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Portraits of women in Dalit and Afro-American literature

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INTRODUCTION

The term Dalit, in a narrow sense, finds meaning with reference to the caste based Hindu society. Those, who are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, and almost outside it and treated as untouchables are referred to by this term. If the principle of exploitation is applied, all the socially, politically and economically oppressed sections of the Indian society are Dalit. This definition gives it a class like formulation. Historically, terms like mleechas, chandalas, achuta, harijans are some of the terms used for them. Though there is no firm historical evidence on the origin of this system, but Mannsmriti and Arthashstra show that by that time this system had deep roots in Indian Society. Dalits have been exploited and subjected to atrocities due to the social stratification of Indian society. Throughout the centuries they have been victimized religiously, socially. culturally and most of all economically. Even in the 21st century, despite the Constitutional provisions for equal rights and priviledges to every citizen, this age old practice that dehumanizes and perpetuates a cruel form of discrimination continues to be practiced.

There is a certain parallel between blacks in America and Dalits in India. Brought to the shores of America in chains, the black American is vastly different from the white races that came to America in search of a "promised land," in search of freedom and prosperity. Deprived of his African heritage and forced into slavery and poverty, all that was left to the black man was his African soul, and even this was taken away as white culture slowly hovered on him. Both Blacks and Dalits have remained outside the mainstream of their respective cultures — excommunicated and exiled. B. R. Ambedkar, the great Dalit leader, reportedly told Mahatma Gandhi, "Gandhiji, I have no homeland."

The cruel enslavement of these two groups was justified and sustained on the basis of religion. In the tenth Adhyaya of the Manusmriti (Sastri 1983), a text which held Hindu society squarely in check for centuries, Manu (X:51-52) says:

Chandals or untouchables must live outside the village.

They may possess only broken mud-pots. Their wealth shall be dogs and donkeys. Their dress shall be the garments of the dead; they shall eat their food from broken dishes; black iron shall be their ornaments, and they must wander from place to place.

Hindu Untouchables were prohibited from entering the village at night and had to signal their arrival during daytime. Their dwellings were perforce, outside or beyond the limits of the village. The

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various tasks assigned to them were the removal of human wastes, the carrying away of unclaimed corpses and acting as hangmen to execute those awarded the king's death penalty. These injunctions were the untouchables' dharma, their inescapable duties.

The tenets of Christianity were similarly used to keep the slave in his proper place. White preachers are known to have warned slaves:

If therefore you would be God's freemen in paradise, you must strive to be good and serve Him here on earth. Your bodies, you know, are not your own. They are at the disposal of those you belong to, but your precious souls are still your own, which nothing can take away from you if it is not your fault. Figure well then that if you lose your souls by leading idle, wicked lives here, you have gained nothing by it in this world and you have lost your all in the next. For idleness and wickedness are generally found out and your body suffer for it here, and what is far worse, if you do not repent and alter your ways, your unhappy souls will suffer for it hereafter (Styron, 1967:97).

During slavery, the negro response to the complexities of his tragic existence was to forge a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity: patience, forbearance, love, faith and hope -hope of compensation in the next world. "In the Lord, in the Lord / my soul has been anchored in the Lord," sang the black man in bondage. And a blues singer of yesteryear has plaintively asked: "what did I do to be so black and blue?"

Likewise, the agony of Dalits according to Saint Chokha Mela, a 12th century Dalit ascetic, springs out of the inability to worship God face to face because of the stigma of unsociability:

Low is my state, Lord,
How may I serve thee, unclean and untouchable as I am?
How should I greet thee?
I am in despair, Lord,
I know not how to serve you (Kharat, 1978:88).

Anand's Untouchable provides a perceptive example of the theory of double-consciousness. Anand's hero Bakha, absorbed in day dreams about his impending English lesson, accidentally touches a high-caste. As the people of the street hurl abuses at him, Bakha realizes the enormity of his deed — because he, like other untouchables, has come to believe implicitly that he is unclean:

To Bakha every second seemed an endless age of woe and suffering. His whole demeanor was concentrated in humility and in his heart there was a queer stirring. His legs trembled and shook under him. He felt they would fail him. He was really sorry and tried hard to convey his repentance to his tormentors (Anand, 1940:36).

Both Dalits and Afro-Americans have protested against religions which perpetuated their enslavement. Because Christianity, a religion imbibed and ingrained through years of indoctrination, could not be given up easily, the black man found ways of altering the image of "whiteness" as synonymous with "good." As early as the 19th century, Bishop Henry M. Turner claimed that "God is a Negro," and in this century the movement has taken a tangible form with the organization of a Black Church, with a Black God, a Black Jesus, a Black Madonna and Black angels.

Hinduism has similarly been rejected by untouchables in India. In 1927, there were large scale conversions to Buddhism, with the Manusmrti being burnt in public by Ambedkar. Recent years have witnessed conversions to Islam both among Dalits and Afro-Americans.

The religious indoctrination which bound blacks and Dalits to slavery, held the women of these communities in a still more stringent web of fierce restrictions. Manu allowed no independence to the woman. In the ninth Adhyaya of the Manusmrti he pronounces:

Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families, and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never lit for independence (Sastri, 1983:IX 2-3).

"Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands" pronounces Paul in the Epistle to the Colossians. Seventeenth century warnings about women take hideous forms:

Eagles eat not men till they are dead, but women devour them alive, for a woman will pick thy pocket and empty thy purse, laugh in thy lace, and cutt thy throat. They are ungrateful, periured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, inconstant, waspish, toyish, light, sullen, proud and discurteous and cruel" (Swetnam, 1617: 16).

This evil creature, therefore, had to be held in check and shown her "proper place." June Jordan (1971: ix) articulates the special paradox of black womanhood: "to be black and to be a woman. To be a double outsider, to be twice oppressed, to be more than invisible. That's a triple vision. White America has continued to hold the black woman in "enslavement" by keeping alive a series of distorted psychological images of black womanhood. These popular stereotypes are those of the "tragic mulatto," the "hot-blooded exotic whore," and the "matriarch" (Washington, 1974:10). For the black woman, "double consciousness" tends to foster an image of ugliness in contrast to the images of "purity," "chastity" and "beauty" associated with white womanhood.

Black psychiatrists analyze the crippling effects of double-consciousness on the black woman whose blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short. She is, in fact, the antithesis of American beauty. There can be no doubt that she will develop a damaged self- concept and an impairment of her feminine narcissicm which will have profound consequences for her character development (Crier and Cobbs, 1968:33).

Alice Walker gives a poignant account of her mother, a maid, who was convinced that she did not "exist" compared to "them," the white people. She "subordinated" her soul to theirs and became "a faithful and timid supporter" of the "Beautiful White People." She thought of them as "jest naturally smarter, prettier, better" (Walker, 1983:123).

In fiction, perhaps the most sensitive portrayal of the self-hatred that the black woman often experiences may be seen in the story of Pecola, in Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970). Pecola is tormented, criticized, laughed at by schoolmates, her neighbors, even by her mother, and prays passionately for a pair of blue eyes — the Shirley Temple variety. Raped, deprived of love, and reminded constantly of her own ugliness, she escapes at last into madness — a total and complete victim of whatever is around her.

The image of the Dalit woman is similarly geared at keeping her in eternal bondage and slavery. Hindu society continues to function within the rigid framework of caste and has kept alive the image of the Dalit as untouchable, polluted and unclean. The Dalit woman shares with the black woman a debased self-image — her touch is vile, she is unclean, undesirable, in contrast to "twice-born" womanhood. She readily believes that even her shadow is a pollutant; the only place for her is gavkusabaher (beyond the limits of the village), and the only possible occupation the removal of human dirt. Recent spurts in women's education and the enlightenment that came in the wake of the Ambedkar movement have not done much to elevate the Dalit woman's self-image.

Her situation is graphically presented by Tarabai Dongre in a story entitled "Maherca Prawas" ("The Journey Home") where Manjula, a Dalit, travels alone with her little infant. She stops at a wayside well and surreptitiously draws water to quench her overpowering thirst. Even as she does this, it is significant to note that she prays for forgiveness, for it is a high-caste well that she is ostensibly polluting. The watchman catches her red-handed and she is mercilessly beaten to death. The little infant cries himself to death (Dongre, 1939).

Slavery arid exploitation begin early in the lives of black and Dalit women. Girl children are made aware that they are the dispossessed, the throwaways of society. A young untouchable girl-child asks her mother why her "shadow" has polluted an upper-caste gentleman. The mother, in the poem entitled "The First Question of a Low-born Child" answers: "We are low, child, they are the high born and we must stay apart" (Kharat, 1978:50).

There is something unique about the adolescence of these girl-children, for the growing up period may be viewed as totally unprotected. In Dalit literature we are shown girls who are pressed into farm labor, help with household chores, care for younger siblings but are treated as second class citizens in the home at the same time. In Walker's novel we are given a heart-rending account of Daphne, the little pickaninny who at the tender age of five is pressed into the dangerous duty of "poisoning" the white man's cotton fields with arsenic. At the end of the day, little Daphne was drenched with sweat, her tattered dress was wringing wet with perspiration and arsenic; her large eyes reddened by the poison, she trembled and vomited and looked beaten down like a tiny, asthmatic old lady (Walker, 1970:53).

In Dalit literature the sheer expendability of the girl-child is well illustrated in the institution of devadasis, the handmaidens of lord Khan-doba. Couples desirous of a male heir often pledge their youngest girl-child to the deity - and she is then introduced to life-long bondage, mainly as the village whore. Married to Khandoba, she may not marry a human, but the men of the village have free access to her body. One of the reasons why the system was perpetuated was to provide an outlet for the repressed sexual urges of the higher-castes to keep the "purity" of higher caste women intact.

The condition of poverty exposes girl-children to the many dimensions of sex at an early age; as a matter of fact, the threat of rape, not only from the dominant group but from within their own, is experienced by the girl-child early in life. In The Street, Petry (1946:206) points out that her

People were so damn poor they didn't have time to do anything but work, and their bodies were the only source of relief from the pressure under which they lived and where the crowding together made the young girls wise beyond their years.

Maya Angelou, seduced and assaulted at the age of eight, was shocked into a terrifying awareness of the realities of existence. Hurston (1984:57) has similarly reported to have felt "weighed down with a power I did not want. I had knowledge before its time. I knew my fate."

Dalit and Afro-American girls are viewed as sex objects without any compunction on the part of the males of the dominant culture. In Sula (1975) school going girls have to devise roundabout ways of returning home from school, because the white gang is ready to molest them at every step. In Bagul's Sood (Revenge), Janaki is shown coming home laden with groceries and a tin of flour bought from money earned as a grass-cutter. She is in a hurry to go home, to feed her tuberculous father and hungry younger siblings. On the way she meets a group of high-caste boys and before she can retrace her steps to save the flour and her own chastity, she is surrounded by them. The teenagers begin teasing her, and at the end of this encounter, Janaki is covered with flour and sweat. Her blouse is torn open, her breasts raw and tingling with pain from what is tantamount to gang rape. Yet there is no authority to whom she may go in appeal, for she is but the lowest of the low.

In Meriwether's Daddy Was a Number Runner (1977), girl children have to face ominous pressure from the white tradesmen -the butcher, the baker and the bald-headed white man who follows them to the movies - all eager for a feel. In Meridian (1977), the girl child submits very early to sexual experiences; in fact, as Walker (1977:62) perceptively points out, Meridian is able to feel a sense of security in the world of men only when she was taken under the wing of whoever wandered across her defenses to become in a remarkably short time her lover. This, then, was probably what sex meant to her, not pleasure, but a sanctuary in which her mind was freed of any consideration for all the other males in the universe who might want anything of her. It was resting from pursuit.

That this "sanctuary" is a myth soon becomes apparent. In point of fact, even "respectable" Dalit and Afro-American women cannot escape the fate of being viewed as sexual objects. Socially unacceptable, they are sexually desirable at the same time. Hernton (1965:124) points out that the black woman more than anyone else has borne the constant agonies of racial barbarity and has often been made the target of white America's repressed puritanical sexuality, "by being transformed sexually into a beast."

One of the questions central to this fiction of protest is: who is responsible for the pain, the deprivation and the sheer expendability of the lives of blacks and Dalits. It is oppression based on caste and race that comes in for heavy indictment. Thus the oppressive features of caste and race are seen as divisive forces, causing a reversal of traditional male-female roles — roles diametrically opposed to those prescribed by the dominant society. Staples (1973:30) points out that the values of white society are inescapable; therefore, "consequent to role reversal, the male hates and brutalizes the female, the female mistrusts and has contempt for the male, because he cannot validate his nominal masculinity in practice." The strategy of white racism aims at eroding black family ties - and it is in their roles as husbands and wives, parents and children that black people are made to suffer their worst afflictions.

Under these trying circumstances black and Dalit women are seen desperately trying to play the role of "wife." In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Mem and Margaret try to become demure submissive wives in imitation of the prevalent image of the white southern matron. It is not possible for them to measure up to this image - Margaret has to work as a bait puller while her son Brownfield is left at home with only an all-day-sucker for company. Mem defeated by the share-cropping system, is forced to work as a maid. The rage and frustration of the black man caused by an oppressive racial system is visited by him on his womenfolk. In Walker's The Color Purple (1982:176) the wife is constantly reminded by the husband "you black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman, Goddam, you nothin' at all."

The 'fro-American wife, exposed as she is to the white man's sexual barbarity, is often reduced to a loose woman, at least in the imagination of the black man. Dalit literature likewise reveals the tensions arising between husbands and wives, for the Wife is viewed as a sexual object by higher caste men - untouchable in theory, but eminently desirable sexually. "Bhandwalshahi" ("Capitalism") recounts the mental torture that the husband, Ganpat, has to undergo because his wife Gajara is seduced by the factory owner (Chavan, 939). More pathetic is the plight of Gajara herself, caught as she is in this vortex of lust — she can and does remain faithful to her husband in spirit, but the "system" ruins family relationship;. In short, it is against great odds that the Dalit woman tries to retain "wifely" virtues.

Against this superhuman struggle to maintain chastity and "wifehood" may be juxtaposed the report by Robert Staples that the majority of prostitutes in major American cities are black. Surveys show that in the major metropolitan cities of India and among the devadasis, a large percentage of prostitutes belong to the untouchable castes. The high incidence of prostitution among these two groups is attributed not at only to economic deprivation alone, but also to vile caste/racist mythology according to which every Dalit/black woman was a slut and "therefore to assault her and exploit her sexually was not all reprehensible, and carried with it none of the normal communal sanctions against such behavior" (Lerner, 1972:163).

The untouchable woman has no claim to "womanly" qualities. She is not, in fact, a woman; and like her black counterpart, even when cast in the image of "loose" or bad woman, she points an accusing finger at her prosecutors, men, who have caused her degradation. Shultz (1977:331) points out that "despair, anger and hatred rather than the carefree nonchalance of the stereotyped whore, are characteristic of the prostitutes in Black American fiction." Shultz suggests, quite rightly, that the easy women of Harlem have a variety of characters; yet given half a chance, like Josie in Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland, they are prepared to settle down to happy domesticity.

Bagul's novel Sood (Revenge) depicts the terrifying rage of a woman forced into prostitution. Janaki is the daughter of a devadasi. "Can a prostitute's daughter hope for honor, respectability, social acceptance?" These are questions that Janaki's mother poses to her. She is told that respectability is the prized possession of the rich. The mother tries to inveigle her into the profession; Janaki's husband and mother-in- law sell her to Rasool, their creditor, who in turn sends her to a brothel from

where she finally escapes. She wants to reject her female body, so she offers it to the River Ganga: thus begins a terrible quest. With shaven head, and three- pronged axe in hand, dressed as a young ascetic in ochre robes, Janaki sets out in search of a guru. She asks, "is there no escape from this female body, will I never be free? Will I forever remain a woman; will the lust in the eyes of men continue always to strip me bare? Much better to die with the knife Gambia) piercing my heart." Janaki has heard of miraculous transformations. In the stories told by her father there are instances of women who jump into magical lakes and are turned into men: "Will I not find a Yogi, an ascetic, somewhere in the Himalayas, who will make this body male?" she asks. The total hopelessness of Dalit female existence with its horrifying degradations is thus forcefully brought home to us in this image of the prostitute, out to destroy her femaleness, the root cause of her tragedy.

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