

## Chapter 3

### **A Symptomatic Reading of the Representation of Childhood in Select Autobiographies by Female Dalit Writers**

You've got a golden chance to learn

So learn and break the chains of caste.

Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast

Savitribai Phule

Thus went the clarion call given by one of the foremost Dalit feminists of India, Savitribai Phule to throw off the dual shackles imposed on Dalit women by the evils of gender and casteism. In the mid twentieth century, the condition of life that Dalit women lived was truly very disturbing. In this chapter, I would attempt to explore the complex but hostile environment in which the Dalit women spend their childhood, caught within the complex web of the combined politics of caste, class and gender, which evades any conception of homogeneity in the exploitation of childhood of an average Indian girl child. As Bama points out, Dalit girls learn to work as soon as they learn to walk (7). This chapter would also attempt to map the strenuous routine of the Dalit girl child— their exploitation as child labourers both at home and in factories, their sense of deprivation in terms of food, clothes and other basic necessities of life, sexual exploitation by both upper caste as well as Dalit males, child marriage, early pregnancies, domestic violence as well as the physical and psychological effects of marital rape and unwanted pregnancies on the tender psyche of the Dalit girl child.

The 1990s had been a crucial decade for feminist politics in India. There had been a radical shift in feminism when Dalit women began to negotiate their representation. So long, Indian feminism represented solely the voice of the upper caste and at most the middle class Savarna feminists and neglected the question of social justice. With the rise of Dalit feminism, the parameter of caste became crucial to feminist politics and a dire need was felt to analyse the feminist movement's deliberate indifference to caste. The most important factor, according to Sharmila Rege (3), which led to this awareness was the participation of the Savarna women in the protest against the implementation of the Mandal Commission's proposal to extend reservations to the OBCs (Other Backward Classes). Upper-caste women declared that they were against all kinds of reservations to save the nation from the hands of "unmeritorious" groups. The arguments of the upper-caste women had clear casteist and patriarchal connotations in their lamentation over what they considered to be the concern over the death of merit due to reservations. As Sharmila Rege recollects:

Elite Savarna girls protesting against Mandal displayed their anxiety (evident in the placards they used in their protests) about finding 'educated' husbands, thus expressing publicly their commitment to caste endogamy. The writings and manifestos of different dalit women's groups underlined the fact that the unmarked feminism of the 1970s had, in fact, been in theory and praxis a kind of brahmanical feminism. (Rege 3)

This indicates the extent to which these Savarna women had internalised the caste system's strict negation of exogamy. Thus Dalit feminism repudiates the categorisation of all women, irrespective of caste, as Dalits, which has been central to feminist politics. Gender is a significant factor of oppression in the microcosmic structure of the family and the macrocosmic structure of the society. A Dalit woman has to face gender discrimination for being a woman and economic and casteist exploitation for being a Dalit. As Shantabai

Dhanaji Dani, in her autobiography *For Us—These Nights and Days: Memories of Food and Hunger* recalls, Baba Saheb Ambedkar's had once said:

In the first place, we were Dalits. Then who among dalits was the most dalit? Babasaheb used to say that the dalit woman in your homes is the most dalit of all. A dalit woman's husband could impose his male ego on his wife. (qtd. in Rege 112)

In the Indian context, Dalit women's autobiography is a fairly recent phenomenon, not more than two decades old. According to Raj Kumar in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives*, the main reason for the delayed development of this genre of Dalit women's autobiography is their lack of education. Unimaginable poverty forces them to abandon their education and start earning their livelihood. Even if some of them, with tremendous strength of mind and zeal to advance their lot through education, somehow manage to battle poverty, they were and still often are subjected to tremendous social pressure to give up their education. Any attempt to improve the lot of these Dalit women by giving them a proper education and helping them to lead a respectable life by standing on their own feet was met by serious resistance by the Savarnas as well by the Dalit males (Kumar 221). Janabai Kachru Girhe, in her autobiographical narrative "Marankala", recalls how the other people in their Gopal community kept advising her father against sending her to school:

But they did not like my going to school and they said to Ba, "Bapya, stop this girl going to school. Otherwise, she will blacken your face. We won't have a face left in the entire gopal community. (qtd in Rege 312)

Janabai remembers how the entire community was of the opinion that studying would spoil her character and ultimately, a panchayat was called and the family is made to pay a hefty fine of nine rupees for having tried to educate their daughter. The judges refused to be convinced by any of the arguments of gender equality advanced by Janabai's father and

remained firm on the opinion that “girls, unlike boys, were like vessels of glass, if they are given freedom they would definitely bring shame to the community”(qtd. in Rege 320).

The obvious result was that most young Dalit girls had no option but to bow down to such societal pressure and remained illiterate or barely literate. Illiterate women cannot write their autobiographies. But these women, if given a chance can wonderfully narrate the tale of their joys and sorrows to someone who is interested in documenting their narrative voices. The greatest example of this is Sumitra Bhave’s *Pan on Fire* which is a collection of the verbal accounts of eight illiterate Dalit women narrating their life stories (Kumar 210). The practice of Dalit women writing their autobiographies began in Maharashtra and spread gradually to other states like Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, two states with a vibrant history of the Dalit movement. For the symptomatic reading of the traumatic childhood of the Dalit female children, the researcher, in this dissertation, would use three seminal texts which are all written in the autobiographical format— *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *A Life Less Ordinary* by Baby Halder and *Sangati* by Bama. These autobiographies, like many other Dalit women’s memoirs that came pouring in over the years, opened up and lay bare the sagas of continuous physical, mental and sexual exploitation that they had had to undergo. Life for a Dalit woman is a never-ending battle with hunger and diseases. Being continuously exposed to casteist violence, back-breaking labour and pregnancy after pregnancy without any access to medical facilities, it would probably be no exaggeration to claim that most Dalit women never get a chance to rest till they are dead.

Among the autobiographies written by women Dalit writers, Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) holds a unique position and deserves special mention, for it holds the credit of being the first Dalit woman’s autobiography in India. This autobiography, which appeared in *Stree* in Marathi language in 1982, depicts her life and experiences which date back to the 1940s. In fact, Kamble’s autobiography was published twenty years after it was

actually written. Kamble, in fact records how she used to be petrified of how her son and her husband would react when they would find out about her writing. Her fear was also not baseless, since her husband always called her an ignorant woman. Therefore, she hid her writings from them for almost two decades ( Kamble 147). The autobiography seriously engages with the experiences of the women of the Dalit community and the inhuman lives that they are forced to lead due to the dual burdens of casteism and patriarchy. In every page, this autobiography proves the hollow nature of the claim of the Savarna woman vis-à-vis their Dalit counterparts that Rege records in her book— that subaltern women are better off than the Savarna women, since they can at least publicly abuse or hit back at their drunken husbands (Rege 6). From times immemorial, Dalit women had had to beg for food from the upper caste houses, do their scavenging and engage in every other menial profession known to mankind . As if that is not enough, they have to endure continuous sexual exploitation by both their own men folk as well as the upper caste males. Jyotiba Phule in *Akhand* (verse) entitled *Kulambin* (woman of the labouring peasant caste), for example, enlists the labour of the women of the productive castes both inside and outside the household. He contrasts it with the *bhatin*'s (brahman woman's) leisure and playful activities (qtd. in Rege 35)

In spite of the reservation policy adopted by the Indian Government and the various schemes and scholarships offered to retain the Dalit girl child in schools and prevent their early marriages, the girl children of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities face tremendous difficulties in receiving education within an education system that has been dominated by Brahmanical values for centuries. Even though Dalits have been a part of the same education system, they have been deliberately taught that if they are to become a part of the hegemonic culture, they have to first unlearn their own culture. Hence, it naturally privileges upper caste students. Kancha Ilaiah says that the field of education carries the hegemonic culture that makes Dalits and more specifically Dalit women, experience the pain

of exclusion. Religion, morality, beauty, food habits and the concept of God, everything that is taught in the Brahmin dominated schools, according to Ilaiah, is fundamentally different from what Dalit and lower caste people learn in their community (12-18). Thus education, the access to which the Dalits, and especially the Dalit women, have got after much struggle, is ironically used as a weapon by the high castes to intimidate them and to impose on them a kind of inferiority complex. As an intertextual reference, we can recollect an incident that Urmila Pawar mentions in her autobiography, where the teacher, while handing her the twelve rupees of the scholarship money allotted by the government for Dalit students, advises her in an open class to use the money to buy soap to wash her clothes and to start bathing everyday. It seems, as if Urmila Pawar, even years after the incident, still shudders with embarrassment when she recollects the public humiliation that she had to face that day in class, as she became an object of joke for all her class-mates—a filthy girl who neither took a bath nor washed her clothes:

The boys stared at me. Now they knew that my clothes were dirty and I did not bathe every day. I died a million deaths at this humiliation. (Pawar 91)

Such deliberate abjection of Dalit students, under the pretext of disciplining them, is actually a sophisticated version of the ruthless Brahmanical violence that has been practised on the Dalits for centuries and often has serious social, psychological and moral repercussions on the helpless children, who end up losing their self confidence and develop mental stress.

From the time they are born, Dalit girls are discriminated against just for being female. This is because the elders of the house consider boys to be permanent members of the family since it is they who would look after their parents in their old age. On the other hand, the female children are thought to be a burden as they are to be raised, fed, clothed, protected from sexual predators of the high castes, only to be married off and transplanted to another

family, where their sole work would be to earn their livelihood by working from dawn to dusk, look after the household tasks, get bashed up by their husbands and mothers-in-law, sexually gratify their husbands and give birth to multiple children. Therefore, it is no wonder that Urmila Pawar records:

In fact, I was an unwanted child because I was a girl. When I was born, my cousin Govindadada wanted to throw me away into the dung heap. When I grew a little older, many would beat me. (Pawar 64)

In this context, we are here reminded of how Bama in her autobiographical narrative too talks about female infants being discriminated against and given less attention as compared to the male children. The baby boy in a Dalit household is never allowed to cry. The moment it starts crying, it is immediately picked up and breast-fed for a longer period of time. The girl, on the other hand, is weaned quickly. In other words, the boys are seen as the bearers of the family name and their health is considered more precious and is paid greater attention to by his parents than that of the girl child. Thus, even with their meagre resources, the Dalit families try their best to feed their male children whereas their girl children are treated solely as a source of free labour, both at home and outside. At home, the half nourished girl children clean vessels, draw water, sweep the houses, gather firewood and wash clothes. Even when they go out to play, they have to carry their younger siblings with them and mind them even when they play. Childhood is one of the most crucial phases in a person's life and a safe and healthy childhood is necessary for a child's all-round physical and mental development. But poverty forces these families to employ their children, especially girl children in various kinds of hazardous professions, both at home and outside to supplement their family income. Shantabai Dhanaji Dani, in her autobiographical narrative *For Us These Days and Nights* recalls how at a very tender age, her palms were filled with several cuts as she would help

her father to make thatched roofs, because that was the only way they could complete two or three thatched roofs and thus make both ends meet. (qtd. in Rege 98).

Poverty among the Dalit families in India is mostly chronic due to population pressure, unemployment and underemployment among adults. Illiteracy and lack of family planning among the adults leads them to have a huge number of children and the task of managing the household chores as well as the younger siblings falls mostly on the elder girl child. Therefore, the best years of the Dalit girl child's life, which should have been spent in acquiring proper education and engaging in sports and playful activities with her friends are spent in nursing her younger siblings. Moreover, since many of the Dalit males are drunkards with almost no source of income, it is the girl children who act as the sole bread earners of their families during their mother's repeated pregnancies, and more often than not, they act as child labourers in factories, which is not only an extremely dangerous profession for a child, but is a gross violation of her fundamental right, since the Indian Constitution through Article 24 explicitly prohibits the employment of children in mines and factories.

Bama in her autobiography *Sangati* talks about such a girl called Maikkanni whose father was a drunkard and had married another woman when he was already married (to Maikkanni's mother). He spent his time oscillating between his two wives, without contributing a penny towards the family of his first wife, that is, Maikkanni's mother. His only contribution towards the family was that every time he visited Maikkanni's mother, she was pregnant with a child. She could not even undergo tubectomy because her financial condition did not afford her the complete rest and post-operative care that the operation demanded. As her mother gave birth to seven children, one after the other, it is Maikkanni who sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the housework like scrubbing the cooking pots, collecting water, washing clothes, gathering firewood, going to shops and



cooking kanji. During her mother's pregnancies, she worked in the neighbouring match factory and the entire family lived on her income.

In spite of working both within and outside their houses, these girl children get the least share of the nutrition available in the family and the maximum share of the physical chastisement. These often made the lives of these young Dalit girls even more stressful, because in their homes resources are limited and their parents do not think twice before psychologically and physically abusing them. The parents themselves are the victims of extremely hard circumstances, which make them harsh, rejecting, insensitive, inconsistent in their treatment of their daughters. Shantabai Dhanaji Dani, in her autobiography *For Us These Days and Nights* recalls an incident when she had come back from school, extremely hungry, to find that there was no food in the house. She describes the agony of the young child in extremely moving terms:

As a child, it was difficult to control hunger. At least once in a day a full meal was needed. It was eight or nine hours since I had eaten. My intestines felt as if they were breaking inside my stomach. (96)

Unable to control her hunger, the small child had asked her neighbours for "just a quarter of a bhakri", with the result that her mother beats her up with a stick for the "crime" of having begged for food (96). Baby Haldar suffers from a similar experience when, for having told her friend that there was no food in their house, she was so brutally beaten up by her father that she is unable to go to school for the next few days. Urmila Pawar describes her father as "quite a thrasher" since he used to beat up his children so much. In fact, the very description that she provides of the father shows the kind of trauma that the continuous physical chastisement by the patriarch of the family had caused within the child:

When he was angry he looked like a monster, straight out of the pages of *Chandoba*, a Marathi children's magazine. When he was home he would behave as if torturing us, the children, was great fun. (30)

Such physical punishments are often the norm and are considered necessary for the socialization and the proper upbringing of the girl children. But such practices often cross the line to become unacceptable and abusive. On the other hand, instances of parental abuse is much less in the autobiographies of the Dalit male writers like Sharan Kumar Limbale and Om Prakash Valmiki which implies that often, the Dalit girl children are more likely to experience harsher parental disciplines than their male counterparts. As in all societies, the way Dalit children are treated by their parents are also a function of deep-seated cultural norms. In other words, it can be deduced from the autobiographies of the Dalit women that among the Dalits, there is a societal tolerance for the use of corporal punishment to discipline the girl child, since the Indian society and especially the Dalit society is an extremely patrilineal one in which the spiritual, economic and social norms of everyday life reflect an extreme preference for the male offspring and a corresponding denigration of the female children. Violence has a quality of percolating down from one level to the next, that is, from the less vulnerable to the more vulnerable. The upper caste Savarna man exploits the Dalit man, who in turn abuses and beats up his wife. The wife, in turn, vents out her frustration on her children, or more specifically the girl children, under the pretext of disciplining them. The reason behind such abuse stems from the various kinds of stresses like extreme poverty, continuously being at the receiving end of casteist violence, hunger, alcohol abuse, marital conflict and violence, large family sizes contrasted with their meagre income increase the probability of abuse of the girl children, who actually are the most defenceless of the lot. This kind of chastisement, which appears quite unnecessary to the common eye, actually stems from a pathological fear within the parent. The parent fears that the child might become

aware that he or she (the parent) is unable to fulfil his or her duty towards the child as a mother or a father. This is not due to negligence, but due to the fact that the parent himself or herself is helpless and is battling poverty and casteist violence everyday, both within the household and outside. This gives rise to a fear that if the child becomes aware of his or her status outside the family, it would potentially undermine his or her authority as a parent. This would, in fact, impact their relationship with their child(ren).

The message that is sent to the Dalit child through this kind of brutal corporal punishment is one of aggression. It destroys the confidence of the child and makes her feel that she is worthless, useless, unloved and unwanted. This message of aggression often has the “desired” effect on the girl’s psychological health later in life. Put differently, one important aim of unleashing this kind of physical violence on the child is to make the child internalise a message of violence and to believe that being a female, it is her “duty” to get beaten up time and again by the more powerful members of her family. Sudhir Kakar, in *The Inner World*, calls this the beginning of an Indian girl’s deliberate training in how to be a “good woman”, a woman, who later in her married life would be able to sail through all the bashings of her drunk husband and abusive mother-in-law (62). It is ironic, but true that physical punishment is used by Dalit parents to teach their daughters not to be aggressive, for, as Kakar points out, under the fear of punishment the girl child needs to be made to understand that the ‘virtues’ of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as skill and grace in all household tasks (63).

However, the continuous exposure to this kind of physical violence within their homes often exposes the child to extreme physical and mental stress, which inevitably results in clinical complications like delayed onset of menarche. The causes for this are many, the most important of them being anaemia which is extremely common in the Dalit female children, who are made to survive on rotten left-overs and for whom nutritious diet remains

just a dream. However, with no access to medical facilities, the delayed menarche is seen as some kind of lack or deformity within the girl for which she herself is to be held responsible. As a result a feeling of guilt or embarrassment is developed within the child, as if she has purposefully delayed the onset of her menarche. Bama, in *Sangati* describes such a girl and her ordeals in extremely moving terms:

Her elder sister was more than sixteen then. But she still hadn't come of age. People in the village gossiped about her and said she would never menstruate. (11)

This medical complication of the girl and the pressure of society to “make” her menstruate was a source of constant tension for this poor Dalit family. Her mother was dead and her father was a drunkard and as long as his children earned enough to pay for his liquor, he was least bothered about their medical complications. But her maternal grandmother and maternal aunt were extremely concerned, less about her not getting her periods, and more about what society would say about her not getting it:

Mariamma is getting quite old, but even now she hasn't developed breasts or anything. People say all sorts of terrible things just because she hasn't come of age. The girl took on too much when she was so little, that's why she has wasted away. (11)

As it is, a delayed onset of puberty is profoundly distressing to the adolescents affected by it, who continually compare themselves to their peers and find themselves lacking. Delayed puberty is a common clinical problem and not any incurable disease; all it needs is proper diagnosis that incorporates patience, astute observation and consideration of multiple potential etiologies. Far from such support, all that these young Dalit girls receive from their society is body-shaming which increases their stress and aggravates the hormonal disorders. There is always a suspicion within the poor illiterate Dalit society that the particular girl

might be jinxed or might be suffering from black magic or her entire birth might be inauspicious. Worse still, she even might be bisexual or a castrato. The poor Dalit families, who cannot afford any kind of medical treatment, increase the pressure on the poor girl child. Their attitude towards her seems to question that if others could menstruate, there was no reason as to why she could not do so too. Mariamma, however, is luckier, since her maternal grandmother takes her to the city to see gynaecologists in the government hospital, where she is diagnosed with anaemia. She is given medicines and told to come for follow-up after a certain period of time. However, even before the medicines could affect her body, the society, like dogs after some wounded animal, starts bombarding her maternal grandmother with uncomfortable questions, thus making the female body an object of politicization:

Even after all the pills and the medicines, Mariamma still did not come of age. Everyone who met Patti [her maternal grandmother] began to pester her , ‘Well, Vellaiamma, it seems that even though you gave her medicines from the town hospital, your granddaughter still hasn’t got her periods. (14)

However, it is only due to the medicines that her maternal grandmother had arranged for her from the Government hospital that Maikkani begins her menstruation normally. It must be mentioned here that Bama’s grandmother, in spite of being a very old and illiterate woman , had shown a sense of rationality, uncommon in her society. She belonged to a class which, at that time, thought black magic to be the cure of all diseases and was neither scientific nor rational enough to consult a doctor. So on an average consideration, such Dalit girl children with gynaecological problems are under tremendous family and peer pressure, while there are exceptional few, who are very rational and much more sympathetic to the problem, like Patti, Maikkani’s grandmother. An old illiterate woman, who should ordinarily have stuck to herbal medicines or different kinds of magic, which are generally promoted by an illiterate Dalit society, shuns such practices and takes the girl to a hospital. This proves that this kind of

matriarchal knowledge and rationality had always already been present within the Dalit societies, but it is simply due to the absence of the instruments of initiation, that this particular woman's thoughts had not been used by others. It is not just enough to possess a scientific temper and rationality, one has to actually exercise it and not be driven away by the average notions of the casteist inferiority complex. Patti's decision to seek medical help to normalise the menstrual flow in her granddaughter, driven solely by filial affection for the motherless grandchild should serve as an edifying illustration for not only the Dalit society, but also for all prejudicial social orders. Patti's action, in this respect, seems to question the entire notion of modernity within the Dalit society. Does being modern simply imply continuing to suffer in silence and bearing the taunts of society because a girl child within the family is suffering from delayed menarche? If they continued submitting to peer pressure and becoming prejudicial to women, how at all will the Dalit society attain complete emancipation? As in most societies, Dalit societies, in dealing with their children and especially their girl children, have some inbuilt, intrinsic weaknesses which act as a hindrance to a healthy girl-child rearing. This is especially true during the years of puberty, when a girl child needs more than parents or guardians; they need parents who can become their close friends. So Patti's attitude in this respect shows what should have been a guardian's correct attitude to the delayed menarche of a girl.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that had the same issue of the delayed onset of puberty be seen in a Dalit boy child, the child would not have been subjected to this sort of stigmatisation. This is because a girl's growth, in a Dalit society, or in any Indian male-dominated society, becomes very conspicuous due to the physical growth taking place inside her body, whereas the boy's physical growth is not so conspicuous simply due to the physiological differences in the male and female bodies. In other words, it is as if a question mark is being drawn on Maikkani's body., which would never be etched out on a male body,

even if his puberty is delayed. Put alternatively, Maikkani's body becomes a sort of conspicuous space for contestation and interrogation. The grandmother Patti, by taking a step which is exceptionally bold for a poor, illiterate Dalit woman had unknowingly turned the binary of the old as prejudicial and the modern as scientific on its head. It is extremely necessary for these young Dalit girls, in their miserable childhood, to at least receive the protection and firm helping hand of women like Patti. She had shown, through her bold act, that to fulfil her role as a matriarch of the family, if an old woman like her could consult modern technology, then there was no reason why other guardians too should not take the childhood care of their girl-children seriously.

It is not only the delay in menstruation, but also the onset of menstruation that spelled doom for the young girls of the Dalit family. They had no access to any kind of facilities that ensure menstrual hygiene because their families simply cannot afford it, and neither do they undergo any kind of counselling which is extremely important before and during menarche, to get the girl child to understand the changes that are suddenly taking place in her body. The mothers of these children have to work from dawn to dusk to make both ends meet, and when they are not working, they are giving birth to children. Therefore, it is absurd to expect those whose lives are spent entirely in finding food for their children, to find time to clarify their girl children's misinformation regarding puberty or to guide her regarding menstrual hygiene.

Thus, menstruation comes to these young girls with a lot of taboo, and more often than not, unhygienic and unnecessary taboos. Euphemisms serve a purpose; they give us words to talk about things that are considered culture specific taboos. Thus in the major part of the Hindu society, and more so in the Dalit society- due to its extreme poverty, illiteracy and lack of medical knowledge, the stigma of menstruation turns into a form of misogyny. Negative taboos condition these young girls to understand menstruation to be something hidden and something shameful. Thus, by not naming a thing, the women of the Dalit

families reinforce the idea that the thing should not be named. Urmila Pawar describes how menarche was described as “the touching of the crow” (Pawar 123). The implication is simple. The crow is a scavenger and a dirty animal and during menstruation, a woman too is generally considered to be dirty and untouchable, and therefore, to spare themselves the shame, Urmila Pawar recollects how they used to keep menstruation as a closely guarded secret. The lives of these Dalit girl children became miserable after they attained puberty, simply because due to their unimaginable poverty, they had not the means to have a safe and hygienic menstruation. As Baby Kamble writes, mothers found it difficult to even arrange for adequate clothes for their menstruating daughters:

When girls reached puberty, their mothers would pull out some dirty rags from a bundle and put them on their bodies to somehow cover them. That was all, by way of clothing. A rag would be tied around the waist; its ends pulled between the legs and tucked up at the waist. (8)

Thus, the onset of menstruation put these young girls at a curious place, somewhere between sanctity and seclusion. It was almost as if they had been gifted something valuable and the gift was a grand welcome to womanhood. But it also urged them to remember that womanhood was a burden that she would now have to carry around, because now she would always have to protect herself from sexual predators, both from the high castes as well as men from their castes and even uncles and cousins of their own families. The only solution to this is what Patti, the maternal grandmother of Bama spells out in *Sangati*:

As soon as she gets her periods, you [Bama’s mother] stop her from studying, hand her over to some fellow or the other, and be at peace....How are you going to keep a virgin girl at home and not get her married? Everyone will tittle-tattle about it.



Keeping young women at home is like keeping a fire in your belly. How long will you protect her, tell me? (10)

A similar incident is noticed in Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary*, when Baby comes back from the hospital with her clothes stained in blood for the first time. In other words, the young girl had had her menarche. The girl, still only a child, is extremely disturbed by the fact that she now becomes the cause of continuous fights breaking out between her father and stepmother. The step-mother began putting pressure on her husband to get rid of the girl by marrying her to the very next man who came their way. When she understood the reason of her step-mother's insecurity, she was dumbstruck. The young child specifically heard them say that once she had had menarche, she could not be kept in the house and the sooner the twelve year child was married off, the better. In order to avoid further trouble from his suspicious new wife, her father too began to create a distance from his daughter. Baby Haldar seems to be permanently scarred by the shock and humiliation caused by her mother suspecting an incestuous relation between her and her own father, just because she had begun menstruating:

Did my stepmother really think that I, a twelve-year-old-kid, could have such an abnormal relationship with her father, that his wife needed to be worried about that? To me, this was unimaginable, but that was precisely what my stepmother thought and that made things extremely difficult for me . (Halder 25)

Thus, a fear of oedipality is actually working within the stepmother. She knew that the girl would naturally be attached to the biological father and feared that the prohibitive order might break down between the father and daughter. Since she is the step-mother and not the biological mother of the child, she had not seen Baby grow from infancy into a menarchical woman in front of her eyes, and as is expected, had not been much involved with the child.

So the general constructions of oedipality, working within her mind, makes the step-mother fear that even a biological pair of father and daughter might not have a safe relationship, especially after her menarche, when she is capable of fertility. Titillations, often unconscious, are not unnatural. Any such relation, if it does take place between a father and his biological daughter, does not escape the nomenclature of perversion, but such cases are common all over the world. So what Baby's stepmother is actually afraid of is perversion. This amply proves that in Dalit families, where reason was scarce due to hunger, poverty and humiliation, the onset of a girl's menarche proved to be a further cause of worry, because these girls were extremely vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse. In this respect, it is worthwhile to quote Sudhir Kakar's words in his path breaking psychoanalytic study of the Hindu childhood:

The traditional ideal holds that a girl should be married soon after her first menstrual period, for it is feared that 'if she remains long a maiden, she gives herself to whom she will. (71)

In other words, young girls in the Hindu families ,just after their first menstruation tend to be, consciously or unconsciously, sexually abused by the male members of the family, like their uncles or cousins. This is equally true for the Dalit families as well, because in these families the girl children are mostly left uncared for and from a very tender age, have to fend for themselves, The reason behind this stems, according to Kakar from the fact, that girls in Hindu families are often neglected and given much less attention by her parents and grandparents as compared to the boy, for the very obvious reason that she is considered to be "an unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute to the family income and who, upon marriage, will take away a considerable part of her family's fortune as dowry" (Kakar 58). However, it cannot be denied that a person cannot lead a life completely devoid of any kind of love or affection in an atmosphere of neglect. In such a situation, often the girl child

tends to gravitate towards some other member of the family who, according to Kakar, gives “a little girl the kind of admiration and sense of being singled out as special that a male child more often receives from many”(61). And this often becomes the starting point of sexual abuse for the female child, for children are often unable to distinguish between love and sexual abuse, and mistake the latter for the former. Even if they are able to understand that what was happening to them should not happen, children are often unable to express to their elders that they are being sexually abused. Moreover, Dalit female children are under the additional threat of being sexually abused by the upper caste males, a threat which does not loom over the caste Hindu female children. Further, all abuses need not be sexual, but physical and casteist violence is often used by the upper caste men to torment and victimise the Dalit child, and when the child has been ‘tamed’ the abuser advances to sexual violence. An incident recorded in Urmila Pawar’s autobiography *The Weave of My Life* is worth mentioning here. She mentions a caste Hindu priest, for whom she initially held a lot of respect, especially due to his awe-inspiring looks. The childish admiration for the man, who in an atmosphere of untouchability, used to distribute Prasad among the Dalit children is evident in the way she describes him. He was very fair, with a face that looked as if it were carved out of marble. However, Urmila’s image of this man is shattered when she sees a Komti girl called Ulgawwa coming out of the temple, petrified and her face wet with tears. The priest came out of the temple after sometime. Although Urmila Pawar was too young to understand that the girl had been sexually abused, she could understand that all was not right with what she had witnessed. Her recording of this experience is brief but extremely loaded with the trauma that she had inwardly felt on witnessing the incident, “Suddenly I was frightened of the priest. I wanted to ask Aaye why Ulgawwa was crying but could not do so” (66).

The direct result of such a danger of sexual abuse looming perpetually over their girl children post-puberty, child marriage is an unavoidable reality among the Dalit families. In Dalit cultures, due to extreme illiteracy, lack of medical knowledge, superstition and their being perpetually answerable to the high-caste Hindus for every big or small decision of their lives, non-virgin girls are considered ruined and unsuitable for marriage. Hence, Dalit families try to marry off their girl children to ensure that they remain virgins until marriage, to prevent conception out of wedlock and also to maximise her childbearing years. That the fear of the parents was not baseless is proved by the attempted sexual abuse of Mariamma that Bama describes in *Sangati*. Once Mariamma, feeling thirsty while gathering firewood had gone to drink water from a pumpset. The pumpset belonged to a high caste man Kumarasami Ayya, who finding her alone, attempts to rape her, but luckily she escapes. But it is she who is falsely accused of being found in a compromisable position with a boy and punished with a fine too heavy for a Dalit family to pay. And the most ridiculous nature of the entire public trial of the girl is that neither is she allowed to say a word in self-defence nor are the witnesses who were ready to testify in her favour allowed to say a word. Put differently, even before the trial had begun, the innocent child had been branded with the scarlet letter of being a girl of “questionable character”. Her life is ruined, since once her reputation had been spoilt, finding a decent groom for her became impossible. Instead of providing consolation or assurances of help to the distressed family, the society continued victimising them and blaming Maikkani for an offence she had not even committed:

If she had only behaved herself, who would have said anything? Is there smoke without fire? Who’s going to marry her now that she’s lost her reputation? (41)

The men are also more than ready to take young girls for wives because a child bride is considered easier to control and shape into an “obedient wife”. Thus, because of the cultural emphasis on virginity, child marriage is seen as a legitimate way to protect Dalit girls from

the hungry blood-thirsty sharks surrounding them from all sides. It is not that some women, like Bama's mother, do not have the desire to educate their daughters so that their lives can be bettered, but they too are helpless before the pressure of society which sees marriage as a cover of respect and protection for these young girls. By not going to school or by no longer playing with their friends, it reduces the risk of the girl child being sexually active outside the house or being harassed or, more often than not, raped while commuting. The menarche of a Dalit girl brings in a fear in her family regarding her safety and "respectability". They believe that their daughters, who have reached child-bearing age are less likely to be physically or sexually assaulted, harassed or forcibly impregnated if they are married and have the protection of a man. In other words, the poor Dalit families, having no way to protect their girl children from the upper caste sexual predators, consider it better to get her married while she was still a child than to be raped or made a mistress of an upper caste man and forced to bear his illegitimate children.

However, if the condition of the Dalit girl children in the homes of their parents was bad, with marriage they fell from the frying pan to the fire. Getting married when they are biologically and psychologically not even ready for it, often has terrible repercussions on the lives of these girls, since they are often not matured enough to deal with the challenges that married life poses. Urmila Pawar, for example, talks about her sister Shantiakka's sister-in-law, Hiriakka, who was married off when she was merely a child. But she returned home for good only a few days after her marriage because she was ignorant about sex and terribly scared of her husband. But she had conceived in the few days spent with her husband and later gave birth to a daughter. Baby Halder's husband too was an absolute stranger to her and many years her senior. The experience of her first sexual encounter with him, after marriage was also something that in modern terminology would be called marital rape:

...he caught hold of me and pulled me roughly towards him. He put his hand on my breast and told me in a gentle voice that he did not like living like this and he no longer wanted to do so. And so saying, he began to press his body against mine. I started to cry out in fear. But then, I thought, what's the point? I'll just wake everyone by shouting like this, so I shut my eyes and my mouth tightly and let him do what he wanted. I just endured everything. ( 37)

The word “endured” in the passage describing marital rape quoted above is extremely disturbing, but it proves beyond doubt that these young Dalit girls, barely twelve or thirteen years of age, do not get married, but rather they “endure” marriage and conjugal relations, simply because they are helpless and do not have any other options. They become the victim of the “sacrosanct” institution of marriage that is dished out by the Hindu society in general and the Dalit society in particular. In both the instances that the researcher has quoted above, the girls are far below the age of consent, but are victims of marital rape, which is the most common and repugnant form of masochism hidden behind the iron curtain of marriage. Yet such sexual relations with girls too young to give consent or even understand the implications of conjugal relations enforce the denial of the girl child's sexual agency and bodily integrity.

The ordeal of the young child bride, however, does not end here, for she is treated as simply as a source of unpaid labour by their mothers-in-law, who generally perceive these young brides as a source of threat to her position in the household and in the life of her son. They grow allergic towards the young girl, often not yet in her teens, who comes into her son's life. She, often unnecessarily tends to blame, victimise and even seek revenge on the helpless girl for the sense of rejection that she had experienced when her son got married and felt her fear of being finally and fully “replaced” as the primary feminine love in her son's life come true before her eyes. Sudhir Kakar very rightly points out that at this point, several disturbing questions tend to arise in the mind of a son's mother. She has a fear that her son

might reject her in favour of his wife. It is this fear that causes the mother-in-law to see her daughter-in-law as her potential competitor and victimise her. She is plagued by questions like whether the young wife will cause her husband to neglect his duties as a son. Will social tradition and family pressure be sufficient to keep the husband-wife bond from developing to a point where it threatens the interests of other family members? Will 'sexual passion' inspire such a close relationship in the bridal couple that the new girl becomes primarily a wife rather than a daughter-in-law and her husband transfers his loyalty and affection to her rather than remaining truly a son of the house? (Kakar 74)

The only solution to such a fear in the mind of the mother-in-law, according to Kakar, is to try her level best to make sure that her son and daughter-in-law do not develop any interest in (let alone affection for) each other and the easiest way to do so is to let them be effectively alone together only for very brief periods during the night. Kakar further points out that if women's folk-songs are any indication, even these brief meetings are furtive affairs; there is hardly a song which does not complain of the ever-wakeful *sas* (mother-in-law) and *nanad* (sister-in-law) preventing the bride from going to her husband at night. To give effect to this scheme, Baby Kamble describes in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* how the tiny tot of a daughter-in-law, who still hadn't attained puberty was, immediately on entering her husband's home, was asked to make the *bhakri* and if she ever over-roasted one, she was publicly shamed by calling the entire neighbourhood to witness how inept at household work she was. She had to grind the grain while the mother-in-law would find fault with her performance of the task and direct select abuses at her mother, for not having taught her daughter the skills necessary to run the household.

However, the real days of trouble for the young girl began after she attained puberty in her in-law's house. The mother-in-law used to do everything possible in her power to keep the young bride away from her husband, both physically and mentally. In fact, Baby Kamble

describes how the elder women of the community further instigated the mother-in-law against the daughter-in-law saying that she would draw her son away from him using her sexual prowess. The mother-in-law, in her turn, poisoned the mind of the young husband against his wife and raised questions about her character. Often, these doubts were extremely baseless in nature, as in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, we find a mother-in-law accusing her daughter-in-law of having seduced the former's husband, that is, the daughter-in-law's father-in-law.

Unable to bear such torture, often the young children made a desperate attempt to escape the *Chakravuh* in which they had been trapped in the name of marriage, but no escape was possible. In fact, by attempting to escape, these young children, barely in their teens, simply invited further misfortune upon themselves. Babytai recalls how, one in every hundred women had a disfigured or a broken nose, punishment to escape the torture at home. Women with broken heads and backs were also not a rare sight. Yet, since fear gives a person courage, some of these young girls did not give up their attempts to escape from the back-breaking labour and hellish torture of their in-laws' house and go back to their paternal home in the darkness of the night. But even then there was no respite. No sooner did they reach their natal homes than they were sent back by their fathers. Urmila Pawar records that even her father, who was a progressive school-teacher and hugely supported his daughter's education and taking up a job, considered marriage to be so sacrosanct that he absolutely refused to entertain or get involved in any of his young niece Sushila's complaints about her drunkard husband. Sushila's husband and mother-in-law tortured her, but each time Sushila came home, Urmila's father would insist on sending her back after a good meal.

On a conclusive note, no Indian can refuse that providing basic minimum healthcare facilities to all the citizens, irrespective of his or her caste, sex or place of birth is one of the important aims of governance since 2000 when India signed the Millennium Development



Goal to combat poverty, hunger, gender inequality, illiteracy, malnutrition, maternal and child mortality. The United Nations Millennium Development Goal incorporates eight goals which all 191 UN member states have agreed to attempt to reach by the year 2015. Yet, the condition in which the Dalit girls grow up , suffering continuous domestic violence in both their paternal as well as their husband's home show that the State has not been able to fulfil the promise to those who lie at the lowest rungs of the social ladder, especially the girl children of the socially and economically backward classes. Violence for them is an inseparable part of their lives. Such violence against the helpless Dalit girl children threatens not only their survival and health but also their emotional well-being and future prospects. The violence that they experience may be physical, sexual, and emotional and also manifest itself as neglect, for being a girl child and not a boy child, for being a Dalit and not a Savarna. Yet the framers of our Constitution had dreamt of an India where every child, irrespective of his or her sex, religion or caste, shall have the right to a safe and unbullied childhood. But the reading of the picture of their childhood painted by the female Dalit writers somewhat makes us, as responsible citizens of India, question ourselves that have we betrayed their dreams?