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Breaking Shackles: Dalit Women in *Sangati* and *The Prisons We Broke*

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The paper aims to study the manner in which dalit women have been represented and the way they attempt to break the prisons around them. The dalit women are multiply jeopardized and silenced. Thus, every attempt to break the chains is difficult for them. Hardly a handful of women appear successful. With the help of Bama's *Sangati* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons we Broke*, the study draws an understanding of the lived experiences of dalit women and their desire for freedom. The writings are a step ahead in their desire and serve as inspiration for other women. This study uses feminist lens to critically analyze woman's existence in the luminal spaces. The conceptual framework of the thesis draws from the seminal works of Beauvoir, Butler, Spivak, and Freire. The methodology chosen to study is groomed in qualitative paradigm.

Introduction

Limbale (2004) describes *dalit* as a self-chosen name of political and cultural identity for untouchables in India since 1970s. They denote a marginalized subaltern group which suffers exploitation and oppression in the society. They are an outcome of psychological, social, and cultural effects of the Indian caste and religious system (Limbale: 2004). They are a product of a highly discriminatory and inhuman nature of the caste system operating at various levels in India, and also abroad (Kumar: 2010). Thus, the caste system along with its myriad variations of subordination, rites and rituals, vices and virtues- can sustain itself across different regions of India in varying degrees of rigidity (Kumar: 2010).

What is Caste?

Caste plays a significant role in Indian society. It is, therefore, important to understand the caste system. Dumont (1988, 2009) refers term "caste" to denote the sense of purity of breed. This system, as he states, divided the whole society into hereditary groups where social groups were different from one another. These groups were based on three characteristics: "separation" in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); division of labour, and "hierarchy," which ranks people as relatively superior or inferior to one another (21). Dumont calls it as an extreme form of social stratification. Caste appears unified from outside, but it is a divided structure from within. It comprises of complex groups of different orders or levels. Dumont further describes caste as a "state of mind" (34) expressed by emergence, in disparate situations, of groups of diverse orders.

Shah (2007) views caste as the central core of the Hindu social order. Caste divided the society along the traditional lines of pure and polluted, and hence emerged the two sections of touchable and untouchable. As Shah suggests caste is an ascending scale of reverence and descending order of contempt. He confirms to the ideas of Ambedkar and highlights the critique of the caste system. Castes, as Shah affirms, are not merely non-social, but they are often anti-social. He contradicts the concept of caste against that of nation. He states that caste calls for closure and nation for openness. While the former is based on rigidity and

stability, the latter is based on flexibility and mobility. Caste stands for inequality unlike nation, which is for equality for all. With the process of Sanskritisation (Srinivas: 1972) affecting India, Aryans started ruling native people as subordinate humans and which gave rise to various low castes and dalit. Singh (1968) found that the process of sanskritization is not merely a positional change in the caste hierarchy but an approach of those in the lower rungs to confront the status of those in the higher by adopting their way of life. Singh (1966) suggests that despite the recent events leading to the breakdown and restoration of democracy in India, this stark structural reality of the Indian social system has not changed. Gupta (2009) examines caste as a major institution that sets India apart from other societies in the world. It creates an unequal and hierarchical order in society. It induces social dilemmas, corrupt social practices, and superstitions in Indian society. Such unequal social condition breed tension, organized resistance, and motivates people for equality. Based on such parameters is the creation of marginalized groups like dalits.

All across the nation, different social reforms were initiated to eradicate the discriminatory process based on the caste system. Shah (2007) assesses the works of reformers like B.R. Ambedkar, Jyoti Phule, and Ramasamy Periyar in eradicating the ill-practices of the caste system rampant in the society. Regarding the annihilation of caste, Ambedkar pleaded for a moral regeneration of society. According to Shah (2007), for Ambedkar the annihilation of untouchability and emancipation of untouchables was basically a problem of social, political, and economic equality. In order to attain this, he asked the population to organize, educate, and agitate for political power.

To sum up, untouchability is not just an ideological and cultural phenomenon but traditionally has been closely related with the material condition- division of labour, economic status, and occupation. The caste-based discrimination is still seen, however, with varying degrees. According to Kumar (2010), with education, dalits seem to engage themselves actively to articulate, aspire, and actualize the new life situations in the society. Emergence in subjectivity, as Aloysius (2007) talks, refers to a becoming- a transition from one mode of being to another. The act of becoming is a passage from a state of passivity, receptivity, and of being an object to a desired state of activity, participation, and subjectivity. Gradually such representations began to emerge in literary writings as well. According to Kumar (2010), writers from dalit and non dalit backgrounds started to write about the hegemony and repercussions of caste and the treatment of the marginalized. The pain and humiliation caused due to caste structure have been analyzed through literary writings in India.

Dalit Literature

Kumar (2010) illustrates that the trend of writing about the lived experiences began in the post- independence era. Such writings help bring the inequalities and pain of the dalits in the society. It gives voice to the humiliated “self” of the dalits. The setting of these writings is generally rural since most of the writers belonged to villages. Limbale (2004) states that by writing dalits aimed to present their lived experiences. Dalits aimed to voice their literary and cultural voices, which remained silent due to the hegemony of the Brahmanical way of life the dalits faced in Indian society. Dalit literature started gaining attention due to the abundance of writings and studies made since the last two decades of the twentieth century. Kumar (2010) explains that dalit writings started as a “... resistance to fight against all forms of oppressions which they have been experiencing for ages” (4). All of them were written in regional languages, but are gradually being translated to English. They appear in different

genres like poetry, short stories, and novels. Dalit writings focus is more on the experiences they narrate rather than the technique and literary qualities.

As Limbale (2004) states the aim behind dalit literature is to give an insight into the suffocated lives of the dalits. By narrating their pain and suffering, they not only create a sense of awareness but also liberate themselves of the pain and suffering and initiate their way for emancipation. He adds that dalit literature can be better analyzed from a sociological standpoint. This perspective focuses on social values rather on the aesthetics and beauty of language.

Ramachandran (2003) writes about the emergence of a low-caste identity through dalit literature. She studies the emergence of literary narratives by and about dalit communities in India from the 1950s to the 1990s. Examining the written texts from a historical materialist perspective, she explores their articulation of self-identity and resistance against the caste system. Dalit literature, she opines, articulates the presence of oppressed communities within the normative framework of upper caste Hindu society. She argues that the materialist methodology of reading dalit writings enables the discussion from the focus on labour and the body, while centrally posing the problematic of emancipation. It further, associates with Spivak's (1988) concern with the voice of the subalterns and problematizes the need to comprehend the representation of the marginalized as they portray themselves. Omprakash Valmiki, Shantabai Kamble, Laxman Mane, Mukta Sarvagod, Kumud Pawde, P. Sivakami, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama Faustina, and Sharankumar Limbale are some of the eminent dalit writers whose works have been translated from regional languages into English.

Among the bulk of writings on dalit lives and the experiences of pain and humiliation there are very few which focus on women and their experiences. The ones which do so are mostly written by women. As Lal, Panja, and Satpathy (2007) write that in spite of the proliferation of dalit discourse, dalit literature by women is scanty, and similarly very few of them are translated into English.

Dalit Women

Among dalits, women are badly affected. Kumar (2010) writes that dalit women are the victims of double oppression- by the upper caste men and the men of their own community. Although, it is observed that rather than double, dalit women are victims of multiple oppressions. Their oppression is because of their caste, their class, and gender. Ghosh and Ghosh (2003) describe the representation of dalit women in Indian rural and urban settings. They also elaborate on how dalit women are jeopardized in the society- first by the broader Hindu society, second by the patriarchal force of their society, and thirdly by women of higher castes. Dalit women live in abject poverty and are neglected most of the times. Ghosh and Ghosh (2003) explain that status of dalit women is that of the worst sufferers of socio-cultural, political, and economic exploitation, injustice, oppression, and violence. Most of the dalit women are illiterate. More so, the health status of these women is very poor. According to Raj and Raj (2004: 326), "In caste- based Indian society, women of the lower castes are the worst hit, as they suffer from double discrimination: First, in the patriarchal society women are discriminated against men, as they have to bear the burden of household work demanding much time and energy without adequate compensatory diet. And second, a lower caste woman, owing to her poor socioeconomic status, also experiences social deprivation."

Jogdand (1995) illustrates the effects of the social reforms on dalit women. He delineates on the social conditions and lived experiences represented in literature to study the position and

role of dalit women. In the process he highlights the dilemma of their existence. Jogdand (1995) states that dalit women lack control over their living, bodies, and thoughts. There is a strong influence of feudalism, casteism, and patriarchy over their lives. He further illustrates the limitation of the study in comprehending the lived experiences from the woman's perspective. Most of the writings on dalits, as he writes, depict the general conditions of their existence rather than bringing in the emotional side of these women and their representation. It is interesting to note that among dalit literary writings, very few have been generated on dalit women and by women.

Humiliation induces pain hurting one's self respect, reverence, and servility and causes repulsion through various trajectories of social context. To quote Guru (2013) it is the notion of untouchability that foregrounds the form and content of humiliation in the Eastern society while it is racism in the West. The targets face common issues like misrecognition, degradation, and humiliation. As Guru opines humiliation is a struggle concept in the sense that it is both a struggle with the self and with the other. Women, can be cited as the best examples. Dalit literature aims to focus on humiliation with which they have been living since their birth. While most of them internalize it, some resist for one's respect and self-recognition.

Dalit women breaking shackles: images of resistance in *Sangati* and *The Prisons We Broke*

The selected narratives are women-centric and depict a realistic picture of their everyday experiences. The narratives encompass different categories of women- growing girls (*Sangati*) and married women (*The Prisons We Broke*). The voice and representation of woman is distinctive in each of them. With diverse characters and representations, the narratives help to unravel an extensive variety of portrayal of dalit women in India. The novels illustrate an unbiased portrayal of dalit woman by both male and female writers. The sequence of events encompasses different age groups of women. They portray common lived experiences along different conditions and categories. The section below helps to look at the major characters of the narratives.

Sangati is an English translation from Tamil novel by the same name. The word literally means "happenings or events" (Bama: 2005, xvi). As the title suggests the novel revolves around the daily events of dalit women, Bama grows up with. The central character of the novel is Bama because she presents the story from her insight. The narrative grows with her age. The narrator, in early chapters, presents the world she lives in from the perspective of a young girl of about twelve years of age. In the last four chapters it is narrated from the perception of Bama as a mature woman. The reflective voice is that of an adult looking back and meditating upon her experiences. As mentioned before, there are many other women characters who play significant roles. *Sangati* focuses on women of different generations. While Bama represents the present generation, her grandmother is two generations above woman, and the women like her mother falls between them. By using them, Bama shows their respective ideologies concerning a woman from different perspectives.

The next important women character in the story is Bama's grandmother, Vellaiyamma Kizhavi. Bama addresses her grandmother as *Paatti* throughout the narrative. In addition to the above characters, there are other women like Bama's mother, Sevathi, and her aunt whom she calls *Perimma* and who play significant roles. Girls like Mariamma and Maikkanni serve significant importance in focusing on the social conditions which trap young girls. Through these characters Bama depicts women covering a wide canvas of roles in a dalit society. They

depict women leading lives as single mothers (*Paatti* and *Perimma*), working as farmers, cleaners, soil diggers, or mid-wives (*Sevathi*, *Paatti*). These women are portrayed as wage earners like men, yet remain powerless and vulnerable. Owing to such intense and vivid range of experiences of women of the society, the novel is also called an autobiography of the community. In spite the collective representation, each woman character appears as an individual and agents of their existences.

The Prisons We Broke is an English translation of Marathi novel *Jina Amucha*. The word “Jina Amucha” literary means our existence. The narrative unravels the lives of women who broke the prison created by men and caste in order to gain selfhood. The major character of the novel is Kamble, who narrates the story as Baby. She presents the dalit society in which she grew, from her perspective. Apart from Baby, other women characters who are pivotal in the narrative are Baby’s nameless grandmother (addressed as *Aaji*), mother Chandrabai, and aunt Sunderabai. Kamble focuses on the lives of married women, daughter-in-laws, and housewives but keeps them nameless. By keeping them unidentified, Kamble intends to focus on the collective experiences of women, as dalits. She also brings together her lived experiences with the other women of her community. Baby kamble, like Bama portrays the autobiography of the community. But while Bama gives most of the characters names, Kamble keeps them nameless. Kamble builds in a symphonic characterization of women and their experiences to depict self-assertion of women.

Apart from narrating the lives and pain of dalit women, Kamble plays the character of a path-breaker and a role-model for dalit women. She joins the Ambedkarite movement and initiates changes for the good of her people and society. The outrage against the inhuman conditions of every day existence and concern for the suffering mass is evident in Kamble’s discourse. She starts the story by moving back when she was born and appears self-critical yet humane. The narrative matures as she grows with age. She concludes the story with an emphasis on education and ridicules some of the age old practices followed by dalits, like eating dead animals. With such changes, she feels, dalits can help in their emancipation.

The narratives appear in the form of individual stories and memories of personal experiences. The narratives incorporate the story of the entire society along with personal experiences of the authors. The representation of marginalized dalit women, as examined through discourses in the narratives, reveal their lived every day experience, discrimination, realization, and resistance. The subsistence of dalit women is influenced by different social institutions. Social forces like patriarchy and caste affect women’s way of living as gendered beings and also shape their voice, agency, and subjectivity as dalits. The everyday narrated experiences emphasize their pain, discrimination, and humiliation. At all the stages of life, they are treated as others to men of their caste as well as of upper caste, and also of the women of upper castes. Due to such othering, either single or married, their lives portray a saga of neglect and oppression. Although they are jeopardized and vulnerable, the discourses in the narratives illustrate them as strong individuals. They control their being once they realize and resist against the odds. With conscientization (Freire’ 1996) they gain emancipation and become agents of change for themselves and for others to emulate.

The experiences of the dalit women represent them as others of the men of their community as well of the upper castes men and women. They undergo alienation due to this and become multiply oppressed. Bama, the narrator and protagonist of *Sangati*, writes that there was not much difference between a girl and a boy child at the time of birth but as they raised them the differences became prominent. This can be attributed to the extreme poor condition of the families. The girls were not burdens as they did not demand any dowry unlike the upper caste

women. In spite of this girls are represented as marginalized in various ways. The section below helps to comprehend the way discourses depict the discrimination of women right from the time they are born.

“*If the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold*’. When I was born, it seems that my grandmother, Vellaiyamma quoted this proverb and rejoiced” (Bama: 3). It soon changed as the girls grew up and they appeared a burden and were discriminated. “*They used to say that it was a good thing for the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth baby, the odd-numbered one, to be a girl*” (Bama: 3). The representation of girl and their birth is associated with odd numbers. Apart from denoting a superstition in identifying births with odds numbers, it also indicates the odd positions of girls in society. The peculiar position of girl’s birth in family marks the strange laws concerning her status in society as well. While she is worshipped as a deity, people discriminate her with unseen code of conducts. Small girls had to follow the same code of behaviour as the women of the society and behave like wise. The following incident from *Sangati* depicts the way small girls and women of the society followed such code of conducts: “*All our men folk gathered in the front community hall, and sat down. The women stood about, behind them, here and there, watching.... Even the little boys were all seated there*” (Bama: 21). Meetings, gatherings, and social conducts were for men and boys. Women had no say in them. Even if the matter concerned them, they had to keep silent and obey what the men would decide. This shows the code of behaviour which the society expects from them.

The making of a girl starts in a different way right from her birth and continues till her death. The girl’s biological difference from boy is so meaningful for the people in the family and the society that they consider a girl almost insignificant to a boy. Her presence is guarded by several measures which they take as natural in the starting years but gradually the whole thing becomes oppressive and suffocating. The narrative unravels the minute details of these characters’ lived experiences and highlights the pain hidden under each fraction of their lives. A girl child faces discrimination each moment. Instances like a boy child eating as much as he pleases and play around while a girl works- are scattered all over the narratives. Bama depicts the day to day activities of the girls and women of the society who live an unheard life in these lines-

“...*girl child must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes... When all this is done, they will carry the tiny babies, minding them even when they go out to play*” (Bama: 7).

The young girls, as the discourse shows, carry the gender roles of a mother when at home. Women, leave the younger children with the eldest child often a daughter, when she moves out for work. The discourse illustrates the way a girl, while eldest or youngest, is prepared to mind the small ones even if the eldest is a boy. While the girl would act like a little mother to all the kids at home the boy even if older to her would act like a man and go out and play. They are made to follow the norms of the society and know what they should do and what should be their limitation. Their perspectives towards life affected other children too. Small girls are made to accept that they cannot play boys’ games and can only play at cooking and getting married. “*People would say, ‘Who does she think she is? She’s just like a donkey, look. Look the way she plays boys’ games’*” (Bama: 7). Games like “*thattaangal*” or “*thaayam*” (those played with stones and shells were for them and if any of them was seen playing “*kabadi*”, lines of abuse would follow them.

Discrimination is seen at every level of their lives. The way they play, talk, sleep, eat, and what they receive like education, food, and recreation are all discriminated on grounds of their being girls or boys. Bama, as a young child saw her grandmother, “Paatti”, call the grandsons first whenever she brought anything at home. The boys had the share first. The leftover was for girls. Bama writes,

“If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her finger nails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we would only get the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruits to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins” (7-8).

Boys were always given the best of food that was available while girls, the leftover. Bama, with discursive representations of the experiences of young girls like Mariamma and Maikkanni, emphasizes their becoming and denial of pleasure. The lived experiences and practices create the images of mothers in the girls, and jeopardize their personal likes and desires. They are made to behave in a restricted manner while men do not follow any such norms. As women, they are subjected to various tortures and a dalit adds to the vulnerability of their existence. They depend on their “superiors” (Beauvoir: 2009) throughout their lives. Their being depend on the choices made by such “superiors,” mostly men of the family, the father, the husband, the sons, and also mother-in-law at times. The helplessness of these women becomes their weakness and gradually transforms in a fear which attacks them along various degree. The realization of the pain and the intolerable situation is not enough to let them gain emancipation.

Kamble presents a collective picture of the women of her society. As mentioned before, she generalizes the nature of incidences by not ascribing it to a particular person. She, like the two other novelists mentioned above, Limbale and Bama, illustrates the lives of the small girls, women, and the different roles they perform. Kamble, in her narrative, brings the stark conditions of a dalit’s life and the different cultural norms and rituals associated with it. The children, as Kamble depicts in the narrative, appear playing with cactus flowers. Throughout the narrative there is a repetition of the image of cactus and its flower. It symbolizes the difficulties associated with the identity of a dalit and the changes one can bring with labour and persistence. She writes, *“The cactus was a boon to us poor people. It yielded us everything, right from toys to firewood. When we went hungry, they supplied us with food. They gave us ornaments too...”* (Kamble: 43). It reflects at the way women searched for happiness and joy even in abject rejection and harsh conditions of existence. The girls and women are depicted as using these flowers every day. With such images and strong persona, women found strength and determination to survive amongst the odds.

Kamble presents the experiences of the people of *Maharwada* (the name of her dalit community). They were associated to her father, who worked as a contractor, and gave them work. Among them she found different types of people and some of them had strong influence on her. Most of the women, Kamble portrays, worked as cleaners. They worked the entire day cleaning animal pens in the Maratha households. Women were the main bread earners of their household. Their husbands are depicted indulged in drinking and wasting money. The house would run on the meager amount the women earned. The condition of the family was pathetic when the women fell ill. In such situations, Kamble’s father would help them by lending money. Driven by poverty and caste, dalit men and women are represented *“... just like animals”* (Kamble: 49). While the animals were fed on fresh grass, dalits had

leftovers. Their daily experiences show their lives as sea of calamities.

Focusing on general dalit women who did not go out to work but were engaged in household chores, Kamble presents the discourses around her mother and grandmother. As it shows, the women woke up at early dawn and grinded the cleaned grains (which had been done previous night). *“At cock’s crow, the grinding stones in each house would start whirring”* (Kamble: 49). Small children, Baby recalls her childhood and relates, would crawl in the lap of their mothers or grandmothers. While the men were still asleep, work for women had already started. The discourses show no sign of tension of work or previous day’s rebukes and pain. Rather it presents a different picture, where the women are portrayed enjoying and singing. They would grind the grains and sing sweet notes. The serenity of the outside atmosphere is in total symphony with the inner self of the women. It is apparent in the following lines:

“In the quiet of the early hours, the sound of the grinding stones and the sweet notes of the women singing would float all over the maharwada. Every woman would sing a song to the child sleeping on her lap. The song would be full of love for their children and grandchildren, their brothers and sisters-in-law, their fathers and their mothers.” (Kamble: 50).

Peace, serenity, and love surrounded the atmosphere. Songs appear as a discourse to let their emotions pour out. Through such songs women praise their people and express hope and conviction of a better future. The love for their children springs out like a fountain and releases the pain, torments, and difficulties that surround them. An example to illustrate is as follows: *“Baby, my daughter’s child/ Is lovely like a flower/Avert your evil eyes/ Oh you wicked neighbour//”* (Kamble: 50). Such rare discourses are seldom seen in the narratives. This time appears in total contrast with other time of the day, when one can hear women wailing, shouting, and running. Through these experiences the writer aims at representing dalit women like women of any other society. There is no sign of dirt, grim, and pain. They appear as embodiments of love, emotions, and kindness. Such representations are very rarely seen for dalit women due to the cumbersome social conditions they are trapped in all the time.

The women, as Kamble depicts, perform the daily household chores. The discourses in the narrative never depict men providing a support or a helping ear to these women. Women talk to women and ease out their pain. During grinding or fetching water, or working in fields they would talk to other women and put their hearts out. The narratives represent women performing similar chores and collecting firewood, while the men would work for upper castes and clean dead animals. Children, in similar way, were left to fend for themselves. After a hard day’s toil, women returned home and had no food to eat. Kamble narrates their pain in the discourse below:

“Then they would return to their houses and look for the basket of bhakris. Most of the times these baskets would be empty as the children would have finished the bhakris. Having no breakfast in the morning, and with no food in the house, hunger gnawed at their empty stomachs like wild fire....” (Kamble: 52).

Along with caste based oppression they faced every day; poverty and patriarchy intensified their suffering. Due to abject poverty and grim conditions, the girls were often married at young age. It is explicitly suggested through the discourses in the narratives on young

married girls. “Young girls, hardly eight or nine or ten years old, were brought home as daughters-in-law” (Kamble: 87). The young girls entered a new phase of their lives with fresh hope but which soon turned out to be violent and harsh. In spite of the young age and innocence, she had to carry out the household chores. “*The child was not even allowed to sleep. When the cock crowed at three in the morning, the sasu would wake her, dragging her by her hair...*” (Kamble: 94). She was abused at little things and physically tormented. As she grew old, the pain and humiliation increased. The woman, as represented through the image of the mother-in-law becomes the “other” of her daughter-in-law. According to Beauvoir (2009) by doing this they appear to impose their destiny on the young ones.

The dalit women, represented in these narratives, are represented like earth. The dalit women appear to have offered their entire lives to the service of mother earth (Kamble: 57). The close proximity with the natural habitat, no movement beyond the restricted boundary aligns them in parallel lines with nature. More so, they are treated similarly as well. “*A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause.*” (Kamble: 83). A woman is represented as a device to give birth to children. For her the cycle of birth and death would go on. It is not just men who victimize her, but she is equally responsible in the part. They victimize themselves by confirming themselves to the men. The women also oppress the girls they give birth to. This is what Butler (2007) calls to “be” (61) it. This elaborates the manner in which woman are called into marginalized existence that occurs within a power relationship.

The women lacked agency in terms of food, clothes, recreation, and spatial locations. The narrators of the three narratives, since their childhood, have been living the pain. Bama blames the women who have been treating girls and boys in different manners and have been putting them down. “*It’s you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other.*” (Bama: 29). But with time, the narratives indicate a change in agency. Gradually, women start questioning as represented by Bama. She, through following discourse and interrogations, resists the dehumanizing attitude towards women. She questions the dual nature of treatment of girls and boys:

“Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes.... Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren’t we also human beings?” (Bama: 29)

Bama’s innumerable questions and arguments in the discourse reject the patriarchal order and resist it. It shows her desire and inquisitiveness to question the social norms and practices. Examples are also seen when she questions the death of the young mothers, which was caused due to negligence of the health of the young girls. The ill health was never considered a matter to be taken seriously. They were never taken to hospitals and would be given home remedies. High superstitious beliefs are also one of the important factors behind their conditions. As the narratives represent, Mariamma was not taken to hospital in spite of her poor health. She could not say anything nor revolt. It was writer, Bama, who as a child was sensitive and dared to undo all the traditional norms. She appears as a spokesperson to generate an awareness of the lived experiences and need to speculate and critically analyze them.

According to Spivak (1988), subalterns cannot speak and even if they try and speak they are not heard. The way the women appear throughout the novels and are seldom heard leaves them with no option but to resist and break the culture of silence. Similarly, Kamble breaks her silence and generates consciousness among the mass against the bad habits of her society. She acts as a critique of her own society, which was a difficult job. She writes that culture cannot be imbibed from educated, intelligent, and rich people but the good culture is in blood. She contradicts the bad practices in the society. She does not speak just for the women of her society but tries to instill pride and self esteem among the people. Their attending meetings and demand for equal seats with the upper caste women indicates their awakening. Kamble calls for education for the children. Their strength and voice indicates a call for space by women excluded from power and language. Kamble, in the narrative, delineates that in spite of social exclusion women possess a hidden power that allows them to function. While she can become a source of negativity and harassment, and struggle with the extreme powers, she can also identify with it and gain agency. Kamble opines “*our women were like that proverbial black cow. Even on occasions when they had a right to be indulged a bit, they had to fill their stomachs with thorns to stay alive*” (Kamble: 57).

“Almost always during the internal stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors” (Freire: 1996, 27). Drawing from Freire (1996), the thoughts of women get conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation which shapes them. Women represented in the selected narratives show courage to break the chains which bind them as animals. They resist the shackles of oppression created by men and society to propel their selfhood. The voice, agency, and subjectivity they emerge with, is a step to change their difficult problem filled lives. After facing the decline of being a woman culturally and socially groomed to please others, they realize and resist the codes to assert their liveliness.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, these narratives cover a huge panorama of lived experiences of marginalized women of dalit society. They are seldom heard. Like most of the dalit writings these selected narratives begin with the experience of women and the manner they perform the roles (Butler: 2007). Literary narratives are means to illustrate and highlight the new awakening among women. Drawing from Freire (1996), through the representation of women, the narratives aim at the recognition of different social trajectories which dehumanize them. To conclude, the literature produced by these writers who themselves had experienced pain, trauma, oppression, and marginalization- question the fundamental issues of human life, especially women. The cultures of the community where dalit women make meaning of their everyday experiences cajole a culture of silence and domination from people and practices higher up in the social hierarchy. We must understand this and other kinds of oppressions as represented in our literature. In context to dalit women, it is observed that sexual oppression, economic exploitation, and socio-cultural subjugation are major reasons which affect their gender relations. The study of their representation suggests the major transformation of dalit women, from victims to agents, where they reject the harsh conditions and power structure.

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