

Dalit women's Challenge to Dominant Culture

(With reference to select Dalit Indian Women Autobiographies of Dalit Literature)

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Abstract: India has made its achievements in science, traditional and cultural developments in the global scenario, although it has unique formation in its nature. However, people of the other cultures respect India for its well known treasure of knowledge, which is received inheritably. But to some extent, in its peculiar form of cultural and caste system, it harbours practitioners from lower class, whom the orthodox named them as Dalit. Eventually, the class system transformed into Caste system and humiliated to the lower class. Out of 220 million Dalits in India a few took the responsibility to challenge the dominant culture.

Traditionally, Harijan bodies are considered impure and filthy. India's rigid caste system is termed as India's 'Hidden Apartheid'. Dominant culture suppressed Dalits in the name of religion and customs. Some women rebelled against the cultures of those which were formed to hold the lower under the control. This is studied in the autobiographies of some eminent Dalit women writers like : *The Weave of My Life:A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar, *Ants Among Elephant* by Sujatha Gilda, *Karukku* by Bama and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

After the independence of India, our country turned from colonial bureaucracy to Brahminical bureaucracy. India got new colonizers and these were transformed into anti development social forces. Incidentally, Dalits were surviving in the villages. Anglicized Brahminical class refused to develop these rural areas. It led to the new social movement, which subsequently had spread throughout India.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The research study carried out on 'The Prisons We Broke' in the Doctoral thesis by Bolleddu Siva Nagaiah's 'Writing the Self: A Thematical Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies' discusses the importance of education and how to access the right education.

In another research paper titled 'Dalit Among Dalits: Dalit Women with Special reference to Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*' by Deepa Rajput is a critique on Subjugation and Humiliation of Dalits. In the research article titled 'An Introspection of Struggle and Threat to India Indigenous people in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants among Elephant*' attempts to depict the Diaspora and Indigenous life of Dalit people, who are also called untouchables. The story of a Dalit woman, who found complete freedom in America escaped from the clutches of Indian orthodox system. She experienced discrimination in India and came up in life in America but her hard work made her successful woman in America.

3. Dominant Culture:

In Caste based Indian social structure, the Brahminical community is identified as superior to others. Cultural supremacy of particular class has dominated over the others. If we turn the pages of Indian history, Aryans came to settle down in India, from their original homeland, ie. the Middle Asia. Dominant culture was systematically associated with 'Purity' and 'Pollution' which had the agenda of ruling the lower class in the name of religion, and it was due to lack of education feeling of fear was developed by the Dalits. They were variously named as: Harijans, Antyajas, Panchamas, Marginalized, Ati-shudras and the Depressed Class in India. Class system which was based on the professions and the subordination, was led to system of the slavery. They were transformed into socially frail,

intellectually less, politically powerless and economically indigent. Dominant society marked them as 'dwija' which means 'Virtual Slaves'. The slaves suffered a lot without any right of citizenship. Under the pressure of some well established castes,

i.e dominated castes denied the religious rights such as recitation of sacred texts such as Sanskrit Sholkas, social interaction and natural human rights. Hence the Dalit community remained submissive and ignorant. Moreover, the system made them to feel weak and helpless which created divisions and disunion in the identity of the Dalits in the Society.

4. Subservient Culture :

Dalit culture was annihilated by Aryans. After the invasion of Aryan 'The Dalit culture' was extinguished forcibly. Basically they were ignorant and illiterate. They accepted Sanskritisation very blindly without knowing the basic structure of the culture, where they were marginalized. Dalits attracted towards 'Brahminism' because of their food habits as: Vegetarianism. Gradually, it came to be the legitimate valued system.

The lower caste constantly tried to improvise their religious and social status by imitating the upper class.

The Hinduism is an act of abusing Dalits through its dogmas and the concept of purity. In its cultural pattern, this works as a catalyst for the development of Brahminical practices. The upper class imposed their practice of untouchability, which later became a tradition as well as a culture. Brahminical culture endangers Dalit identity and integrity. It enhances and annihilates Dalit culture instead of enriching it.

Thus, throughout the centuries, the lower castes were humiliated socially and physically.

The research paper has throws light on these activities and social conditions of the dominated class who imposed the power over the powerless. Kamble in her autobiography, **The Prisons We Broke**, has explored the social conditions of the poor Dalit women. She writes a Mahar woman had to hide her forehead with the borders under the pleats of her saari, upper class took it as an offence. They had to smear their foreheads with Kumkum marks(vermilion) and walk in the lane where all the other lower caste used to walk, their houses were away from the main streams of the society and were in hygienic. She relates their pathetic living conditions as:

"They would walk through the lanes where people from lower castes lived. The lanes were known as Dhangar lane, vinkar lane, mali lane, teli lane, and so on. Finally, they came to the Bhramin lane. All their fire would be sold in this lane. Every house in this lane had a chest-high platform, like a wall, to prohibit the Mahars from directly reaching the door. The Mahar women would stand in the far of corners of the platform and call out, 'Kaki, firewood! The Mahar women here with firewood.'" (The Prisons We Broke Page No.54)

These women used to go in the lane of the Bhramins seldom. As Bhramins didn't allow them to come through the front door and they were made to stand a little away from their houses. She continues:

"The women had to carry the bundles to the backyard or the inner courtyard of the house. Then they untie the bundles and stack all the wood neatly. Thereafter, they had to pick up each stick and check it for any strand of long hair, or thread from their saris that may have stuck to the wood, there will be a lot of trouble. But what's that to you? Your carelessness will cost us heavily. Our house will get polluted. Then we will have to polish the floor with cow dung and wash our all our clothes, even the rags in the house! Such trouble we'll have to undergo for your foolishness! And how will the gods tolerate this, tell me? They too will be polluted, won't they? That's why I'm telling you, check the sticks well." (The Prisons We Broke Page No.55)

Such an atmosphere of coercive suffocation in the society hinged the potentialities of the rural women, who used to carry the bundles of firewood far from their places. But they were not allowed to come near to their houses. They were paid less for their day's labour. And each stick was examined for any strand of a hair or thread of their saris struck to the firewood. Upper class woman were of the opinion that: 'thread of saari and strand of hair' will defile the Gods and their houses.

In another autobiography titled, **Ants Among Elephant** authored by **Sujatha Gilda**, autobiographer's mother and uncle were humiliated by the local Zaminadars. The autobiography depicts the modern Communist Movement in India. Throughout the Movement land owned castes were opposed by the landless laborers. An incident was recalled by the writer when the barbers didn't touch the hair of untouchables. Writer's grandmother once took her grand children to the Christ barber's shop, where the Christian barbers were specially trained in haircutting by the missionaries to serve their fellow untouchables. These barbers did not have proper equipment. The poor were degraded by the Christians who converted these into Christians.

5. Challenges to Dominant Culture :

The process of developing Dalit Literature into a powerful tool that contests the claims of the upper caste Hindu society is in progress. Dalit writing alerts one of the processes of self- actualization and self-articulation.

Education is the only means to alleviate penury and casteism. Dalits are awakened and are enlightened through education. There are traces of agony and ecstasy of the Dalits, their emotional outbursts, collective identity, supernatural powers and mythical heroism are the major subjects to reconstruct a conscious of Dalit Literature.

As Nguagi Wa Thiango in his 'Home Coming' says, 'Literature does grow in a vacuum, it is given impetuous shape, direction and even areas of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society.'

Today's literary world they have begun to question and discuss their stance and have begun to critically engage in dominant discourse. This literary output celebrates liberation and empowerment which transforms their works into a potential instrument for the generation positive social change.

A big handicap for the development of Ambedkar Movement impacted Dalit who got education in schools that majority of them are unlettered. Dalits who got education in the schools. Baby Kamble says :

“Generations after generations of our ancestors wasted themselves in the service of the high castes who are cunning thieves. But still some of us will not give it up! Shouldn't we be ashamed of ourselves? Do you think our struggle was worthless?

Baba gave away his whole life for us. Is even that worthless? Some of us have chosen to discard our sight and be deliberately blind. I ask you, do you get into the habit of groping in the dark with a stick just like your ancestors? You narrate stories of gods as if it is true history. The high castes strive very hard to keep alive the stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the minds of their young generation.” (*The Prisons We Broke* Page No. 122)

Many research has done on Dalits to understand how Dr, Babasaheb Ambedkar struggled to reunite the Dalit community and Dalit women in particular. But some of the Dalits have hardly realized the importance of Ambedkar's struggle for Dalits liberation and opportunities. Youths became the followers of Dr. B.R Ambedkar to avail the opportunities.

Despite nearly five decades of struggle and availability of educational facilities the old age customs and traditions are still in practice. Poverty and illiteracy have induced them to seek livelihood to survive, which became the basic need of the poor Dalits. It was difficult for the poor illiterate Dalit women to present their life documents in writings but still they have got the opportunity to express their pain and struggle in narrative form. Their experiences of agony untold stories are heaped on them.

6. CONCLUSION:

Thus, Dalit women have put up their brave front against the social system, which kept them suppressed and deprived. They were not against any particular communal groups. They aimed at gaining their lost identity. Present autobiographies are the Dalit voices against all those atrocities inflicted on them.

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