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**TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT OF SELF AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY:
TRANSCENDING STEREOTYPES IN DALIT WOMEN
CONSCIOUSNESS**

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to delineate the process empowerment and emancipation of Dalit women as represented in Dalit literature and real life arming them with a set of tools and devices which eventually enable them to dismantle and shred asunder the long pitched standard stereotypes and prejudices of a patriarchal social set up mired in caste discrimination class and gender differences. Along with the presentation of hellish life of Dalit women the paper brings to fore the gradual horizontal This paper sets out to delineate the process of empowerment and emancipation of Dalit women as represented in Dalit literature and real life while arming them with the set of tools and devices which eventually enabled them to dismantle the long pitched standard stereotypes and prejudices of a patriarchal and vertical progression both in content and methods of empowerment of dalit woman.

TERMS:

Stereotypes, Prejudices, Emancipation, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Hegemony
Resistance, Education

Pain, humiliation ,anger and anguish arising as a result of ages- old violence, discrimination and injustice in the patriarchal brahmanical normative ideological social setup became the muse for Dalit literature paving way for a pan India Dalit consciousness. Long-pitched prejudices and stereotypes reflected in marginalisation, subordination and subjugation

were the convenient tools in the hands of those at high ups to push the Dalits and more so the females Dalits and label them the ‘the other ’ both in their consciousness and in the main stream literature divesting them of any history, mythology and traditional rituals and customs. Not only this, their interpretation as such by the reader and the critics reduced them to a non- existent entity without any voice making their hopeless and hopeless situation look normal and natural in the overall scheme of things. Gaytri Spivak says,” the subaltern can not speak because their words can not be properly interpreted. Hence the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of interpretation and not a failure of articulation.”

The Dalit women , having been exposed to the modern education and adamant in their pursuit of searching of their past and construction of an identity of themselves has put the upper class writers, their own men and upper class feminist in the dock for misrepresenting them, showing them in dim colours and depriving them of their dues “we have been denied the right to articulate our version of ewanicitation our energies have been co-opted working out the visions of dominant others who have shown scant respect for our worldview or philosophy of life , by not enabling us to articulate them or work towards achieving them [Prasad 47]”. This deprivation and exclusion proved a blessing in disguise for them. In Theoretical Brahminical and Empirical Studies

Prof. Gopal Gura says, this exclusion of Dalit women from the main stream women’s movement is not such a bad thing after all; it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity and agency [Basa175]”

The present paper sets out to reveal the stereotypes and prejudices as they are faced by the Dalit women to sail through the quagmire of patriarchy, class and gender differences and traditional Hindu orthodoxy

‘We are rejecting this

Unclean, poisonous life

And to escape from these cruel curses

Will you give me

A bright and auspicious moon

My countrymen, to your court

I have brought a complaint

Will you give me justice?

This paper advocates the theorization of the subordination of women for it will help challenge, subvert and expend not only other (male) theories but its own position and agenda. Dalit

women writers have made their own turmoils, bitter violent experiences, inside and outside their homes as the main motifs of their writings. Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar in Marathi, Geeta Nagabhushan in Kannada, P. Shivakami, Bawa in Tamil have represented the Dalit consciousness underlining the simmering discontent of Dalit women against the unjust and unfair system, protest against the economic deprivation and social exclusion, and resistance against the personal outrage and sexual violence. Sukanya Maruti bursts out-

“Enough of this life on earth the blame and humiliation why does the roaring ocean not open its belly and swallow me? ”

The onslaughts from all sides on the life and dignity of the Dalit women have left no option but to raise their voice against the patriarchy, the caste difference in the public domain and the gender difference in the private domain. Thus the discourse of Dalit female resistance has blurred the boundary of the private and public space. In Bama's Sangati(2009) Mariamma escapes from the clutches of the village chief but only to land into the big humiliation by the panchayat. The initial protest of Mariamma culminates into the revolt in Jyoti Lanjewar a Marathi Dalit women writer when she roars, ‘you have to plant the cinder of revolts in your own body’ because sympathy, love, begging and court cases have not yielded any desirable results. They and their suffering have foregrounded themselves as the subject of the writing in various characters instead of being the mere object in the traditional representation of them. But the hope of liberation and redemption from the matrix of patriarchy and gender and class disparity is quite far-fetched, to say the least.

Baby Kamble, an ardent advocate of Ambedkarite ideology, sets an agenda for a solution of it for their emancipation. “We must now give up eating dead animals” says Bhikai Anjisi inspired by Ambedkar. Of all the genres of poetry, short story, novel, essay autobiography is found suitable to write the woman's experience.

Baby Kamble shatters the overarching influence of the Hindu orthodoxy by polluting Rama in protest against not being allowed into the Hindu Temple. She later involved herself in many other activities that included the demanding for Dalit women rights. As a result, the Dalit women became socially educated, politically determined and more radical in questioning the caste determination and dominance. In some cases the woman would protest against the indifferent attitude of their husband towards them. Some of them came to realize that if they remained silent, they would be further exploited. Therefore, they adopted different strategies to deal with their men. Rukhmann gives her opinion about how to tackle a man when she says, “I tell u a man behaves himself as long as u don't answer him back on his face. If u are

weak, he even gets more aggressive (89) Bama equates man even with a dog using proverbs,” if a man sees a terrified dog, he is bound to chase it. If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantages of us. If we stand up for ourselves, they will creep away with their tails between their legs.” Mangala’s mother threw her drunkard husband down the stairs and dismissed him from her life. Rukhmann’s adoption of an unknown orphan was of the same sort. As they find in themselves the courage to see unusual decisions through, they grow in confidence and wisdom. It is through these decisions that dalit women not only brings forth their two fold agony- one as a Dalit and another as a female but show the insurmountable courage and indomitable spirit to overcome the stereotypes also. Chhaya and Mangala had at least begun to imagine the possibility of a future without a husband. Leela and Seema had gone even further. They had both married the men of their own choice. They wanted their children to be highly educated and self reliant. Leela saw dreams of starting a small scale industry for the women of the community. For these women it was not time which had marched ahead, they too had marched at least a few steps along. Savitri had reached a point where she used satyagriha and women demonstrations as a means of making her husband behave himself. She told him that she would massage his feet the whole night if he was good otherwise not. First deserve then desire, she quipped. Their pathetic present can’t have a sway over their promising future. Ashoka observed that if every one followed the tenets of Buddhism, then the gap between man and woman would finally disappear. Some of them even participated actively in political movements and mobilized their fellow woman to unite and fight for their basic rights and freedom. Ashoka, a woman says, “it must be generally understood and accepted in an ideal community that a woman is not a subordinate or a toy or a sex object or a useful machine, she too has a body that tires, a heart, a mind, her own desires. There must be an awareness of her as a person.”

Gradually their consciousness gets enriched by breaking away with the stereotypes and challenging the hidden designs of hegemonic caste and religion, Hindu or christianity . Bama describes in Sangati how deeply the Christian church and its hegemonic power play on Dalit converted when they are assigned the menial jobs of sweeping and swabbing the floor but not allowed to sit with higher caste women. “See how they fool us in the name of god! Why don’t those people need God’s blessing too.” Written in colloquial style, Sangati throws to air the decorum and aesthetics of upper caste Tamil. The novel sets to tease out a positive cultural identity as Dalit women who can resist upper caste norms.

Bama's use of language of Dalits in the realistic manner is a kind of breaking away from normative aestheticism, very much in conformity with the revolt and rebellion of the Dalit women against patriarchy and gender discrimination. Raakkamma retaliates after getting a kick from Paakking, "How dare you kick me!, you low life your hand will get leprosy. How dare you pull my hair! Disgusting man, only fit to drink a women darts----and she lifted her sari in front of the entire crowd. That was when Pakkiaraj walked oft, still shouting.(120)"

Conclusion To sum up, writers dressed in the genres ranging from autobiographies or interviews, short stories or poems, novels or essays have managed to subvert the mainstream stereotypes of Dalit women discourse by taking recourse to the strategies of anger and protest, self assertion and resistance, introspection and self realisation, linguistic foregrounding of subject position and colloquialism, anecdotes and proverbs, paradigm shift in aesthetics and word formation etc. All this has taken them out of the vortex of caste, gender, patriarchal domination and religious subjugation, empowered them to put themselves at equal footing with men and enthused them with a new-found confidence to lead their life on their terms as encapsulated in the second last line of Sangati, "women can make and women can break"

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