



Dalit Feminist Discourse: Women in Neo- Literary Canon

Dr Charu Arya*

*Assistant Professor, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi

Citation: Dr Charu Arya, (2021), Dalit Feminist Discourse: Women in Neo- Literary Canon, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 27(1) 1113 - 1116

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v27i1.9443

‘The challenge to and of feminist writing lies in negotiating women’s identity defined in these terms through simultaneous claim and disavowal: women *are* classed, caste and communal subjects, and both privilege and oppression may be grounded in identity recognised in those terms (in addition to being hierarchised in terms of gender); at the same time, in the interests of a transformative politics, difference must be managed, if not transcended.’

(Rajeswari Sundar Rajan 1999)

When Rajeswari Sundar Rajan was asserting on above description of women being contextualized into categories, she was asserting on the on-gender divisions within the political categorization of people. This gender division led to the further categorisation of women into different challenges for rural and urban women during feminist movements. These broad divisions were made to understand the feminist movements that started during the colonial period that continued in the post-colonial period as well. She also talks about the major division of women into class, caste and community and the impact of these divisions on the feminist movements. In an essay in Rajan’s book, Anupama Rao asserts that the feminist movement was fighting for the rights of women in creating social and political equality for progressive women fighting for their own rights and that caste question was not part of their movement. She describes feminist movement as part of upper caste women struggle where caste issues were not related to gender issues for them, and feminist position remains: ‘*the possibility of denying caste as a problem for gender*’. (Rajan 209)

The need of Dalit issues to be raised was actually born out of the treatment of Dalit women being treated as the ‘Other’ within the feminist voices. The movements emphasising on the struggle to impress upon the gender issues and differences created at the socio-political structures was the core issue, but within the caste and class issues, caste issues were denied their position in the social equality struggle. The feminist struggle was against the patriarchy and its dominance; hence, Dalit feminism was required then to be separated from feminist movement to protest against patriarchy and Dalit patriarchy. Patriarchy was prevalent in all castes and was not possible for Dalit women to highlight their struggle as Dalit women as it was not the suffering of the women of other castes.

Caste issues are more challenging to be tackled in almost all perspectives. Caste needs to be understood as different for different levels of castes within the hierarchical caste orders. Caste was constructed in the beginning of the social construction. Construction required certain laws hence, caste laws were made. These caste laws were taught and were followed easily in the beginning as these were backed by the teachings and preachings. So, for them at the beginning of the social structures, caste was constructed through preaching of texts. These texts were written solely with the purpose of teaching caste orders. But then castes were not normal divisions for the castes which fell at the end of these hierarchical orders and continuously saw discrimination and victimisation in the hands of the other castes. Now these oppressed castes had the gaze of the ‘Others’ or the victims and that was not based on the knowledge of any text but was constructed on the basis of their daily experiences of untouchability and discrimination as various fronts. Now these positions of oppressors and oppressed treated certain castes to be born to be oppressors and they had no issue in carrying on with the caste system whereas, the oppressed castes wanted to bring their victimization and their caste- community sufferings to be voiced.

This hierarchical caste division was accepted as a norm as it was dictated through the textual instructions and it divided people into various caste divisions. Later on, this hierarchical order created a major issue of giving power of dominance to certain castes and the same was denied to others. The essential socio-economic divisions of castes also dealt with issues like, class and community divisions. These broad divisions were made with the purpose of creating a social structure where people could be distinguished by their castes which also identifies their occupation and their position in the caste structure. The historical contextualizing of castes also brings in the specificity connected with the reasons for creating castes.

Uma Chakravarti describes historical existence of caste through various centuries but asserts that the caste flourished with strength during certain periods. She marks the age of Guptas around 300 A.D. as the time of the rise of upper caste dominance. She also quotes from *Advanced History of India* by Nilkantha Shastri and G. Srinivasachari,

'By the fifth century untouchability had also been incorporated into the caste system and is testified to by the Chinese traveller Fa Hien, and this too became a part of the expanding caste system.' (Chakravarti 57)

These caste structures were bestowing power to certain castes and were denying the same to others. This was majorly based on the acquisition of land and wealth by certain castes and helped them stay in the powerful positions because of their occupation and control over preaching texts. These caste structures were exclusive and non-transferrable as the caste determined the position and space of people in Indian caste structure. It was important the boundaries were marked and remained exclusive for each caste. These caste territories were built by making certain specific non accessible things within these divisions of caste-sections in the caste hierarchical order. Each caste structure was managing a few specific social entities. Chakravarti refers to an anthropologist Nur Yalman's argument where he describes caste structures as closed structures 'to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it.'

These concepts of purity and impurity, associated with the defilement of women was followed religiously to maintain what they considered as the power-oriented norms of each caste. Strict laws were made and punishments were decided, especially for the lower and oppressed castes who were considered 'impure' by birth. These strict norms were considered broken in the *Kalyug* which was the age when the caste norms were broken and mixing of castes was done through women getting married into different castes and endogamous caste structures were broken. These issues were though highlighted in through the centuries but no movement could change these close caste structures before this era.

With the colonization of India, a new wave of movements started that led to the openness towards the caste structure and women within these caste structures. Jyotiba Phule, the precursor of the movement against oppressed, he raised his voice against the oppression of the lower castes and women. His perspective was different from others. He highlighted the nature of oppressed where they accept it as their fate and are unable to understand that oppression was not a part of some divine culture but the oppressed people must understand that they are being oppressed because they have accepted their situation as their fate. Phule attacked the historical dominance and privilege of upper caste and uprooted the rituals that decided the caste dominance and power for certain castes. His perspective was not only to attack the oppressors and remind them of their false stories but he also provoked the oppressed people to rise and break the chains of enslavement that they have been carrying on for generations.

Phule strongly advocated education and knowledge as the path of finishing these oppressions where he also considered women as the oppressed section of the social structure. He encouraged women to get education and along with his wife, Savitribai Phule he supported many girl children to get access to education.

During colonial times, after Phule, B. R. Ambedkar aggressively supported the anti-caste movement and also brought in the western line of thinking to replace the orthodox caste system which was not suitable for the oppressed sections of the Indian caste system. Many other leaders like Periyar and Kancha Ilaiah carried these movements by bringing in more radical approach towards increasing knowledge and education in life of oppressed castes.

Women in the caste structures were put at the center and at the peripheries both. They were treated with higher positions when they were compared to men of the lower castes but remained in the lower positions in comparison to the upper caste men. Condition of lower caste women was the worst as they were the sufferers and victims of the patriarchy and caste patriarchy both. They lived in the state where they were denied many social rights as Dalits like access to water, well, food and many other things and further their physical abuse was considered as their fate. The caste politics and the gender politics both were oppressing the Dalit women and after the feminist movements in India, Dalit women movements initiated their caste question against Dalit women's oppression. Chakravarty describes that these Dalit women movement formulated their position in the following three ways in which Dalit women were oppressed:

- '(i) as subject to caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes;
 - (ii) as labourers subject to the class-based oppression, also mainly at the hands of the upper and middle castes who form the bulk of landowners;
 - (iii) as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste.'
- (Chakravarty 143)

Most of these issues were aggressively taken up by the writings of Dalit women in their expressions and narratives. They connected with their communities to voice their own exploitation and the politics of caste oppression as the reason for them to talk about the cruel realities of caste oppression. Arjun Dangle in the beginning of *Poisoned Bread* describes how significantly Dalit authors realised the importance of bringing in their own lived realities in open and led to many Dalit writers starting to express themselves through their narratives in the 1980s and 1990s. These narratives strongly argued by narrating their own journeys and the victimisation of their communities in the hand of the powerful upper caste communities. The tone from aggressive went on to the narratives which were leading the movements for changing lives of the Dalits in future. These narratives assert on describing their conditions in their individual environments but most of these narratives were owned by their writers as the experiences and atrocities were common. Their lives were barricaded not only physically but also emotionally and socially. The restrictions that they were facing were marked to find a gateway and these narratives worked like those gateways.

Narratives are strong mode of emphasising the self and individual in a larger context. The literature that is formed in the frame of narrative is strengthened with the context around it. In every narrative the writer is in

assertive mode to describe his or her experience as the reliable source of information for the readers. It refuses to be questioned as the writing has its own argument and experience in the whole narrative. These narratives are read with the certificate of authentication that the writer has attached with it by calling it an autobiographical journey. The descriptions and incidents in the narratives are always weaved on the basis of the lived experiences of the writer. The writers in such writings are aware of the effect that their writing will make.

Dalit women narratives, mostly lost their real meanings through various interpretations they received of their narratives. They were treated as survivors turned to 'superwoman' who fought through all the victimisation and discrimination and finally was there to speak for herself. As described by Abraham and Barak in the article *A Life Less Ordinary The female subaltern ad Dalit Literature in contemporary India* by Martine van Woerkens,

'Between 1982 and 1989, *Subaltern Studies*, the series of volumes inspired by this programme, destabilized the 'grand narratives' of the struggle for independence, irrespective of whether the narrative was of colonialist, communist or nationalist inspiration.' (Woerkens 225)

She argued that historically these narratives were framed within some socio- political discourse instead of being the literary work that was meant to be read as the literature of resistance. These narratives were voiced by the voiceless, the historically neglected and deprived sections of the society. They were historically and culturally denied their space in the history. These narratives not only spoke about the caste atrocities but also created a significant picture of the oppressed communities and their dwellings.

Woerkens describes the condition of Baby Halder as an inhuman condition where she not only was sold and purchased but was also beaten and kept hungry during her pregnancy. Parenthood and marriage were meaningless for her. From her childhood, she was continuously beaten and tortured by men and women around her. Her narrative was a writing of her experiences and the kind of people she met in her life. The support that she received from the women in her neighbourhood indicates towards Dalit women companionship. Her meeting with her mentor Prabodh, gave her a new freedom. She got access to a house, food and education.

Many writings and narratives by Dalit men like *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki describe the world of Dalit men while portraying Dalit women around them. They also create a picture of their community in their narratives, like Valmiki describes the folk songs being sung during the weddings in their community. He also describes how the weddings in his family took place, how money was procured for these weddings, how they got drunk and played music for their entertainment. He also describes how every day they waited for their mother to come back with some left-over food which was thrown in the pot of my mother and she gathered it all to feed the children of our family. Valmiki describes the pathetic condition of his house surrounded by filth and dirt but at the same time, he also narrates how women in his household were treated by their own caste menfolk and also by the men of upper caste. The condition of women of her family was very painful as they carried human excretion on their heads from their toilets and threw that excretion outside the village. He mentions how painful it was for him to see the suffering of his mother.

A widely read and discussed autobiography *The Outcaste* by Limbale leaves the same impression. His writing is full of curses and other painful details of his childhood and his youth but the portrayal of women around him is equally challenging and painful. His family and the story of his mother takes him to the situation where he tries and find answers in the religious scriptures that gave right to certain castes to be powerful enough to give pain and suffering to other castes. His autobiography also challenges the norms of socio cultural development that tries and give education to a few Dalits but they are still not located in the society as civilized educated people.

The freedom that we see in the life of Bama narrated in *Karkku*, we see her acquiring some path of freedom through the education and the job that she got later. Even in *Karukku* we see Dalit women finding respite in the companionship. They all struggled together while getting beaten up by the men of upper castes, the discrimination in every footstep and how difficult it was for them to grow their children in the spaces with less food and less opportunities to earn money. Bama talks about her life as a little girl and the kind of abusive language that she gets to listen to. The poverty of her family and difficulties that her parents faced during the times when she was being given education. She later on writes,

'Today I am a mongrel, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food, and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience.' (Bama 78)

Bama narrates her own experience as a 'Dalit-Christian'. She could see pictures of Jesus in her house everywhere. She was part of the Church and with her sharp mind reached to the level of becoming a senior teacher, but then, that post was denied to her as she was a Dalit. She talks about everything coming to a point where she was sharing her experience and her suffering as a Dalit who was denied many things in her life and was left to be known as an educated Dalit Christian. She could feel that anger left inside her breaking her down, in spite of all her achievements and education in her life. Her suffering lied in her inability to find a just society, equality in imparting education and also in giving jobs. She narrated her story to describe Dalit politics and discrimination as stronger culture in the Indian society that cannot be removed with education.

Dalit women writings were written to emphasise their role as voices of creating a neo-identity based on their narratives that dealt with the idea of resistance. Most of these writings were written with the purpose of creating a resistance against the system that was controlled by the dominant castes. We can visualize the oppression

and resistance both in almost all these narratives and also how they were creating a counter culture against the writings by the upper castes. The anxiety of narrating their traumatic experiences in their own languages, does not only portray their strength but also the depiction of the strength that they find in the solidarity of other Dalit women narratives.

Dalit feminism was a calculated move as a new wave of feminism after need of Dalit women expression was required. These writings were creating a double sided move, on one side it was an expression of self-assertion and on the other side, it was a medium of protest, filled with vocabulary and language that was creating a parallel discovery of the harsh truth of the Dalit oppression in the hands of dominant castes. These voices were not only challenging the caste hierarchy but were also shouting at the social constructs like patriarchy. These narratives also symbolised a revolution against the psychological formations of caste but it was also attacking the cultural systems that denied equality to the oppressed castes and gender.

It is significant in these narratives that they found these literary expressions strong enough to raise their voices against their oppression and build a counter narrative creating a new history of feminist movement in the form of neo-Dalit voices. Dalit, signifies oppressed but the challenge was to create an empowered voice to develop a stronger argument challenging the historical cultural values.

Baby Kamble's, *The Prisons We broke* translated from Marathi *Jina Amucha* was published in 1985. It was an autobiography, pt under the category of 'sociobiography' by Shinde. She argues that it is not solely autobiography of Baby Kamble, but it records the protest of Mahar community after the radical movements by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Baby Kamble after narrating the atrocities on her community, decides to talk about the influence of the speeches of Dr Ambedkar. She describes how they found a leader for their community in him and could do anything to support his movement. She describes how women around her felt that need of social freedom and wanted to attain it through the path shown by Ambedkar. They all were in this together, in the time of suffering and in the time of revolt. They were ready to sacrifice their children by allowing them to follow the path of Ambedkar of educating each and every child in their households and if not all of them at least one child from one house should be given education to find that power to agitate and revolt against the system of caste oppression. Influence of Western teachings through Ambedkar's radical movements, his speeches in which he emphasised on importance of education were also included in her writing as she found it to be the strongest influence on her.

Dalit writings created a neo-literary canon. The narratives that were not only describing their individual experiences but were also narrating the agony of their community. All these narratives were not silent voices but were provoking in their manners. They were denying the acceptance of normal social values and create a canon to relate to the sufferings of many lower caste oppressed castes in India. The neo-Dalit expressions dealt with the reformative voices, the same that we read in the narratives of Baby Halder, Baby Kamble and of Bama. All of them were suggesting solutions and emphasising on the importance of education and knowledge. They are creating a transcending societal norm that allowed them to reach to the intersections between caste boundaries and create a society shown by emancipators like Phule and Ambedkar.

References-

1. Abraham, Joshil K. Judith Misrahi Barak, (eds). *Dalit Literatures in India*. India: Routledge, 2016.
2. Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*. Calcutta, India: Stree. 2006.
3. Halder, Baby. *A Life Less Ordinary*. Trans. From Hindi by Urvashi Butalia. New Delhi: Zubaan
4. /Penguin Books, 2006.
5. Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Trans. From Marathi by Maya Pandit. Chennai: Orient
6. Longman, 2008.
7. Limbale, Sharankumar. *The Outcaste*. Translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, Oxford University Press:India,
8. 2003.
9. Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *Signposts Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. New Brunswick, New
10. Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press. 2001.
11. Valmiki, Om Prakash. *Joothan*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Columbia University Press,
12. 2011.