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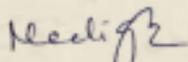
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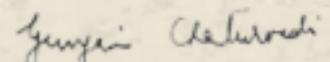
Certificate of Appreciation

Presented to **Dr. Parveen Kumari, Assistant Professor, Central University of Jammu** for her participation as a resource person in the Webinar Lecture Series organized By: Department of English Studies and Research, Baikunthi Devi Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Agra (U.P.)

Topic - Dalit Women's Life-Narratives: A Study of Voice and Agency

Date: 20-06-2020


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To Whom It May Concern

It is to certify that Dr. Parveen Kumari, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Central University of Jammu has delivered a talk on the topic "Dalit Women's Life Narratives as an Agency for Social Change" on 27th November, 2019 in the Centre for Study of Social Exclusion & Inclusive Policy (CSSEIP), University of Jammu.


Prof. Jasbir Singh

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Mother's Story: The 'Third Space' for Emancipation in Dalit Women's Life Narratives

By Parveen Kumari¹, Anupama Vohra²

Abstract

In India, Dalit women wrestle not only with gender and economic deprivation, but also discrimination associated with caste and untouchability, which results in the denial of their social, economic, and political rights. Today, Dalit women's life narratives form an important segment of not only Dalit literature, but also world literature. The narration of their sufferings due to gender and caste forms the basis of these narratives. The articulation of the past, which is a "narrative strategy of reminiscence", is the most crucial aspect of Dalit women's life narratives. While narrating the past, Dalit women try to negotiate direction for the future, and their mother's story is the pedestal on which their life story depends: "...a woman writing thinks back through her mothers'" (Woolf 1929: 81). The oppression of caste, class, and gender pushes Dalit women to understand the construction of power structures. In their life narratives, Dalit women narrate their oppressive lived experiences, but simultaneously acknowledge the resilience of their mothers. They see their mothers as a source of strength as they display "tremendous strength in adverse conditions" (Collins 2000: 75). Against this background, this paper analyses the select life narratives of Dalit women: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* (2017). The study underlines the mother's story as a past which becomes the 'Third Space' in Dalit women's life narratives that acts as a space of emancipation for the future generation, thus giving the marginalized voices a space to articulate and redefine the center.

Keywords: Dalit women, Mother's story, Reminiscence, Third Space, Emancipation

Introduction

It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. (Rich 1976: 221)

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A mother's story is the foundation of a woman's life. A woman as an individual cannot separate herself from her mother as "The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, come[s] from her mother" (Rich 1976: 218). Nancy Chodorow argues, "...the process of identity formation in girls takes place through continuous attachment to and identification with the mother" (qt. in Glenn 1994: 4). A woman achieves awareness of her existence through observation of her mother's life because she identifies herself with her mother. In this context, Virginia Woolf points out, "...a woman writing thinks back through her mother's" (1929: 81). For many, the mother has an audible and visible appearance in women's writing. The mother's story is not merely a guide for the woman writer but also becomes an agent for social change: "...the mother...frequently becomes instrumental to larger and seemingly more important social change objectives...mothers are accorded agency to affect social change" (O' Reilly, *Twenty-first* 2010: 368). The narration of the mother's story as a reminiscence becomes the source of inspiration as well as the action for rising against societal and familial oppression.

In India, Dalit women wrestle with not only gender and economic deprivation but also discrimination associated with caste and untouchability, which results in the denial of their social, economic, and political rights. Jyoti Lanjewar observes, "Dalit women are also Dalits in relation to Dalit men within the Dalit community. They are thus Dalits twice over insofar as they bear the burden of both gender and caste oppression" (qt. in Basu 2002: 195). Dalit women are victims of double marginalization as they are the targets of discrimination within and outside their community because of patriarchy. Hence, Dalit women are "Dalits among Dalits" (Bhoite 2013: vii), the most harmed and unrecognized human beings.

A Dalit woman writer locates Dalit women's "experiences at the complex intersections between and among gender, class, caste, rural/urban divisions and makes a strong case for human rights for all based on rational thought honed by formal education and mediated by motherwit — a very rich metaphor that points to women's/mother's knowledges" (Deo 2013: xiii). While narrating their "lived experience" (Parham-Payne 2017: 2) with the oppression of caste, gender, and class, Dalit women make the 'mother's story' a "pre-text" (Viljoen 2007: 187) in their life narratives, which is a source of strength and awareness for them.

Life narrative is the "act of people representing what they know best, their own lives..." (Smith and Watson 2001: 1). The narration is the representation of the narrator's own life story. Dalit women's life narratives, today, form an important segment of not only Dalit literature, but also world literature. The narration of sufferings due to gender and caste is the basis of these narratives. The articulation of the past, which is a "narrative strategy of reminiscence" (Christopher 2012: 17) is the most crucial aspect of Dalit women's life narratives. A Dalit woman, while narrating the past, tries to negotiate direction for the future, and her mother's story is the pedestal on which her life story depends. The mother's resilience and an unbreakable spirit against the odds become the source of knowledge for Dalit women to overcome adverse circumstances. The mother's story is the 'Third Space'³ for Emancipation in Dalit women's life narratives. Homi Bhabha emphasizes the location of marginalized subjects as the 'Third space' which is crucial in the life narratives of the marginalized as "Dissent operates in a Third space... space where oppressed and oppressor are both able to come together in the mirror of each other..." (Roberts

³Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* defines "Third Space" as "liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction...This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility...that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (1994: 5).

2011: 97). Hence, 'Third Space' is a space created by the marginalized in her/his life narrative which acts as a space where the oppressed and the oppressor come together and the oppressed comes to an understanding of her/his oppression due to the dominance of the oppressor, thus using the Third space as a space of resistance. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* observe that in the life narratives of the marginalized:

...the "I" is often representative of a larger group's experience at powerful moments of social change and an articulation of the desire for transformation as a social group. (2001: 46)

The 'marginalized subject' in these life narratives represents and is the voice of the whole community to which it belongs and speaks for social change. Against this background, this paper analyses the select life narratives of Dalit women: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*⁴(2008), Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary*⁵(2006), and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*⁶(2017). The study underlines the mother's story as a past which becomes the 'Third Space' in Dalit women's life narratives to act as a space of emancipation for the future generation, thus giving the marginalized voices a space to articulate and redefine the dominant discourse.

Discussion and Analysis of the Mother's Story in Select Life Narratives

Urmila Pawar's life narrative *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* attests to the presence of a powerful mother figure. Urmila Pawar belongs to the Mahar⁷ caste in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. Her mother, Laxmi Pawar, had to weave bamboo baskets to earn livelihood for the family. After her husband's death, her only wish was to educate her children. The title of Urmila Pawar's life narrative "The Weave of My Life" is itself an inspiration from her mother's hardships: "My mother used to weave aaydans" (Pawar, 2008: x). Like her mother, who weaved *aaydan*⁸ for livelihood, Urmila Pawar also knits her mother's memories into her life narrative. The symbol of weaving baskets by her mother is the representation of Urmila Pawar's writing: "The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that link us. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are originally linked" (2008: x). Writing and weaving both are the means of expression and creation: "text and textiles...are the same thing" (Prain 2014). Urmila Pawar sees her mother as "an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium, her position in society allowed her to use" (Walker 1972: 407).

Urmila Pawar recalls her mother's hardships which motivated her to strive for progress and create her identity and independence through education and self-awareness. Gloria Wade-Gayles comments, "...mothers in [Marginalized] women's [stories] are strong and devoted...they are

⁴Urmila Pawar's life narrative *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs (WML)* is originally written in Marathi as *Aaydan* which was published in 2003. It was translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Maya Pandit and published in 2008.

⁵Baby Halder's life narrative *A Life Less Ordinary* is originally written in Bengali as *Aalo Aandhari* meaning "From darkness to light" (*LLO*, 2006: 73). The narrative was first translated into Hindi by Prabodh Kumar and published in 2002. In Bengali, *Aalo Aandhari* was published in 2004. Urvashi Butalia translated the Hindi version of *Aalo Aandhari* into English as *A Life Less Ordinary*, published in 2006.

⁶Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* is originally written in English and published in 2017.

⁷A Dalit caste in Maharashtra.

⁸*Aaydan* is the generic term used for all things made from bamboo.

really affectionate" (qt. in Collins 2000: 187). *Aaye*⁹ was a source of support and power which made her confident to fight against injustice. The memories of her mother weaving baskets under a *Vad* tree left a deep impact on Urmila's 'self': "That was the last thing our eyes, heavy with sleep, would take in before we went to bed. And when we opened our eyes early in the morning, she would be sitting in the same place" (*WML* 2008: 64). Despite ill health, her mother continued to weave baskets: "In the past it was my father's hands that worked, now it was hers.... Pressing a rod or pestle into her stomach to lessen her pains, she would continue with her weaving" (*WML* 2008: 64-75). Suzanna Danuta Walters remarks, "The victimization of the mother is carried over onto the daughter" (1992: 145). Her mother's strong will against odds enabled Urmila Pawar to remain brave in unsympathetic conditions.

In her life narrative, Urmila recollects the support of her mother for her. In her school, Herlekar, a school teacher during the study hours always ordered Urmila "to do the dirty work, like cleaning the board, the class, collecting the dirt, and disposing it off" (*WML* 2008: 67). The teacher considered these activities as menial and found her appropriate to perform these duties as she was a Mahar. He once slapped her when she refused to do the work. When Aaye, Urmila's mother, came to know about the incident, she immediately came to her daughter's rescue and support, giving a warning to Herlekar, the teacher:

'...Look, I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree, and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better. And you treat my girl like this? How dare you?' Aaye was speaking in her dialect in a voice, loud and ringing. Then she thundered, 'Let me see you laying even a finger on my girl again and I'll show you! Let me see how you can pass this road if you do so.' (*WML*2008: 69)

Despite her poor and powerless condition, the Dalit mother not only protected her daughter but also taught her the lesson of "the necessary skills to survive" (Crew n.d.). After this incident, the author recalls: "Guruji did not beat me again. I started going to school on time. And most important of all, I started considering my mother a great support" (*WML* 2008: 69).

The economic, caste, and gender factors make the process of "mothering" (Glenn 1994: 1) painful and problematic. The acknowledgment of the mother's support and the telling of the struggle of the mother is an integral part of the marginalized women's writing. A similar parallel can be drawn in Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" in which she admits her mother's toil to feed and educate her children:

Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school.

She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds.... Her day began before sunup and did not end until late at night. (1972: 406)

There are so many "stories of struggle and mothering...considering love and compassion and health and safety for their families, despite a broader social context..." (Dani McClain qt. in

⁹Mother in the Marathi dialect.

Warfield 2019). Despite the hardships, Aaye never gave up her strength of mind as she knew her ways of negotiating were the role model for her daughter. Dani McClain, the author of *We Live for the We*, affirms the struggle of marginalized women of 'mothering' so that: "...you can be the best parent..., and that's going to see your children for who they are and help them find their own self-assurance and dignity" (qt. in Warfield 2019). Urmila's mother's fortitude taught her never to succumb to discrimination, violence, and challenges. She learned from her mother to keep her head high and speak up against inequity and unrighteousness. Thus, Aaye emerged as an agent of rebellion and an inspiration for her daughter to survive in a caste-ridden society and gave Urmila, the author of *The Weave of My Life*, an opportunity to voice the unheard struggle of Dalit women in words.

The lessons learned came to her rescue in critical situations. A farmer once attempted to sexually abuse Urmila. She pushed him and fought him bravely but avoided telling her mother because she knew that she "would have simply torn him apart" (*WML* 2008: 126). The incident substantiates Urmila Pawar's will and determination who, through the observation of her mother's life and her struggle to fight the wrong, realized the power in her 'self' to wrestle any abuse and discrimination that came her way.

Urmila Pawar, in the later years of her marital life, carried out the motherly legacy of care and support, and ensured her daughters became self-reliant. Her daughter Malvika wanted to marry Ravi, a boy from Uttar Pradesh, whom she loved. Urmila Pawar supported her daughter's decision and even went against her husband and other family members for her daughter's happiness. She also inspired her younger daughter, Manini, to assert herself against the relatives and her father who were compelling her to marry Uday just because her elder sister Malvika refused to marry him:

'...Are you willing to marry Uday? I have nothing to say if you are willing.'
 'No', she said, 'I am not at all willing.'
 'All right then. Tell your father clearly.' (*WML* 2008: 312)

Patriarchy limits choices for women. The mentioned incident shows how Dalit mothers help their daughters to stand against this oppression. Hence, *The Weave of My Life* gives insight into the story of Dalit mothers and their legacy. In her novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison reflects upon the importance of "other-mothering" (O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison* 2004: xiii), when she makes the narrator narrate Hagar Dead's need for mother's support and legacy: "She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girlfriends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it" (Morrison 1977: 311). Similarly, Dalit women need 'Mother's story' to live life with confidence. Aaye became the role model for her daughter Urmila because of her resilience, courage, and determination. Sara Ruddick, in her conversation with Andrea O'Reilly on 'Maternal Thinking', affirms: "I do identify resilient cheerfulness as a virtue of maternal practices. Resilient cheerfulness resists despair and courts hope" (O'Reilly and Ruddick 2009: 21). Aaye's strength of fighting back against familial and social subjugation filled her daughter Urmila with optimism, and she later passed on the similar strength to fight back injustice in her daughters, Malvika and Manini. Therefore, the story of Aaye's struggle becomes a source of inspiration not only for Urmila Pawar and her daughters, but also for marginalized women at large. Hence, telling the mother's story acts as a "...third space...a place where the oppressed can plot their liberation" (West 2016: 53). Dalit women are oppressed in public as well as private

spaces because of their gender and caste. Hence, articulation of mother's sufferings becomes the Third space where Dalit woman narrators revolt against oppression.

Akin to Urmila's Aaye's story in *The Weave of My Life*, the story of Baby Halder's mother is the sub-text of her life narrative *A Life Less Ordinary*. Baby belongs to Halder¹⁰ caste. Her life narrative represents the reminiscence of her mother, Ganga, a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her husband, Upendranath Halder. Unable to cope with the long absence and insensitive behavior of her alcoholic husband, Baby's mother abandoned him and her three children and left the house along with her youngest infant son. This mother's life reflects the appalling helplessness of Dalit women: "...the ability for mothers to foster their children's preservation and growth is hindered by social factors like domestic violence" (Sara Ruddick qt. in Jenny N. n.d.). The mother's anguish made Baby conscious about the physical and mental victimization of Dalit women because of the patriarchal aggressive behavior. Upendranath Halder had a job but sent money home occasionally: "...there were gaps of several months" (*LLO* 2006: 1). The money came irregularly, and Baby's mother made efforts to apprise her husband, but he never bothered to respond or communicate. It became hard to provide even the basic amenities to the children, which added to Ganga's mental distress:

Ma found it very difficult to make do: how could she not?... Ma asked Baba's friends for help but none of them was in a position to take on the burden of another family. Ma also thought of taking up a job, but that would have meant going out of the house, which she had never done. And after all, what work could she do? Another of her worries was: what would people say? (2006: 1-2)

Baby's mother was not educated and remained dependent on her husband for her and her children's maintenance: "A woman who is illiterate and does not know what her rights are and who is not allowed to move about without her husband's permission is not likely to take the initiative..." (Thomas 2005:142). Baby's mother suffered mental agony, and she deeply probes the suffering of her mother, "She was in a terrible state. I was a little better off than her because at least I had some friends, especially Tutul and Dolly, whom I could always talk to and who loved me a lot" (*LLO* 2006: 2). Her mother suffered mentally and emotionally and had no one to share her pain with. The situations became unbearable when her father (Upendranath Halder) took her elder sister Sushila to Karimpur to settle her marriage without asking and informing his wife, thus making her a "non-entity" (Jacob 2009: 2) with no right or say in decision making for her children's future, leaving her "to adopt...the stereotyped role of a weak and helpless woman... to ensure complete dependence on the male sex" (Sharma et al. 2013: S245). Baby recognizes her mother as a fellow victim to integrate her 'self' and 'existence' with her mother:

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, 'whatever comes.' A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman.... The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter. (Rich 1976: 243)

¹⁰Halder(in the Bengali language): A Dalit caste in West Bengal.

The author recollects her mother's suffering: "...she couldn't live like this anymore" and "one day, with grief in her heart and my little brother in her arms, she just walked away from home" (*LLO* 2006: 3). According to Caroline McGee, "...mothers are also concerned about the impact of the domestic violence on their children and for many of the mothers, "this is the trigger which led to their leaving" (2001: 69). Baby's mother also opted for the same choice. Sara Ruddick observes, "Some mothers are incapable of interested participation in the practices of mothering because of emotional, intellectual, or physical disability. Severe poverty may make interested maternal practice...nearly impossible" (qt. in Jenny N. n.d.).

Suffering and the absence of a mother in her life became a bitter part of Baby's 'self'. She and her brothers were always on the search for their mother. After many years they found her and brought her home. However, there was no feeling or emotional expression on her mother's face:

Anger, sadness, happiness: didn't she feel any of these at seeing her children after so many years?... I looked at her again. She looked ill. She spoke very little. She still had *sindoor*¹¹ in her hair, a large *tika* on her forehead. But for whom? For a man who had no time to remember her, who was doing perfectly well without her? (*LLO* 2006: 115)

Sindoor and *tika* are the symbols of a married woman in Indian society. She must exhibit these symbols on her body till her husband is alive. It does not matter how much she is ill-treated; a wife has to display these symbols as markers of her devotion and loyalty to him: "The ways of enslaving woman in the patriarchal society are very subtle. The total sacrifice of personality is framed out in such a way that if she doesn't follow the code of conduct, she will underestimate herself...the intention of a man to enslave her is transformed into her own intention to become a *pativrata*¹²" (Athalye 2003:72). Later, when her mother died in a hospital, Upendranath Halder did not bother to visit her in the hospital as he was happy with his second wife.

The sufferings of her mother had already sown the seeds of a rebel in Baby, which stresses "the daughter's identification with...the mother" (Gardiner 1981: 356). When Baby also went through the same mental and physical violence in her marriage, she also rebelled and made the same choice. She left her husband, along with her children, and started working as a domestic helper in Delhi. She saw her mother's decision of separation and leaving her children to her husband as an act of resistance and anger against the oppression and oppressor. Taking a cue from her mother's life, Baby got the spirit to revolt against the oppressor, but she did not want her children to experience the same anguish which she suffered in her life because of the absence of her mother, so she chose to take her children along with her to Delhi.

Baby's mother saw education as the only way to emancipation from the sufferings a woman endures because of her marginalized position in a patriarchal society: "...despite all her difficulties, [her mother] did not let them stop studying" (*LLO* 2006: 1). Even in difficult circumstances, her mother kept telling her to study well: "Education and economic upliftment should form the first step in their overall objective of women's empowerment" (Sinha and Sinha 2007: 247). Ganga's [Baby's mother] emphasis on education for her daughter is itself a narration of the lost dream of being somebody and to have the power to do away with mental agony and sufferings which she endured because of being illiterate:

¹¹A traditional red or orange-red colored cosmetic powder from India that is usually worn by married women in the part of their hair.

¹²In South Asia, among Hindus: a woman who is faithful and devoted to her husband.

...“crazy,” “Sainted” mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who die with their real gifts stifled within them. (Walker 1972: 403)

Baby Halder kept alive this urge for learning infused in her by her mother. Prabodh Kumar, her employer, recognized this urge in her and motivated her to write her life story by providing her with a pen and notebook, “Here. Write something in this notebook” (*LLO* 2006: 152). With that pen, she wrote about her mother's struggle and her sufferings and documented her resistance against oppression and suppression. She ends her life narrative, “Had she been alive today and seen that her Baby was able to read and was learning to do more, how happy she would have been” (*LLO* 2006: 174).

Hence, the articulation of the untold story of her mother's silence in Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* becomes the space of resistance against the double oppression suffered by Dalit women in society and within the family. Carolyn Kay Steedman in “Stories” states that the mother “shaped [her] childhood by the stories she carried from her own, and from an earlier family history. They were stories designed to show [her] the terrible unfairness of things” (1998: 244). Mother's sufferings became the distressing memory of Baby's childhood and made her conscious about the patriarchal double standards which evaluate women more strictly than their male counterparts. The situation becomes more difficult in the case of Dalit women who already are on the extreme periphery of the societal rules and codes because of the caste system. A similar narration of mother's struggle can be found in Sujatha Gidla's life narrative *Ants Among Elephants*. A daughter can identify and relate to the untold sufferings of her mother. Luce Irigaray, a French feminist, psycholinguist, and cultural theorist states:

The relation with the mother is a mad desire because it is a “dark continent” par excellence. She remains in the shadow of our culture. [...] Could the father substitute the uterus with language? But his law refuses any representation of that body, that first love. It is sacrificed to form the empire of representation, which privileges the masculine and the human race. (qt. in Stevens 2015: 94)

The Dalit mother is always silent and cannot be represented in the texts which endorse patriarchy and casteism. Hence, Sujatha Gidla writes her life narrative “in white ink”¹³ (Cixous 1976:881), to articulate her mother's story making it a ‘Third Space’ where “silence speaks” (Rigney 1991:3). Sujatha Gidla belongs to “an untouchable”¹⁴ (*AAE* 2017: 3) caste from Andhra Pradesh. In her life narrative, she makes her mother's [Manjula] hardship as the representation of Dalit women's struggle. Manjula suffered discrimination and alienation as a student; she “felt so out of place” (*AAE* 2017: 190) in Benares¹⁵ where she was pursuing post-graduation in History. She studied hard to get first division. However, she ended up securing second division as Professor R.K. Tripathi held strong caste prejudices: “Then, like a photo developing, a picture formed in her mind. She had made top marks in all the papers except for those that were graded by Tripathi.... His venom had a delayed effect, and Manjula's career would suffer” (*AAE* 2017: 196). Manjula's story of

¹³“Writing in white ink,” means resisting the stable language of patriarchy and creating feminine writing on a literary as well as on a metaphorical level.

¹⁴ Dalit in traditional Indian society.

¹⁵The former name of Varanasi.

victimization as a student represents the agony of Dalit students who are given low grades, failed and at times indirectly compelled by the teachers because of their personal caste-based grudges to commit suicide: "Jaspreet Singh [a student at the Government Medical College (Chandigarh)]...was stunned to find that he had failed community medicine...he was even more devastated by the alleged reason: His professor was determined to flunk him because of his caste" (Overdorf 2011). Meena Kandasamy writes that Dalit student's suicide is:

not just an individual exit strategy, it is a shaming of society that has failed him or her...education has now become a disciplining enterprise working against Dalit students: they are constantly under threat of rustication, expulsion, defamation, discontinuation. (qt. in Biswas 2016)

Hence, the educational institutions which are meant to be the means of change and ending inequalities, ironically end up as the sources of anxieties and restlessness because of the teachers' indifferent attitudes and caste prejudices.

Dalit women's sufferings in the workspace hinder economic progress and hence lead to misery and dependence. As a lecturer, when Manjula went to report at her place of posting, the Brahmin principal harshly told her: "You have no job here. I won't let you report" (*AAE* 2017: 244). Highlighting the effect of caste discrimination on Dalit women in the educational institutions, Bhagwan Das writes: "Universities and colleges abusing the power and authority given to 'autonomous bodies' close the doors of progress to students, teachers, and employees..." (qt. in Mukherjee 2007: xxiv). Hence, the insensitive and discriminatory outlook of the people in authority and power closes the doors of progress and empowerment of Dalit women. By narrating her mother's struggle, Sujatha Gidla "questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies" (Holmstrom 2012: xiv) worn by Dalit women.

Sujatha Gidla realized the marginal existence of Dalit women through the observation of her mother's deplorable condition. Women occupy a secondary place at home with no right to the money they earn and are denied decision making, which pushes these helpless women to the margins. Manjula was educated and working, but all her money was taken away by her brother and his friends: "And all of them leeches off Manjula for their expenses" (*AAE* 2017: 202). As a woman, she was denied the right to economic independence. The lack of awareness about their rights and marginalized position compels Dalit women toward misery. They are even denied the right to choose a life partner on their own. Manjula was married to a man chosen by her brother who turned out to be violent. He had no concern for the family: "He took his mother's and Manjula's gold chains and pawned them..." (*AAE* 2017: 282). When she confronted him, he beat her mercilessly: "A hand grabbed Manjula by her hair, lifting her right out of bed and onto her feet.... Then he slapped her face. Manjula screamed" (*AAE* 2017: 283). Domestic violence reduces a woman to a non-human existence: "...Dalit woman... labors outside her home...When she comes home, her husband will be waiting to snatch her hard-earned money which is often the only source to feed the family. If she refuses to give him the money, the husband beats her up" (Ghosh 2007:58). Domestic violence is a threat to the dignity, self-confidence, and self-respect of a woman as Susan Schechter states, "Domestic violence is not simply an argument. It is a pattern of coercive controls that one person exercises over another and abusers use physical and sexual violence, threats, emotional insults, and economic deprivation as a way to dominate their victims and get their way" (qt. in Kaur and Garg 2008: 73).

The empathy and identification with the mother's sufferings reflect in the writings of women. The identification of herself with her mother as a fellow victim motivated Sujatha Gidla to make her mother's story a central part of her life narrative and therefore a space of articulation of pain and protest their victimization. Discussions of female identity thus inevitably return to the special nature of the mother-daughter bond, and "female identity bears special relevance to women's empathic literary identifications" (Gardiner 1981: 356).

Mother's story forms an inseparable part of Dalit women's life narratives: "...the autobiographical project symbolizes the search for origins, for women a search for maternal origins" (Brodzki 1998:157) where "The constitutive is reconstructed from the constituted" (Brodzki 1998: 158). Dalit women's life narratives are the reconstruction of the already existing stories which signify the search for maternal roots, giving meaning and shape to a Dalit woman narrator. The mother's story in Dalit women's life narrative acts as a "Third space of enunciation" (Bhabha "Cultural," 2006: 157) where articulation acts as resistance to the subjugation and becomes the means of liberation from oppression. The mother's story in the life narratives of Urmila Pawar, Baby Halder, and Sujatha Gidla renders voice to an unarticulated story. This unspoken story has remarkable implications and importance for marginalized and suffering women to gain hope and an indomitable will to survive as "within the reality of our universal inadequacy, uncertainty and blindness is a limitless capacity to reach out to one another, to hold one another, a limitless energy, a limitless empowerment which is available and accessible directly in our finite limited condition" (Kogawa qt. in Vohra 2009: 228). The mother's story in Dalit women's life narratives becomes the space of emancipation for women at large and Dalit women in particular which inspires them to fight back to break free from the shackles of dominance, subjugation, and overlapping oppressions of caste, class, and gender.

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Contents

Sr. No.	Article	Author(s)	Page
1.	Post-Brexit and COVID-19 period goan migration scenario to the United Kingdom : A Compendium of Literature	Afonso Botelho	1-16
2.	Surveying Frontier, Imagining Territories : Early Colonial Surveys and the Construction of Territories in the Northeast	Dharmendra K. Baruah	17-36
3.	Socio-Economic Rise of Spinners and Weavers in Rural India : Empowerment through Khadi	Shruti Gupta, Deepali Rastogi, Ritu Mathur	37-54
4.	Neo-Liberal Developmental Policies and their Impact on Women and Gender Equality in India : A Critique	Nisha Jain	55-77
5.	Problem of Identity and Space : A Study of Dalit Diasporic Testimonies	Parveen Kumari	78-90
6.	Performance Assessment of MGNREGA during the recent economic slowdown	Arushi Jain Smita Sharma	91-112
7.	Disabled women and their heterogeneities : deconstruction from multiple lenses	Rajesh Kumar Chander	113-124
8.	Value inculcating strategies : A case study of SVM School, Pinjore	Naresh Kumari	125-144

Problem of Identity and Space: A Study of Dalit Diasporic Testimonies

PARVEEN KUMARI

Abstract

Diaspora means human migration away from their original homeland. The need for progress is one of the major factors of this migration. Human mobility has become an integral part of the global economy. For centuries Indians have been emigrating to different parts of the world. According to the report published in The Times of India March 27, 2018: "Indian Diaspora is the highest as compared to the countries all over the world". The movement of Indians leads to the influence of Indian culture and traditions on the foreign societies.

Dalits of India form a major section of Indian population and also constitute an indispensable part of the Indian diaspora. The migration of Dalits to Britain, France and Germany as indentured labourers to work in the plantations started during the colonial period. The post-colonial migration of Dalits is directed towards the developed countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as professionals and later to the Gulf and South East Asian countries as skilled or semiskilled labourers. Dalits migrate to these developed countries with the hope of progress and also in the expectation of escaping marginalized space and marginalized identity which they endure in India. However, to their sheer disappointment there is no place without caste. The question arises 'has caste prejudice followed Dalits overseas'? The present paper highlights the problem of identity and space in the testimonies of Dalit diaspora in the United Kingdom documented in Nirula's Dalit Diaspora in the United Kingdom which is published in 2014. It is estimated that "50,000 to much higher 200,000" Dalits live in the United Kingdom. These testimonies are evidence of caste discrimination and harassment in United Kingdom which leads Dalits to question 'What are they and what position do they have in the human society?'

Keywords: Dalit diaspora, testimonies, identity, space

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Drishti: the Sight

Vol.- X, Issue - I, (May, 2021-October, 2021)

CONTENTS

- Editorial # 5
- Reflection of Religious Beliefs in Kachari Origin Myths: An Ecocritical Study # 7
Aftafizur Rahman, Dr. Pritam Priya Goswami
- Of Mothers and Stepmothers: A Contemporary Rendition of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* by Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothanodi* # 13
Dr. Bhupen Chutia, Ms. Murchana Das
- At the Heart of Surpanakha: Re-visioning Female Identity in *Lanka's Princess* # 18
Dr. Anju E. A
- Why 'Maleficent' Matters: Acculturation and Re-tellings of Fairy Tales # 23
Dr. Farrdina Hussain
- Resisting Woman: Rewriting Mythology in Kavita Kane's *Menaka's Choice* # 28
Dr. Parveen Kumari
- Exploring the Queer in The *Mahabharata*: A Study of Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* # 36
Kavya Rajeev
- In-between Myth and Reality, Tradition and Modernity: A Reading of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* # 41
Munmi Bora
- Deconstructing Mythology and Re-writing the Body: Reading Meena Kandasamy's *Ms Militancy* # 46
Dr. Gunja Patni, Dr. Rimika Singhvi
- Wilderness and Culture: An Ecocritical Approach to Select Mythical Works # 51
Patrika Handique, Dr. Anurag Bhattacharrya
- Leaving a Stench: Modernity, Myths and the Female Agency in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* # 57
Raktima Bhuyan
- Revisiting the Gandhian Myth through the Device of Food: A Study of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* # 62
Rashmi Das
- Staging Gender: A Feminist Study Of Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* # 66
Sanjib Kumar Kar
- A Voice from the Fire: Contemporaneity of Draupadi in *Yajnaseni* # 72
Dr. Sumithra Devi S.

- Rewriting Yoruba Folklore: A Postcolonial Reading of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* # 77
Prerana Chakravarty
- The Use of Myth in Hema Sarasvatī's *Prahrāda Caritra* # 82
Pranjal Sharma Bashishtha
- Myth as Representation of the Past and the Present: A Study of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* # 89
Dr. Saugata Kumar Nath
- Studying the Female Body in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: A Posthumanist Approach # 93
Asrin Khatun
- Taming her with a Tonsure: Reading the Symbolism of Hair in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) # 99
Damini Kashyap
- Rhetoric and the Art of Persuasion: A Study of Power Politics in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People* # 103
Dr. Lakshminath Kagyung
- Negotiating Gender, Performativity and Heterosexual hegemony: A discursive study on Ambai's select short fictions # 107
Dr. Premila Swamy
- P(l)ained Hills: The Discourse of Frontier Binaries in Early Assamese Fiction with special reference to *Miri- Jiyori* # 112
Rajarshi Kalita
- Reading Masculine Anxiety in Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* # 117
Simran Tripathi, Dr. Sucharita Sharma
- Out of Lesbian Bond, Heterosexual Bound as A Metaphorical Suicide: A Lesbo-Anomic Reading of Shobhaa De's *Snapshots* # 122
Dipak Giri
- Demystifying Anthropocentrism: Othering and Identity in *The Vigil* by Sarah Joseph # 126
Gayathri Varma U
- লক্ষ্মীধৰ শৰ্মাৰ বচনাত সংস্কাৰ-আন্দোলনৰ প্ৰভাৱ : এটি আলোচনা # 131
ড° মহেশ্বৰ কলিতা

EDITORIAL

Online Transaction of Teaching-learning during Pandemic

In view of the second wave of the pandemic, it is certain that the online transaction of teaching-learning is here to stay. The learners are by this time to some extent conditioned to such a situation following their hour of bafflement caused by the first wave. Students are the main stakeholders of an educational institution and they must get respite from their anxiety over the possible academic fallouts arising out of the presence of the pandemic.

The authorities therefore must make objective planning to find ways about how best they could provide the teachers and the students with the necessary infrastructural facilities, viz. skill, trainings, internet connectivity, tools, and knowledge resources. There is spreading lockdown and the unpredictability of the situation weighs heavy upon the minds of the people in general. However, even at this juncture, in our country, most of the hinterlands reel under connectivity-crisis in terms of internet facilities. The government must therefore wake up to the situation and by taking cue of the situation explore the ways of providing equitable opportunities in online academic transactions through proper IT planning. The Universities too need to gear themselves up to create some standardized pools of knowledge-resources in view of the present circumstances. The objective should be not just to deliver functional contents to the learners but also to be confident of themselves about the resources given as being genuine, relevant, well-researched and well written. The university departments may also research and select from the available data available in the various platforms on the internet for providing them to the students in conformity with the syllabi in use (the university/College departments and libraries may come with lists of websites and links, which the students can depend upon without an iota of doubt. In this regard, policies may be adopted for mobilizing the services of the prominent universities and libraries of the world for international exchange of educational data at a greater level).

Academics need also adopt appropriate methodologies to facilitate their academic transaction. Universities and colleges may also arrange for training and orientation sessions for the faculties regarding online teaching.

Another notable concern is also that in view of suspension of physical mode of classroom learning, there is possibility of stress in the mind of the students. The institutions can also think of engaging one or two psychological counselors to reach out to those learners, who may be available in need of supports in case of stress and trauma arising out of the new familial and social environment during the pandemic. #

Focus area for November, 2021 issue

GENDER AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

Gender has been an issue, inextricably related in various forms to literature and popular culture. Gender as a cultural concept cuts across the traditional notion of a 'man' or a 'woman'. It has rather encompassed all kinds of human existence. In the post modern era, gender is looked as a performance. Judith Butler opines that the subject is a product of discourse and a performative construct. Following the Derridian notion of deference, Butler postulates that the subject never achieves its completion. It is caught up in the process of constant deferral and differentiation. If the subject never achieves its completion, gender can only be an effect of discourse and not the cause of discourse. Thus gender is a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary and cultural discourses.

Popular culture is a contested site. On the one hand, it refers to the cultural practices of lived culture that people engage in. On the other hand, popular culture also refers to the cultural texts which are symbolic and whose function is the production of meaning through words, images or practices. Popular culture, as a fluid concept, encompasses a large number of cultural texts and practices ranging from films to newspaper articles, computer games to music, mass media like Television, Radio, the Press and the emerging social media et al.

Representation is a process of communication that depicts or describes something or someone. In the literary as well as cultural arena, language and images are the key symbolic systems through which representations are made. Representation is crucial in the creation of meanings. Thus, representations are constructed through language, images and socio-cultural practices, and possess a material as well as symbolic dimension. (Milestone & Meyer, 2012:8)

Incorporating these concepts and their diverse dimensions and notions of gender and representation in literature and popular culture, **Drishti: the Sight** intends to reflect upon the theme from multidimensional perspectives and newer theoretical paradigms. Scholars are invited to contribute their original scholarly research papers on any possible topic within the focus area for the next issue of the Journal to be published in November, 2021.

Scholars are requested to submit their papers by following the norms (please read the 'Mode of Submission' portion in the Call for Papers on this website). FOR PAPER SUBMISSION, THE WINDOW WILL REMAIN OPEN FOR THE PERIOD BETWEEN JUNE, 15 AND JULY, 05, 2021 ON THIS WEBSITE.

(Contributors may also submit papers on subjects other than this focus area for the forthcoming November issue. Regarding the modalities to be followed for submission, they are requested to go through the CFP published on this website).



RESEARCHER

Volume XV

No. 1

2019

N Suresh Rao

Monika Sharma, Rakesh Kumar, Rohit Rattan & Ajay Sanotra

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RESEARCHER

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

A Multidisciplinary View on Information: A Case Study

Hydrochemistry and water quality of Gharana wetland conservation reserve, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Late Cretaceous (Maastrichtian) faunal assemblage from a new intertrappean locality, Uthawali, District Dhar, Madhya Pradesh, Central India

SOCIAL SCIENCES

India and China in South Asia

Demand for New States in India: A Case Study of Statehood Demand for Gorkhaland

Understanding the Conundrum of Pakistan Afghanistan Relationship since 9/11

Incidence of Poverty in the State of Jammu and Kashmir: A Micro Level Analysis

BUSINESS STUDIES

Empirical Assessment of the Role of Human Capital Innovation in Service Innovation Implementation in the Hospitality Industry

Role of Information Technology for Product Distribution in Tourism Industry

ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Viramma: *Life of an untouchable*: The Subaltern Speaks

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CONTENTS

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CONTENTS

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 1 | A Multidisciplinary View on Information: A Case Study | 1-3 |
| | <i>N Suresh Rao</i> | |
| 2 | Hydrochemistry and water quality of Gharana wetland conservation reserve, Jammu and Kashmir, India | 4-12 |
| | <i>Monika Sharma, Rakesh Kumar, Rohit Rattan & Ajay Sanotra</i> | |
| 3 | Late Cretaceous (Maastrichtian) faunal assemblage from a new intertrappean locality, Uthawali, District Dhar, Madhya Pradesh, Central India | 13-26 |
| | <i>D.S. Kshetrimayum & Varun Parmar</i> | |

SOCIAL SCIENCES

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 4 | India and China in South Asia | 27-33 |
| | <i>Reetika Sharma</i> | |
| 5 | Demand for New States in India: A Case Study of Statehood Demand for Gorkhaland | 34-39 |
| | <i>Satish Kumar Rana</i> | |
| 6 | Understanding the Conundrum of Pakistan Afghanistan Relationship since 9/11 | 40-49 |
| | <i>Sunil Kumar</i> | |
| 7 | Incidence of Poverty in the State of Jammu and Kashmir: A Micro Level Analysis | 50-64 |
| | <i>Tsering Yangzom & Reena Bhasin</i> | |

BUSINESS STUDIES

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 8 | Empirical Assessment of the Role of Human Capital Innovation in Service Innovation Implementation in the Hospitality Industry | 65-77 |
| | <i>Vivek Sharma & Dada Ab Rouf Bhat</i> | |
| 9 | Role of Information Technology for Product Distribution in Tourism Industry | 78-87 |
| | <i>Jasvinder Singh</i> | |

ARTS AND HUMANITIES

- | | | |
|----|--|--------|
| 10 | <i>Viramma: Life of an untouchable: The Subaltern Speaks</i> | 88-95 |
| | <i>Parveen Kumari</i> | |
| 11 | A Postcolonial Study of the Chakma Folktales | 96-105 |
| | <i>Prasanta Chakraborty</i> | |



Viramma: Life of an untouchable: The Subaltern Speaks

Parveen Kumari*

ABSTRACT

Dalit women in India suffer triple-oppressions of gender, caste and class and as a result face exploitation, exclusion and isolation in society. They are 'subalterns among subalterns.' Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written about their experiences of suffering. A big obstacle in the way of Dalit women's empowerment is their lack of education. However, if given a chance, these women can narrate their happy as well as painful memories and experiences to someone who can help document their voices. Viramma: Life of an untouchable, the life narrative of a Dalit woman named Viramma, is an answer to the question 'Can the subaltern speak?' Viramma: Life of an untouchable demonstrates that subaltern can speak and break any barrier or ceiling of oppression. The present paper highlights the significance of life narrative in documenting the voice of subaltern. The paper also examines the role played by Viramma's memory in the construction of Viramma's life narrative, which in turn helps the subaltern in creating a space and identity of her own on the literary platform as well as in society.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Subaltern, Life Narrative, Memory

Introduction

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines "memory" as one's "ability to remember things" ("memory," def.1). Memory is the mental ability of retaining, reviving and recalling facts, events, lived experiences, etc. According to Thomas Reid, "In memory, we recall...events, experienced previously" ("Reid on Memory"). He claims that memory is not only the recalling of events but it is the record how we have experienced the events. Theorists like John Locke, Thomas Reid recognize the importance of memory in the constitution of one's identity. According to John Locke, "...identity...consists in consciousness alone, and, as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person" (qtd. in Reid, *Essays on the Powers* 173). Thomas Reid observes that the relation between memory and identity is of an evidential nature. He states memories provide "first-personal evidence of personal identity" as "memories allow one to know one's own past, immediately and directly" ("Reid on Memory"). Memory is not mere recollection, it is the "reinterpretation of the past in the present" (Smith and Watson 22) and hence plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of a person's identity, not only individual but also her/his social identity as one cannot be separate from one's community: "Memory is the wellspring of both personal and communal identity...The concept of person and community are but abstract indices denoting actual lived continuities that are memory, capable of generating at any particular point in time..." (Harvey 47). Hence, it is memory which constitutes one's actual lived experiences as an individual and as member of a community which form the foundation of one's identity as a whole.

In literature, memory is important because it refers both to content of literature and its creative process. When it comes to literary texts, memory plays a crucial role in the representation of the past and hence identity because: "The construction of identity has a narrative structure that includes past events and new information resulting from negotiations between past and present experiences, anticipative predictions, dreams, and desires." It involves "the process of dealing or "appropriating"

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Contents

** "What does a Woman Want?" - Roopkumar Balasingh	01 - 17
The Paradox of Subjectivity: Chandra Shekhar Dubey	18 - 24
Postmodern Currents in Hindi Raj Kr Sharma	25 - 32
Pattern in the Type of Characters Gauri Shankar Jha	33 - 41
Indian Women, Changing Roles Saba Anish & Dwijen Sharma	42 - 51
A QUEST FOR 'ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY' Rajesh Kumar	52 - 61
The Self in David Malouf's 'Closer' Chinmaya Lal Thakur	62 - 67
The Shackled 'Self' Amidst Conflict : Madhu Sharma	68 - 76
Anglophile in outlook but Indian to the Core : Harpreet Kour	77 - 87
Journey from Subalternity Parveen Kumari	88 - 98
REVISITING SLAVE NARRATIVES IN Lekha Roy	99 - 107
Book Review Veerendra K Mishra	108 - 113

Journey from Subalternity to Identity in Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku*

Parveen Kumari
University of Jammu

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary labels the term “subaltern” as “any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain” (“subaltern”). The term subaltern refers to subordinate groups within military hierarchies and stands for officers who are below the rank of a captain. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” observes groups of people who suffer domination and marginalization because of social or cultural or economic factors as subalterns: “...the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center)...men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (78). Hence, subalterns are the groups which are socially deprived, excluded, and marginalized, that is who are “subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” (Masselos 189). Subaltern studies is “the most dynamic sector within the emerging disciplines of postcolonial theory” (Chaturvedi vii). Subaltern studies offers a “theory of change”, that is transition which “would...be seen in relation to histories of domination and exploitation...” (Spivak “Subaltern Studies,” 3).

Exclusion is an institutionalized attempt to keep out a segment of the population from social order and this distancing is expressed in physical separation. The word “Marginal” means “not part of a main or important group or situation” (“marginal,” def. 2). Therefore, marginalization is seen as an act of relegating or confining a group of people to a lower social standing of society. Both exclusion and marginalization are the ways of segregating a group of people from the social, political, cultural and economic domains of life. The entity of an individual is seen as to be embedded in society and group. Therefore, the focus is on relations that constrain individuals from achieving, for example education, income, consumption or full development, etc. Nobel Laureate Amritya Sen calls these constraints the “relation roots of deprivation,” that limits the “functionings” (*Poverty and Social*

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Margin as a Space of Resistance Claiming Individuality in Dalit Women's Life Narratives

Parveen Kumari

Abstract

Dalit women, in India, are twice marginalized being Dalits and women. They suffer not only at the hands of upper castes but within the community and family also they are further marginalized because of their gender. Dalit women are the objects of aggression for upper castes as well as Dalit men. They are on the extreme margin of the social system as caste, class and gender play pivotal role in their victimization. The paper focuses on Baby Halder's life narrative *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) and Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* (2007) to explore how the marginalized have used the margin as the space of resistance to enable them to discover and claim their individuality.

Keywords : victimization, margin, lived experiences, space, resistance, Dalit women.

Paper

The distinction between center and margin, as according to John Charles Hawley, is "not solely geographic, as can be seen in a colonial context where the colonizer culturally and politically belongs to the center, while physically living in the colonial periphery. In contrast, the colonized subject who travels to the colonizing center for education or work, no matter how much metropolitan culture he or she may acquire and internalize, will remain in terms of power and political status on the periphery" (86). Hence, the relationship between centre and margin is of powerful and powerless. To conclude, the perception and experience as 'marginal' is a consequence of the binary structure of various kinds of dominant discourse such as patriarchy, imperialism, caste system, racism, etc., which results in exploitation and marginalization of the 'other' by the 'centre.' In this case, resistance by the 'other' becomes the process for obliteration of the binary system making the margin as centre and hence a space of claiming individuality:

...marginality as much more than a site of deprivation; in fact...it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. (hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 206)

Margin is the site which not only reflects deprivation but it is also act as a space of resistance to counter hegemonic discourse and the space where the 'other' can assert her/his individuality. This paper attempts to critically analyze the concept of marginalization in relation to caste, class and gender in Dalit women's life narratives *A Life Less Ordinary*¹ (2006) by Baby Halder and *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*² (2007) by Nalini Jameela to explore how the marginalized have used the margin as the space of resistance to enable them to discover and claim their individuality.

Dalit women, in India are twice marginalized being Dalits and women; and when class factor is included, they become thrice marginalized. They are on the extreme margin of the social system as caste, class and gender play pivotal role in their victimization. All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) observes, "...dalit women's subjugation is materially embedded, that dalit women are thrice-subjugated as women, as dalit women, and as dalit women who perform stigmatized labour" (Rao, Introduction 11). A Dalit woman besides sharing deprivations with Dalit man has to further bear the tortures of the patriarchal social order:

...the Hindu caste system as a pyramid of earthen pots set one on top of another. Not only are Brahmans and Ksatriyas at the top and Shudras and untouchables on the bottom, but within each earthen pot, men are at the top and women of that caste are on the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women. (Dr. B. R. Ambedkar qtd. in Omvedt 321)

They suffer not only at the hands of upper castes but within the community and family also they are further marginalized because of their gender. Dalit women, like Black women, are also the objects of aggression both for upper caste men and Dalit men. Anupama Rao in her Introduction to *Gender and Caste* states, "...newer forms of violence are often complemented by the sexual harassment and molestation of dalit women,

pointing to the caste and gendered forms of vulnerability that dalit women experience" (11). The body of Dalit woman is taken as "a site for the assertion of caste based pride and domination" (K. Singh 50). Every other day Indian national and regional newspapers and news channels cover stories of Dalit women's beating, rape, burning besides naked parade of these helpless women on the streets, etc., by upper caste landlords to keep Dalit patriarchy under control by humiliating their women. A woman is associated with male/family/community/clan's honour and this indirect humiliation of Dalit men at the hands of upper caste men to subdue them further intensifies Dalit women's suffering at the hands of Dalit men who vent out their anger on these women. During the last two decades Dalit women, reflecting on their lives and painful experiences of marginalization, are trying to create a Dalit female space for themselves both in society and literature: "Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance." In their life narratives, Dalit women negotiate from the margin, making it as a radical space of revolt against the victimization "to recover ourselves...to renew" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 204), that is to create their individual identity.

A *Life Less Ordinary* represents Baby Halder's struggle to live an ordinary life and also a fight against the evils of patriarchal society. The narrative is a critique of the society which makes a woman dependent upon a man. Baby Halder realized her marginal position as a woman by watching her mother's predicament: "I came to feminist consciousness in the patriarchal household of my upbringing" (hooks, "Seeing the," xii). Baby Halder starts her narration by remembering her mother's problems and difficulties which she faced because of her irresponsible husband, who served in the Indian army:

Every month he would send money home to cover our household expenses. At first, the money would arrive regularly but then, gradually, there were gaps of several months. Ma found it very difficult to make do: how could she not? After a while, even his letters began to arrive after long gaps. Ma wrote letter upon letter to him but there was never any response. Baba was so far away that Ma could not even go there. She was very worried but despite all her difficulties, she did not let us stop studying. (LLO 1)

Her father's negligence towards family duties and responsibilities forced her mother to leave home. In the very act of remembering the sufferings of

her mother, Baby Halder has encoded her resistance against the patriarchal society: "...the only way to maintain one's prosperity is to remember the suffering of others...." (Bellamy 199). Articulation of the sufferings shows social awareness and it is an act of reclaiming one's suppressed voice.

The lives of the children became miserable after their mother left them. Baby Halder's father became careless towards the children. The children wandered from one relative's house to another's like orphans and in between all this, Baby Halder's studies suffered. Whenever, she opened her books to study at her Pishi3-ma's house or her Jetha4's house, her father would call her back. The father could not understand the value of education, hence deliberately created hurdles for young Baby Halder. In order to forgo parental responsibilities and escape expenses of meeting the requirements of growing up daughters, her father married off Baby Halder's elder sister, Sushila, at the age of fifteen and Baby Halder at the age of twelve to a person fourteen years older than her: "I was a little over twelve years old and he was twenty six!" (LLO 30). The ill matched marriage was another tormenting journey for her: falling from a ditch to the hell. For her husband Shankar, Baby Halder was just a sexual commodity and an object on whom he could demonstrate male power: "...am I an animal or a human being for him to treat me this way?" (117). Shankar took delight in ill-treating her. He used to frequently beat her on trivial issues:

...he picked up a stone from the ground and hit me on the head with it. My forehead split apart, and blood gushed out.... All I asked my husband was what I had done to be beaten like this. The words were barely out of my mouth when he picked up a sturdy piece of wood and began hitting me on my back. (84)

He even went to the extent of snatching the child from her, and did not allow her to see her own son for months. During her second pregnancy, he hit her so hard with a stick that she suffered an abortion. Shankar never gave her money to run the household, not even for the education of the children or for their living expenses:

My husband never gave any money to me. I had to ask him for each and every little thing I needed. He would decide whether he wanted to give me money or not. All kinds of vendors would come into our neighbourhood to sell things and I felt very bad when I saw all the other girls buying from them. Even when there was

shopping to be done at the market, he would go himself. (50)

The lived experiences of marginalization made Baby Halder a rebel. The emerging signs of self-identity started sprouting within her. She did not want her children suffer like her. She left home along with her children and reached Delhi in search of a job. She started working as a domestic help. Moving into the public space, she had a close brush with the hypocrisy of upper caste people. The family for whom she worked was "Brahmin and they had all the customary practices of purity and pollution. But they were quite prepared to let me do everything for them because, after all, they could not do without domestic help" (108). This incident highlights the deception of the upper caste people who perform all kinds of rituals to keep the low caste people away whom they think are polluted. However, they allow the low caste women to work in their houses as domestic workers and let them touch their utensils and cook food for them because they cannot do without them. In this context, Subdakra Mitra Channa comments, "This in itself shows that subjugation of the Dalits is not based on any criteria of religion or purity or pollution as the upper castes claim. It is a matter of exploitation and extraction of labor and services at the cheapest possible terms from the Dalits" (267) are true and highlights the hypocrisy of the upper castes to use untouchability as just the gambit to exploit Dalit women. Baby Halder was a confined prisoner in her employer's house: "I couldn't understand why, but people were always after me: do this, do that, there's work to be done here, and here...and because they had given me a place to stay, I couldn't even say anything" (LLO 136). Vinita Singh observation, "The socio-economic, cultural and educational background of these workers is similar to labour employed in formal or organized sectors. But the very nature of domestic work, conditions of work, duration of working hours, the disproportionate distribution of wages as compared to work, lack of leisure and leave facilities, lack of education and awareness, lack of legal rights and labour legislations" (118) made them vulnerable objects further substantiate Baby Halder plight. The domestic workers lead monotonous lives having low status, struggle and face numerous problems like long hours of work, insecurity regarding jobs, suffer at home as well as at the hands of their employers. Hence, Baby Halder's lived experiences of marginalization as domestic worker represent the marginalization and victimization of the women who work as domestic workers and suffer exploitation at the hands of their employers.

She left the job and started working as a domestic maid in the house of Prabodh Kumar grandson of the famous writer Premchand who became her mentor and moral support. He encouraged her to read and write and further gave her a notebook and a pen to write down her life story:

Here. Write something in this notebook. If you want, you can write your life story in this. Whatever has happened in your life ever since you can remember up to now, write it down. Try to write a little bit every day. (LLO 152)

Baby Halder launched "feminist rebellion by choosing...education against the patriarchal beliefs..." (hooks, "Seeing the," xii) and to create and discover her own individuality outside the "male boundaries" (Nubile 2). By giving a notebook and a pen, Prabodh Kumar gave a new direction to her life. Her writing became a therapy for her and resulted in book which became her voice of resistance and also a source of inspiration for many other common marginalized women like her: "...the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 204). Her voice/work represents all those women who are suffering like her. She is often "invited to speak at literary festivals across the country where she rubs shoulders with top writers like Arundhati Roy, Taslima Nasrin and Jhumpa Lahiri." Rising out of her sufferings today, Baby Halder "champions the cause of women." On being asked in an interview, "Don't you wish you had a better past?" she replied, "All the good things that have happened to me are because of the pain that I had undergone so I don't want to forget or wish it away" (Sharma 24). She looks back on her sufferings and margins as a source of knowledge and hence observes "space of radical openness is a margin" (hooks "Choosing the Margin," 206).

In *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, Nalini Jameela speaks about her experiences of suffering and pain. Nalini Jameela represents a large marginalized section-the sex workers-relegated not even to the extreme periphery but outside the society because of their stigmatized profession which is not held respectable by the society. These marginalized sections have been glorified in the Bollywood cinema but in reality their lives are an unending saga of struggle and survival.

Nalini Jameela speaks as "daughter, wife, mother and friend; and as a

public figure, with a name and a face, rather than remaining anonymous" (Dasgupta). The miserable conditions in which sex workers live and survive is the focal point of the text. The Autobiography of a Sex Worker is not the story of an individual self but represents every marginalized class, its helplessness and deprivation to "raise certain pertinent questions relevant not only to sex workers but to all men and women who question subordination of all kinds-within society at large and also within themselves" (Vohra 161).

Nalini Jameela in her life narrative narrates the marginalization of Dalit woman which she observed since childhood:

...there is an effort to remember that is expressive of the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality. Fragments of memory are not simply represented as flat documentary but constructed to give a 'new take' on the old, constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation. (hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 204-205)

The "...act of 'remembering' one's ordeal" is an act of "claiming agency, and owning one's own voice" (Illouz 192). Nalini Jameela remembers the sufferings of her mother watching whom she analyzed her own position in the society as female. She saw her "communist father, nastiest and patriarchal at home, would often beat his wife..." (Vohra 154). Her mother's helplessness, who would "sit by herself and weep" (AOS 5-6) moved Nalini Jameela to realize "that pride and dignity come only out of having money" (7). For Nalini Jameela this "reminiscence contributed to...deep fear of helplessness and victimhood, and her strong need for independence" (Vohra 154) and resistance.

Nalini Jameela was removed from the school at the age of nine in order to work to contribute to the family's household expenses: "Girls needed to know just enough to keep track of how much paddy was sown and harvested..." (AOS 2). Girls education was considered to be unimportant and a useless endeavour. For Nalini Jameela who wanted to study, the pain of removal from school haunts her all through her life.

Nalini Jameela began to work in the clay mine to help her mother in sharing the household expenditure. She, at the age of eighteen, was rebuked and thrown out of the house by her father for supporting her brother to marry a woman of his choice. Society wants women to be silent observers

and non-interfering. However, Nalini Jameela by supporting her brother had broken the rule and therefore she had to pay the price. Isolated without support and shelter, Nalini Jameela became the wife of Subrahmanyam without wedlock: "A woman leaving home is considered to have committed a socially illegitimate act..." (Geetha 69). This unfortunate incident underscores how a woman is compelled to make compromises in life. Nalini Jameela accepted her fate. Two children, a boy and a girl were born out of this relationship. She suffered unimaginable levels of virulent squabbling at the hands of his mother and sister: "Struggling to hold my ground, fighting inch by inch, I was convinced that life is a great struggle: in order to live, one must fight, fight incessantly" (AOS 22). After a few years, Subrahmanyam was diagnosed with cancer. One day, he mixed poison in his drink and committed suicide leaving Nalini Jameela and two children behind to face the atrocious world.

Subrahmanyam's mother demanded five rupees per day from Nalini Jameela to support them. Nalini Jameela was illiterate and when no other option left, she became a sex worker for her children's upbringing. The most frequently reported reasons for women entering into sex work are financial in nature which includes:

...acute poverty or crises due to the death or poor health of husband, parents or in-laws; a lack of employment opportunities, the need to pay for a daughter's dowry; having outstanding debts; or divorce or separation from a husband or partner....Chronic poverty within the home - often due to wages from daily labour being insufficient to meet family's needs - has also been cited as a common reason for entering into sex work. (McClarty et al. 152)

Nalini Jameela was compelled to make this sacrifice for the survival of her children. When her family came to know about her working as a sex worker, they severed all connections with her as women who are sex workers do not hold honour and respect in/for the male hegemonic society. Despite her troublesome and adverse conditions, Nalini Jameela kept sending money for her children, whom she could never see.

The moral hypocrisy of patriarchal society, the violence against sex workers and their struggle for survival form the core of *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*. Nalini Jameela's first client was a high ranking police officer,

with all the markers of an upper caste man "A man in a gold-bordered dhoti, with a sandal mark on his forehead" (AOS 25) slept with her at night and got her arrested and beaten the next day. At the police station, she was canned on the soles of her feet. In her anger and distress, she shouted, "'Police to sleep with by night; police to give a thrashing by day!'" (26). There is resistance from her side through this desperate verbal response. The incident also reveals the hypocrisy of the upper caste men who shun even the shadow of Dalit women but feel no violation of their purity when they use them for sexual pleasure: "The upper castes would not touch us. They would never eat with us. But they were always ready to fornicate. For 'doing it' our women were not untouchable... Even after licking the private parts of Satnami women, they would not lose their purity" (statement of a Satnami (Chamar) qtd. in Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question* 234). This shows that subjugation of Dalit women is not based on any criteria of religion or purity or pollution as upper caste people claim. It is a matter of sexual exploitation and extraction of labour and services.

Nalini Jameela entered into an illegitimate relationship and also married twice in order to escape her predicament but the "social stigma" (Vohra 153) of being prostitute and her marginalized position again and again forced her into sex work. A new phase in the life of Nalini Jameela came with her introduction to Jwalamukhi, an organization that worked for the rights of sex worker: "Jameela's entry into the public was through the organizing of sex workers by NGOs, as part of AIDS prevention campaigns...." (Devika 1679). She used Jwalamukhi as a platform to discover and re-create herself. Nalini Jameela became an active spokesperson of the sex workers:

'We are here for the sex workers' organisation. We want our rights to be respected. The police shouldn't beat us. The thugs shouldn't harass us....'We aren't the only people to commit this crime. There are lawyers who come to us; there are doctors and businessmen. It isn't fair that all of them are considered respectable and we alone are made into criminals.' (AOS 87)

Nalini Jameela was sponsored by Jwalamukhi to attend a training programme in Thailand that helped sex worker to develop the skills to deal with their problems. In Thailand, she also learnt to handle camera. She made a film: "My concept had three central characters - a well-off young man, a well-off 'society lady' and then me. The 'society lady' and me were

both asking a favour of this young man....I ask for help as a beggar. He hands me the smallest change....The other woman asks him for some money....He pulls out dollars...." (109). This reflects the prevalent class hierarchies in society where vested interests dominate. She went to Thailand for the third time in 2004 to screen her second documentary named "Nisabdarakkapettavarilekku Orettinottam (A Glimpse of Silenced)" and participate in the discussions. This documentary was about police atrocities. She asserted her individuality and resistance against patriarchal boundaries when she affirmed in Asianet News Hour "my desire was to maintain" the sex work. She launched "feminist rebellion by choosing" sex work "against the patriarchal beliefs..." (hooks, "Seeing the," xii) and hence choosing the margin "space of radical openness" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 206).

These helpless women who are compelled due to adverse circumstances to join this line of work look forward to society for understanding and acceptance, not sympathy: "what we need is not sympathy or compassion but acceptance....To have a space which we could share with others..." (AOS 139, 157). Through documentaries and by articulating her sufferings and victimization as marginal being, Nalini Jameela offers resistance to the social structure which turns women into commodities and tries to create a space for herself both in literature and society so that their voices could be heard: "Her story embodies agonies of a woman emerging from the state of marginalization, subjugation and bondage, seeking to establish her identity and the self" (Vohra 160). The *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* aims at "awakening the consciousness of both men and women, and making them aware of the ground realities, the atrocities, and the social stigma in the life of a sex worker" (161). The plea is for a change in the people's outlook towards them. There is no certainty of their being accepted by society but even then efforts for reformation are needed on humane ground.

The act of articulation of the lived experiences of victimization is the act of self-preservation and revolution. Baby Halder and Nalini Jameela through their life narratives narrate their lived experiences which capture the grim picture of the marginalized in Indian society, giving a speaking voice for all those silenced for long by the dominant forces in society. They never negate but negotiate from the margin to resist marginalization and claim individuality: "When I say, then, that these words emerge from suffering,

I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice - that space of my theorizing" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 204). The margin acts as a site of struggle where the voice of the marginalized individual contests the institutionalized hegemony and hence as Bob Morley sings, "We refuse to be what you want us to be, we are what we are, and that's the way it's going to be, that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor, is located in the margins" (qtd. in hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 207). Baby Halder through the documentation of her sufferings and Nalini Jameela left with no option but to become a sex worker resist their marginalization imposed by patriarchy, caste and class; and claim their individuality; and at the same time become the voice of all marginalized beings who question marginalization of all kinds-within society at large and also within themselves.

Notes:

1. *A Life Less Ordinary* is a life narrative by Baby Halder, originally written in Bengali as *Aalo Andhari*, which was later translated into Hindi by Pramod Kumar, published in 2002. The Bengali version was published in 2004. It was translated into English as *A Life Less Ordinary* by Urvashi Butalia, published in 2006. Baby Halder hails from West Bengal and was born in 1973. She is a writer and domestic worker who lives and works in home near Delhi. Her second book *Eshat Roopantar* written in Bengali was published in 2010. The Hindi translation of *Eshat Roopantar* was also published in the same year. Baby Halder belongs to Halder caste and hails from West Bengal.
2. *Nalini Jameela The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* is a collaborative life narrative by Nalini and Gopinath, an activist and a journalist in Thrissur. Gopinath, approached her in 2004 and offered to write her life narrative by taking down what she would tell him. The first version of her life narrative is *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Athmakatha* written in Malayalam which was published in 2005. The second version of her life narrative *Njan Laingika Thozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Athmakatha* in Malayalam which is the re-written version of the first one was narrated to and is written by scholars and social workers was published in 2006. The English translation of *Njan Laingika Thozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Athmakatha* as *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* was done by J. Devika and published by Westland Limited in Madras in 2007. Nalini

Jameela hails from Kerala and belongs to Ezhava caste.

3. Pishi - father's sister
4. Jetha- father's elder brother.

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*Appropriations**Women's Life Narratives*

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