

# DALIT WOMEN AS 'OTHER' IN SELECT DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

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## Abstract

Dalit woman, an object of exploitation has been victim of sexual, physical, social and economic exploitation. Being the victim of gender, caste, class and patriarchy, she has been tool to play with. She is 'absent' in both mainstream feminist corpus and dalit patriarchic literature especially in autobiographical narratives. Dalit writers Siddalingaiah, Y.B.Satyanarayana, Gunshakara and Namdev Nimgade depict the plight of dalit women in their life narratives. She has been 'other' for dalit patriarchic movement, negating her desires, dreams and rights. Gender discrimination, starts with birth, and is maintained in dalit families. This discrimination is maintained in every respect be it food, education, marriage etc. As strived object, she faces inhuman and pity situation. Dalit woman is forced to early marriages without her consent. Woman is to 'use' mentality has been the identity of both, upper caste and dalit patriarchy. Being 'other' dalit woman's space is synchronized to traditional roles. Patriarchy uses tools of authority, violence, power, dominance to control female sexuality.

**Key Words:** Dalit woman, gender, caste, class, patriarchy, other.

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is a Absolute- she is the Other (Beauvoir 16)

Dalit woman, an object of exploitation has been victim of sexual, physical, social and economic exploitation. Being the victim of gender, caste and class she has been tool to play with. She is 'absent' in both mainstream feminist corpus and dalit patriarchic literature especially in autobiographical narratives. She has been 'other' for dalit patriarchic movement, negating her desires, dreams and rights. She is forced at the margin excluding from all spaces of life. She is discriminated on the bases of gender, class, caste and patriarchy.

Gender discrimination, starts with birth, and is maintained in dalit families. Female child is treated badly assuming a burden on a shoulder; as a result in every respect of life she is subjugated and discriminated. Equality is distorted when it comes to birth of girl child. Commenting sharply on this patriarchic psyche, Sudhir Kakkar observes, "At birth of a son drums are beaten in some parts of the country, conch-shells, blown in others and the midwife paid lavishly, while no such spontaneous rejoicing accompanies the birth of a daughter" (58). Namdev Nimgade records the point in his autobiographical narrative *In the Tiger's Shadow*. On His birth "village musicians" were invited to welcome his birth. He, further, states, "As the first child...I was much loved by everyone in the family". (P 5). Baby Kamble in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* sharply castigates this patriarchic attitude considering male child as



subject. She focuses the issue thus, "The eldest son was the pride of the house. He would be offered to the deity as vaghya or potraja. Fathers had a lion's share in preparing their sons for this role. To offer the son as vaghya or potraja was considered a great honor and prestige for the family. The father very diligently saw to it that his son was properly trained." (18-19). Gender discrimination even in the names of Gods and Goddesses is rampant. Commenting on the practice to show female goddess as weak, submissive, object, other and male gods as powerful and subject, Gunasekaran in his autobiography *The Scar* says, "always the female deities and other deities within the village would be very calm and gentle. But Sankaiah, Kazugadiyan and Muniayya, the male deities who stay outside the village, are perceived as being hot tempered." (P 30)

This discrimination is maintained in every respect be it food, education, marriage etc. As strived object, she faces inhuman and pity situation. The leftover food is shared by male, in unequal proportion keeping more shares for him. Being 'other' dalit woman is kept away from education as compared with male. Here in case of education, gender discrimination is practiced. This fact is explained by Gunasekaran, when he says, "Tamilarasi Akka had passed. Unable to afford an higher education she discontinued her studies. This was a common occurrence in most Dalit families." (ibid 38) The same tune is repeated in Siddalingaiah's autobiography *A Word with You World*; he narrates thus, "Two of my uncle's daughters did not go to school. They grazed cattle instead." (P-23) Again duty to look after other children is shouldered to her. This imposed duty literally destroys her future- as an illiterate she lost her power to retaliate and thus suffers for rest of life. She is forced to take care of her issues is well explained by Y. B. Satyanarayana in his autobiography *My Father Baliah*. He touch the issue thus, "Bachamma, his daughter, who had stopped going to school, sat with them...Bachamma played an important role in monitoring her brother's education." (P-85)

An early marriage is blot on dalit woman. Dalit woman, being, 'other' is forced to early marriages without her consent. Worst is that she is never considered in her engagement and between the ages eight to nine, wedding is arranged with a bride senior in age or in some cases with widower. Y.B. Satyanarayana straightly points out the matter describing the point thus, "Early marriages were the norm, and at ten, a girl was considered to be of marriageable age." (ibid 8). Simon De Beavouir is right in this connection. She says, "Marriage today . . . is forced much more tyrannically upon the young girl . . . the women's body is something he buys; to her he represents capital she is authorized to exploit" (450). This point of forced marriage also gets reflect well when Satyanarayana talks about the tradition. Woman as 'other' is degraded to commodity. Labeling her as 'object' of exploitation, she was selling and bought like a slave. This slave-trade tradition is recorded thus, "it was a practice among the dalit and Sudhra communities, particularly in the Telangana region, for parents of the groom to send some money to the bride the day before wedding." (ibid 44). This 'commodity' mind set of Patriarchy and how she is degraded to a second status is also recorded by Siddalingaiah narrating the story of his friend Puttappa whose father had made another marriage on the pretext of death of his first wife. In reality "her husband was neglected her when she was ill, she got herself admitted to hospital." (ibid p-60)



Keeping a second woman or wife is practice of dalit patriarchy who commodifies womanhood looking down her as object. K.A. Gunsekaran records the practice, "Thatha (Grandfather) had mistresses in many places." (ibid 48). He further recollects thus, "despite this, I came to know much later that he (father) had another wife in Marandai with whom he had one son and two daughters." (ibid 8). Woman is to 'use' mentality has been the identity of patriarchy. Woman as 'other' has been object of lust for manhood. This masculinity syndrome is explained through extra-marital relations of Baliah. He is an epitome of masculine power which degrades woman at far end. Balaiah developed illegal relations with Laxmamma, a divorcee sister of his friend Mogulappa. He was attracted towards her as she was "fair, slim and beautiful, with big eyes and a well defined nose. Baliah was on relieving duty again. Laxmamma was in his house in Tandur. Everyone including Narsamma, now knew about Baliah's second wife; she also knew that she [Laxmamma] would be with her [Narsamma] husband in her absence." (ibid 53, 70[mine])

Domestic violence is one of the evils of dalit society. Like patriarchy, poor dalit

Woman is the victim of the ire of her matriarchy. Mother-in-law who has been victim of patriarchy exerts her authority on daughter-in-law. Baby Kamble observes this evil, thus, "but we too were human beings and we too desired to dominate, to wield power. So we made our own arrangements to find slaves- our very own daughters- in-law! If nobody else then we could at least enslave them." (ibid 87). This injustice practice of dominance and power is also explained by Y.B.Satyanarayana. Baliah's wife Narsamma was a victim of cruel treatment meted out by her mother-in-law. Tendency to exert power of mother in law is fully exerted by step-mother of Baliah. Explains Y.b.Satyanarayana thus, Narsamma's "mother-in-law showed little pity on her (ibid 48) Baliah' father aptly describes the cruelty of his wife thus, "look at the poor girl. How she has been harassed by your mother. I can't see her working the whole day without rest." (49)

Being 'other' dalit woman's space is synchronized to traditional roles. Gunasekaran depicts this fact happened with his mother. His mother was educated and had opportunity to do government job but his father (patriarchy) denied and kept her away from job. He says, "My mother had been educated, even in those days, up to eighth standard at Schwartz School in Ramanathapuram...My mother was educated by the church authorities. Our father did not allow my mother to take up a government job." (ibid 8). Division of labor is also gender biased. Productive labor (masculine) is considered superior to reproductive (feminine) on the basis of sex. As a result woman's household duties-child bearing, cooking etc- are regarded as substandard, worthless and mean. Unlike caste woman, dalit woman have to perform double duty- household and outside labor. Through his words, Y.B.Satyanarayana reveals the point, "in untouchable families, it was common for girls to learn every kind of work at home and to even accompany their mothers to work in the fields by the age of eight or nine." (ibid 32)

Dalit woman's sexuality is controlled by patriarchy. Patriarchy uses tools of authority, violence, power, dominance to control female sexuality. The patriarchy looks down upon blossoming of female sex. Puberty is a weapon used against woman through its exhibition. Her puberty (an act of exclusion) is exhibited and as 'other' she is isolated from other members of family. This 'private affair' is



disclosed and declared to society, as a result, in opinion of Sheeba Khan, "...her female body and her very womanhood becomes a source of deep shame for her."(P-56)

Physical violence of upper caste patriarchy is clearly seen the restrictions imposed on dalit woman regarding dress restriction. She was forced to wear sari in typical way and was barred from wearing the blouse and thus forced to expose upper part of body. Gunasekaran narrates the story of Periamma who is his mother's elder sister. She is the victim of this caste practice. She records thus, "From the day I came to Thovoor, after my marriage, I have never worn a blouse. The Cheri women were not allowed to wear blouses as per the caste regulations of the village. Girls of my age who came to this village after their marriage too have been subjected to this practice, and have not worn a blouse to this day." (ibid 26-27)

She is considered as 'birth machine' to begot children in double digits, with little care of her physique, which is injustice imposed on her body by dalit patriarchy. This leads to loss of physical energy that may affect longevity of her life. This politics of gender is exposed by Satyanarayan, thus, "it was a baby boy, the sixth child, and the author of this book...It was now a large family; there were eight children in all."(ibid 82-83)

**Conclusion:** Dalit male autobiographers depict dalit woman as 'other.' They depict them with contempt and as second class citizen. This caste class citizenship is built by upper caste and dalit patriarchy. This second class status leads her to inferior complex and very existence of her being. She is a victim of 'triad trap' of patriarchy that controls all her affairs in the forms of father, husband and son. Violating human rights of her, she is marginally represented in these autobiographical narratives.

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