



# Letting the Genie out of Bottle: Gender and Domestic Violence in Dalit women's Life Narratives in Marathi

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Domestic violence against women is a universal problem. It could broadly be defined as any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, psychological or sexual harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts. It was recognised as a criminal violence in India in 1983 but most violence inside the homes goes unreported. Primarily because family and community structures render it difficult, if not impossible for women to report abusive husbands or in-laws, the very people upon whom they are most dependent (Agnes, 1992). Though domestic violence against women is fairly common across all socio-economic and cultural/ caste configurations across India and is documented fairly extensively in the context of dowry related violence in the middle-class context, the specificity of violence faced by Dalit women in domestic space largely remains neglected in the activism and discourse around domestic violence due to several reasons. Despite clear indications from various surveys and sociological studies that prevalence of women facing domestic violence at physical and psychological level is much higher among Dalit women in comparison to other dominant caste women, it is often (wrongly) treated as insignificant issue in comparison to threat of or actual violence experienced by them in the public spaces.

It is fairly common for Dalit women to work outside home as their earnings are often crucial for the survival of the family. Be it as agricultural labourers in rural India or as construction workers or domestic helps in urban India, their earnings contribute a significant part of the food, healthcare and educational expenses of the household. Since Dalit women are seen to have a measure of independence in financial matters and enjoy freedom in physical movement, choice of work and employer, can easily access public space and the fact that they tend to be more assertive vis-à-vis their dominant caste employers or contractors, it is argued that the gender dynamics within the community is much more egalitarian than the upper-castes. Many Dalit and non-Dalit scholars seem to share this notion that Dalit women are somehow more “free” than upper caste women. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi in their work entitled *Daughters of Independence*

seem to suggest that though Dalit women are impoverished, they lead sexually more liberated lives than upper-caste women (Liddle and Joshi,1986). Sharmila Rege in her incisive analysis writes about how the middle-class women suggest that the Dalit women are better off since “they [can drink and smoke and can] abuse or hit back their drunken husbands (Rege, 2006, p.6). Many influential Dalit scholars too have perpetuated this romantic belief that Dalit patriarchy is more democratic than Hindu patriarchy. As a result, literature on Dalit women focuses on Brahminical patriarchy but says little about the less visible (and more controversial) forms of domination exercised by Dalit men.

A lot has been written about the violence faced by Dalit women due to inter-linking of caste, class and gender discrimination at the hands of dominant caste men domestic violence experienced by Dalit women rarely receives the critical attention and analysis it deserves. Dalit women’s life narratives have started getting published since the mid-1980s in Maharashtra and have received a lot of critical attention as well. Though many scholars have identified Dalit patriarchy as one of the most pertinent factors that dictates the choices Dalit women can make, they have not really focussed on intra-Dalit gender relationships. I strongly feel that in addition to giving voice to the marginalisation and humiliation faced on the grounds of religion, caste and class, Dalit women’s life narratives in Maharashtra also give an account of persistent ideology and practice of patriarchy that crushes the lives of so many women. This paper will mainly discuss three life narratives, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar and *Teen Dagadanchi Chul (A Hearth of Three Stones)* by Vimal More respectively to demonstrate how, the everyday discrimination against Dalit women is further marked by mental, emotional and physical violence by their spouses and other family members. Strong community censorship and the pressure from Dalit movement has not been able to prevent them from exposing the hollow claims of equality and egalitarian patriarchy often made by Dalit intellectuals or ideologues on behalf of the Dalit movement.

Since the exploitation of women (in varying degrees and taking many forms) is wide-spread across all classes, castes and religions in India, what we see in these life narratives has to be viewed against the very dismal, wider context of women’s continued second-class citizenship in contemporary India. Having said that, it is also very important to discuss and analyse the fact of continued domestic violence and highlight it as it is repeatedly documented in the life narratives but somehow side-lined by critics and commentators as something that could be just wished away by refusing to comment and explain it. As Karin Kapadia writes dalit patriarchy and honour have largely been avoided in academic discussion of Dalits. Literature on Dalit women focuses on Brahminical patriarchy but says little about the less visible (and more controversial) forms of domination exercised by Dalit men (Kapadia, 2007).

There seem to be two main challenges for an academic perusal of domestic violence against Dalit women, first, the mainstream women’s movement in India treated all women as a homogenous category, focussing on the issues that primarily mattered to the middle-class educated urban women. While some mainstream feminists pay merely lip service to (Dalit) women who are daily beaten down physically, mentally, spiritually. Such feminist frames have failed to critically interrogate Dalit women’s subordination as ‘Dalit’ and as ‘woman’. What is missing from the mainstream notion of patriarchy is an adequate

appreciation of the social, cultural and political specificity that goes into the making of Dalit women and the Dalit community and of the power relations and inequality that are tied with the ranked hierarchy (Shailaja Paik, 2009, p. 42)

Secondly, the Dalit movement, intellectuals/ activists in general have repeatedly propagated the notion egalitarian intra-Dalit gender relationships, have charged feminist movement as being too westernised and often dismissed feminist voices of dissent from within the community as superfluous, irrelevant and unnecessary for the community. In fact, many Dalit scholars have projected feminist movement as a powerful deterrent to the growth of an autonomous Dalit movement and voiced apprehensions that Dalit feminism may divide the Dalit movement. For example, Urmila Pawar's autobiography received a lot of flak for her 'feminist' approach to critique of patriarchy and what they perceived as the frank and open discussion of women's sexuality (Maya Pandit, Weave ...xxviii). Dalit men's autobiographies in Marathi, which enjoy much wider critical acclaim and scholarly attention in comparison to women's autobiographies, do not mention domestic violence. The manner in which it is dismissed clearly reveals their apathy and complete denial of violence at home.

The widely-acclaimed Dalit men's autobiographical accounts generally tend to portray Dalit women either as heroic sufferers or passive victims, thereby neglecting the complexities of both, women's own subjectivities and the internal gender dynamics of the community. As a result, we are offered a relatively one-dimensional view of Dalit women and little idea of what Dalit patriarchy is and how it operates. Dalit women's life narratives, on the other hand, present riveting accounts of childhood deprivations, suffering, experiences of discrimination and exploitation due to socio-cultural and religious practices. From them, we understand how widespread patriarchal attitudes shape Dalit women's experiences of violence in the domestic sphere of the family, multiplying the gendered harm perpetrated against them. The insecurity generated through structural violence against Dalit women in both, the general community and within the family acts as a form of coercive control over them. This ensures that Dalit women continue to be disempowered, socially suppressed, and physically, sexually, economically and politically exploited. With numerous examples of women personally known to them, these narratives point out how untouchability and patriarchy are the two socio-cultural pressures that together crush a woman's life.

It is often noted that the narratives of Baby Kamble, Shantabai Dani or Shantabai Kamble (who were direct followers of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and active participants in his movement) are markedly different from their male counterparts, both in the perception of gendered inequalities and a sense of agency. As a strategy these women are reticent about their personal/ intimate relationships. While they all mention many incidents of domestic violence and exploitation of women among people known to them, they do not denounce their men, but try to explain the violence directed at them as the only outlet available to their men suffering under the yoke of caste oppression. These women were among the first generation of writers and were deeply conditioned against making any comment that might be perceived as against the Dalit movement. Baby Kamble says her generation was made to believe that the lack of education, overall

backwardness due to unjust social practices were the root cause of all problems and things would change with overall progress achieved in the light of Ambedkarite movement.

Baby Kamble's reflections on conditions of Dalit women in *The Prisons We Broke* date back to pre-independence era but she asserts that as far as suspicion of women's character and constant threat of or actual physical abuse or violence is concerned, very little has changed for the Dalit women even after independence. Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. She writes how so many women had broken or disfigured nose, punishment for attempting to escape the torture at home. Women with broken heads and backs were also common. She writes that girls usually got married at quite young age and they would be expected to perform rigorous domestic labour. Any failure would be met with abuse and physical punishment. If situation became unbearable, the girls would often run back alone at night or during the day to their parents' house. But the husband and his family would bring her back, almost like a slave, for she 'belonged' to their family. The girl's father, brothers and other relatives too would send her back readily. Then her in-laws and others would make life hell for her. Many other daughters-in-law are worn out in meeting the needs of the household, for instance, the shortage of water. She writes, "the life of the women in the lower class was thus shaped by the fire of the calamities. This made their bodies strong but their minds cried out against this oppression" (*The Prisons We Broke*, p.102). The constant fear of violence, the fear of suspicion in husband's mind forced so many women to live crippled existence.

In an interview given to Maya Pandit, Baby Kamble admits that she too faced violence in her personal life on account of the suspicious nature of her husband but chose not to write about it because it was the story of everyone around, every woman suffered. "In those days men always wanted to control women. It was quite common for a husband to beat his wife because he doubted her faithfulness. And I wasn't an exception... all my life I had to face this violence" (*The Prisons*, p.154) She says she chose not to write about it (in her autobiography) because of the community pressure against bringing such things in the public domain.

It is often well-acknowledged that Jotiba Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar and the larger Dalit community urged the Dalit women to gain every possible educational qualification to develop self-esteem, self-confidence, determinacy and daring in order to channel their agency effectively towards cleansing their community as well as striking at the root of gender and caste hierarchy. In her succinct account of Phule-Ambedkarite feminism, Shailaja Paik argues that while tackling Dalit patriarchy was an integral part of this battle for women's self-development, there were complications because these male-centred efforts were also contradictory and ambiguous and the assertion and agenda of masculinity often encouraged patriarchal practices. Control over women was also linked with more honour, dignity, respectability for them. This was a double bind, Dalit women's subjection was produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which they sought emancipation. The management of female sexuality and the whole politics of honour and shame were principal difficulties for most communities including Dalits (Shailaja Paik, 2020, p.82).

Clarinda Still drawing on similarities between Dalit men and black American men, suggests that prevented by institutional barriers from fulfilling masculine identities through legitimised avenues such as provisions for the family, employment and economic independence Dalit men adopt alternative definitions of manhood. Since these men are usually without any material means to implement male superiority and often rely on women's earnings, this results in 'compensatory adaptations' whereby men display toughness and manliness through the exploitation of women or through male aggression (Clarinda Still, p.163).

However, this so-called general understanding of violence in Dalit families that the caste subjugation, disempowerment and lack of status and authority in the general community experienced by Dalit men often results in gender violence has to be questioned. No perpetrator can get away by saying that just because he is oppressed by the existing system, he has the right to oppress his wife. Moreover, Dalit women are more oppressed than Dalit men. In fact, they are thrice exploited. Even then they shoulder family responsibilities as subordinate partners in patriarchal set up. Often, despite being an earning partner, they have no decision-making rights. They spend their earnings on household rations, medical expenses and children's education. Men do not share household chores as they consider it below their dignity to do so. Women often bear entire burden of childcare and meet the needs and demands of the entire family. Any failure to do so is met with violence, physical or psychological. Considering the responsibilities on her shoulders and the violence she faces despite that, how and against whom the Dalit woman vent her anger and frustration?

*The Weave of My Life* "represents a terrain where the Dalit woman stands today, questioning the established ideologies of caste, modernity and patriarchy" (Maya Pandit, xxvi). Urmila Pawar represents what one may call the second generation of Dalit women who came of age in the 1980s. The society has changed significantly since independence and her generation represents the strong sense of political and cultural identity as educated middle-class Dalit women. In her account, one comes across one of the most nuanced presentation of subjugation of women among the Dalit communities. These are not some generalised abstract stories of women's vulnerability, susceptibility to sexual abuse or threat and actual domestic violence, her observations are borne out by the concrete 'lived reality' of the women around her. They include her cousins, aunts, neighbours, sisters in laws and numerous other women who, on their way to market, rested at their house and bared their hearts to her mother. Urmila observes how the percolations into and internalisation of the male superiority ideology in the community leads to varied discriminations. Wife beating, harassment and desertions are quite common.

Urmila discusses the plight of her cousin: Her husband was a drunkard and her mother-in-law a tyrant. Both beat her up mercilessly at the slightest pretext. They would drive her out of the house with her young children even on stormy nights. The poor woman would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother's house (*The Weave of My Life*, p. 33). However, she was made to go back despite the obvious indications of the brutal violence she had to endure there. Urmila fails to understand the contradiction in her father's attitude because the same man who was so concerned with his daughters' empowerment chose to be indifferent to



the cousin's plight. Urmila writes about how her alcoholic cousin tortured his wife because he could not marry someone of his choice, there is also Bhiki Akka who was mistreated by her husband, who had remarried despite begetting two children by her. Both the new wife and husband illtreat her (*The Weave of My Life*, p.112-113). Tormenting and thrashing one's wife is common and an everyday occurrence in Dalit households. The author recounts, "At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her" (ibid) Urmila Writes that despite severe instances of domestic violence, even close relatives would not intervene because of the popular belief that a wife 'belongs' to her husband and he can 'do' whatever suits his fancy. Many women complained about their husband's suspicious nature. They would spend their earnings on alcohol, spy their wives' movements, mercilessly beat them, torture them and also destroy their lives too in the process. She writes that even her father-in-law with grown up children would not hesitate to beat his wife when angry and she would tell people around her that those bruises or swellings were the result of a fall.

Urmila Pawar also deals with the tricky question of women against women or what should be identified as the politics of the household and tries to grapple with why women consent to certain practices that degrade them. She analyses how some women are complicit with men in oppressing other women. There is a mature attempt to understand for herself and for her readers how women's consent is produced in the right to control their lives. Womanhood as a condition of gender servility and social liability makes women put up with huge discrimination and male violence. Urmila Pawar attributes the widely prevalent sense of gender servility among Dalit women to cultural conditioning and lack of self-awareness. She feels that along with the external factors, deeply ingrained notions of their own inferiority and lack of self-assertion are responsible for the miserable condition of Dalit women. Women's complicity in the acts of violence against vulnerable women can perhaps be explained by the fact that in our culture, "women can gain access to power in the family only as agents of domination and oppression of the younger women in the family" (Rege, 2020, p.111).

In a restrained, objective yet candid manner, Urmila writes about the bare the opposition and resistance she faced as she tried pursue education and work for women in the community while working in a responsible position in office. As is typical among urban middle-classes in India she was 'allowed' to study further as long as she continued to manage her office job, household responsibilities and look after the children as before. Her intellectual growth, her exposure to changing world and activism gave her enough confidence to demand support and understanding from her husband only to be repeatedly rebuffed and told that the household remains their duty and priority everything else was worthless. Thus, compelled to walk the tightrope of double responsibilities, Urmila would often wake up at midnight to write, and Baby Kamble had to (secretively) spare some time from her shop and family duties to write about the sufferings of her community. She has to keep her autobiography a secret for twenty years before it got published in 1986. She shares with her readers: I had to take great care that nobody saw me writing. I used to hide the papers under old newspapers. I used to keep my notebooks hidden in places that nobody bothered about, like the uppermost corner of an alcove where all useless things were thrown together (*The Prisons We Broke*, p.147).

Pradnya Lokhande, a well-known Dalit poet and activist asks a very pertinent question (common to all Dalit women writers): Why is it that we are accepted as Dalit writers when we oppose Manu and the upper caste tradition, but turn into traitors the moment we voice our protest against patriarchy within the Dalit caste ... We need to confront the caste system as well as patriarchy within the Dalit tradition to make ourselves heard (Joseph, 2004, p.657). Kumud Pawade, another outspoken Dalit writer voices similar angst when she accuses Dalit men of brazen discrimination, “while thinking about equality across caste, class, men forget gender equality. Women are merely tokens in the [political] movement (Pawade, 1998, p.134). Voicing their concerns and exposing the patriarchal mindset and oppression of women from within the community is still quite a challenging task. Many Dalit women writers feel profoundly that their voices are marginalized, and they are frequently made to feel under attack by male writers who construe feminist expression as aggression toward Dalit men and as a divisive influence on the counter-public identity.

Youngest among the writers here, Vimal More was born in 1970. Vimal More’s narrative *Teen Dagdanchi Chul (The Hearth of Three Stones)* brings in a diverse perspective. She represents the resistant voice from the nomadic communities into the history of Dalit feminism. Her life narrative is a telling commentary on how gender in caste society is often defined in such a manner that “manhood” of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of passivity of the women of the caste. Vimal More depicts a horrific picture of nomadic women’s lives trapped in ignorance, superstition, domestic violence, almost never-ending labour and poverty. It’s a disturbing narrative that depicts most women as trapped in their oppressive routines hampered by superstitions, lack of education and very harsh and oppressive patriarchal norms often enforced through the violent means and stranglehold of caste panchayats on the community.

As they moved from place to place, their husbands went to the village to beg in the name of goddess Amba bai, daily labour and never-ending journeys formed the basic pattern of women’s lives. “Going daily for firewood, water, making *bhakris*, uprooting the *palas*, carrying heavy load on the head and moving from one village to another was the routine of our lives” (*Teen Dagdanchi Chul*, p.20). She writes that domestic violence is very common and so is suspicion of women’s character and subsequent unfounded allegations and beating. Ironically, for a community worshipping goddess *Ambabai* and making a living by begging in the name of goddess, *Gondhali* community is depicted as deeply misogynistic. There is fierce resistance to women’s education, their movements are strictly controlled, they are married off at an early age and are not supposed to talk freely even with close male relatives, leave aside strangers. Hardships related to nomadic existence, poverty and constant fear of male violence seem to be their only fate. With changing times, they are forced to try different occupations to make a living. Their lack of education forces them to limited options like selling utensils in return for used clothes. Vimal writes that even her police constable brother would not hesitate to beat his wife over minor pretexts.

The narratives make it quite clear that Dalit women endure two-fold patriarchal oppression within the community: the intrinsic conventional patriarchy that normalises use of violence against women to ensure fearful obedience to the dictates of husband and one must give credit to the element of critical reflexivity in these narratives that they also write about the complicity of elderly women in the family to ensure harsh patriarchal control over young women in the domestic space. Then there are the caste councils or Panchayats. The second category of patriarchy is severe and unquestionable. The caste panchayat prescribes dictates in matters of marriage, punishment of women who had transgressed. In some cases, the caste panchayat even prescribed rates to buy or sell a woman to men who wanted to marry her (Pardesi and Kamble 1997). Pawar discusses the case of a widow who is found to be pregnant. The whole village knows the man but only the woman is punished for transgression: She was made to stand to lean forward, and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. Urmila asks, “why should this issue of honour that kills humanism and is like an axe for women be so ingrained in women themselves?” (*The Weave of My Life*, p.132) The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they had protected the village’s honour. Urmila writes that if a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the *Panchyat* for justice and punishment. She was publicly judged and her other relatives would beat her up as well (*The Weave of My Life*, 156). Sadly, even now, one does come across newspaper reports about the powerful hold of caste *panchayats* among various Dalit/nomadic communities in Maharashtra.

Thus, despite a severe pressure from the community and implicit censorship from family, these writers bring to light an extremely uncomfortable fact despite claims to the contrary, Dalit women also face severe violence and oppression in the family. They reject the often-repeated argument that domestic violence among the Dalits is a minor issue because the women are empowered enough to fight it back on their own. They bring to light the crippling hold of patriarchy within the community. They conclusively establish the central role played by violence in reproduction of patriarchy among Dalit communities. Therefore, there must be more discursive engagement with the issues raised in these life narratives as they offer much-needed internal critique of Dalit patriarchy in Dalit politics. Instead of constituting “Dalit” as one homogeneous block, we also need to understand the complexity and multi-layered nuances of the Dalit discourse.



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