

FROM THE MARGIN TO THE CENTRE: THE JOURNEY OF THE INDIAN DALIT WOMAN

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Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to locate the journey of a few aspirational women from the Dalit community, the most persecuted group in India, from the fringes of society to its centre, carving for themselves a life of dignity and prosperity. In fact, it may even be argued that the Dalits of India have suffered a similar fate with that of the Afro-American community, living for centuries within the 'margins', being an unacknowledged and derided part of society as the 'unwanted insiders'. As Bell Hooks observes in her seminal work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984): 'To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.' In current sociological and literary epistemology, Dalit Studies has emerged as a new, interdisciplinary mode of assessing and situating the Indian Dalit community. In this respect, this paper takes a few short stories from the Rajasthani Dalit writer Ratan Kumar Sambharia as frameworks to assess the Dalit woman's situation in India and her constant struggle to form a narrative alterity. The Dalit woman faces the double-whammy as a sociological 'other', not only because she is a Dalit but also because she is a Woman. The Dalit woman is under constant pressure to abide by the set social praxis and follow a preordained trajectory, the transgression of which unleashes a multitude of challenges along her path. Therefore, it is important to look at the Dalit Woman as a separate entity, with struggles unique to her social reality. This paper takes a look at some of these pressing issues that have plagued Indian society since generations.*

Keywords: aspirational Dalit, women and dignity, Dalit property, narrative alterity

For any healthy society, it is important for the marginal voices to be heard and assimilated into the mainstream. In her influential essay *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, Nancy Fraser succinctly sums up the discourse of what she calls "subaltern counterpublics"; its need to create a narrative alterity that challenges the hegemonic structure of the dominant classes:

history records that members of subordinated social groups...have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses... On one hand they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics...This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies (Fraser 67-68)

Literature, and the language in which it is written, plays an important role in the formation of resistive narrative patterns that challenge the set customs and assumptions put into motion by the dominant groups. Like the people it talks about, Dalit writing, for a long time, had been operating on the fringes of the 'literary canon', constantly challenging, albeit within bounds, the subversive discourses set forth by the echelons of Brahminical Patriarchy and the Upper-Caste. This was mainly because Dalit Literature resisted being assimilated into the mainstream narrative. In much of Dalit Literature therefore, there is an overt attempt to form dialectic of liminality - to dissolve social hierarchies, and question its preordained praxis and belief-systems. The aim of the earliest Dalit writers has been that of strategic resistance: instead of assimilating into mainstream literary and ontological channels, the exponents of Dalit Studies have sought to form an alternative canon of their own. This end was achieved by deliberately transgressing the modes of 'genteel' writing; by using realistic words, phrases and writing patterns that perceptively encapsulated the Dalit experience. Language therefore became a mode of resistance. Sharankumar Limbale observes in this context:

the reality of Dalit Literature is distinct, and so is the language of this reality. It is the uncouth-impolite language of Dalits. It is the spoken language of Dalits. This language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar. Standard language has a class. Dalit writers have rejected the class of this standard language. Dalit writers have rejected [the] validation of standard language by the cultured classes because it is arrogant (Limbale 33)

However, Dalit Literature also suffered from another major setback. Since they were written mostly in regional Indian languages, its readership also remained confined to regional spaces. Therefore, a huge corpus of Dalit literature remained largely inaccessible to most Indian readers for a long time. To transcend the margin, Dalit writing had to adopt the language of the centre. Therefore, English translations of Dalit writing became instrumental in the spread of and interest in Dalit Studies. Also, it was seen that Dalit oppression was not a distinctively

Indian socio-cultural phenomenon; rather, much of Dalit writing has in common the oppressions faced by marginal groups across the world - the Black people in America or the Burakumins in Japan. So, in essence, Dalit Studies attempts to historicise and contextualise universal oppression.

The Dalit woman, in this context, becomes an interesting entity. As a woman, she is already subjected to myriad forms of oppression; but being both Dalit and Woman, she offers a unique perspective on Dalit social reality. The most abiding emotion of this woman is aspiration and hope, because she often has nothing else to cling on to. The Dalit woman often has to bear the brunt of poverty and humiliation at the hands of her upper-caste peers. Therefore, there is often a split in her personality: she is fully aware of her lowliness in the current social hegemony, but yet a part of her also aspires to transcend this curve and achieve a life of respect and dignity. In Sambharia's *Phulwa*, the titular Dalit character, who is now an old woman receives Rameshwar, her former upper-caste landlord's son into her house. Sambharia perceptively encapsulates Phulwa's emotions in these lines:

Phulwa's joy knew no bounds. The zamindar's son was visiting her home! Her mind went back to the day that had been a day of unimaginable misfortune... Phulwa had become a widow. Their son Radhamohan had been only ten years old then. *Phulwa had inherited her husband's legacy of serfdom and debt... She began cutting the grass, filling water and feeding the cattle at the zamindar's house* [italics mine] (Sambharia 4)

As can be seen in the above passage, the death of her husband in an accident had thrown her life upside down. However, she ensured that her son received a proper education, because only that could save them from a life of perpetual misery: 'She had suffered untold hardship; yet she had made sure that her son Radhamohan completed his education; because if she had not, his hands would still have been wielding the plough' (Sambharia 10). Now, fate had put Phulwa in a unique position of ascendancy. Her son was an 'officer' of great clout, and Rameshwar has come to seek a favour. All this makes her happy beyond measure:

Phulwa's wings were spread wide with happiness. She was virtually soaring in the air. She was going to show Rameshwar each and every thing in the house. Such things, as would not be there, perhaps, even in the homes of landowners and moneylenders (Sambharia 5)

However, Rameshwar was far from happy with this turn of events. He would have been glad to see Phulwa in the same state of misery, but he realises that Phulwa has now become

prosperous. He feels inadequate before her, and therefore his only asset is his birth in an upper-caste family:

Rameshwar's suspicions were confirmed: Phulwa is not the tenant of the house; she is the owner! Pride in his superior caste overwhelmed him and he began to burn with envy (Sambharia 4)

In the city, distinctions of upper-caste and lower-caste are almost redundant. In his village, Rameshwar is a zamindar, commanding automatic reverence, but that means nothing in the city. In fact, he is described as a 'country bumpkin' (Sambharia 1). As Phulwa tells him, 'Our village has thirty-six variations of caste. In the city, however, there are only two-castes- the rich and the poor' (Sambharia 11). At one point, while she was showing him the tap from which water poured forth round the clock, Rameshwar remembers an incident when he had denied pouring water in Phulwa's pitcher because people of her caste were not allowed to draw water from that well. The narrator says:

[Rameshwar] had been beside himself with anger, outraged at the audacious use of his name... *He'd leaned forward and spat into her pitcher.* Phulwa had flung the earthen pitcher right there and run home in tears [*italics mine*] (Sambharia 6)

The old woman too remembers the incident and the corners of her eyes are filled with tears. However, as the narrator tells us, 'Time is a wizard. Rameshwar was still drawing water from the same well, while Phulwa's kitchen had a water tap in it!' (Sambharia 7). If Phulwa's intention was to make Rameshwar jealous of her situation, she had undoubtedly succeeded. Rameshwar is bedazzled by the luxury of Phulwa's 'guest room', a spare room hardly ever used:

The grandeur of the room set every pore of his skin on fire. What a room it was- practically a hall (Sambharia 7)

Rameshwar similarly reacts with envy and awe when Phulwa shows him the terrace of their mansion. To him, 'It was not a terrace – it was a maidan. It was as big as the courtyard of his own house' (Sambharia 8). Phulwa had not merely thrived in the city, but had become wealthy. Her prosperity finds expression through her material possessions, operating as external signifiers of her high social status in the city. Her drawing room:

had a sofa set and a granite-topped centre table. A phone was sitting on a stool. The walls were adorned with wooden artefacts and paintings. Three

glittering glass-fronted cabinets were filled with eye-catching figurines. A velvety carpet was spread on the floor (Sambharia 8)

Rameshwar expects Phulwa to be deferential to him and behave modestly about her prosperity, solely because of his superior caste. His orthodox prejudices also extend to the other females of Phulwa's family – her granddaughter and daughter-in-law:

The girl looked up, went through the formality of greeting Rameshwar and then returned to her books. He was angered that she had not even risen to her feet in a show of respect when he saw him (Sambharia 7)

Rameshwar also expected Santi, Phulwa's daughter-in-law, to follow the set social customs of a village woman. He vents his disappointment thus:

When [Santi] left, Rameshwar ground his teeth, his eyes bloodshot with rage. He had assumed Phulwa's daughter-in-law would appear in a metre-long veil and touch his feet... *Had she behaved like this in our village, I would have yanked her down by her hair and...* (Sambharia 13)

Phulwa's decision to stand by her son's education and to bear the brunt of singlehandedly enduring her impoverished life changes her life for the better. As a Dalit woman, she is subjected to various forms of emotional abuse by her upper-caste landowners. Yet, she never loses hope, aspiring always for a better future, if not for herself then at least for her son. Her former landlord Rameshwar coming to her palatial home, fifteen years after she has left the village, to ask a favour from Radhamohan, her son, is Phulwa's ultimate moral victory. Far from adopting a victim-mentality, she is the epitome of the aspirational Dalit woman who dares to transcend her social conditioning in order to live a more dignified life. The village allowed Phulwa and her son to live only in the margins. It is only by moving into the city, the centre, does she carve a distinct identity for herself, and create a narrative alterity. From a poor Dalit woman, living on the charity and magnanimity of her landowners, she sets a new narrative pattern for her family, from her son onwards. This is proved when Pandit Mataprasad's widow tells Rameshwar:

You have remained a frog in the well, Rameshwaria! Now it is the era of position and influence, not of caste. Phulwanti's Radhamohan is no petty officer. He is the Superintendent of Police. Tell you what – just go and fall at Memsahib's feet and don't let go till she says "Yes" (Sambharia 17)

Phulwa is now the ‘Memsahib’ and Radhamohan the Superintendent of Police. The Brahmin’s widow asks Rameshwar, who is a high caste zamindar himself, to fall at Phulwa’s feet until she promised to help him. This is perhaps Phulwa’s greatest victory - her ability to create an alternative narrative about her life and identity. Most importantly, she manages to transcend her caste, for unlike in their village, caste does not operate as a social capital in the city. Also, unlike in the village, Phulwa enjoys social respect and prestige in the city.

In *Word of Honour*, the protagonist Surti, again a widow, is forced to ask for a loan of three hundred rupees from Dheeng, a local womaniser and bachelor in his late forties. Her son Radhu’s school fees have been outstanding for three months. Her late husband had extracted a promise on his deathbed with these words:

Education is the poor man’s treasure. Our son is a good student. He will certainly become an officer someday. *No matter how much suffering you need to go through for it, make sure Radhu is never parted from his books* [italics mine] (Sambharia 148)

After the death of her husband, Surti has to regularly fend off unsolicited sexual advances from Dheeng. Thus, Sambharia also highlights the hypocrisy of caste-based discrimination. Surti’s Dalit status does not matter anymore to the upper-caste village males, because she is now the ‘unprotected female’. As Dheeng plans:

To bring a woman from another community into one’s community was frowned upon. But if you made her your concubine, it enhanced your image (Sambharia 154)

For the Dalit woman, ‘selling’ often becomes her only way of saving an unmanageable situation. She either has to lose valuable property for obtaining financial loans, or she runs the risk of becoming a sexual property herself. When Radhu gets ill, nobody in the village is prepared to lend Surti fifty rupees for the doctor’s fee. It is only by selling her silver bangles does she manage to procure the money. In fact, after giving Surti the loan for Radhu’s school fees, Dheeng ‘began to treat her like his personal property, as one might a cow one had paid for’ (Sambharia 156). Similarly, in *The Old Woman*, the respected village Master Ji agrees to lend Chunni a sum of hundred rupees only if she gives him her most prized possession - her bronze thali. Sambharia captures the anguish Chunni undergoes at the prospect of losing an emotionally valuable possession:

Sixty years ago, her mother had bought this thali to give to her daughter for her marriage. For twenty years, Chunni and her husband had shared their evening meal on this very plate...The thali was the only memory she had of

her mother and her husband. Still, she had no choice but to give up (Sambharia 89-90)

The Dalit woman cannot afford to have memories and possessions because her very existence is continually threatened in the margins. Yet, Chunni has managed to raise a strong and independent daughter, who now lives in the city. What comes across powerfully in Sambharia's stories is that despite the heavy challenges faced by his Dalit women characters, they have persevered and retained their sense of dignity. Phulwa, Surti and Chunni are struck with misfortune and poverty, yet they also ensure that their children have happier futures. Education becomes an important source of empowerment for the Dalits, and the women do everything in their power to continue the educative aspirations of their children. Social acceptance, financial security and a life of dignity is all that the Dalit woman strives for. In this respect, the Dalit woman's struggles are universal. Her journey begins from the margin, until finally she manages to carve a distinct identity for herself in the centre.

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