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Dalit-Muslim-Women and their Systemic Exclusion from Feminist and Dalit Discourses

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Introduction

This article talks about the systemic exclusion of Dalit Muslim women from mainstream discourses. It is premised on one of the most evocative statements in the feminist and subaltern discourses-'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (Spivak 1988).

Based on her evocative question, I too raise a couple of questions -"Why Dalit-Muslim-women are not visible in feminist and Dalit discourses; who will speak for them?'

One of the defining features of India is the deeply entrenched caste system, and research studies, through their findings, have corroborated to the axiomatic ubiquity of caste hierarchies present even within non-Hindu religious communities. Take for instance, Islam that otherwise professes egalitarianism, and abhors any kind of discriminatory practices among its adherents, too has succumbed to the social divisions of caste system premised on the idea of inter-caste repulsions. Thus, even within the Muslim community, castes are categorized under three hierarchical rubrics- *Ashraaf, Ajlaaf, and Arzaals*, corresponding to their Hindu counterparts of Upper castes, Lower castes, and the untouchables or Dalits in the respective order (Ahmad 1978, Government of India 2006).

Intersectional Identity of Dalit-Muslim-Women

How can my teaching of a course on Dalit feminism be complete without taking into account the scholarship on Dalit-Muslim-women, i.e., female members of the now-politically active

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Pasmanda (a word of Persian root and alludes to the most backward) Muslims? But, Alas!! There isn't any!!!

Such severe exclusion of the multiply disadvantageous Pasmanda women from feminist, Dalit, and subaltern discourses reflects the alleged apathy of the feminists and the Dalit activists towards them. In fact, by not including Pasmanda women in their respective agenda, feminist and Dalit activists have further contributed towards their perpetual marginality.

Even as the corpus of Dalit literature grows, and discourses on Dalit lives make their way through distinct 'Centres for Dalit Studies' in most universities of India, the invisibility and exclusion of Dalit Muslim women in the University Curricula are glaringly conspicuous. Similar disavowal regarding Pasmandaaa women is witnessed in Women's Study Centres that were founded across India to mainstream feminist curricula. Scholarly articles and research projects too seem to be uninterested in recuperating the voices of these women from the abyss of oblivion. Popular literature, art, visual media, and cinema- all seem to be towing the same line.What is rather more intriguing is the manner in which the progressivism and prescience of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWA) did not consider it worthy to even acknowledge the intersectional identity of Dalit Muslim women. However, even the towering legacy of the Progressive Writers Movement of the early 20th century in ushering the dawn of radical Marxist literature and its role in transforming the Indian society by ameliorating the condition of the oppressed and exploited population failed to notice the plight of the multiply marginalized women. It is not that the stalwarts associated with this movement, such as Kaifi Azmi, Ali Sardar Jafri, Krishan Chandar, Sajjad Zaheer, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, and Ismat Chughtai did not write about the Dalits, for instance, one does find an adequate representation of the Dalits in Premchand's stories (*Mandir, Nek Bakkhti, Poos ki Raat, Kaffan, Doodh ki Qimat, Mantar*) and in the work of other writers such as Krishen Chander (*Kaalu Bhangi*), Sadaat Hasan Manto (*Naya Qanoon*), Razia Sajjad Zaheer (*Neech*), and Ismat Chughtai (*Maile ka Tokra* and *Do Haath*). Ironically, even the leading feminist icon of PWA, Ismat Chughtai, renowned for her outspokenness and for exposing the social vices prevalent within the inner quarters/Zanana of an Ashraf milieu, was found abnegating her moral duty on representing their voices. She wrote the famously infamous *Lihaaf*/The Quilt, in the early 1940s on the theme of lesbianism, the protagonist of which was an Ashraf woman of the Purdah society. Writing on the taboo topic of homosexuality was seen as a direct assault on Ashraf respectability. As a consequence of this, she was charged for encouraging obscenity through her writings. Notwithstanding all the disrepute that the court trial brought her, it was *Lihaaf* that made her famous and helped her establish herself as a bold, fearless feminist writer. Despite being a bold feminist writer, Ismat never proactively focused on the existential crisis of Dalit Muslim women. This could partially be attributed to the fact that- i) she remained in a state of denial about the oppressive

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and discriminatory practice of untouchability existing within the Ashraf groups for the simple reason that such practices are considered to be antithetical to the very concept of Islamic brotherhood, and;

ii) Owing to her privileged centrality as a writer, Ismat Chughtai enjoyed the prerogative of choosing to depict or erase the histories of people as the power to choose was informed by her predilections, prejudices, and preferences.

Can the sexed Subaltern speak? Politics of religion, caste, and gender

The politics of communitarian identity played by the forerunner of the Pasmanda Movement is evident in the non-representation of their women either on the political platform or in the development discourse. Underlying their unaccounted absence also reflects the insouciant attitude of the *Pasmanda* leaders towards them. Muting their voices over specific concerns raises questions about the very efficacy of the *Pasmanda* movement. In fact, the very foundation of the Pasmanda Movement was premised on the politics of caste-based reservations as recommended by the Mandal Commission in 1980, but the recommendations were implemented only in the 1990s. The recommendations were opposed tooth and nail by the non-reserved categories. It was in the tumultuous decade of the 1990s, that Dalit Muslims' organizations such as All India United Muslim Morcha (1993) and the All India Muslim Mahaz (1998) were formed to join the movement of political assertion by demanding reservations in government jobs on the pretext of their 'Dalitness'.

Though the category '*Pasmanda* Muslims' refers to the most downtrodden groups who indulge in demeaning and menial occupations such as cleaning, scavenging, butchery, bangle sellers, washermen, vegetable vendors, fishermen, potters, blacksmith, and weavers, this category, however, is fluid and accommodates even those castes, that are relatively well off. But a large majority of them are the most backward on all the indices of development. Educational backwardness and the concomitant un-employability add to their depravities. One is then forced to ponder as to how to make their distinctive intersectional identity visible to the mainstream feminists (Collins and Bilge 2016). How does one understand the lived experiences of Dalit Muslim women whose community claims to be distinct from the rest of the Muslim community? Can by documenting their stories, 'an 'Ashraf' upper-middle-class-English medium educated, urbanized woman do justice to the lived experiences of Pasmanda women? (Kazim 2021).

Gayatri C Spivak (1986) raised somewhat similar questions on deliberate exclusion and erasure of the history of multiply disadvantageous women, albeit in a different context. She

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vehemently critiqued western feminists for excluding the specific experiences of women from the Third World when they constructed a universal feminist subject. Owing to such blatant omissions, feminist movements have often been accused of ignoring the plight of women from the subaltern and disempowered groups for having dissimilar life experiences. Unsurprisingly then, until recently, even in India, upper caste and upper class, urban, educated feminists were charged with ignoring the plight of Dalit and tribal women.

In conclusion

It is high time that the Indian mainstream feminists, Dalit, and Muslim feminists collectively took cognizance of this gap in feminist scholarship. I have tried, through this article, to open up certain discomforting epistemic aporia within extant feminist and Dalit scholarship in a bid to accord visibility to the hitherto multiply marginalized Pasmanda women.

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