



Violence

in Literature, Culture and Society

Edited by
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Violence in Literature, Culture and Society

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CHAPTER 6

Dalit Motherhood under the Images of Casteism and Violence in Select Autographies of Dalit Women

Biswadeb Rajbanshi

Introduction

In caste-based patriarchal social stratification, Dalit mothers are soft targets of violence and vilification. Patriarchy legitimises violence under social consciousness. Dalit mothers undergo other violence and oppression sanctioned and legitimised by religion. Along with facing oppression in the paradigm of power relations based on class-caste society, they become common targets and subjects of exploitation. Dalit motherhood is a separate agency that subtly differentiates upper-caste motherhood and womanhood in the light of the theories of Dalit feminism. This chapter explores how images of casteism play an important role in Dalit motherhood in the complex cluster of caste-based patriarchy. To explore the images of casteism and violence upon Dalit motherhood, this chapter considers Bamma's *Karukku*, *Sangati*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* as primary texts.

Body of Dalit Mothers under the Images of Violence

The body of Dalit women is an easy target of oppression, and still, they are being controlled by caste, religion and patriarchy. Oppression of Dalit mothers and women under the images of casteism and gender-based violence in the domain of the Dalit discipline gets culturally materialised. The post-Nehruvian state policies in India are supposed to have provided more opportunities for Dalits through constitutional reservation policies. Implementing these opportunities, some Dalits have, of course, benefited while the majority of working-class Dalits remain in rural areas, urban and semi-urban slums. However, the irony is that modernity still sticks to caste-based extreme prejudices where Dalit women face difficulty for being Dalit

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(caste) women, along with violence strictly accelerated by the Brahmanical hegemony in the Indian socio-cultural milieu. The comparative discussion on the exploitation of the body through different forms would reveal how internal and external patriarchy shape and reshape different modes of violations and exploitations of Dalit motherhood.

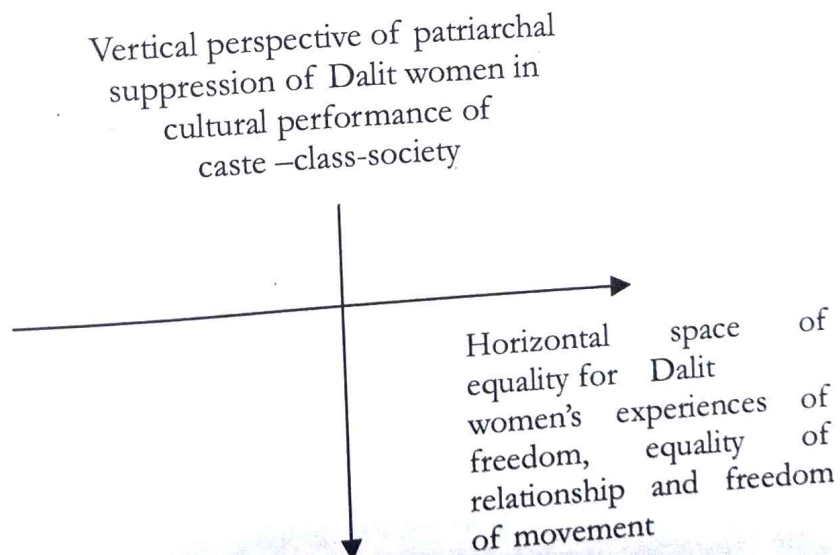
Society has conceptualised feminine and masculine divisions under certain cultural constructions. Hence, masculinity promotes dogmatic ideologies of supremacy over feminine productivity. In her *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Vandana Shiva observes women's emancipation by countering the established concept of "masculinisation of the female" (Shiva 47). If we metaphorically construct a pyramid based on a social and cultural hierarchy of gender, class, and caste, we can metonym Dalit mother[s] producers who produce[s] new lives. In Indian cultural construction and reproduction, bodies of Dalit and tribal mothers are the sources of sustenance. Here one may counter the assertion that why is it not the same for other women and mothers. The obvious answer we may provide from Shiva's argument for those women who belong to the close existence of nature and work as producers.

Collectively Shiva terms this as "women-the-gatherer". Masculinity is termed destructive for engaging with the image of "hunting". Besides being a mother, a woman acts as a preserver and protector without destroying or hampering any existential substance[s] belonging to the pyramid. Most of the Dalit women's testimonials are based on agrarian socio-economic background. Hence, they subtly figure out unmarked truth. The symbolic representation of the body relates to the nature of consciousness. Religious and social provisions sanction different types of violence upon Dalit woman's bodies. Patriarchy purposefully uses religion to impose violence upon the body, and violence is subsumed under the image of religious provisions. To relate this, the traditional practices like Devadasi, Dola, and Adabapa in Hinduism are legitimised. The duality of patriarchal oppression gets sanctioned through religion and social consent. Caste hierarchy is actively working to legitimise rape, and on the other hand, religious recognition of these practices highly nurtures patriarchal desire collectively. These systems collectively manipulate people of society through cultural manifestations and representation that exhibit only appearance, not reality. Dalit motherhood may be reshaped as a separate agency that subtly differentiates upper-caste motherhood and womanhood. Certainly,

motherhood executes certain characteristics of womanhood besides being a mother. However, the body of a Dalit mother is always under trauma and tension, as rightly pointed out by Bama in *Karukku* and *Sangati*. This tension revolves throughout life to affirm her belongings for others. Suppose the mother is a universal symbol of preserver and creator of new birth. In that case, the Dalit mother has to fight against caste, class, and patriarchy (internal and external) to grow and accomplish their motherhood and matristic value in caste-based certain socio-cultural ethos dominated by patriarchy.

Violence and Space

In the book *Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India* (2014), Aloysius Irudayam S.J. el. have pointed out that Dalit motherhood and womanhood undergo a “bipolar tension”. On the one hand, Dalit women experience a horizontal relationship with their families and community. Here, Dalit mothers experience relative equality of relationships and freedom of movement. This space is relatively better for Dalit women than caste women as they have their collective existence and justification. On the other hand, Dalit mothers face the impact of patriarchy from vertically structured class-caste society and their power relation in cultural performances. Dalit women writers have often pointed out the problems of Dalit mothers, whom we may categorise by representing vertically. The problems of these Dalit women are more complex. Therefore, their existence gets worsened. When mainstream feminism tends to overlook it in social justification, images of Dalit motherhood are still measured by the docile, submissive, obedient bodies.



Representation of Bipolar Tension of Dalit Women

Abstraction of motherhood is felt as a universalised and homogenised image. This universal acknowledgement of motherhood is reflected in one of the poems of Kalyani Thakur Charal's Bengali poetry collection, *Chandalini Vane*. She writes:

O mother, you are ready to keep me on your lap
Of soft grass- bed.
May my last sleep
I would be on this same
Bed of yours.
How often you kept me aloof
From your lap,
To gather sustenances. (my translation)

The poet's intense desire to be with her mother is highly desired as she was alienated from her mother growing up. Her desirous self is pampering to fulfil her emotional attachment to her mother.

Verbal Venom and Exposure of Unconscious

Y. S. Alone has opined, "Social realities of Dalit women acquire a different dimension when it comes to the so-called liberated and civilised spaces reserved for image representation" (Arya and Rathore 128). Here the concept of motherhood is perversive, as documented in Urmila Pawar's testimonial *The Weave of My Life*, "The bastards! They always get sons!" (Pawar 210). "They" (as signifier) is referred to the Dalit Mahar mothers who are signified as "bastards". This semiotics is symbolic to represent the behavioural approach of the upper caste and their patriarchal attribution upon Dalit motherhood. Moreover, at a time, giving – birth to a male child is prioritised unconsciously when the desire to bear "son" gets exposed through abuses of "bastards" and a type of depression in the exclamation of "They always get sons!" Thus, the Dalit mother becomes a common target of exploitation. These usages of abusive languages and caste-based stigmatised professional identity cultivate much nomenclature in dominant patriarchal classes. In her essay, "The Dalit Women Question", Susie Tharu points out that Dalit poetry written by Dalit male writers lacks "positive critique" regarding the usages of abusive words related to Dalit female organs. Tharu mentions a stalemate in Andhrapradesh. In the year 1995, a long-time debate was sustained by "the feminist writer-intellectuals and activists Volga, Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran" (Arya and Rathore 183)

against a “well-received collection of Dalit poems, Nishani (Thumbprint)” (183). Tharu argues:

Clearly stating that they considered the Dalit movement and poetry progressive, they argued for the need to strengthen Dalit and feminist connections. They objected to the language used in the poems, which they described as the language of the patriarchal ruling classes and insulting to women. It was regrettable that abusive terms referring to women’s body parts were being claimed as part of Dalit culture. True, it was an upper-caste culture that had stigmatised these terms, but was it not possible to develop a new language, one that does not humiliate women to express anger and hatred? Dalit poetry, they said, needed to invent a new and more egalitarian language. (183)

Ultimately this controversy promoted certain issues like politics of language and Dalit women’s bodies under the male gaze. The point, thus, becomes more gender centric though there were polarities of opinions. Tharu writes:

Some quickly criticised the response as an upper-caste attack on a new movement and its poetry and described the feminist movement as Brahmanical and ‘Hindu’. Others argued that the upper castes considered the everyday behaviour and ordinary language of Dalits as violent or vulgar. It was this politics of language and culture that should be the focus of discussion, not vulgarity.... (187).

Desire and Violence

Body of a Dalit woman, as represented in the novel of U. R. Anantha Murthy’s 1965 *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, becomes a commodity and shiny object that is used by Brahmin (Naranappa and Praneshacharya) to get desire-ridden salvation. Dalit women and their bodies in the Dalit women’s testimonials tend to reflect, resist, expose and dare to violate imposed forms of social patriarchy. In contrast, Anantha Murthy’s Dalit woman and her body (Chandri’s) is used by Brahmins like Naranappa and Praneshacharya to get rid of their libidinous desires. This embodies the anti-self of Brahmin-hood that practises asceticism against eroticism. The erotic appeal of the Dalit female body is compared to the perennial Tunga river. Naranappa’s lustrous desires of a repressive soul get exposed when his repressive self expresses dissatisfaction and thus asserts:

However, before these Brahmin women bear two brats, their eyes sink, cheeks become hollow, and breasts sag and fall- not hers. Perennial Tunga, a river that does not dry up, does not tire. Naranappa had guzzled at her body like a ten-year-old, tearing and

devouring like a gluttonous bear at a honeycomb. (Anantha Murthy p 45)

Lacan recognises desire as an important component of perversion. Naranappa's desire is instigated by his gaze upon Chandri's body. Hence his craving mind cannot control his thinking. The basic difference may be highlighted under the lens of handling Dalit women's bodies – one is by non-Dalit writers, and another is by Dalit writers. These two viewpoints in the Dalit discipline dissect two different perspectives. Thus, the body of Dalit women suffers “anti-life force”, and mothers are uncertain about losing their lifeline source.

So, striving for survival is rooted in their conscious practices. To relate to this issue, Dalit mothers and women in Maharashtra often sing a song of Daya Pawar and represent their existential crisis:

As I build this dam
I bury my life.
The dawn breaks
There is no flour in the grinding stone.

I collect yesterday's husk for today's meal
The sun rises
Moreover, my spirit sinks.
Hiding my baby under a basket
And biding my tears
I go to build the dam

The dam is ready
It feeds their sugarcane fields
Making the crop lush and juicy.
But I walk miles through forests
In search of a drop of drinking water
I water the vegetation with drops of my sweat
As dry leaves fall and fill my parched yard. (qtd. in Shiva p. 185)

Consequently, two different oppositional aspects, “building this dam” and “burying my life”, juxtaposed with images of inevitable reality (prediction of death) that are formulated by cause (building dam) and a long-term effect (death) in future. Mothers are primarily concerned with availing foods for family members. The lack of “flour in the grinding stone” reveals their tension and uncertainty regarding food, and thus, they become gatherers to “collect yesterday's husk. Dalit mothers have to work under certain compulsions. In her testimony, *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar has described this harsh reality similarly. When mothers used to go

far away jungles to collect fuel early in the morning, they left their little children under the supervision of Grandma or other old persons in the house. Pawar writes:

Grandma, keep an eye on the kids! They might go to the river! Moreover, the third one would beg her neighbour, 'Could you please look after my baby? He has got a high fever. You will give him his medicine on time, won't you? Moreover, do not forget the holy ash under his bed. Put a pinch on his forehead, will you? I will be back in no time at all. (Pawar p. 4)

Religion and Legitimation of Violence

As argued earlier, Y. S. Alone has pointed out that patriarchal social structure and its representation do not merely follow imitation in a social context. The symbolic representation of the body relates to the nature of consciousness. Religious and social provisions sanction different types of violence upon Dalit women's bodies. Alone focuses on the legitimation of this violence under patriarchal social consciousness. Patriarchy is using religion to impose violence upon the body, and violence is subsumed under the image of religious provisions. To relate this, traditional practices like Devadasi, Dola, and Adabapa are legitimised in religion. The duality of patriarchal oppression gets sanctioned through religion and social consent. Caste hierarchy is actively working to legitimise rape, and, on the other hand, religious recognition of these practices highly nurtures patriarchal desire collectively. These systems collectively manipulate people of society through cultural manifestations and representation that exhibit only appearance, not reality.

Dalit motherhood performs a good deal of socialism and positivity. The concept of motherhood is attributed to others while birth mothers are absent. Moreover, an individual child becomes a subject of others in the Dalit social periphery, which grows to build community life. Hence, we often find the collective invocation of the first-person pronoun "we" in the Dalit women's testimonies. Another perspective that Dalit mothers represent through songs is about class conflict. Vandana Shiva's argument about development reflects a deeper truth that any type of development is patriarchal, and these patriarchal economic categories "see only profits in life" (Shiva 4). Therefore, Dalit mothers are performing an important role in raising questions against the trend of capitalism when its mechanism tries to control the natural resources which ought to be for all. Using the same pronoun, "their", and the phrase "sugarcane fields making the

crop lush and juicy” create a sense of alienation in the patriarchal mode of production, and this mechanism causes permanent deprivation. This mechanism shifts a group of agrarian skilled and productive workers into unskilled refugees.

Female Masculinity and Motherhood

If masculinity torments and traumatises the Dalit female body, female masculinity also follows the same path when they have chances to perform authority over the subordinate female body. Strikingly, this is also authorised and supposed to be normative. In her testimony, *The Weave of Life*, Urmila Pawar describes how Dalit women bash another Dalit woman when their husbands are suspicious of their wives' activities. Pawar writes:

It was not only husbands or family members who bashed up women. If a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for justice and punishment. She was publicly judged, and her other relatives would also beat her up. I must have been in the ninth or tenth standard then. One day some women from the village came reporting that a widow was found to be pregnant.... So she was judged before nine villagers and punished in keeping with the verdict. (Pawar 156)

Sometimes, this incident became so torturous that they hardly thought about the consequences. The condition of their daughter-in-law would become the most miserable, for she works the whole day long as an enslaved person. At one time, she has to tolerate body-centric changes; on the other hand, she has to face internal oppression performed by other female house members. In this traumatised and psychotic condition, she desires to be free by hook or crook. Baby Kamble, in her testimony, *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), describes these tensed and harassed daughters-in-law who “would try to run away to escape this torture. Once night fell, darkness would descend everywhere, at home, in the village, and on the roads. When everybody was fast asleep, the harassed daughter-in-law would pick up a couple of rags and run away under darkness” (Kamble 99). However, where would she go? Female masculinity becomes synonymous with toxic masculinity as the other female house members treat her like an animal who escaped from the house and is now caught. Kamble narrates:

The carpenter would drill a hole in the wood, big enough for the sides to make it impossible for her to pull her foot out.... Her leg would get wounded, and blood would ooze out every time she tried to move her leg. She was not a human being for her in-laws, but just

another piece of wood. Her hair would be tangled and spread around her head in complete disarray. (Kamble 99)

To make the body of Dalit women a docile entity, every one of the houses takes the path of violence. Michel Foucault's argument of making the female body fabricate and regulate is useful to correlate and connect the concept of docility. As Foucault thinks, women are passive victims of an all-dominating "patriarchal" system. Here the daughter-in-law is subjugated in various ways. First, she becomes a victim of patriarchy. Second, other women in the family also participate in this oppression. Her mother-in-law immediately instigates her son to be more toxic by uttering, "Some bastard must have made her leave you" (99). This incident gets its ultimate turn by more violence that instigates the bride's husband to cut off "her nose with a sharp razor". Even after this incident, the oppressed bride is counted as "muddy", and the whole community refuses her entry into the "so-called good homes" (101). Here, agential female masculinity roles are rampant, exposing patriarchal orthography among Dalit clans. Foucault argues:

... in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (Young 52)

Conclusion

Dalit women exclude other Dalit women by prohibiting their inclusion in the social and familial periphery from manifesting and translating patriarchal systems of domination upon women. Here, Dalit female masculinity imitates same trend of authoritative power that patriarchal discourse desires. Hence, the mother (mother-in-law) performs as an oppressor who instigates other to vilify the bride's body through production of violence. In this respect, motherhood acts to construct patriarchal order rather than formulating an oppositional agency. However, this standpoint and other innumerable familial compulsions make Dalit female body vulnerable. Dalit women's autobiographies, as analysed above, aptly depict violence upon Dalit women, their resistance to achieve emancipation and Dalit motherhood as an entity of Dalit theology.

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