

## **DELINEATING THE DALIT SELF: GLIMPSES INTO DALIT WOMEN NARRATIVES**

Dr.Sakunthala A.I.  
Associate professor of English  
M.P.M.M.S.N.trusts College  
Shoranur-2, Kerala

Literature is a representation of the pulses and vibrations that circulate within the wide framework of society. Literary history, like language, is male-centred and women writers are conspicuous by their absence in literary history. The literature produced by male authors, indoctrinated by the ideology of patriarchy, provides a prejudiced, mutilated graph of women.

Caste and class are different social categories, but they seem to be operational together and in consonance with gender in Dalit literature. The cultures of the community where dalit women make meaning of their everyday experiences cajole a culture of silence and domination from people and practices higher up in the social hierarchy. To know is the first step in visualising social change. This comprehension and advocacy will help dalit women fight oppression in solidarity with other marginalised groups.

Culture, societal relationships, diverse institutions including family, education and religion, literature, sexuality- all bear the imprint of hegemony and subjugation. The subaltern is the one who is denied an authentic presence. Pushed towards the margin, to the periphery, away from the vitality and vivacity of the centre, he/she is the one bereft of voice or dignity. The gravity of the situation is intensified when the subaltern is a woman as it is a lethal combination for the subaltern to be a woman. “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other” (Beauvoir). Her dreams, hopes and aspirations and even her basic right to be a dignified human being are all thwarted by multiple forces of oppression and suppression. The oppressive forces have so naturalised the subjugation of women that she has so far failed to recognise the pitfall that she has plunged into. Feminist literature has constantly endeavoured to bring into the limelight this universal predicament of women.

Dalit literature is not merely a collection of texts, but it signals the emergence of a new self consciousness inculcated by the philosophy of Dr.Ambedkar and the writers of this movement show a clear awareness of belonging to a distinct literary culture and society. Dalit women have been misrepresented in Indian Literature. They are portrayed as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men and never as rebels to fight against the injustice perpetuated upon them. As a consequence of this, Dalit female characters end their journey of deep darkness and started to behold dreams of sunrise. “They fight for truth and for themselves.

They revolt to protect their self-respect. The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centred but society-centred. That is why Dalit writers do not portray Dalit women as hollow identities, overflowing with love as embodiments of sacrifice”(Prasad 46).

In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit women used literature as a weapon to counter the mainstream feminist writing that include the genres like poetry, short story, essay, novel and autobiography. Of all the genres, the autobiography is found suitable to write the women's experiences in their local idiom. Such writings include Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Bama's *Karukku*, C.K.Janu's *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K.Janu*, Josiane Racine's *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of Life*, etc.

The autobiography is the most potent and marketable genre of Dalit literature today. Dalit autobiographies were part of Dalit literature, whose arrival on the Indian literary scenario has caused much anxiety and furore among the custodians of literary establishments resulting in a paradigm shift in the age-old literary practices. Autobiographies/self narratives by Dalit women have brought to the centre-stage a gendered marginalised self by rewriting the self in a genre which is masculine in its orientation. Articulation of collective experiences of hurt and humiliation challenges the hegemonic caste structure and gendered oppression and the text is transformed into a vibrant literary space.

*The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble highlights the plight of the dalit women especially from the Mahar caste of Western Maharashtra. It also depicts the transformation in their life due to Ambedkarite Movement. *Jina Amucha*, the Marathi original of *The Prisons We Broke*, is a milestone in the history of Dalit writing in Marathi. Maya Pundit, the translator of the Marathi autobiography writes in her introductory note: “Baby Kamle's autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke* is a direct self-assertion of a dalit woman; but it also went two steps ahead: it was a head-on confrontation with brahminical hegemony on the one hand and patriarchal domination on the other. In one sense it is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography”(Kamble XIII).

Kamble narrates the plight of Dalit girls who were married at a very young age. The girl married into the family had to work hard. Regarding the sad plight of the daughter-in-law in such a family Kamble writes: “The daughter-in-law of that house was kept busy all twenty-four hours of the day. The men folk would bring loads of meat in big baskets on their heads. The meat needed to be preserved. This was a very arduous task. And many a time, the duty fell on the daughter-in-law. She had to sit down with a sharp knife, cut the huge pieces of meat into smaller ones of about half kilo each, and then stretch these into long snake like strips”(Kamble 73-74).

Another aspect of domestic violence that dalit women experience is the hegemony of husband and the dominance of in-law's at the bride groom's place. The author illustrates: “But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves- our very own daughters-in law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them”(Kamble 87).

The writer authentically sketches the role played by jealous mothers-in-law in connivance with male members of the family in the exploitation of the hapless daughters-in-law. The

mother-in-law makes use of elaborate stratagems to lower the prestige of the daughter-in-law in the eyes of the husband. When the cup of suffering of these women was full, they ran away stealthily to their parental home. But even there, they did not escape from the tangles of barbarity into which fate had cast them away.

There was a superstition predominant among Mahars that Goddess Satwai and the God Barama visit the house of a newly born baby to write the baby's future on its forehead. Baba sahib Ambedkar's call for them to convert and to give up religion which bind them to slavery and superstition brought about an immense change in the attitude of Mahars. Kamble challenges: "Today, if we come across Barama and Satwai, we would like to give them both a sound thrashing and ask Barama and Satwai, you ruined the lives of generation after generation of the Mahars! You wrote our fates, didn't you? Religion must have bribed you quite well to do this. But now we are more than a match for you, do you realise? Fine, you stamped a fate of misery on our foreheads ten times and we suffered a thousand times more. But now we have vanquished you. We have true power, because we have sheel, satwa and neeti, and they stand supreme in the whole world" (Kamble 62).

One of the things that Kamble repeatedly stresses upon is the importance of education. Kamble asserts that an escape for dalit women out of this quagmire of poverty and inhuman degradation lies in following the message of Ambedkar to shun superstitions and to educate themselves. She describes how despite the discrimination she faced at school, she still went because her father was inspired by Dr. Ambedkar who gave the call to "Educate, Agitate, Organise." Kamble recognises the influence education can have on empowering women not just in public lives but also within marriage, and the role women can play in social development.

Baby Kamble's narration of various incidents suggests that the nature of the problems faced by the Dalit women in India essentially differs from those that the upper caste women face. Baby Kamble shows the remarkable dignity and resilience of the Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community. As a staunch follower of Dr. Ambedkar, Kamble illustrates how education and self-assertion redeem the dalit women from the kind of the domestic and social problems that they confront.

Bama is a well known Tamil dalit writer and activist whose autobiography *Karukku* is of an unusual kind. It traces the story of the narrator's own life who grows up in Parayar community, her subsequent decision to enter into a convent and her consequent disenchantment from the Church. Interwoven into her experiences of dalithood is her awareness of herself as a dalit woman who is seeking to find a place for herself in a society full of an assortment of handicaps and disabilities.

As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. Though written in Tamil in 1992, *Karukku* won worldwide acclaim only after Lakshmi

Holmstrom translated it into English in 2000. The English translation has enabled *Karukku* to cross linguistic and regional boundaries and reach the global readers.

*Karukku* is rather a revelation of the bitter reality of the social ills confronted by a dalit woman. It is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation and education etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the Catholic church itself.

The story is narrated through a feminine voice having marked similarities with the writer herself. The consciousness of the narrator traverses important milestones in her life. Starting from her childhood, it covers her education and her vocation as a teacher and culminates into her decision to enter into a Convent. Her subsequent disillusionment leading to her resolution to leave the convent proves to be a turning point in her life. The reasons precipitating this step and consequent results on its aftermath are treated elaborately in the course of the novel.

Bama focuses on two essential forces namely Caste and Religion that cause great pain in her life. Bama has never heard of untouchability until her third standard. The first realisation of the demeaning presence of casteism was through the spectacle of an elder Paraya carrying a bundle of snacks by a string and presenting it to a Naicker, an upper caste. Also the practice of handing over the leftovers or pouring water in the cupped hand of the dalits without touching them gives the writer further glimpses into this callous practice. Later when she narrated these incidents to her elder brother he advised her: "If we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can"(Bama 15).

Her brother's advice proved to be very influential and from then onwards Bama took her studies very seriously and saw to it that she always stood first in class. But throughout her education, Bama found that wherever she went, there was a painful reminder of her caste and untouchability. The financial grants and special tuitions that the government offered the harijans were more of a humiliation than consolation, mainly because it singled out her caste identity. Once the identity was revealed, she could sense "among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt"(Bama 19).

Bama entered a Convent as a nun with a view to teach the dalit children who were treated contemptuously by the authorities there. She recalls painfully the comments of the nuns on the poor dalit children: "Look at the cheri children! When they stay here, they eat to their full and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home- just skin and bone"(Bama 17-18). To her horror she found that the Convent is not devoid of caste consciousness. Bama writes: "I was dying several deaths with in"(Bama 23).

Having realised that there was no connection between the Convent's God and the suffering poor, Bama's mind is tormented. Completely alienated from her environment, Bama decides to leave the Convent. "But how long can one play-act this way? Anyway this wasn't possible for me. I had to leave the Order, come into the world"(Bama 93). Having come out of the religious order, Bama decided to be with the Dalits, work for them, serve them and inspire them as true Dalits.

The life as portrayed in *Karukku* throws light on the most agonising and hapless lives of the Dalits. Bama's portrayal needs to be understood as representative of the experience. The book is also a revelation of the inner strength and vigour of Dalit women as represented by Bama. Even though she feels she has gathered nothing, saved nothing, she refuses to bow down. Thus we can see that centuries of oppression have not succeeded in completely sapping the vitality and inner vigour of the dalits. Though their journey towards self-discovery, identification and empowerment tedious, the encounters painful and the experiences agonising, the dalits especially the dalit women have enormous strength and courage to bounce back against all odds.

The platform to articulate, the authority to represent and the power to voice are denied to the subaltern woman, especially those who occupy positions of extreme marginality in the orb of subalternity itself as in the case of tribal women. It is deemed an impossibility for them to speak out and try to create a space for themselves. Still there can be found some voices from the margin, emerging boldly, thwarting all the oppressive shackles, with the primary goal of mere articulation of their life and reality. Sheer articulation itself is a bold step as far as these are concerned, for voicing itself is an act of rebellion. C.K.Janu is one such isolated voice affirming a bold presence, establishing a strong aura of cultural resistance and rebellion in the ideologically patriarchal society.

C.K.Janu is not a writer like Bama, Baby Kamble or Urmila Pawar, but she has been an active leader of the tribal people and is committed to the cause of tribal rights in Kerala. Her fight is for the forest land of the adivasis of Wayanad in Kerala. Her book, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K.Janu* is a personal account narrated to Sri. Bhaskaran and it has been translated into English By N.Ravi Shanker. In this autobiographical narrative, Janu gives a passionate account of her struggle to get back the lands of which they were dispossessed. The narrative also provides a glimpse of her attachment to the forest and its environment. She was part of the forest like her people, untouched by sophistication beyond the forests. She says : "No one knows the forest like we do. The forest is mother to us. More than a mother, because she never abandons us"(Janu65). The very title of her narrative, *Mother Forest* indicates the link between the people and the forest.

Janu, belongs to the Adiya community (Adiya literally means slave), received no formal education, was illiterate till 17, became actively involved in the literacy campaign in Kerala, learned to read and write, proving her to be a natural leader. Janu's concept of development is different from that of civil society. "All development projects is for civil society. That is why they build shining roads to colonies that do not even have a bicycle. They are made for the bank vans that come to recover loans. There is no purpose in having roads for settlements which do not have proper courtyards to enjoy the breeze and open or closed spaces for people to relieve themselves. That is how the roads were turned into public toilets. That is how we got to be unclean people"(Janu 50).

Janu is well aware of the fact that forest flower beetles cannot argue with city microphones, but she will fight unto death for the restoration of the rights of her people. Her narration is an eloquent testimonial to her convictions and courage in mobilising a protest

against the government to restore the alienated land to the tribal people, enabling them to regain their sense of dignity.

In *Viramma-Life of an Untouchable*, Viramma, a dalit from a village in South India, tells her story: her carefree childhood, her marriage before puberty, giving birth to 12 children and her adult life as an agricultural worker. It is an unusual autobiography because it is co-authored by Josiane Racine and Jean Racine- Tamil born ethnomusicologists educated from France, to whom Viramma narrates her story in the first person. The book was first published in French under the aegis of UNESCO Series of Representative Works and later it was published by Verso in 1997.

*Viramma* brings to light the lost world of dalit way of life as seen from the eyes of a dalit woman belonging to an elder generation. Dalit songs, rituals, festivals and other community-centric ceremonies are narrated with the intimacy of a participant. The entire autobiographical account bristles with the confidence of an autonomous being. Some of Viramma's most poignant stories explain her community's interaction with the upper caste people and with the state. Viramma was asked by her employers of the Reddi caste to breastfeed a child of their house. "I used to take him to the cheri and I fed him like my own child. And now he's a man, he doesn't respect me and if I'm at his house, in the courtyard, he says to me, 'Aye! Stop there, You! It smells of pariah here'"(Racine 27). These interactions beg comparisons with the master-slave relationship in America and the rest of the world.

*Viramma* provides a poignant account of what femininity can be and combines a very traditional perception of a woman- submissive and obedient along with an image of admirable strength for facing the challenges in society. The presentation traces the struggle of the socially excluded towards their endeavour to express themselves. Viramma as a dalit woman does not simply bewail and cry her dalit identity, she seems to celebrate it, and would even like to perfect it. The book through the voice of a dalit female seeks to express those aspects of female experience which are either thought to be too insignificant or too private by the conservative males belonging to both upper castes and dalits.

Urmila Pawar's memoir *Aaydan*, originally written in Marathi, was published in 2003, and was translated by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*. The text can be read as a complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but also goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective. Pawar redefines the category of dalit to include a radical human agency: "Dalit! How are we Dalit now? They asked angrily. We had to make an elaborate explanation: Dalit does not mean socially oppressed people. It also signals secular people who have discarded the oppressive system and concepts like God, fate and Caste system" (Pawar 275).

In this memoir, Pawar has given very minute details of oppression and exploitations of a girl child and woman. Sometimes the humiliation is so much that it is biting to the reader with his/her sensibility. Once her classmates had decided to cook a meal and to bring it to the school. They had discussed what everyone should bring: rice, lentils and so on. "What I should I bring? Nothing, they said, You must bring some money"(Pawar 107) They had a

really nice time at school enjoying the food the various girls brought. "They did not allow me to touch anything. However we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about how much I had eaten"(Pawar 110). It was very humiliating that Urmila felt thousands death that day. These narratives show two important issues in the cultural inheritance of the country: Children show signs of caste discrimination and untouchability as well as poor people are humiliated for their hunger.

There are many incidents in the text which the narrator mentions as moments of humiliation. One such episode is when Pawar goes to deliver the baskets woven by her mother to her customer's house and she would be made to stand outside their houses on the threshold. Pawar would put the baskets down and the customers would sprinkle water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them"(Pawar 65). And would drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me."Later when Pawar moved to Ratnagiri with her husband, the couple was told by their landlady to look for another accommodation on account of their caste. "My earlier landlady was a maid servant and this landlady was a municipal councillor. Yet the maid and the honourable councillor were united on one point: caste"(Pawar 206).

Also Pawar has narrated a number of incidents of wife beating in the slum area opposite to her house and that has given her conscience a deep and impact making appeal to help such hapless women to better their lives and to provide them some relief. Urmila Pawar strongly felt that women's issues did not have any place on the agenda of Dalit Movement and the Women's Movement. Both these organisations were indifferent to the issues faced by women. In this frank and intimate memoir, Pawar not only shares her tireless effort to surmount hideous personal tragedy but also conveys excitement of an awakening consciousness during a time of preferred political and social change.

Through such narrative interventions, these women writers contest oppressive identity performances and highlight the temporalities and spatialities of marginalised identities. In all these narrations, the narrator's self is relegated to the margins of society, but they boldly resist taken for granted attitudes towards these neglected segments of the population and speak for them. Thus by challenging the existing sanctioned and legitimised cultural performances of identity, they are trying to locate themselves as subjects, leaving behind the object status to which cultural identities have confined them. These texts illustrate the need for a revisionary method of reading the discourses of people regarded as marginal to the dominant literary tradition. They also prompt one to reassess the psychological simplicity attributed to these marginalised groups.

These first-person life stories are a means of expressing the angst and assertion of the gendered subalterns and they uniformly seek to exorcise the ghost of untouchability that has haunted their communities. These novels and testimonials offer a critique of the high brow feminism of upper caste women as well as restrictive caste based theorising of dalit male writers. Most of these testimonies by dalit women end on a message of hope. For a nation that loves to live in denial, such authentic narratives will hopefully lead to a greater

engagement with understanding and these writers will not rest until a dignified status is attributed to this ‘thrice-subjugated ‘ human segment in literature as well as in society.

**Works Cited:**

- Bama. *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrong. Chennai: Macmillan India Ltd, 2000. (All textual references are from this edition of the book)
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage, 1997.
- Janu C.K. *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu*. Trans. Ravi Shankar. Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004
- Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Trans. Maya Pandit. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009. (All textual references are from this edition of the book)
- Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life*. Trans. Maya Pandit. Kolkata: Stree, 2008
- Prasad, Amar Nath. *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2007.
- Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine. *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*. London: Verso, 1997.