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Research Article



From Individuality to Universality: A Critical Exposition of ‘Self’ of Women in Dalit Movement and Literature in India

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Abstract

This scholarly research article delves into the conceptualization of ‘Self’ of women in the Dalit movement and literature in India, providing a critical analysis that bridges the gap between individuality and universality. It initiates a discourse on the often-overlooked narrative of Dalit women in a predominantly patriarchal and caste-dominated society, underscoring the experiences they encapsulate, extending from personal narratives to shared universality. Through the examination of an assortment of primary sources, including autobiographies, literary texts, speeches, and interviews of Dalit women, this study unveils the complexities in their identities, informed by the intersection of caste, gender, and class. It further explores how

these experiences, entrenched in oppression and resistance, shape the ‘Self’ and communal identity of Dalit women. The article advances a unique theoretical framework that combines intersectional feminism and subaltern studies to decipher the nuances of Dalit women’s selfhood. The framework enables a systematic exploration of the convergences and divergences in the perception of ‘Self’ amongst Dalit women, aiding in the understanding of their position within the wider socio-political discourse. In unearthing the shared collective consciousness arising from individual struggles, the research sheds light on the universality of Dalit women’s experiences. Simultaneously, it exposes the evolution of the Dalit women’s movement from a regional force to a global voice, forging an essential link between local experiences and universal human rights discourses. This study conclusively asserts the need for broader recognition and comprehension of Dalit women’s narratives, not as a marginal story but as a central one that intersects with various global feminist and human rights movements. It proposes that the understanding of Dalit women’s ‘Self’ is pivotal in moving towards an inclusive and equitable society, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of social justice in India and beyond.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Selfhood, Individuality, Universality, Intersectional Feminism, Subaltern Studies, Collective Consciousness, Autobiographies, Patriarchy, Caste System, Human Rights Discourse, Social Justice, Marginalized Narratives, Gender-Class-Caste Intersectionality, Global Feminist Movements

Right after the independence in 1947, English literature in India has been expressing an earnest concern towards the marginalised classes of society. In modern times, literature representing the writings of and about the exploited people has been pivotal in various intellectual discourses and discussions. Though even in the earlier times, there have been many writers in the post-colonial literature addressing the social reality of India, who wrote about the various aspects of Dalit community e.g. Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Munshi Premchand etc., the modern litterateurs have attempted to voice the unheard agonies, pain, which has earlier been considered as ‘secondary’ or ‘subaltern’ by the privileged classes of society, Etymologically speaking, the term ‘Dalit’ is derived from the Sanskrit language where it connotes the ‘oppressed’ or ‘a member of caste that is considered the lowest, most deprived and has an unequal advantages’ as compared to the upper caste. In this context, the present paper attempts to reflect on the following research questions:

1. What are the assumptions of ‘soul’ (*Atman*) as a universal phenomenon and its impact on the caste division mentioned in Indian scriptures?
2. Who is *Dalit* as a caste and how are they depicted by non-*Dalits* in Indian literature?
3. Is being *Dalit* a universal phenomenon on the grounds of empathy?
4. What is the status of women in *Dalit* Movements and *Dalit* Literature in India?
5. How does a ‘*Dalit* woman’ find herself excluded from the notion of ‘womanhood’?

When we study the grand narratives in Indian context, such as the *Aptavakyas* of Vedic scriptures, it is realised that they talk about living beings as the part of the absolute soul which

is called *Brahman*- the supreme cosmic reality; such *Brahman* has to be realised nowhere else but within you. Maybe this is the reason why the Vedas assert '*ayam atma asi* (I am the Soul)', '*Tat tvam Asi* (Thou art thee)' and '*Aham Brahmasmi*' (I am the Absolute One). That is why, the inner voice keeps repeating '*Soham-Soham*' meaning 'I am the God'. This is the realisation of the self which we usually don't comprehend, since we ignore our inner voice. It has been clearly mentioned as: "*Deho Devalayah Prakto Jivo Devah Sanatah*" (The body is like a temple where the God is the dweller). (2nd adhyay, Maitreyi Upnishad)

According to Rishi Kanada- the founder of *Vaisesika Darśan*, *Dharma* may be defined as "*Yato, Bhudayah – Nisreyash Siddhih Sa Dharmah*" (*Vaisheshika-sutra 1.1.2 Eng. trans.*)

The above mentioned śloka means 'dharma is that which guides us to the attainment of *abhyudaya* in this world; that guides us away from the sufferings and that takes us to the ultimate goal of human life. Indian philosophy is claimed to be ascetic in nature. As Heinrich Zimmer points out in his famous book *Philosophies of India*, "...this is the sort of identity that we should expect to find in the west, only in a monk or a priest alone" (Zimmer 49).

Influenced by the Western anthropocentric approach, we proudly name ourselves (humans) as the most intellectual and rational being on earth, but in this endeavour tend to violate the true spirit of universal fraternity (repeatedly referred to as 'universal fraternity'). Even in *Manusmriti*, we find that the caste system is nothing but a provided structure of society in which people would be systematically organized on the grounds of their assigned duties (*varnāśrama vyavasthā*). Following the same duties for a long time from one generation-to-another-generation, it took the form of a social evil comprising depravedness, exploitation, discrimination on the name of untouchability and much more.

Although in the literature of various languages (in India), we find the illustrations but the term 'Dalit literature' came into existence for the first time in 1960s in the Marathi language and soon its spirit appeared in other prevailing languages of India. *Dalit Conference of Bombay*, 1972 (held under the supervision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar)- a combined effort of, Dalit Panthers and U.S Black panthers aired the notion of 'Dalit consciousness' at the global level and expressed their feelings and solidarity. Arjun Dangle- a prominent writer of *Dalit Panther* group says:

Dalit is not a caste but realisation and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity rebellion and loyalty to science does finally ending as revolutionary. (Dangle, 21)

During 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., a conflict between higher class and lower class was prominent in society. Ancient *Dharmaśāstras* and *Rigveda*- both imparted a lot of significance to this caste system (*varnāśrama vyavasthā*), but they had only two castes in the society- Hindu Caste known as the 'Savarna' and the other lower castes known as the 'Avarna'. This lower class, came to known subsequently with various names like Dās, Asura, Rakshasa, Chāndālś and so on. Before 1947, Britishers used to call them the 'depressed class' and after independence, they were called the 'schedule caste', which was officially a name given to designate the lower classes by the Indian Constitution:

They were broken men and ‘Protestant Hindus’ to Dr. Ambedkar and ‘Harijan’ to Mahatma Gandhi. To the Britishers, they were the ‘untouchables’ and ‘depressed classes’. They were (put under a schedule and) referred to as the scheduled caste in the constitution of India. *Dalit* is a recent term adopted by the dalit themselves to indicate the fact that they are the most oppressed, exploited and dehumanized section of Indian culture. (Massey, 81)

In spite of the revolutionary attempts made by Vlangkar and Moon Pande, Dalit movement takes real shape with the emergence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Indian political scenario. The idea of 19th century Dalit reformer Jyoti Rao Phule is also not of less importance, when he considered *Śūdra* and *Dalits* the original inhabitants of India. He was in favour of rejecting the universal idea of Hinduism and advocated ‘Sarvjanik Satya Dharma’ to establish a discrimination-free and egalitarian society. As the *Neo-Dalit* or ‘Adi’ movements (of 1920) arose in several parts of India, it is seen that many Indian writers e.g. Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*), Mulkraj Anand (*Untouchable*), Ravindra Nath Tagore (*Chandalika*) etc. were consistently contributing to the literary world with their realistic and heartrending works. Even in Hindi literature, we can see the glimpses of *Dalit* revolutionary spirit when Munshi Prem Chandra writes in *Godan*:

You cannot make Brahmins out of us but, we can make Chamars out of you. If you’re willing to make us Brahmans, our whole community is agreeable. As long as that’s not possible, then become chamars. Eat with us, drink with us and live with us. If you are going to take away our honour, then give us your caste. (Jain & Kushwaha 171)

These are the words spoken by Harkhu Chamar to Datadin, who is a village Brahmin. Harkhu raises his voice against the evil intentions of Brahmin, who rejects the lower castes on the name of untouchability, but never hesitates to molest a woman of the so-called inferior caste. Not only this, but Mulk Raj Anand also presents the same double-standard of the upper caste people in his novel *Untouchable*, when a young sweeper Bakha’s sister has to wait for the water (on the name of untouchability), but she is never spared from the attempts of molestation on the same grounds.

Among the various voices rising from Bengal, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh etc., the concerns raised by the non-Dalit writers can also be heard clearly and consistently; but the argument regarding the Dalit literature as an unadulterated and realistic version of the experiences of the marginalized people (on the name of caste) demands a clearer definition of this stream. As Sharan Kumar Limbale points out that Dalit Literature should be seen as a typical literature written by and about the dalits. It should necessarily have a spirit of Dalit responsiveness in it. A true Dalit literature should have Dalitness as its main spirit and it should certainly be written with a purpose to let subaltern groups be aware of their subordination and suppression; it should necessarily manifest their agony and struggle against the Hindus belonging to the upper castes.

However, the resolution proposed by the *Dalit Sahitya Sangh Conference* (1958) univocally claims that the literature written by Dalit and/or the literature focusing on dalit life

though written by other castes might be acknowledged as a unique establishment and therefore, can be considered as Dalit Literature. (Raj 39-45)

Another conspicuous aspect of such literature is the contribution of women writers which follows strong ideological differences that sustain between them and other male writers of the dalit literature: it can be easily seen that while male writings are more concerned about their slavery, subjugation and exploitation by upper caste, the dalit women writers express their life-narratives, since they face a double bind of not only grappling with the caste-biased social system but also being humiliated for being a dalit woman (This phenomenon of ‘double-binding’ can be compared to the concerns of Martin Bernal depicted in the well-known work *Black Athena*, Routledge University Press, 1987). Therefore, they interrogate the patriarchal issues prevailing within and outside the dalit community. Vimal Thorat - a dalit activist and academicians, states about this newly-emerging dalit women’s literature that ‘it claims for the recognition for their own unique identity’ and says that:

We now have two generations of articulate, committed dalit women professionals who are lecturers, professors, activists. But their articulation threatens the dalit male leadership. They will find no place on their committees! Their presence itself will be a threat to their articulations that refuse to articulate the issue of brutal violence against dalit woman, gender violence and nuts-and-bolts issues like the right to water and a life of dignity. Forty years after the dalit movement, where is women’s share? (Thorat, web)

The questions raised by dalit women writers bring their stereotype image up to a different level, where their male counterparts seem to be entangled (since they know the capability of women) in between a traditional role assigned to women and sways of new women’s image being infused with the same. This consciousness of women’s ‘worth’ reflected through her literary works as Urmila Pawar’s autobiography *The Wave of my Life: A Dalit Women’s Memoirs* points out:

On the one hand, he was proud of my writing; he admitted as much to his friends and relatives. But on the other, he immensely resented my being recognised as a writer, my speaking in public programs and my emerging as a figure in the public domain. (Pawar246)

Urmila Pawar’s autobiography also reveals the fact that how being women is interpreted differently and is placed on backfoot even in the Dalit struggle. It is not just an issue of being dalit; it is also not just being a woman, but it is being a woman and a dalit at the same time. In other words, it is being ‘marginalised among marginalized’. In such a situation, dalit women seem to be a misfit for both the regular ideologies of dalit men and a general idea of women’s movements, which have their own issues and doesn’t seem to be very concerned with the women under the veil of the dalit tag.

To grapple with the issue, Indian lower castes paved the way for a unique ideology to which they call ‘Dalit Feminist Tradition’. As a result, the rise of various women’s movements, e.g. National Federation of Dalit Women, Vikas Panchayat Mahila Parishad, Christy Mahila Sangharsh Sangathan during 1990s aired the presuppositions of Gopal Guru’s essay “*Dalit Women Talk Differently*” (1995)

In his prominent work “*Dalit Women Talk Differently*” Gopal Guru draws our attention towards the basic problems of *Dalit* community and focuses on the notion of difference on the following grounds:

He says that at the initial stage, dalit women do appreciate the radical fervour of new feminist movements in Maharashtra, yet they don't completely comprehend it as a satisfactory pleading for them. During the Peasant Movements, they stood against the complete subjugation of deprived caste to the presiding voice of Maharashtra's *Shetkari Sanghata* and Karnataka's *Rayat Sangh*. For them, Peasants Movements were well-occupied by such people whose main agenda was to represent the aristocratic peasants and that is why, they seemed carefully ignorant of the poor dalit labourers working in agricultural fields and their concern for minimum remuneration. (Guru 2548)

Secondly, according to Gopal Guru (2548), Dalit women would never be satisfied with *Shetkari Sanghata* and its feminist supporters on the issue of 'moral economy'. The rationale behind this dissatisfaction can be traced from the Dalit women's genuine emphasis that *Sanghata*'s moral economy didn't address their poverty for any feasible solution; rather it merely implored their poor conditions as an appropriate and natural condition.

In addition, these so-called lower caste women didn't seem satisfied with the notion of 'ecofeminist call' for the emergence of environmental consciousness and thereby, advocate their viewpoint by drawing attention to the complete negligence of *Dalits* during the equal distribution of land. No justified 'legitimate piece of land' from 'the ceiling land' was distributed among them as the land was always under the control of village landlords. (Guru 2548)

Thirdly, the solidarity of womenhood and its treatment as a homogenous community can always be challenged on the grounds of being a woman of an upper caste and the women belonging to the *Dalit* community. Women's solidarity at global and national level seems to ignore certain latent but significant issues; as the dalit women find themselves exploited by the upper caste women too. Such contradictions, according to Gopal Guru, "... involve subtle forms of caste-discrimination as practiced by upper caste upper class women against *Dalit* women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of the *Dalit* women in rural areas..." (Guru 2548)

Gopal Guru further states:

... thus beneath the call for the women's solidarity the identity of *Dalit* women as 'Dalit' gets whitewashed and allows a 'non-Dalit' woman to speak on her behalf. It is against this background that Dalit women have of late protested against their 'guest appearances' in a text or a speech of a non-Dalit woman and instead organised on their own terms. They consider the feminist theory developed by non-Dalit women as inauthentic since it does not capture their reality. (Guru 2548)

Dalit literature in India also reminds us of the Afro-American Feminist writers and growth of black feminist consciousness and its immense contribution to the world of literature. Such shared experiences of Dalit women play a unique role in the growth of 'third wave of feminism'. They not only reject the homogenous appearances of Indian women created by

upper caste feminist writers, but are capable enough to raise voice against the meaningless foolish multiple narratives of 'oppression'. The notion of '*difference*' between the homogenous image of feminism in its general sense (which talks about upper caste women) and women who are twice the victim of marginalisation (as a woman belonging to *Dalit* community) might be better comprehended with stand point theory that insists upon making women's experiences as the point of departure and depicts it more convincing to understand dalit women's narratives or perspectives since they are deemed to be the '*Dalit* among the *Dalits*'. Keeping this standpoint theory in mind, one intensifies the problem of dalit women as a prey to exploitation and subordination and somewhere stands with Gopal Guru's opinion which says that "Dalit women's issues by non-dalits are less authentic" (Guru2548) due to their different social locations.

This theory weakens the strength of women as an 'integrated force' and restricts its scope. However, a Telugu dalit women writer C. Swarupani seems to settle the discussion with a more liberal opinion saying:

Writing by dalits that is based on dalit consciousness will reflect the painful *lived* experiences of dalit people. The fact of being born a dalit alone is not enough to write dalit poetry. Dalit consciousness is a critical factor in dalit writing. (Rani WS-21)

Under the tutelage of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, dalit women started participating in various walks of life including the demands for equal rights during *Mahad Satyagraha* (1927) for claiming water from the same tank, *Nasik Satyagrah* (1930) which was held to open the gates of temples for all the people belonging to Hinduism; not only this these dalit women showed a strong enthusiasm towards religious conversion with the opinion that they needed a religion which will provide them equal status, full freedom and the long-awaited respect 'not simply as a dalit, but as a woman too'.

More than a socio-political agenda, dalit women's life transformed and incepted a new genre in the world of literature. Autobiographies are generally considered an outcome of bourgeois 'life history' and is therefore, largely supposed to be an account of one's life-events as they usually happened and thus, is regarded as a 'factual literary type'. Such a kind of writing style by the Dalit writers definitely provided a primary data which exposes their exploitation by the upper section of the society, but as far as the resolution rights for emancipation is concerned; their works (especially literature written by women) should be studied as 'testimonials'. As a testimonial, the dalit women's literature represents the whole *Dalit Womenhood* as 'a single entity suffering from the same pain'. It talks about their subordination in a collective manner. In this context, Sharmila Rege says:

... dalit life narratives are in fact testimonials, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. (Rege13)

Both ideologically and as an artistic piece, Dalit women's literature has presented the notion of dalit-women as a different- subjugated but awakened entity, capable to express her sorrow, sufficiently vocal to raise questions and potential enough to fire her revolutionary spirit. Their narratives show lot of maturity not only in India, but also overseas; they are

securing their position as a ‘resistance-narrative’. At least this much can be asserted here that nobody can ignore their proclamation on any of the grounds. As Bama says, “Sangati grew out of hope that the dalit women who read it will rise up in fervour and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society” (Bama ix).

This revolutionary spirit makes their presence more evident and challenging when Madduri Vijayasree states:

...

For you

It may be surprising

Ridiculous

Irritating

But

I am a new question.” (Vijayasree qtd. In Bharathi/ Rani217)

The above-mentioned discussion gives rise to certain worth-pondering issues:

- Before we criticize our old narratives, we have to see if we are thoroughly analyzing them by assimilating the real meaning and sole purpose of these *Aptavakyas*? Since these *Aptavakyas* consider absolute soul (*Atman*) as the dweller of each and every particle of this universe, we have to see how far making any distinction on the name of caste is justified and how far criticizing Indian grand narratives would be acceptable considering the shortcoming of their improper interpretations. The idea of *Shram-Vibhajan* (Division of Labour) seems to be much misinterpreted and corrupted here. As per the distinctions found in the classical scriptures, it is not the Sudras who are supposed to perform a specific set of duties; rather it is the performance of duties that provide the concerned people a specific identity in a particular socio-cultural and political context. In the true spirit of reason, science and progress, people perform different duties in different contexts, irrespective of the duties allocated to them by the scriptures- Any man may publish books or do the household chores as per the requirements. In such a scenario, it is to be seen how far the criticism will sustain and hold its ground. It goes unsaid, at this point of time, no work maybe considered to be of more or less importance (unless it is detrimental to the multi-cultural fabric of the modern society). So, it is a time to move on!
- If we consider Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak’s definition, it is seen that any community which is devoid of any platform for expression, will be considered a subaltern. (Every group may be seen as subaltern if looked upon from other’s perspective- may it be Dalit for upper caste, Dalit women for Dalit men or Dalit women for upper class men and women). Revisiting this definition would make it clearer that the term subaltern is a relative term that should not be bracketed out of its contextual meaning. Since the upper caste/class men are also seen working in different sectors in the modern society, they are also marginalized and thereby, may be considered ‘subaltern’, for someone else. Interestingly but ironically, what I find here is that, I remember above names only because they actually have enough voice to let the

world realize there pain but perhaps there is much more that goes unheard. We also find the names of a few women- dominating societies like Musuo, China and obviously in such case men might be feeling subjugated in such societies. Here the point is that being subjugated or, subaltern is not limited to a particular group of society, but it is a universal phenomenon and affects all individuals in different ways.

- The different kind of subjugations might give birth to different tastes of pain, but one clear phenomenon is also incepted here that we all at least know the flavour of subjugation and the suffocation behind it (though it goes unheard in most of the cases). Here again, Gayatri's popular concept of "learn to learn from below" (discussed by Andreotti, 69) plays its role. If we really believe that in one way or other, we all belong to the subaltern groups, we all should head up with a huge heart to understand each-other's agonies.

We should keep in mind that under a huge umbrella term 'subaltern', we all are sharing our portions of subjugation and frustrations and this realization is the only way how empathy and care may be incepted in the hearts of the people. This is the only way how we can call ourselves Proud-Rational-Empathetic-Humans.

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