

## Women Bodies and Emotions in Writings by Dalit Women Writers in India

Cuerpos y emociones de mujeres en los escritos de escritoras Dalit de la India

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### Resumen

Basándose en las concepciones teóricas sobre el cuerpo de los estudios corporales y la escritura de la vida de escritoras Dalit como Bama, Baby Kamble y Urmila Pawar, este artículo intenta comprender cómo las mujeres Dalit escriben sus cuerpos femeninos en sus textos autobiográficos y los presentan de distintas formas que subvierten la dócil imagen acordada a sus cuerpos desde tiempos inmemoriales. Las mujeres Dalit a menudo incluyen sus experiencias emocionales y corporales en sus escritos autobiográficos en el proceso de revalorizar diversos aspectos de la experiencia humana.

Este artículo también explorará cómo la escritura de la vida cargada con un cierto sentido de “emoción” se convierte en una herramienta significativa para que las mujeres expresen sus preocupaciones y, al hacerlo, presenta una narrativa en la que las mujeres tienden a ocupar posiciones de sujetos, reescribiendo así el guión androcéntrico de una manera que proporcione agencia a los personajes femeninos Dalit.

**Palabras claves:** Mujeres Dalit; Mujeres escribiendo; India; Autobiografía; Narratología feminista.

### Abstract

Drawing upon theoretical conceptions on body from body studies and life-writing of Dalit women writers such as Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, this article attempts to understand how Dalit women write their female bodies into their autobiographical texts, and present them in ways that subvert the docile image accorded to their bodies since time immemorial. Dalit women often include their emotional and bodily experiences in their autobiographical writings in the process of revaluing varied aspects of human experience.

This article will also explore how life-writing charged with a certain sense of “emotion” becomes a significant tool for women to voice their concerns, and in so doing, presents a counter narrative in which women tend to occupy subject positions, thereby rewriting the androcentric script in a manner that provide agency to Dalit women characters.

**Keywords:** Dalit Women; Women Writing; India; Autobiography; Feminist Narratology

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## Women Bodies and Emotions in Writings by Dalit Women Writers in India

### Introduction

Human body can no longer be considered an exclusively biological entity. Since 1980s, Social Sciences and Humanities have formulated “body studies”, an interdisciplinary area of research, keeping in mind numerous socio-cultural factors such as ethnicity, race, age, caste, class, disability, and gender that tend to influence our embodied selves. The controversial French philosopher Michel Foucault has carefully demonstrated how distinctive forms of knowledge and power have historically exerted a pervasive effect on people’s bodies. In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977, pp. 138-9), he asserts that the key feature of disciplinary power is that it is exercised directly on the body. Disciplinary practices subject bodily activities to a process of constant surveillance and examination that enables a continuous and pervasive control of individual conduct. Thus, discipline produces subjected, practiced and “docile” bodies.

Within the Indian system of social stratification, Dalit women are the most oppressed, as they occupy the lowest position in the social structure of the Indian caste system. They are doubly marginalized, as Dalits and as women. Their bodies are viewed as completely docile and subjugated, battered by domestic violence and social oppression. This double marginal status was accorded to them in literature, too, which eventually propelled Dalit Women to write about their experiences, as they were alienated both by male Dalit counterparts and Indian feminists of the upper castes.

Drawing upon theoretical conceptions on body from body studies and life-writing of Dalit women writers such as Bama<sup>1</sup>, Baby Kamble<sup>2</sup>, Urmila

Pawar<sup>3</sup>, and Kusum Meghwal<sup>4</sup>, this article attempts to understand how Dalit women write their female bodies into their autobiographical and fictive texts, and present them in ways that subvert the docile image accorded to their bodies since time immemorial. Dalit women often include their emotional and bodily experiences in their autobiographical writings in the process of revaluing varied aspects of human experience. This article will also explore how life-writing charged with emotions becomes a significant tool for women to voice their concerns, and in so doing, presents a counter narrative in which women tend to occupy subject positions, thereby rewriting the androcentric script in a manner that provide agency to Dalit women characters.

### Dalit and Dalit Literature

In the Indian caste system, people are divided primarily into four categories: the “brahmins” (or priests), the “kshatriyas” (or warriors), the “vaishyas” (or traders), and the “shudras” (or slaves), to which a fifth category was added later during the period of the Vedic era comprising of “atishudras” (or untouchables), now also known as “Dalits”. The Dalits, considered as untouchables, were often treated as pariahs (outsiders), and therefore forced to live outside the boundaries of the villages. As socially they occupy the lowest place, they have been brutally discriminated and looked down upon by the upper castes. They are often engaged in most menial jobs such as cleaning toilets, burning human bodies etc. Caste, explains critics, is a form of social control

untouchable community in Maharashtra. Her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* is the first Dalit autobiography by a woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian language.

3 Urmila Pawar is a prominent figure in the Dalit and feminist movements in India. All her works are written in Marathi. Pawar’s autobiography *Aidan (The Weave of my Life)* was one of the first of its kind by a Dalit woman.

4 Kusum Meghwal, too, is a well-known Dalit writer and activist who writes in Hindi. She is also the founder of Rajasthan Dalit Sahitya Academy and has a huge corpus of works including several short stories and poems.

1 Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil Dalit feminist, a committed teacher, and a novelist. She became popular with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu.

2 Baby Kamble, also known as Babytai Kamble, was an Indian Dalit activist and writer, born into the Mahar caste, the largest

based on heredity and a ritual observance of fourfold division. Relations between castes are governed by the concepts of endogamy, pollution, and purity, an idea central to this article.

In India, despite several provisions and legislations made in the constitution to safeguard the rights and lives of Dalits, caste has persisted. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who played a significant role in the Committee that formulated the Constitution of India promised affirmative action, abolition of untouchability and laws to safeguard the life and rights of Dalits. As a result, some Dalit individuals and communities have been able to overcome hurdles and achieve tremendous progress. However, the upward mobility of Dalit individuals and communities is not easy, as they face reprisals in the form of mob violence, burning down of houses, murders, assaults, rapes and institutional discrimination.

Etymologically, the word “Dalit” is derived from the Marathi word “dala” meaning “of the soil or the earth”. It could also mean rooted in the soil. By extrapolation it can come to signify “been ground down”. The term Dalit, historically, was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of “Depressed Classes” prior to 1935. It was later popularized by B. R. Ambedkar in preference to the earlier more legal term “Scheduled Castes”. His choice of the term Dalit contributed to the formation and visibility of the Dalit identity and came to include all depressed people irrespective of their caste into the definition of Dalit. Later, in the 1970s the use of the word “Dalit” was invigorated when it was adopted by the activist group Dalit Panthers.

Dalit writers broadened the semantic horizons of the word “Dalit” and it came to signify people who have been oppressed by a repressive social system, and who challenge the oppression from a scientific, rational and humanitarian perspective. This meaning is widely accepted today and has developed into a movement of self-awareness, drawing from Ambedkarite philosophy of “Dalit consciousness”.

The term “Dalit literature” came into use in 1958, at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society). Today it is an important stream of Indian writing in English and other regional languages of India. This category of literature became significant in the 1960s in Marathi literature first and later in Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam as well as English. These writings formed a collective voice that questioned through articulation of their social reality the kind of writings that made them invisible or distorted their identity. Like Black Literature, Dalit writing is characterized by pride, militancy, creativity and uses writing as a weapon of

resistance.

A tradition of Dalit writing can be traced back to the eleventh century writer Cekkilar [Periyapuram]. Modern Dalit writings, however, base themselves on the works and ideological insights of four revolutionaries -- Jyothiba Phule, Periyar, Narayana Guru and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. They ruthlessly examined Hindu religion and fiercely attacked those who supported caste superiority. Dalit writing is intimately tied to Dalit liberation movements in various parts of India. Dalit writings are not simply texts of protest and rejection, but they also constitute a literature primarily engaged in constructive reconstruction of the past. Dalit consciousness has generated interest in many intellectuals to reinvestigate and rethink the entire Indian history and culture from below. Sharan Kumar Limbale (2004) asserts that Dalit literature is unique, even though its evolution is in the context of history of various regional literatures. Dalit literature has a particular purpose and therefore it should not be assessed by “universal” criteria. This subaltern historical approach has led to the questioning of numerous Hindu practices and rituals and contributes tremendously in rethinking India.

Dalit literature has acquired a distinct language due to its heterogeneous character that challenges dominant literary canons and has finally managed to get a recognizable identity towards the middle of the twentieth century. Although Dalits have been raising their voices through their personal narratives, they have been neglected within the academic circle for a long time due to the fact that these voices challenge the hegemony of the upper castes and make way for the assertion of the marginal self.

### ***Dalit Women Writing***

Dalit Literature, while attacking Brahminism and casteism promoted by it, limited itself to the expression of Dalit male experience. As a result, for a long time, it mainly consisted of works by eminent Dalit men in which only the masculine Dalit self-asserted itself and occupied the centre-stage. The Dalit women got only a marginal representation. Most Dalit writings, however, make oppression of women a significant theme in their works particularly because one cannot deny the intersectionality of oppression faced by Dalit women, as they are suppressed not only because of gender but also due to caste. Insulting them amounts to an insult thrust upon the entire Dalit community. Dalit women then tend to play a crucial role within the Dalit writings, but mainly as brutalised victims showcasing the cruelty and brutality of the upper caste Brahmins who are often their employers.

Dalit narratives usually begin with an insult or

a humiliation inflicted primarily on a Dalit woman's body in the form of an act of physical assault or rape. The male protagonist, often a husband or brother of the lady in the story then seeks a revenge, leading to a certain awakening of the Dalit community. One discerns here objectification of the Dalit woman's body because its primary value is located in its victimised status as a brutalised body, representing sexual violence against women and through them against the Dalit community. This victimised and helpless body then becomes the catalyst for revenge narratives in which it is men, not women, who stage revenge or revolt, thereby erasing women from the script. Mohandas Naimishray's (1998) story "Apna Gam", meaning our village is a classic example of this case as the story begins by the naked parading of the character Chamiya by upper caste men for the failure of her husband to pay back a debt of rupees 500. The story describes the events that led to Chamiya's humiliation, illustrating the reaction of the Dalit community as they plan a retaliation. Sampat, Chamiya's husband then returns to the village mainly with the objective of seeking revenge, and little by little Chamiya disappears from the narrative. She has no voice and is never asked to make an appeal on her own behalf. Towards the end, Sampat decides to quit the village and move to another place without any discussion with Chamiya.

Laura Brueck (2017) states that using a victimized woman as a mute spectator is common to many male-authored narratives. The sexualised female body where caste is inscribed by the upper caste men is then central even to the narrative of many Dalit male writers. They exploit the victimised status and representation of the brutalised body that becomes the point of departure to exact revenge. As revenge and resistance are solely in the hands of Dalit men, there is no focus on reversing the gaze on woman's body, no effort to liberate it from its stereotypical notions of helplessness, no initiative to accord any sense of agency to it. Anupama Rao also notes that "the bodies of Dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of desire and/or sexuality because of the overdetermination of this violence as caste-privilege" (Rao, 2003: 229). The women therefore are strategically erased out of the narrative and denied even the possibility of providing testimony that can validate their experience, or become an agent of their own self-preservation and retribution.

In Dalit male autobiographies, as in the bourgeois autobiographies, the narrative unfolds from the viewpoint of the male hero and it is his

concerns and preoccupations that get articulated. His struggle against caste and poverty are illustrated and the key issue is the construction of his identity as a Dalit awakened being. The Dalit male self is represented as a paradigm for Dalit-selves. In the process of the transformation of Dalit male, from non-self to self-hood, Dalit female becomes the "Other", lacking in caste consciousness, unlike the male hero who undergoes a transformation under the aegis of Ambedkar's ideology. This accounts for the reason why in Dalit male autobiographies, assertions of identity very often become male-specific and defined (Bandhu, 2003). Dalit woman is denied subjectivity as her subliminal voice of protest never gets articulated.

Laura Brueck (2017) asserts that the ever-present threat of sexual violence against Dalit women has been rhetorically constructed as part of Dalit women's identities both by Indian Dalit males and feminist communities of upper caste women. She is not the only one, other critics too rightly observe a certain kind of alienation and exclusion the Dalit women as well as Dalit women writers face within the parameters of Indian Feminism. The pain and exclusions experienced by Dalit feminist writers, expressed powerfully in their literature has not been foregrounded as Indian feminist writing.

The upper and middle class woman's movements in India have been overlooking the caste issue in theorising their feminism. They tend to consider all women as equal victims of patriarchal oppression, irrespective of class and caste differences in order to forge a pseudo sense of unity. They believe that if patriarchy is defeated all forms of oppression against women will disappear. In other words, since caste and patriarchy are mutually supportive institutions of capitalism, they think that if patriarchy is destroyed, caste will have a natural death. Consequently, there were not many attempts within the woman's movements in India to address the issues pertaining to Dalit women from the vantage point of caste.

Historically, there were various social reform movements that aimed at improving the condition of women before the emergence of organised feminist movements in India. For example, the social reform movements of the nineteenth century had placed the woman's question high in their agenda. However, such movements, influenced primarily by colonial modernity, were mainly concerned with the upper-caste women's social mobility. The social reformers located women's backwardness on certain social evils and obsolete practices, rather than considering them as deeply rooted in social organization. Hence, their attempt was to eliminate them in order to

transform the condition of women. They challenged evil practices like Sati, child marriage etc. and tried to promote the cause of women's education. They called for the removal of outworn customs and conventions, which obstruct women's freedom and social mobility. In doing so, they were influenced by the progressive ideas of the West concerning women's rights. Hence, the issues such as Sati, widow remarriage, child marriage and the education of women in general were taken up while the issues pertaining to the gendered-caste subalterns were not addressed. The reformers operated within the tradition. Therefore, their goal was the transformation of upper-caste women in domestic and social spheres. However, there was no attempt to problematise Brahminical patriarchy as such, which was the dominant model of gender relations, and its relationship to social, and economic structures remained largely unexplored. The life experiences of Dalit women are undoubtedly different as their oppression is multiple in nature and therefore cannot simply be understood or articulated within the middle class urban feminist movement.

In a 1995 article titled, "Dalit Women Talk Differently", Gopal Guru argues that Dalit women need to speak 'differently' because they face exclusion not only in the political field but also in the cultural field. He asserts: "Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of Dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it" (Guru, 1995: 2549). Two points that come out of his opinion are "differences" exist not only among Indian women but also within the Dalit community based on gender, and that writing becomes a way for Dalit women to articulate their struggles and resistances. Realizing this, lately, many women writers in different regional languages such as Marathi and Tamil have published fictive and autobiographical works drawing our attention to the urgent need to consider carefully the issues pertaining to Dalit and Minority women that have not been articulated in either Dalit male writers or Indian feminist writings. Dalit women writers such as Bama in Tamil, Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar in Marathi, along with many others, are in the process of rewriting these narratives by creating strategies and spaces from where they voice their resistance and present alternate representations of women characters. Adding to this group there is another writer Kusum Meghwal from Rajasthan whose writings in Hindi are exemplary in their exploration of strategies that prepare ground for female agency.

### **Dalit Women Bodies**

Our bodies are shaped and governed as much by social forces and relationships as by natural biological

forces. This observation is most contentious when one thinks of gender differences. The belief that there exist fundamental and immutable differences in the physiological and neurological make-up of males and females based on their role in biological reproduction remains till date widely held and leads to stereotyping of female body in a manner that it is subjugated and objectified for the benefit of the "stronger" sex. A Dalit woman's body is even more complicated as it has both sex and caste inscribed on it and this is precisely why body is central to all Dalit writings particularly those by Dalit women.

In Bama's narrative, for example, bodies occupy the centre stage and become the site where caste and gender hierarchies are played out, where trauma is both experienced and subverted. Both *Sangati* and *Karukku* are replete with numerous descriptions of the corporeal where bodily image is primarily located within the social structures of caste. She writes in her preface "Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them . . . The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed (. . .)" (Bama, 2012: 13).

The "bleeding" that becomes the point of departure of her writings in the above citation exemplifies the corporeal and physical nature of all trauma that Bama and other Dalits undergo on daily basis. Here the body's suffering is singular to her but through this physical misery she conjoins her corporeal pain to the oppression and constant suffering of her entire community that is rejected due to the impure nature of body. Bama underscores the corporeal aspect of social oppression early on in her narrative, as she states: "When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is" (Bama, 2012: 11).

Bama also describes caste-related humiliation in corporeal terms as she describes how a Dalit elder takes some *vadais* (a savoury made of lentils) to an "upper caste" man, holding the packet by its string to make sure that he does not "pollute" the food item with his "untouchable" hands. In a conversation with her brother, she discovers that "Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas" (Bama, 2012: 13). Later she also sees a Naicker woman giving water to her grandmother and observes, "The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths.

I always felt terrible when I watched this” (Bama, 2012: 14). The taboo and social barriers are therefore enforced through prohibitions about the bodily. Later reflecting on the hatred with which Dalits are treated by the upper caste, Bama writes: “How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when traveling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows. And pain” (Bama, 2012: 24).

She feels a “burning anger” when she sees the trembling bodies of old, “abused” Dalits (23), and caste violence and atrocities (26). She concludes that Dalit bodies are hurt and brutalized particularly because social structures allow it. Pramod Nayar while analysing Bama’s works explains that “caste is inscribed upon the Dalit’s body through its very rejection: the body and how it is received/treated becomes a marker of caste” (Nayar, 2006: 89). He explains how when Bama is humiliated by the priest in full view of her class, the caste system’s oppression is inscribed in terms of Bama’s “shamed” body: “When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping” (Bama, 2012: 17).

However, in Bama’s works as in the texts of other Dalit women writers, the reclaiming of these battered and exploited bodies has to happen through the body itself. Her work encourages positive activism when she states, “In order to change this state of affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God’s word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights, and battle for them” (Bama, 2012: 13). If caste and gender entrap women in their shamed bodies, upliftment and resistance are also cast in bodily imaginaries, as she describes how hard she studies with her “heart” and “soul”: “I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan [elder brother] had urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi [her caste]” (Bama, 2012: 15).

While Bama attempts to subvert the rejection imposed on Dalit bodies particularly those of Dalit women and tries to change the stereotypical corporal image associated with Dalits, other Dalit writers such as Kusum Meghwal, too, are exemplary in their representations of women characters and their bodies and in rewriting the androcentric scripts that imprison the Dalit feminine bodies in gendered stereotypes. We will explore her short stories “Mangali” and “Angar”

in this article. Mangali the eponymous heroine of the story is a day labourer at a construction site. After the death of her husband, she is first wooed by her contractor with gifts and kindness. He later begins to make advances towards her. The innocent Mangali, unaware of the intentions of the employer, gives in and realises pretty late. In the final sequence, as a proud Bhil<sup>5</sup> woman, she hits the contractor in self-defence, as he tries to pounce on her. Later, she runs to file a complaint against the contractor and is finally helped by the police.

Throughout the story, Mangali plays the stereotypical role of victimised Dalit woman struggling for survival against numerous odds. She is repeatedly projected as an innocent person unaware of the malicious designs of the contractor and it is only towards the very end with Mangali’s delayed realization of the contractor’s plot that narrative determinism is overturned. Meghwal herself asserts, “Mangali was made of stronger stuff than he had thought” (Meghwal, 1997: 34). Mangali’s sudden transformation from a helpless widow to a strong Bhil lady who successfully manages to attack her oppressor is of interest. She evokes her strong Bhil lineage as if this feminine inheritance gives her the strength to fight and win, “I am telling you firmly that I am a daughter of a Bhil woman who, if she gives birth to a child while she is cutting wood in the jungle, she’ll cut the umbilical cord herself, lift the child in her arms and go home. So don’t try to come any closer or I will cut you like a goat.” (ibid). Mangali removes the veil over her head and picks up a thick piece of firewood lying by the stove and hits at the contractor’s head who loses consciousness immediately and falls to the ground. Meghwal describes Mangali as an angry goddess running in rage. It is the Bhil inheritance from her mothers and grandmothers that gives her the strength to fight back. As she refuses to be a rape victim and fights back in the story, she ends up occupying the subject position in the narrative.

Laura Brueck (2017) rightly points out that in this story it is not the Dalit woman but the Dalit man, Mangali’s husband, who disappears, leaving the woman to rise as an angry goddess to protect herself and thereby rewrites the stereotypical rape script. By making the strength of the Bhil body central to the denouement of this narrative, this story challenges the oft repeated representation of Dalit female body as helpless, brutalized, torn apart by sexual abuse. The polluted dirty body stands in its own defence and cries for its own liberation.

Similarly, Urmila Pawar in her autobiography 5 Bhils are Indo-Aryan speaking ethnic group in West India. They speak the Bhil languages, a subgroup of the Western Zone of the Indo-Aryan languages.

*Aaydan, The Weave of my Life*, from the incipit itself presents feminine bodies as powerhouses of energy, who against all the odds walk miles and miles during the day to sell their produce. Instead of describing herself in her autobiographical account, the narrator begins with “Women from our village travelled to the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things” (Pawar, 2018: 1). She therefore places the women of her life at the centre of her account. She highlights the difficult life these women had as they used to “trudge the whole distance, with huge, heavy bundles on their heads, filled with firewood or grass, rice or semolina... their loads would be heavy enough to break their necks”(1). The road between the village and the market was difficult to negotiate as it wound up and down the hills and made the trip very exhausting for the ladies. Yet they would start every morning with a sense of optimism and tread the path narrating endless stories and hurling abuses at their ancestors for choosing such a place as home. While discussing the trip of these women to the markets and back, she describes their bodies. With their emancipated bodies covered in rags, bony stick-like legs, bare feet, pale, lifeless faces dripping either with sweat or rain, sunken stomachs, palms thickened with work, and feet with huge crevices like a path freshly tilled, they looked like cadavers floating in powerful streams, propelled by a force hurtling them along the strong currents, being dashed against rocks and thrust forward by powerful waves (Pawar, 2018).

Deviating sharply from the sensual representations of Dalit feminine bodies, Urmila Pawar offers a realistic account of their corporeal experiences and emphasises the fact that their daily physical struggles made their bodies so strong that they were able to accomplish difficult tasks and take all kinds of risks. This resonates with Meghwal’s view that Bhil women were stronger than the upper-caste women and even men and that it is precisely their back-breaking labour through centuries that accords a certain undeniable corporeal power to them. This aspect of their bodies has been conspicuously absent from the male Dalit writings as well as Indian feminist works, leaving the task of representing real Dalit female bodies to Dalit women writers who in turn present an alternate point of view.

In *Angar* (Spark in English) another story by Kusum Meghwal, the female protagonist Jamuna is abducted and raped repeatedly by the village head’s son. She manages to escape after a few days. However, when she returns home she is abandoned and ostracised by all, except her brother Hira who comes to her rescue and decides to file a complaint. The police, however, bribed by the village head, refuse

to file a report, as a relative of the offender happened to be a government minister. Her attackers return to the village waving guns and shouting at them. As angry Hira attacks them with an axe many run away, leaving the village head’s son who falls to the ground wounded. Jamuna then, as a spark, runs out of the house with a scythe in hand and slices off the genitals of her rapist. By stealing the manhood of the man who stole her honour, she exacts a bloody revenge.

According to Laura Brueck, this is the most graphic example of Meghwal’s revenge fantasy narrative. In the opening scene, Jamuna was an object of spectacle sitting outside her house and a group of people stares at her, as she returns home after the abduction, displaying her helpless and battered state. However, the final sequence makes her the subject as she is the one standing with a scythe in hand, having cut-off the genitals of her oppressor. Here a violated female body, in an act of reversal of roles, inscribes her anger on the body of her male perpetrator and thereby rewrites the androcentric script in which it is always the feminine body that gets “penetrated” by the violence of both the upper and lower caste men. The chopping off of penis is undoubtedly symbolic as it suggests a systemic attack on the male order and subversion of patriarchy. Revenge is exacted not by a man, but by the most marginalised woman in the community. In this way, Meghwal suggests that a woman does not die or disappear after she is violated but rather continues to exist as an agent of her actions. She turns her narrative away from the melodramatic mode of narration that presents rape and rape victims in a titillating manner for the male readers, that holds women accountable for rape or traps them into narratives of shame and guilt. Meghwal reinserts in the texts women’s subjectivity both as victims who suffered and as victors who had the courage to surmount their trauma in order to avenge their humiliation. Her representations of women’s agency counter the patriarchal view that female bodies mute vessels where caste battles can be waged. Her narrative offers a possibility where female subjectivity can be reclaimed.

In addition to the questions of sexuality and agency, Dalit women’s autobiographical writings, take up the issue of bodily purity and impurity at a more structural level and subvert the image of a polluted identity attributed to them in Hinduism. Purity, be it corporal or spiritual, is central to Hindu and precisely Brahminical thought process. The division of caste and gender both plays itself out on the basis of corporal purity to a large extent. The Dalits are outcasts, untouchables mainly because their bodies are highly polluting. Even the sight or the shadow

of a Dalit's body has the potential of polluting the pure bodies of the upper castes. For Dalits, caste carries untouchability particularly due to the menial professions they are engaged in. As Women, female body carries untouchability through biological functions like menstruation and childbirth. Dalit women bodies then are doubly untouchables, doubly impure and polluting.

According to the Manusmriti<sup>6</sup>, the religious legal code compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE, men and upper caste women have the possibility of purifying themselves after contact with a polluted person, dead body or after menstruation and childbirth. However, the lower castes have no such privilege. There is a strict separation between the "sacred" texts and the lower caste people who are denied all access to holy scriptures or to purity. The connection therefore between gender, caste and pollution is intricate. Pollution then is inherent to the caste Dalit female body first as a Dalit and second as a woman. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as a staunch Dalit activist and theoretician, resisted the idea of Dalits and women as impure creatures through his rational thought and logic while pointing out the points of intersection between caste and patriarchy as two positions that work on similar principles and act simultaneously on Dalit female bodies. He also believed that Buddhism offered a tradition that effectively challenged the caste system and sexism inherent in Hinduism. In inserting their most polluted, impure and gendered bodies into the texts that have tried hard to erase them, Dalit women writers resist their negative portrayals by all other literatures.

Carolyn Hibbs (2018) explains how Dalit women represent the truths of their bodily experiences through the medium of their autobiography and challenge their misrepresentations. Dalit women writers discuss with no inhibition issues such as menstruation, female sexual desire and gendered violence because these are feminine experiences and in doing so take the role of their embodied selves. According to Hibbs (2018), "Dalit women represent practices of the bodily untouchability in Hindu culture, and their resistance to, or subversion of, the practices of untouchability as they re-emerge in neo-Buddhist culture" (p.276). She asserts that if sacred texts define them as polluted beings and prevent their access to the written word as readers and more so as writers, Dalit autobiographical writings defy these codes. Baby Kamble for example in her work *The Prisons We Broke* describes how she along with a friend had entered a

temple only to "pollute" the gods there: "You don't know how that spirit hates things that pollute. Even women are polluting for this spirit god" (Kamble, 2018: 130). If the purpose of defining anything as a pollutant is to exclude and thereby to dehumanize, Pawar through her autobiography reflects on the Dalit experience of untouchability and provides the possibility of dissent from these underlying regulations. Pawar discusses menstruation and describes her first experience of it: "As it was, people in the class kept me at a distance because of my caste. Now, because of this, even my own people in the house would keep me away" (Pawar, 2018: 124). She becomes an untouchable to the world as well as to her own community. Gendered dimension of such experiences then allows these writers to critique the treatment meted out of them by the men in their own community and to be able to see that Dalits treat their women the same way as they are treated by the upper caste.

Further, Pawar in her controversial<sup>7</sup> autobiography discusses her sexual desires with no inhibition. While describing her first sexual intercourse with her husband, she states that she experienced some bleeding. Taking it to be menstrual blood, she segregates herself<sup>8</sup>, but when her true cycle arrives, she had to hide it with the help of her sister-in-law. In this small act, she sees a subversion of the regulations that segregate women during their menstruation days: "In the meantime, I freely roamed about everywhere [...]. When our eyes met, Mai and I would break into peals of laughter" (Pawar, 2018: 187).

Dalit women autobiographies as a genre itself constitutes blasphemy since Dalit women are barred from sacred texts and texts in general on the grounds that they belong to lower caste and that they are women. Kumud Pawde discusses how Dalits are prohibited from learning Sanskrit, as it is a sacred language accessible only to few. She was told by many, "You won't be able to manage. There will be no one at home to help you. Sanskrit is very difficult" (Pawde, 1992: 29).

Carolyn Hibbs explains that in interweaving their bodies and texts in the autobiographies that both contain markers of untouchability, Dalit women writers achieve a vantage point that allows them to reject these fixed markers of identity: "Dalit women's blasphemy, in their breach of multiple untouchability observances based on both their bodies and their

7 Urmila Pawar's autobiography was controversial due to the sexual nature of its content. It was critiqued heavily by the male Dalit writers.

8 In certain cultures, in India a menstruating female lives separately for the duration of her menstruation.

6 Manusmriti is an ancient legal Hindu text. This text in Sanskrit dated from the 2nd century BCE to 3rd century CE presents itself as a discourse given by Manu and Brigu topics such as duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and others.

access to knowledge, breaks down the hierarchical binaries of body and mind, and physicality and rationality. Through this approach, women demand their rights in their profane and sacred lives, despite the intersecting pressures of a patriarchal and a caste-biased culture” (Hibbs, 2018: 280). It has not been an easy task for women writers to write about their sexualities and bodies in a conservative society like India without the risk of being condemned. Even the legal codes apply restrictions on speaking about women’s bodies. This leads to a further mystification of the female body as something that needs to be hidden and occulted, leading to numerous problems in the society. Writers like Pawar, on the other hand, use their works to break this silence in order to educate women about their bodies: “I was made aware of the biological aspects of male and female bodies. This was quite different from the titillating yellow books one got on the streets. Here I got information on male and female reproductive organs with illustrations, presented in an objective, clean and scientific manner” (Pawar, 2018: 245).

If on one hand, these writings present a collective conscious of the Dalit community, on the other they are also very personal accounts of the writers’ emotions. Be it an overwhelming sense of agony followed by an intense anger that allows the protagonist of “Angar” to slice off the genitals of her perpetrator, the joys of community life as they celebrate festivals and communal gatherings together or an extreme sense of grief and sorrow. For example, in Pawar’s work it is not just sexual experiences and sexuality that gets discussed at length, her text also focuses on grief and sorrow in a very personal manner. She presents in detail the grief she experiences at her son’s death under caste related issues, “In the past my writing did not allow me to sleep. Now, I could not sleep and therefore started writing. I was drowning my grief in my work. And yet, the painful reality kept breaking through every barricade, and flooded my brain” (Pawar, 2018, pp. 299-300).

In Pawar’s world then one discerns no dichotomous opposition between the intellectual and the emotional. In fact, the two come together to express one’s trauma in a therapeutic manner. Women are conventionally defined as emotional and bodily creatures in a way that their rational and intellectual capacities are devalued, particularly because reason and intellect are placed hierarchically above emotions and seen in binary opposition to each other. However, the above citation by Pawar challenges this dichotomy and demonstrates how women writers access the intellectual through the bodily or the emotional. Rather than erasing the emotions and bodies off the

texts, they accord value to these, questioning the binary oppositions that aim at stereotyping women as dumb, irrational beings, incapable of accessing anything intellectual, and thereby prohibiting them all access to sacred texts or texts in general. By showing that it is precisely the emotional that paves way for the intellectual, these writers not only bring bodies and corporality to the texts but intertwine writing and corporality in ways that subvert the conventional logic and rationality.

Carolyn Hibbs also asserts that “through the autobiographical genre, Dalit women reclaim both the literacy-the truth of the written text and of their bodies” (Hibbs, 2018: 284). In including the experiences of menstruation, sexual desire, and violence that are taboo and therefore absent from religious texts and intellectual spaces that view them as a deviation from the universal perfect male body, Dalit women writings indeed deconstruct the stereotype that Hindu male body is pure and ideal. Dalit women writers both expose oppressive aspects of culture and reconstruct their own experiences, breaking down distinctions between bodily- intellectual, pure-impure, profane-sacred.

By presenting Dalit women’s bodies in their most humane form, and calling into question the notion of gendered and caste bodies as polluted, these writers redefine women’s bodies “as worthy of participation in the sacred spaces refused to them in Brahmanical patriarchy” (Hibbs, 2018: 284). These autobiographies then propose a Dalit Feminist Standpoint that is critical of not only Dalit male writings but also of Upper caste feminist writings. Emerging from the margins of the margin, they have a lot to offer both to the Dalit caste movements as well as dominant feminist views in India that have not engaged critically with Brahmanical Patriarchy.

### **Conclusion**

Dalit women writing presents a counter narrative in which women tend to occupy subject positions and subverts the androcentric script in a manner that provides agency to women characters. But that is not all, Dalit women writing locates itself at the crossroads of gender and caste politics and stands at the vantage point from where writers can investigate the conjuncture of caste and gender in order to challenge the systemic violence inflicted by Brahmanical patriarchy on women in general, be it higher or lower caste. It can therefore be highly useful for the upper and middle class feminists in India, as their theoretical framework has conveniently ignored the fundamental connection between control of women and control of lower-caste people in the

politics of Brahminism. This is precisely what Dalit Feminism points out as it analyses the limitations of Male Dalit and Indian Feminist Writings.

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Citado. TYAGI, Ritu (2021) "Women Bodies and Emotions in Writings by Dalit Women Writers in India" en Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre Cuerpos, Emociones y Sociedad - RELACES, N°36. Año 13. Agosto 2021-Noviembre 2021. Córdoba. ISSN 18528759. pp. 79-88. Disponible en: <http://www.relaces.com.ar/index.php/relaces/article/view/423>.

**Plazos.** Recibido: 13/01/2021. Aceptado: 22/05/2021