation of Caste is a breach of peace” – Dr.B.R. Ambedkar.**

Dalit women have unique lived experiences, as this faction comprises of the intersectional oppressions of two groups oppressed on account of their birth: ‘Dalits’ and ‘women’. Dalits in India are the ‘depressed classes’ (Ambedkar, 1936) and women ‘the second sex’ (Beauvoir, 1989). These doubly oppressed women are subjugated, downgraded, and marginalized. Hence the need to create a Dalit Feminist Standpoint has been identified by many researchers: Gopal Guru (1995), Sharmila Rege (1998), and Chhaya Datar (1999). However, ‘lived experience’ of Dalit women and their perspectives could be articulated accurately in their writing.

The scrutiny of select texts: Sangati, The Weave of My Life, and The Prisons We Broke reveal the common aspect of the lives of their respective writers: Bama Faustina, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble, that they all certainly have a privileged standpoint as an 'outsider-within'. The study reflects their development from childhood to fully conscious grown-ups; their odyssey from a marginal space to the dominant social structures fetching them the epistemic benefit of the 'double vision' as a result of bestriding both sides of a dichotomous social divide. This shaped their new perspectives on life. These narratives can be called 'social epiphanies' which led Dalit women to follow the ethics of Black women writers, especially 'politicizing of their memory', 'remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present' (hooks 1990: 147).

Another commonality among Dalit women writers is that they all have written their narratives in their regional languages; therefore, the visibility of these minor texts has been accredited to the political commitment of their translators. Maya Pandit has crossed many borders and very proficiently introduced the readers who are 'outsiders', to the nooks and crannies of Indian Marathi region in her translations of the two original Marathi texts into English: Kamble's *JinaAamcha* (1985) as *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) and Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) as *The Weave of My Life: Dalit Women's Memoirs* (2008). Sangati, an English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom of the second work of Bama, published in Tamil (1994) conveys the essence of the original text without sensationalizing its subject matter. As a result, what is from the margins in the regional language and culture has been brought into the vanguard of the international arena for the sake of bonding with similar cultural forces operating within other cultures. Thus, as with Black women intellectuals, the 'double vision' of Dalit women writers helped them to understand that the privileged classes and the patriarchy use ideologies to restrict these women to the periphery, consequently limiting their access to societal resources and institutions to control, define, and marginalize their location.

The term 'outsider-within' was first coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986). 'Outsider-within' status holder occupies a special space that their difference makes; they become different people, 'the other', 'marginalized'. It shapes the perspective of the experiencer which locates a unique standpoint. 'Outsider-within' status was captured by Bell Hooks, a black feminist critic while giving an account of her small-town, Kentucky childhood, she registers, 'living as we did—on the edge— we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out... we understood both' (1984: vii). Their difference makes them conscious of patterns or social constructions that may be beyond the comprehension or sight of sociological insiders. Therefore, the select narratives reveal some common themes. The lived experiences of Dalit women are painful. "When drawing on bitter memories and writing about them, the tendency to reconstruct instead of resurrecting the past is inevitable" (Whitehead, 2009:126). Chandran and Hashim (2014) assert that in the process of reconstructing, writers may choose to restructure and present events or experiences according to the importance that deems appropriate. Accordingly, the writers of the select texts while writing about the oppression and marginalization of the Dalit community develop a strong leaning towards feminist issues because gender with caste forms a lethal combination in the lives of women. As a result, consideration of the interlocking nature of caste, gender, and class oppression is the foremost recurring theme in the select texts followed by the discussion on the endurance and resilience, and the role of women in the transformation of Dalit community. Secondly, while life as a Dalit woman may produce certain commonalities of outlook, the multiplicity of class, age, religion, and sexual orientation shaping individual Dalit women's lives has resulted in different expressions of these common themes. Therefore, collective themes that appear in their narratives may be experienced and expressed differently by different groups of Dalit women. Finally, while a Dalit Feminist Standpoint certainly exists, its contours or outlines may not be clear to Dalit women themselves. Therefore, this paper theorizes the articulation of Dalit women's lived experiences to elucidate a Dalit Feminist Standpoint (DFS) with the hope that documenting the experiences of depressed women may reach a wider audience. The subsequent discussion of three key themes in select life narratives is itself a fragment of this emerging process of interpretation.

Dalit women being sexually harassed by Dalit men is not a new story. Almost all my Dalit women friends have expressed their helplessness with regard to sexual harassment at the hands of Dalit men because most of these sexual predators pass for Dalit student-leaders, activists, poets etc. Dalit women being sexually harassed by Dalit student-leaders, Dalit academics, activists, and lawyers is considered an "internal matter" and a "minor concern" within Dalit activist circles. These issues are mostly dealt by Dalit scholars or activists, where Dalit women are pressured to not put the Dalit men through due process since such an act is considered a "betrayal" to the Dalit movement.

Dalit women face gruesome violence at the hands of dominant-caste men and women. [Khairlanji](#) is an example of such violence. (Teltumbde, 2008) Dalit women face domestic violence in families. ([Kamble, 2008 and Pawar, 2008](#)) Dalit women face discrimination both from upper-caste feminists and Dalit men in academic and political platforms. Caste-discrimination and public violence is directed more against Dalit women than men. The justification that Dalit men face public violence and redirect/resolve their angst towards Dalit women is a distorted

and misplaced concept. Dalit women face more public violence than Dalit men. However, they do not resolve it by redirecting it to their respective husbands.

Also Dalit ideology seems to have constructed Dalit women as mere extensions of their caste-group, and are not ready to respect their sexual choices. It resembles the same Brahminical ideology of gender. I would like to present my views on the gap between Ambedkar's idea of caste-exogamy and its implementation by Dalit ideologues.

While upholding the idea of inter-caste marriage, the movement has overlooked the position of Dalit women in such political assertion of inter-caste marriage which keeps them at the receiving end of caste oppression and Brahminical patriarchy. Dalit women who suffer various forms of graded patriarchies along with graded inequalities of caste, have faced gruesome violence in inter-caste marriages with dominant caste men. Chandra Sri (Hyderabad-based activist), Radhika Vemula (Rohith Vemula's mother) are the victims of casteism and untouchability in their matrimonial homes. (Tamalapakula, 2019) Moreover, Dalit activist men seem to be supporting only a Dalit man's marriage with a dominant-caste woman but not a Dalit woman's inter-caste marriage. The idea of annihilation of caste through inter-caste marriage subverts the foundations of caste which is built on caste-endogamy. Caste endogamy, or marriage between men and women who belong to the same caste, helps the perpetuation of the caste-system. However, upholding the ideology of inter-caste marriage unilaterally leads to reconstruction of heterosexual-monogamous-patriarchal marriage as the only viable form of conjugality available to Dalits.

As a Dalit woman, Pawar wrote about her life experiences, dared to articulate them intimately and explicitly — and that was the point of arrival from which Dalit narratives against caste society became clearer to the world. Though pioneering writers like Shantabai Kamble and other Dalit women had already put their struggle into words, it was Pawar's work which received wide readership. In her book, one of the instances she mentions is of the menstrual cycle, illustrating how the idea of 'purity' and 'impurity' not only fractured Brahmins psychologically but also victimised Dalits till a certain point of time. When she, as a girl, was made to sit in a corner by her mother to avoid touching anything during her cycle, Pawar recounts thinking: "As if I wasn't discriminated (against) enough by others outside, now (my) family too, has set rules for me". This incisive understanding showed how Pawar explored and experienced the twofold struggle — of a woman, and of a Dalit. This exploration of one's personality in relation to society is a remarkable contribution she made to the discourse of feminism in India. This also served as the arrival point for Dalit feminism, as 'feminism' in India — based as it was on the understanding of Brahmin/upper caste women due to their relatively better position in the powerstructure of the caste society — could not do justice to Dalit women's issues. Dalit women dealt with

'caste+patriarchy' whereas Brahmin feminists were mostly blind to the caste factor in feminism until recently. Pawar did not stop with an autobiography, in exploring the nuances of Dalit life. She also wrote two collections of short stories and one play, *Vhay Mi Savitribai (Yes! I am Savitribai)*, based on India's first woman teacher Savitribai Phule. The play, in which Pawar has also acted, has been running for almost 25 years. Pawar has been one of the prominent members of the women's movement for decades in Maharashtra. Her biggest contribution is a book she co-authored with Minakshi Moon, *Amhihi Itihas Ghadvila* (translated and published in English as *We Also Made History*). The book included the narratives of Dalit women who actively participated in Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement against caste. This book is remarkable in many ways as it was perhaps one of the first to collect oral accounts of women and build it into a discursive narrative that cemented the voice of Dalit feminism.

Pawar — as a writer, and one of the strongest voices of Dalit feminism — has made her own place in the history of Dalit women and their contribution to the movement against caste. Not only this, her book (*Aaidan*) laid the groundwork for building a theory around Dalit women's narratives. *Aaidan* — as a book, as a manifestation of the Dalit woman's mind, as a speech of a Dalit woman, as a theory — indicated the arrival of the Dalit woman, who had started to see the twofold oppression in which she had been caught for centuries. Thus did Urmila Pawar break the barriers of caste and patriarchy — both of which are part and parcel of Brahminism.

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### COMPASSION OF OPPRESSION AND LACK OF HUMANITY

**“Religion, social status, and property are all sources of power and authority which one man has, to control the liberty of another” – Dr.B.R.Ambedkar.**

Bama's life narrative is based on her life as a dalit Christian belonging to the Paraya community. This Tamil dalit community has converted to Christianity but Bama's narrative sheds light on how conversion did not help them to be saved from caste discrimination which is practised as much in Christianity as in Hinduism. The book is written at a point of crisis in Bama's life. She had joined the convent as a nun with the objective of serving the poor dalit community but after discovering the impossibility of realising her mission within an order which differs in practice from what it outwardly professes, she decided to leave the nunnery and her secure job and join back her community. She wrote the narrative at this juncture and in it she shares the context of dalit life within the community in which she grew up. She has written about their world of hard labour, food habits, games, intercommunity conflicts within her village, their exploitation at the hands of the upper castes, state machinery, police etc, her determined efforts to get an education, her realisation of the presence of casteism in all institutions, her Christian upbringing, joining the Catholic order, disappointment with the hypocrisies she encounters and her quest for living a meaningful life, by working for the liberation of the dalits.

As we read *Karruku*, we notice that Bama has creatively and purposefully transgressed the traditional expectations from autobiographical writing, as a genre. In this context, M. S.S. Pandian has brought out the relevance of some of the textual strategies used by her. Firstly, her not giving any specific name to herself as protagonist, or to her village and the institutions and important people that figure in the narrative effectively serves to replace the autobiographical 'I', a product of bourgeois individualism, with the collectivity of the dalit community. It is not just her story but her community's story since her pain, strength, beliefs, religion, language, culture, etc, are all what her community provided. Further, this strategy of anonymity serves to shift the narrative from the local into a universal indictment against oppression (Pandian, 1998, p.129-135). Another striking feature of *Karruku* is that the story is not told in a linear narrative traditionally associated with autobiographical writing. Events and incidents are re-visited repeatedly, giving different perspectives on them which Bama gains at different stages of her life. This mode also serves to deepen the reader's understanding of the dalit experience.

As compared to the two Marathi life narratives by Kamble and Pawar, Bama's *Karruku* does not offer a detailed and focussed analysis of the life of the women of her community. It is in her later publication, the novel *Sangati* (1994) that Bama has dealt primarily with the lives of a community of dalit women and their joint struggle and strengths. Yet, even in *Karruku*, the narrative is interspersed with a gendered perspective as she points out the anomaly about men being always paid more for the same labour (Bama, 1992, p.46), or when she states matter of factly that the community cannot see the sense in sending girls to school since it is the girl child who bears the burden of the dire poverty of the family by staying at home, collecting firewood, looking after the chores, caring for the babies, etc (Bama, 1992, p.68). When she narrates the incident about the inter-caste trouble which led to most of the men of the community being taken into police custody, she brings out a gendered perspective on how the women were subjected to obscene comments and sexually charged suggestions from the policemen who came to inspect the houses.

The narrative is that Bama does not simply tell a tale of women as helpless, passive victims but brings out their resilience, ingenuity and strength, in the midst of their hard labour and multiple anxieties. She also narrates various instances to highlight the grit and creativity of the women who not only manage to look after themselves and the children without the men but also employ strategies to protect some of the men to escape arrest or how they cleverly help one of the men to attend his son's funeral in spite of the police vigil. In this way, Bama draws attention to the fact that, despite the harsh realities of their lives, the women of her community deserve admiration and not pity. By drawing attention to some Bama's main concern in *Karruku*, appears to be her attempt to bring about social change by bringing to the forefront and then questioning the irrational casteism which dalits like herself are subjected to, within all social structures and institutions, including within the Catholic church. Her narration of her life experiences in the book is indeed a part of her political struggle to incite the dalits about the injustice of the human discriminatory practices which she has observed and experienced and to bring awareness within them about their strengths and the necessity to unite and battle for their rights. She feels that the worst injustice is when the dalits unquestioningly internalise their subjugation due to a handed down sense of their inferiority, based on fate.

Laying emphasis on the important role of education, she has claimed that she could dare to speak up for herself and hold her head high only because of the ability she acquired through her education. The narrative communicates her continual questioning on behalf of her community. "How did the upper castes become so elevated?" she asks. She wants the dalits to "dare to stand up for change" and a "just society where all are equal" (Bama, 1992, p.24). Kamble and Pawar who have prominently brought in the legacy of Ambedkar in the liberation struggle of the dalits, Bama does not specifically mention either Ambedkar or the Tamil leader, Periyar, although her views and her vision are in consonance with them and a part of the larger dalit movement. Bama links her goal towards an equal and just society with her narrative of her personal journey towards discovering the true meaning of God who has "the greatest compassion for the oppressed" (Bama, 1992, p.90). Her narration of her life as a Tamil dalit Christian who earlier adhered to the prescribed religious rituals out of fear, her joining the convent and understanding of the "lack of humanity" in the professed piety of the nuns and priests who discriminated against and exploited rather than served the poor and needy followed by her reading and interpretation of the Bible for herself, mark the stages in her spiritual growth. She learns that God's true meaning is linked to the questioning of injustice which is indeed the purpose of her own life as it ought to be for all dalits who should reclaim their likeness to God and live with self-respect and a love towards all humankind (Bama, 1992, p.94). Bama's self-discovery of this truth is also on behalf of her community.

## CONCLUSION

Ambedkar's analysis of degrading status of Hindu women in terms of Manu's social code and accompanying social ideology throws light on some aspects of caste-gender interface. It indicates that while the women from all castes suffered Manu's code of gender disabilities, the women from untouchable caste suffered both from caste and gender disabilities. So while high caste women may be willing partners in addressing the disabilities related to gender, caste cleavage may develop on the issue of caste discrimination, as this is seen as an issue concerning only Dalit women. The majority of high caste women, often may find themselves on the side of high caste men. By highlighting the role of Hindu ideology and legal framework, Ambedkar has outlined the genesis of the degrading status of Hindu women.

Ambedkar also understood how women are often made the instruments for the perpetuation of the caste hierarchy, for nurturing the culture of caste. In India, patriarchal control of women by men of their own community is often justified by the need to maintain the caste order. This applies to upper-caste women, but in the case of Dalit women there is a possibility of men and women coming together to fight caste patriarchy. Therefore, the "interface between caste, patriarchy and gender", is a theme which needs thorough theoretical and empirical study to locate the causes and the actual day-to-day functioning, often in new modes which respond to changing social dynamics--of the multi-layered caste and gender exploitation of Dalit women. Research is required firstly, to understand the connection between patriarchy and caste, what sort of experiences Dalit women had in the family as mother, wife and daughter; what difference was there between a common Dalit or non-Dalit housewife and a Dalit woman social worker and how far these women are aware of continuing 'atrocities' on women and similar issues. Women from excluded groups are not 'just like' the rest of the women. They are also disadvantaged by who they are. They suffer from social exclusion which deprives them of choices and opportunities to escape from poverty and denies them a voice to claim their rights. There is a close inter-face between patriarchy and social exclusion which enforce each other. The women from discriminated groups suffer from triple deprivation - gender, poverty and social exclusion. We need to study the nature and forms of discrimination faced by Dalit women as a woman, as a Dalit woman and as a poor woman.



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