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From Bama's *Karukku* ([1992] 2014) to Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019): The Changing Nature of Dalit Feminist Consciousness

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Abstract:

Dalit literature articulates the oppression and exploitation faced by Dalits in a caste-ridden society as it records their social and cultural lives before and after India's independence. This cultural revolt that burgeoned in the 1970s has largely been Dalit male-centric in its orientation, adopting paternalistic and patronising tones towards Dalit women. As a consequence, Dalit women remained firmly encapsulated in the patriarchal roles of the silent, agenciless and 'victimised sexual being,' perpetuating thus gendered stereotypes. These accounts failed to properly address Dalit women's predicament and the interlocking oppression of caste and gender, which compelled them to create a distinct space for themselves. Dalit women have traversed a long path over the last four decades. During this time, their consciousness has evolved in many ways as reflected in Dalit writing. Life narratives, such as Bama's *Karukku* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*, function as the locus of enunciation where agency and self-identity are attended and asserted by Dalit women, through different approaches. As the social location determines the perception of reality, this paper attempts a look at how these two texts tackle and bring to the centre the gendered nature of caste and the power relations that still affect Dalit women, from a heterogeneous standpoint. It further analyses how through form, language and subject matter, Dalit women attempt to defy generic conventions, depart from imposed identities, and build up resistance against this enduring double oppression and the forces that insist on homogenising Dalit body politics.

Keywords: Dalit Studies; Caste System; Gendered Casteism; Feminist Studies; Dalit Female Consciousness.

1. Introduction

Dalit life experiences, insights and aspirations have informed and shaped Dalit literature through a particular critical perspective, namely, the Dalit perspective. Yet, the Indian caste system has not only produced a vertical oppression, but also a horizontal one as is the case of Dalit women's multi-layered discrimination.[1] The aim of this paper is to examine the power structures that continue to affect the lives of Dalit women and to examine various discourses of difference that have emerged from them. In other words, it sets to examine the Dalit feminist discourse.

There has been a pervasive assumption in the Dalit movement that Dalit women are included and represented. The literary address, however, has systematically reproduced a glaring gender differentiation between Dalit men and women. The Dalit woman has been portrayed not only as 'a guest appearance' in Dalit texts (Guru 2008, 160), but also as an injured subject, a passive victim "of the lust of […] men" (Kumar 2010, 219) encapsulated "firmly in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimised sexual being'" (Rege 1998, 42). Her sexuality has also been culturally constructed in the male gaze (Mulvey 1999, 837-843)—particularly in the Dalit one—a phenomenon that has converted Dalit masculinity in a medium for the evaluation and shaping of the general Dalit identity and politics. The contrast between her body and the chaste and honourable one of the upper-caste woman has rendered her as sexually available by both upper and lower-caste men. Charu Gupta explains that it is the "alleged 'loose' character of Dalit women" that exacerbated their sexual exploitation (Gupta 2011, 25). The transcription of caste and patriarchy on the female Dalit body turned it into a subject to be acted upon and to be written about. This inclined Dalit women to internalise the negative codification attached to them as well as their susceptibility to violence. Yashica Dutt explains: "the weight of my Dalitness had settled so deep within me that I'd stopped feeling its weight or recognizing its presence" (Dutt 2019, xiii).

Another factor that obscured Dalit women's authentic representation has been Indian feminism's scholarships and policies around women's differences. The context of gender disenfranchisement has been constructed in a discourse of convenience and convention, and it has often given way to undifferentiated conglomerates. Indian feminism has questioned the existing gender relations and gender discrimination and control of sexuality through the theorisation of patriarchy but, in so doing, it has turned into a monolithic category that has

1 The idea of 'Triple Dalit' or 'Thrice Dalit' termed by the scholar Fiona Margaret Page Dalton (2008) arises from this particular social position of Dalit women.

failed to reckon with pluralising and complex factors such as religion, ethnicity, class and caste, among others.

In the second half of the 20th century, Dalit women writers sought to recast the patriarchal male gaze and to overturn the established misogynistic notions attached to them so as to reclaim humanity for themselves and the women depicted in their texts. By the same token, towards the 1990s, they began to question Indian feminism's claim to universal representation and to pinpoint its exclusive focus on issues of upper-caste/middle-class women. In other words, they began to challenge at the same time the 'masculinisation of lower castes' and the 'savarnization of Indian women' (Tharu and Niranjana 1996, 232-260).

The constitution of the Dalit female subject through varied oppressive and exclusive discourses and practices, as argued before, still problematises any universal or homogeneous experience. Apart from obvious spatial and temporal differences that affect the process of subject formation, there continue to exist 'unclaimed experiences' with different combinations of ethnicity, caste and class. There is, thus, the need to take into account varied Dalit female subjectivities within a post-modern context still laced with a patriarchal and traditional culture and rigid gender expectations. In her quest to replace the 'single story' (Dutt 2019, 179) written about them so far, Dutt signals the "twenty-something middle-class college kids, forty-something neighbours, Internet-savvy parents or successful entrepreneurs" (177), "those who live in the cities and in villages, those who read Ambedkar or don't, those who are out as Dalit or not and those who exist somewhere in between" (ix), and those who have migrated like her.

The texts chosen for analysis are written from two similar yet different Dalit female subject positions. Bama, also known as Bama Faustina, is a Dalit feminist, teacher and novelist born in 1958 into a Catholic family in the then southern Madras State—now Tamil Nadu. Despite the financial and social difficulties, she managed to finish her studies and obtain a teaching degree, although the search for a job took her through yet another series of humiliations and discrimination. She wrote *Karukku* in 1992 after spending seven years as a nun and a teacher in a Christian convent from where she walked out disillusioned and determined to put her experiences to paper. Back then, the Tamil publishing industry found her language unacceptable and *Karukku* had to be published privately. The text broke barriers in more than one way: it was not only the first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer and a classic of subaltern writing, but it is a bold and poignant writing of life outside mainstream Indian thought. With the casteist discrimination within the Catholic Church at its core, this text portrays the tension between the self and the community, and presents Bama's life as a process of self-reflection and recovery from social and institutional oppression. *Karukku* was first translated into

English in 2000, but this second edition includes a Postscript and a special note titled 'Ten Years Later' in which Bama revisits her harrowing experiences.

Yashica Dutt is a freelance journalist and writer, born into a Dalit family in 1986 in a city in the northern state of Rajasthan. After spending most of her teenage years in New Delhi, she migrated to the United States to continue her studies. At seven years old she joined a boarding school, being 'advised' by her mother to hide her Dalit identity and to learn from her classmates how to behave as an upper caste. She has kept her caste hidden ever since. Following the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD student at Hyderabad University, as a consequence of casteist discrimination, Dutt publicly declared herself a Dalit in 2016. Since then, she has launched a platform called 'Document of Dalit Discrimination' for Dalits to share their stories of caste discrimination. Her book *Coming Out as Dalit* is the latest writing by a Dalit woman and compiles her experiences and those of many Dalits who have used her platform to speak.

These two texts complement each other not only in drawing a timeline of casteism in the post-Independence and democratic era, but also in giving an account of the Dalit female attitude's progression.[2] There are clear spatial and temporal differences that have resulted in an experiential diversity. *Karukku* illustrates the social reality and Dalit feminist consciousness of 1992, while *Coming Out as Dalit* of 2019 brings to light the consequences of Indian affirmative action towards Depressed Castes such as Dalits nearly 70 years after its implementation and counters the post-caste narrative.

2. We Do as We See: The Dalit Female Interpellated Subject

Judith Butler (1993, 1999) points to the role of discourse in shaping gender identity and in creating an intelligible subject. The psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) believed that certain developmental tasks occur at specific stages in one's life. He particularly highlighted adolescent identity development as a critical

2 Bama and Yashica Dutt are not the only Dalit women who dared to speak up against the caste system. Two of the first Dalit women who also voiced their predicament are Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. Apart from documenting the plight and everyday struggles of the women in their community, these two Dalit female writers develop, in the course of their weave, alternative expressive spaces for resistance and agency. Although Urmila Pawar does not display a radical rejection of social structures in her text *The Weave of My Life* (2008), she does suggest Dalit women's role in revising and reshaping unjust social practices. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), on the other hand, deploys a more radical and angrier discourse to prove that Dalit women are far from being 'silent subjects' at the receiving end of humiliation. She was determined to lay bare the emergence of a Dalit female subject who speaks up, writes out and confronts outright (Guru 2008, 5).

milestone arguing that, during this period, the young person enters a psychological moratorium in which he or she experiments with roles and identities drawn from the surrounding culture. Along these lines, if young individuals are unable to experiment or are submitted to constricted and oppressing identities, they may suffer identity confusion and diffusion with negative consequences, such as social withdrawal, depression and anxiety. Similarly, given the family system's input for identity knowledge, the inequality or gender bias within the family can lead to personal and relational problems that can persist into adulthood. Identity formation, then, is not simply an agentic, internally driven and controlled process; precisely by having to adapt oneself to a stigmatised context, one is forced to either repress or falsify oneself in order to fit in and survive.

The gender bias existing in Indian society can lead the young Dalit woman to feel like a secondary citizen, a feeling she often initially learns in her own home and carries with her out into the world. This concords with Judith Butler's concepts of 'performativity' (1993) and 'constrained agency' (1999). According to this critic, we perform our identities according to the social pressure or normative discourse that governs our society. In this vein, gender is socially constructed via language, symbolic interaction and socialisation within a normative paradigm that supports rigid gender scripts and social categories, shaping then an 'interpellated subject' (Butler 1999).

The regulatory nature of the dominant casteist and patriarchal discourse has historically interpellated the Dalit female as a passive and silent victim and this has impacted on how she performs her gender. Yet, she will not only act out, but also internalise, in the process, her 'appropriate' or expected identity so as to gain acceptance or avoid repercussions.[3] Bama acknowledges, "in the face of poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling" and, instead "stayed at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores" (Bama 2014, 79). The regulation of one's identity has gone beyond one's character and has also affected what one should look like. Given Indian society's obsession with fairness, in order to get closer to an 'accepted identity'—or just to avoid any kind of offense—Dalit women were made very conscious of their skin colour. As Dutt reckons, "the bias against dark skin affects both men and women," but in the patriarchal set-up "it is women who suffer its consequences the most" (Dutt 2019, 17).

3 This is what Butler has termed as 'intelligibility' or the subjectivity given only to those who fit into and reiterate the dominant norm. Those who do not fit into such social categories—due to their gender, social or ethnic backgrounds—are marked off and 'abjected' as unviable, unintelligible subjects that cannot be recognised within the matrix of normalcy (Butler 1993, 3).

The persistence of colourism in modern India is put forth by Dutt's confession about her mother's obsession with fair skin:

> She would try a new ubtan every week and faithfully shielded her arms, face and other uncovered body parts from the stinging rays of the sun; she still does. Even her mother and grandmother bathed with home-made ubtan instead of soap. [...] Dad's family would ridicule her for not being fair enough, even as most of them, except Dad, were of the same skin tone. [...] This became a constant source of anxiety for her. Before I was old enough to remember or protest, she started bathing me with ubtans –something I had no choice but to follow [...] I understood that I *needed* to be fair to be accepted, and not 'Dalit-looking' [...]. (30; italics in the original)

In light of this constrained agency and performativity, both Bama and Dutt unmask the depth of the iniquitous caste system and how its social hierarchy materialises into collective dehumanisation and discrimination. They also denounce that, not only has their social subjectivity been shaped, but the gender normative has also been set differently for them as Dalits. In other words, they argue against the simple 'intersection' of caste and gender as separate issues, claiming instead that they assume added meanings and consequences.

Nevertheless, Dutt's text does account for a change in the Dalit female subject. Despite continuing to be interpellated subjects privately and publicly, Dutt argues that their access to the Internet and the existence of several Dalit women's organisations have amplified Dalit women's voices and have diversified the feminist narrative in India. More significantly, she calls for a different set of parameters when considering Dalit female agency: while some of them have the means to protest or to put pen to paper, the overwhelming majority of them pose a challenge to the caste through simple, daily acts that create progress and build momentum (Dutt 2019, 181).

3. Sexed Subjectivity

One of the consequences of performativity and constrained agency is the doubly-inflicted sexual violence on Dalit women: whereas upper-caste women's subordination usually ends in their families, Dalit women's subordination extends. Besides household responsibilities, Dalit women have had to toil in the public realm and this has resulted in the questioning of their chastity and honour—in the devaluation of their womanhood and citizenship. In fact, as sexual violence is normalised as part of caste violence and male privilege, it is often not even conceived as violation—except when resistance is encountered, in

which case 'male rights' are brutally asserted. Moreover, the association between practices of intimacy and caste preservation has resulted in the positing of women as the keepers of the family and the community's honour. In order to secure this honour—or to avenge it—female sexuality is regulated and humiliation against them is intensified. As a result, the security of both 'the private' and 'the public' have been denied to Dalit women and the conflation rather than separation of both spaces has shaped their compartmentalised subjectivity. Dutt terms this as a "disgusting misogyny" (Dutt 2019, 59) that considers a "stubborn and wasteful expense" to educate girls (34) and that condemns women for being "'too proud', 'too outspoken' or 'too confident'" (6).

This patriarchal set-up takes on added restrictions on women upon economic and social betterment, "a deeper subscription to Brahminical patriarchy" (8). As Dutt narrates about her better-off parents,

> [her father] would drag [her mother] from the makeshift kitchen at the back of the house to their room, beating her all the while. One evening when he slapped her, the impact punctured her eardrum. When she told her father about this abuse, he came to see her. But by the time her father came to visit, she had softened her stance, especially after Dad's father 'advised' her to be a good daughter-in-law by not reporting her husband's abuse […]. (6)

Dutt adds that rape of Dalit women is still "shockingly normal" (143), a reality that they often have to accept as part of their lives. This proves that the Dalit female body continues to be symbolised through violence and violation up to the point that it has become an aspect of her gendered Dalit personhood. Bama also bears witness to the continuation of Dalit women's 'othering' within the democratic social structure of India: their beauty is still seen as burdensome and they are forced to subjugate their needs to please others through image creation, repression and subordination. Many incidents in *Karukku* occur on the body of women so as to show that the Dalit female body is the site where forces of patriarchy undoubtedly unleash, but also the place for subversion and reclaiming female subjectivity. Inter-caste strife was recurrent in Bama's village, although there is one in particular between Bama's community and the Chaaliyar community that is a case in point. Following a fight in which a Chaaliyar man got beaten up, the Chaaliyars placed an elaborate and exaggerated police complaint against Bama's whole community, which prompted the police to charge against Bama's community and heavily abuse the menfolk before arresting them. In order to protect their men, the women from her community devised several plans to trick the police such as making up labour pains (Bama 2014, 39), faking sickness to keep the police away from their houses (40) or disguising men in women's saris (42). In contrast to the traditional image

of Indian womanhood that upholds values such as modesty and shyness, Bama thus insists on showcasing an emerging Dalit woman: one that is independent, courageous and straightforward whose epitome is Yashica Dutt. Bela Malik words that "the younger women [are] most militant and less willing to tolerate the terms of their existence" (Malik 2005, 102) resonate with Dutt whose subject position removes her from the mainstream social paradigm but, at the same time, provides her with the tools to efficiently counteract.

4. Perilous Sanskritisation

Another aspect put forth by Dalit women writers is Dalits' need to emulate the upper-caste lifestyle as a coping mechanism and survival strategy, but also its damaging effects for Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. For Gabriele Dietrich (2003), patriarchy in Dalit castes is an imitation of upper-caste culture. But, although it is true that Bama, for instance, portrays many poor Dalit women who do not carry the markers of religion or marriage—as upper-caste women do—or who fight back domestic violence, *Karukku* is not free from the violence perpetrated against Dalit women in economically backward families. This indicates that the internalisation of male dominance has taken place before the economic upward-mobility of Dalits began.

That being said, economic prosperity has indeed led to a certain imitation of upper-caste cultural values within Dalit families and this has often added oppression to women. Dutt depicts the continuation of female oppression among the educated Dalits in the city and the diaspora and she specifically underlines the emotional and mental damage experienced by Dalit women when trying to hide their caste (Dutt 2019, 15, 37, 132). Dutt's family has unquestioningly followed Hindu rituals and notions of purity and impurity so as to become acceptable within the caste Hindu framework. This has been known as the Gandhian approach to the problem of untouchability, a liberal Hinduist method which affirms individual agency by creating conditions of non-untouchability on the part of Dalits by following the oppressor caste's habits and worldview. The major issue of this approach is that it shifts the epistemic privilege from the Dalit to the caste Hindu and from the realm of the collective to that of the individual. This means that the citizen-subjecthood of Dalits is contingent upon their will and ability to model themselves culturally upon the paternalistic higher castes. In this resolution, Dalits not only lose out on their discursive pre-eminence, but also their agency. Besides, the guilt of rejecting one's identity and the fear of getting caught follow the 'emulator' every step of the way. Dutt's moments of triumph as a young girl, for instance, were accompanied by self-flagellation. Caste has continued to haunt her when she chose to work as a fashion journalist, eschewing politics for fear that in writing a story or expressing

an opinion she might reveal her caste. As she poignantly argues, "We don't leave our Dalitness behind just so that we can blend in more easily. We do it because sometimes that's our only option. We change our last names so we can get jobs and rent houses. We lie about our caste so our friends, classmates and teachers don't think we are lesser than them. We learn their habits so no one can use our Dalitness to make fun of us" (181).

This is an ephemeral and fragile attempt which often proves insufficient: "for my journey to start, I had to leave India so I didn't have to worry about what would happen if people found out about my caste" (135). Emotional turbulence persisted in her adulthood because of the recurrent moral dilemmas posed to her by the clash between her Sanskritised self and her evolving Dalit self: "Right now, I believe it was the right choice. She [her mother] was trying to protect us and give us a good education" (Dhillon 2020, n.p.), she concludes.

As for Bama, once free from the shackles of rural patriarchy and casteism, she recounts Dalit women's inability to go to the cinema in the city (Bama 2014, 58) or the dangers and stigma attached to them when being alone or moving freely around (119), which demonstrates that their constraints and incapacities on account of their caste and class position are often considerably aggravated in the urban space. In fact, these limits of mobility and hybridity in the city eventually prompted Bama to resolutely return home (136). The disappointing contact with the urban space diminished her spirit of resistance and forced a young and educated Bama to recognise the impossibility of escaping stigma, thus signalling the failure of the Ambedkarite approach and Indian democracy in resolving the Dalit problem. She inscribes this both at the level of content and form as her narrative loops back and forth, constantly circling around the home territory that can never be left behind: "In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear" (26).

Both Bama and Dutt show that Sanskritisation involves a constant cultural flow, able to blur or highlight boundaries. In their cases, the emulation of the ways of the 'other' has only emphasised their difference, their status always incomplete, always behind. Worse still, their oppression has acquired added inter/intra dimensions as it "led to upper caste norms and upper caste patriarchal practices percolation into the lower caste ranks too" (Chakravarti 2013, 87-88).

5. Hybrid Social Realism

Taking a cue from Antonio Gramsci's postulation on subaltern theory, Cosimo Zene applies Spivak's notorious question to the issue of Dalits: Can the subaltern speak? And he argues: "Not only does the Dalit woman speak and talk, but she

wants to be listened to through words, poetry, singing, dancing and working—and more precisely the always underpaid extra-work" (Zene 2020, 88-89).

As this paper aims to show, Dalit women's writings aim at confronting the reader with ethical questions. Yet, not only is the subject matter at issue; the aesthetics deployed to put forth these topics is also a consequential tool in challenging a passive consumption altogether. As is the case with most Dalit writers, the most immediate manner to deliver and assert their cultural and social specificities has been the autobiographical mode.[4] The fact that Dalit autobiographies have taken on various forms and are charged with significant political investment has motivated many critics to categorise them as 'life narratives'. Life writing has been interpreted as "a general term that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical" (Watson and Smith 2010, 4). Mini Krishnan writes in the 'Editor's Note' to *Karukku*: "Breaking a silence that has lasted for more generations than we can count comes Bama's *Karukku*, a text which is a life story that could lay the foundation for a course on Dalit memoirs. Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto" (Krishnan 2014, xxv).

Although mainly biographical, Dalit female writings do not lack aesthetics, rather, aesthetics is a quintessential part of their critical political project. They are useful cultural texts that provide entry points to Dalits' material conditions and trauma from a specific spatio-temporal perspective and, more importantly, in a symbolic and metaphorical language. It is a literature of social reform whose dominant representational strategy is described as the social realist mode. The fact that this kind of literature not only revises realism's history of representational failures, but also calls into question the opposition between aesthetics and politics, points to narrative hybridisation (Gajarawala 2013, 173).[5] The form of the texts and the way the events unfold further suggest an aesthetic allegiance to a moral order on the part of the writer (Dash 2020, 99).

Both *Karukku* and *Coming Out as Dalit* prove the ongoing faith of Dalit writers in the social realist mode; but they indeed challenge and adapt it precisely by not adhering to Dalit women's victimisation and self-pity, but by artfully and ingeniously transforming pain into a social weapon, instead.

4 Given the Indian historical context and the influence of the caste system, autobiography was not a popular genre since collectivity has been preferred to individual agency (Arnold and Blackburn 2004, 5). This changed in the second half of the 20th century due to factors such as the liberalisation of discourse and the political assertion of marginalised groups, such as Dalits.

5 Dalit realism differs from social realism in that, apart from countering the elision of caste, it purports to endow Dalit characters with subjectivity.

"The Dalit should write as a Dalit", declared Bama (2001, np) in an interview. The Dalit writer must disturb what she calls "the superficial orderliness of the status quo" by which she refers to the rules of grammar, syntax, prosody and the so-called decency of standard languages (Bama 1999, 98). As a Dalit writer herself, she unequivocally made sure to stamp her 'Dalitness' on her writings. However, this 'linguistic' protest, so evident in *Karukku*, is not present in *Coming Out as Dalit*, as Dutt uses a 'sanitised' and formal language to put forth her protest. Moreover, the literariness and narrativity in Bama's text is replaced by an emphatic journalistic style in Dutt in which personal accounts are laced with history and the latest data on Dalits and Dalit women's state of affairs.

In addition, Bama and Dutt have staged issues of caste and gender through a particular gender-cum-community perspective (Naik 2016, 16) that often disregards the unified subject presupposed in the canonical Bildungsroman. In these texts, one has to search for the 'I' through a careful reading of the 'we' since, although they do mostly narrate their lives, the background of these narrations are the struggles of their community. This displacement of the authorial 'I', not only grants the Dalit subject a matter-of-fact exteriority, but also confers space for the 'others' to get in, to forge a collective voice and identity which has not been possible in an individual manner—especially not for women. This is precisely what we find in *Karukku*. Bama writes her autobiography to heal her internal wounds (Bama 2014, ix) but manages to represent a shared suffering as she deploys a fluctuating and organic shift between the generic conventions of individual life-writing and collective biography. *Karukku*, in fact, does not seem to have a protagonist whose singular growth is charted. In the first chapter, even before we know anything about the narrator's life, we get a glimpse of the community, stories about many Dalit women—some who have taken their lives of suffering as the only possible reality (80), while others strive to resist—as if she wanted the reader to pay attention to the structures within which varied Dalit female subjectivities function.

Dutt's text, although apparently more self-centred, is also a mapping of the history of many Dalit women, of their powerlessness as much as their gradual attainment of political consciousness. She writes: "I talk of the lives of a varied group of Dalits" (Dutt 2019, ix), although she feels the need to clarify later on that, "it details my own experiences, those of my family and goes deep into the areas of Indian society I am familiar with [....] What it is not is a comprehensive history of Dalits in India and it should not be taken as such. There are many aspects of the Dalit experience that lie outside the scope of this book" (180). Even so, the lurking pluralised register in her text, which encompasses different voices, emotions and subjectivities should not be overlooked as part of her literary responsibility, beyond the aesthetic and self-reflexive plane.

6. Dalit Feminism

The experience of humiliation produces "its own structures of subjectivity" (Kumar 2013, 166), but it also shapes a specific reaction and counteraction. The agency and assertion laid bare in these texts through a particular narrative framework and a purposeful politics of language shape a 'Dalit feminism' with a potential to address multiple subjugating intersectionalities—be it the caste system, patriarchy or subalternity in general. Dalit female writers such as Bama and Dutt bring on a structural and linguistic difference from the universalist category of Dalit and Indian women writing in that their aesthetic concerns are directed towards a more productive articulation of their social subjectivity in literature. In *Karukku*, the iconoclastic, non-conformist narrator uses a confrontational tone of "a fierce anger that wants to break down everything that obstructs the creation of an equal and just society, and an unshakable belief in that goal" (Bama 2014, 138).[6]

In transforming their material and conceptual spaces into spaces of radical politics and being, both Bama and Dutt reveal themselves as active and reflective subjects, albeit at different paces and from different positions. They inherently warn against the mere reinforcement of stereotypes and the aestheticisation of experience as they purposefully rework the boundary between suffering and emancipation while retaining in a way a certain ambivalence. As a result, the recount of their daily ordeal is imbued with a political programme and agenda for emancipation. For Bama "writing itself is a political act and it is one of the weapons that [she] use[s] to fight against this dehumanizing caste practice" (Sarangi 2018, 4). Similarly, "by writing, [...] For a few precious minutes, [Dutt] felt an unfamiliar combination of triumph and self-worth" (Dutt 2019, 131). The new Dalit women, according to her, do not "need traditional print and TV news outlets to leave their mark on history" (167); while some protest, some organise and some write; yet, "many of us don't. We go to school, raise children, have jobs, run businesses, experience joy and success, and that in itself is our biggest challenge to caste" (181). This new Dalit woman, thus, rejects predestined and imposed identities, contests the ideology that degrades and dehumanises her, and insists in redefining caste as a contemporary form of social and cultural inequality and power relations.

Another remarkable aspect of this Dalit feminism is the writers' acknowledgement of the vast differences, even contradictory positions, between Dalit women themselves. They repeatedly urge the question of caste be argued out from every class, caste, religious and geographical position possible. It is this particular Dalit consciousness and perspective and the vision that Dalit female writers bring to literature about caste and Indian society as a whole that constitute the contemporary Dalit women writing.

6 When asked about the tag 'Dalit Feminism' Bama responded: "The life of a Dalit woman is totally different from a non-Dalit woman. So, Dalit feminism is a must" (Sarangi 2018, 4).

7. Conclusion

In Indian and Dalit mainstream schema, the questions of Dalit women's representation and their role in the emancipation of the Dalit community were hardly attended to, or were else heavily misrepresented by attributing models of passivity and victimisation to them. As a result, patriarchy became normalised whereas Dalit women's capacity for criticality and agency was being overlooked and undermined in inversely proportional manner. The neglect of Dalit subjecthood within the mainstream feminist framework added to Dalit women's marginalisation and resulted in Dalit women's need to formulate their convoluted subject positions.

Dalit female writers such as Bama and Yashica Dutt depict how social rules and forces have dictated—and continue to do so—power differentials which, besides affecting the micro and macro systems in society, can definitely affect behaviour, cognition and determine one's social inclusion. Butler's take on gender, identity and performativity conceptualises how dominant social discourses about normalcy and viability can shape one's gender, image and sense of self. One is forced, she argues, to engage in a specific type of performance in order to conform and be accepted in a society that honours the performance of 'intelligible subjects' (Butler 1993). Identity then is impacted by internal, familial and social forces, a fluid interaction between the person and their environment. Those females outside the dominant culture, as is the case of Dalit women, suffer a more pronounced gender socialisation and, consequently, run a higher risk of psychological dissociation and internalisation due to the intersecting variables of their 'othering'.

While violence against women is certainly not unique to Indian society, the social institution of caste reinforces the humiliation, subordination, seclusion and exploitation that Dalit women face. This inevitably leads to the internalisation of patriarchal ideologies that will result in more societal pressure and oppression. Additionally, the responsibility and necessity of working outside their households often generates mental agony on account of the indignity and sexual humiliation they often suffer. Bama and Dutt demonstrate how violence against women cuts across caste, class and spaces and lay bare the paradox of sexual violation as constitutive of female identity.

In their quest to recover a wide range of Dalit female experiences and voices, Dalit women life narratives such as Bama and Dutt's intertwine the internal and the external realm, come to grips with the everyday experiences of caste and gender, and politically situate the subject in its specificities. By conflating confessional experiences with prevailing social issues—such as the recovery of disregarded Dalit female positionalities, the impact that oppressive structural forces have had on Dalit gender performance, the paradox of sexual violence as constitutive of female identity, and the pervasiveness of caste in unsuspected contexts—through a more complex approach, they have posed a significant challenge to the individualistic

nature of autobiographical writing. Bama and Dutt assert their being part of the communal processes by placing the individual entity of the writer/protagonist in tandem with the collective Dalit female identity—although this communitarian notion is more evinced by Bama—thus highlighting the fact that the Dalit female self comes across as a layered and complex entity.

The act of writing in and through public debate is an important political act and the representation of Dalit female life in literature is indeed a form of resilient and subversive activism: a space for the (re)presentation, (re)consideration and (re)cognition of subjects whose sole existence poses a threat to the mainstream. The interlacing of the community's struggle and their own personal goals has given place to a shared negotiation of pain and emancipatory politics. However, this emphasis on the sociological significance of Dalit female literature must not relegate it to the socio-political domain; on the contrary, its particular literary expressions are also—if not more so—revealing of what is still to be done and how it should be approached.

However, in an increasingly right-wing and coercive national and global context,[7] it is becoming increasingly difficult and challenging to produce knowledge against the mainstream, to work against the hierarchies of caste, class or gender and to voice the voiceless. Furthermore, even if things have changed, Dalit literature, and female Dalit writing in particular, are still unknown or underestimated outside of India, which inevitably and inadvertently contributes to perpetuating their silencing. Moreover, as the market determines, not only the language in which experience can be rendered, but also what can be said, the gradual 'sensationalising' of issues that women have struggled to legitimise and bring within the parameters of the literary—such as sexuality or rape—has complicated their socio-political consideration (Menon 2004, np). Finally, anti-Dalit violence has intensified in the last decades as a reaction to Dalit economic and political emancipation. All this proves that the oppressing culture and the casteist value system are still there and, thus, that there is still the need to go beyond, to question identity constructions and liberate the infinite female Indias within so as to gain a more accurate understanding of an otherwise still overshadowed Dalit universe.

7 In Narendra Modi's India, things have taken a new, devious turn. There has been noticeable caste polarisation and the country's 200 million Dalits are still often denied access to basic rights —such as public water sources, temples, schools— and in some areas are still banned from marrying into higher castes or even sharing food with them. Many are confined to the most menial jobs —such as cleaning sewers by hand— and in cities and villages they are often shunted into separate enclaves. What is more, the rise of violent Hindu nationalism —also known as the Hindutva ideology— has not only hampered progress to get to Dalits' doorsteps, but has contributed to the rise of violence and hate crimes against Dalits.

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