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Labour as Violence in Dalit Households: Reading Autobiographical Narratives by Dalit Women

By Pratibha¹

Abstract

The everyday concerns of Dalit women are frequently overlooked in discourses about the emancipation of Dalits from Brahminical hegemony in favor of issues deemed weightier, such as reform ideology, caste conflicts, and political power struggles. The micro-politics of the sexual division of labour in Dalit households, with its corrosive effects on the well-being and self-perception of Dalit women, has remained side-lined. Even when discussed with reference to caste and gender intersectionality, the labour consigned to Dalit women is spoken of in additive terms to explicate their “double oppression” or victimisation through sexual exploitation at the hands of upper caste men. In the light of these arguments, this article examines the depiction of “labouring bodies” in select autobiographical narratives by Dalit women translated into English, to enunciate the physical and psychological subjugation these women endure in the name of labour, which gets subsumed as obligation due to brahminical ideology. Taking Meena Gopal’s argument (2014) as a point of departure, that women’s domestic labour, from marginalised communities in particular, is rendered invisible and undervalued in the mechanistic distinction of the world of work into categories like formal and informal, market and domestic labour, this article attempts to render the agency and voice of these women by bringing to attention the instances where Dalit women have voiced dissent against wage disparity, abjectness and devaluation of their domestic or non-domestic labour, the burden of providing for familial food/sustenance, and the tendency of their own family and community members to deny their personhood by treating them primarily as useful machines. These issues emerge as significant sources of friction within the Dalit household. The article also examines the representation of the domestication of Dalit women in the selected texts.

Keywords: Violence, Gender, Caste, Labour, Autobiographical narratives, Dalit women

Introduction

The discursive interrogation of caste in canonized Dalit² autobiographical literature remains mostly focused on the examination of the lived experience of the male Dalit figure and his quest to overcome caste indignities as he becomes a politically active member of his community. Often, his dissident self-expression against caste discrimination is uncritically and symbolically interpreted as the expression of agency of the narrator’s entire community

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²Although a contested category comprising heterogeneity in terms of castes, the word refers to those who were earlier stigmatised and vilified under the caste system as untouchables. The term is commonly used today by these people to identify themselves and assert themselves socio-politically.

because the “I” is taken to represent a collective stance. In such narratives, the female body remains relatively minimal and is visualized as a site where the intersectional ideologies of caste, class, and gender collude to render Dalit women vulnerable to insidious forms of physical and psychological violence, especially by their kin and community members. There has also been the tendency to frequently present Dalit women as passive victims of sexual assault and other forms of exploitation, mostly by upper-caste men. Rarely are the following questions addressed: How do Dalit women themselves narrate their embodiment, reconstituting it as a language to render their agency? How do they reposition their lived body as voice to express divergent experiences, that not only decry brahminical hegemony, but also defy casteist patriarchal ideology prevalent in the normative Dalit discourse? Tied to a quest for self-esteem/self-perception, how does the body as a recurrent motif symbolically or metaphorically emerge as a battleground between the self and the community, conveying conflicting value judgments, gender biases, and brahminical anxieties?

With the above-stated questions in mind and keeping the trope of the body central to the critique, this article illustrates the debilitating aspects of Dalit women’s caste and gender embodiment, consequent upon the domestic and non-domestic labour they perform. Abrogating the reductionist oppositional binaries of victim-oppressor or Dalit-Savarna, it looks into the micro-politics of sexual division of labour in Dalit households as depicted in select autobiographical narratives by Dalit women in English translation, namely: *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable* (1997), *Karukku* (2000), *Sangati* (2005), *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story* (1988) and *The Weave of My Life* (2008).³ The objective is to explicate that by disrupting the dichotomization of the notions of work into formal and informal, market and domestic, these narratives demand the visibility and revaluation of Dalit women’s reproductive labour, and by extension, claim their personhood. The aim is not to retrieve the individual personage behind the text through a biographical criticism approach, but to assess, by applying a Dalit feminist intersectional interpretive framework,⁴ how these texts interrogate the grand narrative and the cultural schema of Dalit consciousness by bringing scrutiny to domestic sites, thereby opening up this sphere for the deflation of political pretensions. It is argued that these accounts, even when exposing the overlapping and compounding intersectionality of caste and gender norms contributing to the pauperization of Dalit women, do not fixate agency in victimhood or reactionary collective resistance against the upper-castes; rather, they call for a reframing of stereotypical representations of Dalit women by articulating the need for individuation. For the exposition of this, excerpts are taken from the texts where Dalit women articulate their self-perception tied to their labour in intra-group dynamics. The excerpts indicate that in a casteist feudal economy, or even in the domestic sphere in urban locales, along with coercive caste imperatives binding them to caste-based or gendered labour, their complicit kinship also contributes to their economic exploitation as it regulates and exercises constraints on their access to and the nature of work taken up for livelihood. By speaking of the abuse suffered by their bodies in ways that override the narrow conception of violence in terms of sexual commodification or physical assault, Dalit women in these narratives extend the conception of their bodily integrity beyond the biological or sexual, to what Drucilla

³ These texts are not considered as representative samples, as inclusive or exhaustive of Dalit women’s concerns. Rather, they were chosen for their acclaimed status, availability in English translation, and how, as a result of their widespread distribution, they have profoundly influenced the references, resonances, and vocabulary of academic literary discourses about Dalit women.

⁴ Anandita Pan in *Mapping Dalit Feminism* defines it “as a methodological praxis to identify and analyse how various modes of caste and gender-based oppression intersect with each other to oppress dalit woman.” Rather than being a pre-given notion of identity, it is an intersectional standpoint positionality that enables analysis of any text to interpret it from caste-gender angle, and how both categories of identity “simultaneously influence not just dalit women but also upper-caste men and women and dalit men” (Pan, 2021, p. 7).

Cornell has called the “imaginative body” with a “concomitant re-imagining of who one is and who one seeks to become” (1995, p. 5).

Further, as domestic violence, in particular, receives scant representation in literature, partly due to the hesitance of receiving backlash from the community for subjecting intimate relationships to scrutiny, the article also focuses on instances of subtle coercion (such as shaming, blaming, or ridicule) through which unequal socio-economic structures, indicative of brahminical gender ideology reflected in the domestication of Dalit women, are upheld in the middle-class Dalit households. Such instances force us to rethink the dominant proclivity in prevalent scholarship to excessively insist on the difference between upper-caste women and Dalit women in terms of the patriarchal subjugation experienced by them.

Caste, Labour, and Violence

The concept of labour has been central to the critique of the caste system, described as a graded hierarchy premised on the dogma of predestination by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who proclaimed in “Annihilation of Castes” that it is “not merely division of labour. It is also division of labourers” (Rodrigues, 2002, p. 263). Insisting on the bodily roots of caste-marked subjectivity, Anupama Rao in *Caste and Gender* (2003) has argued that caste should be understood as a form of embodiment. As Rao argues, caste ideologies “render the body a culturally legible surface” by employing biological metaphors of stigma and defilement for the formulation of personhood (Rao, 2003, p. 5). This includes practices such as propagating taboos regarding touch, ritual sanctions, and physical segregation that regulate bodies and physical space. In Rao’s words: “[c]aste is a religio-ritual form of personhood, a social organisation of the world through the phenomenology of touch, an extension of the concept of stigma from the facticity of biological bodies to metaphorical collectivities such as the body politic, and most importantly, it is an apparatus that regulates sexuality” (2003, p. 6).

Brahminical norms governing the sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour overlap to create a curious paradox jeopardizing Dalit women’s integrity when it comes to prevalent value judgments about their sexuality and moral character. First, because these women belong to the castes that perform the most menial and stigmatized labour, they incur the status of being polluted due to their defiling occupation. Then they get vilified as promiscuous and uncouth women, precisely because they venture out of their homes into the public domain to earn a livelihood. Leela Dube (2008) in “Caste and Women” notes how the casteist mindset consigns Dalit women to the status of being doubly polluted and makes men from dominant castes consider the bodies of these women readily available for their lustful advances. Dube illustrates the point by mentioning that:

[i]n Uttar Pradesh [...] it is said that just as she-goat may be milked at any time at one’s own will, so can a chamar woman be enjoyed any time at one’s discretion. In Vidarbha, Kunbi landowners who are on a lookout for Mahar women working in their fields say with contempt, ‘Give her a few measures of grain and she will be quiet.’ (p. 474).

Kalpna Kannabiran explains the reason for such a belief in “A Cartography of Resistance” (2012). She delineates that the proscription of physical contact between the upper castes and the untouchables does not encompass the sexual relations between upper-caste men and untouchable women, as sexual slavery is subsumed under physical labour provided by the slave women (p. 65). The impoverished position of Dalits makes it difficult for them to protect their women against the lecherous manoeuvres of their upper-caste masters in a feudal system, as they are dependent on the good graces of their masters to earn their livelihoods. This dependence on feudal lords for sustenance and their haplessness in the face of sexual abuse is articulated by the character Savuriamma in *Sangati*, who remarks, “[t]he landowners get up to

all sorts of evil in the fields. Can we bring them to justice, though? After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work” (Bama, 2005, p. 25). However, this facet of the sexual exploitation of Dalit women has found a modicum of redress in studies in social sciences, literature, and even media reportage. What remains an elusive topic in debates about gendered violence perpetrated on Dalit women is the abuse faced by them in interpersonal relationships.

The material basis of caste is maintained by the *jatis* – the caste-marked kinship groups that function through family units and monitor/regulate/enforce not only the inter-caste relations of production but also decide on the allocation of resources, rights and entitlements of family members on the basis of gender. Much of the burden of maintaining caste-bound labour falls on the Dalit women. This tendency is prevalent in communities that are forced to retain their caste-based traditional occupations due to the non-viability of alternate avenues to earn a livelihood. In such communities, the inclination and the capability to do conventional occupational work make Dalit girls and women acceptable and valuable. Thus, Dalit women are even conditioned from a young age to be amenable to rigorous labour, affecting their self-perception. In these narratives, we see these women complain about the habitual behaviour of their own family and community members, who deny them their personhood by treating them mostly as useful machines. Further, they also express that a failure to meet the normative standards of labour expected from them makes them vulnerable to mortification and violent reprimand. The backbreaking domestic and non-domestic work undertaken by them gets subsumed as duties and obligations under the rubric of patriarchal norms. Despite being breadwinners, they get maltreated. What compounds their impoverished condition further is that, in some communities, women are expected to meet the household expenses with their earnings, whereas men get away with squandering what they earn on indulgences like alcohol, because of a sense of entitlement to the money they earn. This condition emerges as a significant source of conflict within the Dalit households. The 2006 overview report, *Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India*, based on the study in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu/Pondicherry and Uttar Pradesh by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, states that demanding an account of money spent from the husband’s earnings and refusal to give own earnings or jewellery to fund the husband’s drinking habits or spendthrift habits is one of the myriad issues causing intra-familial discord, which manifests as verbal, physical, sexual assaults, and marital rapes. Husbands, followed by mothers-in-law and women’s other relatives, emerge as key perpetrators of domestic violence (Irudayam, Mangubhai & Lee, p. 10). Documenting this facet of domestic violence, Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life*, writes:

Every house had its own share of drunkards. There would be at least one woman among them badly bashed up by her husband. She would walk painfully, somehow managing to drag her aching body along the way. If someone asked what was wrong her anger gushed out. . . followed by a detailed account of reasons for the beating. He demanded money for liquor, she was late in serving his meal; she asked for money for household expenses, for buying medicines for the sick child. (p. 5)

Anupama Rao, in the introduction to the book *Gender and Caste*, urges to disrupt a “unified and monolithic account of patriarchy-in-action,” and proposes that the issues of labour must be revisited from the perspective of caste and its sexual economies, to rethink the relationship between the symbolic economies of gender and sexuality and their material consequences, which lead to the economic dispossession of Dalit women (2003, p. 5). Correspondingly, examining the significance of kinship in maintaining caste hierarchy, Dube has identified three analytically distinguishable but interrelated basic principles implicated in the reproduction of

caste, which operate through kinship units called *jatis* (defined as birth status groups). These are: (a) seclusion and separation (rules governing marriage and contact), (b) hierarchy of order and rank according to status, and (c) interdependence concerning labour. According to her, the third category is closely tied to the other two principles. *Jati* as a caste group functions through the constituent familial units. It is the families as lineages that hold the material resources (Dube, 2003, p. 223). Hence, an investigation of the material basis of the caste system – inequalities in the distribution of resources and exploitative relations of production – needs to be comprehended not just through inter-caste relations but also through an inquiry into intra-caste kinship that governs the allocation of resources, rights to property, services and entitlements. Also, the preservation of rules of conduct and behaviour specific to one's *jati*, and the patterns of interaction with other birth status groups, impinge on kinship units and the household, so much so that the punishment for transgression of caste rules leads to the banishment of the domestic group, unless the household disowns the recalcitrant individual (Dube, 2003, p. 224). Further, she illustrates her ideas with reference to the service castes, like barbers and washermen in many parts of the country, and shows that despite regional variations, the continuity of traditional caste occupation is substantially maintained by women (2003, p. 225). For instance, the *Jajmani* relation, a short-term contractual relation of exchange, which is a feature visible in many rural and semi-rural areas, functions at the family level. Under this, in many places, the bond or contract which ties the labourer to the master is understood to include the services of both the husband and the wife, and at times, even other members of the family (Dube, 2003, p. 226). Substantiating this phenomenon, in *Viramma: Life-story of an Untouchable*,⁵ a mediated autobiographical narrative of a Tamil Dalit woman, Viramma recalls:

All my family is employed at the Grand Reddiar's. My husband takes care of the pumps. [...] I collect the cow dung and clean the stable. My daughter Miniyamma helped me until she got married. Sundari has done the same and now it's my daughter-in-law Amsa who works at the Reddiar's. Anban started by looking after the cows. Now he does important cultivation work with my husband. (1997, p. 156)

Serving in the fields of the Reddi community is considered the prime duty of Pariahs. As a serf, Viramma worked at Reddiar's fields along with her husband and rendered domestic service, which included sweeping the front of Reddiar's house, cleaning the stable, pounding the rice, winnowing the lentils, etc. She laments that despite being onerous, the labour of women remains unacknowledged and underpaid. While her husband got seven or eight measures of paddy as payment in kind, she got two little measures along with the one she received as wages, for shelling the black lentils at the Reddiars. Viramma is critical of the social workers, who claim to work for their upliftment, incite the Pariahs against the landlords but perpetuate the wage gap in their rousing speeches, demanding "[f]ive rupees for the women, ten rupees for the men!" (1997, p. 181). Highly critical of the dominant male chauvinistic attitude prevalent in her community, Viramma is not so defiant about caste hierarchy or serfdom, because labour is the only resource that her people exchange for a wage in the absence of alternative economic avenues. Thus, fully aware of the vulnerability of her community, she does not advocate a

⁵ The text is a result of ten years' worth of conversation between a Tamil Dalit woman, Viramma, and Josiane Racine, during Racine's ethnomusicological research in the 1980s. Originally recalled by Viramma in Tamil, the narrative was culled from Racine's taped material and published in French in France in 1995. The English translation by Will Hobson was published in 1997. As noted by Racine, this text is "not a Dalit text" for it lacks the militant reformative zeal or damning critique of the caste system. However, it is most definitely the "text of a Dalit" as it vividly captures the oppressive life of the Paraiya community, their culture, and the caste ideological framework in praxis in Indian village society (Viramma, 1997, p. 310).

radical revolt against the landlords, but speaks of the sneaky tricks and maneuvers like lies, stealing, and laxity in work that these people use to their advantage in an exploitative agrarian social order.

Similarly, Bama, the acclaimed Tamil Dalit feminist writer, in *Karukku* (2000)⁶ voices her disaffection about wage disparity. She narrates that while growing up, she watched both the men and the women of the Palla and Paraya communities, attached to the Naicker family as bonded labourers, perform hard and continuous labour, but “[e]ven if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why” (2000, p. 47). In *Sangati* (2005)⁷ too, Bama recounts the inequality in remuneration for men and women doing manual labour. In construction work, the men entered the well directly, excavated the sides, and loaded baskets with stone and debris. The baskets had to be tipped out by the women after the men descended and carried them up on their heads. Since men use dynamite to blast the rocks, excavate the well, and construct the walls using cement, their work is considered risky; therefore, they receive higher pay. As Bama notes, “The women, in any case, whatever work they did were paid less than the men. Even when they did the very same work” (Bama, 2005, p. 18). Providing corroborating commentary on the issue of gender-based wage disparity among the Malas and Madigas in Nampalli village, Andhra Pradesh, Clarinda Still notes:

[a]lthough women receive half the salary of men it is their wage that often keeps the house afloat. Women’s earnings are often spent on food, clothes, and daily household expenses, while men spend a larger proportion of their wage on cinema and alcohol [...] Spending habits are a major source of conflict between men and women in Dalit community. (2011, pp. 1132-1133)

Bolstering Still’s argument and indicating that the meagre income Dalit women earn is often primarily spent on household expenditure, Bama recalls: “in our streets, men and women both go out and earn. Most of the men, though, never give their wages to their women. It is the woman who looks after everything in the house” (2005, p. 67). The grievance against the spending habits of men finds mention in *Pan on Fire* (1988)⁸ as well. As Sangeeta states, because her husband cannot stick to the budget, it is she who manages the monthly ration, pays the bills, and saves some money for movies and some tea (Bhave, 1988, p. 20). She also speaks of another woman in her neighbourhood, who slaves away night and day, at home and as a road sweeper with the City Municipal Corporation, because her husband is a wastrel. Similarly, Mangala mentions, “[a]mong us it is customary for women to roll *beedis*. Even well-off women

⁶ *Karukku* is considered a seminal text for another reason, as it is the first of its kind that problematises the phenomena of conversion as a means of social transformation that had ensued among Dalits following B. R. Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism. The narrative depicts how the state and the church, in collusion with the upper castes, legitimize physical and psychological violence against Dalits by exposing the superstitions and punitive ethos rampant in the church through the privations of a young girl.

⁷ *Sangati*, originally written in Tamil and published in 1994, and translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom into English and published in 2005, is more prominently known for foregrounding the multi-layered subjugation faced by Dalit women. Through an assortment of interconnected anecdotes, experiences, and memories by women of the Paraiya community, accommodating several characters from three generations, the colloquial, dialogic multiple narrations with generously used Dalit Tamil slangs, and sexually explicit references, the text presents retrospective meditations in the autobiographical mode by Paraiya women.

⁸ A significant mediated autobiographical text, the book is a collection of narrated stories by urban, slum-dwelling Dalit women, namely Rukmini, Chhaya, Rakhma, Sangeeta, Mangala, Ashoka, Savitri, and Leela. The book documents the results of research conducted by a team headed by Bhave under the auspices of Ishvani Kendra, Pune. The objective was to elicit responses from these women on the major incidents in their lives, to cull out their perceptions of themselves. The four key thematic concerns which were kept fundamental to the dialogic interviews were family, work, society, and religion.

do that. The money they earn goes to run the house, and the money the husbands earn goes into their own drinking or gambling” (Bhave, 1988, p. 107). This tendency cuts across various castes as women are perceived to have no legitimate needs outside the common household domain. Mary E. John (2008) opines that because men mediate between the world and the household, their commercial work related to food production gets economic evaluation. Therefore, personal expenses such as tobacco or a cup of tea in the market are considered valid entitlements and status markers, with men considering them essential, whereas many women perceive money spent on them as frivolous or wasteful expenditure; ultimately, this disparity in perspectives often leads to discord (John, 2008, p. 410).

Furthermore, when men abandon traditional caste-bound occupations due to low ritual status, insufficient remuneration, or migration to better-paying opportunities, the burden of these tasks falls on the women. Moreover, in the absence of other employment opportunities, maintaining the traditional occupation for earning a livelihood is an important reason for the perpetuation of endogamy in Dalit communities. Because the capability and the inclination to do traditional work render a girl serviceable and acceptable in the husband’s family, inter-caste marriages are not favored even within some Dalit communities. For instance, Mangala reports that girls are taught to roll *beedis* (cigarettes) the moment they can in her community. Inability to do so is frowned upon. After marriage, knowing housework is not enough, and no matter how educated the girl is, “the moment a girl is married, she has to get down to rolling beedis” (Bhave, 1988, p.117).

Abjectness of Domestic Labour and Dalit Women’s Self-Perception

Annie Namala (2008), in her essay, “Dalit Women: The Conflict and the Dilemma,” argues that although Dalit women do enjoy greater sexual autonomy and mobility in terms of their contribution to the economy of their family, they are severely neglected within their community, as we see a preference for male children and the marginalization of the girl child concerning food intake and education. Dalit girls from a very young age are also forced to shoulder extra household responsibilities (Namala, 2008, p. 462). Corroborating this, Viramma recounts how girls in her community are groomed from an early age to work in fields to contribute to their husbands’ household work. The idea of rigorous hard work is instilled in them from childhood. In her words: “Listen little girls . . . You must learn to use your hands. One day you’ll go make your life elsewhere and people must be able to say, Here is a good worker! Here’s a pair of hands that’ll bring in money and not just mouth to feed!” (1997, p. 9).

In the metonymic use of “hands” to speak of the entire being of a Dalit girl in her injunction about inculcating dexterity, Viramma reveals the dehumanizing propensities of thought that she has also interpellated about her worth. In *Karukku*, Bama recalls that, from the very young age of ten or twelve years, Dalit children try to find means to make money. Exploited for cheap labour, Dalit children usually toil away their childhood working in fields or factories. Dalit girls, in particular, are forced to take up the additional responsibility of household chores like cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, and minding younger siblings from an early age, to help their mothers, who are wrung continuously out in the cycle of work, childbirth, or domestic violence. Bama remarks: “[i]t was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home” (2000, p. 45). Bringing gender discrimination into sharper relief in *Sangati*, Bama vividly presents the picture of a young Dalit girl caught in the vicious circle of work and violence through the character of Maikkanni. Barely eleven years old, Maikkanni looks underage due to severe malnourishment. She is prematurely pushed into burdensome household responsibilities; she also acts as a surrogate mother for her siblings. Apart from the physical exertion of housework before the body is ready for it, girls from Dalit communities are also taxed with hours of labour extracted from them due to the immiserated condition of their families. Like many Dalit children forced

into child labour, Maikkanni worked in the nearby town's match factory, when her mother would be due for delivery. Despite earning, she had no access to the money, as her wages would be collected by her father. She even gets thrashed severely once by her father, when she feels tempted to buy an ice-cream cone with the money she somehow happened to get by chance. Manhandled by supervisors in the factory for minor lapses, bullied by boys in the bus, and harassed by lecherous Dalit men who lunge at her while returning from work, she is tormented at all times. Only after her mother resumed her work in the fields, Maikkanni quit the factory work but took to managing the home and nursing the baby (Bama, 2005, pp. 69-78). Indicating a similar pattern, Sangeeta from *Pan on Fire* recalls that she considered it her job to care for the younger siblings because she was the eldest child: "I remember my mother was often in poor health when I was little and so I used to help every way I could. I mean no one told me to do anything, but since there was nobody to do the work, I did it myself" (Bhave, 1988, p. 4). Considering this aspect to be crucial to her sense of self-worth, Sangeeta feels that she became self-reliant because she shouldered responsibilities from an early age. Sangeeta's sense of pride in her self-reliance is also symptomatic of how young Dalit girls, sometimes deliberately, take on these strenuous responsibilities at a young age to feel valued. It is a coping strategy to compensate for the physical and emotional neglect by their family members. They do so to earn their keep and to get validation from family members who are usually negligent of their needs, and subject them to harsh discipline on the pretext of training them for the future to become good housewives and mothers. The instances of Maikkanni and Sangeeta suggest a strong propensity for the household as a site of deprivation where overt violence (verbal abuse, thrashing) and covert violence (denial, negligence) become tools to socialize Dalit girls into acquiescence to gendered labour.

Another text full of graphic details of the female body being subjected to depleting rigours of gendered labour is *Aaydan* (2003)⁹ by Urmila Pawar, an acclaimed Marathi writer and Dalit feminist historian. This narrative is noteworthy not just for the rendition of the plight of Mahar women as wives caught in the rigmarole of farm labour and housework, but more so because, through her own experience, she brings out the understanding of the phenomenon of the "domestication of Dalit women" in upwardly mobile families. Despite migrating to urban locales, earning educational degrees and securing jobs, Dalit women are still expected to remain subservient to the men in some middle-class families. In the name of tradition, they are also expected to carry on with the feudal gender ideology. Pawar reiterates this when she analyses her relationship with her husband and mentions his contradictory attitude towards her achievements. She claims that while Harishchandra proudly displayed her writing to his relatives, he also used an iron hand to establish his authority over her. Nonetheless, instead of assuming a victim position by vilifying him for such conduct, Pawar absolves him by bringing out his sense of bewilderment at the changed circumstances. She considers his behavior an outcome of social conditioning and an imitation of normative patriarchal predisposition in their community. According to her, all his life, he had seen women in the village break their backs by working from dusk to dawn, tending to domestic work and leading a slave-like subservient existence under the authority of their husbands. Influenced by this perception, he too held the conduct of women from the village as an example to be emulated by his wife, and felt perplexed when she behaved differently or asserted her autonomy. Rendering her own dilemma about this situation, and questioning the deep-seated interpellated notion of a "pativrata stri," Pawar writes:

⁹ The text was translated from Marathi into English by Maya Pandit and published as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008). By questioning the entrenched ideologies of caste, modernity, and patriarchy from a feminist perspective, the text exposes the fissures and contradictions within the collective consciousness of the Dalit community.

Before joining the Maitrini group, I knew I was a woman and looked at myself with patriarchal eyes. Gadkari's *Sindhu*¹⁰ had entrenched herself deep down in my unconscious. I slogged the whole day in the office, at home and after an arduous journey was dead tired by the time I reached home. And yet at night, though my body was a mass of aches and pains, I pressed my husband's feet. I was ready to do anything that he wanted, just to make him happy. [...] But he accused me, 'Leave alone a good wife, you are not even a good one!' Later on he began saying that I was far from being a good mother as well! I failed to understand what exactly he wanted from me and became miserable. Gradually it became clear to me that everything that gave me an independent identity – my writing, which was getting published, my education, my participation in public programmes – irritated Mr. Pawar no end. Gradually, he began to be full of resentment... He would tell me, 'Look at the village woman. The husband's wish is law for her. She does not dare to sit down or get up without his permission.' (2003, p. 246)

The cited excerpt brings to light shaming and blaming as subtle forms of psychological abuse in intimate relationships that make women susceptible to sabotage their self-worth. It also suggests that enhanced political activism may not necessarily translate into Dalit women's capacity for self-determination within the household, due to the sub-structuring influence that men's consent exerts on their agency through gatekeeping or leveraging. In this sense, not only is a Dalit woman's agency relational in nature, instead of being individualistic, but it is also shaped by her community's cultural ideologies of womanhood, respectability, and the sexual division of labour, which are further tied to notions of male privilege and consent. Additionally, the agency of Dalit women, like that of upper-caste women, is ensconced in the interstices of caste-gender ideology with an emphasis on the maintenance of "wifely fidelity" at the cost of individuality. In another instance, Pawar recalls that initially, after moving to Mumbai, she enrolled in an employment exchange and received two job offers at once. She had sought her husband's advice in choosing the one she reported for. After she received her first salary, she intentionally started handing it over to Harishchandra, implying how she deliberately practiced financial dependence on her husband, as it is culturally expected of a good wife. Then, because her office was close to Siddhartha College, she thought of completing her education. This was something that she had desperately wanted to do after leaving Ratnagiri, but had to plead with her husband to get his permission. Harishchandra retorted at her request: "Look you can do what you like only after finishing your daily chores in the house. Cooking, looking after children, and all that stuff. If you think you can do this and get more education, fine! This was actually his way of saying 'No,' but I took it up as a challenge" (2008, p. 237).

Following such a gruelling routine of shuttling between college and office and managing her studies by burning the midnight oil, Pawar could graduate with second-class marks, and Harishchandra had indeed felt elated about it. Yet, when Pawar expressed the desire to pursue higher education further by getting an M.A. degree, he had not agreed, because to him, "looking after the house was the sole responsibility of the woman" (2008, p. 241). The excerpt indicates that contrary to the perception of Dalit households being egalitarian and positively inclined towards a culture of production, in families where Dalit men still refuse to give up their male privileges, even with increased self-assertion and participation in social activism, the burden of painstaking labour seems to have only increased upon Dalit women. Also, in caste communities where social mobility has led to the imitation of upper-caste gender patterns, Dalit women's mobility has also been constrained due to the emulation of seclusion practices, respectability norms, and even concerns about sexual harassment in public spaces.

¹⁰ The wife of the protagonist Sudhaka in Ram Ganesh Gadkari's play *Ekat Pyala* is an "Arya Pativrata". She devotes herself selflessly to the service of her drunkard husband and sacrifices her son and herself for his sake.

Pawar observes that such tendencies are more pronounced among the educated and financially well-to-do Dalits. She recalls in her narrative the resistance from Dalit men she came across during the membership hunt for a Dalit women's organisation. One Mr. Karande (from the Charmakar community) had even refused to acknowledge that Dalit women needed liberation. In his opinion, they were already free since they could leave the house or drive the husband out if they did not get along. Another colleague of hers, whose wife also worked in the same office, had taken Pawar to be a feminist and retorted:

There is no need for our women to get out of the house. We give them everything they need in the house. How do our women suffer? He fired away, Are they being burnt or killed? Well, in married life, a couple of slaps here and there is nothing . . . But women's liberation! What for? Because one receives a few slaps? (2008, p. 274)

Both the instances cited above corroborate Shailaja Paik's (2009) observation about the growing phenomenon of domestication of Dalit women among the middle-class Dalits by keeping them tied to the household as a means to gain respectability in society (p. 43). Explaining the phenomenon, Paik notes:

The larger brahminical ideology and the norms of chastity and pativrata women, tied to the household continue to underpin the beliefs and practices of some dalits. This is especially true of some of those who are seeking upward mobility. Dalit women have always been working outside in the fields; the new phenomenon of middle-classness called for domesticating dalit women. (2009, p. 43)

Despite being confident and assertive, just like Pawar, Ashoka from *Pan on Fire*, finds herself bogged down by domestication and the traditional norms relating to feminine and masculine duties. Having moved to the city with her family right after her birth, she boasts of studying in an English-medium school and could even complete graduation. It is perplexing to see that for Ashoka, having a graduate degree, being fluent in English, and even having the freedom to choose her husband did not necessarily translate into empowerment. Critical of dehumanizing beliefs about the obligation of women, she states:

People think a woman must start work before sunrise and finish housework before anyone is up. She must please everybody, she must look after everybody's needs and likes and dislikes, she must cover her head if she is married; she must mind the elders; she must never answer back; she must not talk with her husband before others, or chat with him, or sit with him, she must not even be polite to a strange man; and this sort of woman is called an ideal one. My mother-in-law is opposed to my doing post-graduation. She says, "Why do you want a job? Why can't you make do with your husband's salary?" (Bhave, 1988, p. 148-149).

What placed limits on Ashoka's ambitions was the sexual division of labour. Her unyielding family believes that arduous housework is necessarily women's work. In the excerpts cited above, this supposedly primary responsibility significantly limits the horizons of opportunities for women across the spectrum of castes while making a choice—be it about career or participation in activism.

Drawing insights from Kumkum Sangari (1993), Meena Gopal (2014) argues that one primary reason for the devaluation of domestic work is the ideology of sexual division of labour, according to which women's work within the household gets subsumed into duties and obligations. Because women are seen as natural repositories of values like selfless devotion,

sacrifice, and altruism, they are therefore labelled as “labourers of love.” This abjectness of labour also has significant implications on the perception of women as good or bad, because women who are unable to comply with these notions, or women who try to unhinge themselves from these structures of vulnerability, are often considered recalcitrant and subjected to shame, humiliation, and even violence. Hence, as soon as women (Dalit or not) begin to assert autonomy, the first institution that begins to crack is the family. The individual’s struggle to break out of caste/class/gender oppressive structures entails a conflict with the family or the community (Sangari, 1995, pp. 3289-3294).

Sangeeta’s experience from *Pan on Fire* substantiates this. Accustomed to backbreaking domestic labour, she sees merit in exhaustive self-depleting work, so much so that her self-definition is based on this hazardous notion. She admits with pride that she tends to household chores even when she is sick and in utter need of rest. Unable to rely on her husband to take care of his food, she abstains from going away and doesn’t even visit her mother. She feels proud of herself because her sisters-in-law and other family members laud her for her assiduousness and tidiness (Bhave, 1988, p. 19). Sangeeta unwittingly reveals her self-negating tendency in her denial of ailments. However, Ashoka is able to take cognizance of the impact of notions about gendered labour on the well-being of women in her account. She identifies the toxic nature of this belief system that makes Dalit women seek validation of their identity by living like beasts of burden, but she insists that “[i]t must be generally understood and accepted in an ideal community that a woman is not a subordinate or a toy or a sex object or a useful machine; she too has a body that tires, a heart, a mind, her own desires. There must be an awareness of her as a person” (Bhave, 1988, p. 150).

Conclusion

It is a widely accepted notion that the self, as a subject in Dalit autobiographical texts, represents an oppressed community’s marginal identity rather than merely its individuality. Thus, examining the interdependence and the interpersonal transactions between the community members holds tremendous significance for enunciating not only the subject’s representative nature, but also the intra-community systemic power dynamic that may be detrimental to its well-being. In the excerpts discussed in this article, the labouring bodies of Dalit women emerge as socially and discursively informed symbolic language. Their depiction encodes, in the literary realm, a conflicted self-perception that cathects intra-community social perceptions about debilitating work generally consigned to Dalit women. By being vocal about the feelings of distress, discomfort, and resentment about the denial of personhood, emanating from the abjectness of their labour and the abuse of their bodies, women in these texts demand that work-related discriminatory attitudes, caste-gender biases within their communities, and their maltreatment and harassment should be recognized and addressed. Moreover, Pawar’s narrative, in particular, draws attention to the fissures in Dalit consciousness and the need to acknowledge increasing brahminical constraints being imposed upon the autonomy of Dalit women in middle-class Dalit families. As Dalits ascend the status ladder economically and socially, old paradigms of understanding Dalitness may become obsolete.

Further, revealing a familiar pattern, all the primary texts contain instances that register a criticism of the dehumanizing domestic and non-domestic labour undertaken by Dalit women. This is an issue that is usually glossed over as insignificant, compared to the violence faced by Dalit women in public spaces, perpetrated by dominant castes (such as stripping, parading naked, rape, atrocities, lynching, and murder that get reported in the media or get notified to law enforcement institutions). These depictions disrupt the assumption that Dalit women are better off than upper-caste women because of their economic utility. Contrarily, the caste and gender-related labour liability (such as in the *jajmani* system) that regulates their autonomy renders Dalit women vulnerable to exploitation as well as castigation in both public and private

spheres. The strenuous familial or vocational work done by them gets subsumed as duties and obligations under the caste-gender rubric, thus not bringing them commensurate remuneration or livelihood. Though it must be acknowledged that the labour allocation and spending, predicated by caste occupation and degrees of gender bias, may differ regionally within sub-castes or even from family to family, these narratives indicate that a family's or caste's economic status cannot be taken solely as a justifiable indicator of Dalit women's independent access to economic or subsistence resources. Given that the majority of these women are employed in the informal sector or as daily wage labourers, Dalit women frequently have little bargaining power over the valuation of their bodily labour.

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