

The Politics of Caste-Gender Nexus and the Dalit Feminist Response: Reading Three Dalit Women Writers

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If difference as a concept has been justly pressed into service in thinking identity in general, it has proved to be all the more crucial in negotiating the women's question, for gender as a category today has to reckon with the pluralizing and complex factors like caste, class, culture, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and so on. The context of Indian Dalit women has to be understood from such an awareness of the situation where the difference is made by the peculiarity of the caste-gender nexus that has bedevilled their lives. I intend to study texts written by three Dalit women writers namely Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, Bama's *Sangati* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* from this perspective to examine the various patriarchal structures that affect the lives of Dalit women and to examine the various discourses of difference that might emerge from them. In other words, I want to examine the Dalit feminist discourses that might be located in these texts and critically articulated.

Feminist movements in the West, until recently, had taken into account predominantly the experiences of white middle- and upper-class women to the neglect of the specific problems of Third World women. Besides, Third World women have, for a long time, been seen as a monolithic category and that is itself a fallacy. In the Indian context, the categories of women are extremely chequered and varied, so much so that Dalit women in India have felt themselves unrepresented in the Indian middle-class feminist movements. Hence an effective feminist theory in this regard needs to make *difference* the corner-stone of its politics so that multiple subjectivities and situations could be taken into consideration for dynamic and radical negotiations. Postmodern intervention in this respect has indeed provided discursive support for cognizing and theorizing these varied experiences of women. In this context, Chris Weedon aptly says:

Much early second-wave feminist theory, like radical feminism today, privileged women's lives and experiences as the basis upon which to construct theory. Poststructuralist developments in feminist theory problematized this relationship by complexifying the categories of experience and subjectivity. In the realm of both politics and theory the increasingly audible voices of previously marginalized women, including Third World women, have demanded recognition for lives and experiences which long remained invisible in mainstream Western feminism. A complex understanding of experience remains central to those forms of feminist politics and theory which speak to the real conditions under which women live (180).

Coming specifically to the context of Dalit women, an understanding of their situation can only be clear when experiences specific to their caste which humiliate, demean and disempower them are taken into consideration. In India caste system legitimizes gender inequality and untouchability. It brings about all possible divisions down the hierarchy in society including class division. Lower caste and lower class are more often than not synonymous. The only difference is that unlike class caste is inherent and unalterable and hence hard to transcend, its having been determined at birth. However, the best way to get a glimpse into the Dalit life-worlds is through autobiographies and novels, especially those written by women. The women writers generally provide a comprehensive critique of the society, not only critiquing the caste system and the harrowing living conditions and experiences the Dalits in general have to undergo, but also the oppression Dalit women suffer at the hands of both their own patriarchy and that of the so-called upper-caste society at large. Dalit literature especially by women, therefore, can be said to be "double-voiced" for more than one reason. Apart from its relentless criticism of both the societies, it boldly comes forward also to defend its own society for some of its

positive aspects, its tradition, culture and rituals, its unity and pleasure of communal living. This “double-voiced” approach inherent in their writing can be said to have given it the truly postcolonial edge that proves to be both critical and inaugural.

The chief problematic, therefore, that the Dalit women writers address is not only the evils of the caste system in the Hindu society but its nexus with gender perpetuating women’s oppression and discrimination. Here hierarchy is maintained by following various rituals of purity and pollution and the divisions of *Varna* and *Jati* under the overall dominance of Brahmanism. The untouchables are seen as a source of pollution and are carefully excluded from all aspects of social life. The caste difference is also made stark by total separation of living space; the untouchables almost always live outside the main village inhabited by the upper-caste people. It can be said, therefore, that caste difference in India works as a “unique” marker of alienation. No matter how much they otherwise advance, it appears as if the Dalits can never shed their “dalitness” which is determined at birth.

Women are the worst victims of this caste system. The Hindu social system sees the untouchables and women as similar; both have to be kept under control and supervision by the upper-caste and upper-class men. This segregation is maintained not only through various rituals of purity and pollution but also through cultural ideologies. Cultural ideologies such as *stridharma* and *pativrata* have always been used to control female sexuality especially that of upper-caste women to ensure their compliance to reproduce and further entrench the system. “Pativrata” may be regarded, as Uma Chakravarti observes, “as the ideological ‘purdah’ of the Hindu woman as chastity and wifely fidelity came to be regarded as the means to salvation; it was also the means by which the iniquitous and hierarchal structure was reproduced *with the complicity of women*” (74).

Dalit women’s fates in this general situation prove to be still more hazardous. They face multiple discriminations because of being lower caste, that is, Dalit and also women at the same time. They face sexual harassment from the upper-caste landlords for whom they work. They fare no better in the home front either where the discrimination from the patriarchy of their own society is another source of affliction. Hence Dalit women are victims of caste, class, patriarchy and religion all at the same time. Moreover, Dalit men, especially those, who have collected a little wealth, have started adopting upper-caste Hindu rituals in order to move up the social ladder in respect of social prestige. They tend to grow more patriarchal than the Dalit communities themselves would sanction. However, though the oppression that

Dalit women face is multilayered and cruel, they have failed to get adequate representation in women’s movements which they have dubbed upper-class. Hence the need felt by the Dalit women to have their own organizations and create an altogether different discourse to represent the agonizing experiences of the Dalit women. Invariably, as their predicament required, Dalit women writers had to take up a dual responsibility of critiquing Dalit male patriarchy on the one hand and defending their community against the greater atrocities of the caste system on the other. In other words, they are required to “problematize” the whole situation of discrimination and victimization from the standpoint of a radical “doubleness”, to use one of Radhakrishnan’s useful concepts (62), that could help them develop a language of their own self-reflexive identity. This self-reflexivity is nowhere more articulate than in the very mode of their writing. It is more often than not autobiographical, but not in the sense of the canonical European *Bildungsroman*. The reasons are not far to seek. For the Dalits as communities, it is almost always their community that is prioritized over the individual because the community has been a victim of caste atrocities and violence for ages. Hence almost always their writing is autobiographical and the community takes precedence over the individual self. Both *The Grip of Change* by Sivakami and *Sangati* by Bama are autobiographical novels. *Sangati*, in fact, further breaks away from the canonical forms of novel writing, for it does not have a protagonist whose singular growth it needs to chart. It is not a canonical *Bildungsroman* in the usual sense but a subversion of it. The novel rather tells stories about many Dalit women to show different aspects and sufferings of their lives. The assemblage of these stories through time past and present gives rise to the proper awareness on the part of the writer about the community itself. Baby Kamble’s autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, another text for our discussion here, is no exception. It is also more an autobiography of the community than about the author herself. Dalit men’s movements and writings, too, strongly reflect their affiliation and allegiance towards their respective communities. But while it can be said that their struggle for recognition and identity did bear fruit, it must also be remembered that their struggle based on identity politics often gets trapped within its own binary logic and becomes often reductionist. Dalit women’s writings, on the other hand, are much more radical because they are celebratory and self-critical at the same time. Hence what has emerged from their writings can be called a kind of “Dalit feminism” which has in it the larger potential to address all types of domination and subjugation, be it the caste system or

patriarchy or subalternity in general. Its “becoming-dalit” is indeed for a vision beyond the state of being a “Dalit”, that is, oppressed, in all senses. Its negotiations are re-negotiations around the concept of difference.

Of the three texts that I have chosen, two are Tamil autobiographical novels and the third one is a Marathi autobiography. But the experiences as revealed in all the three texts are similar. *Sangati* tells the stories of a whole generation of women. It starts with Patti, the author’s grandmother and goes on to reveal the experiences of the still younger generation like that of Mariamma and Maikkanni. In showing similar hard struggles that women from the previous to the later generations have to go through, it shows a continuum in the experiences of the Dalit women. The novel talks of many women, some who have taken their lives of suffering as the only possible reality of their lives, while others who show resistance. Bama introduces us to characters like Thaayi, whose beauty is the cause of her husband’s jealousy and which leads to her being beaten every day. Then there are characters like Rakkamma who is as vicious and aggressive as her husband. After suffering an undeserved beating, she wouldn’t let her husband go scot free so easily. And then there is Marriamma’s story of sexual exploitation by the upper caste landlord, a common phenomenon suffered by many Dalit women. The choice of such a wide and assorted range of Dalit women characters, gives us a glimpse into the lives of Dalit women in general. Lakshmi Holmstrom rightly says in the Introduction to *Sangati*: “*Sangati* moves from the story of individual struggle to the perception of a community of *paraiya* women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relations and their joint struggle. In this sense, *Sangati* is perhaps the autobiography of a community” (xv).

The Grip of Change is the story of Thangam, a lower-caste widow, who is used sexually very regularly by her upper-caste landlord Paranjothi Udayar. It is very difficult for a woman to survive without the protection of a man and Thangam’s widowhood makes her life vulnerable and miserable. She even had to rebuff the sexual approaches of her own brothers-in-law. Thangam is the perfect example of the way Dalit women are exploited at different levels, for in the power hierarchy everyone else is more powerful than her. On one such sexual encounter with Paranjothi Udayar, on whose agricultural land she worked to earn her living, Paranjothi’s wife’s brothers see them together and beat up Thangam almost to death. Though Paranjothi is the one who has forced her into the sexual relationship and her acceptance was more for the reasons of survival for she earns her bread by working for him, yet when caught in the illicit act, she is the one who is punished. But even

after being beaten almost to a pulp Thangam’s spirit is not broken. Her resolve to take the perpetrators of crime to task becomes strong. She reveals the hardness and mental strength of a Dalit woman by going all the way to Kathamuthu’s house to seek justice. In fact, the various Dalit women represented in all the three texts are tough women who suffer and survive pain in its harshest possible form. Thangam at last gets justice due to Kathamuthu’s intervention and manipulation, but only after fulfilling his lust for her. He too uses her sexually, but makes sure that she gets justice. Gauri, Kathamuthu’s daughter in the novel, through whose voices the whole story is narrated, is highly critical of her father’s ways and does not approve of the way he treats other people with absolute disregard and highhandedness. But in the Book Two of the novel called *Author’s Notes*, Sivakami looks at her father differently, with much more sympathy, acknowledging his good qualities and the work he has done for his fellow caste brethren.

Kamble’s autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, concentrates on the Mahar community of Maharashtra as she has grown up seeing. It is a depiction of the history of the Mahar community, its utter powerlessness as much as its gradual attainment of political consciousness amongst its members. The main point of focus of the autobiography is the extreme oppressiveness of the caste system which has embittered the life of the untouchables. She has given graphic description of the life of extreme repulsiveness led by the untouchable Mahar community of Maharashtra, the community she herself belongs to. Caste system forces an unthinkable lowly life on people. Examples abound in the book to show how the Dalit life suffers extreme deprivation which ranges from eating putrefied meat to eating cactus flowers when none are easily available. Kamble, too, like Bama and Sivakami, looks at her community objectively without romanticizing it or falling into self-pity. She also talks of the superstitious beliefs and patriarchal structures of the community, which lead women to extreme marginalization. Kamble gives a graphic description of sufferings that women have to undergo at different stages of their lives from child-marriage to childbirth and to her life of absolute slavery as a daughter-in-law. A Dalit woman has no respite till her life comes to an end. But Kamble’s most important focus in the text is on the Ambedkarite movement to which she herself is committed and whose principles have shaped the greater part of her life. The Ambedkarite movement was gaining strong hold in the community, especially amongst the youth, due to the emancipatory discourses that it had preached and the active measures it had taken for the uplift of the Dalits. Its objective was to raise the

consciousness of the people and oppose caste-based oppression. Baby Kamble as an activist herself has immense faith in Babasaheb Ambedkar and she strongly believes that the active participation of the Dalit men and women in the Ambedkarite movement would help emancipate them.

Caste and gender nexus is one of the most important aspects dealt with by all the three writers and the different incidents in the life of Dalit women narrated by the authors showcase the same. Many of Bama's characters in *Sangati* undergo inhuman physical and mental torture at the hands of Dalit men and for being Dalit women by caste. Of the many stories about Dalit women narrated by the author, Mariamma's is one classic example in *Sangati* of the oppression that Dalit women face from different fronts. She is a young girl, molested by the upper-caste landlord for whom she works and she gets no justice and support even from her own community when she is falsely charged by this very landlord of having seen her in a compromising situation with another man. So far as the men in the Dalit community are concerned, they too look at their women with utmost disregard. While Mariamma has to seek forgiveness in full public view for something that she has not done, the boy who is also falsely charged is let off easily. Further, no one seems to be bothered about the fact that Mariamma's own father does not look after the family but stays with his "kept" woman. The women who are witness to her innocence were silenced when they tried to intervene. The men started abusing the women as soon as some of them came out in support of Mariamma. As Susaiamma says later, "Everybody in the village knows about her father's kept woman, even a baby who was born the other day. Did anyone call a village meeting and question him about it? They say he's a man: if he sees mud he'll step into it, if he sees water, he'll wash himself. It's one justice for men and quite another for women (Bama 24). Rape, molestation and teasing are everyday experiences of Dalit women belonging to different communities in India. It is a form of social control, punishment and a display of upper-caste men's rights over Dalit women.

This double standard becomes all too glaring in *The Grip of Change* when the upper-caste landlord, Paranjothi Udayar, is shown to believe that he has a natural right over the body of a Dalit woman. That is what Paranjothi Udayar says after Thangam, the lower-caste woman, who works as labourer for him, accuses him of sexual harassment in the novel, *The Grip of Change*. Paranjothi says, "ÖUngrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Parachi could

have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me!" (Sivakami 32).

To get justice, Thangam seeks help from Kathamuthu, the Dalit leader. She gets justice but only after gratifying Kathamuthu's sexual needs. Interestingly, all incidents in the novel occur on the body of a woman to show how a Dalit woman's body itself becomes the site of contestation between forces of patriarchy on the one hand and the woman seeking her subjectivity on the other. The importance of Dalit women writers lies in the fact that they have the ability to show the contradiction and the hypocrisies present even in their own societies. They have no qualms in condemning such actions by their own men. As rightly shown by the authors under discussion, even Dalit men who are the leaders of their own societies can be as patriarchal and abusive at home as any other men.

Since most of the incidents described in the three texts occur on the body of Dalit women, it is important to mention how caste ideology views women's body. Caste ideology sees the body of women as inferior and inauspicious. It is a potential source of pollution, requiring control and segregation. In the case of a Dalit woman, the caste system dubs her body as untouchable and lowly. Such bodies naturally have no value and hence can be obtained and discarded at one's whims. Moreover, such bodies are seen as a potential source of challenge to the caste system. Hence both Dalit men and upper-caste men control them through harsh and violent measures. If for upper caste men these bodies can become a source of sexual pleasure, for Dalit men these bodies are a platform to articulate their otherwise frustrated masculinity. But having represented all these through their texts, all the three writers also show how these same bodies can become agents of subversion and how Dalit women use their so-called untouchable bodies intelligently at times to gain power and at other times to save themselves from violence inflicted by their own men. Thus most of the significant incidents in the texts occur on the body of Dalit women, so much so that the texts could even be described as body-centric. In *The Grip of Change*, Thangam's body is under constant attack and appropriation. The novel in fact starts with the badly beaten and battered body of Thangam crouching in one corner of the balcony of Kathamuthu's house:

Slowly, as Kathamuthu's eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, he could make out a person crouching there, groaning in pain.

'Who is it? What...?' Kathamuthu asked fearfully.

'Ayyo... Ayyo... They have butchered me.... Ayyo...' The figure cried like a wounded animal and finally fell down (3).

Thangam's body has been the constant source of desire and for a long time she had to fight not only Paranjothi Udayar, the upper-caste landlord for whom she worked, but also her brothers-in-law. After she is beaten almost to a pulp by Paranjothi's brothers-in-law, she shows tremendous strength and drags her half-dead body and reaches Kathamuthu's village. With Kathamuthu's help she wins the case against Paranjothi Udayar and becomes a member of his family. Later, it is again her body which makes her powerful and gives her the status of a third wife in Kathamuthu's house. As Sivakami says, "Thangam swaggered with newly acquired power. She assumed the responsibility of paying those who worked on Kathamuthu's land; she also received people who came in search of Kathamuthu. Her once bony hips had acquired outward curves, having accumulated layers of flesh" (93).

The body of Dalit women also plays an important part in Bama's novel *Sangati*. Amongst the stories of the many women that Bama narrates, the story of Thaayi needs mention because it shows what happens when untouchable bodies become beautiful or an untouchable woman is burdened with a beautiful body. Thaayi is a light-skinned and beautiful woman but beauty itself is a problem for her. Beauty is a luxury that can perhaps be enjoyed by the upper-caste and the rich, people who have time and the means to beautify themselves and have the much-needed security that a beautiful body demands. For a lower-caste woman, beauty makes her body burdensome and attracts much unwanted attention, making even her own husband suspicious and jealous. A Dalit body perhaps cannot aspire to be beautiful either. Thaayi's husband beats her up mercilessly, almost to death. The beauty of his wife is a source of great insecurity to him, and this regular beating appears to be his way of proclaiming himself as the master and his wife as his sole possession and hence such brutal behaviour in public. In an act of ultimate unkindness, he cuts off her hair and hangs it from the door post, an act to violate her beauty. If this, on the one hand, shows patriarchal domination and cruelty of the Dalit community itself, it also shows the insecurity of the man whose wife is a beauty, on the other. A man who anyway feels emasculated and powerless outside the house, feels all the more emasculated when there are chances of other men being lusty about his wife, and so in desperation he does every possible thing to get rid of the beauty and the possible pride that comes with it. Home is perhaps the only front where he can show his masculinity and power.

Baby Kamble, in *The Prisons We Broke*, also narrates many incidents where the body of a Dalit woman

experiences suffering and pain due to social and economic reasons. Kamble says that Mahar women have to work very hard, doing everything from childbearing to running the house. It affects their body terribly. It is only their indomitable spirit that keeps them going. One way of earning money by the Mahar women is selling firewood. Firewood is sold to Brahmin households. The money paid for the firewood is very little, but the women are made to work very hard. Each stick is checked for all sources of pollution namely a Mahar woman's hair or thread from her sari sticking to it. But Kamble makes it clear that even after this meticulous examination and the effort made to do away with pollution, the upper castes ironically fail to ensure the total purity they look for. She, in fact, ridicules them and says that even if the upper castes try to get rid of all sorts of so-called pollutants, they cannot get rid of the fluids in the form of sweat and blood from the Mahar women's bodies which get soaked in the firewood sold to the Brahmin households. If Mahar women's body is seen as a source of pollution and if the upper castes try desperately to avoid it, Kamble's subversion of the situation points to its very paradoxicality as an imbroglio, comparable to the master-slave binarity and its implications. The hypocrisy of the purity/pollution divide becomes stark when it becomes clear that in reality the upper castes cannot survive without depending on the lower castes for various kinds of work. Kamble shows that a total segregation that is preached by the scriptures and desired by the upper castes is not possible. As she says:

When the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish! Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of the Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then? (56).

Bama gives the example of Maikkanni, an eleven year old girl, who looks like an eight- or nine-year-old girl due to sheer hard work. As Bama says, "The day Maikkanni learnt to walk, she started to work as well" (74). Maikkanni's father abandoned the family immediately after she was born and this young girl now works tirelessly to look after the family and five other young children in the house. Her father's only task is to visit her mother occasionally and leave her in a pregnant state. At an early age Maikkanni has realized that hard physical labour is the only way that will help her support her family. But the girl shows unusual intelligence and maturity at a very young age. Kamble too refers to the hard physical labour that is Dalit women's lot from a

young age. As she says with reference to the wretched existence of women of her community:

Every day the maharwada would with the cries of hapless women in some house or the other. Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do till the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious. But there was no one to care for them.

They had no food to eat, no proper clothing to cover their bodies; their hair would remain uncombed and tangled, dry from lack of oil. Women led the most miserable existence. (Kamble 98)

If a body can be a cause of pain, suffering and subjugation of all types, this same body, which is looked upon as low and polluting and hence not worthy of preservation as an upper-caste body is, can also give considerable freedom and power to the owner of the body. Since the body of a Dalit woman is seen as an "untouchable" body, obviously the Brahmanical patriarchal rules restricting the freedom of the body, do not apply to them. All the three writers feel that this is something very positive and that Dalit women should use it to augment their freedom. In fact, this derogatory aspect of untouchability, which obviously is a reality, can be appropriated to bring about positive changes in their lives. Hence Bama says that Dalit women are freer about their bodies and many a time even uses them for their own convenience. Someone like Rakkamma uses her body to save herself from the brutal beatings of her husband. One day after getting beaten up by her husband in front of everyone, her only way to save herself was to lift her sari to expose her nakedness in front of all present and shame her husband. Her body helps her escape torture. Moreover, being free of their bodies also allows them to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Bama's narrator tells us of the many enjoyable moments she had spent with other women swimming in a tank, unlike Brahmin women who are conscious of their bodies. As she says, "It was only women from the palla, paraiya, and chakkili communities who bathed there. We never felt shy with each other, nor thought we were being immodest. We stripped off our clothes casually and went into the water" (116).

It is interesting to note the varied and complex ways a Dalit woman's body is perceived, judged and discoursed about by the society. What emerges from this is that the Dalit woman comes out as a multiplicitous being, not as she has been represented till now as only broken and exploited. She can appear to be a complex character who can deal with her situation with a lot of agility. Dalit women writers have the ability to portray these diverse perceptions and multifaceted relationships in their texts. They showcase various sides of a Dalit woman's life and

the wide-ranging way she gets physically and mentally affected. In fact, much of her mental trauma is related to her physical trauma itself. Hence body-centricity is one important aspect of most of the writings by Dalit women writers. Dalit women writers are in fact very open about the contradictions and the hypocrisies present in their very own societies. Their writings seem to be extremely self-critical and they seem to be saying that only after one is fully aware of one's own drawbacks can one look for solutions. Only when one accepts the oppressor within oneself can one challenge greater hierarchal structures. Hence writers like Bama and Sivakami expose Dalit men who are as patriarchal and abusive at home as any other men, while Baby Kamble exposes the other vicious circle that generates oppression of women on women: "The other world has bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves - our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them" (87).

However, as already referred to, all these writers have also talked of the more positive aspects of Dalit communities, aspects which are liberating, demonstrating the uniqueness of these communities, especially the uniqueness of Dalit women. Most of the women as represented by Bama in her novel are strong. They are witty, intelligent and have discovered their own survival tactics. Some women are as violent and as abusive as their husbands, so much so that their husbands do not even dare to misbehave with them. Kamble appreciates the Mahar women and their determination and strength when she says, "When the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat" (56). Such is the grit, determination and strength of Dalit women. It needs extraordinary strength of mind to sustain oneself in this manner. Thangam too in *The Grip of Change*, after being beaten almost to death, goes all the way to Kathamuthu's village to seek his help and lodge a complaint against her landlord, the powerful and upper-caste Paranjothi Udayar. Examples of such women break the stereotypical notion of Dalit women being only oppressed and voiceless. In fact, they have never been totally oppressed, they have always applied their own tactics to fight against all odds and survive. Compared to the upper-caste Hindu households, there are many aspects in Dalit societies which give much more freedom and liberation to women that the so-called upper-caste societies do not allow. For example, Dalit widows do not lead the life of deprivation that upper-caste widows lead. The Dalitbahujan households are free from private/public and purity/pollution divide and hence women

lead a more independent and free life, as claimed by Kancha Ilaiah in his book, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*: "This does not mean the Dalitbahujan women and the female political society that they create are free from internalized patriarchal values. They are not. But what is important is that compared to the Brahmins, the Baniyas and the Neo-Kshatriyas the man-woman relations among the Dalitbahujans are far more democratic" (47).

In other words, even though their life is very hard, the women have a life outside their homes unlike upper-caste, middle-class women who remain inside their homes at all times. Amongst themselves these women have a world of their own which is enjoyable and fun-filled. But situations become more complicated for them when Brahmanical patriarchal norms are adopted by the men of their castes to become "better" patriarchs. Kathamuthu in *The Grip of Change* is a case in point. He started following the rituals of Vakil Venkatakrishnan, a Brahmin lawyer, with an objective of this kind. Kamble too talks of this tendency among the educated Dalits and cautions them of the fact that this kind of an appropriation of upper-caste norms is of no good for them, for that does not help them transcend their caste positions. She would call them "parasites of the high castes" (121).

This is enough to show how the materiality of subjugation is related to caste and the caste-gender nexus. All the three texts demonstrate it powerfully and passionately. But they also look forward in terms of transcendence, ending with a futuristic vision by focusing on the duties of the younger generations towards their communities. The two young narrators in *Sangati* and *The Grip of Change* have grown up to be educated young women, conscious of their background and caste, but also grimly aware of the fact that however educated they are, caste as a marker of identity does not stop following them even in the metropolis, more so for the fact of their being women at that, because one's social vulnerability grows proportionately thereby. Sivakami's, Bama's as well as Kamble's implied concept of "becoming-dalit", therefore, can be said to have the deconstructive edge that takes both the societies, their own and the mainstream one, historically and critically. "Becoming-dalit" as a concept would rather point up its provisionality but a necessity at the same time. They wanted to prove their identity in terms of the difference of some of their positive social and cultural aspects of community life. They, therefore, emphasize again and again that the younger generation should try to sympathetically understand their communities and their history. Trying to disown one's caste identity in the face of ascribed social inferiority would be of no good either for them or for the society at large. A committed owning up coupled with courageous work for the communities would rather increase self-

respect and the possibility of over-all changes, changes beyond "dalitism". This is the message left behind by Sivakami at the end of her novel, especially in the *Author's Notes*. In an unrelenting self-criticism done from hindsight there, she rejects much of what she experimented with earlier in the novel in the shape of nearly "the workers of all the world unite" and comes to own up the "dalit identity" in order to pave means to transcend it. As she asserts, "Caste is still an indomitable force, challenging those who try to break it down. The present leadership lacks spirit and is inadequate. The combined effort of all oppressed castes is necessary; continuous focus on the problem of caste is necessary" (151).

If this is the general perception, all the three writers show how women have tremendous power in them to sustain themselves in the face of violence and oppression and how they themselves can be agents of change. Baby Kamble herself emerges as an activist who is totally dedicated to her society. The two other novelists, too, the way they end their books with their women protagonists, show that it is the radical young women who should face this challenge of subalternity in a bid to do away with it with the help of the women's discourse of difference and new confidence. The conviction expressed by Bama's protagonist at the close of the novel is indeed significant:

We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. If we rear our children from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that 'Women can make and women can break' (123).

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