



Analyzing the Atrocities on the Marginalized Dalit Women: A Study of Caste-Gender Interplay in Dalit Women's Autobiographies

Surajit Senapati, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tamralipta Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7173-7056>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5203252

Abstract

Dalit women constitute the most unfortunate and deprived segment in Indian society, collectively suffering from the multitudes of discrimination, marginalization and atrocities in their quotidian existence. They are subjected to brutal violence in myriad forms, such as rape, gang rape, sexual assault and physical abuse, with the persistence of caste hierarchies playing a pivotal role in perpetuating such heinous crimes against humanity. Dalit women face multiple vulnerabilities on account of their caste positions and gender identity, apart from their vulnerability in the material relations of society both within and outside their communities. The paper examines such graded forms of violence committed on Dalit women, and the factors behind the perpetrators enjoying cultural impunity in society. As Dalit women are seen as ritually impure and dirty beings, they are denied equality, freedom and self-respect, thus making them prey to the Brahmanical nature of caste oppression and gender violence in a society that practices the notion of purity and pollution in everyday realities, thus effectively undermining the autonomy and sexual freedom of Dalit women. The sexual subordination of Dalit women constitutes the core agenda of caste hegemony and patriarchal manipulation, as the caste hierarchies reinforce gender inequalities and perpetuate social fragmentation along the caste lines. The paper tries to locate and analyze the motives behind such atrocities committed against Dalit women as narrated in Dalit autobiographies extensively, and how such artistic endeavours attempt to sensitize citizens so that such heinous forms of violence can be prevented against women in general and Dalit women in particular.

Keywords: Atrocities, Caste, Dalit, Gender, Marginalization, Violence, Patriarchy.

Introduction

The rise of Dalit women's autobiographies breaks a new ground in countering the elitist views of women's writings dominated by upper caste women authors and exposes the dark underbelly of Hindu society that strictly regulates the caste segregation and gender-based regulations on the daily basis. In the Shastric interpretations, Dalit women are considered the carriers of "polluted bodies" as they have been denied a ritually pure status in the Hindu Shastras, thus relegating them to the status of permanent pollution in Hindu society. They are considered to be contemptible and highly polluting, therefore forcing the upper caste groups to maintain a distance from them as their touch is defiling in nature and



can pollute the sacred status of the upper castes. They foreground their “polluted bodies” to draw our attention to the regressive and oppressive mentality of society towards the collective predicament of Dalit women and questions the male-centric viewpoints of Dalit men authors as they are seen deliberately ignoring the specific needs and difficulties of Dalit women. They bring to the public the culture of oppression and violence against women as normalized in the Hindu society and its repressive cultural traditions. Such autobiographical narratives are not only acts of testifying to the myriad ways in which Dalit women are oppressed and subjugated, but also reflect the collective resistance against gender and caste-based violence as experienced by the women belonging to the marginalized social backgrounds. It attacks the “exclusive nature of Dalit men’s autobiographies and critiques the communitarian view on Dalit women and their collective predicament.

As the representative of collective struggle of Dalit women, such personal narratives are truthful expression of socio-cultural marginalization and otherisation as experienced by the Dalit women in the normative social universe of the Hindu society. Such personal narratives discard the glorifying tendencies of “bourgeois individualism” and highlight the harsh realities of Dalit women spent in the caste-segmented Hindu society. It is a metaphorical act of speaking for oneself and a way of expression the grudge and dissatisfaction against a society which has been unkind and adverse to the collective emancipation of Dalit women. Gopal Guru has stressed on the need for Dalit women’s talk differently as their sociological backgrounds produces an altogether view of reality which has been hardly portrayed by the savarna female writers and Dalit male writers in their personal memories.

In the normative Hindu society, Dalit women are positioned at the lowest rung of Hindu society. As their bodies represent the polluted status, they are deprived of love, empathy and social respectability due to their supposed ritual impurity. In the elaborate texts of Hindu shastras, women are given the lowest positions along the shudras, as they are ritually impure beings and do not enjoy the social acceptance. As Dalit women are “doubly oppressed” due to their caste and gender positions, they face a multifaceted oppression and subordination in society from different quarters. They foreground the women-specific issues to the fore as absent in Dalit men’s autobiographies and express a candid view on the protection of female sexuality and bodily exploitation by the upper caste men. They reject all patriarchal notions that portray women negatively and highlight the sexist gaze they face in their everyday living in a caste- divided society. It critiques the male dominance in Hindu society and ridicules the caste-ascribed roles as enforced on Dalit women due to their caste and gender positions in Hindu society. The negative image of Dalit women and their polluted bodies as ascribed by the custodians of caste and gender supremacy has been turned upside down in order to underline the bodily exploitation of Dalit women as sites of resistance for sociological transformation. They don’t talk like “victims” of caste oppression and gender injustice, but assumes a pivotal role as the agents of social transformation, bringing an end to the gender violence and caste-based inequalities.



Violence or atrocities on Dalit women is a recurring phenomenon in Indian society and the role of shastric interpretation in denying equality, justice and agency should be understood through the elaborate system of purity and pollution. In addition, all atrocities against Dalit women are instigated by the “caste animosity” and hence it would not be erroneous if one call gender atrocities on Dalit women as the manifestation of “caste violence.” The very social location of Dalit women at the lowest rung of society and attaching the tag of “untouchable” to their identities makes them perfect prey for such caste-based violence that assumes gender specific attributes later on. The observation of Guru (1995) needs to be contextualized here in order to properly understand the nuanced aspects of atrocities or violence of any kind perpetrated on Dalit women and their female sexuality. He argued that the question of heinous atrocities committed by the upper caste men on Dalit women “cannot be grasped merely in terms of class, criminality, or as a psychological aberration or an illustration of male violence. The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude” (Guru, 2548).

The perpetration of violence on Dalit women’s bodies can be seen as the manifestation of the persistence of caste hierarchies and patriarchal domination that work in tandem and incessantly to subordinate Dalit women in society, thus denying them a legitimate dignified space in the normative imagination of Hindu society. They are still tormented inside and outside their families, as they are still considered to be “untouchable” in the eyes of the upper caste groups. It is their caste and gender location that makes them vulnerable to material exploitation, sexual violence and physical abuse. Dalit women are seen to be subservient to the diktats of patriarchal forces which try to ensure male dominance in society and subordination of the female sexuality, thus denying women agency, equality and emancipatory identity. The excessive use of violence on the female sexuality of Dalit women can also be described as a tool of maintaining caste privilege and ensuring the gender subordination of the marginalized women in a patriarchal society that disallows any equal treatment to women due to the persistence of ritual impurity attached to their polluted bodies.

Dalit women occupy the most vulnerable positions in society and suffer from economic disability, due to the lack of material independence. They have to render physical labors along with their husbands on the farmlands of the upper caste groups in order to sustain their daily living. The upper castes treat them as “untouchables” and hardly give them any respect for rendering the physical labor at the exchange of meager wages. Like their husbands, they too spend their quotidian living working as the low-paid agricultural jobs or other forms of works which are hardly given any dignified place in society. The hazardous nature of jobs not only affects their health, but also hardly ensures the requirement of minimal income for running a family. In the most cases, Dalit women are seen as the sole earning members of their family, whereas their husbands squandering away their lives in gambling and drinking.

Poverty is the dominant image in the lives of Dalit communities, with women of the said community facing the brunt of such disability the most due to their social and gender



locations. They are subjected to the graded forms of oppression and violence within and outside their families. The pervasive nature of graded patriarchies affects their well-being to a great extent. They suffer from torture and physical abuse in the hands of their husbands, which testify the existence of Dalit patriarchal structures. Not only that, they face violent oppression in the hands of the upper caste men who treat the former as their properties and are subjected to their whims. Their material vulnerability becomes the opportunities for the upper caste men for perpetrating sexual and physical violence against women belonging to the marginalized groups, as they use their socially dominant positions in order to demonstrate their caste-based and patriarchal domination on the hapless women. Many Dalit women's autobiographies such as Bama's *Sangati* (2005) have shown how the Dalit women are subjected to sexual exploitation by the upper caste men in which the latter use their ownership of landed properties as a tool to perpetrate atrocities against Dalit women. As the marginalized Dalit women are uneducated and suffer from material deprivation, they can't resist such lewd advances due to their precarious position in the material relations of Hindu society.

Women from the marginalized social background experience the vicious cycle of "triple oppression" due to their caste, class and gender locations within and outside their families. All of Dalit women have a similarity in their lived experiences of sexual or physical assault in the hands of the upper caste men, as they utilize their poor economic condition to launch brutal forms of physical abuse and sexual violence at the daily basis. As they face consistent threats from the upper caste employers, Dalit women frequently change their occupations or jobs in order to protect their self-respect and honor. In the majority cases, the complaints made by Dalit women against the upper caste men are not even heard. Instead, Dalit women are accused of maligning the good image of the men of dominant castes. Bama demonstrated in *Sangati* (2005) how the myriad ways in which the upper caste men sexually exploit the marginalized women working on their fields as the agricultural laborers. Even the village council displays its parochial patriarchal mentality, when it punishes the innocent Dalit women arbitrarily to establish casteist and patriarchal hegemony over the female sexuality. Due to the material depravity, Dalit women always face sexual threats from the upper caste men as the latter use every possible opportunity to sexually exploit women belonging to the marginalized social backgrounds. Bama showed how the upper caste men used mere "excuse for squeezing" the breasts of a Dalit girl (Bama, 26). Dalit women are relegated to the mere properties of men and the sole objects of fulfilling the sexual urges of men. Such diminution of Dalit women's body reflects the extent of patriarchal oppression and subjugation that they are subjected to in their quotidian living. Bama expressed with sadness: "A woman's body, mind, feelings, words and deeds, and her entire life are all under his control and domination" (Bama, 68).

Dalit women also face the frequent cases of domestic violence within their families in the hands of their husbands and in-laws. They are hardly given any dignified space and freedom within their family and are considered as the mere tool of fulfilling domestic obligations and sexual satisfaction of their husbands. None displays any sympathy for their



suffering condition, as they are hardly considered as the fellow human beings. The commoditization of Dalit women is a dominant norm in Indian society, thus denying them equality, freedom and self-respect in their quotidian existence, which leads to the violations of their human rights in a caste-ascribed and patriarchal society that remains insensitive to the collective predicament of Dalit women. Dalit women face the myriad forms of oppression from their parents, husbands and in-laws, who acted “as tyrants by curbing their freedom and punishing them for small misdeeds” (Kumar, 225). Even Dalit women are brutally tortured by their own husbands in families as they never respect them and use them as mere toys of fulfilling their sexual needs. Instead of lending a supporting hand to their wives, Dalit husbands torture their wives and sexually exploit them in a heinous manner, thus testifying the prevalence of the practice of “Dalit patriarchy” in Indian society. Thomas said: “In this context, the family turns out to be another means of extending patriarchal and social control over the woman. Since the Dalit man has access to the public, he is entitled to exercise power and control over the Dalit woman, and it is he who determines her place in society- that is, relegates her to the private sphere of her home” (Thomas, 243). It busted the myth that Dalit communities don’t practice patriarchy and they are “egalitarian” in their normative existence. Gopal Guru said: “the moral code imposed by Dalit patriarchy forced Dalit women into private spheres and denied them public visibility” (Guru, 1995: 57).

While Dalit men enjoy accessibility to the public spaces, Dalit women are condemned to the private spheres encircled by the four walls of domesticity. While women are kept within the houses, Dalit men enjoy greater freedom and enjoy spatial mobility. Whenever Dalit women transcend their gender-ascribed roles, they are punished for morally subversive acts, such as choosing sexual partners on their own. Chakravarti (2018:65) highlighted how “consent” of women is obtained through the powerful ideology of “Pavitrata” and “stridhrama” in the patriarchal Hindu society to ensure the seamless operation of patriarchal notions in society, which aim at coercing women into patriarchal domination and denying them a space for self-respect, equality and social emancipation. The control over the female sexuality is the ultimate objective of any patriarchal society and this leads to the unquestioned dominance of men over women in society. Chakravarti showed how a need has been felt to organize and order the female sexuality and the innate natures of women by “paternal power” in the emerging societies “to serve the new social and political arrangements organized by men of the dominant sections of society” (Chakravarti, 69).

Everyday humiliation, denial and discrimination are the privileges of Dalit women and their married lives are have been “harsh and arduous”, as they face multitudes of physical and sexual exploitation in the family of their husbands. Instead of welcoming them with love and empathy, Dalit women are consistently tortured and abused in myriad ways for their socio-economic vulnerabilities. Since they are married off at a very early age, they hardly finish their school education, thus continuing their ignorant life. Marriage means “calamity” for these young Dalit girls, as they venture into the predestined life of suffering, humiliation and marginalization. Kamble showed how the complexity of patriarchal structures in society proved to be very destructive for Dalit girls, as they “had to endure the abuses everyday in the



household.... This rigorous punishment at a young age, however, was far preferable to what she had to endure once she reached maturity” (Kamble, 95). Kamble in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) recounted her painful days as she married too early and was forced to abandon a life of freedom and happiness to fulfill the domestic obligation and to satisfy the sexual needs of her husband. She was the victim of caste discrimination and gender injustice, as she had followed the instructions of her husbands’ all the time, thus losing her autonomy and agency. She showed how as a woman she faced derogatory remarks from her husband questioning about her ability at the daily basis. To escape the patriarchal wrath of her husband, she was forced to hide her personal diary from her husband. Her husband was very patriarchal in outlook and “considered a woman to be an inferior being” (Kamble 147).

Like the upper castes, Dalits too express the preference for male children in families and express a disdainful approach to girl children which results in the proper upbringing and timely education of girl children being seriously affected. As Dalits suffer from illiteracy and class inequality, they get their girl children married at the very early age even before reaching the stage of puberty. They are forced to fulfill all the family obligations and are asked to strictly remain loyal to the parents’ or husbands’ families. The gender restrictions are everywhere in the daily living of Dalit women. Even they become mothers at the very age and are forced to resume their daily physical labors within weeks after their delivery, thus putting themselves at the greater health-related risks. But, it is a common phenomenon and can be seen in every Dalit household across the country. It is a reflection of the patriarchal mentality and sex-based division of laborers to the disadvantages of the Dalit women.

Bama’s *Karkku* (2012) is an important Dalit woman’s autobiography, which chronicles the collective trajectory of Dalit Christian community and how Dalit women in particular face all forms of oppression and violence in their daily living. It shows the disillusionment of Dalit Christians who considered that conversion to Christianity will usher in a ray of hope and emancipation for the ex-untouchables who used to be subjected to brutal forms of caste and gender oppression and violence in the Hindu society. Her autobiography becomes the autobiography of the entire community. Her hope for emancipation in Christianity proved to be a disillusion as she continued to face discrimination and humiliation in the Roman Catholic Church due to her caste location. This bears testimony to the fact that mere conversion to other religion fails to ensure equality and self-respect for Dalits as the caste prejudices in the religious folds continue to survive in this country. The caste identity of the individual becomes his/her predestined fate and a source of social acceptance or rejection.

Dalit women writers such as Baby Kamble, Bama, Sivakami, and Urmila Pawar had made a sustained attack on the Brahmanical Hinduism for the wretched conditions of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. They revisit such religious texts of Hinduism and expose the hidden justification of caste and gender based violence and subordination. They foreground a Phule-Ambedkarti perspective to analyze the sorry state of Dalits and try to unfold how the systematic discrimination and atrocities on Dalit women have been



normalized under the caste system which promotes the patriarchal hegemony to keep women under the permanent subservience to their counterparts. In this respect, the guiding principle of purity and pollution has been legitimized by the Brahminical Hindu texts in order to regularize or justify the sordid and suffering condition of Dalit women in Hindu society. The application of ritual impurity or pollution to women and lower caste groups is seen another effective ploy to perpetuate the caste hegemony of the dominant castes and regulate the female sexuality to suit the patriarchal agenda. They also critique the ignorance of Dalits and their unflinching devotion to the Hindu rituals which are both oppressive and exploitative in nature. The acute paucity of “education” is seen behind the persistence of such dead cultural practices despite the fact that such dead customs or rituals hardly alleviate Dalit women as they reject equality, self-respect and collective emancipation of Dalit women.

The unflinching love for education is another important dominant theme in every Dalit women’s autobiographies as they consider that it is the lack of knowledge which is responsible for such wretched condition for Dalit communities. And they consider that education is the only route to the collective emancipation of Dalits which not only ensures self-respect for Dalits but also provides them with ample opportunities for socio-economic mobility. In other words, education serves as the only way for achieving “an egalitarian society” as envisioned by Phule and Ambedkar in their anti-caste polemic writings. It infuses Dalit women with the empowering spirit of self-confidence and makes them mentally strong enough to wage a fight against any kind of social and gender-linked oppression and discrimination.

Kumud Pawde’s autobiographical extract, *The Story of My Sanskrit* included in *Antasphot* narrates how the author had been denied the opportunities to learn Sanskrit in her college as Sanskrit was considered to be the exclusive privilege of Brahmins. Pawde recounted the humiliation she faced during her interview due to her caste location: “So now even these people are to teach Sanskrit! Government Brahmins, aren’t they?” (Pawde, 105) Despite the numerous odds, she fought against such social discrimination and became a professor in that language. Here, education is seen as a tool of realizing freedom and achieving social mobility. Instead of being bogged down by the upper caste hegemony over the language of Sanskrit, Pawde continued learning Sanskrit, thus breaking the social monopoly of the upper castes, which resulted in democratizing the field of knowledge production. This personal memoir bears testimony to the fact that Dalit women are the least fortunate segment in Indian society and suffers from multiple forms of oppression and discrimination due to their social location and gender positions, yet they never give up hope for a better future. The normative Indian society effectively restricts the freedom and socio-spatial mobility of Dalit women, as they continue to face the social repulsion due to the persistence of caste-based prejudices and patriarchal mentality.

With the expansion of neo-liberal order and the rise in educational qualifications of Dalits, the orthodox, the repressive structures of village economy have been collapsing gradually. Educated Dalit women no more dependent on the mercy of the upper castes for survival, as they are moving out of the villages and are migrating to the urban areas to secure



the semi-skilled or skilled jobs in different sectors, thus gaining economic independence and spatial mobility, which eroded the hegemonic hold of the dominant castes over the collective lives of Dalit women. This created a solid “resentment” and a fear of losing the caste-linked privileges such as the material dominance in the rural economy by the upper castes. The effects of modernity have been felt in Dalit women too and as a result, they are coming out of their “imposed captivities” to assert their rights in the different socio-symbolic levels. It led to the intensification of the animosity that the upper castes have for Dalits.

They couldn't tolerate such independent living of Dalits and their achieving socio-economic mobility. The relative progress made thanks to the reservation policies, educated Dalit women are getting educated and joining in different professions in different sectors, thus gathering power and prestige in society. The noticeable changes have been detected in the ways of living, dress-codes and attitudinal attributes of the marginalized Dalit women, who don't shy away from making their voices heard. Dalit women's autobiographies indicate the emergence of a new kind of Dalit women who refuse to be depicted as the mere “victims” of caste and gender based atrocities in the caste –segregated society and want to act as the agents of social transformation, thus leading their living on their own choice. This altered the status quo of the traditional village economy and power relations and infuriated non-Dalits to a great extent. As a result, there has been intensification of such violent atrocities on Dalit women in particular, with the upper caste men are increasingly becoming the perpetrators of such cruel forms of atrocities. The violation of Dalit women's bodily modesty and sexuality by the upper caste men can be interpreted as a lesson for the entire Dalit community. The culture of impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of caste-linked atrocities committed on the marginalized women reflects the direct patronage of society which reproduces caste hierarchies and regulates gender relations in everyday social living.

Conclusion

Dalit women face brutal forms of atrocities on the everyday basis, with the regressive caste ideology and patriarchy playing an important role in their sustenance. The very foundation of Hindu society is based on the caste-based separation and gender discrimination, with the culture of violence against women being normalized in the religious texts of Hindus, as Dalit women inherit the status of “permanent ritual impurity” according to Hindu religious texts. But, with the passage of time, Dalit women have become vocal about their human rights and are becoming increasingly assertive in their constitutional rights, thus creating a resentment of the upper castes against Dalit in general and Dalit women in particular. The very location of Dalit women at the intersecting point of caste, class and gender has exacerbated their socio-economic vulnerabilities, which led to the further occurrence of atrocities on Dalit women. Dalit women's autobiographies testify to the caste-gender linkage to such violent acts committed against Dalit women and expose the overall regressive mentality of society against women. Putting an end to such cycles of caste-cum-gender violence would not be an easy feat, yet the marginalized women can change such deplorable condition, if they get educated more and more, and forge solidarities with other oppressed



segments of society to fight a collective battle for gender equality and emancipation for all women.

References

- [1] Rao, Anupama(ed) (2018). *Gender, Caste and the Imagination of Equality*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.
- [2] Thomas, Sara Sindhu (2016). ‘Witnessing and Experiencing Dalitness: In Defence of Dalit Women’s Testimonios,’ in Joshil K. Abraham, and Judith Mishrahi-Barak (ed). *Dalit Literatures in India*. New York: Routledge.
- [3] Chakravarti, Uma. (2018). *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens*. New Delhi: Sage & Stree.
- [4] Dangle, Arjun(ed)(1992). *Poisoned Bread: Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1994.
- [5] Kumar, Raj (2010). *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
- [6] Teltumbde, Anand (2010). *The persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- [7] Bama (2012). *Karukku*. Trans. from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [8] ----- (2005). *Sangati*. Trans. from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Kamble, Baby (2008). *The Prisons We Broke*. Trans. from Marathi by Maya Pandit. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
- [10] Guru, Gopal (1995). ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently.’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 41/42 (Oct. 14-21, 1995), pp. 2548-2550

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.