

# **African American Womanism Speaks to Dalit Feminism: Special Reference to Telugu Dalit Women's Literature**

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## **Abstract**

'Mainstream feminism' in India remained substantially elitist in its concerns carrying the legacy of 'western feminism'. As such it failed to appreciate, accommodate and represent the specific concerns of Dalit women. Consequently Dalit women are forced to lead a separate movement. It is the premise of this paper that the nascent Dalit Feminism, which could not derive any theoretical and representational sustenance from the Indian Feminism, can draw from the African American womanist/feminist experiences as it shares a similar socio-historical environment. Further, it argues in favor of Dalit feminism as a more inclusive kind of feminism that challenges oppression of any form for women in India or elsewhere. As much of Dalit women's writing is produced in Indian vernaculars a few short stories from Telugu Dalit writing, translated into English are analyzed to reflect different perspectives of Dalit women's discourse.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Dalit Feminism, African Feminism, Untouchability, Education of Dalits.

## **1. Introduction**

Even though it comes under the category of 'third world' feminism, 'Indian mainstream feminism' remained elitist in its concerns carrying the legacy of 'western feminism.' Indian feminism was/is truncated in appreciating the heterogeneity and the specific needs of women belonging to various oppressed castes, tribes, minorities. Its failure to accommodate and represent the specific concerns of Dalit women lead to its rejection. Thus originated, nascent Dalit Feminism could not derive any theoretical and representational sustenance from the mainstream Indian Feminism. However it can derive roots from the African American womanist/feminist experiences as both share a similar socio-historical environment. The paper argues in favor of Dalit feminism to become more inclusive challenging oppression of all women. As much of Dalit women's writing is produced in Indian vernaculars a few short stories from Telugu Dalit writing are analyzed to show how Dalit Feminism can draw theoretical sustenance from African American Feminism.

## **2. The Context**

African American Feminism/Womanism took its birth from the Black liberation movements as much as from the American women's liberation movements. Discriminative politics in the

American women's rights movements, dominated by middle and upper class white women, etched out a distinct brand of feminism/ womanism for the African American women. American Feminism was blind to native working class (white) women, immigrant women, and more so to the conspicuous presence of the female slaves. Though, theoretically, the early American women's rights movement conceived a 'universal sisterhood,' it finally remained exclusive. The 19<sup>th</sup> century American society was highly patriarchal and confined its women to domestic realm. Hence, their struggle was aimed at equal politico legal status with men and differed from the aspirations of black female slaves. Ann Ducille succinctly states the differing perspectives:

Whereas white female activists were concerned with the rights of married woman to own property, for example, black women were concerned with the basic human right not to be literally owned as chattel. As white women lobbied to change divorce laws, black women lobbied to change the laws that prohibited slaves from marrying. While white women sought definition outside the roles of wife and mother, black women sought the freedom to live within traditional gender roles, to claim the luxury of loving their own men and mothering their own children. (2006: 30)

Similarly, in the Indian context, upper caste women sought liberty from oppressive patriarchy which entangled their lives, while Dalit women sought freedom from the stigma of pollution, untouchability and poverty. While upper caste women confront oppression in domestic realm, Dalit women have to bear it in the social, political and economic realms. Hence, as upper caste feminists lobbied for laws against dowry, domestic/psychological violence, sexual freedom and property rights, the Dalit women have to fight against physical violence (by upper caste wo/men as well as their own men), basic amenities and daily lively hood. Though the upper caste 'women's movement' progressed to the extent of seeking reservations for women in legislatures, the Dalit women have to plead for government ration and human dignity as Swaroopa Rani, a dalit feminist and writer points out:

For the feminist movement in India, all women are the same and, therefore, their problems are the same. But this is far from the reality. In our society, which has differences of caste, religion, class and region, the problems of any group are not the same as that of any other group. Although some similarities may exist, many differences are also evident. Because all these groups have their own identities, their problems will also be particular to their situation. Although the slogan 'All Woman Are One' appears very liberal, it does not allow the reflections of feminists to move even one step beyond that. (2013: 705)

Though dalit women confront gender oppression, caste naturally took precedence being their immediate cause of suffering. Tormented in 'ways as particular to their gender as determined by the race,' Ann Ducille (2006: 36) rightly says that 'nineteenth-century black women writers, activists, and intellectuals were concerned with the rights, roles and responsibilities of women, as well as a double consciousness that cut across (rather than between) their racial and gender identities.' The priority for the African American women was not one against the other (race and gender) but it was accepted that the emancipation /empowerment of race was inextricably linked with the improvement of the material conditions of women (Ducille, 2006: 36). In a similar vein, Swaroopa Rani (2013: 707) writes dalit women remain confused in choosing between elitist feminism and male centered 'Dalitism' that make them scapegoats in their movements. She argues that though Indian feminists and Dalit men include Dalit women in their movements of struggle they remain mute when atrocities on Dalit women take place for

being Dalits/women. Hence, the priority for Dalit women is to contest upper caste domination while striving for the empowerment of the community.

Pioneers like Maria W. Stewart in 183 laid a formidable path to African American feminist thought which has been flourishing on the pillars of: self, community and society to build a 'multifaceted African American women's intellectual tradition' (Collins, 2012). Further, though it grew as a more inclusive ally of Black male, it could not remain blind to the oppression within the family/community/race. Hence, from 1970 as Collins points out, the African American feminist intellectuals "... insisted that the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought, the racist bias in feminist theory, and the heterosexist bias in both be corrected." (2012: 10). The complex multidimensionality of African American feminine subjectivity is recognized as the product of the intersectionality of social categories like gender, race and class as Kimberle Crenshaw recognized in her seminal critique of U.S. antidiscrimination law that failed to acknowledge Black women's unique experience of racism and sexism as simultaneous and inseparable.

Similar task awaits Dalit feminism which needs a distinct path from main stream Indian feminism that was never a single theoretical point of reference. Developed as a legacy from the Vedic period, religious reformations, Bhakti movements, social reformation movements, anti-colonial freedom struggles and postcolonial discourses of the Indian nation state, Indian Feminism was never inclusive. Even during the freedom struggle, when pioneering male feminists like Raja Ramohan Roy in Bengal (against Sati) or Veerasalingam (in favour of widow remarriages) in Andhra Pradesh led a movement for the liberation of women it was aimed at the liberation of the upper caste women. Further the nationalist movement has relegated both caste/women's question to the sphere of the cultural/private to prevent colonial intervention. The nationalist project fulfilled its agenda of liberation but certainly not without 'the forcible marginalization of many who were supposed to have a share in the fruits of liberation' (Chatterjee, 2001: 156). Postcolonial India however found a solution to the empirical reality of caste discrimination in the advocacy of modernist reform and the affirmative action of the state. This did not bring transformation given the deep rooted caste prejudices in the Indian society, though changes did come slowly.

Except for the efforts of the two pioneers of Dalit empowerment - Jyotiba Phule and Baba Saheb Ambedkar, Dalit movements hardly addressed the oppression of their women in the family/community. Meanwhile, Dalit women have to face the almost routine violence that shaped their lives cutting across the intersecting categories of caste, gender and class. Hence, their voices became vibrant from the later years of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though participated in women's movements in India, Dalit women activists soon realized that these were exclusive and felt the need to fight separately. They have to struggle against poverty, the stigma of caste and violence specific to their location where caste, class and gender intersect. The same patriarchy that fixed and oppressed the upper caste women in tradition has fixed the Dalit women in pollution. But an interrogation of the tradition that oppressed the upper caste women did not necessarily lead to an interrogation of pollution and marginalization of Dalit wo/men. Hence, Vinodini a telugu Dalit writer exclaims, feminism of sexual freedom is strange to women like her and they do not experience this on the similar lines of Chalam's (popular telugu Novelist) heroine Rajeswari (*Maidanam*).

In India various religious, social, reformatory and emancipatory movements scorned the caste as a negative categorical framework that excludes a community of people. This led to the ignorance of peculiar forms of oppression that Dalit women face in their everyday lives. Although caste, gender and class readily intersect in the daily lives of Dalit women they are rarely identified as such. Numerous incidents of sexual violence on Dalit women in postcolonial India that are

perpetuated by the upper castes, especially in rural areas, point out to their poverty and inaccessibility to agencies of law. Hence the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in its VIII National Convention on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009 has identified that Dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste, untouchables. Swaroopa Rani puts it succinctly: “If other women are victims of gender-related oppression, dalit women are the victims of caste and class exploitation also. Compared with the oppression of caste and poverty, which chase them at every step, their gender problems don’t seem so immediate (*steel nibs*, 2013: 705). It is now obvious that these intersectional identities compelled them to choose either gender or caste though they were marginalized by both simultaneously.

Between the gendered caste representative politics Dalit feminism should initiate to address issues of intersectional identities to construct a robust and inclusive feminist theoretical discourse that can interrogate oppressive caste/patriarchal structures. At this juncture, they could explore the *abrahmanical* tradition of India to formulate a strong womanist/feminist discourse. Sharad Patil points out the origin of *abrahmani* school of thought to the social conflict in Indian society (Sharmila Rege). Directed towards the annihilation of caste, class and female oppression, the *abrahmani* school of thought is represented by Sankhya (a rationalist school of Indian Philosophy), Lokayata (Philosophical school of Indian Materialism), Buddhist (Existential religious philosophy of India), Kaula, Tantra and Shaiva philosophies in the past; by ideologies of Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar in the present. By taking an anti-caste stand Dalit wo/men can contest brahminical patriarchy that is structurally integrated into the Indian caste system. Sharmila also asserts that a Dalit feminist's stand point should provide a more objective and comprehensive emancipatory feminist position.

### 3. Telugu Dalit Women Writers

Indeed, the Telugu Dalit women writers, who are now a polemical group, initiated to take a stand that contests both upper caste domination as well as the domestic oppression. Telugu Dalit Literature evolved from the simmering Dalit consciousness in colonial times that resulted in various Dalit movements in Andhra Pradesh<sup>1</sup>. Before 1980s it was reformist in form and content. Pioneers like Bheemanna (*Paleru-Bonded Labourer*), Jashuva (*Gabbilam-A Bat*) etc., explored the progressive/ reformist ideology for the emancipation of Dalits. Though, stringent satiric element is all pervasive in these works, it was never rebellious advocating radical solutions for the adversities of the untouchables in the ‘varna’ system. However, a series of atrocities on Dalits (karamchedu, Tsundur, Neerukonda etc.) in coastal villages of Andhra Pradesh in 1980s metamorphosed this literature to one of rebellion and anger. Many Dalits took to pen which resulted in poetry anthologies like *Chikkanavithunna Pata* (1995). However, Dalit women writers did not find place in these anthologies. It was only around the turn of the century that Dalit women’s issues got attention though Dalit women writers did exist from pre-independent days.

Telugu Dalit women writers expressed themselves in poetry, short story, essays and even in critical theory and wrote to fight against varied forms of oppression: discrimination,

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<sup>1</sup> Jagan Mitra Mandali-1906, Manya Sangham-1911, Provincial Panchama Mahajan Sabha or Adi-Andhra Mahajan Sabha-1917, Suneetha Balasamajam or Bhoomananda Swami Gurumandali -1912, Adi-Hindu-Jatyonnati Sabha or Adi-Hindu Mahasabha-1927, The Arundatiya Mahasabha-1931, The Hyderabad State Adi Hindu Mahasabha-1941 etc.,

sexual/physical exploitation and negative stereotyping of Dalit women etc. Short stories of prominent writers like Gogu Shyamala – “Raw Wound” (Translator R. Srivatsan pp. 715-731) Joopaka Subhadra – “A Bloody Mess in the Bathroom” (Translator Diia Rajan pp. 639-646) and M.M. Vinodini's – “The Parable of the Lost Daughter: Luke 15: 11-32” (Translator Uma Bhrugubanda 755-767) are analyzed to understand different ways in which Dalit women contested caste discrimination. They are analyzed in an order that narrates the long journey of dalit women from being victims of upper caste exploitation in rural India, the struggle for education staying in government welfare hostels and finally the realization that even after education, the stigma of caste remains. The three stories represent the three stages of Dalit women's struggle for liberation, education and emancipation in the post independent India. Endings of these stories reveal the perpetuation of oppression and its changing colors, confirming what the Dalit women rightly pointing out – that caste is a greater oppressive evil than gender and their victimization was due to their intersectional identities of caste, class and gender.

#### 4. Analysis of Stories

Gogu Shyamala is a senior fellow at Anveshi Research Centre for Women, Hyderabad. Her short stories collection is translated into English in 2012 as *Father May be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But ...*. Her “Raw Wound” is about the jogini system' prevalent in post independent Telangana and the deccan region of Southern India. As part of this superstitious and hideous tradition, girls born into a particular Dalit family are married to God as 'jogins' for the good of the village. Then the village elder/s take the privilege of having her sexually for the first time, later on she is available to all village men sexually while performing the rituals assigned to her. The story vividly describes the exploitation of the family of Balappa – a man from madiga caste by the village Patel who decides to transform Balappa's daughter Syamma as 'jogini.' The writer begins the story with the description of Syamma's innocent childhood days and her joy of carrying the 'lunch bundle and aluminum buttermilk pot' to her father who works in the field. But one night the girl is secretly deported to the social welfare hostel in Tandur.

Balappa informs the hostel warden about Patel's insistence to dedicate Syamma as jogu, as the former jogu, being old could not perform religious rituals during village festivals. Balappa laments that Patel is black mailing him stating, “If you don't do your duty and I mine, we are doomed. We have to follow what is written on our foreheads. Who are we to change our destiny? You know that the fingers of the hand are not equal, don't you, my man?” (p. 721). These lines reveal the dominant upper caste attitude that projects inequality between human beings as 'god made'. His argument that 'fingers of the hand are not equal' is symbolic of casteist discourse in which Dalits as 'Panchamas/untouchables' occupy the lowest space. It is similar to the white racist ideologies that reduced the black to apes and bound them in slavery for generations. The obvious paradox in the story is, while Dalits remain untouchables, the Dalit 'jogins' are 'touchable' for free sexual pleasures of the upper caste who forget the, 'impurity and pollution' for carnal pleasures. Patel doesn't oblige though Balappa pleads for his daughter's education as his two sons are already in bonded labour. Thus the story envisages how caste and poverty connive to deprive the education to Dalits. For the landless scheduled castes education remained the only avenue of progress but it is also denied. Like the African Americas Dalits have to struggle against many odds to gain education. The numerous Dalit autobiographies underscore the fact that literacy and freedom is the major motif in Dalit life too. Literacy for a girl is even more complicated as the story reveals. When the girl is admitted in the hostel, Patel summons Balappa for the second time to discuss the matter of 'jogin'. Patel assaults Balappa and threatens him of dire consequences

and hits Balappa with a paper weight and kicks on his chest. The dominating and violent behavior of upper caste men like Patel was a regular scene in rural India that showcases the upper caste atrocities on Dalits. At this juncture one of the village elders and friend of Patel - Sharma ridicules scornfully the prohibition of untouchability and jogini system, as it is disturbing their comfortable life.

Later Patel's men throw Balappa on the street. As the news spreads, Balappa's mother Sangavva and wife Ananthamma come wailing and cursing. They try to nurse him with the herbs available on the roadside to control the bleeding. They could not get even a gulp of water to bring Balappa back to consciousness as elite families do not offer water fearing pollution. At last a 'mala' woman Kashamma, passing the way offers her breast milk, which they pour into Balappa's mouth as well as on the wound. When Balappa comes to consciousness, Patel tries to convince him again to dedicate Syamma as 'jogin' on refusing, Patel's men force Balappa's thumb prints along with his mother's and wife's on the land document to grab the community land and force them to leave the village. Thus Balappa's family is rendered land/homeless for the education of their daughter. Patel could not be merciful towards Balappa and his family though the later puts his life at stake to save the former's life. The writer emphasizes the miserable ostracization of their family:

'From now on, the red earth field will not be ours!  
The black clay field beside the canal will not be ours!  
The madiga quarter will not be ours!  
The home and yard we were born and brought up in will not be ours!  
The house we had built with lime and mortar will not be ours!  
We have become birds without a place to go!' (p. 731).

The writer thus brings out the forced alienation and exploitation of the Dalits in the post independent India. The Dalit history in India has many such 'raw wounds' un/recorded.

Joopaka Subhadra is a Dalit writer, feminist and activist. She is a staunch opponent of 'elitist Indian feminism' that was/is blind to the suffering of Dalit women. Her short story "A Bloody Mess in the Bathroom" brings out the negative stereotyping of Dalit women/girls in social welfare hostels. Narrated by an anonymous college girl, a resident of social welfare hostel it reveals: unhygienic facilities, corruption of the wardens and their stereotyped attitude about Dalit women's sexualities. Poor Dalit girls are jam packed into unhygienic hostels: "Like cattle driven into cattle sheds, children . . . crammed into the hostels, into tiny pigsty rooms with no ventilation and hardly any bathrooms to speak of" (p. 639). Every morning, the narrator states, was a battle for water, for food and for the bathrooms (p. 639). In addition to these the Dalit girls confront daily humiliation in the hands of warden and staff. Once a 'bloody mess' was discovered by the sweeper in the bathroom and instantly dalit inmates are suspected of abortion. The warden calls for a parade of all the mature girls with a "sprightly sadistic pleasure" (p. 641) examining "them with a magnifying glass" to find out the culprit (p. 642). The corrupt warden black mails the girls with close surveillance, male visitors, attendance in college and watching movies etc., On the day she notices the 'bloody mess,' she threatens them of dire consequences once the truth is sought and sends inmates for pregnancy test. She adds insult to injury accosting the poor dalit girls: "The government gives you so many facilities and this is the nonsense you get up to? You can offer a dog ghee and rice, but it will still turn back to the tannery ..." (p. 642).

Further the story reveals the humiliation being heaped as the narrator reveals: "swallowing ... anxieties, discomfort ... we could not defy her - we were helpless because we were insecure ... the thought she was going to subject our bodies to invasive tests wounded us more than anything

else ever had. But we were incapable of protesting” (p. 643). It is obvious that caste, class and gender intersect in suspecting the Dalit girls' morality. It resonates the age old suffering of Dalits whose bodies are never theirs. The dalit women's bodies are readily available to the upper castes for introspection, for manual labour (to clean their roads or work in their fields) and appropriation for sexual pleasure. They are reduced to or fixed in their bodies. The hostel warden in terms of her profession has access to the Dalit girls' bodies. The upper caste ideology, to which she subscribes, permits her the hegemonic gaze – a gaze that permits objectification and subjugation of the Dalit women's body. However, the story is not one of mute submission but one of resistance as the narrator refuses to get tested for pregnancy: “Madam, I'm not going to get tested. Everyone in this hostel knows what kind of a person I am. You do what you want, but I am not going to the hospital,” (p. 645). The narrator rejects the stereotype representing the growing rebellion among Dalit women. The story concludes with the knowledge that it was a female dog that creates the bloody mess but not without the humiliation of girls being tested for pregnancy. Thus it brings forth the dalit women's struggle for education.

M.M. Vinodini is a dalit short story writer who believes that feminist concerns take on a totally different color in the Dalit context as they are concerned not with the issues of gender, desire, realization of the individual self and sexual freedom but are very particular about the issues of hate and pollution that perpetuate a sort of 'self contempt' among Dalit women. Her story “The Parable of the Lost Daughter: Luke 15: 11-32” analyses the 'self contempt' undergone by a Christian Dalit woman – Suvarthavani and her realization. Suvarthavani (word of good news) the Fanonian black woman, in her attempts to put on a barhmanical mask, absorbs the brahmanical way of speaking, behaviour and develops a passion for Sanskrit as well as classical Telugu literature. The writer adopted the biblical 'parable of lost son' metaphorically to relate how Suvarthavani becomes oblivious of her 'Dalit identity' infatuated with brahmanical ways of living, and at last regains it to declare her 'true identity.' If the 'lost son' runs away from his father physically, Suvarthavani abandons her parents/community emotionally.

Suvarthavani is the daughter of Paladasu – a rickshaw puller and Krupamma – a domestic help, both in the lowest of professions, eking out their lives. In spite of their poverty, the couple let their daughter finish her Post Graduation in Telugu literature in Rajahmundry. Suvarthavani befriends her class mate Gayatri, a Brahmin woman. When taken to visit the latter's house with *bottu* (a dot of vermilion on the forehead) and without 'cross' in her neck, Suvarthavani gets impressed by: the tidiness of a brahmin household, the writings of Piratla Subramaniam - father of Gaytri and the river Godavari - sacred for Hindus.

Concomitantly, Suvarthavani develops 'contempt' towards 'Dalitness', her own people, locality and the house in which she was brought up. She compares the clean brahmin locality with her own place of living that is like a gutter and starts repudiating her parents for their shabby appearance, and insists on tidiness. Like the colored woman who endeavors to 'whiten the black race' Vani longs for 'sanctification' of all Dalits. She even shortens her name as S. Vani, stops eating beef and refines her speech with an additional 'h' while articulating each word to conceal her 'Dalit Identity'. Thus, Vani like the Fanonian colonized black speaks like a brahmin and strives to assimilate with the brahmanical culture and civilization. Thus, metamorphosed superficially Vani feels it great to be a part of her friend's civilized (brahmin) family and the ceremonies in her house. Mingling with them she pretends to be an elite outwardly in her dress, language and eating habits there by distancing herself from the 'Dalit identity'. Though Gayatri is a close friend of Vani, she rejects applying turmeric to Vani's feet because she is a Dalit and continues to apply on the feet of other upper caste women participants of the function. Even at this juncture, infatuated

Vani could not break her illusion like the colonized who could not break the colonizer's spell. Rather, Vani herself applies the turmeric and participates in the ceremony representing the innate urge on part of the Dalits to mimic the ways of elite brahmins just like the colored people's passion for 'white people's' ways.

Suvarthavani after her studies returns to her home and like a '*dorasani*' (white lady-in-Telugu language dora is white man and 'sani' is his woman) keeps grudging but stays with parents while working in a college. When she has to attend a spot valuation in Hyderabad, she goes to stay with Gayatri's parents who shifted there, after their daughter got married and settled in abroad. Even in the absence of her friend, Vani wants to mingle with them as a family member. She could not notice the subtle 'contempt' of Gayatri's father, when she visits their house and continues to stay in a separate room they provided for her at the very entrance of their house. One afternoon, Gayatri's brother-in-law comes across Vani in the street and offers lift on his motorcycle. When she hesitatingly accepts and sits on the back seat, he drives through potholes applying unnecessary brakes and takes her to a café. His stereotypical talk about Dalit/Christian women presenting them as lax unlike elite brahmin women disturbs her. His talk reveals the licentiousness of upper caste men and their desire to have sexual pleasures from a 'polluted' Dalit woman as if their bodies are accessible to them. One can find parallels to the 'hegemonic power' that the white man assumes to sleep with his black female slaves with that of the brahmin man's 'ideological hegemony' that stereotypes Dalit women as being careless in morality and chastity. This makes Vani to recollect her previous encounters of insults for being a dalit woman. The same night she listens to the scandalizing remarks of Gayatri's father who abuses his wife as a 'low caste bitch' for a negligible mistake (766). Both the incidents wake up Suvarthavani to the hypocrisy of the man she held in high esteem, a writer who speaks progressive things in public, but filled with such malice and contempt for the lower castes in private. Abusive language, says the narrator, is not new to her as it was common enough in her own family and in her community but it blended seamlessly into their life and language. Those terms were used to express love, affection and intimacy (766). But this kind of hatred and malice is shockingly repulsive and she rightly feels that the man is not just abusing his wife – "He had abused her too! He abused her caste, her religion, and the women of her community, and the men of her community." (766). It is with shock that Suvarthavani realizes the hypocrisy of the upper castes who disown caste in public but reinvent it in the private. Hence, at the end of the story, when Gayatri's mother asks her if she has forgotten to apply *bottu* she could firmly reply, "No, Mother, I haven't forgotten, I am a Christian girl. I am a dalit girl." (p. 767) Thus, the 'lost daughter' regains her 'dalit identity', turns strong and sensible for her community and thus the story reveals the emancipation of dalit women with education though not wholly liberated from the stigma.

## 5. Conclusion

The three stories narrate the different shades of caste discrimination faced by dalit women at various stages of their of lives. Besides the issue of caste that these writers took up in their writings, Swaroopa Rani another dalit writer/poet takes up the issue of Dalit male chauvinism in her poem *Mankena Puvvu*:

... when have I lived  
my life myself ... ?  
At home male ego has slapped  
me on one cheek ... (p. 189)



She also criticizes irresponsible men/husbands who waste the hard earned money of their wives on liquor. She writes in *Matti Chetulu*:

When she reaches home  
All eagerness to fill the little ones' stomachs  
There sits the husband  
Ready to drink her sweat as arrack

Dalit feminism is in its nascent stage as Swaroopa Rani states and many of the Dalit sisters are ignorant about the nature of exploitation they undergo (steel nibs, 2013: 709). The discrimination and inhuman treatment they encounter in the society is accepted by them as their 'Karma' (fate). Hence, the internalization of inferiority should be addressed first and then these women should be trained for reconstruction and empowerment. Ways and means of 'decolonizing the mind' should appear in Dalit feminist activities and literature. Dalit women writers can also turn to orature as in African/American womanist tradition which turned to matrilineal African oral cultures. Folksongs and stories, based on farm labor may certainly contain social protest in muted or open forms and dalit writers/scholars should explore them. Following Ambedkar's call, Dalit wo/men can organize themselves into mutual helping societies, associations, and clubs. The African American women's popular slogan "Lifting as we climb" is relevant to Dalit middle and upper class wo/men who can come to the succor of their less fortunate sisters in rural/urban India. Further, the Dalit wo/men's feminist/literary critical canon should evolve to project their internal oppression. Like their African counterparts they should focus on the context of Christian religious influence in dalit life, as a good number of dalits are converted/converting. African womanists recognized the strong patriarchal tendencies promoted by Christianity during colonialism and are interrogating for a return to nativity. Indeed Swaroopa Rani, who laments that no pure dalit culture remains after Sanskritization, is also critical about Christian influence:

What is more, today it is the Christian dalits who are most brahminized. Their women are restricted. My sense is that Christianity has damaged and suppressed the dalit consciousness. So the problem is worse when it comes to Christian women. Those with a Hindu background are stronger. (2013: 699)

Following the ideological stances of Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar they have to venture upon the construction of formidable dalit women's voices. A re-reading of main stream Indian literature (both in vernacular and now in English) and Dalit Literature (men) should be taken up to deconstruct the misrepresentations, silences and stereotyping of Dalit women. The 'passive' and 'submissive' figures certainly can speak volumes about their struggle and perseverance against many odds they face, both at home and in the community. Dalit women's literature can chart its own course, develop genres of writing and aesthetics based on orature rather than remain an appendix to feminist literature in India or to the Dalit men's literature. The distinct rhetorical strategies, tropes and the linguistic cadences of dalit utterances (in vernacular) along with their gendered inflections, can be studied and theorized.

Dalit women, like their African American counterparts can also endeavor to formulate alternative terms like 'Dalit' feminism or 'Dalit Bahujan Feminism' 'Dalita Strivadam' (Dalit woman's feminism) distinguishing their feminism from the broad category of Indian feminism. Dalit wo/men writers should pay attention to the fact that Dalit feminist literature and criticism should evolve inclusively like their African/American counterparts. The need for comparison with

African/American women is not solely on the basis of caste/race issue but on conceptual models like community oriented living, inclusiveness, entrepreneurship, levels of gender sensitivity etc., conceived by these communities. Dalit women writers/critics have a lot of digging to do. Much research has to be done in different regions as exploitation took many forms in various parts of the country and development of positive frame-works is inevitable. They should proceed with an inclusive agenda asserting the need for strong alliance between the women's movement and the Dalit women's movement for realizing the common vision of equality and justice. Indeed what Avtar Brah suggests in the context of black and white feminism, is true with dalit feminism and 'mainstream' Indian feminism and they should not be seen as essentially fixed, oppositional categories, but rather as historically contingent fields of contestation within discursive and material practices (1993: 95).

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