

“Worse than the Worst: The Position of Black and Dalit Women Equated”

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No matter whatever may be the basis of social stratification in society, women are always the worst forebears of the unequal system. Not only has the female voice been marginalized to the corners, but even whatever that has reached us has been through the vocal cords of the mainstream male sex, who have effectively and systematically put a cloak on their role in the subjugation of women. This essay aims to compare and contrast the exploitation and subjugation of Black Women in racial North America, with the experiences and stature of Dalit Women in casteist India. It also brings to light that even though not every system is racist or casteist; every racist or casteist system is undeniably patriarchal.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Caste, Sexism, Black Woman, Racism.

INTRODUCTION

Historically speaking, the subjects of caste and race are some of the most common and well-deliberated subjects in the history of social stratification. However, any attempt at drawing a comparison between the two systems or worse, talking about women in the system has only invited scorn and hatred from scholars. A reason could be the inherent male biases in reformist academia, which effectively wanted to relegate its domains to anti-caste and anti-race; and not place the women's question in the larger framework of social inequality. This essay attempts at doing exactly that.

Our essay does not mean to insult all Indian Comparative Feminists before us. We are not the first people to talk about this and we sincerely hope we will not be the last.

We want our essay to be seen as an initiation – an initiation of how we construct curriculums. This essay comes from our reality of not being taught Comparative feminism. It is the result of some answers to questions which were never asked. This is our humble initiation to ask them.

THE STRUCTURE

We have loosely borrowed from two schools of thought. First, “the politics of location”¹ which itself is relatively new to Western academia as a whole and almost unheard of in South Asia. It looks at the “location” of women from different vantages and draws similarities and differences between those of Dalit and Black women. The oppression exerted by the Caste system is independent of the sex of the oppressor. Similarly, racial reform is against everyone who upholds the institution of racial segregation – men, women, and others alike.

Second, the essay highlights a “new politics of knowledge”² which surfaced as a branch of post-structural feminism through the voices of bell hooks, Hill-Collins, Sharmila Rege and Meenakshi Thapan amongst many others.

FOUNDATIONS IN HISTORY

The genesis of the Anti-Caste movement in India coincidences with that of the Civil Rights Movement in the US by a convincing degree Jyotirao Phule³ in an as early as 1873 wrote: “Gulamgiri” (*literally: Slavery*) which is considered as the first attack against the atrocities of Caste System in India. Phule was a proponent of equality and an ardent follower of George Washington.

Dollard in as early as 1957, talked about the *sexual gain of caste* (as quoted by Beteille⁴) which was later compared by G. Berreman to the sexual exploitation of black women. We make our first point of similarity here. Both Black and Dalit women face “**dual exploitation**”. This duality can have two meanings.

One, the dual sexual exploitation advanced on them by Dalit (and Black men) as well as upper caste (and white men.) Their sexuality is manipulated by both men of privilege and unprivileged men. Second, this duality can also refer to their unique case of exploitation from their gender. The upper caste and white women are harbingers of injustice brought upon the women in question. This deduces the latter to a position of “**Worse than the Worst**” as the men in their lives, exploited in the public realm, become exploiters in the private.

A CATEGORY OF DIFFERENCE

Black and Dalit feminists argue that the stories of Negro Women and Dalit Women have been primarily dictated by upper castes and white scholars. **Sharmila Rege**⁵ in her article, “*Dalit Women Speak Differently*” argues that feminist movements construct certain universal

¹ Davis n.d.

² P. Hill-Collins 2000

³ As quoted by (Paik 2014)

⁴ Beteille 1990

⁵ Rege, Dalit Women Talk Differently 1998

identities of women that need to be countered. Most feminists of the 1970s were intellectual middle class or Brahmin women that had access to a world-class education. A category of difference needed to be inserted in this voice of universal. Crucial to this category were the images of women, experience and personal politics. Hence, she propagated the need for a revolutionary epistemological shift of feminist literature to insert a Dalit feminist standpoint.⁶

Bell hooks⁷ went into causal explanations and highlighted the reasons for the reluctance of adoption of the feminist discourse by black and lower-class women. Acceptance of sexism comes from the lack of social, political and economic power in their husbands' hands.⁸ The latter exercise over their women; what they cannot over other men – that is - irrefutable power. The reluctance also flows due to the ambiguous umbrella-like definitions of feminism, which comprises anything and everything. Whatever the reasons may be, this reluctance has led to the inadequacy of black standpoint feminist literature and the formation of a universal discourse by women, just like in the case of Dalit women.

THE CROSSROADS OF SEXUALITY AND NATIONHOOD

The similar stories of their sexual exploitation have been the stories of contrasting identities. These women were discriminated against in the largest democracies of the world. Patricia Hill-Collins⁹ brings the concept of **nationhood into the discussion**. This is our third point of similarity.

The regulation of black women's sexuality has been important for the nationalist discourse as it also alternatively raises questions of women's chastity and racial purity. The national expectations divided women into two categories – the asexual, moral women protected by marital bonds contrasting with their immoral, sexual counterparts. Collectively, these binaries create a sexual hierarchy with approved sexual expression installed at the top and forbidden sexualities relegated to the bottom. These expectations are extremely similar to those outlined by Manu¹⁰; in the Manusmriti for the High Caste Hindu women.¹¹ A high caste woman must always be pure and chaste, while a Dalit woman could be expected to be impure and promiscuous. Ambedkar in 1936, pointed out that most Devadasis and prostitutes in the Kamatipura area of Bombay were Untouchable or Shudra women. Unarguably, *the entry of an Untouchable woman into a life of sex work was dictated by her birth into specific untouchable communities that are expected to provide sexual favors to caste-Hindu men, and not by choice.*¹²

⁶ Ibid

⁷ hooks 1984

⁸ Ibid

⁹ P. Hill-Collins 2000

¹⁰ Ramabai 1981

¹¹ As quoted by (Rege, Dalit Women Talk Differently 1998

¹² Rege, Dalit Women Talk Differently 1998

There is also a commonality of political propaganda in both cases. The rape of women of color and untouchables has become a political showdown for the projection of strength of powerful men. The fumes of the Unnao rape* victim's burning body smelt of political arrogance and Caste supremacy of four men belonging to a deeply fascist and theocratic political party.

A UNIQUE POSITION

The argument of position also stretches to the position of these women in their larger social world – the everyday realities of their unique experiences. Patricia Hill-Collins¹³ argues that Afro-American women have long been privy to some of the most intimate secrets of white society as they have taken up the roles of cooks, housekeepers, baby-caretakers for a good number of white families.¹⁴ They have worked as domestic help, sometimes unpaid and done some of the most menial of jobs in the white society. They also performed child care and capitalized on their motherhood. In a larger social context, this sustained the ideal of motherhood as unpaid labor. However, she argues that the role of black women in American society has given them a special status of outsiders-within. These **outsiders-within**¹⁵ can contribute significantly to sociology as their oral histories would resonate with lived realities.

This also stands true for Dalit woman who has worked as manual scavengers or as petty household helps in upper-caste home, and continue to do so till date.

SYMBOLS AND SUBSTANCES

Comparing caste and race at a deeper level, **Andre Beteille**¹⁶ detects the prevalence of values and symbols relating to blood and natural substance and beliefs regarding the strong constraints imposed by them on human character and conduct.¹⁷ Hindus regard differences of caste as being differences of substance and believe that these latter impel that members of different castes to act differently. There are parallel beliefs that differences of race express differences of a natural substance that constrain character as well as to conduct. Thus, though different in operation, the rationale of difference in both race and caste is the same.

¹³ P. Hill-Collins 2004

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Beteille 1990

¹⁷ Ibid

* The Unnao Rape case refers to the gang rape of a 17-year-old girl on 4 June 2017 in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, India. In an open letter written on 17 August 2017 to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, the victim stated that, prior to the events of 11 June 2017, she had been raped on 4 June 2017 at 8:00 p.m. in the house of Kuldeep Singh Sengar, a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh from the Unnao constituency, and a member of the Bharatiya Janta Party. In her statement, she named all the five accused and narrated the ordeal. Out of the five persons, including two who were accused in the rape case, the Unnao rape survivor named, two have been arrested, the UP police said. She said that the accused Shivam and Shubham Trivedi had abducted and raped her and video-graphed the act. (Source: Outlook India)

WORSE THAN EACH OTHER

On the other hand, these differences of natural substance which impose social conduct are crucial to the Hindu society but only peripheral to the American society. The entire Caste-Varna system was based on beliefs on a natural substance, while Americans, and although racist did not construct their entire social life around it. Coming to think of it, what separated the realities of Dalit and Black women was the extremity of their competition for a social stature and access to resources. Most issues of Black women were also issues of black men, such as racial segregation and discrimination. With the eradication of Apartheid and retreat of colonial powers in international geographies, many of these issues were resolved. However, Dalit women still have a long way to go. When the caste system retreated, it did not emancipate but metamorphosed itself into class-based inequalities. Dalit women had to compete with more men and women from diverse strata, due to the complexity of the Varna system. These men and women were mostly unsympathetic and unhelpful, leading to a greater struggle for Dalit and Shudra women. There are also greater levels of segregation within the Dalit caste itself. More than fifty types of Dalit caste surnames have been scheduled under the provisions of the Indian Constitution and each group claims to be of a higher descent than the other. Since there is no way to prove descent than to go back to the foundations of the Varna system – the same system women are demanding emancipation from; it makes liberation tougher for Dalit women than it was for black women.

The difference of position also gets reflected in the examples of successful women of color like Rihanna and Jennifer Lopez who are well-established in the Hollywood industry of the US. How many Dalit women can we name who have achieved the same in the Indian film industry? While cosmopolitanism has enhanced and idealized the sexuality of black women, the Dalit identity has been given the cloak of invisibility. There is no admiration for a Dalit identity today, any more than there was fifty years ago.

A HOPE

That being said, our take is not entirely passive. We do believe in the inception of transnational feminism. We wouldn't be writing this essay otherwise. The sparks, wherever they are, have merely not reached us yet. In our opinion, there is a need to take a 360-degree turn on how we study social systems in the first place. No social system should be studied in isolation. While we study gender stratification in a radicalized context or the global economy; very little research has been done on the stature of women across societies. For sociology to be a truly comparative science, we need to explore the possibilities of comparative gender studies across systems and not just across cultures. This would not just benefit feminist literature, but the method of doing sociology. What is the point of a science of social systems anyway, if it does not look beneath, between, and beyond social systems?

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