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## The Poetical and Political Dimensions of the 'Woman Question' in Dalit Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

#### Publication Info

##### *Article history :*

Received : 29-04-2024

Accepted : 02-05-2024

DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v20i1.5

##### *Key words:*

Dalit women, caste, feminism, colonial India, Ambedkarite movement, gender oppression.

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The Dalit perspective offers a comprehensive understanding of "the woman question" during colonial and postcolonial times, focusing on Dalit women. Before the rise of mainstream feminism in India, the discourse on women's issues emerged within caste discussions in the late 19th century. Early reforms targeting upper-caste women were based on lower-caste models but were hindered by upper-caste fears of losing caste status and power. Dalit women's issues were highlighted by movements like Jotiba Phule's Satyashodhak Sabha and Ambedkarite movements, intertwining women's rights with political rights for Dalits. Influential figures such as Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, Muktabai Salve, and Tarabai Shinde played crucial roles in advocating for women's education, challenging Brahmanical patriarchy, and criticizing gender inequalities. The Ambedkarite movement further radicalized Dalit women, emphasizing the intersection of caste and gender oppression and encouraging the creation of new public spaces for Dalit women. Dalit women's autobiographical narratives, emerging from the Ambedkarite movement, reflect their double marginalization and offer a distinct voice within Indian feminist literature, highlighting both individual and collective struggles for dignity and identity.

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The Dalit point of view offers a holistic understanding of "the woman question" during the colonial and postcolonial times with special reference to the Dalit women. It must be noted that before the rise of mainstream feminism in India, the woman's question began to be contested within the emerging discourse of caste in the second half of nineteenth-century colonial India. The initial reformist steps that involved the women of upper-caste communities were largely based on lower-caste models. However, the reforms in upper caste Hindus were deterred by the fear of losing caste and power of caste. In this respect, Uma Chakravarty (1998) has adequately shown how Pandita Ramabai's rejection of patriarchal Brahmanic practices and her later conversion to Christianity in the second half of the nineteenth century was seen as a revolt and a betrayal of a nation.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, and the first half of the twentieth century the woman question was aptly discussed by Jotiba Phule's Satyashodhak Sabha and Ambedkarite movements in Maharashtra. Besides the print culture, it was, too, contested through the popular folk songs of the Satyashodhak and Ambedkarite counterpublics. The women's rights were juxtaposed with the demand for political rights for Dalits.

Phule intertwined women's question with his project of rewriting Hindu mythology from Dalit point of view. He proposed education for women of all castes and recognized the plight of enforced widowhood from a psychological and moral point of view. In his *Akhand* (verse) entitled *Kulambin* (woman of the laboring peasant caste), he feministically records the labour of the women of the labouring castes both inside and outside the household. This verse

can be considered one of the earliest attempts to understand the division of Brahmanic patriarchal labour and the enforced burden of double labour on untouchable women in contrast to the caste privileges of the Brahman caste.

Dalit women's question was further raised by Satyashodhak women activists like Savitribai Phule, Muktabai Salve, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Rhode, and Janabai Rokde. Muktabai and Tarabai Shinde's essays 'About the Grief of Mahars and Mangs' (1855) and 'A Comparison between Men and Women' (*Stree Purush Tulana*) (1882) respectively set the direction of the Dalit feminist movement. Both Muktabai and Tarabai were the followers of Phule and members of *Satyashodhak Samaj*. About the miserable condition of pregnant Dalit women Muktabai writes, "Our women give birth to babies and they do not even have a roof over their heads. How they suffer rain and cold! Try to think about it from your own experiences" (Rege 2006:46). Tarabai in her text interrogates Brahmanical patriarchy and criticizes other non-brahman castes for the practice of widowhood. She also raises questions about the representation of women in the literature of her time. As Rosalind O'Hanlon, the translator of Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana*, has noted, Tarabai's articulation spans issues ranging across practical matters of the domestic and everyday, enforced widowhood, women's education, and the exclusively masculine public sphere (O'Hanlon 1994:8). Savitribai Phule, the mother of Indian (Dalit) feminism, in one of her poems describes the Peshwa rule thus: "In the Peshwai that ruled, the immoral practices scared the ati-shudras, a pot around the neck to spit, a broom tied to the back to clean their foot prints. The shameless husband sends his wife to his Master Bajirao, and the brahman women are exploited by this tyrannical rule, they keep saying may the Peshwai burn down to ashes" (Mali 1980: 90).

Savitribai Rhode used to run a journal called *Kshatiya Ramoshi*, a journal that focused on the enlightenment and education of women in general and Dalit women in particular. Janabai Rokde, another Satyashodhak activist, attained popularity as a midwife in Mumbai in the early years of the twentieth century. Thus, the Satyashodhak women trained under the Phuleite philosophy of democracy and egalitarianism gave a new shape and set a new subaltern Dalit voice to the Indian feminist movement.

The Satyashodhaks fought the women's question on different fronts. *Din Mitra*- the newspaper of the Satyashodhaks- gave voice to many contemporary issues related to the untouchables and other subaltern people and demanded solutions in the public sphere. The Satyashodhaks, in addition to the print media, also explored the musical form *jalsa* (a recording of the folk form *tamasha*) for communicating their political messages. The *jalsa* being musical in form became very popular among people and became an important instrument in raising women's issues and launching an assault on untouchability and Brahmanism. Shayamarao Kulat in one of the *jalsa* compositions titled as 'The Request to all Women' addresses Dalit women:

To all you women, I request,...

Don't be carried away by the Bhats (brahman),  
Do not take their advice  
To all you women, I request,  
Guide your sons and daughters  
to the best path,  
Teach them- at day and at night,  
Send the boys and girls to school... (Rege 2006: 49)

*Jalsas* also presented a critique of Brahmanism for its enforced widowhood and practice of tonsuring of widows. In one of the *jalsas*, a young Brahman widow argues with her father:

I am your loved one, father, your loved one,  
why do you make me a tonsured widow?...  
Drop your adamant behavior, Arrange for my Pat (second marriage)  
allowed among lower castes. (ibid. 50)

Thus, the Satyashodhaks played an important role in creating pre-Ambedkarite Dalit publics and counter-discourse of Dalit identity.

Sharmila Rege (2006) has noted that with the collective efforts of the Satyashodhaks, pre-Ambdekartie untouchable leaders, and many other nonbrahman social reformers of that time, many legal reforms affecting the position of Dalit men and women were administered. Important among them include the declaration of reservation of 50 percent positions for Backward Castes, an order for Compulsory Primary Education (1917), a Law for the Registration of Intercaste and Interreligious Marriages (1919), a Law against Cruelty to Women (1919), the Divorce Act of 1919, and the Act granting inheritance rights to 'illegitimate' children and Devdasis. Here, it is important to note that many of these acts were aggressively opposed in *Kesari*, the Tilakite newspaper, and were contested by the emerging Satyashodhak and other non-brahman discourses.

Dalit feminism which started to be shaped under the Phuleite ideology in the second half of the nineteenth century got its firm form and character under the Ambekartie movement and the emerging Dalit public sphere in the first half of the twentieth century. The Mahad satyagraha in 1927 for access to the Chavadar lake for untouchables, the burning of the *Manusmruti* (December 1927), the debate on the Communal Award of separate electorates for the untouchables, the Hindu Code Bill and later Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism played a major role in raising sensibility about Dalit woman's question. The important thing to be observed in this regard, as noted by Mary E. John (2000: 3824), is the opposition of all reservations and denying of political representation to the depressed classes by the women's organizations (AIWC, NCIW, and WIA) of that time. The women's organizations did oppose the practice of untouchability as a disgrace to Hinduism but, the issue of caste was relegated to the 'private' sphere, hence not to be debated in the public, and political spheres. Located in the nationalist politics of that time, the upper-caste women's organizations glorified Brahmanic femininity as pan-Indian femininity.

The Ambedkartie movement radicalized Dalit women. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon note Ambedkar's speech addressed to the Dalit women to actively participate in the public struggle for equality, justice, and self-respect:

... Men and women together resolve the problems of everyday life. If the men take up this work (annihilation of caste) on their own, there is no doubt that they will take a long time to complete it. But if women take this work on themselves, I am sure they will soon succeed....To tell the truth, the task of removing untouchability belongs not to men, but to you women.....you must all give up your old and disgusting customs....no untouchable person carries the mark of being untouchables stamped on his forehead. But untouchable persons can be easily recognized as such because of their customs and way of life.

The way you wear your saris is a sign of your being untouchable...Knowledge and learning are not for men alone, they are essential for women too.... I am hopeful that you will

not go away and forget his speech (Pawar and Moon 2014: 121-23).\

In Ambedkar's thinking the subordination of women is embedded with the theory of caste. The absence of inter-caste marriage or endogamy is the core of caste and is the essence of control over women and subordination in patriarchy. Ambedkar in his essay 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' (1916) has argued that the practices of sati, enforced widowhood, and child marriage come to be prescribed by Brahmanism to regulate and control any transgression of boundaries (Ambedkar 1916:15-16). Ambedkar in this essay maintains that the caste system can be maintained only through the controls on women's sexuality and prohibiting exogamy. He radically challenges the linkages of caste and purity and asks Dalit women to challenge upper-caste women's claim of purity. Since the woman is subordinated in caste, the Dalit woman is subordinated at multiple levels within the Brahmanical patriarchy. Ambedkar's analysis of caste and women's position in it encourages Dalit women to create new public spaces for them.

Ambedkarite movement gave birth to Dalit women's literary activity which is quite different from the mainstream women's literary tradition. One example will suffice to elaborate on the social theme in Dalit women's writings in the early Ambedkarite movement. In Dalit women's writings, community is prioritized over conjugality. In one of the compositions by a Dalit woman addressed to Ambedkar's second wife who was a Brahmin, the speaker says:

O girl from brahman family,  
Drape your sari well to cover yourself,  
Baba is busy with his work –  
Sitting on the chair,  
He's not looking at you (Gaikwad 1993: 64).

Thus, the Ambedkarite influence left an immense influence on the Dalit women to carve out their Dalit voice and vision.

Modernity in India entered during the colonial period not by simply adhering to English education or adopting Westernized lifestyles in the cultural sphere; it entered the Indian socio-cultural setting by renegotiating and interrogating the fixed social relations in private and public spheres. Such reconstitution in social sphere helped the educated people to form a 'middle class' that was distinct from the feudal rich and the lower classes. In such a condition, women's question concerning caste reemerged. While understanding the colonial intellectual position in Maharashtra in the context of Dalit and women's question, Sharmila Rege points out four basic positions: the Brahmanical revivalist (Tilak), the Brahmanical reformist (Lokhitwadi, Agarkar, Ranade), the non-Brahmanical reformist (V. R. Shinde) and the non-Brahmanical revolutionary position (Phule, Ambedkar) (Rege 2006: 59). Within the nationalist discourse the Gandhian understanding of women's question, to some extent, did open up the public space for women, but it did not radicalize women's space with its meek approach to caste and the condition of Dalit women within it.

Here, a brief sketch of Marathi women's autobiographical narratives from the early twentieth century is attempted to understand the emergence of the Dalit voice and vision within a broader Dalit women's literary tradition. By 1975, Marathi literature witnessed the publication of more than thirty-five autobiographical narratives by women. But the narratives in these autobiographies mostly revolve around the life of the husband and his reformist zeal and the narrative of joy and pains at times. In such autobiographical narratives, the woman as a

subject of the narrative does not take the subject position. Such narratives could not challenge the Brahminic patriarchy.

The categorization of Marathi women's autobiographical tradition shows that the earlier autobiographies, associated with the lives lived by women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were concerned with the life sketches of husbands and their public image. Later, with the rise of middle-class and upper-caste women, women's presence was slowly but steadily felt in public fields like education, music, dance, and cinema. In such narratives the women's place was marginal and their identities were subsumed into their husbands' identities.

In the next phase of Marathi women's autobiographies, the narratives of idealized companionship and the intricacies and discord of conjugal life emerged. Since all these autobiographies have been penned by upper caste women caste has not yet entered the narrative. The modern Marathi women's autobiographical self tries to be universal, modern, and Indian without passing through the trauma of caste experience. Thus, the omission of caste in mainstream Indian feminism is viewed by Dalit feminists as a Brahmanic appropriation of the field of feminism.

In contrast to the upper caste women's autobiographies, Dalit women's autobiographies exhibit new poetic and political aspirations. Some major observations about Dalit women's autobiographical narratives are as under:

- The Dalit women's autobiographical narratives exhibit double marginalization and discrimination of Dalit women. Being women, they suffer gender discrimination within the Dalit patriarchy and caste untouchability within the Brahminic patriarchy. In their self-narratives, they expose both kinds of exploitation at the hands of Dalit and caste males. Dalit women experience discrimination and exploitation both in the private and the public realms. Her untouchable body becomes an object of gaze and appropriation in the public realm. Her body becomes a privileged space within Dalit and Brahmanic patriarchy and is crushed by public untouchability and private machismo.
- Dalit women's autobiographical narratives do not display laments, resentments, or shame of their Dalit past and their existence as women subjects. They rather frankly present a critique of the available reality and strive for dignity and a new identity.
- The Marathi Mahar women's autobiographical narratives historically confirm the active participation of the country women in the Dalit liberation movement initiated by Ambedkar. The narratives humbly accept the role played by the Ambedkarite movement in their lives. The Ambedkarite movement for the liberation of women in general and Dalit women, in particular, has been shadowed by the mainstream nationalist and feminist movements of that time. These narratives provide an opportunity to the reader to understand Indian women's struggle for liberation from another angle.
- Dalit women's autobiographical narratives share a collective Dalit feminine sensibility and cultural creativity. Here, personal becomes collective and vice-versa. Unlike mainstream feminism's quest for individual subjectivity, the Dalit feminist quest for subjectivity is very often subsumed within the collective quest for the subjectivity of the Dalits as a community, but that does not trivialize Dalit women's quest for self. The self-narratives

unravel the hidden feelings of dissent and revolt and the humiliated place both in home and outside the home.

- The patriarchal tradition of autobiography centres around the quest for the sublime, elevated self. But in women's, especially in Dalit women's, autobiographies women's humdrum existence becomes a space for knowledge. As compared to middle-class women's lives, Dalit women's lives form a very different site of contestation. Their lives are highly influenced by the intersections of religion, culture and politics. Unlike middle-class women, Dalit women's lives are marked by daily labour relations within caste hierarchies in addition to private and family life. Though subalterns, their consciousness is not dead subjectivity.
- Dalit women's autobiographical narratives very positively expose the mundane, at times, violent religious rituals and superstitions whose victims they become in everyday life. The Dalit women autobiographers in their autobiographical narratives refer to such superstitions which are nonsensical but the Dalits, especially women, succumb to them. The paradox is that the Dalit women keep themselves occupied with such rituals, sacrifices, and superstitions that bind them to the tradition and are responsible for their downtrodden condition.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, gender becomes a crucial factor in the social-political life of India. The reformist steps that began during that period were to affect and shape in the long run the identity of the middle class in general and women in particular. The paradox of these reforms was that certain lower caste models were adopted for higher caste/class people. For example, a ban on widow remarriage, and Sati tradition were vices of the upper castes, not the lower castes. The reforms directly affected women and challenged the gender formation of upper-caste women. Later the jolt given to upper caste notions about womanhood through reformation was replaced by the construction of a single notion of Hindu womanhood and wifehood based on Vedic civilization. The nationalists and Orientalists of the nineteenth century remained successful in challenging British colonial power with their invocation of the distant Aryan, idealized Indian past, but could not show any radicalism in deconstructing the hierarchization of different social groups. The foregrounding of the nation-state in the distant past eventually muffled the voices of the subaltern people, especially women in general and the Dalit women in particular.

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