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SAGA OF DALIT WOMEN POETS FROM SOUTH INDIA

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This paper focuses on the saga of Dalit women writers from South India and their contribution to literature. Dalit women are members of the lowest caste in India, previously known as "untouchables," who face discrimination and oppression on multiple levels due to their gender and caste identity. Despite these obstacles, many Dalit women have turned to literature to express their experiences and resist social norms and traditions. Through their writing, Dalit women writers challenge dominant narratives and give voice to marginalized communities, bringing to light issues of gender, caste, and class. This abstract explores the lives and works of prominent Dalit women writers from South India, such as Bama, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Sivakami and their contribution to literature in their respective languages. This paper also highlights the unique challenges faced by Dalit women writers, including the difficulty of breaking into mainstream publishing and the lack of recognition for their work. However, the rise of Dalit literature movements and the growing interest in diverse voices have created more opportunities for these writers to share their stories and perspectives.

Keywords: Caste, Class, Gender, Literature Movements, Untouchables

Introduction:

Discrimination is a devilish disease among human beings. There is hardly any place in the entire world which is free from human discrimination of some sort or other. The discrimination between races, communities, castes and between men and women is everywhere, in every country and in every society. Women in general in any society are the most discriminated but the worst affected, undoubtedly, are the Dalit women.

The plight of dalit women, "the dalits of the dalits" in the Indian society is far more horrible because they are oppressed on the basis of caste, class and sex. They have to be subservient in the patriarchal world of male chauvinism in matter pertaining of education, love, marriage, worship, mobility and interaction with neighbours are controlled by men in their capacity as father, brother, husband, father-in-law and priest. They have a precarious existence combining abject poverty, burdensome and loathing labour in the fields, work place and in the home front. (Sankar Jha. 2012).

The suppression of Dalit women is as old as the hills but, unfortunately, it is never talked about anywhere openly, not even among women themselves. The reason is: most women never knew they could protest it. Moreover, the suppression meted out to the dalit women is not from one front but from many. They remained silent for generations together believing it to be the fate. The worst of all is bearing the sexual assault passively and burying it silently.

'Many a flower is born to blush unseen'. Women are subject to sexual harassment and physical assault. Discrimination, dejection, despair, devastation, and disillusionment lead the women to a state of lunacy. From time immemorial, men seem to have taken a sadist pleasure in subjugating and exploiting women in every respect. In this content it is really a welcome sign to see the women writers come out boldly to explore the problems faced by the oppressed women. The dalit writers have started searching for the root cause of the oppression discrimination and injustice inflicted upon them (Shankar Jha. 2012).

'Dalit women writing' blatantly rejects Brahmins' ideology, their text and their religious order owing to its wicked *Varnashramadharma*. Dalit women's writing exposes trouble and tribulations caused by the varna and the caste system as part of the religious domination. They use their education and literacy skills to expose the role religion played in their subjugation. Dalit women writings clearly indicate that there is no significant representation from dalit women. Taking trials and tribulations of Dalit women as an insignificant issue to be discussed, the contemporary dalit writings seem to



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misrepresent comparing them to the concerns of dalit movement and dalit writing literary and political marginalization of dalit women. The post-Ambedkarite period also necessitates the need for dalit women to bring out their experiences of patriarchies and caste oppression.

‘Dalit women writing’ aims at bringing out the physical violence as well as symbolic violence. ‘Dalit women writing’ discusses the problems at two levels: upper castes committing atrocities on dalits, patriarchal violence that dalit women suffer from witting and outside the caste. Unless we understand the caste and gender dynamics of violence in the society, we cannot fully understand caste violence.

Feminist literary theories speak of a term “double burden” which refers to the dual oppression experienced by women who are both paid workers and unpaid home makers, wives and mothers in the household. This concept assumes that the primary site of a women’s oppression is in the private sphere and the oppression double when she takes up the employment in the public sphere. But the dalit women bear the “triple burden” when they participate in the employment. (Shankar Jha 2012).

Brahminism is one of the detrimental forces that worked on the oppression of Dalits. Phule, Periyar and Dr. Ambedkar sacrificed their lives and worked for the liberation of all the deprived communities from the brutal oppression of brahminism. They devoted their lives in order to create a new and better society for every Dalit. They never once got back despite humiliation and deprivation imposed on them by Brahminism. They deemed the communities’ agony as their own and worked towards the single goal of liberating the under-privileged. However, the predicaments of the Dalit women were not fully addressed though they happened to be the most oppressed sections in Indian society. Their oppression is two times more than the usual oppression of Dalits. They suffered from the triple oppressions of being poor, being Dalit and being female. The non-brahmin writings from Phule have highlighted their problems. Phule recognized the significance of imparting education to Dalits which could attain two objectives that is end of patriarchy and brahminical domination.

Dalit women’s writing has also questioned the hold of patriarchy in their community. Dalit women confined themselves to the vulnerable position owing to the poor socio-economic structure for generations together. From their trivial state of living and from victimized position, from the shell of confinement, all Dalit women have to come out and build their own castle of liberated life instead of silently bearing the brunt of internal violence and external violence.

There are many Dalit women writers who couldn’t fully come to limelight owing to patriarchal shadows in society. Yet, we have Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde and Urmila Pawar among the best Dalit women writers who used the literature as a weapon to express their struggle against caste and patriarchy. They also narrated the experiences of Dalit women who actively participated in Ambedkarite movement and yet not recognized due to patriarchal tendencies of Dalit movement itself. Dalit women writers do not agree with an assumption that the Dalit families are less patriarchal or ‘democratically patriarchal’. In fact, they constantly engage themselves with the critique of mainstream feminism that has been marginalizing Dalit women for a long time. The expressions, language, societal values and morals depicted by Dalit women writers are also revolutionary in tone.

Baby Kamble is one among the Dalit writers who used her mighty pen to wage a war against the patriarchal violence. Her first Dalit autobiographical book ‘*Jina Amacha*’ (*The prison we Broke*) points out various forms of patriarchal violence within the Dalit society. She gives an account of the life of Mahars in pre-Ambedkarite period and the powerful ideology of Ambedkar’s that influenced Dalits. Her autobiographical book depicts Dalit women of Mahar community and their tribulations. It is an important document on the women’s participation in Ambedkarite Dalit movement and the condition of Dalit women during this period, the autobiography aims to proclaim how Dalit women lived as slaves in the families and suffered lack of food, medical facilities and so on.



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Shantabai Kamble:

Shantabai Kamble is yet another Dalit known for her commitment in writing. *Majya Jalmachi Chettarkatha* is her first novel and this is considered as the first novel written by a Dalit woman in her times. She is the protagonist and this could be looked upon as an autobiography showing through her eyes the burden born by Dalits of class, caste and oppression. It chronicles life of Naja through childhood, marriage, hunger and labour.

Urmila Pawar:

Urmila Pawar is a Marathi based writer. *The Weave of My Life* (2008) is a significant autobiography written in her mother tongue. She narrates her difficulties in the present education system which is modelled upon the upper caste norms and notion of language, culture and values. She also discusses the internal patriarchy which makes Dalit women victims of the patriarchal control by Dalit men's physical abuse and economic exploitation. The autobiography deals with how Dalit movement is blind to the gender issues and how Dalit movement is carried away by the notion of "all women being untouchable" which further makes them not consider the issues of dalit women. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's (*We Also Made History* 2008) is a theoretical work of rewriting the history of Ambedkarite Movement and the brought dominance within the movement. It is a matter of great concern that Dalit women's participation in the movement itself is not recognized by Ambedkarite movement. The history of Dalit women participation is brought out effectively in the work. It also highlights the domestic violence experienced by Dalit women.

Dalit women writing in Tamil:

Dalit women's autobiography in Tamil language engages us with different aspects of Dalit life. (*Karukku* 200), Bama's autobiography first appeared in Tamil language in 1992 deals with the life of Dalit Christians in Tamilnadu during 60's and 70's. *Karukku* is the first Dalit women autobiography in Tamil language *Karukku* literally means the palmyra leaves with sharpness on both the scales. The title also indicates how Dalit literature can be as sharp as a knife to fight against the caste discrimination, inequality and subjugation. Bama deals with the serious political questions such as 'can the conversion solve the caste questions'? 'Are the other religions in India free from caste system?' The autobiography has its significance especially in the content of mass conversions and the conversions as an ideology developed by Dr. Ambedkar.

Though a significant part of it critiques the caste inequalities entering Catholic Church, it describes both the endemic violence on Dalits within the villages and the symbolic violence that humiliates Dalits in the educational institutions. Dalit women experience sexual and economic exploitation and the issue of patriarchy which makes Dalit women victims of patriarchal control within the families is found only in a few contexts in *Karukku*. Nevertheless, the issue of internal patriarchy, physical abuse of Dalit women in the families, upper-caste men exploiting Dalit women have been widely discussed in (*Sangati*. 2005).

Sivakami:

Sivakami is a writer whose contribution is invaluable in the Dalit movement from the writers' front. Her book '*The Grip of Change*' attempts to portray the misery of the Dalit women. Brahminism for ages pushed Dalit women to lower strata of the society and she is considered the main contribution to the society. In return to her services everyone in the society has constructed hell around her. Her helpless condition in the society was correctly pictured in her book. Her book brings to light various unknown facts about the Dalit women. This book illustrates how Dalit women for ages have been victimized by the dominant castes through different methods. Dalit women emerged to speak about the actual conditions around themselves. Their writings were part of their personal experiences and partial representations of the religious violence of the dominant caste. And many more dalit women writers are their in Tamil.



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Dalit Women Writing from Telugu

Gogushymala:

Gogushymala's is a noted Dalit women writer who comes totally different background. For a larger part of her life, she has been associated with the revolutionary politics and in the later phase of her life she turned her attention towards Dalit issues. The book edited by her *Nallapoddu* (Black Dawn, 2004), comprises of a large number of Telugu Dalit women's writings and their life histories from 1921 to 2002.

Gogu Shyamala's stories dissolve burdens as they work their magic on orthodox forms of realism, psychic allegory and political table. Whether she is describing the setting sun or the way people are gathered at a village council like thickly steam grain on the threshing floor, the varied rhythms of a Dalit drum or a young woman astride has favourite buffalo, Shymala walks us through a world that is at once particular and small, and simultaneously universal.

Set in the Madiga quarter of a Telangana village, the stories spotlight different settings, events and experiences, and offer new propositions on how to see, think and be touched by life in that world. With her intensely beautiful and sharp political writing, Shymala makes a clean break with the tales of oppression and misery. (*Nallaregatisallu: Madiga, Madiga Upakulala Aadolla Kathalu / Furrows in Black Soil : The stories of Madiga and Madiga sub-caste women* 2006), and *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket*, But 2012 are the books published by her.

Jajula Gouri:

Jajula Gouri is a writer known for her a variety of Dalit issues taken up in her writings. Her works include '*Dalitha Samrajyam*' (Dalit Dynasty), '*Uthikaresta*', '*Chatur Varna Vyavasta*'. She also wrote short stories such as *Mannu Buvva*, *Pagati Bellu*, *Dastakath*, etc. She has brought out many volumes of poetry dealing with self-respect, discrimination, exploitation and the lives of the Dalits, child labour etc. In the story *Mannu Buvva (Clay Rice)* she speaks about her own life experiences of 1976 famine. As this story becomes popular many readers identified her with the title "Matti Rachayatri" (Poetess of Mud).

There are many other Dalit women writers from Telugu like Jubhaka Subhadra, T. N. Sadalaxmi who are contributing their part for the transformation in Dalit women.

Dalit women writer from Malayalam

Vijila Chirappad:

Vijila Chirappad is well known for her writings that have evoked a lot of consciousness among Dalit women. '*Adukala Illatha Veedu*' (A Home without a Kitchen, 2006), '*Amma oru Kalpanika Kavitha Alla*' (Mother is not a poetic figment of our Imagination, 2009), and '*Parkarthi Ezuthu*' are her collection of poems which portray the hardships and anguish of Dalit life. Her usage of poetry instead of prose is a unique feature as poetry is considered to be more romanticized in nature. Her works talk about gender and caste issue.

Rekharaj:

Rekharaj is an activist, a writer and a researcher, and has contributed essays and criticism to mainstream journals such as *Madyamam*, *Bhashaposhini*, *Mathaubhumi* and *Pachakuthira* as well as little magazines like *Sameeksha*. Some of her writings are co-authored with Renukumar. Her article *Rajani's Suicide* (The suicide of a young Dalit Engineering student, Rajini S. Anand in July 2004).



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Dalit women writing from Kannada:

B.T. Jahnnavi:

B.T.Jahnnavi is a well-regarded writer and theatre personality from Kannada. Her short stories are described as having emerging out of Dalit sensibility as well as an urban middle-class women's sensibility. The complex intersection of these two aspects in contemporary life involves her both as a writer and as person. Some of her most moving stories are about women's sexuality. Jahnnavi has published two collections of stories, *Kaledukonddavalu Mattu Itara Kathegalu (The lost girl and other stories.* 1996). And *Hudukaata (Hide 'n' seek,* 2007) and *A Biography of has Father Muttisikondavaru (The one who Got Touched,* 1999).

Du Saraswathi:

This poet, theatre person and activist among women street sweepers, is a second generation Dalit intellectual in more senses than one. Her life as a writer began with the diaries she maintained while in college. In 1997, she submitted a collection of (hand written) poems for an award, which she received. The collection was published the same year with the title *Henedare Jadan Ante (Weave like a Spider).*

Saraswathi has also written articles on many different public issues for *Manasa* and co-authored a play, *Rakka Kathuvira (Will You Tie Wings for Us)*, that has been performed over eighty times all over Karnataka. She has edited a book for Byapur Women's University on the skills, knowledge, labour and aesthetics of food. It is based on thirty interviews of women from various districts of Karnataka. Both as Dalit and feminist, she has had to face difficult questions about Casteism and Patriarchy. Her 2009 '*Bachchisu*' (*Tip*), and the little poem from *Jeeva Sampige (Tree of life,* 2006) brought her a great reputation.

Conclusion:

The saga of Dalit women writers from South India is a powerful and poignant account of the experiences and struggles of Dalit women. Through their writing, these women have been able to break free from the oppression and discrimination they have faced, and to raise their voices against the injustices they have endured. They have also challenged the dominant narratives of caste and gender that have perpetuated their marginalization and subordination. The works of these writers have contributed to a greater understanding of the Dalit experience and have inspired others to join the fight for equality and justice. As we continue to listen to the voices of Dalit women writers from South India and amplify their messages, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
ISSN:2277-7881(Print); IMPACT FACTOR :9.014(2025); IC VALUE:5.16; ISI VALUE:2.286
PEER REVIEWED AND REFEREED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
(Fulfilled Suggests Parameters of UGC by IJMER)
Volume:14, Issue:11(3), November, 2025
Scopus Review ID: A2B96D3ACF3FEA2A
Article Received: Reviewed: Accepted
Publisher: Sucharitha Publication, India
Online Copy of Article Publication Available: www.ijmer.in

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