



ISSN: 0975-833X

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### UPSURGES FROM THE MARGIN: RISE OF DALIT FEMINISM

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2015  
Received in revised form  
29<sup>th</sup> August, 2015  
Accepted 05<sup>th</sup> September, 2015  
Published online 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2015

##### Key words:

Subjugation,  
Dehumanisation,  
Thrice-marginalised,  
Post-Ambedkar Period.

#### ABSTRACT

The deplorable status of the socially oppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited Dalits has led them to paucity, subjugation and dehumanisation, culminating them into cultural silence. The plight of a Dalit becomes all the more pathetic when the Dalit is a woman. She has to face not only the caste discrimination, but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. A Dalit woman is thrice- marginalised – by Caste-Hindus, Caste Hindu women and Dalit men themselves simultaneously. Although Dalit movement started in mid-nineteenth century for the upliftment of these marginalised communities, issues of Dalit women are still neglected not only by mainstream feminist literary movement, but also by patriarchal Dalit movement. Nowadays women have started protesting against the discrimination and injustices levelled upon them and are trying to create a female space for themselves. In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit women used literature as a weapon to counter the mainstream feminist writings that include the genres like poetry, short story, essays novel and autobiography.

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**Citation:** Dr. Sakunthala, A.I, 2015. "Upsurges from the margin: Rise of Dalit feminism", *International Journal of Current Research*, 7, (10), 21969-21971.

#### INTRODUCTION

Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited, coloniser and colonised, powerful and the powerless. The notion of a complete monolithic Indian society connected through religion is completely broken in India as there is a huge campus of religion in the country. There are four major caste divisions in India: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The lowest caste people came under Shudras. They are regarded as Dalits. These people are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalised in every sphere of life. These people are also regarded as untouchables/ Ahoot/ Harijans. According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the caste system is neither divinely ordained nor self-sprung through a particular incident in history; it slowly developed due to peculiar socio-economic-political conditions in the remote past of our country when the atmosphere was ripe for it. Hence Manu was not the originator of it, the caste system existed even before him and Manu only codified the social practice. The class system slowly rigidified into caste system due to Brahmanic class's proclivity to enclose itself. The other classes also followed the suit through imitation and thus the enclosed units viz. castes came into existence.

The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means broken, downtrodden, or oppressed. Generally it refers to all the exploited and disadvantaged people, but in its particular sense, it is used synonymously only to those who have been socially oppressed, excluded from the main stream of the society and have been living with the stigma of untouchability since centuries. Over the past two decades, the concepts of subalternity and marginality have received much critical attention from the scholars in various disciplines. The term 'subaltern' is derived from the Latin word 'subalternus', it means an officer below the rank of a Captain, specially a second lieutenant, at its adjectival level, it means of an inferior rank, the later meaning is applicable as far as literature is concerned. Obviously, the term covers the subjects, the masses, the deprived and the neglected sections of society, same as marginality refers to the edge, border or boundary. Nowadays, marginality emerges as a literary concept and behavioural model, shaped by societal norms and traditional canons.

Recently in India the term 'subaltern' is generally used synonymously with the term 'Dalit', especially focusing their attention on the oppressive structures of caste in the Indian context, which divided people as superiors and inferiors, touchables and untouchables or upper castes and lower castes. "The subordination and subjection that marks the life of Dalits in India bring them into the contours of a particularly contextual assembly of subalternity" (Guha 7). The term

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'subaltern' has added significance in India, as India was a subaltern as a British colony and also the people are subjected to subordination based on class, caste and gender. Thus the extent of hopelessness is compounded by the fact that they were the doubly dispossessed and the marginalised. In India the term 'Dalit' is widely used in the academic circles than the word 'subaltern', and it signifies the oppressed sections of the society, who are subjugated by the ruling class. "In post colonial theory, the term 'subaltern' describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society- a subaltern is a person rendered without human agency, by his or her social status"(Young 32).

"Dalit is not a caste, but a realisation and is related to the experience of joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of the society"(Dangle 23). The deplorable status of the socially oppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited Dalits has led them to paucity, subjugation and dehumanisation, culminating them into cultural silence. The Indian Dalit laments as though in anguish and anger: "What did I do/ To be so outcast." And though it was always a cry in the wilderness, it echoes today in the form of Dalit literature. There are three distinct stages in the development of Dalit literature. In the early stage, Hindu religious literature was monopolised entirely by upper caste Hindus who not only pushed the untouchables to the boundaries, they also made them invisible in their literature which was largely religious. It is said that "the upper caste Hindus achieved in literature what they could not in real life, namely a complete silencing, if not erasure of the untouchable- *Other*- with no chance of being polluted by the untouchable's shadow" (Limbale 4). The second stage was reached, when due to many socio-political changes such as the arrival of the British, spread of modern education, Nationalistic Movement under Congress etc. there grew in literature a new consciousness about the plight of Dalits and they were started to be portrayed with sympathy in the works of non-dalit writers.

Dalit writers now consider works of these non-dalit writers such as those of Premchand, and Mulk Raj Anand as discourses of pity. "These representations do not show Dalits as they are, but as helpless and childlike people who cannot make their own decisions or take action" (Limbale 8). These portrayals lacked in intensity of experience, force and vigour of Dalit literature which originated in the next phase. The absence of realistic pictures of Dalit protagonists in their novels result from paucity of first hand experience of what it is to be a Dalit. The scope, language and purpose of Dalit literature in its third phase made it a genre apart from upper caste writings. Since what makes Dalit literature different from other literature on Dalits, is the experience of lived life, conveyed through minute details of his everyday life, the Dalit writers opined that it cannot be communicated by a sympathetic writer, however brilliant his imagination and power of empathy may be. Only the Dalit knows what it is to be a Dalit.

Since Dalit writer's tale of their life involves their first hand experience of caste disabilities on themselves as well as people known to them, these representations assume acute poignancy. These depictions are not emotional rendering of their

sufferings, rather they are "sociologically illuminating, politically subversive and aesthetically interesting" (Rege 12). Generally Dalit literature is considered to be questioning the mainstream literary theories and the upper caste ideology. It brings to light the neglected and the ignored aspects of life. The plight of a Dalit becomes all the more pathetic when the Dalit is a woman. She has to face not only the caste discrimination, but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. A Dalit woman is thrice- marginalised – by Caste-Hindus, Caste Hindu women and Dalit men themselves simultaneously. Although Dalit movement started in mid-nineteenth century for the upliftment of these marginalised communities, issues of Dalit women are still neglected not only by mainstream feminist literary movement, but also by patriarchal Dalit movement.

The widely held perception of the Dalit woman as the *OTHER* is the distilled impact of centuries long alienation generated by ingrained patriarchal and Brahminical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, invisibility and structural and domestic violence which is the experience of Dalit women. She is at the receiving end of a long, socially engineered pecking order, which asserts the relative superiority of one category of human being over another. She belongs to the lowest category as manifest in her condition of total social, physical, economic and political vulnerability. Gayatri Spivak categorised women, non-whites, non-European and oppressed castes and frames them in the subaltern description in her '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' She brings forward a series of questions regarding representation, resistance, cultural subjugation of the perspectives of the marginalised, exploited, oppressed. She says: The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as pious item. Representation has not withered away" (Spivak 4).

Caste oppression, gender subjugation, and class exploitation are all interlined together. Caste uses gender to construct caste status, power relations and cultural differences and thereby oppressing lower caste women. Thus, three interlocking systems of caste, class and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity, and intensity of oppression, which is destructive to the experiences of Dalit women. The sweeping statements made in the West i.e. 'All women are Niggers' was blindly put into Indian context calling 'All women are Dalits.' But here one should not forget that "the social status of the upper caste woman is never like that of Dalit men or women" (Ghosh 57). It is difficult to trace the origin of Dalit Feminism, but according to Sharmila Rege, "In the early nineties, Dalit Feminism articulation especially on the issues of quotas within quotas, challenged the conceptions of 'genderless caste' and 'casteless gender'" (Rege 3).

In India there has often been a critique of the Feminism of the 1970s for being Brahminical in its theory and practice. Dalit Feminist "aims at actively participating in eradicating all forms of violence, intolerance, hierarchy and discrimination in society. An effective way of achieving this ideal is to take these differences seriously and engage with the politics of difference" (Ghosh 57-58). Therefore Dalit writing celebrates its differences by projecting the social evils and inhuman

practices. Dalit women have the right to be seen as subjects and not as objects, which played an active role for the betterment of not only their family but also for their whole community. Their voices have been muted and kept in silence, their issues obscured thus far and their attempts to communicate about their condition in their own language, using their own medium have not been given the hearing and audience they deserve. They have a greater right to be heard than the privileged ones- in fact justice and equity make it imperative that their voices be heard and articulations publicized. Hence the need to articulate their vision and build their own praxis and theory: "We have been denied the right to articulate our own visions of emancipation. Our energies have been co-opted to working out the visions of dominant others who have shown scant respect for our world-view or philosophy of life, by not enabling us to articulate them or work towards achieving them" (Prasad 47).

It was required to have a development of Dalit feminist theory and to define this state of being through Dalit female language. Thus a new word was coined, 'Dalit Womanism' to understand Dalit woman's life in a better manner and try to transform them. The term 'Womanism' was coined by Alice Walker in 1893. Womanism defined as a consciousness, incorporates racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic and political considerations where as Feminism places priority on women. The Womanism of the Dalits will be entirely based on the lives, experiences and consciousness of Dalit women. Thus Dalit women are slowly attempting to speak out their traumatic experiences as well as theorising their pain, their anger in their writing. Dalit women have been misrepresented in Indian literature and Indian English literature. Most of the upper caste male writers are biased towards Dalit women. They are portrayed as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men and never as rebels to fight against the injustices perpetuated on them. Even in the writings of the progressive writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand and so on, Dalit women are either molested or raped by the upper castes. By depicting such pictures, these writers gained sympathy for the victims. They have completely ignored the fact that Dalit women can also resist and fight back like any other victim of social oppression to guard their dignity. Thus in these literature, a Dalit women is never a fighter but always a victim.

Nowadays women have started protesting against the discrimination and injustices levelled upon them and are trying to create a female space for themselves. In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit women used literature as a weapon to counter the mainstream feminist writings that include the genres like poetry, short story, essays novel and autobiography. In this context, the works of women writers who come out to the main stream to explore the problems faced by the oppressed women became highly important. There are a large number of women writers in Dalit discourses who brought Dalit texts into mainstream visibility. The Dalit women have started searching for the root cause of these marginalisations levelled against them. Women in these discourses bring their own identification as women as well as Dalit.

The female characters in Dalit literature are dynamic, and not static. Dalit writers do not look upon widows, prostitutes, deprived women, as Dalit, the exploited with compassion alone; but they make them march towards radiance. In the stories and novels of Annabhau, Shankar Rao Kharat, Baburao Bagul and others, though the nature of the struggle of women in the beginning is individual, later it becomes class conflict. As a consequence of this, Dalit female characters end the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise. "They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self-respect. The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centred, but society centred.

That is why Dalit writers do not portray Dalit women as hollow identities, overflowing with love, as embodiments of sacrifice" (Prasad 46). Dalit Feminism is considered as the 'discourse of discontent,' 'a politics of difference' from the mainstream Indian Feminism, which often been critiqued for marginalising Dalit women. Dalit feminist discourses not only question the mainstream Indian feminist hegemony in claiming to speak for all women, but also the hegemony of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women. This Dalit feminist theory is aimed towards social justice and against all sorts of exploitation and oppression towards Dalit women. In such scenario, Dalit writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and many more Dalit women writers taking pen in their hands, articulating and recording their experiences of humiliation and hurt, subverts centuries of old historical neglect and a stubborn denial to be considered as a subject.

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