

Resurgence of Self: An Analysis of Dalit Feminist Writings**Manju P. K.**, Asst Professor in English Education, Mahajubilee Training College, Mulloorkkara

Abstract: The caste system in India emerged during the ancient period and got transformed with ages. Independent India strictly prohibits caste discrimination but Dalits who belong to the lower strata still continue to bear the stigma of untouchability. The caste system prevalent in India denied 'Dalits' their basic human rights and are subjected to humiliation and tortures. The Dalit women are the worst sufferers on account of caste and gender tyranny. The Women are considered inferior to men and are treated badly. The feminist movement is mainly concerned with the issues pertaining to high-caste and upper middle class women. The ordeals of Dalit women are scantily represented or atomized in the mainstream feminist discourses. Dalit literature depicts the inhuman and degraded conditions composed by their natural feelings of being a Dalit and written with blood of pain. The emergence of Dalit Politics and Dalit Literature came about in the modern times through the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi, Jyotiba Phule and Bheem Rao Ambedkar. The Dalit writers are determined to gain self respect and their works portray the hardships, dehumanization and exploitations they suffered for centuries. More and more Dalit literature is being translated in to English and thus Dalits are increasingly gaining political and economical mileage nowadays. In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit women gained enough strength to uproar over the exploitations and used literature as a weapon to counter the mainstream writings. Unlike the men, the Dalit feminist writers strongly protested against the injustices levelled upon them through their powerful writings. The author tries to sketch out the ways by which various Dalit feminist writings get transformed from subjugation to self representation.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Dalit feminism, Subjugation, Caste system, Stratification

Caste is not unique to India. The birth of caste system is accompanied with the genesis of Hindu religious theology wherein there are four stratifications/savarnas among the Hindu communities in India. The four varnas or castes are further divided into many subcastes placing untouchables in the final stratum. They were later called as Dalits who were considered as impure and the lowliest of all. The term Dalit means 'broken/scattered' and they have been socially oppressed and excluded from the mainstream of the society. The Excruciating pain and agony they suffered at the hands of upper class were recorded with minute details and sprouted as a protest literature. Along with the atrocities of caste discrimination and experiences of subjugation, Dalit literature also includes detailed description of the cultural values of Dalits. The Dalit culture is a life-giving and life-affirming culture. Dalit literature is available in a variety of genres-autobiography, short story, novels, poetry and essays. The paper attempts to trace the reasons behind the emergence of Dalit feminism, the multiple level oppressions encountered by the Dalit women and the quest for identity and equality unfolded through the Dalit feminist literature.

Dalit women are at the most disadvantaged group as they are oppressed by non-Dalit women, non-Dalit men and Dalit men. Dalit women are triply oppressed in our society. When state interventions are gender blind or lack gender sensitivity, lower caste Dalit women are not only exploited and marginalized by upper caste brahmanical patriarchs but also marginalized by mainstream feminist movements. Dalit women are always victims of harsh abuse and symbolic /physical violence. Despite the implementation of plenty of literary programmes in India, literate Dalit women remains abysmally low in number. The 'different voice' of the Dalit women in their works is a reflection of the long lived experiences of their everyday struggles and joint oppression of caste and gender but remained invisible to both the women's and Dalit movement in India. In the Dalit movement, the voices and experiences of Dalit women were framed as roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimised sexual being' and in the feminist movement all women came to be framed as 'victims' thereby subsuming the life events of Dalit women. The Dalit movement was indifferent to Dalit women, and refused to give women more space in the society. At the same time the women's liberation movement failed to take Dalit women's suffering in to account.

Dalit women are the most vulnerable and discriminated sections in a caste based society. They constitute the lower strata of the society. Majority of them have worked in unorganized sectors and a considerable number of them got engaged in sex work as a part of traditional caste system. They are usually underpaid and are exploited by the upper class. Their bodies are the site of the most brutal violence in India. They were subjected to naked parades, gang rapes, sexual exploitations of various kinds and degraded labour like manual scavenging.

Dalit women, as a specific category got attention in the beginning of 1990's when young Dalit women who had higher academic background began to articulate themselves and attempted to integrate caste and gender frameworks. They were highly influenced by Ambedkar's philosophy and black feminist articulations in America. They pointed out the failure of other discourses in understanding and exploring the multiple level oppressions faced by Dalit women and found themselves a new political self which is that of a Dalit feminist.

Those voices which were muted and kept in silence for long years slowly attempted to speak out of their traumatic experiences. Although Dalit feminism articulates the everyday experiences of Dalit women, they are not homogenous in nature. Their voices are diverse according to the sub caste, location, region and other aspects.

Dalit Sahitya in its early phase has seen the entrance of a number of women writers and poets who are all invariably influenced by Ambedkar's ideology like Urmila Pawar, Surekha Bhagat, Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble and Shanta Bai Dane. Ambedkar's ideas enable the Dalit women to radically reorient themselves and to give expression to their creative writings.

Among the Dalit women writing in India Bama's name is foremost. Dalit women's narrative finds a new and profound structuring in Bama's *Karukku*. The novel takes the readers to the unknown terrains of a Dalit women's social and psychological consciousness through her autobiography. The work powerfully transmits the raw experience of Dalit women. She protests and fights back against the presence of casteism which is all pervasive at all stages of her life. Dalit women need not only to fight against the cast monster but they also have to struggle against dalit patriarchy. This predicament is well portrayed in Bama's story *Karukku*. In spite of the weak and mumbling cry of a defeated female which is usually shared in male dalit autobiographies, *Karukku* presents the powerful voice of protest of the dalit females. Bama's voice represents the whole dalit community and all crudeness, obscenity and naturalness comes alive in the narrative. The author's conscious choice of spoken Dalit Tamil and ungoverned by elaborate grammatical rules as a medium to voice the story of her community was an effort to completely identify herself in the community of dalits. The discrimination and contempt Bama had to face because of her being a dalit can be felt throughout her book. It contains a pungent critique of the church as a capitalist and a patriarchal institution. Being a Dalit Christian, Bama faces further marginalization. She feels alienated and humiliated not only because of the gender subordination but also because of her lower caste position. She also realized that her education has no way helped her to get rid of her caste stigma.

Karukku may be considered as her own story whereas *Sangathi* contains a series of anecdotes which are self contained and unrelated to one another except through the central narrator voice of Bama. The reason behind the revolt of Dalit women was well said in the preface. "Oppression, ruled and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of the society in order to live" (Preface, Sangati).

The women characters of Bama are not represented as mere hapless victims of casteism and patriarchal violence but most of them successfully put up a brave fight before surrendering to their inevitable fate. *Sangathi* contains inspiring stories empowering Dalit women to swim vigorously against the tide about their way developing self confidence and self respect to leap over the adversities. Bama shows how the discrimination of women starts right from the birth. She speaks of the inhuman exploitation of Dalit women by landlords. Dalit women face the threat of molestation by landlords in the fields, act as mere slaves at the church, and they have to submit to the sexual torment of their husband at home after their menial work. Bama's works demonstrate the problems and challenges the Dalit women in India face and how the Dalit women writers respond to them.

Another most prominent Dalit Feminist writer and pioneers of the Dalit feminist movement is Urmila Pawar, an Indian writer of Marathi Language. Her autobiographical work-*Aaidan* could be examined as a testimony of the hardships of Dalit women. Their primary source of income was by weaving baskets which metaphorically indicates their position on the lower rungs of caste system and crippling poverty. The autobiography provides a detailed description of the struggles of Dalit women. Dalit women were poorly fed than men and were humiliated regularly in public places, during weddings and even in the school environment.

"Caste is hidden like a prowling beast in the forest; it can pounce any time on you!"(Aaidan)

The caste related prejudices and upper castes making fun at the eating and living habits of the poorer people were all expressed with sadness. The book provides an exploration of Pawar's life as a Dalit women and how she was made aware of the stark differences between her life and that of other upper caste. The rise of Dr B.R Ambedkar's philosophy and his public denouncement of Hinduism and the Manusmriti were welcomed by their community and was the powerful strength for their revival. Pawar discloses the two standards displayed by her father; who was a reformer to the world, but quite abusive and patriarchal in the family. Marital life experiences and her dependency upon someone else were also mentioned in the work. She had to spend years and years reading books and participating in college events to gain herself respect. Her family remained ambivalent to her securing a Masters degree and her traditional husband expected her to take care of house hold chores and the children. Pawar went on to write much more and make considerable strides in her field by writing a biography of B.R Ambedkar, and becoming an eminent name in literary circles. She took writing as a means to escape from her painful life experiences and considers her mother's weaving as a source of inspiration for her autobiography. Pawar's book highlighted Dr.Ambedkar as the greatest inspiration behind Dalit feminist writings and documentation.

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Inequality is the root cause of marginality and Dalit's outcry the injustice and cruelties encountered by them in their writings. The expressions were not at all fictitious but were true representations of their silent sufferings. Dalit literature was totally ignored and not considered seriously among the mainstream literary genres. The emergence of Post structural and Post modern theories paved way towards exploring the cultural constitutions of the oppressed and the marginalized. Dalit literature that commenced as a protest literature opened with lot of frustration and anger upon the cruelties by the subjugated group. The voiceless anger from the deep rooted souls of the downtrodden Dalit women remained silent and got buried under the caste system for centuries. This marginal representation often resulted in the origin of Dalit Feminism in literature. There have been a lot of interventions taken by the government and nongovernmental organizations to rectify the evils of caste system. In spite of the general improvements and elevation in the Dalit literature, India has still a long way to go, to root out the evils of the caste system from the society.

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