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## Learning from 'the Outsider Within': The Sociological Significance of Dalit Women's Life Narratives

Bhushan Sharma<sup>1</sup> and Anurag Kumar<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Dalit women have long occupied marginal positions and been excluded from two major Indian social movements: The Feminist Movement and the Dalit Movement. The researcher examines how Dalit women have made creative use of their marginality—their 'outsider-within' status—and have represented their lived experiences. The study scrutinizes select life narratives of Dalit women writers: Bama's *Sangati: Events* (2005), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2015), and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) to discuss and explore the sociological significance of three characteristic themes in these narratives: (1) the interlocking nature of Dalit women's oppression, (2) endurance and resilience, (3) their role in the transformation of the Dalit community. Thus, the perspectives of Dalit women writers create new knowledge about their lives, families, and communities. Their perspectives may well provide a preparatory point for the development of the Dalit Feminist Standpoint. This study may help other marginalized sections or social scientists by putting greater trust in the creative potential of their narratives and cultural biographies.

*Keywords:* Caste, Dalits, Gender, Intersectional oppressions, Outsider-within status, Substituted knowledge, Standpoint.

### Introduction

Indian Dalit Literature is an articulation of the unrepresented painful past of former 'untouchables' of the Indian subcontinent. They were kept outside the four *Varnas*<sup>3</sup> of the Hindu social order. Another term for 'Untouchables' is the 'depressed classes' (Ambedkar), 'Harijans' (Gandhiji), 'Scheduled Castes' (Article 341, Indian Constitution), and 'Dalits'; the last being their self-chosen terminology. According to Zellig, "Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution"

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<sup>3</sup> The Hindu social order; according to the holy texts, consists of four-fold Varna division in the society, 'The highest is that of the Brahmans or priests, below them the Kshatriyas or warriors, then the Vaishyas, in modern usage mainly merchants, and finally the Shudras, the servants or have-nots... There is in actual fact a fifth category, the untouchables, who are left outside the classification' (Dumonts, 1999, 66-67). These were 'outcasts' who were described as impure and relegated to the rank of those who should not be touched, in other words, "Untouchables". They performed menial and impure jobs.

(1996: 268). And Bhoite & Bhoite, view “Dalit Sahitya (Literary) Movement is not purely a literary movement as it sounds to be; a deeper analysis reveals that it is basically a social movement” (1977: 74), for the liberation of Dalits and to bring about fundamental changes in the Indian social order.

Dalit literature is a quest for identity and social equality and mainly articulates the oppressed history of a community; documenting atrocities and discrimination done to Dalits by the hegemony of upper-caste people. However, Dalit literature has its internal limitations. The gender question has either not been comprehended or was excluded from mainstream Dalit literature: “Dalit women’s issues did not have any place on the agenda of the Dalit movement and the Women’s movement. Even today things have not changed” (Pawar 2015: 260). Seemingly Indian feminism has not broadened its perspective to encompass the concerns of Dalit women who are ‘Dalit of Dalits’ (Manorma: 2008). Appropriately, as noted by the Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde, “[I]t is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences” (Lorde 1984: 122).

Hence, Dalit women have felt the need to transform Dalit consciousness, to represent their perspectives and lived experiences. The central problem addressed in this article is how Dalit women made creative use of their marginality and learning from their ‘outsider-within’ status to bring about this consciousness transformation. The current study illustrates the sociological significance of the select Dalit women’s life narratives.

### Discussion and Analysis

Dalit women have unique lived experiences, as this faction comprises of the intersectional oppressions of two groups oppressed on account of their birth: ‘Dalits’ and ‘women’. Dalits in India are the ‘depressed classes’ (Ambedkar, 1936) and women ‘the second sex’ (Beauvoir, 1989). These doubly oppressed women are subjugated, downgraded, and marginalized. Hence the need to create a Dalit Feminist Standpoint has been identified by many researchers: Gopal Guru (1995), Sharmila Rege (1998), and Chhaya Datar (1999). However, ‘lived experience’ of Dalit women and their perspectives could be articulated accurately in their writing.

The scrutiny of select texts: *Sangati*, *The Weave of My Life*, and *The Prisons We Broke* reveal the common aspect of the lives of their respective writers: Bama Faustina, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble, that they all certainly have a privileged standpoint as an ‘outsider-within’. The study reflects their development from childhood to fully conscious grown-ups; their odyssey from a marginal space to the dominant social structures fetching them the epistemic benefit of the ‘double vision’ as a result of bestriding both sides of a dichotomous social divide. This shaped their new perspectives on life. These narratives can be called ‘social epiphanies’ which led Dalit women to follow the ethics of Black women writers, especially ‘politicizing of their memory’, ‘remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present’ (hooks 1990: 147).

Another commonality among Dalit women writers is that they all have written their narratives in their regional languages; therefore, the visibility of these minor texts has been accredited to the political commitment of their translators. Maya Pandit has crossed many borders and very proficiently introduced the readers who are ‘outsiders’, to the nooks and crannies of Indian Marathi region in her translations of the two original Marathi texts into English: Kamble’s *Jina Aamcha* (1985) as *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) and Pawar’s *Aaydan*

(2003) as *The Weave of My Life: Dalit Women's Memoirs (2008)*. *Sangati*, an English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom of the second work of Bama, published in Tamil (1994) conveys the essence of the original text without sensationalizing its subject matter. As a result, what is from the margins in the regional language and culture has been brought into the vanguard of the international arena for the sake of bonding with similar cultural forces operating within other cultures. Thus, as with Black women intellectuals, the 'double vision' of Dalit women writers helped them to understand that the privileged classes and the patriarchy use ideologies to restrict these women to the periphery, consequently limiting their access to societal resources and institutions to control, define, and marginalize their location.

The term 'outsider-within' was first coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986). 'Outsider-within' status holder occupies a special space that their difference makes; they become different people, 'the other', 'marginalized'. It shapes the perspective of the experiencer which locates a unique standpoint. 'Outsider-within' status was captured by Bell Hooks, a black feminist critic while giving an account of her small- town, Kentucky childhood, she registers, 'living as we did –on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out... we understood both' (1984: vii). Their difference makes them conscious of patterns or social constructions that may be beyond the comprehension or sight of sociological insiders. Therefore, the select narratives reveal some common themes.

### **Three Key Themes in Dalit Women's Life Narratives**

The lived experiences of Dalit women are painful. "When drawing on bitter memories and writing about them, the tendency to reconstruct instead of resurrecting the past is inevitable" (Whitehead, 2009:126). Chandran and Hashim (2014) assert that in the process of reconstructing, writers may choose to restructure and present events or experiences according to the importance that deems appropriate. Accordingly, the writers of the select texts while writing about the oppression and marginalization of the Dalit community develop a strong leaning towards feminist issues because gender with caste forms a lethal combination in the lives of women. As a result, consideration of the interlocking nature of caste, gender, and class oppression is the foremost recurring theme in the select texts followed by the discussion on the endurance and resilience, and the role of women in the transformation of Dalit community.

Secondly, while life as a Dalit woman may produce certain commonalities of outlook, the multiplicity of class, age, religion, and sexual orientation shaping individual Dalit women's lives has resulted in different expressions of these common themes. Therefore, collective themes that appear in their narratives may be experienced and expressed differently by different groups of Dalit women. Finally, while a Dalit Feminist Standpoint certainly exists, its contours or outlines may not be clear to Dalit women themselves. Therefore, this paper theorizes the articulation of Dalit women's lived experiences to elucidate a Dalit Feminist Standpoint (DFS) with the hope that documenting the experiences of depressed women may reach a wider audience. The subsequent discussion of three key themes in select life narratives is itself a fragment of this emerging process of interpretation.

### **The Interlocking Nature of Oppression**

The texts illustrate that the marginality and social exclusion of the Dalit community further pushed Dalit women as the second sex, into a state of repression, poverty, and ignorance.

The interlocking nature of caste, class, and gender oppression of women is appropriately summarized by Bama:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating. In the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church, they first lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment (Bama 2005: 35).

This shows Dalit women suffer within the household, the workplace, and religious spaces. They are agonized physically, mentally, economically, and spiritually, with the effect of caste closely related to their location within Indian society. The select texts demonstrate that the caste system is most prevalent and stern in rural areas. The texts elucidate power relations and the framework of the intersectional oppressions of caste, gender, and class responsible for the crippled existence of women. Their main struggle is for survival in a space of social exclusion and marginal spatial realities: "In the face of poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stayed at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores" (Bama 2012: 79). Kamble states, "Our place was in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste... We ate the leftovers without complaining and labored for others' (2008: 49). The majority, of women who belong to these repressed communities, work as food gatherers, and are mostly dependent on natural resources for their survival. They collect firewood, dry grass, wild fruits from forests, and a variety of fish, crabs, and shells from the creeks. *The Weave* portrays the conditions of a subhuman existence of an entire community, shamelessly exploited by the upper castes, reduced to a status of beasts of burden, extremely marginalized' (Pandit 2015: xvi). The text presents an authentic picture of Dalit women's hardships:

Women hunted for crawfish or crabs in the rocks by pushing their hands inside. They got drenched in the waves dashing against the rocks. Their hands and feet would be cut by the sharp edges of the rocks, and the salty seawater stung the wounds (Pawar 2015: 44).

Some women lost their lives because they did not notice the water rising' (Pawar 2015) These women are also compelled to undertake dicey journeys for their survival to sell their wares. Kamble's *Aaji*<sup>4</sup> would also go with other women to fetch wood. Once the big branches were cut and tied in small bundles they were carried to the village for sale; the caste factor traversed their labor.

They were not allowed to use the regular road that was used by the higher castes. When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, descend into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside. They had to cover themselves fully if they saw any man from the higher castes coming down the road, and when he came close, they had to say, 'The humble Mahar women fall at your feet.' This was like a chant,

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<sup>4</sup> Grandmother.

which they had to repeat innumerable times, even to a small child if it belonged to a higher caste (Kamble 2008: 52).

They were forced to accept their subjugation and submission to the social hierarchy, through these chants founded on religious ideology. They could not pass without showing due respect to upper-caste men, otherwise, they had to face the rage of their masters and elder male members of their family. The gathered firewood was mostly sold on the Brahmin lane. Every house on this lane had a platform of approximate chest height, meant to prohibit the *Mahar*<sup>5</sup> women from directly reaching the entrance. Instead, they would call out, "Kaki, firewood! The *Mahar* women are here with firewood." (Kamble 2008: 54). The *kaki*<sup>6</sup> would then bargain with them. And finally, these women were asked to carry the bundles to the courtyard of the house. They had to stack all the wood neatly after checking if any of their thread or hair was not left sticking to the wood that might pollute the lady's house.

Akin to the same principle of submission in the name of caste or religion, hegemonic gender ideology also forced them to accept their subservient positions in marital relations:

We believe that if a woman has her husband, she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her. It's another thing that these masters of Kumkum generally bestow upon us nothing but grief and suffering (Kamble 2008: 41).

The writers represent numerous cases of violence against Dalit women. 'At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her.' (Pawar 2015: 112-113). 'He would beat me up for a flimsy reason... This was the life most women-led' (Kamble 2008: 155). '... the poor women would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother's house' (Pawar 2015: 33). These quotations indicate that Dalit women are only subservient partners in marital relations, only an object of lust fulfillment and unpaid servants.

Bama's *Sangati* is an illustration of how patriarchy works in the case of Dalit women. The foremost question is economic inequality. Women presented in *Sangati* are wage earners working as agricultural and building-site laborers but earning less than men do. Yet the money that men earn is their own to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family, often on their own. They are also constantly vulnerable to abuses in the world of work. Hard labor and economic precariousness lead to a culture of violence. This is the theme that Bama explores boldly throughout the book. Bama also exposes the atrocities and sexual exploitation of Dalit women who work as farm laborers for the upper caste landlords. The whole account of Mariamma in *Sangati* validates the inhuman treatment given to poor Dalit girls. She fell into a well while working and was almost crippled; she suffered from malnutrition, and a landlord attempted to rape her. But gender and caste politics blamed her as the perpetrator, and she is made to pay a fine of 200 rupees. In the Dalit community '[I]t's one justice for men and quite another for women' (Bama 2005: 24). Mariamma is then scolded by the *naattaamai*<sup>7</sup>: "The landowners get up to all sorts of evil in the fields. Can we bring them to justice? ... After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work" (Bama 2005: 25). Thus, the

<sup>5</sup>The name of an Atishudra (Dalit) caste.

<sup>6</sup> Paternal aunt, also a respectful way of addressing elder women.

<sup>7</sup> The headman of the *paraiya* (low caste) community.

social relegation of Dalits leads to their powerlessness in protecting their women from sexual exploitation by upper-caste men. Therefore, these women suffer double patriarchal oppression, one from the men of their community and the other from upper-caste men. Patriarchy as a system is not free from caste.

The study of texts also shows the violent treatment of women by fathers, brothers, and husbands. Bama writes that within the community power rests with men: caste courts and churches are male-led. Rules governing sexual behavior are very different for men than women (2005). Kamble's text, *The Prisons*, illustrates that Dalit men did not hesitate to chop off the noses of their women who failed to abide by patriarchal norms. She also discusses the horrible social practices of *Devadasis*<sup>8</sup> and *Muralis*. In the former practice, young Dalit girls are married to gods or goddesses and in the later, the traditional *Mahars* dedicate their girls to the God Khandoba as *Muralis*.

Pawar also represents the enforcement of archaic and unjust gender rules of caste panchayats (village councils) and shares the case of a widow who was found to be pregnant. The whole village knew who the man was. But only she was given the verdict.

She was made to lean forward, and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they had protected the village's honor. If a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for justice and punishment. She was publically judged and her other relatives would beat her up as well (Pawar 2015: 156).

Therefore, the narratives of Dalit women reject the assertions made by non-Dalit feminists that Dalit women can fight back against domestic violence (Dietrich, 2003). They also subvert the claims made by Dalit male intellectuals that Dalit patriarchy is less intense and hierarchical than other forms of patriarchy (Ilaiyah, 1996). The interlocking nature of oppression is so exasperating that women are many a time possessed by spirits. Bama explores how psychological stress and strains are the possible reason for Dalit women's belief that they are possessed by spirits or *peys*. Decades ago (in 1987), this idea of spirit possession as a strategy of the marginalized to challenge the dominant hierarchy was established by Aihwa Ong, who studied Malaysian factory women. She noted: "In their resistance to being treated like things, mounting work pressures (*tekanan*), and harsh (*keras*) foremen operators were seized upon by vengeful spirits (Ong 2010: 203) who occupied the bodies of the women on the factory floor. Also, it has long been recognized by scholars of Hatian Voodoo, that in Haiti, possession of voodoo spirits is a form of resistance and healing against racialized capitalism enacted through slavery. The Voodoo that emerged in Haiti in the eighteenth century was a cry of "Enough to slavery!" (*Voodoo Spirits of Haiti*. RT Documentary), and hence it is a resistance to the

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<sup>8</sup> In the Devadasi system young Dalit girls are married either to a god or goddess. This is done for the well-being and survival of a male child. The conservative Mahars are shown opposing the efforts to demobilize common Dalit masses from this system. The argument advanced by the conservative Mahars in support of the system is quite interesting for they sought to defend the system by elevating it spiritually. They would argue that marriage of a Dalit women with God Khandoba is a rare privilege, while, while the reformist would argue that this elevation is a reduction of a human being to the worst form of exploitation. This reduction and elevation is an on-going tension between those who support the system and those who oppose it. This system is prevalent among the Dait women from several Indian states. (Guru 2008: 167).

interlocking oppressions of racialized capitalist patriarchy, which is also the root cause of Black feminist discourse as claimed by bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and other feminists.

Gender discrimination in the Dalit community is pervasive and begins from birth. A girl's birth is never welcomed in a family, and it is a must for a woman to beget a boy. Baby boys receive more attention and care; they are even fed longer. Boys are given more support, liberty, and respect than girls. Gender bias which begins from the birth of girls continues throughout life for all women including progressive women. If a woman wants to pursue her education or search for a job, she can only do so under the condition that she must first finish her daily chores in the house. Even if she does work outside the home, the community has established an exploitative culture for working women who must hand over their salaries to their husbands. Pawar notes that this is like "deliberately offering your head for butcher's knife" (2015: 208). Gender discrimination is also seen at the time of promotions. Moreover, "The moment a man is promoted; he immediately becomes a *Bhau*<sup>9</sup> *saheb*. But women can never earn the title of *Saheb*<sup>10</sup>. Even after they are promoted, women remain '*bai*'<sup>11</sup>, without the '*Saheb*' (Pawar 2015: 235). Therefore, many social practices, far from being neutral, are gendered, sustaining a patriarchal social order. And caste is the biggest enemy.

The practice of untouchability is imposed on Dalits from birth; there is the belief that caste is inherent and dictates their fate of repression and marginalization. Children become aware of Caste bias in the course of daily life without anybody telling them. Many Dalit writers have memories of a difficult childhood, starvation, repression, and social exclusion. Pawar still has the colonial imprints in her memories: *Aaye*<sup>12</sup> sent Urmila to deliver baskets to her customers who never allowed her to enter their house and made her stand at the threshold. They sprinkled water on the baskets to wash away the pollution. To avoid contact with her they would drop coins in her hand from above. She also remembers her accounts with a Pandit family to whom her *Aaye* would send her with some paisa coins to buy some pickles from them. She was not allowed to go beyond the first step of *Pandit's* (upper-caste) house.

Kaku would bring some fiery red pickle on a plantain leaf, the lime pieces covered with yellow rai dal and oil, and keep it on the second or third step. Then I kept my coins on a step, which the Kaku collected, but only after she had sprinkled water on them to cleanse them of pollution (Pawar 2015: 78).

This suggests the notion that "ritual pollution is internalized" (Guru 2008:164) by the Dalit community, which is the result of their continuous victimization by caste hierarchy. Women endure triple oppression. They are oppressed politically and have no say in the community; they are exploited economically: "... men received one wage, women another, they always paid men more" (Bama 2008: 54). They suffer physical and sexual violence, silence, and impunity. For women, service to others and biological reproduction is their prime duty. Biological reproduction continues until menopause. Kamble gave birth to eleven children of whom three died during childhood. She describes the traumatic and life-threatening conditions in which women give birth to children:

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<sup>9</sup> Brother

<sup>10</sup> Sir, master —used especially among the native inhabitants of colonial India

<sup>11</sup> A polite form of address for women.

<sup>12</sup> Mother

The ignorant midwives would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl's vagina to see how far the baby had progressed. Invariably, the vagina would get swollen, obstructing the baby's path... It was battle with death (Kamble 2008: 58).

This indicates that the women who produce the labor force they labor at the cost of their life. They lack basic facilities and for the want of cotton or cloth pads, they continue to bleed. Many a time they suffer the pangs of hunger.

After the baby comes out into the world, a terrible void is left inside. The stomach needs soft and light food. But from where could Mahars get such food? With the hunger gnawing her insides, the poor woman would just tie up her stomach tightly and lie down on rags, her body a mass of aches and pain (Kamble 2008: 57).

As they have nothing to eat, many women risk their lives during childbirth. These women offer their whole lives to the subsistence of their families but they are helpless when they become mothers.

### **Endurance and Resilience**

Despite the pain and suffering that Dalit women experience, there exists within them, the motivation to persevere. Bama asserts, 'Our women have an abundant will to survive however they might have to struggle for their last breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best ways we can.' (2005: 68). Some women endure their suffering patiently and many show perseverance and continue with the duties that they are obliged to perform. Others resist and find a new meaning to their existence. Bama chose the path of education and remaining single. 'In this way, because of my education alone, I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste difference and discrimination' (2012: 22). Baby Kamble worked with her husband in their department store and managed to find time for reading and writing. Pawar grew with each experience, developing into a hard-core feminist. She came to understand more about rationalism, humanism, scientific thinking, and the distinction between suffering born out of natural causes and those caused by man-made artificial factors such as hierarchical relations.

I felt that a woman was also an individual. If a man has muscle power, a woman has the power to give birth. These are distinctly different capacities and need to be evaluated differently, not in the same way. I had realized that I now had a new vision, a new perspective of looking at women. I had lost my fear (Kamble 2008: 248).

Therefore, these narratives talk about the differences between women, their varied needs, the different ways in which they are subject to oppression, and their coping strategies. The older generation had their ways of overcoming oppression and distress. *Aaye*, the mother of Pawar suffered from the curse of caste, illiteracy, and poverty. She became a widow at a young age and lost her son. But this pain made her tough to take a stand and rebuild her life. She earned by

weaving cane baskets, became combative, arguing with the customers, abusing and thrashing her children if they missed school.

Bama Faustina is a rare example of Dalit women's endurance and resilience, and her writing of *Karukku* was more of an outpouring of all her experiences than a literary act. She rejected all the colonial imprints<sup>13</sup> embodied in memories. Pouring out all negative emotions was a catharsis. She healed herself and felt like "a falcon that treads the air, high in the skies" (Bama 2012: xi). *Sangati*, Bama's second novel, teases out a positive cultural identity as both Dalits and women who can resist upper-caste and upper-class norms. She offers a glimpse into a part of the lives of those 'Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt' (Bama 2005: vii). Much has been written on feminist laughter, humor, and comedy as it offers feminism a strategy of resistance that challenges patriarchy and heterosexuality. It is a feminist intervention into language practices that attempt to erase and silence the body (Fryett 2012:13). Audrey (1998) identifies laughing feminism as subversive comedy.

Narratives of Dalit women also show their liveliness and their will to bounce back. Set against the chronicles of hardships are the accounts of reinforcing cultural events: 'coming-of-age ceremony,' a 'betrothal where gifts are made by the groom to the bride', 'a group wedding five couples at church,' (Bama 2005: 76). Kamble writes in detail about their favorite month of *Ashadh*, a month of ritual baths, house cleaning, comfort, and sweet food. 'This one month of happiness developed in their hearts an iron will to endure whatever suffering came their way during the remaining eleven months' (Kamble 2008: 12). Other reviving facets of Dalit women's lives, held in common, are in the female bonding and everyday occurrences; working together, preparing and eating food, washing, bathing, and swimming or celebrating. Singing was their main bouncy activity. 'They sang all the time at work, too, so that the woods rang out to the sound of their laughter as they made up songs and words to tease each other' (Bama, 2005: 76).

Handsome man, dark as a crow  
More handsome than a blackened pot  
I have given you my promise  
You who can read Ingilissu (Bama 2005: 77).

The main point here is that the prospective bridegroom had been to school and could read English. That the bride could learn a little English is a matter of pride for these women. Another song about a man who took a mistress after he got married offers another opportunity for humour.

Eighteen sweet *paniyaaram*  
You handed to her, across the wall  
But whatever you might give away  
You still are my husband (Bama 2005: 77).

The women always sang songs and laughed like this, while weeding, transplanting rice, harvesting, etc. Their habitual act of lampooning and joking finally gives them the strength to

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<sup>13</sup> Colonial imprints are the lasting effects of colonialism, which is a practice of domination that involves the subjugation and rule of one people over another. Scholarship has explored the distinctions and overlap between colonialism and imperialism.

stand up courageously against caste oppression, which shows feminist solidarity, a celebration of female bonding, and the creation of a community that opens up a place to begin the healing (Brantley 1999).

### **Role in Transformation of the Community**

Dalit women perform the reproductive labour<sup>14</sup> for their community. They are the force behind the survival and struggle of the oppressed community of Dalits. Also, the analysis of the select texts reveal that women form the backbone of their households by running the family often alone; while a man often uses his earnings for himself, women work for their families. Despite all these constraints, Dalit women have emerged as agents of transformation in their community. They forward the Dalit literary movement by contributing intellectually, by representing their perspectives on community issues chiefly womenfolk. In an interview with Manoj Nair, Bama says, "...I could not build a monument; I could not build a sculpture. I wrote a book. My community thus found a place in the mainstream media" (Bama 2001). Their writings generated Dalit consciousness and inculcate the impulse for resistance in future generations. Kamble states in the Introduction to *The Prisons We Broke*:

I am writing this history for my sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and my grandchildren to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realize what ordeals of fire the Mahars have passed through. I also want to show them what the great soul Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar single-handedly achieved which no one else had achieved in ages (Kamble 2008: xiv).

Kamble is a veteran of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. Inspired by the radical leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, she has been involved with the struggle from a very young age. She has established a residential school for socially backward students in Nimbure, a small village near Phaltan, Maharashtra. Her autobiography also brings to the forefront, the tremendous transformative potential of oppressed people to change the world. Kamble writes that Dr. B.R Ambedkar was the torchbearer of Dalit movement who taught the depressed classes, "You don't worship God; you worship your ignorance. Generations after generations *Mahars* have ruined themselves with such superstitions." He asked them to follow the path of educating their children and to abandon god. Ambedkar's speech was attended by a huge crowd including women. Kamble's *Aaji* also made a resonating speech (Kamble 2012: 65). Many women became determined to sacrifice everything for their children's education. Pawar's mother also worked hard for her children's education. However, on the one hand, she would abuse and thrash her children if they missed school, while on the other, she would confront the schoolteacher about his caste bias: "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" (Pawar 2015: 69).

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<sup>14</sup> Reproductive labor is the labor needed to sustain the productive labor force. Such work includes household chores; the care of elderly, adults, and youth; care of the sick; the socialization of children; and the maintenance of social ties in the family. Refer to Parren-as, Rhacel Salazar. "Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labor" (Gender and Society 14, no. 4 (2000): 561).

Pawar, a long-term member of the Dalit and Women's movements offers a cogent critique of feminist and Dalit politics in her writings. She, along with other members, founded the 'Dalit Women's Organization' (Pawar 2015: 267) and her idea of '*Samwadini Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch*' (*Samwadini*<sup>15</sup> Dalit Women's Literary Forum) was brought to reality by her companion Eleanor Zelliot (Pawar 2015: 275). Pawar along with Meenakshi Moon also wrote the contemporary classic *We Also Made History* to record the contribution of women to their communities and the Dalit movement.

Bama enlightens the people about the repressive nature of all religions, the Catholic Church in particular. She argues that the church is comprised of priests and nuns who are from the upper castes, and 'control the dispossessed and the poor by thrusting blind belief and devotion upon them, and turning them into slaves in the name of God, while they themselves live in comfort' (Bama 2012:108). She believes that only education can transform society. She also admires and applauds the ideals of 'courage, fearless, independence, and self-esteem' (Bama, 2005, xx) in Dalit women and not the traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of *accham* (fear), *naanam* (shyness), *madam* (simplicity, innocence), *payirppu* (modesty).

## Conclusion

The 'outsider-within' status of Dalit women writers demonstrates a real site of epistemic dispensation. It introduces new understandings about the hierarchy of caste-based Indian social structure which suppress, repress and marginalize Dalits, and Dalit women who are the easy targets of hegemonic gender ideology. The standpoint of the writers substantiates the truth that many social practices are not neutral but gender-based which maintain and propagate a patriarchal social order, relations of power that systematically privilege men to the detriment, disempowerment, and objectification of women as a social group. Dalit women's sexuality is exploited to maintain caste. They are doubly ensnared in patriarchal societies; one from the men of their community and another from upper-caste men. Caste councils and Caste *panchayats* seek to enforce their archaic and unjust gender rules over them to protect the community identity. And upper-caste men are granted impunity against their crimes committed on these women.

Focusing on various social evils within Dalit society, it is laden with superstitions, ignorance, drunkenness, harassment, and humiliation of brides at the hands of their in-laws under the guise of religion, culture, and ideology. Dalit women endure the interlocking oppressions of caste, class, and gender. Despite all these adverse factors these women have shown endurance and resilience. They have equally contributed to the family, labor, economy, caste struggles, Dalit movement, and Dalit Literature.

Therefore, this study concludes that the narratives of Dalit women are not 'sob stories' but rather testimonies, which carve out a standpoint against injustices to challenge the social order. Thus, they provide productive starting points for an inquiry into questions about not only those who are politically and socially suppressed and muted but also those who, because of the same social and political system, subjugate others. This study may also benefit other marginalized groups by expanding trust in their creative potential for their narratives and cultural biographies.

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<sup>15</sup> *Samwadini* is the name given to the Dalit Women's Forum, and the term means a woman who aims at communication with everyone.

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