

**NARRATING GENDERED SUBALTERN: A STUDY OF SELECTED
DALIT WOMEN LIFE NARRATIVES**

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Conclusion

Postcolonial studies can be extended to any state of oppression: say, the slavery of Jews in ancient Egypt or the covert forms of oppression enforced by global corporates through the neoliberal politics of the governments. An intersection of Postcolonial Studies and Cultural Studies creates a discursive space concerned with the questions of power, resistance, hegemony, exclusion, and so on. Discourses of power and resistance also engage with the formation or erasure of identity and the notions of subjectivity and its articulation. The discursive construction of identity is related to constructs like race/caste, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on. When persons or groups are discriminated based on one or more of the cultural constructs mentioned about, they get marginalised. They are politically termed subalterns most of which are victims of multiple marginalisation/oppressions. The thesis explores the question of caste, gender, self, identity, resistance, narration and language in respect of dalit women, ideologically treated as gendered subalterns, the victims of the hegemonic structures of caste, gender and class.

This thesis analyses select dalit women's life narratives where the gendered subalterns speak about the genres appropriate for the articulation of their identity, the formation of the dalit female self, the systemic hegemony they cope with, their resistance and survival and finally the narration of their stories in dalit dialects. The voices of the gendered subalterns are either muted or misrepresented in upper caste/ class literature or male subaltern (dalit) literature. This is because they are

oppressed by upper caste/class men and women and dalit men. The persons/groups who dominate gendered subaltern devoice them and deny them the context to speak. In this context, Justin D. Edwards remarks: “Often the subaltern makes an attempt at self-representation, yet this act of representation is not heard. The hegemonic listener does not recognise it, because it does not fit into the official institutional structures of representation. The failure of the fulfilment of the speech act is what Spivak calls ‘not speaking’. . . If subalterns could speak she would no longer be a subaltern” (66). Edwards means that the voices of the subaltern are ignored by the dominants. In the case of the gendered subalterns, the dominants include male subalterns as well.

With the change of political contexts, the dominants have been compelled to listen to the struggle and resistance of the subalterns. The thesis therefore explains how literary discourses are used as a subversive force to challenge and undermine the phallogentric and Brahmanical ideas circulated in society. Indian Brahmanical patriarchy has muted the gendered dalit voices and keeps them in consistently marginalised position. By unveiling their dalit female identity, dalit women’s autobiographies have initiated discussions on caste, class, gender, power, hegemony and resistance. Dalit women’s creative writings have become a subversive force of resistance against both caste and patriarchal hegemonies. This study of dalit women’s narratives is concerned with the overlapping concepts of gender and creativity. Gender is a cultural construct and gender stereotyping gathers momentum with the interpellation of ideology practised in various social

institutions like family, marriage, religion and workplace. Dalit woman is twice marginalised; first as a dalit and then as a woman. Caste hegemony also inscribes its messages on the dalit (female) body and tries to erase her identity.

This thesis highlights the emergence of dalit women as the champions of emancipation. After experimenting with various methods of resistance, they have found literary discourses as the most effective and productive medium to articulate their trials and tribulations of life. Patriarchy has constructed female subjectivity pervaded by distorted images of female identity. Dalit women have deconstructed the stereotypical images of dalits as well as women in literature and tried to rectify them. Therefore, narration becomes an act of resistance where language is appropriated to reconstruct the identity of dalit women, falsely projected by others. Dalit women's engagement with literature exposes the ambivalence created in the society, as writing was confined to men and the upper castes. They have found literature an excellent medium to showcase their resistance in the context of socio-cultural and historical subjugation and marginalisation. They have explored literature to develop the collective consciousness of dalits in general and dalit women in particular. Therefore, dalit women's writings represent the double consciousness of dalit women as both dalit and women.

The study uses the terms, dalit as synonymous with subaltern and gendered dalit as equivalent to gendered subaltern. The views of the prominent theorists in Subaltern Studies such as Gramsci, Spivak, Ranajit Guha are explored in the thesis along with feminists' concepts developed by Beauvoir, Woolf, Millet, Showalter

and Butler. In order to explicate the ideas of dalit feminism, Indian feminist thinkers like Sharmila Rege, Uma Chakravarti, V. Geetha are also incorporated into the discussion. The narratological features of dalit narratives and their political significance are also evaluated to explain why the gendered dalits prefer genres like memoirs and life narratives to conventional genres of expression. These genres seem to be gender specific which trigger spontaneous confession from the gendered dalit self. Narration in this context is the political act of articulating the dalit female identity hegemonised by Varna/caste system and patriarchy.

Autobiography is the genre most appropriate to represent the dalit female self and to prevent the erasure of the gendered dalit self from the collective unconscious of the dalits. Dalit woman's life narratives are therefore, political and polemic. The radical image of dalit women have been foregrounded in these narratives. Dalit women writers have gathered their discursive energy from various social movements led by leaders like Phule and Ambedkar. These narratives have adopted a two-pronged attack on both casteism and patriarchy. These narratives have critiqued the misrepresentation of dalit (female) identities and rectified the (gendered) dalit stereotypes circulated in discourses. They also synchronise the discourses of oppression and resistance. They further challenge the absence or erasure of dalits, especially gendered dalits, from the history and culture of society. They expose the hegemonic structures of caste and gender. Life narratives of dalit women differ from both the Western and Eastern models of

autobiographies in that they represent life experiences of the community at large. In these narratives, the individual voice “I” converges with the collective narrative voice “We.” Therefore, the Self transparent in the narrative is in the text itself.

Dalit women’s autobiographies, represent their subjectivity. They express the real dalit Self based on the reality of lived experiences. They motivate dalits in general and dalit women in particular to subvert Brahmanical patriarchy. They show the indomitable spirit of dalit women to demand a social life with freedom and dignity. These testimonies reflect dalit women’s progress from primitivity to modernity, finding out ways to evolve as independent individuals with unrestricted social mobility and possibilities of self-development. These narratives call upon dalit men and women to transcend caste hegemony. These autobiographies try to develop a dalit feminist sisterhood which equally resists casteism and sexism pervasive in Indian society. These narratives contemplate on the dalit women to transform their inferior status and marginalised identity to the elevated status of an autonomous individual who is central to dalit history and culture.

Dalit women’s autobiographies discuss the formation of dalit female identity at the one hand and strategies of survival and resistance on the other. Power, especially hegemonic power, has always been opposed by resistance in the history of humanity. A close analysis of the selected narratives concluded that the texts are testimonies of struggles and resistance. These texts show multiple oppressions that the (gendered) dalits cope with in life. Since, articulation is a form of resistance, the autobiographical narratives constitute a form of resistance.

Dalit women have politically explored to deconstruct the mis-representations of dalits in general and dalit women in particular in discourses. Discourse is one of the strategies of resistance. The texts *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life* speak about the history of dalit resistance and presents Ambedkar as their leader of political liberation. His inspiring speeches and the movements led by him led to dalit consciousness – raising and prepared the ground for their emancipation. His writings serve as the models of dalit literary tradition. Both Kamble and Pawar assert that Ambedkar's words have given them the strength to face the adversities in life and fight them with courage. In their life narratives, Kamble and Pawar discuss the various strategies of dalit resistance. They also present dalits' struggle for freedom, dignity and self-respect in social life. They also express the struggle and trauma, desires and hopes of the (gendered) dalits, kept under perpetual marginalisation by systems of caste, class and gender.

The various forms of resistance practised by the dalits to overcome their subordination in the society, includes religious conversions, exorcism, rituals, forced entry into temples, defiance of authorities, and so on. But conversion to Christianity appears as an aborted attempt to undermine caste hegemony. Bama's *Karukku* graphically pictures the worst kind of injustice dalits had to endure, after their conversion to Christianity. Christianity has assimilated the hegemonic structure of caste into the organisation of the church and discriminated against the dalit converts. Dalit Christians have thus, become the Other of both the Christians and the dalits. Thus, caste remains as an inerasable tag which cannot be removed

by education, wealth or social position. Protest against restriction at public spaces like temples or hotels, is also a form of resistance. Multiple forms of resistance are configured to fight the interlocking systems of subjugation that operate collectively to keep the dalits in perpetual subordination. Embarking on occupations forbidden to dalits and abstaining from doing the filthy jobs like scavenging, or eating the dead animals, or announcing the news of deaths are forms of resistance practised by dalits. They have started to dig their own well, dressed up decently and resolved to send their children to school. Pawar has very keenly discussed about the phallocentric ideologies that subjugate women. While pursuing higher education and actively participating in the literary and social movements, Pawar had to face many conflicts from her husband. But she has resisted all notions of patriarchal subordination and carried on her literary activities with a determination of propagating her true identity as well as the identity of her fellow dalit women. There is an explicit suggestion of celebration of sisterhood of dalit women in the three texts. The women in the community support one another in their adversities. Dalit women have always tried to move forward instead of hovering in an imaginary world. Dalit women writers have noted the power of language. Culture specific dalit dialect is used as a tool by the dalit women to negate their misrepresented, stereotyped and appropriated identity. Writing is a counter hegemonic discourse for them to formulate new definitions and dimensions of the concepts of gender, female labour, caste, class, power,

hegemony, resistance, sisterhood, and so on. Thus, writing constitutes the greatest form of resistance of the gendered dalit.

The thesis also analyses the various narrative strategies adopted by the select dalit women writers to express their real identity. The politics of narration in dalit women's autobiographies harness the content, constituted by dalit female identity, and the form of an irregular autobiography. This also constitutes a solidarity between the subaltern women writers and readers who continue to struggle under similar conditions of marginality. The texts also call for a grant alliance of the subalterns. These narratives also hint at the kind of resistance through the way of cultural practises institutions and interpersonal relations. As a weak and unorganised group, dalit women find cultural resistance as effective at individual level. The narratives also highlight significant roles played by women in various cultural practises. Thus, women are central to the exercise of dalit resistance to Brahmanical patriarchy.

Another important aspect of the select narratives is the convergence of the individual narrative voice "I" with the collective narrative voice "We." This shows that dalit women's individual identity is inseparable from their communal identity. This is a characteristic of all the subaltern groups. This tangible bond of the individuals with the community helps them in developing strong solidarity among one another. This solidarity creates an imagined community of dalit women which strengthens their voice that articulates their identity and reinforces their will to resist hegemony.

Though the focus of the select autobiographies vary, Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, asserts that dalit life has changed commendably under the influence of various reform movements led by Ambedkar. Pawar's focus is more on her personal experiences rather than the experience of her community. She has given more narrative space to describe her personal miseries than the predicament of her community. Pawar foregrounds dalit patriarchy by bringing in her conflicting relationship with her husband. He is presented as inferior to her and envious of her pursuing higher education and participating in social and literary movements of her times. Bama's *Karukku* focuses on the life of dalit Christians. Through her testimony she has tried to prove that religious conversions have brought no benefit to dalits. Christianity has incorporated and imitated the caste system in the structure of church and discriminated against dalit Christians. All the three texts selected for study present a wide spectrum of dalit lives, their experiences, the reality of (gendered) dalit self, the strategies of dalit resistance and the power of their articulation.

The politics of dalit narration also includes revision of myths circulating in the society. These myths are shaped by caste Hindus and Brahmanical patriarchy as tools to subjugate the subalterns and keep them in perpetual exclusion. The select texts reveal how dalits have erased the myth of impure origin. The dalits have embarked on new occupations, once forbidden to them, and cultivated new consciousness that upholds their rights and privileges, declaring the tag of impurity as a fiction fabricated by the caste Hindu ideology. They have broken the

myth of god by declaring Ambedkar as their new leader and democratic icon. The select autobiographies also show the progression of dalit women from passivity to activity and present them as a source of strength and determination. By exemplifying their endurance, courage, wit and determination, these writers have reconstructed the image of dalit women disproved the myths that attribute docility, innocence and helplessness to them. They have justified the “impure language” of their articulation. The “coarse” language used by dalit women is culture specific and filled with dalit registers and is appropriate to express the harsh realities of dalit lived experiences.

Dalit women writers under study have made unlimited use of songs in their narratives. The songs express the unique culture of dalit community and an essential part of dalit existence, culture and ethos. Songs are inseparably connected to dalit way of life: there is a genre of songs for every piece of work in dalit life. Dalits believe in the therapeutic value of language. Discourses and psyche are analogous and they consolidate the healing power of language.

Dalit women’s life narratives transcend the boundaries of a postcolonial text. They are complex cultural texts which incorporate the experiences and multiple views of the authors along with their dreams, hopes, aspirations and realities of life. They represent the experiences of a community whose voice has been muted and pushed to the periphery by patriarchy and caste Hindu hegemony. These texts accommodate myriad muted voices speaking in unison for social equality and dignity in life. Most of the dalit narratives are written in regional

languages and many discourses are in the oral form, failing to make their presence in the discussions of literary discourse. More initiatives are required to translate and preserve such discourses to explain the structure of the nation. The dalit self appears to be alienated in the gendered discourses of the nation.

The spirit of the preamble of the constitution is not reflected in the historiography of the state. The relative silence about the human dimensions of dalit experiences, especially dalit female experiences, in the public domain remains as a puzzle. The memories associated with the humiliation and suppression of dalit are incomprehensible. With the emergence of dalit literary consciousness, the guilt and shame in the dalit unconscious assume the shape of self-revelation and resistance. The represented memories of violence, exclusion, oppression and guilt associated with the exploitation, and the shame experienced have become topics of global discussion. Epoch making dalit movements and dalit feminism result in political interventions and the emergence of disciplines like Dalit Studies. Alternate literary discourses like dalit women's life narratives have challenged hegemonies of caste and gender. They have dissuaded a revision of Indian historiography.

The articulation of new subaltern voices comes under the purview of new knowledge production. Subaltern voices have been muted until recently.

Discourses have been appropriated with a view to circulating distorted images of the dalits. Dalits have rewritten the historiography of the nation through socio-political interventions and literary discourses. Many social and political changes

after independence have brought some improvement in the economic status of the dalits. But economic stability alone cannot erase their caste identity. It is an inescapable stigma; caste tag follows like one's shadow. Caste consciousness is deeply engraved in the minds of the people and is therefore pervasive. Dalit's alternative literary discourses have challenged the caste system and caste hegemony. They faithfully represent the dalit self/identity.

Dalit women writers, with their new discourses of life narratives try to rewrite the social scripts of caste/gender discrimination, caste/gender violence, religious tyranny and patriarchal hegemony. They view literature as a space to represent their true self, gendered dalit identity. Their narratives express the intersection of dalit consciousness and female consciousness. Dalit women's autobiographies present dalit women as victims of Brahmanical patriarchy as well as dalit patriarchy. They challenge the misrepresentation of dalit female identity and rectify the stereotypical images of gendered dalits. Dalit women writers' powerful interventions to enrich the creative impulse of literature and literary criticism by resisting various stereotyped identities such as that of an illiterate ignorant, marginalised and silenced subject, exploited and fragile victim exposed to violence and crime. Dalit women's autobiographies exemplify their resistance to misrepresentation and silencing. Their life narratives therefore negotiate a politics of identity where the narrative voice "I" merges with the voice of the community at large, the "We." They synthesise content and form of narration by the gendered dalit in to a new discourse of emancipatory politics.