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INDIAN SUBALTERN FEMINISM AND AMERICAN BLACK WOMANISM

Abstract:

Women's oppression is the most widespread and the deepest form of oppression in society. The world of women, as Simone de Beauvoir observes, "is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated by the male universe; high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that will block her way". Women all over the world, like the colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of the "other" "marginalized" and in a metaphorical sense "colonized" by various forms of patriarchal domination as they share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. Based on this assumption of inferior position, women are called the "subalterns". The issues agitating women belonging to different cultures are different. There are two special voices shouting in the wilderness for liberation-- the Dalit woman in India and the Black woman in America, who are under the triple subjugation of caste or race, gender and class. It is therefore imperative to isolate the problems specific to these triple-subjugated women and work for their empowerment. The Dalit woman writer Bama's stories and the African-American woman writer Alice Walker's stories demonstrate how the material reality of different groups of women can lead to very different perceptions of the nature of political struggle. All the different schools of Feminist thought have a particular way of characterizing freedom or liberation. In the case of Womanist thought, the emphasis is on the full self-development of woman but there is also recognition that women are all involved with families, communities, political entities and other groups that affect their progress in important ways. Dalit Feminism, on the other hand, underscores the relevance of the histories of colonialism on the national front and stories of male hegemony on the familial front. Hence, this paper focuses on Dalit Feminism and American Black Womanism.

Keywords:

Dalit Feminism, Black Womanism, Subaltern, Colonialism, Hegemony, Triple-subjugation.

A Few Reflections

Feminism is of crucial interest to postcolonial discourse for two reasons. Firstly, both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence the experience of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of ways and both feminist and postcolonial politics oppose such dominance. Secondly, there have been vigorous debates in a number of colonized societies over whether gender or colonial oppression is the more important political factor in women's lives. For both groups, language has been a vehicle for subverting patriarchal and imperial power. Colonialism operated very differently for women and for men. There is "double colonization" for women as women are subjected both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women. The world of women as Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*, "is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated by the male universe; high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that will block her way" (1953:325).

Women's oppression is the most widespread and the deepest form of oppression in society. Patriarchy has assumed that women are naturally inferior to men, lacking rational thought. As she is biologically endowed with the supreme task of reproduction to carry the human race forward, it is considered to be imperative to subsume her individuality to serve the needs of her husband. The male principle in the Indian Sankhya philosophy has placed more values on the "seed" than the "land". In the Hebraic tradition, every woman is said to enter history with a piece missing. Aristotelian tradition too defines a woman by what she lacks. This lack tradition has been reinforced by Sigmund Freud in the modern age by his concept of "penis envy" in women. Based on this assumption of inferior position, women are called the "subalterns".

The term "subaltern" is a key term to postcolonial studies which refers to the category of those who are lower in social position. Subaltern classes include all the marginalized—peasants, workers, women, Dalits, Blacks, tribals and such groups of unfortunate people who are under the social, economic, political and cultural domination of the oppressor. They are cut off from the mainstream of power and privilege. Though they cry out in angry, anguished voices, they remain unheard. The dominant discourse does not provide the needed space for them to speak. Of all postcolonial theorists, Gayatri Spivak has consistently focused on the subaltern. In her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988: 307) Spivak observes that the "subaltern cannot speak" because without an infrastructure that would recognize resistance, even resistance is in vain. However, the subalterns have started asserting themselves through the process of resistance. They demand their voices be heard. They have begun to move from the periphery to the centre. They have rewritten their history and deconstructed the myths which subjugated them. They speak through their purposive, liberatory, and transformational literature. Hence Edward Said emphatically says, "For indeed, the subaltern *can* speak, as the history of liberation movements in the twentieth century eloquently attests" (2001: 335).

In fact, women all over the world, like the colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of the “other” “marginalized” and in a metaphorical sense “colonized” by various forms of patriarchal domination as they share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. Hence both feminist and postcolonial discourses seek to reinstate the marginalized, inverting the oppressive structures, giving voice to the voiceless. However, the issues agitating women belonging to different cultures are different. The differences between the political priorities of the first and third-world women have persisted to the present, although the interconnection of various forms of social oppression materially affects the lives of all women. There are two different special voices shouting in the wilderness for liberation—the Dalit woman in India and the Black woman in America who are under the triple-subjugation of caste or race, gender and class. It is therefore imperative to isolate the problems specific to these triple-subjugated women and work for their emancipation and empowerment.

Postcolonial studies and post-modern feminism grant these subaltern groups the needed space to break their cocoon of fear, low self-esteem and stifling diffidence in order to assert their dignity, individuality and human rights. For millions of Dalit women, Dalit Feminism has created a pulpit to preach the gospel of freedom for them to come out of their existential subordination and trauma of untouchability. Racism and gender subordination marginalizes the Black women within the Western feminist movement. Black feminists have challenged the White feminists’ moral right and ability to speak for them. Their universalizing and essentializing approach has obscured many differences of racial, ethnic and class cleavages, harming Black women. Hence Black women writers create new forms and new rules, sing new songs and rewrite new histories, new symbols, myths and legends. “Dreams they have and nightmares they confront. They explore their long past to trace the fossils of their forefathers’ existence and also forge their future. Their literature is indeed a creative excavation for their heritage,” says J. M. Waghmare (2001:17).

Bama (1958-) is a widely acclaimed Indian Tamil Dalit woman writer. She has been using her pen as a powerful weapon to fight for the rights of her people—the Dalits. Bama is the pen name of Faustina Mary. She is regarded as one of India’s newest and most challenging voices. Alice Walker (1944-) is a highly regarded African American woman writer. She is not only a writer but also a publisher, social activist, womanist, globe-trotter and spiritual explorer. Bama’s stories and the stories of Alice Walker demonstrate how the material reality of different groups of women can lead to very different perceptions of the nature of political struggle. Bama’s pen is like a sharp-edged weapon to cut the weeds of untouchability and patriarchy which have thickly grown over the centuries in the ancient land of India. Alice Walker, the champion of Black women, has come out with her own Black feminist theory of “Womanism” in African-American feminist parlance. Most of the women in the works of Bama and Alice Walker emerge victorious breaking domestic, social, religious, political and sexual shackles which so far have been like millstones weighing on them. They have transformed themselves from passive, battered, voiceless females into self-confident, assertive, modern women who compete with men in all spheres. They have marched ahead from erasure to assertion and from being victims to victors. This victory is the ultimate goal of Dalit feminism and African-American womanism. Hence it is important to know the

concepts of Dalit Feminism and Black Feminism before delving deep into the emergence of the new woman in the short-fictional creations of Bama and Alice Walker.

When asked to distinguish Dalit feminism from mainstream feminism, Bama tells *Litterit* journal “All women in the world are second-class citizens and Dalit women experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. Hard labour and agony are their lot in life. Other problems are the same for all women” (2007:33:111). In her essay “Dalit Women: Problems and Prospects” Bama writes, “Since our society is not only a male-dominated society, but upper-caste male-dominated society, a Dalit woman’s problems are unique, she is a Dalit among Dalits” (2001: 329). Dalit women’s experiences have become the central concern in Dalit feminist literature. An urgent agenda of Dalit feminism is to send a signal to the higher caste people to put an end to untouchability. It also empowers Dalit women to hit back if their male partners hurt and humiliate them. Dalit feminism recognizes and praises Dalit women who carry out their responsibilities without expecting any reward. It celebrates a woman’s individuality, along with family and motherhood. It aims at subverting the conventional norms of social and religious hierarchy. Dalit women are asked to jettison conventional values of female beauty and create for themselves a new and natural image of womanhood. It encourages Dalit women’s use of words as weapons. It is concerned with eco-friendliness and the safeguarding of native culture.

There are three major circles of reality in American society which reflects degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which White people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space in which Black people experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is the third one, a small dark enclosure in which Black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of Black womanhood in White America. The Black woman thus faces the reality of triple-subjugation of class, race and gender. According to Alice Walker, the term “Black Feminism” does not fully describe the triple-subjugated condition of Black women. Hence she has expounded the concept of “Womanism” saying, “I just want to have words that describe things correctly. Now to me, ‘black feminist’ does not do that. I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture that really expresses the spirit that we see in black women. And it’s just...womanish” (1973:185-211). In her widely popular work *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983) Alice Walker describes her concept of Womanism poetically as, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender”. While Black Feminism benefits the privileged Black women, especially those in the academia, Womanism addresses issues of masses of Black women doing all kinds of menial work. The word “womanish” stemming from the Black folk expression, “you acting womanish” signifies that the woman in question is “responsible”, “in charge” and “serious”. “Womanist” is a woman who loves other women “sexually and or non-sexually”. She prefers and appreciates “women’s culture” and “women’s strength”. The womanist takes pride in being Black and female. Womanism repudiates the conventional White norms of beauty and glorifies women with “big legs, big hips and black skin” (Walker:1983:2).

Bama's stories proclaim what real woman power is and what it can achieve. They are packed with pathos but the thread of humour running through them softens the harshness of their world. The unique trait of Bama's Dalit women is that they do not hesitate to resist tyranny in any form either at the familial or social level when they are not loved and respected as human beings. The new Dalit woman is powerfully presented by Bama in her stories of three volumes. However, for the sake of brevity, the researcher of this paper has chosen only two famous stories such as "Ponnuthayi", (named after the heroine) and "Samiyattam" (Possessed by the Goddess) for a detailed discussion. Ponnuthayi evolves from a woman trapped by male tyranny and social restriction to a revolutionary figure, effecting action and strategy to bring freedom to herself and other fellow sufferers in her community. She is an uneducated, dark, Dalit woman who lives with her husband Muukkandi and their four children. Although very poor and illiterate, she is dignified and self-reliant. She becomes a vendor of coconuts and vegetables and sells them from house to house. Unmindful of others' critical comments on her "business" instead of working on the farms like other Dalit women, she continues to do her work with determination. Nobody dares to criticize her to her face because she would at once retort to them with very strong words. When her drunken husband sells their cow without her consent and beats her black and blue, she goes to her parents' house, leaving her four children under Muukkandi's care. The villagers abuse her saying, "What kind of woman is she? Not having a bit of love for her own children! Roaming around like a man!" but she is not worried about any comment. If anyone dares to speak about it to her, she asks a very pertinent question, "Are they only my children? It was to quench his lust that he had children one after another. When I went for the family planning operation, he didn't allow me to do it. So now let him bring them up" (64). Muukkandi struggles with his four children day and night.

One day he picks a quarrel with her, beats her and bashes her head. Ponnuthayi wails loudly and runs to the police station with blood dripping all over her. She sees to it that her husband is arrested and put in prison. Once again people start talking ill of her. Even her parents shout at her for her action and advise her to fall at his feet and live with him. They remind her of the age-old proverb, "A husband is a husband even if he is a stone or a blade of grass", but she replies at once, "I'm fed up with my marriage to a stone or a blade of grass all these days" (68). Her ensuing act reveals her determination to face any challenge in life all alone. Saying so, she cuts off her "thaali" (wedding icon), sells the gold in it and sets up a small shop in her village for her livelihood. She proves her real mettle as a bold, practical woman without any unnecessary sentimental attachment to her "thaali" or any such symbol of slavery associated with marriage. She is truly an independent, intelligent, courageous and self-confident woman, wielding her words as weapons against those who criticize her. Ponnuthayi represents the emergent new woman who can shake off the tyranny of a husband with the sale of her "thaali" to buy the things for a new shop she plans to open.

"Samiyattam" ("Possessed by the Goddess") is again the story of a long-suffering wife, named Annalakshmi. She and her two daughters really suffer what is known as battered female syndrome. Annalakshmi's husband Venkaipuli does not go to work with regularity and borrows

money from all without any shame. He does not hesitate in desperation even to pawn the few household utensils. He pledged even his wife's small nose and earrings, which her mother, a domestic help, had bought her with her hard-earned money and she never saw them again. He would drink everyday whether he goes to work or not. He expects his wife to cook for him his meal and throughout the night he would use abusive language questioning her sexual purity even in the presence of their children. To top it all, he is terribly mean as well. When he brings home fish or meat he would insist on counting them to see if anybody eats them before his dinner. One day Venkaipuli got back drunk as usual and was getting into a noisy argument. He used words too abusive to be mentioned. When he called her a harlot and accused her of carrying on affairs with many men, she could not stomach his words, uttered within the earshot of their children and slapped him hard on his cheek leaving on it the imprint of her five fingers. It completely silenced him for the night. He murmured whether she really hit him and went to sleep stroking his cheek.

The next morning he complained to the landlady that his wife had hit him. The landlady also defends the brutal behavior of the man to the terrible annoyance of Annalakshmi. When the landlady asks her to be prepared to face the music that evening, she makes up her mind not to put up with his insolence and violence anymore. All of a sudden her drunken husband comes home staggering. The woman feeds him and her children patiently bearing his abusive language and insolent behavior. When she finally sits to eat her meal, thinking him to be asleep, suddenly warm water falls down her head and face and flows into her plate. When she turns back she sees her man passing urine. Annalakshmi takes a chopper and cuts off his organ. Hearing the screaming the neighbors flock there. Maari, a clever woman among them defends Annalakshmi saying that she has been possessed by the Goddess. Taking her cue from Maari, Annalakshmi now starts playing her role perfectly calling her man by his name and abusing him. Annalakshmi proves herself to be a courageous, intelligent and resourceful woman. When her endurance is lost due to endless torture and humiliation, she dares to use not only strong words as powerful weapons but also the actual weapon to attack her husband. It is a warning to all men who use physical and mental tortures on their wives.

Bama believes that women have to fight for their own emancipation and gain empowerment on their own, for no one is going to help the victimized women of her community, not even the government. Dalit feminism fashioned by Bama in her stories boldly opposes the dominant culture and challenges traditional evaluative norms. The seminal purpose of Bama's fiction is to empower Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular to take up their rightful place the process of building an egalitarian society. In her novel *Sangati* she exhorts Dalit women for action thus: "We must take up the challenge ourselves. We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. We must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged and broken in the belief that it is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive" (2005: 59).

Most of Alice Walker's protagonists are images of her perceptions of herself. She depicts violent Black men who physically and psychologically abuse their wives and children. It is mainly emotional violence that one sees male characters inflicting on women. These men are products of the social mores of their time stemming from the morally sanctioned patriarchal tradition. Having struggled for health and wholeness herself Alice Walker saw the struggle worthy its place in fiction. Her women struggle to kill the dragons of racism and sexism with their powerful "agwu" or spirit. In her works there is a move for the Black woman towards wholeness through greater self-awareness and resistance to the constraints of society especially in her second volume of short fiction *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. Irene in "Source" and Gracie Mae Still in "Nineteen Fifty-Five" are women who have their own autonomy outside the realm of their man's kingdom. They have discovered their own potentialities, exercised them in full and shine as successful women in the racist White society.

The young Black girl Irene in Alice Walker's story "Source" is a true "womanist" modeled on Alice Walker. She is a New Woman growing towards "wholeness". Irene has dedicated her life to the education of the rural poor Southern Black women. Anastasia Green is Irene's college mate and friend. The contrasting portrayal of this mulatto young girl with Irene highlights the depth of Irene's personality. Anastasia has chosen an "easygoing life style, and her reliance on personal fashion" (143). Irene does not like Anastasia's life style because she is contemptuous of the Black middle class for its "boringly slavish imitation of the white middle class" (144). Irene is a young woman of high intellectual caliber. She is critical of the US government's funding of Black women's education. She is so generous in educating the poor women that she even includes the poor White women in her educational programs. According to her, when White people reach a certain level of poverty, they cease to be White. She is very much aware of and also critical of religion which exploits people in the name of God's grace, God's love and God's forgiveness. She is sad to see Anastasia to have fallen a prey to such a kind of religion, when she becomes a devotee of Swamiji Source. She considers religion opiating their minds debilitating them from revolting against injustice. The traditional teachings of religion do not appeal to Irene. "Obedience, Peace Everlasting! Holy shit!" (148). Like Alice Walker, Irene finds God in nature and human beings.

Irene's insight into the sufferings of the Blacks in America displays her deep concern for them. She differs from Anastasia who tells her "when they suffer it is because they *choose* suffering. If you suffer in a place, leave" (148-149). She further says, "your life is what you make it". But Irene does not agree with her. She gives a brilliant reply to Anastasia, "But that's *absurd*. Not everyone's life is what they make it. Some people's life is what other people make it. I would say this is true of the majority of the people in the world. The women I teach didn't choose to be illiterate, didn't choose to be poor" (154). She, being an enlightened woman, says, "I believe in movements, collective action to influence the future, and all that" (148). Being a womanist, Irene is not against marriage and family. "I loved being married. I was finally calm enough to look about me without panic" (157). Anastasia too agrees with Irene that marriage gives social protection. She aptly says, "When you're not living with someone it's like all sides of you are

exposed at once. Right? But when you are living with someone at least one side of you is covered. Panic can still strike, but not on that one side” (157).

Gracie Mae Still in Alice Walker’s story “Nineteen Fifty- Five” is another Black woman who has emerged as a successful singer. She is modeled on the Blues and Rock singer Mae Thornton. Traynor, a fragile White young man begs for Gracie Mae’s song and she sells its copyright to him. His version of her song helps him to attain great fame and Traynor lavishes Gracie Mae with valuable gifts. The same Gracie Mae who earlier refused to give her song to the Blues singer Bessie Smith has now agreed to sell it to a White singer only because in her there is a legitimate racial pride of subjugating a White man, the oppressor of her community. The hallmark of Gracie Mae is that she is true to herself which is the characteristic feature of the emerging new Black woman. She is earthy, pragmatic, honest and fun-loving. Her integrity and love for Black cultural heritage make her happy, contented and resilient although like the White Traynor she has not achieved success and popularity as a singer. Traynor does not even understand the meaning of Gracie Mae’s song but he becomes very popular by singing it. He tells Gracie Mae, “I’ve sung it and sung it, and I’m making forty thousand dollars a day and you know what, I don’t have the faintest notion what that song means” (80). He is a professional success but a personal failure. He represents the White American public which rejects the genuine while Gracie Mae is the representative of the authentic Black culture.

The characters of Bama and Alice Walker are marginalized women lurking on the fringes of an oppressive casteist or White society who see life as a perpetual cycle of hope and despair. The horrors of dehumanizing experiences are seen by women in the course of their marriages as well. Women love their men but, but they are neither loved nor understood in return. Both the writers bring out the painful fact that Dalit and Black men seek to have everything that White and upper caste men have including dominance over women. They believe that for their own empowerment and control of their own destiny, women must commit themselves to each other and to creating their own identity. Most of these women try desperately to face their situations and deal with them even when their resistance makes them out to be insane, ignorant or irrational. Their stories memorably bring out the strength and imagination of the women victimized by the male-oriented world. Their struggles engross the readers. The women characters exemplify Alice Walker’s view expressed in her interview with Amy Goodman, “The most horrible things can happen to people and they can still be happy” (2006). They prove that their struggle is more worthy and meaningful than winning, provided they continue to stay connected to nature and people. They are resilient because they have realized like Alice Walker and Bama, “Life itself, basic life, is incredibly precious and wonderful and that we are so lucky to have that...a certain kind of crucifixion leads to a certain kind of freedom because you cannot be contained by other people’s opinion of you” (2006).

Though there are similarities between Dalit and Black women, the social and cultural differences are also very obvious. While the Black woman has to face racism and sexism, the Dalit woman has to brave herself against untouchability and patriarchy. Alice Walker notes in her interview

with Amy Goodman, “The time has gone forever when Black people felt limited by themselves. We realize that we are as ourselves unlimited and our experiences are valid. It is for the rest of the world to recognize this, if they choose” (2006).

“It is harder to kill something

That is spiritually alive

Than it is to bring the dead

Back to life” says Hermann Hesse whose above lines are quoted as an epigraph in Alice Walker’s second collection of short fiction *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*. In an interview with the author of this research paper Bama highlighted the differences between Dalit and non-Dalit women thus: “ Non-Dalit women depend on their men for anything and everything but Dalit women work, earn and fulfill their needs and they don’t depend on their men. Dependence on men is what primarily curtails women’s freedom. Dalit women do not cling on to traditional beliefs, values and ceremonies which stifle their mobility and freedom” (2007). At the same time Dalit Feminism does not favor the kind of women bonding or lesbian relationship advocated by Alice Walker’s Black Womanism.

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