

UNRAVELLING FEMINIST SPACES IN A PATRIARCHAL DOMAIN

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ABSTRACT

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A Woman's status in India is a turbulent one. In the present system, a woman is expected to mould herself in the pattern of the family into which she is married and ultimately merges her identity with that of her husband. For years this has been the practice in this male chauvinistic Indian family, where even an attempt towards transgression is considered a sin. Women writer's over the years opposed this and started to write about this with determination. A woman's status in India is a paradox. There is a vast gulf between the status of literate, working, urban women and illiterate, rural women. But they are unified by some kind of subordination at different levels and in different ways. Their status is perceived to be a paradox because, with advancement of literary rate among urban Indian women, their establishment in various fields marks their growth. But the question of the position of the rural, subaltern Indian women is still a decisive factor. Flipping through the pages of history, the condition and eminence of women in India has been liable to great many contradictions over the bygone years. Across the nation their subordination remains universal. As a critic observes

The subjugation of Women is clearly visible in all religious scripts. In the introduction to women in India Soman Das writes, "Ithihasas, Puranas, Dharma, slowly sank the position of women

into a commodity and thing of pleasure" (xiv). Thus, the fact is clear about the age old superiority of man over woman. In The Bible, Adam is presented as the master. He names all the beasts and animals and Eve. The Koran also emphasizes the superiority of men over women. The Buddhists regarded the company of woman as an obstacle for the development of man. Judaism has not awarded equal status to women. (Jayashree, 116)

A Woman's growth in present day is determined by social, economical, educational psychological and political factors. Today educated, urban women in India hold offices at different levels such as education, politics, media, sports, technology, art and culture. But the status of rural marginalized woman's condition is still an important factor to be reviewed. It is important to recall the cruelties meted out on women down Indian history before analyzing the relevant texts. There was a time when women were victims of social evils and practices like "Sati", the immolation of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre, "Jauhar", a practice, where women were married to deity, "child marriage", wherein girl children even at the age of four or five were forced to marry and "female infanticide", where

girl children were poisoned to death. As critic Jayashree remarks:

Women of India are the worst victims of male tyranny. They are assigned inferior place as far as culture and religion are concerned. A woman is seen in terms of the male-oriented world, a world which identifies her by her male counterpart. She is gentle, dependent, submissive and passive. The inferior status of woman is established right from her birth. The birth of a girl child is annoying, is annoying, as she is considered to be an economic burden. Gender cleansing is a frightening reality. (Jeyashree, 117)

These practices were predominant in medieval India which is considered to be the dark ages. The patriarchal structure of Indian society is the primary powerful determinant of women's status in India. A woman always finds her identity in affiliation to her father, brother, husband and other male members of the patriarchal order, She is very much alien to the idea of "self reliance" unlike her western counterparts. The status of modern women in India is yet another paradox. On one hand she is at the zenith of success in any area and on the other, she mutely suffers violence afflicted by the family, work place and the society at large. Women's suffering in India is further based on her class (haves, have nots) she belongs to. The underprivileged women in India are the most exploited and tortured. This is the most grappled subject of feminist discourse in India today and an important component of subaltern studies globally. Feminism itself is a problematic term in Indian context because resistance to violence and harassment is a complex question in discourse. But the very act of writing is taken to be resistance by women writers of India. Feminism in India is a group of movements focused at gaining and asserting equal rights and opportunities for women. Like their women counterparts all over

the world, feminists in India seek gender equality, that is the right to work for equal wages, be treated equally and the right to freedom of expression on par with men. There are innumerable laws that are passed in favour of this:

The constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women, equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the state (Article 15 (1), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39) (d). In addition, it allows specific provisions to be made by the state in favour of women and children. Article 51(A) and € allows for provision to be made by state for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42). (Basu, 8)

Feminism is a challenging term in Indian context and being a feminist writer adds more complexity to this challenge. In spite of such labelling, there are a host of female writers in India, who never let this convolution affect them. These writers have earned their place by producing remarkable works that have given them worldwide recognition. A reflection on feminist writings in the words of Critic Shoba Venkatesh is:

Perhaps, we could begin by examining the first basic step- that is the fact of women writing. If silence is powerlessness, then the very act of writing can be designated as resistance. Indeed an important strand of the critical project has been the recovery of works by women. But the argument of writing-as-resistance can be pushed only so far (and not just for the reason that writings by women are frequently reactionary in content). Women's access to writing is certainly important for a

feminist politics, but the politics is not adequately radicalized just by the fact of women writing. (Ghosh, 71)

While explicating Feminism and feminist writing in India, it is important to note how there are a few feminist writers who shun away from being labelled as a feminist writer because of its western impact and connotations. Writer- Activist Devi avoids being pigeonholed a feminist writer inspite of her powerful feminist concern in her writings. This chapter attempts to examine and discuss the plight of the marginalized women in the works of Devi who undergo torments in this male hegemonic society in terms of class and gender. Devi's women characters are strong and courageous as they have sturdy will power and face all odds of life with great audacity Women in her novels fall into two distinct categories. First category are rebels who oppose the system aggressively, while the next category of women in her works are victims of the cruel system. Devi's women struggle against all the predicaments life has to offer. This chapter attempts to examine and discuss the plight of the marginalized women who undergo exploitation in this male chauvinistic society. The unique feature of Devi's writing is that her works do not confine to the familial space that Indian women share, rather her women are fixed in the larger spectrum of society.

The present paper attempts to highlight the feminist perspective in, Bama's "**Karukku**", Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's **The Palace of Illusions**, Ambai's **Kitchen in the Corner of the House**, Meena Kanda Sami's **When I hit you**. Mahasweta Devi's **Breast Stories**.

Devi in conversation with Sue Dickman says, "I am a woman and I am writing. But I am not writing of women alone. What I am writing..... Is about class exploitation "(Dickman). This might seem a contradictory statement, from a writer whose works are ideal and powerful feminist texts that portray women's fight against the complex web of patriarchy and class exploitation. "Feminism" being a

problematic term in Indian context, makes writer Devi elude the term feminist but her works are a significant source for feminist study. Devi elaborates her stand on feminism as follows:

For you it may be important that this story is written by a woman, another woman has adapted it into a play, and yet another adapted it into a play and another directed the film. It is not very important to me whether it was done by a woman or not..... I write as a writer, not as a woman.... When I write I never think of myself as a woman. I have written a story called **Chotti Munda and His Arrow** which is about a tribal man. **Arenyar Adhikar** is about male tribals, so what? These are stories of people's struggle, their confrontation with the system.... I look at the class, not at the gender problem. Take a story like Ganesh Mahima – It is about a woman. But I have written it from the class point of view. In "Rudali" you have a character like Dulna who knows how to use the system. In my stories men and women alike belong to different classes". (Devi, 5)

Devi is one of India's foremost writers, and one of the boldest of Bengali female writers. She quite often refuses to have connection with any school of thought, but in reality her empathetic portrayal of victimization and oppression of women and her powerful women characters that "resist" and fight against such oppression adds new feminist dimensions to her texts:

Devi is a trend – setter in postcolonial subaltern-metaphorical depiction of tribal women. As Spivak observes, ontology-wise, Devi does not, but epistemology- wise, yes, she

belongs and as this writer adds, activism wise she does belong to the world of the subaltern. Mulk Raj Anand could be mentioned here as her predecessor in this regard. (Dasan, 82)

Devi usually considers women's oppression as associated to the oppressions of class and caste. Most of her women characters are stronger compared to their men and they are always fighters against the system, that suppresses them. She doesn't stop with presenting the victimization and sympathetic portrayal of women but frames women characters who resist oppression. This makes Devi distinct from other feminist writers who most often stop with presenting only victimization. Critic Smitha describes Devi's women character as follows:

Devi's female characters are shown as victims of the dominant patriarchy, but they are not pictured as sad swans of suffering. The better part of her work is that the oppression emerge, finally, as survivors. At the minimum they restimulate a rethinking of the patriarchal societal norms. Anjum Katyal, in "The Metamorphosis of Rudali", opines, in both incarnations of Rudali, it has been a woman writer who has wrought and rewrought this text which revolves around the life of a woman- poor, low cast "Sanichari" other women, her husband, son, Dulan and many other women, her husband, son, Dulan and many other men do suffer the same marginalization. In "Mother of 1084", Sujatha and Brati equally pass through the suffocation. (Smitha, 90)

Draupadi a Naxalite Guerilla, hunted down by the government in their attempt to subjugate the Naxalites at large. Devi grapples with the epic

character of Draupadi as a base for her short story "Draupadi" that stands distinctively unique for its radical nature. Devi simply does not refute Draupadi of the grand epic Mahabharatha but allows her to emerge even more radically. In fact there is a lot of similarity between Draupadi of the Mahabharatha and Dopdi of Devi. They are both dark, Draupadi is also known as "Krisnaa" (krsna) meaning "of dark complexion" while Devi's Dopdi too is a dark tribal woman. The second similarity is the resistance to oppression. Both of them are put to shame by men who humiliate them. As critic Shoba Venkatesh puts it:

Why there are more writers in our country who has grappled with Draupadi than Sita. Because Sita is largely uninflected and all-of-a-piece as a character who fills her role (if not in morality) to Helen of Troy, she is finally significant to the narrative as the site on which the forces of Good and Evil as appointed by an expansionist Aryan world view, resolve themselves in a final, climatic battle, Female complement to the ideal women-as daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, sister-in-law and mother. (Ghosh, 92)

Draupadi is described in the Mahabharatha as a woman of exalted individuality of appreciable self-confidence, a multifaceted personality, bold and beautiful and unsurpassed by any other woman of her times. Devi through her Dopdi re-defines the female identity. She constructs a new image of woman by deconstructing the myth of Draupadi by revolting against the system. She not only subverts the female archetype of womanhood but also refutes the patriarchal framework of the great epic. Devi has re-interpreted the mythological story "Draupadi", gives an unexpected twist, a modern interpretation to this story. In Critic Sunitha's words: Mahasweta Devi portrays Dopdi in contrast to the romanticized version of Draupadi in the epic Mahabharatha."

Next radical feminist writer of that ilk is Bama Faustina of **Karukku** fame. Karukku is anchored in the predominant issue of class oppression. It chronicles the everyday reality in the life of the author herself making it an autobiography. Stanching in realism Karukku in the words of Bama "That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds: I had no other motives" (feminismindia.com). Karukku is not simply autobiography but a document of collective suffering that also deliberates on Dalit feminist issues. Though Karukku is caught in the overlapping web of caste and class structures it is still a powerful Dalit feminist text. It is a cry against discrimination, pain and agony. One of the salient features of the text apart from the dimensions of gender is that it demarks itself from the elite discourses. Like Devi Bama dares not to capture reality as it is. As activist writers Devi and Bama are both bold and radical. Their characters are mostly rebellious and exhibit resistance and unique stamina. They are fighters for the rights of the marginalized women and both of them value and cherish women's identity and dignity as a human being. Yet another similarity is that their very act of writing is resistance and duty. To a large extent their writings are radical and militant particularly the kind of language they use and the content they write and the characters they create align in common concern. The creative works of Devi and Bama are highly political.

Unlike the above writers Meena Kandasamy has delved into domestic space and its issues. Her *Gypsy Goddess* was a plunge into caste system, poverty and violence in southern India. While in **when I Hit You** She explores domestic spaces clogged in the mire of patriarchal authority, violence, middle class biases and social taboos. The book is an explication into Kandasamy's marital life. She cries: "a woman at whom society cannot spit or throw stones because this me is a she who is made up only of words on a on a phase and the lines she speaks are those that everyone hears in it" (feminism in India). She also speaks

about how women should not talk/express the stain in marital relationships.

In the words of Meena Kandasamy: In a marriage, there's no such room to fool around. Everything belongs in its place. The peg on the cloth line, the gem clips on the table, the coat-hanger in the closet, the woman in the kitchen, the submissive between the sheets. (WIHY, 104). The text is also a psychological excavation into the minds of married Indian women in loggerheads with her husband/her relationship. Kandasamy opines "It is just stress. When one is stressed, one loses one's immunity completely. The body's defense mechanism is broken. It is a free for all situation (WIHY, 6) Lakshmi Holmstrom/Ambai is yet another regional writer who writes in English and Tamil. Women in Ambai's stories are middle class wives who struggle for a life of individuality and independence. Most often Ambai deals with the untrodden psychological plane of female characters in her fiction. Her "Purple Sea" is a collection seventeen stories. Her Women characters are made of flesh and blood and they express all their desires and fantasies without any qualm. Most of the short stories of Ambai take the readers by surprise. The awareness shown in her stories is almost entirely from the women's point of view. Her stories depict how women today have learnt to keep their eyes open to fight. The social injustices faced by them. But most often Ambai presents women characters as 'unpaid servants' submissive wives but even such characters exhibit an innate will and strength. They are no longer content with their role as submissive women. Feminist perspective of Ambai is completely different. Her works are set in middle class surrounding and focus how the passive feminine has ceased to exist. She throws light on how the new woman looks around and refuses to accept the myths created and nourished by a male ordained society. She reacts against the curious combination and other trade offers to meet dependency needs that have drawn and held men and women in the past.

Her women characters are sensitive enough to react violently and her reaction which is abrupt and unexpected earns her name, "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" is an outstanding story that concentrates on the experiences of women. It highlights on diverse abstract themes such as liberation of women, position of women in the past and the present, symbols of freedom and renaissance of women. In this story, Ambai uses certain symbols that echo liberty and emancipation of women. Apart from her middle class renderings to her stories, Ambai's concern for gender issues is intense. As she says in *A Purple Sea*: "Your womb and your breasts will fall away from you. The smell of cooking will vanish away. The sparkle of jewellery will disappear. And there will be you. Not trapped nor diminished by gender, but freed". (*A Purple Sea*, 252)

Generally speaking, Ambai's stories consistently present woman as a thinking analysing person placed in a variety of situations. Whether within the four walls of her home or outside them, she is a woman who is not used to submitting. Ambai's stories make one undergo a necessarily disorienting but ultimately immensely rewarding course in humanity and decency. *A Purple Sea* deserves to be treasured for it gives an unambiguous view of the situation of women in India. It not only produces an understanding of the various tribulations faced by women but also provides the essential strength to fight against social discrimination.

Another outstanding writer of contemporary relevance who shares the platform with these feminist writers is Arundhati Roy. Their works align in common concern. Roy's **God of Small Things** studies the predicament of Indian women in the state of Kerala where the complex webs of relationships enmesh the female characters subjecting them to repeated suppression and stifling their individual freedom. Roy as one of the prominent contemporary women writers in India takes us inside the consciousness of her modern educated middle class woman characters to

present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions.

Caught between patriarchy and tradition on one hand and self-expression, individuality, independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost, confused and try to explore ways to fulfill themselves. Roy in the novel analyses the gender oppression through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. All her female characters are resourceful, smart and belong to the affluent class who are deprived of fully realizing their capabilities. They lack guts to openly defy the social order and are tossed between traditional norms and modern thinking. "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinistic society" Ammu sarcastically observes. (Roy, 57) Arundhati Roy in the novel has a sensitive understanding of her female characters. They are not emancipated, though they are affluent and belong to upper middle class. However, they cannot be termed as passive. They experience incessant struggle.

Women's approach towards historical narratives has taken different views too. Many feminist writers question the representation of women in historical narratives like *Devi*. For a writer like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who is a historian and mythologist, the reading of *Mahabharatha* was an unsatisfactory experience even during her childhood, for its scanty and false portrayal of women characters. Chitra Banerjee says in the foreword of her text:

If I ever wrote a book, I remember thinking (though at time I didn't really believe this would ever happen), I would place the women in the fore front of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her

heart breaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? It is her life, her voice her questions, and her vision that I invite you in to the palace of Illusions. (The Palace of Illusions, xiv).

Whatever be the facet of feminism these writers across the nation have dealt with, they have genuinely tried to fix the position of women in their fiction based on what they experienced, witnessed and shared. If Devi writes about the plight of tribal women, Ambai wrote on middle class housewives challenging patriarchy. Bama presented the emotional trauma and stigma that a Dalit woman undergoes in society. There are a host of other women writers in Indian Literature who try to fix the position of women belonging to diverse caste, class and strata across the nations who are unified through their subordination, exploitation and suffering. Most of these writers technically categorized as postcolonial writers, use resistance, subversion and opposition as the base to their fiction and seek to question the biased patriarchal system. These ideas are much apparent when their texts are read as purely feminist texts. In Post colonial studies, the representation of subaltern women is important and complex issue. The above works of these feminist writers not only show the resistance of the subalterns towards the powers that oppress them but also the writer's resistance towards these powers. By representing the subaltern women, they provide a space for them to resist oppression through their bodies and to be heard.

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