

**CONSTRUCTING FEMALE IDENTITY IN SELECT
AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND DALIT FEMINIST WRITINGS**

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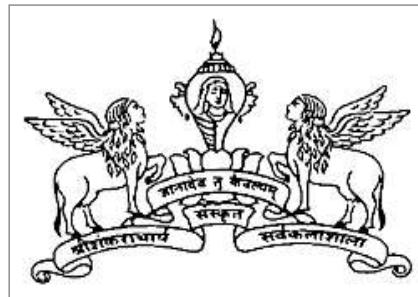
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Chapter 5

Conclusion: Towards a New Female Identity

Both dalit and black women have always been outside mainstream cultures. Both in casteist India and racist America, women are seen as sex objects receiving no respect from men of their own community and of the dominant culture. Both dalit and African-American women are trapped by triple oppression. The surprising fact is that while these women are socially unacceptable, they are sexually desirable for men. Eventhough untouchability in India and slavery in America have been abolished, dalit and African-American women are subjected to the unjust treatment of the dominant castes/race. Despite many movements and ongoing struggles, both dalit and African-American women are still prone to marginalization and the upper caste/race people do not consider them as human beings.

Often, women have been denied their basic right to live as human beings. Unfortunately, every single opportunity to verbalise their thoughts, feelings and torments are taken away from them as well. The more women repress their feelings and thoughts, the more are the pressures on them. This silent suffering often leads to depression. The protagonists in the novels and stories analysed in this thesis do not believe that women are inferior beings who must remain passive and submissive. They realise that voicing concerns about the oppression is the best way to escape the repressive mechanisms of society. In the course of their quest for identity, the protagonists move from oppression to liberation.

Eventually, the struggles of these women are paid off and they attain wholeness, completeness and authentic selfhood. Each of the works studied here represents the female protagonist's constant search for her authentic self. Separating

themselves from oppressive familial ties, these women seek to find meaning and values in their life. Their quest asserts human values and ensures their rights as human beings. The search for identity on the part of the protagonists finds artistic expression in the protagonist's resistance against the patriarchal core of society. All the studied works expose how oppressed women disentangle themselves from both their domestic and societal roles. Their bold attempts release them from all emotional turmoil. Despite all the obstacles in their way, they affirm their identity by breaking their long silence.

The novels and stories stand apart from traditional modes of writing or narration. Each work has a unique feature that makes it stands out from other novels and stories. The writers break the stereotypical images of women and experiment with new mode of narration. All these works of fiction carry unique titles. Be Bama's *Sangati*, Gogu Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket But...* and Urmila Pawar's *Motherwit*, the titles are one of a kind and hint at new dalit female experience. In *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket But...* and *Motherwit* the writers have used the short story mode of narration which gives room for discussing various issues that dalit women face today. Not only do they treat topics which are relevant today, they use language familiar and common to dalit people, for easy and convincing assimilation.

Though the prominent themes of dalit women's writings include caste and discrimination, recently these have shifted from personal experience to a universal voicing of what it is to be a woman. Dalit women writers have been identifying similarities of experiences all dalit women share, and portraying concerns about their position in society. Their stories incorporate subversive subject matter, including what

has formerly been seen as unmentionable in literature. Other than just reporting violence against women, the writers explore and question these exploitations in a bolder tenor.

In the matter of narration, Bama's Sangati marks a significant departure from mainstream literature. Sangati centres round the stories of dalit women of Bama's own community, and not on a single character. Autobiographical elements have been incorporated in the novel and the author focuses on the strong and the courageous dalit women who have the power to question authority. Through a series of stories, memories and anecdotes, the novel describes events that happened in Bama's own dalit community. As against the traditional settings of a novel, a series of interconnected stories take the place of the conventional plot. Bama explains what prompted her to write Sangati:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live with passion to life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. (ix)

Sangati is an outcome of Bama's own hope that dalit women who read her novel will be inspired to work hard and define their own life.

In *Sangati*, the language Bama uses is rich and she extensively uses folktales, folk songs, stories about spirits and proverbs which are prevalent in her community.

By using typical Tamil dalit slang, Bama works out a refreshing difference from other mainstream women writers. This is evident when she describes the names and details of particular rituals, festivals, superstitions, customs, food, clothes, places, ornaments, games, occupations and the terms they use to address their relatives etc.

Throughout the novel, we hear the narratives of women from Bama's own community. Voices of despair, voices of pain, voices of courage and voices of anger, are also heard, and these signify a complex kind of triple oppression. Bama portrays women who quarrel with their husbands in their house or even in the streets. They use sharp language in order to survive and to deal with their aggressive husbands. Bama's positive portrayals of dalit women as strong wives, working women, cooks, organizers or even priests, subvert the dominant idea that dalit women are weak and submissive. Her writings find consolidation as a consciousness-raising project, which inspires them to question oppressive measures of the casteist, classist and sexist society.

The select short stories "The Odd One," "Mother" and "Woman as Caste" from Urmila Pawar's *Motherwit* deal with three separate issues. "The Odd One" is about a married, working dalit woman's irresistible spirit to chase her dreams, despite all the hindrances in both the public and private spheres. The short story "Mother" is about the uncompromising spirit of a dalit widow who strongly opposes the wicked plans of her brother-in-law who tries to control her. "Woman as Caste" is yet another striking story about a powerful dalit woman who demands divorce from her cunning husband.

Pawar has made effective use of the short story form and this has attracted wide readership. She locates dalit and Maharashtrian women's experiences at the

complicated intersections of triple oppression and the rural/urban divide. The word ‘Motherwit’ is a powerful metaphor that embodies women’s or mothers’ knowledge, and also local experimental knowledge often discarded and destroyed by powerful dominant forces. Veena Deo in the introduction to *Motherwit* says:

...by bringing narratives of dalit women of rural Maharashtra and/or older generations and more educated dalit working women together with narratives of middle-class urban women who may or may not be identified as dalit, Pawar inscribes the narrative of “woman” in its vast variety and complexity. (xxiii)

Pawar’s short story “Woman as Caste” speaks to this identification of gendered reality that all women experience.

The protagonist of “Woman as Caste,” Tara, stands for her rights when she bravely questions her husband and her own family members who try to control her. Tara’s questioning of her husband’s decision to remarry is a novel plot element in dalit fiction. She defies those who condemn her as a barren woman. Rather than being frustrated by her husband’s action, she decides to teach him a lesson by filing a case against him and she even takes necessary steps for a divorce as well. By breaking the stereotypical expectations of a dalit woman, Tara acts as a new age dalit woman who creates an identity of her own, apart from the one that the casteist, sexist, classist society has made for her.

In “The Odd One,” the protagonist Nalini’s voice is not that prominent as she does not talk much. But this does not mean that she is silent or not articulate. To an extent, her meaningful silence prepares the way for her determined moves at the end of the story. Nalini leaves her in-laws’ house to pursue her dreams. Proving that the

power of decision making is not in the hands of men alone, she decides to stick to her own decision to follow her dreams. Here, Pawar's use of language is noteworthy and versatile. Various forms of speech ranging from educated upper-class speech to uneducated dalit speech, and the fast-paced narrative makes the clutter and noise around Nalini more foreboding. As Veena Deo in the introduction says:

The noise created by educated and uneducated, upper caste and lower caste communities around her emphasises a need for a subject position that consistently moves between worlds: the woman in that position has to centre herself through inner recourses that are not necessarily voiced or articulated, and therefore extremely difficult because she has few supporters. (xxxiv)

These are more hurdles to clear for the lower caste women than for the upper caste women.

The story "Mother" traces the indomitable spirit of the dalit widowed mother. Vahini exercises a kind of measured courage to challenge the tyrannical powers trying to control her as a dalit woman. Her determination proves to be the ideal offensive against the patriarchal regime. Her strategy surprises men like Tatya who would have never guessed dalit women to be so bold, intelligent and audacious. Vahini's source of strength is her irrepressible desire for a better future and welfare for her children. Her ultimate aim is to educate her children and move up in life. Dalit women have long been denied the power of decision-making. The task, traditionally, has been assigned to men. Whatever decisions men make dalit women must obey and follow without any complaint. Time has changed; dalit women have found their voice, and question

injustice and repression. Whenever they challenge these powers directly or indirectly, they are challenging conventional notions of silence and submission.

Dalit women have been exploited and oppressed for long and they hardly find the resources, openings or momentum for self-improvement. Domestic violence and abuse of women and children in dalit homes have become a part of their life. Pawar's stories suggest that the situation of dalit women will certainly improve if they gain proper education, and appropriate treatment in their own families. They need to understand and define their own identity and strength and this will lead to self-respect. Pawar's stories reflect this very idea. Her dalit female characters have traits that would inspire dalit women to seek and find the gems of strength and courage buried deep within them. Her stories offer a clear perception of the complex and contradictory lives of dalit women in different urban and rural settings. She provides the sophisticated articulation of an emergent voice that moves through a variety of discourses enriching Marathi literature as a whole.

In *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*, Gogu Shyamala does full justice to her female characters by giving them positive identities that transcend the usual stereotypes one finds in mainstream literature. Shyamala presents her female characters as strong, courageous and determined beings. By incorporating specific songs, deities, foods, language, games and legends familiar to dalits of her community, she breaks away from traditional mode of writing. The unique narrative style stands apart from the mainstream, and endows dalit women with a new identity. The titles of the three selected short stories of Shyamala, “But Why Shouldn’t the Bairdla Woman Ask for Her Land?,” “Jambava’s Lineage” and

“Tataki Wins Again” are highly articulate and suggestive. Each title initiates a powerful story.

Set in a rural background, Shyamala’s short story “But Why Shouldn’t the *Bainyla* Woman Ask for Her Land?” explores the inner strength of a *Bainyla* woman, Saayamma, who boldly demands her rights to redeem her own land from an upper caste landlord. Apart from stereotypical roles such as wife, daughter, mother and worker, dalit women may assume roles that set their identity. Saayamma is one such woman who has demonstrated her competence in priesthood and capacity for religious devotion. Timidity and the fear to respond are crucial handicaps that slow down the progression of dalit women. Overcoming all such obstacles, the fearless Saayamma shows the guts to question the exploitative and authoritative upper caste landlord.

“Jambava’s Lineage” tells the story of a courageous *Chindu Bhagotam* performer, Ellamma. Performing *Chindu* has become the integral part of her life and she uses this platform to resist the exploitation of upper caste people. Throughout the performance, she lashes out at upper caste men with abusive words and insults. A character like Ellamma is indeed an inspiration to other suffering dalit women, and a source of confidence in their efforts to come up in life. The story is woven out of a host of myths and legends, folk performances and powerful Telugu terms. *Balanagamma Katha*, *Jambavapuram*, the legends of *Mandeyechu* and *Beerappaare* and performances like *Gangakalyanam*, and *Pramilarjuneeeyam* are metaphors through which Ellamma deploys her activism.

The story, “Tataki Wins Again,” reinforces the fact that dalit women are not in any sense, less than men. They have strength, courage and the power of will to deal with any situation. Dalit women have started to realize their hidden power which

hitherto had been suppressed. Gogu Shyamala's stories are a treasure-house of knowledge, skills, music and aesthetics of dalit life. They fill us with wonder, joy and pain all at once. As Susie Tharu in an endorsement on the back cover of *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* says:

I am tempted to suggest that we think of Shyamala's stories as prototypes of a compact new genre that might be called, not a short, but little story. The 'little' here would of course recall the intrepid independence of the little magazines that have nourished the Telugu reading public since the 1960s; it would make reference to Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "A little history of photography," that cuts deep to track over a quick few pages the photographic element's degeneration from the enchanted portraiture of its early years into a realist endorsement of middle class life; and it would point to the world of the little, subaltern traditions, as against that of the great traditions.

Shyamala's way of telling stories is entirely different. Her stories are crafted in such a way that they do not fit into any ideological framework. Stories are full of subtle descriptions of livestock, wild animals, crops, food and rituals. Her writings change and enrich our understanding of rural ecology and environment.

Dalit female characters in Shyamala's stories always display self respect with a powerful impulse to identify themselves as human beings like others. Their priorities are self-esteem and identity that would ultimately empower and emancipate them and ensure for them a better standard of living. Caste, class and gender factors have denied them justice, and now, they are racing towards their dreams, defying and breaking all societal pressures that contain them. Gathering strength and courage, they

are surging towards self-identity and self-empowerment in an epic struggle for themselves and their coming generations.

Like dalit women, African-American women have been suffering in terms of class, gender and race. The authors of the three select African-American novels, Gayl Jones, Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor have consciously created black female characters, who are courageous and powerful. The objective is consciousness raising among African-American women, to let them know their hidden power and strength, to help them to rise above whatever is making them feel inferior to others.

Corregidora tells the story of a black woman, Ursula, who breaks the familial agenda of ‘making generation’ which she later understands to be a hindrance to her self-growth. *Corregidora* explores different ways in which history or the past trap individuals in its web and consume their lives. This is revealed in a direct truth telling form. Jones’ narration of history exposes slavery’s horrifying facts and sad realities. Jones stresses the necessity to define boundaries between private and collective history. Hence, *Corregidora* presents a fictional world in which history and personal life are closely linked. Ursula, the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, starts her autobiography in a rather unusual way. There is no mention of her name, her place of birth, or information about her origins-factors that usually open conventional autobiographical narratives. She starts the story by presenting the two main tensions in her life: her art, and her love for a man who does not understand how her songs are as much part of her life as he is.

Jones begins the novel in a non-dramatic, straightforward mode. As the novel progresses one realizes that what is described in the opening scene is the turning point in Ursula’s life, which compels her to tell her story. For Ursula, music is a crucial element

in her life. She feels an urge to sing because it is the only way through which she can give form and expression to her feelings. Her songs provide her with a language of her own to communicate her experiences. It is understood from the first line of the novel that Ursa defines herself as an artist whose art form is in conflict with her personal life. The themes of the novel are clearly revealed here.

The tension between Ursa's public and private sides are aggravated by her historical legacy as a Corregidora woman. She travels through different time spans, from a nineteenth century Brazilian plantation to the twentieth century United States. Her quest occurs within her psychological boundaries. It is indeed a process of separating the collective memories of the Corregidora women from her own private memories and finding a role for the past in her life that will allow her to live a present of her own - a present that will enable her to live her life and maintain her relationship with Mutt on equal terms.

Ironically, Ursa's hysterectomy helps her to escape from the Corregidora legacy, and the compulsion to perpetuate Corregidora's memories. However, when the novel ends, one realizes that Ursa has ultimately fulfilled her foremothers' expectations. She achieves continuity in time through the songs she writes and sings. Ursa finds resolution and strength in artistic performance by singing blues. In her songs she finds an alternative to prolong the common memory of the Corregidora women. She sings for the same reason her Great Gram and Gram decide to make generation to pass on the horrifying memories they had with Corregidora. Hence, singing blues is a substitute for reproduction and becomes an act of both rebellion and celebration, equivalent to her foremothers' act of making generation. Ursa overcomes her infertility and frees herself from bondage through her development into a major

blues singer. Reproduction, for the Corregidora women, is a means of transforming their bodies into a space of resistance, not liberation. But, challenging the traditional feminine roles of mother and wife, Ursula retreats into her foremothers' memory, as well as her own, to rediscover a past in order to define her fragmented present, overcome a legacy of sexual abuse, and restore the feminine body to a condition of wholeness.

In Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* one encounters exceptionally courageous black women, fighting to overcome life's harsh realities. In a review published in *Freedomways*, Loyle Hairston says that the characters "...throb with vitality amid the shattering of their hopes and dreams" (284). With its use of multiple protagonists, its female-centred orientation and its depiction of a twentieth century ghettoized African-American community, the novel represents the unbeatable spirit of black women who challenge and question the oppressive measures of the racist, sexist and classist community. The indomitable spirit of Mattie Michael, Kiswana Browne, Cora Lee, Etta Mae Johnson, Lucielia Louise Turner (Ciel), Lorraine and Theresa (the lesbian couple) is unforgettably remarkable.

When Mattie is being cheated and impregnated by the man she loves and being rejected by her own father, the decision she takes is to leave her house and live an independent life. The love and support she gets from her friend, Eva Turner changes her life and later she extends a helping hand to other women in the Brewster Place. Brewster Place witnesses the state of these women from oppression to liberation and the manner in which these women regain their identities and voices. Rather than this, Brewster Place becomes a place where these women set up associations, assert the importance of their existence and form a sisterhood-bound community through the

power of storytelling. In spite of all the differences, they maintain closeness among them. Ciel's journey to self-realization and her identity as a black woman has also been catalyzed by her sisterhood with Mattie. Kiswana Brown, who belongs to a privileged middle-class family in Linden Hill, chooses to be a Civil Rights activist and works for the poor black women of her community. In order to sustain her African roots and identity, she even changes her name from Melanie Brown to Kiswana Brown. She appears to be an independent and self-sufficient black woman. Unaffected by her mother's pressure to become a civil liberties lawyer or an assembly woman, Kiswana is determined in her own decision to become a social activist.

The story of Cora Lee begins with her interests in baby dolls and ends with her checking on her own baby asleep in the crib. Both Kiswana and Mattie have played major roles in bringing back Cora Lee to the actual world from the world of fantasy. Cora Lee's emergence from the world of dreams to reality and her self-realization take place as a result of the timely intervention of Kiswana and the advice Mattie gives her.

Etta is an independent black woman who is unwilling to accept the traditional concept of black femininity set by patriarchal society. Being a freedom lover, she wishes to live her life on her own terms. Her journey to find a man to complete her life has always led to frustrations. Both Reverend Moreland and Johnny Brick Woods whom she finds as a perfect match for her, proves the opposite. After being sexually exploited by these men, Etta feels totally lost. Finally, her journey ends with Brewster Place where she finds her true identity through the sisterhood with the women in there. The story of Theresa and Lorraine, the only lesbian couple in Brewster Place, throws light on how society isolates people on account of their sexual orientation.

Even the women in Brewster Place look at them with disgust. While Theresa is quite bothered about people's reactions to their sexual orientation, Lorraine is determined and bold enough to face the situation. The women in Brewster Place accept Lorraine and Theresa only after Lorraine has been raped and her body has been violated by men. Mattie's support for this lesbian couple is remarkable. All the characters try to break the stereotypical image of black women and establish identities for themselves. Regardless of umpteen oppressive factors, they rise above the testing times and evolve as strong women.

Their Eyes Were Watching God depicts an inspiring story of a black woman, Janie, who struggle hard to regain her black female identity and for her right to enjoy a happy life. Unlike many African-American women, she has clear ideas about marriage and love which are not based on the domination of male partner, but on equality. This is reflected in her married life with Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. Janie's timely reaction to her husband's mental and physical exploitation impedes further victimization. As soon as she finds that her idea of marriage and love have been withering with her relationship with these men, she leaves them without any regret. Rather than being a passive and submissive victim to her husband's tortures, she chooses to stay strong by fighting back. Janie's quest for true love and happiness ends when she finally meets Tea Cake. Their relationship is solely based on mutual understanding and affection. Eventually, she proves that her Nanny's idea of black women as "de mule uh de world" is wrong (Hurston 19). She frees herself from her Nanny's vision of black women and her controlling husbands who always want her to be submissive.

Despite the loss of the love of her life, Tea Cake, Janie has finally accomplished a life that she has wished for. By redefining the traditional concept of black femininity, Janie stands as a role model for other struggling black women. Among many other things that make Janie different from other black women, one factor is her strong belief in herself, which ultimately helps her to gain black female identity. The choices she makes in her life, her questioning voice and financial independence shape her identity as a strong black woman. She tells her own story to the whole community to inspire them to raise their voice against the racist, sexist and classist society.

Writers like Gloria Naylor, Zora Neale Hurston and Gayl Jones use their writings to propagate the idea that black women are not worthless and weak, but strong, courageous and powerful. The characters in their novels represent coming of age women, powerfully exhibiting their inner strength and voice. Through their writings, these writers voice the suffering of black women both in the public and private spheres. Characters like Janie, Ursula, Mattie and Kiswana indeed break away from the stereotypical black women who stay obedient and low key to their male partners. By showing the courage to defy all oppressive measures of male-dominated society, these women successfully establish identities of their own.

The novels and stories analyzed in the thesis draw the conclusion that dalit and African-American women are no longer passive victims of violence. Most of the women survive by resisting violence, and seeking to create a new life. These women are quite aware of their oppression and strive hard to bring an end to their misery. By adopting a shield of confidence, these women fight for a better future. All their struggles, determination and courage ensure the fact that coming generations wouldn't

have to confront the same exploitation that these women have suffered. These narratives are indeed narratives of dignity, positivity and self-respect. The women in these works use argument, protest and assertion to stop violence targeting them. The present study suggests that although dalit and African-American women are not privileged, and they lead triply oppressed lives, their efforts to change their fate are significant. They bravely fight against all odds to find respect, dignity, and a better future for the coming generations.