

“DALITNESS” OF INDIAN WOMEN IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit Language and means ‘ground’, ‘suppressed’, ‘crushed’, or broken to pieces. It was first used by Jyoti Rao Phule in the 19th century. In the context of Hindu society Dalit status has been associated with menial occupations. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated and banned from full participation in social life. Discrimination against dalits still exists more so against women. A majority of dalit women have experienced violence, murder, rape and other atrocities. A dalit woman is thus doubly victimized. She has experienced the brunt of societal repression both for being a woman and a dalit woman.

On its positive side, ‘Dalit’ is no longer a caste. It has become a symbol of change. “Dalitness” as Sanjay Paswan calls it in the Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India: Human Rights, is essentially a process towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. It is a source of confrontation. This change has its essence in the desire for justice for the entire mankind. In this sense, ‘Dalitness’ has become a matter of appreciating the potential of one’s total entity. Thus individual, cultural, social burden and ‘Dalitness’ cannot be isolated.

Dalit literature, therefore, not only points out the age old oppression of dalits but seeks to transcend all barriers, break all shackles and promises liberation. Taken figuratively, the word ‘Dalit’ can be applied to any Indian woman irrespective of caste or state, who is repressed by the patriarchal Indian society. The plight of Indian women and their protest (though rare) are reflected in the works of a number of masters of Indian English Literature like Raj Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.k.Narayan, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Desh Pande, KamalaDas, Jai Nimbkar, Suniti Jain and Gouri Desh Pande to mention only a few.

This paper makes an attempt to substantiate the statement that dalitness of women is not caste based as popularly believed, by illustrating the plight or protest of Indian women in the works of some of these masters.

To begin with, Sita, stamped as the ideal of Indian womanhood is perhaps the first Indian woman in literature, who has suffered the dalitness in the patriarchal society of Rama Rajya, where 'dharma' walked on all its four feet. 'Yugas' have changed; the world has become civilized and developed by leaps and bounds. Many margins were erased, yet a number of walls have been erected. Woman continues to be victimized or 'dalitised', an expression yet to be coined.

Javni in Raja Rao's short story by the same name, and his masterpiece reflects the plight of a poor old dalit widow so soulfully that no reader's eyes remain dry at the end of the reading. Poverty, widowhood and caste compete with one another in playing havoc with her life. Having been widowed and penniless she goes to her brother for shelter. But his wife swears at her, calls her a prostitute, rejects to give even a morsel of food or palm width shelter. At last she is given a little hut "to sit, weep, eat, shit, and die". Javni earns her own food, yet her sister in law makes her life a life of tears.

The higher caste woman in whose house she worked said that she was like an elder sister or mother to her, but she never treated Javni like one, because she belonged to a lower caste and it would be irreligious to treat her in a better way. Javni always ate her food in the cow shed in the midst of dung and stink. When the narrator of the story went to observe her, she was sitting in a corner of the shed and eating in the darkness even without a lantern. Beside her were the cow breathing hard, and the calf nibbling at the wisps of hay. Just at the moment, the cow threw a heapful of dung, which splashed across the cobbled floor. It was a terrible moment for the humane narrator. The whole misery of the world seemed to be weighing all about her. But Javni didn't seem to mind anything, she continued eating. Thus Javni bore all suffering like a humble cow.

In her story "A Doll for the Child Prostitute", Kamala Das deals with juvenile prostitution in a heart rending manner. The story relates the pitiful life of a bunch of child prostitutes. Ironically all of them are named after Indian goddesses-Radha, Rukmini, Sita, Saraswathi and Mira. Indians proclaim that where women are revered their gods prevail. But in reality these women stink in the world of pain, poverty, disease and darkness. The plight of these children caused by the society is but the desecration of the goddesses. This is what the author lays bare in heart wringing language. Here is a conversation between Sita and Rukmini, which reveals the horror of the situation poignantly:

"I cannot sleep in the day", said Rukmini. Sita laughed loudly and held on to her stomach as though it was about to burst. "You are so innocent. Do you think we can sleep at night in this house? We shall all be so busy entertaining the visitors."

"Visitors at night?" asked Rukmini. "Who will come at night?" Sita could not control her laughter. "Oho ho," she laughed...The brutality these innocent girls suffer is evident from Sita's painful outburst, "Men are real dogs".

The most horrific situation that wrenches the heart of the reader is when Rukmini is reluctant to entertain the Inspector of Police because she is a mere child and cannot be weaned away from her dolls.

T.N. Geetha touchingly words the thematic concerns of the writer thus:

Pain resulting from loveless living, aches dulled by routine, sobs stifled by unfeeling society, life blighted by disease and death, goodness soured into harshness by callous necessity—such are the themes of her stories which have the effect of disturbing the reader's complacency and highlighting his awareness of the misery around her".

Sunita Jain in her story "A Woman is Dead", narrates the suffering of a poor young girl married to a middle aged widower with six children. She has prepared herself to reconcile with her fate but when she learns from her husband that he had already undergone vasectomy and there is no hope for her to bear a child of her own she cannot take it. She takes stern decisions to dedicate herself to Lord Krishna, not to touch her husband and take the responsibility of looking after the step children. Opening up her heart to the elderly neighbor she says, "I told him I'd take good care of his children, and he'd have no complaint, but he could never touch me" and as she said she sobbed so hard, and continued, "To that sister of mine, his wife, he gave six, Auntie but he cannot give me one. "Only one, just one so that my life wouldn't be wasted".

This protest is commendable the woman is dead but a mother is born. The protest of a victimized and battered woman in Jai Nimbkar's story, "The Childless One" is even stronger. Radha's husband, a Police officer, worked as a police officer in the city and left her with his termagant mother in the village. Radha's life was a hell until she became a pregnant. But her peace was short lived. She would not deliver even after the due time. And when she was taken to the hospital, she was operated only to remove a big tumour—a horrid lump of flesh. Thereafter, her life became even worse. Her mother in law married her son with another woman and drove her out of the house. Radha found her livelihood as a farm labourer. Every day she went to the temple and prayed to Bhairoda to give her husband and his mother the punishment they deserved. But she soon lost her sanity. Her uncontrollable rage against them made her shout abusive words cursing them. This became a sort of amusement to the onlookers. They called her a mad woman and heartless men even baited her to fill an empty hour.

After some days she stopped shouting and kept to herself, but the bitterness remained. She still fantasized about doing horrible things to her husband and his mother. Thus hatred became her constant companion. The time was ripe for her to avenge them when a child was born to her. She sent a word to her husband to see him. And when he came, she proudly showed it to him.

She said, "He is my son". When he scorned at her and said, "Which dung heap did you pick him from?" she proudly replied, "he was born of me". And when he shouted, "have you no shame?" and called her a whore, she gave the apt retort, "Why should I have shame? What can a woman do when her husband isn't man enough to protect her? And as for him, why should I be ashamed of a son"? "Shut up" she shouted back at him and screamed after him, "all you were ever fit to father was a lump of flesh, do you hear? "A child with neither head nor limbs."

That the woman has grown out of the stage of silent suffering to voicing her protest is itself a positive indication that she is proceeding in the right direction, and is erasing the negative connotations of her dalitness.