

## Representation of Feminism in African American and Dalit Literature

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### Abstract

Mainstream feminism has remained an elitist concept in India with much less attention and significance in comparison to the feminism conception in western countries. The Indian feminist movement failed to represent the perspectives of the Dalit women that have been subjected in the Indian society since ages. Subsequently, the Dalit women were forced to initiate a separate movement to gain sustenance and representation in the mainstream social conduct. The theoretical representations of the Dalit women could also be drawn from American and African literature that shares experiences of Dalit feminism and subjection on a broader scale. Further, the research reflects Dalit feminism in terms of inclusive feminism that confronts domination of female community in India and elsewhere. Considering the Dalit woman's writing, the glimpses can be found in the Indian vernaculars in the form of short stories. It is present in the form of Telugu Dalit writing that have been translated into English to reflect the perceptions of the Dalit women and their experiences in Indian discourse.

Keywords: Feminism, Dalit Feminism, African Feminism, Untouchability, Education of Dalits, liberation, Telugu Dalit, Indian society, Indian feminist, mainstream feminism

## Introduction

Indian mainstream feminism has remained a subjected segment over years. Though it has been categorized as third world feminism, it remained elitist in the legacy of western feminism. Considering the Indian feminism, it has remained truncated in the midst of heterogeneity and did not highlight the specific needs of the women from oppressed castes, tribes, minorities. As a result, the failure to maintain heterogeneity in the Indian feminism led to the rejection of concerns of Dalit women and did not highlight the subjections of this community to larger social realms. It created a gap between the Dalit Feminism and mainstream Indian Feminism resulting in the lack of conjectural and figurative sustenance. The roots of Dalit Feminism could also be witnessed in African as well as American womanist as both highlighted a similar social and historical background (Aniekwu, 2006).

The emergence of African American Feminism took place since the evolution of Black liberation movement that were similar to the women movements that were initiated in America. It highlighted that the American women movements were mainly dominant by middle and upper class white women. As a result, the discriminative politics created a distinctive trademark of womanism for the African American women. In the segment of the American feminism, it was found that the white women who were the native working class females showed a blind eye to the immigrant women. The white native women did not support the female slaves and adopted a conspicuous attitude towards them. As a result, based on the theoretical perspective, it can be said that the early American women's rights movement exhibited a universal sisterhood attitude that were exclusively enjoyed by the native working class women in America. This condition of the female slaves and immigrant women prevailed entirely during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It also revealed the prevalence of patriarchal dominance in the society in which the women were

majorly confined to the realms of household responsibilities and domestic chores. Therefore, the struggle that was faced by the women in the American society was related to the attainment of equal politico legal status alongside males. It was also identified that the aspirations of the black women slaves was different from the aspirations of the immigrant and female slaves (Bharathi, 2008).

A wide contrasting difference was found in the perspectives of activists in America because the white female activists were highly concerned about the civil liberties of the married women and the black women did not even enjoy their fundamental human rights. For example, the female activists were concern about the property ownership rights of the female white women but did not highlight the chattel rights of the back women (Davis, Evans & Lorber, 2006). On one hand, the white women were protesting to change the laws related to divorce and the black women were protesting to change the laws that did not allow the slaves to marry. The white women focused on identifying the roles that were beyond the responsibilities of mother and wife, while the black women were fighting to seek freedom from the gender roles and live a life of luxury with their men enjoying motherhood. A similar situation could be witnessed in the Indian society in which the upper caste women were seeking liberty against the patriarchy dominance that has plagued the society for years by entangling the lives of the women and men. On the other hand, the Dalit women seek freedom from the stigma experienced by them because of untouchability, low creed, and poverty. The upper class women in India protested against the conformations prevalent in the domestic realm while the Dalit women protested against the inequality prevalent in the social, political and economic realms. Based on the above facts, it can be said that the present paper argues in the favour of Dalit feminism and highlights Indian

vernaculars through Telugu Dalit writing. It includes drawing conclusions from notional victuals of African American Feminism (Walker, 1983).

### Literature Review

According to Ducille, (2006) difference in the protesting approach of Dalit and upper class women was identified in the Indian feminism domain because the upper class women fought for different rights and the Dalit women fought for different rights. For example, the upper class women protested against the oppression in domestic realm, while the Dalit women protested against the subjections experienced by them in the segment of sexual freedom and property rights. The Dalit women have to also fight against the physical violence faced by them because of subjected attitude of upper caste women and men along with the men in their own community. The condition of Dalit women was very poor because they were deprived of daily livelihood opportunities and lacked availability of basic amenities.

Satyanarayana, (2013) analyzed that the upper class women movement continued and reached to the extent to seek reservation in the legislature while the Dalit women still struggled to seek human dignity and ration from the government. Though it is highlighted that the feminist movement in India are same but in real terms there is a broad gap between the feminist approach showed by the upper class and lower class women. Apart from this, differences are also found in the motive of the feminist movement as per differences in social group, belief, set, and constituency and problems.

Balagopalan, (2011) analyzed that the Dalit women were highly subjected at the hands of male confrontations and caste which caused them immediate suffering and torments. The witnesses of the plight of the Dalit women could be found in the writers, activists, and intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The feminists highlighted women concerns related to their

rights, responsibilities, and roles in place of the subjections suffered by them on account of race and gender disparities.

Daley, (2006) asserted that the perspective of the African American women feminist and highlighted that did not focused on the race and gender issues but aimed to act on broader issues that would bring benefits to the entire community in terms of empowerment and emancipation.

Chandhoke, (2007) analyzed that there was a creation of a confused environment among the Dalit women to choose between the male centered 'Dalitism' and elitist feminism. The Dalit women felt that in both the movements, they were used as space goats. The major reason behind it is that in the movement of struggle that were accompanied by Indian feminists and Dalit men, most of the Dalit women remained mute and there was no highlighting of the atrocities faced by them. Therefore, the main aim of the Dalit women remained to contest against the upper class women and strived for the empowerment of their community. For example, the Dalit women highlighted that even during the freedom struggle the feminist movements aimed at the liberation of upper class women in place of lower class women. It created differences in the agenda of movement and forcible marginalization of the Dalit women amidst caste discrimination and affirmative action of the state.

### Research Methodology

The present research includes qualitative research approach so that there is subjective assessment of the facts and attainment of insights about representation of feminism in African American and Dalit literature. The study includes the use of descriptive research design so that there is creation of no influence on the subject outcomes. The descriptive research design will help in detecting and illustrating the conduct of the feminism in African American so that there is attainment of plurality of meanings about Indian mainstream feminism and Dalit feminism. In

the segment of data collection, secondary data collection will be included to collect facts related to the genesis and characteristics of African American women feminist and Dalit feminist. The research highly focuses on collecting facts from the different literature and article surveys such as African American and Dalit literature so that there is collection of facts related to women empowerment and emancipation. The study also includes qualitative data analysis in which the thematic analysis process will be used to authenticate the facts that have been collected from different resources. It includes segregating the collected facts into different subthemes so that there will be an examination of facts as per the sub-divided themes. The subthemes will be categorized into different parts such as Dalit literature, African American literature, Dalit feminism, upper class feminism, white women feminism, black women feminism so that there is attainment of valuable insights about the representation of Dalit women in different American and African literature.

## Result

The Indian history highlights the prevalence of two major movements such as Jyotiba Phule and Baba Saheb Ambedkar that were initiated by the Dalit women to fight against their oppressive condition. However, during the entire course of movement, the Dalit women were subjected to violence that shaped their lives to the conflicting verge of social group, gender and set. As a result, the voices of the Dalit women activists became more vibrant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the Dalit women participated in several women movements in India, but they realized that the subjections that are suffered by them could only be reduced by initiating a separate movement that exclusively demands for the freedom and right so Dalit women. By merging Dalit movement with other feminist movement, it would not bring much improvement to the poor conditions of the Dalit women(Uwakweh, 2013).The Dalit feminist specified that their major

force of protest was fight against poverty, stigma of caste, and violence experienced by them at the intersect of class, class, and gender. Therefore it can be said that it is rightly mentioned in the Telugu Dalit literature that feminism movement related to sexual freedom does not seek relevance to Dalit movement because the atrocities faced by them are different from that experienced by women of other classes. The Dalits were considered to be the least significant section of the society and all the minimal jobs were surrendered to this division of people. As a result, the Dalits faced a lot of tribulations, and social obligations due to the incidence of discrimination because of the unfairness prevailing in the society due to the social division of the Indian society (Brooks, Bowleg&Quina, 2010).

#### Discussion

The adverse condition of the Dalit women is highlighted in different Telugu literature such as *Chikkanavithunna Pata (1995)*, *A Bloody Mess in the Bathroom*, *Raw Wound*, *The Parable of the Lost Daughter*, and *Father May be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket*. For example, the *Father May be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket* written by Gogu Shyamala highlights the plight of a young girl that was secretly deported to the social welfare hostel in Tandur. The story depicts the atrocities that are faced by the Dalit at the hands of the upper caste men like Patel with the presence of untouchability and jogini system in rural Indian regions. The plight of lower class men and women could be witnessed with the incident that Balappa is continuously pressurized to make Syamma as 'jogin. On refusing the wish of the upper class men, the family of Balappa is subjected to violence and homelessness. Syamma has to miss her education and face miserable ostracization in her life. The plight of Syamma could be identified with these lines

*From now on, the red earth field will not be ours! The black clay field beside the canal will not be ours! The madiga quarter will not be ours! The home and yard we were born and brought up in will not be ours! The house we had built with lime and mortar will not be ours! We have become birds without a place to go!’ (p. 731).*

The aspect of another Dalit writer such as Joopaka Subhadra is also to be included in the research that highlights the feminist and activist movement in the segment of elitist Indian feminism. In the short story A Bloody Mess in the Bathroom, the adversities that are faced by the poor Dalit girls could be witnessed clearly with cramming of several girls in an unhygienic hostel. The rooms of the hostel were tiny pigsty with no facilities of ventilation or provision of bathrooms. The hostel highlighted the epitome of unhygienic facilities at the hands of the warden corruption. Additionally, the Dalit girls were also stereotyped as Dalit women’s sexualities with dire consequences of insult and subjection (Zelliot, 1996).

The research also highlights the inputs that have been collected from the Dalit story that was written by M.M. Vinodini. The main protagonist in the Parable of the Lost Daughter was not given any rights to speak or work freely in the community and subjected to slavery and torture by the upper class. She was not allowed to touch the people of other caste and if they touched somebody outside their own caste it was considered to be a punishable offence. As a result, most of the times Dalit protagonist, had to work as peasants and low class labourers that resulted in subjection and poor living conditions. For example, Dalit people had to drink water from separate wells which were particularly used by the Dalit community and prohibited to be used by the people of other communities. The story highlights the plight that is faced by Suvarthavan who is the daughter of Paladasu, a Krupamma. It is regarded as the lowest minimal job that is to be executed by an individual to earn livelihood. However, with great efforts, the couple

somehow brought up their child by providing education till Post Graduation in Telugu literature in Rajahmundry. However, all these efforts go into waste when Suvarthavan had to face atrocities at the end of the Dalitness in the community. SAs a result she started hiding her identity and shorted her name to S.Vani and added an additional 'h' to all the words used by her when pronouncing the speech. The difference could be faced by her best friend Gayatri who refuses to put turmeric on her face because of belonging to Dalit community (Rege, 2014). Based on the above facts, it can be said that the even though Dalit community is well educated and acquired good position in the community, they are still treated as inferior people by the educated and well earning groups. It can be said that even though feminist activity and movements have brought changes in the lives of the Dalit women, their lookout and perceiveness by the other people have been restricted and fully accepted by the people of other communities. As a result, it can be said that the Dalit communities are victims of the many socio-cultural and political disparities that limit their growth and upliftment to low levels (Jyothirmai, & Ramesh, 2017). For example, most of the Dalit women face identity issues and not allowed to study resulting in low participation of Dalit communities in governance and economic activities. Additional subjection is faced by Dailt community in the form of different feminist movement that is occurring in upper class and lower class segments in India. The bifurcations in the needs and protests of the upper class and lower class feminism results in low growth of the women in the male dominated society in Indian resulting in no major alteration in the women outlook at community level. Hence, it can be said that the present research focuses on analyzing the representation of Dalit women by focusing on the African American and Dalit literature so that differences and similarities present in different approach of feminist movements are identified(Rege, 2019).

## Conclusion

Based on the above discussed facts, it can be said that the different stories that have been discussed in the paper, there is exclusion of Dalits from education is systematically linked to caste-based discrimination. The criticism is included in the research by focusing on the discrimination faced by Dalit women at the hands of the upper class. As a result, by focusing on the feminist movement, it can be said that in all the spheres of the world whether India or America, the lower class women have been the subjected lot that created issues in their learning and growth process. It was found that the Dalit women faced a lot of tribulations, and social obligations because of discrimination. The Dalits were ill-treated and had to live in separate places that did not belong to the main village or city and was built in the outskirts or far places so they could not come in the way of upper class people. The unfairness attitude was experienced by women because of their low caste which impacted their livelihood opportunities. For example, the Dalits were not allowed to mix the people of other communities and did not have the rights to move freely in the villages. The Dalits were not give any rights to speak or work freely in the community and were subjected to slavery and torture by the upper class people. Hence, it can be said that the current research highly focused on presenting the facts related to the women feminists that prevailed in American and Indian societies with a difference in upper class feminism and lower class feminism.

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