



## Dalit Feminism and Its Social Relevance

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Feminism in its simplest sense is the demand for equality of both genders in the social, political and economic sphere. It challenged the already established institutions that restricts the participation of women and dismantles ideas and systems that enhanced the inequality of the sexes. It gained momentum in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and campaigned for equality and freedom of women. Feminism is a body of social and political theory that strive for the liberation of women. It advocates for equal participation and rights of women in all established institutions and political sphere. As stated by Bell Hooks,

Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. More importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into (Hooks, 26).

Feminist movements garnered and brought women together fighting for their liberty and humanity from the shackles of patriarchy, gender oppression, gender inequality and gender stereotypes. It advocates equalitarianism in all established institutions and fought for the advancement and liberation of women. Some of the pioneers who influenced the movement of Feminism are writers and stands as the founders of Feminism like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1927), Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1983), Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969). The history of feminism consists of three waves. The first wave appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the second wave in the 1960s and 1970s and the third wave from 1990s to the present. The first wave focussed on women's suffrage. Mary Wollstonecraft published the first feminist treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) advocating

for the rights of women in the social and moral equality of the sexes. The second wave focused on the economic equality of the genders and major feminist treatise were written advocating the recognition of lesbian women, how women have been presented in literary traditions by male and predispositions of such writings. The Third Wave feminism was influenced by postmodern and postcolonial thinking. It looks at the diversity of feminism and sexuality.

### Black Feminism

Postcolonial feminism emerged as a response to Feminism during the 1980s and argues that issues such as racism and colonialism do not affect western societies and women. Women in the colonised countries are misrepresented and the oppression they face is different from the Western countries. Postcolonial feminist tries to decentre the marginalisation of the 'other' and criticised colonialism and imperialism in its writings. The concept of 'sisterhood' that emerged during the second wave of feminism in the west triggered the birth of postcolonial feminism as it was based on the idea that all women undergo through the same plight and suffers the same problems all over the world. Postcolonial feminist criticised the concept of 'sisterhood' in its writings and formed a new literary theory to represent their issues and concerns.

U.S and European women's studies have challenged the seemingly hegemonic ideas of elite white men. Ironically, Western feminism has also suppressed Black women's ideas. Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a distinctive African-influenced and feminist sensibility about how race and class intersect in structuring gender...As a result, African-American, Latino, Native American and Asian-American women have criticised western feminism for being

racist and overly concerned with White, middle-class women's issues (Collins, 5).

Black Feminism argues that, Black women have different experiences from their male counterparts and white women and they are thrice marginalised because of their gender, race and colour. The identity of their womanhood lies in their colour, sex and race and they cannot be categories under the concept of 'sisterhood' because their experiences and reality are diverse. "As a historically oppressed groups, U.S Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression...Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice" (Collins, 9). Bell Hooks, a black feminist lays down the basic requirements needed of a feminist work,

The value of a feminist work should not be determined by whether or not it conforms to academic standards. The value of a feminist work should not be determined by whether or not it is difficult reading...If feminist writing and scholarship aim to promote and advance feminist movement, then matters of style must be considered in conjunction with political intent. There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well educated few (Hooks, 111).

Alice Walker, one of the pioneers of Black feminism in her short story, "Coming Apart" (1979) and in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983) was the first to use the term "womanism" and assert that it is, "feminist, Afrocentric, healing, embodied, and spiritual" (Razak, 100). Womanism amplifies to the women of colour suffering under racism and sexism. Black feminism emerged because of the need to represent black women as oppressed by both racism and sexism and encounters this dual subjectivity not only from outside but within the household of the black community. Another important feature of Black Feminism is the emancipation of education and knowledge among the oppressed groups. As Hooks explicitly writes in her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that, "Encouraging women to strive for education, to develop their intellects, should be a primary goal of feminist movement. Education as 'the practise of freedom' will be a reality for women only when we develop an educational methodology that addresses the needs of all women. This is an important feminist agenda" (Hooks, 114). She asserts that only through education the movement and

activism will reach out to the general masses and questions how feminism "have not stressed the need to make education, especially basic literacy, a feminist agenda" (Hooks, 107). Black Feminism paved the way for a distinctive identity and self assertion of the black women garnering support and recognition from literary spheres and through their movement and theory they turn their oppression into a political one influencing many feminist theories around the world. Black Feminism influenced Dalit feminism on grounds that they were doubly oppressed externally and internally and race and caste were the main reason for their oppression including their gender.

### **Dalit Feminism**

The exclusion of the Dalit women in the Mainstream feminism in India gave rise to Dalit feminism. During the 1980s and 1990s the women's movement in India gain momentum with the distinct participation of the Dalit women and it changed the course of the Dalit women in seeing themselves as women with feministic traits and vigour and established their distinct caste identity. Social reforms mostly concern the issues of women in any society as such the Dalit movement launched by Ambedkar aimed at the renunciation of several social, brahmanical and religious systems that had deteriorated the female gender and advocates for their participation in the social, political, religious and economic position. Dalit women according to Gopal Guru needed to speak differently because of their differences in treatment and needed a separate identity distinct from mainstream feminism and Dalit literature in order to club them in unity and represent them. As Uma Chakravarti writes,

Dalit feminist have formulated the position of the three-way oppression of Dalit women:

- (i) as subjects to caste oppression at the hands of the upper caste;
- (ii) as labourers subject to the caste-based oppression, also mainly at the hands of the upper and middle caste who form the bulk of landowners;
- (iii) as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste. (Chakravarti, 135)

Black and Dalit literature focused on the historical, political, social, cultural marginalization of their community which gave rise to their commutative voices as a group of people marginalised because of

their colour, race, caste, gender etc. Both Dalits and Black literatures are literatures of marginalisation and protest. It is the narrative of pain, sufferings and bondages. They are the experiential narratives of living under the bondage of slavery and untouchability. Even within the Dalit movement, gender superiority and biasness could not be avoided. As Urmila Pawar writes in her autobiography *The Weave of Bamboo* that, “Even in the Dalit movement, the secondary treatment given to women in the home was reproduced in programmes and practices. She recalls being invited as a speaker for meetings and then being made to wait outside the hall while activists received the male leaders” (Rege, 394). Though the Dalit women participated in the Dalit movement and revoke and implemented some gender rights, the large scoop of marginalisation was still evident, “There was no place for the woman question in the dalit movement and the women’s movement was equally indifferent to the Dalit question” (Pawar, 218). This led to the question of their individual identity and assertion in the society as a group of women doubly marginalised and oppressed. Women studies in India neglected caste system in their framework and resigned to the oppression faced by the savarna upper caste women through the mode of feminism in India. The exclusion of the Dalit women’s problem in the mainstream feminism has rather urge them to find a separate distinct identity for themselves as Festineo quotes,

However, as Tomar (2013) observes, the fact of being excluded even from the Indian Feminist Movement has turned them into fighters rather than victims. They have thus founded Dalit Feminism or better, Dalit Womanism, in order to define their conditions of experience. The term ‘womanism’ was coined by Alice Walker; it is much more appropriate to the condition of Dalit women than the more restricted term Feminism because it refers to racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic and political conflicts. (Festineo, 29).

Neelavathi in her essay, “Will Educated Women take the Initiative” states, “There is no anatomical difference between one human being and another. Neither is there any difference in terms of emotions and feeling. How can we justify ourselves when we classify one man as high and the other as low? Tell me, does any other country suffer from this demon called untouchability?” (Neelavathi, 84) She asserts that untouchability has prevented the form of relationships and builds walls to prevent their

humanistic traits from letting on. Animals like cows, buffalos, dogs, donkeys that hallows in the dirt exercise more freedom than the Dalits. They are free to roam the streets, drink from the canal and excrete wherever they wanted. Whereas a Dalit, born with all the human senses have no rights to even walk the streets freely. A dalit woman was forbidden from wearing a blouse and gold ornaments. Maragathavalliyar in her essay, “The Sufferings of the Adi-dravidas” says, “Can the rich do without the adi-dravidas? They cannot. Only if the poor wet the earth with the sweat of their brow, can the rich live in comfort and talk about ‘upper-caste’ and ‘lower-caste’ (58). The social hierarchy strengthens the demarcation between poor and rich making the rich in control of the poor.

Another important feature of Dalit Feminism is the celebration of Dalit womanhood. They celebrate the strength and valour of Dalit women and their ability to overcome their oppression of external and internal controls. Dalit feminist writers like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Sharmila Rege, Bama highlights the unimaginable pain and sufferings of the Dalit women but also glorify their resilience and will power, the sacrifices they made for the education of their children and their strong courageous spirit. Dalit women writers write about the painful memories of their past, their present plight and hope for an equal society for the future. On their writing style, Jaydeep Sarangi writes,

Dalit feminist writers used language that is militant and blunt. Their language is mostly colloquial and it gives a counter code to elite aesthetics defined by the upper caste and upper class citizens in India. Unconventionally militant similes, metaphors from their social ethos and analogies used seem to befittingly paint their social experiences, experience of the self, as well as that of fellow subaltern populations, as devoid of dignity and identity under the alien sky (Sarangi, 79).

Memoirs, letters, diaries, autobiographies are taken as one coherent narrative writing for Dalit women writers where the self is thoroughly analysed in order to replicate one’s personal experiences to the general women masses. They used autobiographies in general, in order to inform that their stories are not fictionalised but are more of a social protest against the institution of caste, gender, and patriarchy. Without realising their slavery, it becomes a uniform mentality among the women to serve and obey men in all aspects even to the point of sacrificing their own



life for the male. Patriarchal society enforced more rigorous rules and orientations towards the female gender making her feel less significant and weaker. Dalit feminist writers delved on the themes and subject matters of domestic violence and patriarchal domination, themes that have been ignored by the male writers mostly in autobiographies that require the use of memory and experience. The writing style between male dalit writers and women writers differed thus bringing in the diverse knowledge of what they faced as oppressors and oppressed. Dalit women writers take the genre of autobiography as the most prominent genre to detail their experience and call for reforms and action. However as Sharmila Rege writes on Kumud Pawde, “Kumudtai explains that Antasphot is not an ‘autobiography’ but a critical narrative of her experiences, in fact, she feels that all Dalit life stories are critical narratives and not autobiographies” (Rege, 305). The Dalit women writers takes the term ‘narrative’ to depict their narratives of oppression and deprivation and also for “communicative ends” (Festineo, 33) educating and empowering the dalit women on the forces of their oppression. Dalit women writers also write on their rich culture and traditions and look at how women play an important role in the transmission and retrieval of such customs, keeping the memory of their culture alive.

Bama is a celebrated feminist writer of the dalits and have published autobiographies that depicts the culturally and traditional role women were forced to live in based on her gender, caste, religion. She takes female sufferings as her subject matter and her works deals with feminine struggles and problems from the upper caste and within the dalit community. Bama is the pen name of Faustima Mary Fatima Rani and hails from the Paraya Roman Catholic community of Tamil Nadu. She has published *Karukku* (1992), an autobiography; *Sangati* (1994), a novel; *Kisumbukkaran* (1996), a collection of short stories. She explores the female psyche in her works along with the psyche she was forced to grow up into a community without humanity and compassion for the depressed lower caste. She has become the voice of the voiceless and writes with deep feminine sensibilities that captures the harsh reality of Dalit women from her childbirth to that of adulthood. Her work *Karukku* won many awards and is felicitated for her realistic portrayal of the women’s suffering both from India and abroad. She used literature as a weapon to highlight the despicable nature of the Dalit women’s suffering and shades light to the darkness.

Bama delves into the hypocritical mechanisms of caste and religion and how it interlocks together to suppressed a Dalit’s individuality as a human. She represents the voices of depressed Dalit women living under such regimes. Her novel *Sangati* though structured on the techniques of a novel is far from fiction as it brings to light the realistic depiction of Dalit women and studies the psychological trauma of the Dalit female from three generations of women. The demarcated gender roles and the function of patriarchy are also delved in highlighting the male ego and pride they possessed through torturing the females. The strength and power of a Dalit woman is applauded who would risk her life to support her family and is not afraid of the consequences that come along with it after selling her ‘Mangalsutra’, as she writes “*Sangati* is a look at part of the lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt” (Bama, vi). She presents the courageous spirits of the Dalit women in fending off their religious annotations and symbols for their survival.

Urmila Pawar’s autobiographical narrative *Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoir* translated to English by Maya Pandit was published in 2008. The narrative is important in influencing Dalit feminism with feminine consciousness and sensibility. It celebrates the strength of a Dalit woman when faced with adversities and discriminations in life. She narrates the experiences of the Dalit women in the contemporary period with issues like education, employment and women’s involvement in the Dalit women’s movement. She looks at how caste had shaped the society and how caste and gender interlinks together to make the Dalit woman the most oppressed person in the workings of this system.

Like other Dalit feminist writers, Pawar looks into the Dalit household to highlight gender subjugation and depravity right from the childbirth. She narrates how her birth was premeditated even before she was born because her parents wanted a boy. She had to carry this guilt of shame all throughout her life for disappointing her parents and upsetting their spirits. As she writes, “I was the youngest child in the family. Yet I was never indulged. In fact, I was an unwanted child, because I was a girl. When I was born, my cousin Govindada wanted to throw me on the dung heap. When I grow a little older, many would beat me” (Pawar, 64). Due to being a girl, she was never serve the same portion of food like her brothers and

had to stay indoors doing household chores while her brothers go out to play. The same ordeal implies to a married women who had to seize her hunger to make sure her husband eat his filled and the leftovers were what she grudge upon. Even in the simplest notion like food there was disparity between the two sexes. She was an activist, social reformer who placed the marginalisation of Dalit women to the forefront and liberated the cause for the equality of the Dalit women and inspired Dalit feminism through her works. Her works provides a historical, sociological and political base for the construction of Dalit feminism. Her struggle to work for the advancement of Dalit women had indecisively uplifted Dalit women and ushered in self assertion and Dalit women's identity.

Dalit feminist writers write with a conscious mind asserting their rights to equality of the sexes and demand for their individuality without the labelling of 'caste' and 'gender'. They seek to educate the women through their works and give an insight to their oppression and subjugation not only from the upper caste but within the Dalit household as well. It impacted the women's understanding of seeing herself as a distinct individual, as a woman enriched with powerful feminine traits and values. As a powerful mode of representing depressed Dalit women, Dalit feminist works have attain recognition and attention from various spheres and their voices are being heard for the first time. Dalit feminism had strengthen the very spirit for which Dalit literature was created- to give voice to the voiceless and recognition of their depravity in all spheres of life.

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