

# Dalit Women Writing: A Sociological Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Brahmanical patriarchy's claim for holding a superior social position is based on its notion of supposed purity which is achieved by restricting the movement of upper caste women within the household and by controlling their sexuality through the imposition of rites and rituals. Though now-a-days a huge number of urban, educated upper caste women join the workforce to meet the increasing demands of the market economy yet Brahmanical patriarchy by disseminating its ideology through state sponsored agencies ensures its authority over the sexuality of these women. However, this inverse relationship between caste status and women's mobility cannot easily be understood in the context of Dalit households since a bleak economic condition that prevails in poor Dalit families compels Dalit women to work outside.

**Keywords:** Households, Indiscriminately, Community, Misappropriation

## Introduction:

A sociological analysis of the relation between caste and gender suggests that the notion of caste purity in Hindu tradition is determined by the level of control over the sexuality and labour of the women of a particular caste group. Thus Brahmanical patriarchy's claim for holding a superior social position is based on its notion of supposed purity which is achieved by restricting the movement of upper caste women within the household and by controlling their sexuality through the imposition of rites and rituals. Though now-a-days a huge number of urban, educated upper caste women join the workforce to meet the increasing demands of the market economy yet Brahmanical patriarchy by disseminating its ideology through state sponsored agencies ensures its authority over the sexuality of these women. However, this inverse relationship between caste status and women's mobility cannot easily be understood in the context of Dalit households since a bleak economic

condition that prevails in poor Dalit families compels Dalit women to work outside. This leads to the "...lack of stringent controls on their labour, mobility and sexuality and this renders them 'impure' or 'lacking in virtue'" (Rege 29-30) According to the precepts of Brahmanical patriarchy, Dalit women are not entitled to claim any respect or honor since they jeopardize the public- private divide. Similarly, Dalit men, too, by extension of the same argument are robbed of their honor since they are unable to control the mobility and sexuality of their women. The fact that Dalit women are seen by the upper caste strata of Indian society as 'essentially' unchaste women is understood from the prevalence of joginitradition which is a religiously sanctioned social practice for exploiting a Dalit woman's body. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani in her poem Prohibited History portrays the grim picture of such institutionalized form of sexual exploitation as she writes:

I get unveiled as a woman, On sale in flesh market But the credit for being labeled a prostitute even before I took birth in this Karma bhoomi belongs to me... (Rani/Rao 91-92)

Rani's poem brings out the humiliation of Dalit women whose sexual exploitation in the hands of upper-caste men is often deemed 'justified' as they are located at the bottom of an imaginary purity-scale solely created by the caste-Hindu-dominated patriarchal social set-up. One does not have to go much deeper to understand the political implication of such a wide-spread misrepresentation of Dalit women. The alliance of caste and patriarchy is necessary to undermine the very being of not only Dalit women but also of Dalit men (who are born of 'essentially unchaste' Dalit women) and thus to consolidate the foundation of a social system which fulfils the interests of the male members of the high caste communities only. Arundhati Roy's article on ShekharKapur's film *Bandit Queen* reinforces this attitude of disregard for the dignity of Dalit women.

The notion cherished by most of the upper-caste men that they do have natural rights to possess, discard or mutilate the bodies of Dalit women is revealed through Roy's narration of the incident of a surgery that Phoolan Devi had to undergo when she was in police custody. In Roy's words: While she was still in jail, Phoolan was rushed to hospital bleeding heavily because of an ovarian cyst. Her womb was removed. When Mala Sen asked why this had been necessary, the prison doctor laughed and said "We don't want her breeding any more Phoolan Devi's." The State removed a woman's uterus! Without asking her. Without her knowing. It just reached into her and plucked out a part of her! It decided to control who was allowed to breed and who wasn't. Was this even mentioned in the film? No. Not even in

the rolling titles at the end. When it comes to getting bums on seats, hysterectomy just doesn't measure up to rape. (Roy, Web) Rape from a political perspective has always been used as a weapon to 'emasculate' a class or community that poses threat to the existence and integrity of the dominant group. According to scholars like Vasanth and KalpanaKannabiran, Gender within caste society is thus defined and structured in such a manner that the 'manhood' of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of passivity of the women of the caste. By the same argument, demonstrating control by humiliating women of another caste is a certain way of reducing the 'manhood' of those castes. (Kannabiran&Kannabiran 254) This explains why often women from the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities are indiscriminately raped or paraded naked in public.

The Hindutva politics that foregrounds the supremacy of Brahmanical patriarchy attempts to strengthen its authority by building a tradition of continual dishonoring of the low caste and non-Hindu religious groups through sexual violation of their women since women are viewed as the 'bearers of tradition and protectors of the honour' (Kannabiran&Kannabiran 257) of any social or religious community.

However, interestingly enough, patriarchy enjoys a ubiquitous presence. It will be wrong to infer that patriarchy exists only in the upper class/caste of Indian society. Gopal Guru's article "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995) makes it explicit that Dalit women are subjugated by two distinct patriarchal structures/situations: a Brahmanical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatized dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of "their" women. (Rao 1)

Marathi Dalit woman writer Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (translated by Maya Pandit) portrays a gruesome picture of domestic violence suffered by Dalit women within their own homes. Kamble's narrative informs us that the inhuman practice of chopping the nose of a 'wayward' daughter-in-law was rampant among the Mahars till 1940s. The issue of domestic violence and the subjugated status of Dalit women in their own homes also become apparent in *The Grip of Change* where the narrator describes the environment of mutual jealousy and violence in Kathamuthu's house. Nagamani, one of the three wives of the Dalit leader Kathamuthu is reported to be hit sometimes so hard by her husband that she has to lie down for days together without being able to even eat or drink. This novel by P. Sivakami in fact brilliantly illustrates the multiple levels of Dalit patriarchy which is no less efficient than its Brahmanical counterpart in exploiting Dalit women for its own selfish ends. Dalit woman's dignity means nothing when it comes to the protection of caste pride. The same logic can be applied to understand Kathamuthu's motive when he tries to get money by changing the rape issue into a caste issue. Moreover, he appropriates the money and indulges in sexual consumption of Thangam's body. Even the brothers of Thangam's late husband try to take advantage of her situation. She is deprived of her property and made into an object of their lust. Their vexed responses at Thangam's rape and subsequent physical torture, again, reveals the general attitude of giving more priority to caste pride than to a woman's honor. With their proclamation, "She deserves this and more! She seduced Udayar... shameless bitch... ignoring all of us she found succor in him! ( Sivakami 26) they reiterate the rhetoric which is used by men of every caste group since they believe that they have natural

unquestionable rights over the sexuality of the women of their own communities. The theme of sexual misappropriation of Dalit women's body appears time and again in most of the accounts written by Dalit women.

Tersamma- a low-caste activist expresses in a poem her anguish at the sexual slavery that Dalit women are bound to experience in the hands of 'double patriarchies. Events narrates how her senior aunt was beaten to death by her husband since she was unable to satisfy his sexual hunger. SumitraBhabe's essay "Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Stories" throws light on the dynamics of marital relationship as one 'character' Sangeeta narrates the disgusting experience of her conjugal life where she was often forced to have sexual intimacy with her husband against her will. Recollecting those moments she says:

"...then, one day in the afternoon, they had all gone out and in rushes my husband, catches hold of me, and there I was- a wife in no time at all! I was scared and I was disgusted."

(Bhave 119)

Patriarchy's root is so deeply entrenched in the psyche of our society that it manifests itself not only through the attitude of men but also through the behavior and thought-processes of women of a given caste or class group. Dalit community is also no exception. Baby Kamble's life-narrative *JinaAmucha* (*The Prisons We Broke* in English translation) describes the inhuman torture that was inflicted upon new brides by their mothers- in-law who having internalized patriarchal ideologies used to facilitate the process of consolidating male domination. Apart from physical torture, they also used to poison the minds of their sons against their wives. Kamble writes:

She would be worried all the time about his falling in love with his wife. Her daughter- in-law was her enemy! She would feel terribly jealous of her youth. She would constantly keep complaining to her son about his wife. **(Kamble 96)**

Another Marathi Dalit writer Urmila Pawar recounts the traumatic experiences of one of her elder sisters who in spite of having a job at the airport office was not spared from being tortured by her husband. Dalit men fight for humanity, but what is humanity even they do not know, because they do not have humanity towards their wives. (Pawar, Interview 237) A similar note of criticism against the hypocrisy of Dalit men is heard in the account of Ashoka one of those eight Dalit women whose narratives have been recorded by Sumitra Bhabe. Ashoka who converted to Buddhism shunning the meaningless rituals of Hindu Dharma found to her utter dismay that her husband had not been spiritually enlightened by the messages of compassion and equality propagated by Lord Buddha. Conversion for him was just an external event.

#### **Ashoka tells:**

My husband does not behave according to the religion. He drinks, talks foul language, beats me up and so sometimes I wonder if I'm really a Buddhist or just the same old Hindu! and, at times, because of him I'm ashamed to call myself a Buddhist. (Bhabe 127)

#### **Conclusion:**

Perhaps making a general comment about the nature of Dalit men would obscure the nuances involved in this issue. Any random reading of Dalit women's narratives makes it explicit that these women possess great physical strength and far

greater strength of mind. However, the sad part of the story is that these women in spite of enduring such back-breaking toil never get their due acknowledgement- neither at home nor in the work place.

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