



*postScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*

Online – Open Access – Peer Reviewed ISSN: 2456-7507

postscriptum.co.in

Volume II Number i (January 2017)

Nandy, Pamoli & Basabi Pal. "Manifold Forms of Oppressions: ..." pp. 84-95

## **Manifold Forms of Oppressions: Reading select short stories from *Poisoned Bread***

**Pamoli Nandy**

Bankura University

&

**Basabi Pal**

Assistant Professor of English, Rabindra Mahavidyalaya, Champadanga,

Hooghly

Pamoli Nandy is a research scholar at Bankura University. Her area of research is feminism and postfeminism. She is also an assistant teacher of Sadashibpur Bishore High School (Higher Secondary).

Basabi Pal is an Assistant Professor of English at Rabindra Maavidyalaya, Champadanga, Hooghly and she is also a research scholar at Bankura University. Her area of interest is Indian English literature.

### **Abstract**

In the hierarchical order of the caste-based Indian society Dalits are placed at the bottom and so they are deprived of the equal opportunities and rights enjoyed by the dominant upper caste people. Indian caste system has made them untouchable and compels them to remain silent and subjugated only to maintain the controlling power of the upper caste people. But the degree of oppression of the Dalit women is more intense than the Dalit men. If the causes of the Dalit men's oppressions are caste and class, the issue of gender discrimination is added in the case of Dalit women. They are oppressed not only by the upper caste people but they are also subjugated by the Dalit men of their own community. So in every sphere of life the Dalit women have to remain silent to claim their rights. Their exploitations and sufferings are portrayed in Dalit literature. In the selected short stories published in the anthology *Poisoned Bread* (2009) edited by Arjun Dangle, the picture of their social exclusion is vividly portrayed. Dalit women are treated by both of the societies, Dalit and upper caste, like less than human. The present paper would like to look back at manifold forms of oppressions faced by the Dalit women of Indian society.

### **Keywords**

Dalit, women, oppression, short story

Time falls apace. By this time the 70<sup>th</sup> year of Indian independence is celebrated with a great grandeur. Literally the Indians now boast of their glorious achievement as independent citizens of democratic country. But at least one section of the people has the least regard for this free Republican country. This section is exploited, unprivileged, marginalized, denied and devastated group, i.e. they are the Dalits. Etymologically the word 'Dalit' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dalita' which means divided or broken or oppressed. The word gets its popularity with the efforts of B. R. Ambedkar and now it refers to that group who are being excluded from the four-fold Varna system of Hindu society in India. Though they get the constitutional and legal recognition as scheduled caste or scheduled tribe, terms like untouchable, outcaste, atisudra, harijan, the fifth or panchama and the subaltern – are often used to denote their exclusion from this quadruple division on the basis of Varna.

Due to this hierarchical and hegemonic Brahminical Hindu society in India they have to undergo a series of oppressions and depressions both physically and psychically. Thus they are de-humanized and humiliated in their existence in Indian societal background. Their societal backward position results in their economic, cultural and political deprivation in India. Due to this quadruple division on the basis of Varna, we find the distinction between the exploiter and the exploited, the dominance and the dominated as well as the Dalits and the non-Dalits. This issue of dualism takes an extreme form on the basis of gender discrimination. The feminists try to distinguish the notion of gender and sex. Simon De Beauvoir says:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (295)

So we find that the notion of masculinity and femininity is a socio-culturally constructed idea. Dalits are identified as victimized, underclass and the others. The process of victimization becomes more prominent in case of the female of the Dalit community. Due to their untouchability the Dalits are oppressed but in relation to the Dalit women they are doubly oppressed and thus they have to undergo double discriminations. Firstly, due to their ignoble rank in the social categorization they are exploited and secondly due to this gender inequality they have to face a series of tortures from this patriarchal Indian society.

Now we would like to give a quick look on the general ideas of feminism. It is a known fact that feminism as a broad concept continues its struggle to get recognition of the women in the social, economic, political and cultural perspectives of a society. Though the aim of the Western feminist and the Indian feminists is the same, the distinction between the two is there in their approach.

The history of Indian feminist movements shows very clearly that it is somehow different from its Western counterparts. The demands made by the Indian feminist activists were based on the Indian socio-cultural backgrounds which were of course dissimilar with the Western backgrounds. Unlike the Western feminist movements, Indian movements were mainly initiated by men and women joined there later. Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen were the propagators who helped to bring many social reformations. They brought reformation on 'Sati', child marriage, purdah system, widow remarriage, female education etc. which paved the way of women freedom and empowerment. No one can deny their noteworthy contribution to the history of Indian feminist movements. But it is also true that all these reformations were made for only upper caste women and the Dalit women who were in the bottom of Indian hierarchical society were left out of the then social reformation process though their necessity was the most. After independence some leaders of non-Brahmanic movements, like Phule, Narayan Gure, Ambedkar took the problems of Dalit women as their matter of considerations though they also had their limitations.

Thus the mainstream feminists always ignore the exploitation of the Dalit women of the Hindu society. In this context the observation of Uma Chakravarti is worth to be mentioned "The women's movement was also critiqued by Dalit feminists for not paying attention to the specific and most extreme forms of oppression experienced by Dalit women who bore a triple burden: as dalits from the upper castes, as labourers from the landlords, and as women from men of their own families and caste" (4).

In the seventies of the twentieth century the Dalit Panthers Movement introduced a new form of writing i.e. "Dalit Literature" which consisted of mainly poems, short stories and autobiographies. They depict their pathetic condition in these writings. Limbale says, "...the questions they pose in their work are their own, and those of their society..." (Towards *an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: Histories, controversies and considerations*, 34). In these writings we can find a vivid portrayal of Dalit women who live a poor and backward life.

Indian hierarchical and patriarchal society denies them a voice to claim their rights. Dalit women are discriminated and subjugated not only by the dominant upper class people but they are oppressed by the Dalit men of their own community also. Their exploitation stretches from inside to outside world.

In the caste-based Indian society the reason of Dalit women's oppression is not only because of their lack of education, low status or economic background, but also Hindu religious scriptures legitimate the right of the upper caste people's suppression of them. In every sphere of life like education, employment and sanitation they are not given equal opportunity like the upper caste women. But all of these daily experiences of ill-treatment of Dalit women are not paid due attention by the traditional Indian feminists. In this matter we can find a similarity between Dalit feminism and Black feminism because of some common problems faced by both of them. Like the Dalit women, the Black women also have to face various oppressions because of racial as well as gender discrimination. The white western patriarchal society always tries to represent the 'women of colour' as inferior, weak and inactive. They are treated as less than humans by the whites. Here we can mention Bankim Chandra Mondal's words written in the article "Dalit Feminist Perspective in India":

Like dalits feminists, Black feminists criticize mainstream feminists for ignoring race (caste) as a category of oppression and analysis. The Black feminists stress that they face racial as well as gender discrimination in the labour market which is identical with the dalit feminist's experience. Like dalit women, the Black women are often forced to take jobs that white women would not accept. (*Voice of Dalit*, 131-32)

The plight of women in Dalit community is very heart-touching. Due to their silence Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak" raises questions like: "Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?" (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 294) She again replies that "the question of woman' seems most problematic in this context" (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 294). These literary texts not only register the traumatic experience but also appeal to us as self-theorizing texts, wiping out the so-called opposition between literature and theory and a study of such Dalit literature is not only an abstract idea but a concrete social, collective problematic discourse, i.e. the casteism and gender issues in India. They remain in the most cornered section of the society. They are never allowed to speak out and if it continues "the subaltern women will be

as mute as ever” (Spivak, 90). So they are oppressed for being a Dalit and for being a female. They are really in a problematic situation which “compels us to defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently” (Guru, 2549).

Their need to talk differently is admitted in the writings of both the Dalit men and women writers. Dalit women’s subordinated and marginalized status of life is depicted in the short stories published by Arjun Dangle in *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Marathi Dalit Literature*. Some collected short stories in this book depict the stark reality faced by the Dalit women in India. The objective of this paper is to showcase the extreme oppressed condition of the Dalit women who are oppressed due to the cause of casteism and gender positioning in India. In this paper we would like to focus on the multi-faceted mechanisms of oppressions which a Dalit woman compels to face. We would like to explore the condition of the Dalit women in Indian society and how it is depicted in the short stories like “Mother” and “Livelihood” by Baburao Bagul and Bhimrao Shirwale respectively. The paper is a study to look back at the subjugation and suppression of the Dalit women in India in the select short stories published in Dangle’s *Poisoned Bread*.

As these short stories are written in the mode of realism and naturalism, these are very interesting to read for all of us. Such stories are mainly concerned with the depiction of the state of the mind of the main character. They highlight on the psychological and moral traits of these protagonists.

Dalits thus belong to the lowest section of the societal pyramid of India. Their prolonged oppression is depicted in the Dalit literature and Dalit literature first emerges in Maharashtra with the Marathi language. Later on it becomes a sub branch of Indian literature. It gets its popularity with the publication of *An Anthology of Dalit literature*, edited by Anand and Zelliott and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, edited by Arjun Dangle. So Arjun Dangle plays a leading role for the development of Dalit literature and his *Poisoned Bread* becomes the first anthology of Dalit literature. In this anthology we find the English translation of short stories, poems, essays, speeches, autobiographical extracts which are originally written in Marathi language. Thus it becomes a unique literary creation and opens a new vista of Dalit literature for all of us.

This anthology includes short stories like “Mother” by Baburao Bagul and “Livelihood” by Bhimrao Shirwale. Both these writers depict the exploited condition of the Dalit women of the then India. So many mechanisms are used to keep them oppressed and

their pathetic condition, silent voice and marginalized status are clearly understood by a thorough reading of these two short stories.

Firstly, we would like to focus on Baburao Bagul's short story "Mother" to understand the condition of the Dalit women in India. The story is a depiction of a mother. Here she is Pandu's mother and she is also a Dalit woman. Being a woman she is exploited in her private life and also in the public domain by her own husband, by the overseer and is severely criticized by the members of her community. As gender is a socio culturally constructed idea, she becomes an easy victim at the hands of the patriarchal society. Like Beauvoir, Millett also thinks that gender is "essentially cultural, rather than biological bases" (*Sexual Politics*, 28). That's why this Dalit woman is treated miserably in the story "Mother".

From a prolonged period in our society women have to maintain a different relationship with men. Millett admits that "because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and that their life experiences are utterly different - and this is crucial" (*Sexual Politics*, 31). Masculinity is attributed with the adjectives like active and rational and they always show their dominance over their submissive, passive and emotional female counterpart. Due to this stereotyped role of gender this Dalit woman in the story has to undergo a pathetic experience from her husband. Her husband, a tubercular patient, has not the ability to earn wages and she has to do a lot of laborious works for the sustenance of their living. Yet he shows his male dominance over his wife. That woman feels extremely humiliated when her husband "would strip her and examine her feet, her thighs, her breasts, her sari and blouse, and would carefully scrutinize her lips and cheeks" (214). She has to tolerate some critical comments of her husband: "Your sari looks as if you have worn it in a hurry, your hair's coming loose, where were you, slut?" (214). The role of patriarchy is so pervasive that her husband always searches for money from his wife and "when he found nothing, he would taunt her, 'Giving I on credit now, are you?'" (214). Due to that subordination of the women in the society, that woman becomes responsible for her husband's 'disease, his failing strength, his joblessness' (214). Patriarchy thus tries to show its dominance over the women of the society.

Thus the Dalit woman in the story becomes an easy victim of domestic violence and this condition continues till the death of that tubercular husband. Next he starts another journey - the journey of a widow as a Dalit woman and now the situation is worse than the previous one: "She had suffered immeasurable torment after his death. Men were drawn to

her; she did not want them. They tried rape and their women waged a war of slander against her” (215). As a Dalit widow she has to undergo miserable experiences from the male members of her neighbourhood. But we see that the Hindu widows live a restricted life renouncing all earthly pleasures. Eventually this widow has to bear up pathetic experiences even in the public place of this male-dominated society. She has to tolerate the abusive remarks from the neighbour Dagdu. And at the hands of Dagdu and her overseer, she becomes an object of enjoyment. Due to her late in returning home she becomes the easy victim and gains the status of the most marginalized in that marginalized community. The following excerpt states about her most cornered position in that Dalit community:

“...At that very moment; she was rushing towards home with lightning steps...The entire street was transfixed by her undulating walk. The men stripped her bare in their mind’s eye, the women burned with envy, but couldn’t help looking. Dagdu slowly called out ‘S...l...u...t!’ and the women laughed in derision” (213).

Except this his mother has to tolerate such other satirical remarks from the neighbours, “Your mother’s “business” seems to be doing very well. What a great rush there must be. Five rupees for each customer” (216). Thus being a Dalit widow she has to undergo this pathetic experience within her own community. She also becomes an object of enjoyment for the upper class overseer. Only for earning some money that poor Dalit widow is compelled to sacrifice herself to her overseer. Only to earn her livelihood and to protect her only son, she unwillingly becomes a sex toy for the enjoyment of the overseer who is none other than a representative of the upper class society. Her unwillingness is clearly depicted here in the story, “...the overseer, already blinded with lust, refused to let her go; he was pulling her into the room with his strong brown arms” (217).

Her miserable life story takes an extreme form when she gets a final blow from her only one “support” (217) - her own child - Pandu. Pandu experiences a bitter incident in the classroom scenario where the teacher teaches a poem about a mother who is like “‘Vatsalya Sindhu’ – a river of motherly love and benediction” (209). This poem gives a relief to Pandu’s mind and he is in a state of trance and thinks of his own mother’s love and care for himself. But this day dream is shattered when one of his class mates utters: “Don’t touch Pandu, any of you. My mother says Pandu’s mother sleeps with the mukadam like this...” (210).

Hearing such harsh statement about his mother the child's attitude towards his mother is going to be changed. The story teller tells that Pandu thinks: "...My mother has certainly changed; she is not the mother of old. Last night I waited for her return for such a long time, but she didn't come on time". (211) And when this poor widow realises that just like her husband, his son becomes suspicious of his mother's behaviour, she feels that she is the worst sufferer of that family and the story teller tells: "...The suspicion in Pandu's eyes took her back into the past,..."(215). Pandu even decides to leave his mother and when he leaves the room, he utters: "Whore! I spit on your clothes..." (216).

Thus being a Dalit woman, this poor widow is oppressed by each and everyone. When traditionally in upper caste family the motherhood is celebrated but in this caste prejudiced society she also has to sacrifice her motherhood. Child is so desirous in our life that many rituals related to child birth are performed in upper-caste Hindu families. Many songs and poems are written in praise of the children and likewise Wordsworth also says, "The child is the father of the man/And I could wish my days to be/Bound each to each by natural piety." (308)

Here in this story this Dalit woman has no choice in her life. Even her last support – her only son – Pandu has left her. She pathetically cries out: "You've all tortured me - you, your father, the men in this street – also the women" (217). Again she admits that she continues her life struggle only for her son. But he has even betrayed her: "I lived for you, hoping you'd grow up, be my support, but you have betrayed me..." (217).

At the end of the story Pandu plays the role of a silent observer. He saw that his mother and the overseer "in a tight embrace" (217). Looking at her son, his mother tries a lot to "escape from the beer-like hug of the overseer. But like a person stuck fast in a quagmire, she found release impossible" (218) and thus the story ends tragically with the separation of a mother from her child.

Now we would like to look back at another selected short story from the anthology *Poisoned Bread*. In the short story "Livelihood" written by Bhimra Shirwale we can visualise the sad plight of the helpless Kashi, daughter of a poor widow. After her husband Dharma's leaving of the Koliwada hutment colony to serve a sentence of twenty years' hard labour, Kashi becomes alone in the whole world. Then she becomes helpless having no money to live. Being helpless she tries different ways to earn money for her livelihood and her experiences are pathetic:

She had tried to earn her living by working. She had managed to get a house job through some women she knew. She washed and cleaned for a retired gentleman. She worked at this job for fifteen days. Then one day, the old man took advantage of their being alone to make a pass at her. That was the end of her ideas of earning her own living. But it wasn't the end of living. (201)

This incident proves the fact that most of the Dalit women are harassed and raped by the dominant caste men when they go out for work to earn money. Patriarchal society always treats women as a sexual object and as a result all of the women in our society become the victims of male desire. But Dalit women are more victimized than upper caste women because of their social status.

It is not that Dalit women are coerced only by the upper caste men but they are oppressed even by the men of their own community. When Kashi tries to earn money to live in the absence of her husband, Kesu Ghatge, a bootlegger stretches his helpful hands calling her "Kashibai, you are like a sister to me" (200). But in one dark night he also jumps at her to rape her taking the advantage of her being alone in her hut:

He came in and lunged at her body like a starved man going at a plateful of the choicest food. Kashi woke up with a dreadful fear in her heart to see Kesu Ghatge trying to rob her of her virtue. He had called her 'sister', but her young body made him numb with desire. An unsuspected strength flowed into Kashi's body and she fell upon him, fighting and clawing. (202)

After this incident people start to look at her differently. She tries to find out a way to protect her from "those lust-filled glances" (202). In spite of knowing that Kesu "was a traitor" (202) and "dangerous" (202), Kashi remembers his helping hands at the time of her helplessness. Patriarchal society never allows a woman to live alone depending on her own self and so she always needs someone to support herself strongly. Freedom and independence is never permitted to any woman either an upper caste or a Dalit woman by the male dominated society. So, to support her Kashi has to accept Kesu in her life hoping a protected better future.

But her life starts to become worse as Kesu "began beating Kashi" (203). "Strange perverted thoughts" (203) comes in the mind of Kesu seeing the beauty of Kashi and he

always makes plan to make Kashi ugly. His torture becomes unbearable and he becomes a bloody devil when:

And then one day, Kesu reached the top gear of his perverted desire. He kicked Kashi, grown languid with pregnancy, and stuffed lime into her eye. Jankibai's darling daughter became blind in one eye. One eye closed forever and Kesu sighed with pleasure and then began to laugh like the devil. (203-04)

Kashi becomes a mere toy in the powerful hands of Kesu whose behaviour towards Kashi, the innocent beautiful lady, is not better than a dangerous demon. He always tries to show his power and strength to prove Kashi powerless and weak like every patriarchal male person. All of these attitudes can easily be seen as his effort to dominate Kashi's life without giving her any voice to speak.

Traditional gender roles represent men as rational, strong and decisive to cast women as irrational or emotional, weak and submissive. These traditional gender categories are of course social constructions. And the patriarchal concept of femininity always disempowers women and allows them little opportunity for equality. When in this short story Kashi tries to find out her own livelihood by her own effort she is attacked by Kesu because according to Tyson "... it is not feminine to succeed in business, to have strong opinions, to have a healthy appetite( for anything), or to assert one's rights" (88). Their conversation emphasizes the ill-treatment which she receives from Kesu:

Kesu Ghatge flared up under this attack.

‘You bloody bitch...’

‘If you'd had any decency, any shame, you wouldn't have shown your face here, you bastard... son of a bitch’.

‘Mind your tongue, you whore. I've come to claim my earnings.’ (206-07)

The reason behind such treatment is Kesu's inner patriarchal ego which always craves for more power and more opportunity to dominate. At this point we can quote Tyson:

... patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender roles and obeys the patriarchal rules, she's a "good girl"; if she doesn't, she's a "bad girl". These two roles - also referred to as "madonna" and "whore" or "angel" and "bitch"- view women in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order. (89)

From this above discussion we realize that like Kashi of this short story every ordinary Dalit woman is deprived and subjugated. Only a minute observation can divulge the truth of their manifold forms of oppression. Here it is worthy to mention the comments of Raj Kumar in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives*:

Generally speaking, they are the most underprivileged group left out at the bottom of the hierarchical caste society for centuries. Compared to Dalit men, they suffer more due to their dual disadvantages: being Dalit and being women. Being Dalit, they suffer due to caste discrimination. And being women, they become the victims of the patriarchal social order in their families and outside. The social scientists studying the conditions of Dalit women believe that they are alienated at three levels - due to their caste, class and gender positions. (217)

Thus in the real life situation the Dalit women are worst sufferer of their community. They face different types of oppressions in this caste prejudiced and gender ridden Indian society. They can hardly challenge the socially structured parameter. Their voice is being silenced and they become the easy victim of different types of violence. Thus these two short stories effectively narrate the suffocating and stifling condition of the Dalit women in India.

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