

MARGINALISING WITHIN THE MARGINS: THE EVOLUTION OF DALIT WOMEN'S (MIS)REPRESENTATION IN NARENDRA JADHAV'S *UNTOUCHABLES: MY FAMILY'S TRIUMPHANT JOURNEY OUT OF THE CASTE SYSTEM IN MODERN INDIA* (2005) AND BABY KAMBLE'S *THE PRISONS WE BROKE* (2008)

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ABSTRACT

Dalit women have traversed a long path over the last four decades. During this time their consciousness has evolved in many ways as reflected in Dalit writing. Life narratives function as the locus of enunciation where agency and self-identity are attended and asserted by Dalit women, through different approaches. As the social location determines the perception of reality, this paper attempts a look at how Narendra Jadhav and Baby Kamble tackle and bring to the centre the gendered nature of caste and the power-relations that still affect Dalit women. Form, language and subject matter are some of the resources that Dalit women use to defy generic conventions, depart from imposed identities, and build up resistance against an enduring double oppression which insists on homogenising Dalit body politics.

KEYWORDS: Dalit Studies, Caste System, Gendered Casteism, Feminist Studies, Dalit Female Consciousness.

MARGINACIÓN EN LOS MÁRGENES: LA EVOLUCIÓN DE LA (MAL)INTERPRETACIÓN DE LAS MUJERES DALIT EN *UNTOUCHABLES: MY FAMILY'S TRIUMPHANT JOURNEY OUT OF THE CASTE SYSTEM IN MODERN INDIA* (2005) DE NARENDRA JADHAV Y *THE PRISONS WE BROKE* (2008) DE BABY KAMBLE

RESUMEN

Las mujeres Dalit han recorrido un largo camino en las últimas cuatro décadas. En este tiempo su conciencia ha evolucionado en muchos aspectos tal y como se refleja en la escritura Dalit. Las autobiografías funcionan como el punto donde las mujeres Dalit afirman su voluntad e identidad propia, a través de diferentes enfoques. Dado que la ubicación social determina la percepción de la realidad, este artículo pretende observar cómo Narendra Jadhav y Baby Kamble abordan y enfocan la naturaleza de género de la casta y las relaciones de poder que aún afectan a las mujeres Dalit. La forma, el lenguaje y los temas tratados son algunos de los recursos que las mujeres Dalit utilizan en su intento de desafiar las convenciones genéricas, esquivar las identidades impuestas y forjar resistencia contra una doble opresión persistente que insiste en homogeneizar al 'Dalit'.

PALABRAS CLAVE: estudios Dalit, sistema de castas, casteísmo de género, estudios feministas, conciencia femenina Dalit.

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The caste structure in India has privileged the upper castes and disempowered the lower and outcaste populations through a form of social stratification of hierarchically arranged strata. One is ascribed to a stratum by descent, thus leaving no scope of individual capabilities, inclinations or choices. This has led to the establishment of a pair of opposing counterparts of upper and lower castes and to the creation of a 'purity/pollution' polarity in the Indian mindset. The most notorious corollary of this dualism is the conception of 'untouchability' vested in the Dalit communities and their subsequent otherising.<sup>1</sup>

Yet casteism has not only divided individuals in terms of their descent and hierarchy, but has also created gender divisions that reinforce the former. Conversely, gender ideology in India has legitimated not only the patriarchal structure, but also the very organisation of caste (Liddle and Joshi 1989, 69). This specific overlapping of patriarchy and caste is what the feminist historian Uma Chakravarti has coined as 'Brahminical patriarchy' (2002). Leela Dube, in her book *Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields* (2001), explores the intermeshing of caste and gender and notes that casteist principles inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society; in turn, the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are inevitably articulated and shaped by gender (Rao 2003, 242). The question arises, however, whether gender overrides caste, or caste simply intensifies gender relations. Dalit author Baby Kamble extensively addresses this additional layer of discrimination to casteism in her critically acclaimed text *The Prisons We Broke* (2008). She argues: "Just as the chaturvarna system created castes and sanctioned discriminatory practices, the cunning creator of the world established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have therefore dominated women ever since" (Kamble 2008, 102).

The institution of caste has established a clear dichotomy 'man' versus 'woman' and has, at the same time, positioned Dalit women at the bottom of the three dominant power structures, namely, caste, class and patriarchy. As a result, Dalit women have unequivocally become 'the Dalits among the Dalits'. Dalit author

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<sup>1</sup> 'Untouchability' has often coincided with the notion of 'impurity', both in social and literary contexts, due to the fact that the ancient and highly influential Hindu religious text *Manusmriti* establishes several sources of impurity –such as birth, death, menstruation, occupation and gender (Bühler 1886). However, the concept of 'untouchability' referred to under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution is theorised as distinct from the 'impurity' described in the *Manusmriti*: while untouchability is permanent, impurity is occasional –as soon as the duration of impurity is over or the stain is removed, no one is expected to observe it; untouchability is observed in respect of a whole caste, whereas impurity is more individualistic, irrespective of one's caste; finally, in Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's words, "while the impure as a class came into existence at the time of Dharma Sutras, the untouchables came into being much later than 400 A.D." (Ambedkar 2003, xiv). The desire to define oneself by defining what one is not has been a powerful influence on the initiation and continuation of the caste system. Edward Saïd resorted to the theory of the Aryan invasion and the creation of an 'other' to explain the origin and creation of the caste structure in India (Saïd 1978).



Meena Kandasamy also discusses the conflation of womanhood and Dalithood in her texts and claims: “For a man, the woman is the Dalit of the house” (Kandasamy 2008, webpage).<sup>2</sup> It is imperative, thus, to understand and address the interaction of these three structures, to analyse the particular form of oppression they cause – often different from both upper-caste women’s and Dalit men’s– and the way they have shaped the life experience of female Dalits, both individually and collectively.

## GENDERED CASTEISM

Indian womanhood has suffered in general from patriarchal oppression which, apart from generating gender-based inequalities, has established a particular imagery of the ‘good Indian woman’. According to that notion, Hindu women had to cover themselves modestly and behave as proper chaste women. This image contrasted with that of low-caste females who were portrayed as loud, uncouth, shameless, immoral and flagrantly sexual figures, which strengthened Dalit women’s devaluation and ‘otherness’. Consequently, the crass representations of the Dalit female body, juxtaposed to the demure demeanour of the secluded upper-caste female body, have constructed and institutionalised stable categories of womanhood in India.<sup>3</sup>

The image of Dalit women as loose led Dalit men to try to counter it by granting their women less liberty of movement, forbidding them to go to certain places or do certain activities, and by asserting control over their bodies; all done in an effort to restore Dalits’ –especially men’s– dignity. This progressively changed the perception of Dalit women from polluting and lascivious to silenced and vulnerable victims of a particular casteist exploitation and living under conditions of circumscribed rejection, marginalisation and poverty. This image of suffering passive bodies eventually allowed for a conceptualisation of the ideal Dalit woman as a romanticised, submissive and mute being, which largely resonated in literary

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, her first collection of poems, entitled *Touch* (2006), focuses on the casteist but also gendered basis of issues of ‘touchability’ and ‘untouchability’.

<sup>3</sup> Several scholars, such as Uma Chakravarti, have demonstrated that the repetitive transmission of negative images of Dalit women have their roots in ancient cultural traditions, such as the *Manusmriti*, *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, in which Dalit and Dravidian women were often depicted as vulgar, treacherous, dangerous, polluted and evil ‘others’. The figure of Surpanakha – literally meaning ‘sharp’, ‘long nails’, and the sister of the Dravidian king Ravana in the *Ramayan*– was that of a savage woman who embodied all that was ugly and fearful. Many researchers have initially read the mutilation of Surpanakha’s body, at the hands of Lakshman, as punishment meted out by an Aryan male to a lustful Dravidian woman. In the *Mahabharat*, Hidimbi, a low-caste woman, is also epitomised as a lustful being, full of uncontrollable desire. The *Manusmriti* also dehumanises the Dalit woman labelling her as ‘fierce, untouchable’ with the permanent power to pollute (Chakravarti 2002). Va Geetha highlights that the “*Manusmriti* lumps together animals, Shudras and women and considers all of them equally unclean, polluting, fit to be subdued and controlled by men of upper castes” (Geetha 2002, 41).



productions such as Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India* (2005).

Moreover, the patriarchal social set up has conceptualised different gender roles for men and women. In this gender stereotyping –which begins at birth and continues throughout one's life– men are assigned superior and decision-making roles, whereas women are discriminated against and relegated to the margins of different spheres of the social, cultural and private life. Leela Dube (2005, 224-227) understands Indian women's work at large as a substantial contribution to the continuity of traditional occupations that are closely tied to caste. This has a significant impact on Dalit women in particular since the majority of Dalit jobs are linked to the land or traditionally low occupations (Deliège 1999, 117). Being the downtrodden among the downtrodden (Omvedt 1979), Dalit women have remained at the lowest ebb of their rank, and have been entrusted with the most undesirable occupations, both inside and outside the household such as the processing of hides and leather, the removal of dead animals, scavenging, cutting hair or laundering (Deliège 1999, 116-145).

This gender stereotyping is heavily based on the Indian scriptures which compare females to the goddess *Sita*, who is the incarnation of compassion, the provider of food, and the destroyer of evil (Chakravarti 2003).<sup>4</sup> The myth of *Sita* has become a stereotype in the popular imaginary and the epitome of all womanly virtues in a Hindu woman, which compels women to abide by the patriarchal norms of wifely devotion, chastity and forbearance. Hindu socio-religious values also preached a degraded status of Hindu women, and demanded from them almost total self-abnegation, self-denial and submissiveness, conditions that unmistakably benefited the paternalistic joint-family and the rigid caste structure. Culturally, the expected role of the Dalit female is fundamentally equivalent to that of every Indian woman, yet magnified by her casteless status.

The insignificance of women in a Dalit household is continuously illustrated by Jadhav, mostly through the figure of his mother: "My man would hastily pull me [...]. I was exhausted, but how could I complain to my man? [...] In the beginning, I tried talking to him, asking him where we were going. His only answer was silence" (Jadhav 2005, 29). Dalit women were not only invisible to the rest, but they actually tried to be as discreet as possible. They "tried to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible, hiding themselves from others", as Kamble explains in *The Prisons We Broke* (2008, 54).

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which profess God as male or metasexual, the Hindu pantheon is replete with goddesses venerated as counterparts of the male deities. However, the abundance of female deities does not translate into female empowerment or an egalitarian status for women in Hindu society. In fact, Wendy Doniger argues that "the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous, goddesses are perceived to be, the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous human women are perceived [...], and [...] greater the need to keep [them] far away from the actual use of any power in the world" (Doniger 2014, 280). She labels this as the 'Clytemnestra Syndrome'.



Dalit women have survived and conformed themselves with a submissive domestic position, always mindful not to overstep the social boundaries dictated by their status. They have usually been dissuaded from working outside the limits of the household and encouraged, instead, to focus on domestic chores. Jadhav describes this from the wife's standpoint: "My man was unhappy that Najuka and I had to work. [He was] hurling abuse at me" (Jadhav 2005, 171-173). He then shifts to the husband's perspective: "To make matters worse, I had bitterly scolded Sonu when she told me of her various plans to bring home some money. That was more than I could bear: my wife going out to make money" (191). As demonstrated by Jadhav, among Dalit women's many duties, service to others—especially their husbands—and biological reproduction are the basic and the only ones usually available to them.

All these precepts represent the hegemonic and patriarchal social view imposed and followed, above all, by caste Hindus. However, the practice of 'Sanskritisation'—or the principle according to which lower castes imitate higher ones in the hope of raising their status and mounting the steps of the caste hierarchy—makes the seclusion of women an ideal shared by all.

#### EXTRA/INTRA-PATRIARCHY

The patriarchal social framework has definitely governed the Indian public sphere. Yet life inside the home—generally regarded as a safe and private space—rather than relaxing its codes, has revealed itself as equally brutal, unjust and oppressive as the one outside. Once their life purpose of getting married was completed, Dalit women's predicament would not end; on the contrary, it would magnify. Kamble underscores the importance of getting married in Indian society as well as in the Dalit community: "we lay our lives at the feet of our husbands. We believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her" (Kamble 2008, 41). She explains the difference between a married woman and a widow, especially in terms of the amount of labour imposed on each one:

For married women whose husbands were alive, Tuesdays and Fridays in the month of Aakhad were full of activity. A lot of work had to be done. The poor daughters-in-law would really benefit from the grace of goddesses like Lakshmi Aai and Mari Aai. It seemed as if ten days of this month [...] were reserved specially for them by the goddesses. (21)

Akin to the principle of submission on the name of caste, the hegemonic gender ideology in India would make them accept their subservient position in marital relations. As both Jadhav and Kamble evince in their texts, Dalit families unequivocally follow a male-dominated structure, and the violence stemming from within the family reinforces the casteist violence at the hands of upper castes at large. This resolves in a coordinated oppression in which caste and gender are linked to such an extent that it is difficult to decipher whether the oppression is due to one or the



other. One of the most recurrent aspects put forth by Kamble is, in fact, the domestic violence inflicted on Dalit women: “The furious husband would beat her to a pulp with a stick and drive her out of the house. She was an easy prey. Anybody could torture her as they wished” (Kamble 2008, 97). She poignantly adds: “Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious” (98).

As for Dalit menfolk, they have easily assimilated these categories as images of power that they play out in relation to their fellow women whenever possible. They treat the women of their community as their ‘other’ –just as the upper castes treat Dalits as their social ‘other’– duplicating thus the oppressive pattern. Historians and anthropologists, such as Charu Gupta (2010) and S. Anandhi (2002), have evinced the logic whereby Dalit men, robbed of their masculinity through economic and caste-based hierarchies, often seek to reassert it by enforcing patriarchal structures and wielding excessive control over women’s movements and sexuality. As a result, women are abused by their husbands on account of their gender, but also to counteract men’s feelings of failure and emasculation.<sup>5</sup> Many of such domestic fights combine with males’ excessive drinking and result in physical and emotional abuse, which creates an environment of continuous violent behaviour (Rege 1995). This is how Kamble tackles her mother’s case: “My aai must have felt so oppressed, so suffocated! And that must have made her so insensitive, so cruel towards the others. She could never maintain good relations with her relatives [...]. She could never get along with people” (2008, 6).

The fear that Dalit girls could be corrupted or harmed as long as they were still unmarried or occupied at school reinforced parents’ preference for speedy marriages; otherwise, both the family and the girl would be subjected to extreme criticism and dishonour, and the daughter, in particular, would be labelled as promiscuous. Moreover, recurrent instances of abductions, rape and molestation generated insecurity among Dalit girls and their families, and this further dampened the enthusiasm of both parents and girls in pursuing education beyond a certain age, which bounded girls to their homes.

In tune with this, the general Indian (Brahminical) belief that women’s intrusion into the fortresses of knowledge –besides disrupting the matrix of domination– would pollute it with their inferior status, legitimised their inaccessibility to the written text, both as readers and writers.<sup>6</sup> Thus, social structures, cultural

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<sup>5</sup> When nationalism was at its peak, reformist Indians extensively applied a discourse of inferiority on their women so as to balance out the one imposed on them by the colonial agenda. In an effort to break down the images of passive and effeminate –used by the British rule so as to justify their exclusion from positions of power– Indian reformers imposed a patriarchal standard of behaviour on their fellow women, thus bringing them more under men’s control (Gupta 2010).

<sup>6</sup> The connection between women and pollution is persistent. In fact, the belief that women’s bodily processes contaminate has been shared to such a point that the expulsion of a woman from home during her monthly menstruation has been commonly adopted across India. Dalit women’s



forces and the educational system operated together to constrain the thoughts and actions of Dalit girls. Jadhav's text, for instance, is an intermeshing of memories from both Damu and Sonu's perspectives; but while Damu's chapters are written by Damu himself, Sonu's recollection is reproduced and constructed by Jadhav from what he had seen and heard, given that Sonu was illiterate.

Casteism and Hinduism have been so adamant in their instructions that even women themselves believed in the senselessness of being educated. Jadhav puts forth this reality, from a women's perspective:

I remember the story Tau Master had told us about Mahatma Phule, and how he had faced society's wrath to educate Savitri, his wife. 'Sonu, do you know that Savitri started a school for women, teaching them to read and write? People threw stones at her and abused her when she walked to the school. But she went on teaching undeterred.' That managed to spark [my] interest, and soon [I] was learning too. [...] Initially, [my mother-in-law] just shot us a few obnoxious looks. But after a few days, she could take it no more. 'Is Sonu going to be a barrister?' she asked contemptuously. 'No, but if she learns to read and write, she can make sure that our children become no less than a barrister,' [Sonu's husband] replied. 'Then teach your children. Why her?' (Jadhav 2005, 193-194)

This gender segregation and male superiority is reinforced from an early age and is internalised by all members of the community, which explains why many women are not aware of their oppression; in fact, they expect this as part of their role as women. As Tabish Khair adds, if female characters are ever able –or dare– to confront the patriarchal/male-dominated structures, in either the social, religious and economic areas, such a confrontation would be strongly contested by the (male) status quo (Khair 2001, 186).

## PATRIARCHY AND MATRIARCHY

Apart from dictating most male-female interactions, caste and gender prejudices have also prompted one to look down on his or her own brethren. Furthermore, the creation and perpetuation of specific roles for each individual, and the retribution enacted on those who do not abide by them, have led to the assimilation of such roles. Uma Chakravarti, in *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (2003), exposes systematically the interface between caste and gender within the discourse on the female body. She elucidates that the mechanism of control upon women operates on three levels. The first one is the realm of ideology, in which women are made to internalise patriarchal stereotypes and control their own sexuality, as they would not only gain power and respect in return, but they would also achieve

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bodily pollution meets its doctrinal illiteracy in the *Manusmriti*, which defines them as polluted and polluting.



their own salvation. The second level of control is related to kinship, and it represents the kinsmen's right to discipline an errant woman. Lastly, the ultimate level of law empowers the state to punish women for recalcitrant behaviour. Chakravarti regards this as "a masterstroke of genius" of the Hindu normative order, since it enables iniquitous and hierarchical structures to be reproduced and sustained with the complicity of women themselves (Chakravarti 2003, 72-74).

Men's supremacy and female subjugation are, therefore, not only shaped and reinforced by men, but also by women. There is an interplay of patriarchy and matriarchy in Indian society that results in renewed oppression of Dalit women. Women's internalisation of patriarchal values is displayed in many texts; not as self-deprecation *per se*, but rather as an indication of the acknowledgement that one's life is important only in relation to others – particularly the males upon whom the woman depends. The figure of Sonu, the wife in Jadhav's text, is especially illustrative on this matter: "It had been a long time since I had seen my man smile. I mustered up courage and asked" (Jadhav 2005, 63). She adds:

'Why is *fate* determined to treat us so badly?' I asked [...]. '*Fate* is what we make of ourselves. It is entirely up to us,' [her husband] said [...]. '*You are my fate* ever since the day you made me your woman.' [Sonu] smiled shyly. '*My fate is following Babasaheb's* teachings and fighting to claim dignity for our community.' (63; emphasis added)

At home, mothers acted as matriarchs, instructing and restricting girls while their husbands were away for work. Kamble dexterously depicts Dalit girls being disciplined by their own mothers on their secondary position in a Dalit household: "She often told me, 'Baby, you have only one brother. It is your duty to help him!' She would go on and on like this" (2008, 6).

Outside the home, women would continue to oppress one another, both as a way of exerting some kind of control and as the only revenge available to them. In order to counteract the oppression meted out against them at home and to exercise the power denied to them in their domestic space, older Dalit women would often turn aggressive and violent against younger ones. Once married, the female Dalit was subjected to yet another layer of abuse at the hands of her in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law. The dynamics of Indian patriarchy and the pattern of patrilocality brought about the traditional Indian residence practice of moving in with the husband's lineage in an extended family network. In India, the household is administered by the mother-in-law and all daughters-in-law must comply with her domination. Because of this strong cultural tradition and the combined effect of economic poverty, many young wives cannot set up their autonomous households.

As Kamble explains, the members of the Dalit community were influenced by the joys of enslaving others, imitating thus the callous nature of casteist subjugation (2008, 87). As they had no one below them to show their dominance, they began to enslave the weaker sex; their own spouses, mothers, daughters, and especially daughters-in-law: "The other world had bound us with chains of slavery [but] we too desired to dominate, to wield power. [...]. So we made our own arrangements to find





slaves –our very own daughters-in-law!” (87). Kamble epitomises the objectification of daughters-in-law by arguing that “she was not a human being for her in-laws but just another piece of wood” (99). She vividly describes the level of abuse inflicted on them at the hands of their mothers-in-law or on account of their influence:

In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off. [...] It's because of the sasu [mother-in-law], who would poison her son's mind. These sasus ruined the lives of innocent women forever. [...] The entire day, the poor daughter-in-law would serve the entire household like a slave. [...] Even her brother and father would flog her mercilessly and ask her in-laws to take her back. [...] ‘Cut her into pieces then and there! [...] Never mind if you have to go to prison for six months! You must chop off your wife's nose and present it to her brother and father.’ [...] Then her sasu would happily arrange a second marriage for her son with some divorced woman with a couple of children. She would feel elated that the harassment she had suffered was being finally compensated for. An innocent girl would thus be sacrificed to atone for the sasu's suffering. (98-101)

A Dalit woman has been, therefore, only a servile figure in marital relations, an object of lust fulfilment, and an unpaid servant for whom marriage meant nothing but calamity.

## GENDERED ESSENTIALIST REPRESENTATION

Writing signifies for contemporary Dalit literature the staging of identifications in a process of protesting and empowerment. But, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, “Representation legitimizes and privileges certain kinds of knowledge” (1988, 53-54). Undoubtedly, the dynamics of literary assertion laid bare in Dalit literature delineates a mainstream body of texts around which a trend has been developed of looking at it in unitary terms. However, a simplistic interpretation of the ‘difference’ of Dalit writing from more mainstream literary categories is not at all reflective of its nuanced, complex and diverse literary reality. The Dalit identity does not constitute a homogenous or unified identity, neither now, nor in the past. When discussing caste in India then, the mistaking of a part for the whole is highly problematic and oblivious. As Sarah Beth contends, no individual can truly represent the wide variety of identities held by every member of the community s/he claims to represent (2015). There exists a plurality of voices, life experiences and perspectives that often find themselves at odds with one another when trying to fulfil the demands of a mainstream audience for a recognisable, ‘authentic’ and even ‘digestible’ Dalit literary voice. The fact that not much attention has been paid to the historical specificities and material conditions around the interaction of caste with gender in negotiating Dalit boundaries and the assumptions of gender neutrality in Dalit writing have rendered Dalit women largely invisible, and have led to depictions of Dalits as a predominantly male category.

Female Dalit voices decry a double or even triple oppression within the patriarchal structures of casteist society, as well as within their own communities



and homes, which underscores Dalit literature's narrow scope. At the same time, they call for a widening of perspective that would account for multiple realities, such as theirs. Laura Brueck states that this dismissiveness is seemingly wilful as part of a strategic campaign to protect the boundaries of Dalit literature from dissimulation into multiple, individual authorial approaches that could reduce their unified political impact (Brueck 2014, 7). In privileging a monolithic image of the 'Dalit selfhood', inner conflicts and divisions have been perceived as counter-productive to the larger movement, and have often been silenced. One such instance of silence and elision is the question of Dalit women.

From a general observation of Dalit writings, as well as the Dalit social sphere, one can appreciate a largely male-centric orientation. They concentrate on the efforts of Dalit men, and thus diminish or even exclude women's actions and aspirations. The proportion of representation of Dalit women's predicament in the works of male writers is insignificant. There abound only passing references to the ordeals endured by their womenfolk or, as Gopal Guru bluntly puts it, Dalit women make "only a guest appearance" in them (2008, 160). Guru explains this attitude arguing that it is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event (1995).

In addition to the generalised absence of Dalit women in Dalit writings, when they have been represented, this has been done inadequately. In Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables* the predicament of Dalit women is expressed only in the chapters narrated by Sonu. However, even in those chapters, her husband's principles, beliefs and struggles are more dealt with than hers. More significantly, Sonu —and by extension, the general Dalit woman— is depicted as taking a more backward-thinking stance than her male counterpart:

I could not understand what was so bad about taking our turn as Yeskar. [...] After all, scores of generations had done this duty; what was making him so angry? [...] I had not understood why he was not willing to conform to tradition. (Jadhav 2005, 31-33)

Given the importance that the figure of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar has acquired for Dalits and their assertion movement, the most striking aspect of Sonu's portrayal is her blatant indifference towards him, which highlights the level of regression of her state of mind:

My husband dragged me along with him to these lectures. 'Soney, take more interest in these talks instead of the song and dance you like to see. They are about our community and about the uplifting of our people.' I thought, even in our village, we had lived among the Mahars and no one had ever questioned the age-old system. [...] Sometimes, I got bored when he talked endlessly about Babasaheb's speeches. Of course, I dutifully followed him, but secretly I told myself, 'It is enough to have that social ghost sitting on my husband's head... I am better off without it'. (146-147)

Dalit male writers —and Indian male writers in general— have tended to present a distorted image of Dalit women, from polluting to victimised and from



lascivious to vulnerable individuals (Kumar 2010, 219),<sup>7</sup> or to romanticise them through their depiction in stereotyped female roles, such as those of sacrificing wives and mothers (Lokhande quoted in Rege 2006, 74-75). They have been framed in iconographies of sentimentality, sympathy and subservience, and narrated in condescending language. Their quotidian depiction as victims has concealed deep structures of inequality, and has helped maintaining the hegemonic and hierarchical caste order. “Representations in print”, to quote Rancière, are often “embodied allegories of inequality” (2009, 12).

Apart from silent –and silenced– victims, Dalit women have frequently been discursively constructed as victims of rape and sexual violence at the hands of both upper-caste and Dalit men, on account of their body and beauty. This has undoubtedly added to the generalised denial of their subjectivity and political agency. Brueck points to a normative masculinist tendency in the employment of a ‘rape script’, or a discursive determinism of sexual violence, as singularly defining the experience of Dalit womanhood (Brueck 2014, 19). In this narrative tendency, female Dalit bodies have been depicted as readily available for their fellow Dalit men, but have also been appropriated by upper-caste men as a way to emasculate and control Dalit men. This, apart from reducing Dalit women to a hyper-symbolic state of victimhood through images of collective violence, customary access, and expropriation of women’s bodies, has also rendered them impure and lacking in virtue. Their bodies are thus seen as collectively mute, and capable of bearing penetration. Brueck further denounces that these writings have legitimated rape and other forms of sexual assault in casteist society, and have predicated men as the subjects and operators of violence, while rendering women as the objects of it (159). Another interesting aspect that Brueck notices about these ‘rape scripts’ is that atrocities of this kind are often placed as a starting point of a story or an episode. By following this structure, the event works as a catalyst to drive the story towards the male agents’ struggle to obtain justice and revolt against the upper-caste oppressors. Consequently, “The victimized women have little voice and are often left by the wayside as the narrative focus turns toward the male agents of the recuperation of honour” (Brueck 2012, 230). In such narratives, male authors speak on behalf of women, a phenomenon that undoubtedly deprives them of autonomy and agency.

Devaluation and vulnerability, together with spectatorial pity mingled with charitable benevolence, became a cornerstone in the representation of Dalit women. Their capacity for agency, criticality and ingenuity was systematically undermined, thus leaving them as subjects to be acted upon; to be written, thought, and talked about. This demonstrates that caste is irrefutably gendered, with gender as an added qualifier to it.

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<sup>7</sup> Uma Chakravarti demonstrates how repetitive negative images of Dalit women had their roots in ancient cultural traditions such as the *Manusmriti*, *Ramayana* or *Mahabharat*, in which Dalit women were often depicted as vulgar, treacherous, dangerous, polluted and evil (Chakravarti 2003).



## FROM CONTAINMENT TO ASSERTION

Dalit women have been claimed by both Dalit and feminist movements across India, each demanding a de-emphasis on one aspect of their identity –gender or caste. Their voices have been lost in the hegemonic rhetoric of both movements, claiming either to speak on behalf of Dalit women or all women, respectively. The need was felt by women imbued with Dalit consciousness to represent their perspectives and lived experience in a genuine manner, to make a creative use of their marginality from their ‘outsider-within’ status.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of these factors, in 1995, an autonomous organisation known as the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) emerged.<sup>9</sup> Drawing from the formation of the NFDW, Guru opened the debate on the use of ‘difference’ for a Dalit feminist, suggesting that Dalit women go through a ‘differential experience’ shaped by the contradictions between them and upper-caste women, as well as the patriarchal domination within Dalit communities (Guru 1995). There is, therefore, a ‘politics of difference’ that structures the articulation of the specificity of Dalit women’s lives. Their sexuality, political awareness, self-assertion, experience of profession, violence, and suffering within the community justify their need to speak differently.

Dalit women writers’ voices have emerged relatively late in the written literary traditions, gathering momentum in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, that does not preclude them from being articulate and forceful. As is the case of the rest of Dalit literature, life narratives have become a discursive arena for Dalit women, as it permitted them to represent themselves and tell their suffering from their own perspective. Sharmila Rege calls this the ‘Dalit feminist standpoint’ that takes into account, in short, the multi-layered problems and identities of Dalit women, which are at the intersection of gender, caste and ethnicity (Rege 1998, 45). She argues that Dalit feminism differs from Indian mainstream feminism in its demands and adds female emancipation to the Dalit movement. In that sense,

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘outsider-within’ was first coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986), and designates a special space of the experiencer made by his or her ‘difference’ or unique standpoint. ‘Outsider-within’ status was captured by bell hooks while giving an account of her small-town Kentucky childhood: “living as we did –on the edge– we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out [...] we understood both” (hooks 1984, vii). Their difference makes them conscious of patterns or social constructions that may be beyond the comprehension or sight of sociological insiders.

<sup>9</sup> The NFDW was formed as the result of a process that began in 1987 with a national consultation on the struggles and aspirations of Dalit women in Bangalore and then in Delhi and Pune. Several other groups, such as the All India Dalit Women’s Forum, were also formed in the 1990s and, in recent years, the Dalit women question has also received international attention through the United Nations Conference against All Forms of Racism attesting to a forceful Dalit women contingent. The basis of the formation –and proliferation– of these autonomous groups was the argument that Dalit women were invisible, both in the women’s movement and in the Dalit movement, because of which Dalit women needed a separate platform to forge their own identity and find solutions to their problems (Guru 1995).



the artistic and literary representations of Dalit feminism cannot be accommodated within either of these two conventional forms.

Laura Brueck agrees with Rege on the Dalit female need to move beyond the hegemonic and Dalit male writers' representations, especially in the case of the 'rape script'. Brueck brings to the fore the necessity to reconsider the ever-present threat of sexual violence as part of Dalit women's identities, and to contest the narrative determinism behind it. She advocates a feminist recuperation of the misogynistic and casteist rape narrative that she labels as 'rescripting rape' (Brueck 2014, 58); a sort of revenge narrative that would complicate and even rewrite the casteist rape script. Against the treatment of rape as merely a structural aspect in the narrative with the explicit mission to emphasise casteist oppression, this 'rescripting rape' narrative would focus on the sexual exploitation and eventual violent reprisal towards the woman, thus creating a woman-centred rape revenge. Moreover, it would disrupt the normative social script of sexual assault and the physically passive role prescribed to Dalit women.

Apart from documenting the plight of the women in their community and their everyday struggle to earn their livelihood and their ethos, Dalit women writers are also developing, in the course of their weave, alternative expressive spaces where they can voice resistance and re-imagine the representative norm. Their aim is to rescue female Dalit bodies from passive manipulations, and build alternative feminist agentic imaginings and narratives of survival where issues of identity, community, casteism and patriarchy are disclosed.

Resistance is creatively articulated in Dalit women's writings as an everyday resilience against daily casteism and oppression. Potentially mistaken with an indifferent stance towards hardships –or an attitude of accepting life as it is– Dalit women have learned through life-long experience that they cannot control their milieu; but they certainly can control their individual actions. As such, they have learned to use their instincts and their abilities to uncover ways so as to silently thwart the system. Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, for instance, is not only a revelation of the bitter reality of the social ills that Dalit women confront; it also brings to light their inner strength and vigour. The narrative abounds with stories of Dalit women who had the resilience and strength to negotiate their existence in a male-dominated society. It illustrates that even uneducated Dalit women working as field labourers have cunningly created ways of interpreting and asserting their identities. They refuse to be consigned to a state of hopelessness; instead, they strive to persevere. Kamble demonstrates through her text that, while some women endure the sufferings patiently, many others show perseverance and resistance, and even find new ways of coping with their wretched existence.

Rather than focusing on describing and analysing victimhood, most female Dalit writings shed light on the political engagement and agency of Dalit women. Kamble, for instance, considers it significant to voice the trials and tribulations of Dalit women, but she also firmly depicts them as agents in bringing about change, both in their own lives and in the lives of other Dalit women. She shows that Dalit women are far from being 'silent subjects' at the receiving end of humiliation. Instead, we see the emergence of a subject with critical agency who speaks up, writes



out and confronts outright (Guru 2009, 5). In fact, Sharmila Rege contends that it is precisely in the act of writing against humiliation that the active socio-political subjectivity and agency of Dalit women assume a concrete form (2006, 13). This demonstrates that the new generation of Dalit women is not willing to suffer as their elder generations did for hundreds of years. Bela Malik writes that “the younger women [are] most militant and less willing to tolerate the terms of their existence” (2005, 102). Kamble, for instance, is removed from the mainstream social paradigm for being a female and a Dalit; yet she compensates it all with the gift of her prose. The language is a tool at her disposal, and she uses it to defend as well as to attack.

Considering this mixture of resilience and defiance, Tabish Khair postulates that female Dalit writings should be read both as covert and overt gestures of subversion (2001, 178). This subversion is not only ideological, but also corporeal in nature. In contrast to the traditional image of Indian womanhood that supposedly upholds values such as modesty and shyness, Kamble showcases a different kind of woman that is independent, courageous and straightforward. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Dalit women resort to strong expletives in order to escape the brutal assaults on their bodies caused by their husbands. This is just an instance of how Dalit women use the limited material at their disposal to subvert hierarchies of gender and caste, and strive to turn the logic of subjugation back on their tormenters. In response to regulations and assumptions imposed on their bodies that render them polluted, Dalit women convert their ‘polluting’ bodies into sharp weapons that help protect themselves from domestic violence, both verbal and physical. Female Dalit writers, such as Kamble, include many aspects of their lives that are absent from men’s writings, such as the experiences of menstruation, female sexual desire, and gendered violence, as instruments in their claim for a rightful social and narrative space. Moreover, in using their bodies as narrative weapons they contradict the paternalist conception that links women with the emotional and bodily, and therefore devalue their rational and intellectual capacities.

These writers vividly demonstrate their ability to craft intellectual productions, as women and as Dalits, and they do so without erasing their bodily and emotional experiences; precisely the contrary, they make sure to emphasise them. This evinces the mark of feminism in their voices and ideas as most of the women portrayed in *The Prisons We Broke*, for instance, are unmistakably feminist—without using or knowing the term—in their rebellions and support for each other. Their writings not only address the lacunae in the literary tradition of feminist representation in Indian writing, but also transcend the stereotype of ‘narrative of pain and suffering’ that has come to be associated with Dalit writing. The bodies and experiences of Dalit women, that have been marginalised and obliterated in the domain of mainstream Dalit literature, are now repositioned right at the centre, together with a strong collective affirmative stance.



## CONCLUSION

As has been put forth, another substantial characteristic of the caste system is its gendered nature, which demonstrates that 'Dalit' is far from being a homogeneous category with fixed and universal layers of suffering. The caste system has constructed and shaped the image of the 'good Indian woman' and has distorted the image of the Dalit woman, as Jadhav and Kamble especially lay bare in their texts. Rendered as silent, submissive and passive, the Dalit woman has suffered from accentuated discrimination as the patriarchy ruling Indian society has added to the patriarchy that holds sway over Dalit households. Patriarchy has also coalesced with matriarchy, a fierce combination that has left its mark especially on the figure of the daughter-in-law. This patriarchal –and matriarchal– codification of caste has objectified and denigrated the Dalit woman and has converted her in the repository of male power and control, which has ultimately established a dreadful and irrefutable link between female sexuality and the preservation of the caste order.

The Dalit woman's predicament has been many-sided, intensified by many disparate forces and pervading every sphere of life. Yet, the element that constituted the repository of male power and oppression and strengthened her 'twice Dalit' state is her body. Gender has been central to the constitution of the caste system and there are specific ways in which women's experiences and bodies are structured into the caste order, indeed specific ways in which bodies are gendered. As a result, caste and patriarchy act together to gain control over the female body. Moreover, the prolonged exposure to multi-layered kinds of oppression complicates the ability to extricate oneself from the existing situation. For that reason, many scholars and writers on the Dalit question have critiqued the gender limitations of the Dalit consciousness as a dangerous rhetorical construction of collective identity formation and have warned against this discursive construct, unrepresentative of caste or gender pluralist identities and experiences. In doing this, they have argued that this discourse could potentially reduce Dalit women to a hypersymbolic state of invisibility, which is why a separation of the 'Dalit woman' within the Dalit community category is necessary.

The essentialism of the Dalit literary project has also affected it internally. It has legitimised narrow and gendered representations and has depicted Dalit selfhood as a monolithic image with a largely male-centric orientation. However, Dalit identity is neither homogeneous nor unified and, therefore, the correlation of a part for the whole is problematic and oblivious. The systematic assumptions of gender neutrality in Dalit literature over the decades have rendered Dalit women invisible. They have only been 'guest appearances' in Dalit texts (Guru 2008, 160), largely stereotyped as backward-thinking, silent and submissive victims, as put forth by Jadhav. The 'rape script' added to these stereotypes (Brueck 2014) by building a discursive determinism and further oppressing the Dalit woman's body and self. It accentuated her social devaluation, vulnerability, and the spectatorial pity crafted around her.

As both the Indian feminist movement and the Dalit movement itself failed to adequately engage with their predicament, Dalit women have resolved to take hold of the pen themselves, and reclaim the widening of the literary scope which



could alone shed light on their own Dalit realities. Standing at the intersection of ethnicity, caste and gender, Kamble not only presents a different side of the story, but she also feels the need to tell it differently, steered by her differential experience (Rege 1998). She attempts a Dalit feminist recuperation of the casteist and misogynistic narrative and a re-imagination of the representative norm, through both covert and overt agency and resistance. Most importantly, she testifies to the mechanisms of power, both among the powerful and the powerless.





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