

Confronting Patriarchy: A Study of Kaushalya Baisantri's Autobiography Dohara Abhishap



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Abstract

In India men or father-figures hold authority over women. In most Indian societies, women are considered as an object of pleasure and no more than a laborer at home and work. In fact women think of men or their husbands as equal to god and call them lord or *pati-parameswar*. Sometime these so called lords exploit women. When this kind of trauma becomes unbearable, women look for a medium to express it. Autobiography is a medium to express their pain. Kaushalya Baisantri, in her autobiography *Dohra Abhishap* calls this exploitation of women as a double curse, because being a dalit and a woman makes her victimization double. The suffering and pain of dalit women is not a matter of today but ages old. In the Vedic era, women were given equal opportunities of education and the privilege to choose their husbands and were respected. Sage Manu portrayed women as morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men. In medieval age, the subcontinent of India witnessed many changes in the status of women. The Rajputs of Rajasthan started the practice of *Jauhar* and *Purdah* to save their women from the Muslim invaders. Henceforth the status of women in India began to deteriorate. In India, many reformers worked for the women's pitiable condition. Though a dalit author rejects the thinking and ideas of sage Manu yet he follows patriarchal thinking in the matters of their women. A man can not tolerate over her. Dalit women author Kaushalya Baisantri, writes about patriarchal psychology of men of her own family and her community. A man cannot tolerate the openness of the woman. He always searches for a chance to dishonour the woman and impose his own dignity over her. She also talks about the ordeals meted out to three generations of woman: her grandmother, her mother and herself. She looked for self respect and dignity so that she could lead a normal life which is so far not within her reach.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Autobiography, Dalit, Women, Victimization, Male Ego, Double Standard.

Introduction

The exploitation of women across the world is as old as the human race. In fact women too are conditioned to think it natural to serve men. In India women think of men or their husbands as equal to god and call them lord or *pati-parameswar*. This is an ancient tradition established by the patriarchal system, in which men hold the primary power within the family and society and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property.¹ In the domain of the family, fathers or father-figures hold authority over women and children. In most Indian societies property and title are inherited by the male lineage. Sometime these so called lords exploit women mentally, physically and economically. When this kind of trauma becomes unbearable women look for a medium to express it. Autobiographies by women are one such mode of their self expression of their personal pain. Dalit women authors like Sushila Takbhore describe this suffocating pain in her autobiography *Shikanje ka Dard*.² Kaushalya Baisantri calls this exploitation of women by the patriarchy as a double curse in her autobiography *Dohra Abhishap*, because being a dalit and a woman makes her victimization double.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the research paper are: (1) to review the deterioration of the dignity of women in India from the Vedic era to the present age. They were regarded with respect in the Vedic age, how their condition has changed and who are responsible for their pitiable condition, is a matter of study (2) to show the male psychology in framing norms to

victimize and exploit women. Men think women inferior in every aspect of life. They think them mere object of pleasure.

Review of Literature

The suffering and pain of dalit women is not a matter of today but ages old. In the Vedic era, women were given equal opportunities of education and the privilege to choose their husbands and were respected. *Manusmriti*, a social document dealing with the classification of social system by sage Manu portrayed women as morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men and considered women as the property of men. He claimed that women's role in society was to only reproduce and serve men in the households. He further says that as a child she should be protected by her father, in her youth she should be protected by her husband and in old age by her son.³ Their proper sphere was within the four walls of the home; any contact with the outside world was supposed to corrupt and spoil them. Their sole business was to look after the comfort of their men folk. Her life span was bound by the domination of men. He saw this domination of women as natural and virtuous. Many theorists agreed with Manu's views concerning the place of women in society. In the 5th and 6th centuries during the Gupta age, women participated in running the administration. Queen Kurmadevi of Mewar commanded her armies in the twelfth century. With the onset of the medieval age, the subcontinent of India witnessed many changes in the status of women. The Rajputs of Rajasthan started the practice of *Jauhar* and *Purdah* to save their women from the Muslim invaders.⁴ Henceforth the status of women in India began to deteriorate. In the 16th and the 17th century supporters of women rights Robert Filmer and Aphra Behn opposed the concept of sage Manu. In India, Rajaram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekanand and Mahatma Jyotirao Phule worked for the reform of the Indian women's pitiable condition. David A. J. Richard, a teacher of criminal and constitutional law at NYU School of Law, defines patriarchy in his book *Resisting Injustice and the Feminist Ethics of Care in the Age of Obama* as:

An unjust social system that enforces gender roles and is oppressive to both men and women.⁵

In the 19th century, various women like Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai began to question the commonly accepted patriarchal interpretation of their identity. During British rule many reforms took place in the condition of women.

Many women chose literature to express their pain. The plight of women, especially the dalit women as depicted in their autobiographies reveals the psyche of men and the limitations of the women. They are victimized at the hands of their brothers, fathers and husbands also. Literature written by the dalit women reveals various instances of injustice and inequalities which they felt or experienced and shows the narrow mindedness of the men. Mohan Das Naimishray, a great author of dalit literature, discloses in his article:

Dalit woman faces not only the patriarchal tyranny of the upper classes but also their own societies.⁶

Alpana Pareek, professor in political science, in her article "Dalit Stree Vimarsh" writes:

Although Dalits struggle for their freedom and equality but ironically they do not consider their own wives and daughters as equal. They do not provide them freedom. How the supporters of the dalit movement exploit the women is unimaginable.⁷

Patriarchal Psychology in *Dohra Abhishap*

Interestingly dalit authors hide the fact related to the sufferings of their own women. Though they reject the thinking and ideas of sage Manu yet they follow him in the matters of their women. Gradually with the passing of time the conditions have changed. Women have been given political, social freedom and so many women have begun to come out of their homes to take up independent careers. However it still cannot be claimed that women are being given the status of equality and dignity that they deserve.

Women are now trying to write their own tales of pain. They are participating in social activities related to their plight. In Rajasthan social activist Jamuna Barupal and Kusum Meghwal have raised their voice against this dubious behavior of dalit men. Unfortunately their protest against this deprivation and inequality has resulted in harassment and aggression by dalit men. A dalit author, Dr. Desraj in his article "Stree Vimarsh Ke Prashan Aur Mahadevi Verma" reveals tactics adopted by the men to keep the women far away from the periphery of power. He says that men hold the authority of the society and literature to exercise this patriarchal tyranny.⁸

In ancient time most of the dalit women did not write against the scandalous behaviour of their husbands, brothers and fathers; because they thought that it brings dishonour to their families. Kaushalya Baisantri herself did not write about the sufferings and pain till the age of sixty eight. She started her autobiography when she read the Marathi author Kumud Pavde's quarterly journal *Asmitadarsh* and knew about her mother and grandmother's agony and torments at the hands of her grandfather and the people of her community.⁹ Kaushalya Baisantri writes in the preface of her autobiography *Dohra Abhishap* that:

In a patriarchal society a man cannot tolerate the openness of the woman. He always searches for a chance to dishonour the woman and impose his own dignity over her.¹⁰

She also talks about the ordeals meted out to three generations of woman: her grandmother, her mother and herself. She does not hesitate while writing about the cruelty and tyranny that her grandmother, Aaji, suffered at the hands of her grandfather whom she called Aajoba:

He always rebuked, Aaji, without any reason, only to prove his superiority. Aaji did not have the courage to object. She tolerated it with patience.¹¹

Kaushalya Baisantri vocalizes the immense pain in her autobiography when her grandfather abuses his wife and beats her:

Aajoba drinks daily and shows anger towards his wife. He feels inferior as Aaji was a beautiful lady.¹²

Another incident of male egoism is that of the engagement of Bhagerathi was called off simply because her fiancé sent a letter specifically to her mother, Aaji inviting them to his village Ramtek because there was plague in her city Nagpur. Her grandfather's ego flared up immensely when he came to know of this. He thought it below his dignity that a woman should be given such a prime responsibility instead of a man in the family. In anger he broke up the engagement. In spite of the fact that her grandparents had been living separately for quite some time, even then Kaushalya Baisantri's grandfather exerted his male authority to satisfy his ego.

He will fix the marriage of his daughter according to his will as he was the father after all.¹³

Though once again male authority works here and her grandmother too accepts it as her fate by not opposing Aajoba in the matter of the marriage of her daughter, yet her determination about her daughter's future does not grow weak. Since she needed economic help of her husband she accepts his decision. Within most Indian families men think that the women should follow their orders. Women were kept away from education in the ancient times. Getting married was the only right thing for them. Kaushalya's mother made great efforts for the education of her daughters. One more instance of the male ego is expressed thus:

Some relatives disliked us on being educated. Some of them were so envious that they used to shun latrine at our doorsteps. My mother used to clean the doorsteps, but never yield before them.¹⁴

To be educated for a girl child was an issue of great envy among the community. It also shows the double standards of the society. While the education of a boy was promoted, the girl was prohibited from going to school. It is noteworthy that while a dalit writer talks against the discrimination of women among the upper classes he remains silent in the matter of the women of dalit community. Kaushalya Baisantri says that her sister-in-laws did not have the courage to speak directly to their brother, Kaushalya's husband Devendra Kumar. Women in the writings of dalit men are represented within a patriarchal set up. A man cannot tolerate that his children should favour his wife for eg. Even though Devendra Kumar was a freedom fighter, and had got a silver medal in government service, yet even he could not bear the

favour of his son towards his mother. Men ignore the contribution of the women in the household economy and make a great fuss at slight mistakes of women. Devendra Kumar's conservative and dominating character can be easily seen when he complains to Kaushalya's brother that she has her meals before him. Baisantri's reaction shows her frustration:

Is it a sin to take meal before a husband? Devendra Kumar, a freedom fighter! and such foolishness?¹⁵

The women in Kaushalya Baisantri's autobiography; Aaji, Bhagerathi and the author herself were determined to face the ordeals meted out to them. They wanted to fight their battle against dalit patriarchy independently. They were confident to win. Aaji did not return back to her husband's house though her daughter died on the way while going to the city to begin a new life. Bhagerathi also informs her parents that she alone would struggle against her husband's injustice. Most dalit men writers say that the life of dalits is full of pain, suffocation and insult on the other hand Kaushalya Baisantri, in her autobiography says that one can work hard to shield oneself from this pain and insult. Kaushalya Baisantri looked for self respect and dignity so that she could lead a normal life which is so far not within her reach. Baisantri was inspired by them. She shows courage to disclose the false dignity of the men of her community. She wrote about the hardships of her life which were posed by the men of her own family and her community.

Conclusion

In India, many reformers struggled for the women's pitiable condition. Though dalit authors reject the thinking and ideas of sage Manu yet they follow patriarchal thinking in the matters of their women. They can not tolerate. Dalit women author Kaushalya Baisantri, writes against this patriarchal psychology of men of her own family and her community. Dalit authors cannot tolerate the openness of the woman, and always search for chances to dishonour the woman and impose their own dignity over her. Baisantri also talks about the ordeals meted out to three generations of woman: her grandmother, her mother and herself. She looked for self respect and dignity so that she could lead a normal life which is so far not within her reach.

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