

## Chapter 3

### Dalit Women and Marathi Dalit Theatre

#### 3.0 Introduction:

In this chapter, I attempt to explain how Dalit women characters are different from upper caste women characters. They are distinct from each other since unlike upper caste women characters, they are victims of a combination of caste, class and gender discrimination. Dalit women also differ from upper caste women in terms of how they are represented and their educational status largely portrayed as uneducated or partially educated. Apart from these differences, they also differ from each other in how they are represented in plays. It is seen that upper caste women are given more space than Dalit women as they appear on stage whereas Dalit women are represented through either upper caste women or Dalit men.

In this chapter, I endeavour to explain the Dalit women characters as victims of epistemic violence. In Marathi plays, written by both, Dalit and non-Dalit dramatists, Dalit women characters are seen to be victims of epistemic violence as they are silenced for their behaviour which differs from upper caste women characters. They are silenced to obstruct them from entering public places which are dominated by upper castes and educated Dalits. They are also victims of systemic violence which is exerted through institutions, controlled by the upper castes. Epistemic and systemic violence overlap in the case of Dalit women, therefore violence against them is explained simultaneously.

I also try to explain how Dalit women characters are made victims of 'brutal violence.' Dalit women characters are physically and sexually assaulted by upper caste male characters, especially belonging to the landlord class. 'Brutal violence' against Dalit women characters is noticed in Marathi plays, *Lokkatha* 78 (Mumbai:1978) *Purush* (Mumbai:2006) and *Wata-Palwata* (Pune:1997). Though these plays portray Dalit women as victims of systemic

violence, they differ from each other with respect to how Dalit women are perceived. In *Purush* (Mumbai:2006), a Dalit woman character is represented as a victim of class and gender violence whereas *Wata-Palwata* (Pune:1997) depicts Shewanta, a Dalit woman character as a victim of caste and gender violence.

Apart from the portrayal of Dalit women characters as victims of epistemic, systemic and brutal violence, they are represented as victims of Dalit patriarchy. Dalit women characters are denied centre-space in Marathi Dalit theatre.

### **3.1 The Difference between Upper Caste Women and Dalit Women**

The upper caste and Dalit women characters are different in terms of class, education, and the language they speak. In the selected Marathi plays, the upper caste women characters are portrayed as belonging to a class higher than that of Dalit women. The distinction between them also lies in their educational status. The upper caste women characters are educated while Dalit women characters are represented as either educated or partially educated. The difference in terms of education causes linguistic disparity between the upper caste and Dalit women in the play. The former speaks a variety of language which is recognized as the language of public places and the upper caste locality, therefore upper caste women get an access to public places but Dalit women are not allowed access to such places.

#### **3.1.1 The Difference between Ambika and Maya in *Purush***

In *Purush*, written by Jaywant Dalvi, the parallel between Ambika, an upper caste character and Maya, a Dalit character, is drawn in order to show upper caste and Dalit women on par as far as violence against them is concerned. Both are victims of male chauvinism because they are represented to be victims of sexual violence, perpetuated by men, belonging to a class having control over government institutions. Khanderao Patil, a political leader sexually assaults Maya Gawai and as he has control over institutions like police and judiciary and

therefore gets acquitted by the court. Gulabrao, like Khanderao Patil, is also a political leader who controls institutions like police. He sexually assaults Ambika when she goes to meet Gulabrao for demanding donation for the organization in which she works. Moreover, they differ from each other with respect to how violence against them is represented.

Ambika belongs to a Gandhian middle-class family. Her father is a retired school teacher, who has taken part in the freedom struggle. She does social work along with Siddharth, a Dalit character and supports him economically — as unlike her, he is unemployed. She does not believe in caste discrimination as she scolds her mother for calling Siddharth a low caste. The conversation between Tara, her mother and Ambika is so subtle that one may find it difficult to note that Tara uses such an expression for Siddharth. The following conversation between Tara and Ambika brings out Ambika's views about caste:

Ambika: But he (Siddharth) is not like that...! Therefore  
I like him... (Looking at Tarabai sarcastically)  
Even if he is from low...  
Tara: (irritated) Ambu! Don't taunt me indirectly!  
I never called him a low caste...!  
Ambika: You always say so, Aai! I know it ...  
Even if you say so in my absence...<sup>1</sup> (Act I)

Ambika also expresses sympathy for Maya Gawai, a Dalit woman character who is raped by Khanderao Patil, a landlord. (Further, she equates her with Maya Gawai when she becomes a victim of sexual assault, by Gulabrao, a political leader. However, Ambika appears to express sympathy for Maya because she does not make difference between her and Maya as she is of the opinion that they are sexually assaulted because they are women who are victims of

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<sup>1</sup> Dalvi. Jaywant. *Purush*. Mumbai: Mumbai: Majestic Parakashan, 2006. p.18

characters, belonging to a class which is politically dominant, whose castes are not mentioned. It may be because they are represented as a dominant class.

Nevertheless, Siddharth sees the difference between Ambika and Maya. He finds Maya more vulnerable to violence because of her educational and economic condition. She is economically poor and unable to express her anger against caste discrimination because she is uneducated. He is of the opinion that Ambika is better placed because she is educated and aware of exploitation, based on caste, class and gender. Siddharth tells Ambika how she is different from Maya in the following quotation:

Siddharth: How can Maya Gawai and you be equal? She  
(Maya) is illiterate and meagre. She is not aware of  
her rights. You could stand independently. <sup>2</sup> (Act II)

The difference between Ambika and Maya Gawai has been noticed by Siddharth only as other characters draw a parallel between them at the level of their gender identity in order to prove that women are victimized irrespective of their caste and class differences. It is noticed in the beginning of the play that upper caste women, Tara and Mathu, sympathise with Maya Gawai and look at violence against Maya as an example of violence against women irrespective of caste and class differences.

The difference between Ambika and Maya is also noted as far as how they are represented in the play. Ambika appears on stage to express her views about caste and even about sexual assault on her to seek justice. However, Maya Gawai and sexual assault on her is informed to the audience through radio news. She is further introduced by Mathu, an upper caste woman character who expresses anger against Khanderao Patil, a political leader who sexually assaults Maya:

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<sup>2</sup> Dalvi. Jaywant. *Purush*. Mumbai: Mumbai: Majestic Parakashan, 2006. p.51

Mathu: I am speaking the truth...I got angry after reading the news in the morning...He (Patil) raped a Dalit girl...when his brother questions him, he (Patil) blinded him...on top of that he gets acquitted by the court. (Angrily) I wish to go to Akola and lynch him (Patil).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, at the level of caste and class, Ambika and Maya Gawai differ from each other. Apart from this, they also stand in contrast to each other as far as how they are represented in the play. Maya is represented through upper caste women characters whereas Ambika remains present on stage and expresses herself.

### **3.1.2 The Difference between Mrs. Abhyankar and Rakhma in *Zhunj***

The difference between upper caste women and Dalit women is reflected in the play, *Zhunj*, by Madhukar Toradmal. This difference is represented through the portrayal of Mrs. Abhyankar, an upper caste woman character, and Rakhma, a Dalit woman character. They do not meet each other but the contrast between them is noticed during a meeting in the college in which the allegation against Professor Gaikwad, a Dalit character, is discussed. Professor Gaikwad is promoted to the post of principal after Mr. Abhyankar's death. His promotion is despised by the upper caste characters, especially his colleagues, Rishi and Chavan. They make Sindhu, a library attendant, to make false allegations of sexual assault on Professor Gaikwad.

Mrs. Abhyankar is the wife of the former principal, Mr. Abhyankar, who dies in an accident. After his death, she leaves the college quarters and hands over the keys to the newly appointed principal, Professor Gaikwad. Before leaving the college quarter, she advises Professor Gaikwad to carefully follow what principal Abhyankar had said to him concerning his duties

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<sup>3</sup> Dalvi. Jaywant. *Purush*. Mumbai: Mumbai: Majestic Parakashan, 2006. p.05

as principal of the college. He wants him to be a human being and not a person belonging to any race, class and caste. She advises him in the following quotation:

I understand but keep in mind. You cannot be  
Gaikwad in this chair (principal). You must be  
Abhyankar. You should not be just Abhyankar.  
You must do what he could not do and  
he attempted to do so. ...Human! Who is not  
fair, not black, not Brahmin, not Mahar, not  
owner, not slave not the rich and not poor  
like pure human...pure human!<sup>4</sup> (Act I Scene III)

Mrs. Abhyankar advises Professor Gaikwad because her husband had cordial relations with him. She even appears during the meeting in which the allegations against Professor Gaikwad are discussed. Sindhu, an upper caste woman character, alleges that Professor Gaikwad has assaulted her at his residence in the college. Mrs. Abhyankar appears in the meeting and testifies in favour of Professor Gaikwad. Her testimonial proves him innocent as she has been respected by committee members who are discussing the allegation. (Toradmal, 1982: 67)

Rakhma, a Dalit woman character, lives with Professor Gaikwad in a Dalit locality. She has been living with him since his wife's death in order to look after the dead wife's son. She and Professor Gaikwad share a relationship, which is not defined in the play, but other Dalit characters call her *vahini* (*Bhabhi*). When Professor Gaikwad becomes the principal of the college, he wants her to marry him and change her language because he thinks that his relationship with her and her language are not acceptable to the upper caste people in the college. She refuses to marry him and change her language as she does not want to leave the Dalit locality where she feels comfortable. (Toradmal, 1982:14-15)

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<sup>4</sup> Dalvi. Jaywant. *Purush*. Mumbai: Mumbai: Majestic Parakashan, 2006. p.21

Sindhu, an upper caste woman character, who works in the college library, makes an allegation against Professor Gaikwad of sexual assault. In order to find the truth, the college committee members organize a meeting. Before the meeting, upper caste characters like Rishi and Chavan raise questions about the relation between Rakhma and Professor Gaikwad. In order to save Professor Gaikwad, Rakhma marries him and attends the meeting.

In the meeting, when Sindhu makes the allegation against Professor Gaikwad, she becomes angry and uses a variety of language against Sindhu which is, according to upper caste characters, not suitable for a place like the college. Chavan, an upper caste character, equates her language with the Dalit locality and asks the committee members to order her to leave the meeting which she does. (Toradmal. 1982:64)

Thus, Professor Gaikwad's approach towards Mrs. Abhyankar and Rakhma brings out the difference between them. He seems to be under the influence of Mrs. Abhyankar. After her husband's death, she leaves the college quarter, assigned to her husband, Mr. Abhyankar who was principal of the college. Before leaving the college quarter she advises Professor Gaikwad to be human like Mr. Abhyankar and he accepts to do so without any argument. On the other hand, Gaikwad does not take Rakhma with him to the college quarters when he becomes principal of the college because of her views about marriage and her language. He does not accept her views about marriage and language and finds it uncomfortable to take her as she is living in a Dalit locality. It seems to me that he may be led by an upper caste perception of morality that does not allow him to take Rakhma with him. They also differ from each other in respect to how they are treated in the meeting. It is the difference between varieties of language they speak which makes people in the meeting treat them differently. It appears to me that Mrs. Abhyankar is well received because unlike Rakhma, she is educated and her language suits the so-called decorum of the meeting which is governed by upper castes.

### **3.1.3 The Difference between Hema and Shewanta in *Wata-Palwata***

*Wata-Palwata* is a play that brings out the difference between three generations of Dalit activism which shows how the activists differ from each other. This is seen in terms of how they perceive Dalit activism. The first generation finds liberation in Buddhism as it has been influenced by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's idea of Buddhism because religion is their forte. The second generation seems to be leaning towards rational understanding of castes as it believes in taking decisions concerning caste discrimination and anti-caste demonstration rationally which is negated by the first generation which seems to be emotional as far as its attachment to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) and Buddhism is concerned. The third generation, on the other hand, believes in a militant manner to deal with caste discrimination. (Sathe, 2015,1041-44)

Apart from differences among three generations of Dalit activism, the play also brings out the difference between Hema, an upper caste woman character and Shewanta, a Dalit woman character. Apart from their caste differences, they also differ from each other in how they are represented.

Hema and Shewanta are introduced in the beginning of the play, but the way they are introduced makes them different from each other. Hema appears on stage along with Kaka, a Dalit character. This is shown through their conversation. Hema has married Satish, a Dalit college teacher. She is of the opinion that she has given up her caste identity as an upper caste by marrying outside her caste. However, it is Kaka who reminds her that she cannot get rid of her caste identity just by marrying outside her caste. It seems that Hema would like to forget her caste identity but Kaka always reminds her caste identity and Hema blames him by saying:

...But you are not ready to forget? For the last  
six months, you have been staying with us and you

have not missed a single day to mention my caste. <sup>5</sup>

(Act I Scene I)

Apart from Hema's caste identity, by discussing Shewanta who needs an experience certificate so that they can enroll for a teacher training course, they bring in the notion of systemic violence rather subtly. Kaka wants to help her as he has asked Satish to get a certificate from his college but he does not do so because he thinks it to be illegal because Shewanta has not taught in any institution. When Hema says that Satish is against getting a fake certificate, Kaka gets angry and says that he will manage to get it from someone else. Thus, showing that there is a practical way of operation which people indulge in without recourse to morality.

Kaka manages a certificate from Dasrao Joshi, a Brahmin, who works in the college in which Satish works. Before asking him for a certificate, he gives more information about Shewanta in order to explain the need for the certificate. Again, the interaction implies that there is systemic violence. Kaka gives the audience the story of Shewanta to subtly bring in the violence that the system does to her. He says that Shewanta has lost her husband and income source, therefore she wants to continue her education by enrolling for a teacher training programme. He informs Dasrao Joshi about the plight of Shewanta in the following manner:

Gopya (Shewanta's husband) died last year.

A truck ran over him. Now she is a widow.

No one is close to her. She has cleared matric.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in the beginning of the play, both Hema and Shewanta are introduced but the way they are introduced brings out how caste situates one and the notion of systemic and epistemic violence or inadequacy of resources as part of the caste issue the play highlights. Hema is

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<sup>5</sup> Bhagat, Datta. *Wata-Palwata*. Pune: Continental, 1997. p.02.

<sup>6</sup> Bhagat, Datta. *Wata-Palwata*. Pune: Continental, 1997.p.11

present on stage when she is introduced, whereas Shewanta is introduced as an absentee character. Kaka, a Dalit character introduces her to Hema and Dasrao Joshi. This complicates the dynamics of the play.

### **3.2 Epistemic and Systemic Violence against Dalit Women**

Epistemic violence is defined as “a consequence of epistemic injustice, that is, the structural prerogative that a system of knowledge, self-perceived as more accurate and valuable, has over another system of knowledge, which it deems to be inferior and uncertain.”<sup>7</sup> As it is defined as a system of knowledge, dominating another system of knowledge, it significantly contributes to understand upper caste domination which is located in a system of knowledge that assists upper castes’ domination over lower castes and Dalits. Epistemic violence, perpetuated by upper castes, is quite visible in terms of Dalit women because Dalit women are more deprived of basic resources like education than Dalit men who also unknowingly contribute to the epistemological subjugation of Dalit women.

Epistemic violence against Dalit women characters is perpetuated by upper caste as well as by Dalit male characters, unknowingly. Epistemic violence is also employed in order to try to silence and stop Dalit women characters from entering public places. It is curiously shown in the play through the use of language. One of the reasons of them being denied access to public places is because they are kept out of education by the caste system. Not being educated as well as speaking a language that does not suit public places, which are dominated by upper castes and educated Dalits, especially Dalit men shows how language is at one level a systemic tool to keep them outside the system or at least control them.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.debatesindigenas.org/ENG/ns/59-epistemic-violence.html#:~:text=Epistemic%20violence%20is%20a%20consequence%20of%20epistemic%20injustice%20C,which%20it%20deems%20to%20be%20inferior%20and%20uncertain.>

Apart from epistemic violence, Dalit women also face systemic violence which is closely related to structural or institutional violence. It is defined as “institutional practices or procedures that adversely affect groups or individuals psychologically, mentally, culturally, economically, spiritually, or physically.”<sup>8</sup> Dalit women are victimized because they belong to a caste which is lowest in the caste hierarchy. They are exploited by the upper castes who manipulates institutions to cause violence against Dalit women. Systemic and epistemic violence overlaps as far as the victimization of Dalit women is concerned as they are deprived of basic resources like education and access to public places.

Epistemic and Systemic violence against Dalit women is depicted in Marathi plays, *Zhunj* (Mumbai:1982) and *Bamanwada* (Pune:1991) written by Madhukar Toradmal and Ramnath Chavan respectively. In these plays, Dalit women characters are either seemingly silenced or prohibited from entering public places.

In *Zhunj*, Rakhma, a Dalit woman character lives with Professor Gaikwad, a Dalit male character who works in a college. The radical nature of the act challenges traditional society. She has been staying with him since his wife’s death. They are living together without marriage, which is accepted by other Dalit characters in Dalit localities. It is seen that Rakhma is addressed as *Vahini* (sister-in-law) by Dalit male characters like Professor Kamble who also stay with them in the same Dalit locality. Even Professor Gaikwad’s son, Ram calls her mother and she has no objection to it. In many ways this is an act of reversal of tradition but subtly violent to women as it does not give a woman a status that she might have enjoyed if a live-in like situation was not indulged in.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://criminal-justice.iresearchnet.com/crime/school-violence/systemic-and-structural-violence-in-college/#:~:text=Systemic%20violence%20and%20structural%20violence,economically%2C%20spiritually%2C%20or%20physically>

When Professor Gaikwad becomes principal of the college, he moves to the college quarters. Before moving to the college quarters, he asks Rakhma to marry him so that they can live together at the college quarters. She refuses to marry him because she does not want to leave the Dalit locality and give up the freedom, she enjoys by staying with professor Gaikwad without marriage, what is called a live-in today. Consequently, Gaikwad does not take her to the college quarters because he thinks that a public place like the college quarters does not allow them to live together without marriage. (Toradmal, 1982:15) Thus the structure of society limits the location of women and is an example of how people are kept out of locations because of systemic and epistemic violence.

It is not just Rakhma's views about marriage but her linguistic identity also that makes Professor Gaikwad reluctant to take Rakhma to the college quarters. It looks as if he wants her to change her linguistic ability before shifting to the college quarters. He thinks that her language is not suitable for a public place like the college. Rakhma also is of a similar opinion about her language; therefore, she refuses to move. She reckons her language full of abuses and impurities as unsuitable for 'a glittery place' like the college. It is manifested in her response to Professor Gaikwad who wants to take her to a college quarter to live with him. She compares her mouth to a sewage gutter and says that she does not want to make the college impure with her language:

Rakhma: ...I spent my whole life in Maharawada  
(Dalit locality). I swept roads and developed  
rough hands. My mouth is flowing sewage gutter.  
Why are you taking a whore like me to a glittery  
place (college)?<sup>9</sup> (Act I Scene II)

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<sup>9</sup> Toradmal, Madhukar. Zhunj. Mumbai: Majestic Prakashan, 1982, p.15

Though Rakhma accepts that her language is not suitable for a public place like the college quarters, it is strange that educated Dalit characters like Professor Gaikwad and Kamble do not make her accept that her language is different from the upper caste language used in the college.

A similar example of restricting a Dalit woman to a specific place because of her linguistic identity is identified in *Bamanwada* (Pune:2007) written by Ramnath Chavan, a Dalit dramatist. Aai is an uneducated Dalit female character belonging to rural area. She comes from a village somewhere near Solapur to meet her son, Bhalchandra Sathe who stays at Brahmanwada with his wife, Shahi who is Brahmin by caste. When she begins to converse with upper caste female characters, Ramakaku and Radhakaku. They ignore her because they think that her language is impure and not sophisticated enough for a place like Brahmanwada. When she complains to her son about the mistreatment she receives from them, her son, Bhalchandra Sathe tells her not to go out of her room and mix with people staying at Brahmanwada who are mainly Brahmins by caste.

Thus, the lack of education among Dalit female characters and their linguistic identity that distinguishes them from Dalit male characters causes them to be restricted within the walls of caste. This seems to me to be epistemic and systemic violence on Dalit women. It looks like the plays do not show how Dalit males are kept out of the system in a similar manner. It also seems strange that in the plays I have chosen, epistemic and systemic violence is not shown when brutal violence is.

### 3.3. Brutal Violence against Dalit Women:

The word, brutal means “an unpleasant effect on people, especially there is not attempt by anyone to reduce their effect.”<sup>10</sup> The word, brutal aptly described violence against women as it is not just cruel but its effect is not reduced. Still Dalit women face violence at work places as they are mainly illiterate, daily wage labourers, they are vulnerable to brutal violence at the hands of their employers. They face physical violence, sexual harassment and sometimes they are raped and murdered because they are Dalit and women. The following quotation corroborates my argument:

They are considered vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation due to their gender and caste. They face a higher degree of violence most prominently in rural areas by the upper caste Hindus.<sup>11</sup>

As Dalits have no access to properties like land and potable water, Dalit women are more prone to violence as they must go to properties belonging to upper castes to work along with Dalit men and fulfil domestic needs like fetching fuel and potable water for cooking food. Non-Dalit dramatists seem to associate their presence at such properties to carry out domestic work with their class identity and hold class identity responsible for physical and sexual violence against them. It is evident in plays like *Lokkatha 78* (Mumbai:1978) and *Purush*, (Pune:2006) written by non-Dalit dramatists, Ratnakar Matkari and Jaywant Dalvi respectively. In order to substantiate, it seems to me that they draw a parallel between Dalit and upper caste female characters as far as sexual violence against them is concerned. They draw parallels because they seem to be influenced by the Left-party-based feminism and autonomous groups of

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/brutal>

<sup>11</sup> Kumar, Ajay (2021). Sexual Violence against Dalit Women: An Analytical Study of Intersectionality of Gender, Caste, and Class in India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(10), p.123.

feminism. In these plays, both Dalit and upper caste women characters are shown as victims of sexual violence, perpetuated by the landlords in the plays whose caste identity is concealed in order to represent them as a dominant class only. As far as caste identity of victims is concerned, both Matkari and Dalvi are less concerned with caste identity of victims because they represent both, Dalit women and upper caste women as victims of class and gender identity only. Matkari and Dalvi appear to have done so under the influence of The-Left-party-based women and autonomous group of women. It is evident in the following quotation:

The Left-party-based women's organisations made significant contribution towards economic and work-related issues as the autonomous women's groups politicised and made public the issue of violence against women. Serious debates on class v/s patriarchies emerged, both parties however did not address the issues of brahmanism. While for the former 'caste' was contained in class, for the latter the notion of sisterhood was pivotal.<sup>12</sup>

In *Lokkatha 78* (Mumbai: 2000), Ratnakar Matkari appears to convert caste struggle into class struggle because he describes the struggle between wage labourers belonging to low castes and the landlord as a result of their differences which Matkari locates in their class identity. He seems to propose the aforesaid view about caste as class through the struggle between high castes.

Jagnya, a character belonging to a low caste, *Koli*, says that low castes are exploited because of poverty in which they live and their class identity as labourers. He is of the opinion that Patil

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<sup>12</sup> Sharmila Rege. "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 44, 1998, p.42

and Sarpanch in the play are responsible for exploitation of low castes in the play. Though there are characters in the play belonging to different castes, he sees them as equal at the level of their class as labourers; therefore, he opines that they should come together as an oppressed class to fight for justice.

In order to strengthen his argument about caste as class, Ratnakar Matkari relates the sexual violence against a Dalit girl with her class identity. It is evident in how sexual assault on a Dalit girl in the play, *Lokkatha 78* (Mumbai:2000), is narrated by the low caste characters in the play. They narrate how she is sexually assaulted and murdered by the son and nephew of the landlord when she is alone in the field. They say that she is sexually assaulted and murdered because she is poor like them. They identify her identity as a daughter of a labourer as the reason for sexual assault by characters belonging to a dominant class, represented through Patil and Sarpanch in the play.

Even Jagnya agrees with them as he incites low caste characters to fight against the landlord to save the honour of low caste women. Jagnya relates the sexual assault on the Dalit girl with other low caste women so that low caste male characters may come forward to challenge the dominance of the landlord in the village. Thus, it seems that through Jagnya, one of the main characters in the play, Matkari bypasses the caste identity of low caste characters to form a class against the landlord in the name of saving the honour of low caste women from the landlord.

In order to show the similarity between Dalit and other low caste women in the play, Matkari draws a parallel between sexual assaults on a Dalit girl and Savitri in *Lokkatha 78* (Mumbai:2000) a low caste woman because both these women are shown as victims of the landlord in the play. Savitri is sexually assaulted by goons, sent by the landlord in order to humiliate and silence Savitri because she is mobilizing all the low caste characters in the play

against the landlord after her husband's death. She is threatened initially and asked not to say anything to reporters who come from cities to know about her husband's murder by the landlord. Nonetheless, she gives an interview in which she blames the landlord for her husband's death. As she does not listen to the landlord, she has been threatened and sexually assaulted in public. In case of Savitri, the landlord uses sexual assault as a weapon to silence her by humiliating her in front the people she is leading.

By drawing a parallel between the Dalit girl and Savitri as far as sexual violence against them is concerned, Ratnakar Matkari suggests that low caste women including Dalit women are victims of sexual violence perpetuated against them by the landlords in the play. By doing so, he limits the caste identity of these female characters to their class identity which is represented as subservient to the landlords.

A similar perception of sexual assault on a Dalit female character is evident in *Purush*, a Marathi play written by Jaywant Dalvi. In the play, Maya Gawai, a Dalit female character is sexually assaulted and murdered by Khanderao Patil, a character belonging to landlord class. Like the landlord in *Lokkatha 78* (Mumbai:2000), he is also represented as a political leader having control over the police administration as with the help of the police, he gets acquitted by the court in the sexual assault case. The sexual assault on Maya Gawai, similar to the Dalit girl in *Lokkatha 78* (Mumbai:2000), occurs off the stage and is informed to the audience through the conversation between upper caste female characters, Tara and Mathu.

### **3.3.1. Violence because of empowerment**

Apart from these two similarities, the sexual assault on Maya Gawai in *Purush* appears to be a parallel to the sexual assault on Ambika, an upper caste female character in the play. Ambika is sexually assaulted by Gulabrao Jadhav who happens to be a landlord and a political leader. She is also sexually assaulted in order to humiliate and silence her because she is also fighting

against exploitation of low caste characters like Malibai in the play. By projecting Maya Gawai and Ambika as victims of characters who are landlords and political leaders, Dalvi seems to make a point that they are exploited because of their class and gender identity as both are shown victims of a dominant class in the society which is represented as landlords and political leaders. In order to substantiate his argument, he seems to conceal the caste identity of both the landlords, Khanderao Patil and Gulabrao Jadhav and represent them as a dominant class in society.

In both these plays, it seems that the attempt has been made to represent Dalit female characters as victims of class discrimination by equating sexual violence against them with that of women from other castes. By drawing parallels between sexual assaults on Dalit and upper caste female characters, these plays, *Lokkatha* 78 and *Purush* are similar to each other as they ignore the caste identity of victims which can be located in the place where sexual assault is carried out against them.

### **3.3.2. Location of sexual violence**

Generally, Dalit women are sexually assaulted when they are away from their homes to carry out domestic work like fetching fuel and water from wells, mainly owned by upper castes. Unlike Dalit women, upper caste women's domestic work remains limited to their homes as they are controlled by upper caste patriarchy that does not allow them to go out in search of fuel and water.<sup>13</sup> Dalit women are deprived of basic resources to fulfil domestic needs therefore they go for daily wages with their men to upper caste properties which makes them vulnerable to sexual violence. (Malik, 1999:323-24)

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<sup>13</sup>Bela Malik. "Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 6, 1999, pp. 323-24.

In case of Dalit women in the plays, *Lokkatha 78* and *Purush*, it is true that Dalit female characters are victimized when they are away from their homes either for fetching fuel as with the case of a Dalit girl in *Lokkatha 78* or working as a wage labourer in case of Maya Gawai in *Purush*. A Dalit girl in *Lokkatha 78* is sexually assaulted by the son and nephew of the landlord when she is collecting fuel in the field, owned by the landlord. As far as Maya Gawai, a Dalit female character in *Purush* is concerned, she becomes a victim of sexual violence when she goes to fetch water from the well, owned by Khanderao Patil, a landlord.

The place of sexual assault on Dalit female characters differentiates them from upper caste female characters who are also sexually assaulted. In comparison to Dalit women, upper caste women, Savitri in *Lokkatha 78* and Ambika in *Purush* are sexually victimized at public places like the square in the village and the guest house respectively. Savitri and Ambika are present at these places not out of the compulsion but out of their choice whereas the presence of Dalit women at the places of sexual assault is governed by compulsion to meet the domestic needs. Thus, the difference between the places where sexual violence takes place distinguishes Dalit female characters from upper caste female characters on the basis of their caste identity.

### **3.3.3 Intensity of Violence**

In addition to places of sexual assault, intensity of violence against Dalit women also brings out the difference between Dalit and upper caste female characters in these plays. It is evident that the intensity of violence against Dalit women is more severe than the violence against upper caste women. The Dalit girl in *Lokkatha 78* and Maya Gawai in *Purush* are raped and brutally murdered by landlords whereas upper caste women, Savitri and Ambika, are sexually assaulted but not murdered by landlords.

The difference in the intensity of violence lies in the caste identity of these victims of sexual assault because it is noted that intensity and magnitude of sexual and physical violence against

Dalit women is more severe and brutal in comparison to upper caste women. “The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against Dalit women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude.”<sup>14</sup> As far as the violence against Savitri and Ambika is concerned, perpetrators appear to be interested in humiliating them rather than physically hurting them in order to silence their protest against the dominance of the landlords in the plays. Thus, though non-Dalit dramatists relate the physical and sexual violence against Dalit women to class discrimination, it is the place where sexual violence is committed, and intensity and magnitude of the violence emphasize that they are not only the victims of class as well as caste discrimination. By highlighting Dalit female characters as victims of only class discrimination, Matkari and Dalvi are influenced by the Dalit Panther Movement and the mainstream movement of feminism as these movements have addressed violence against Dalit women at class level which is substantiated as follows:

...Dalit Panther Movement along with the women's movement for ignoring the specific oppression of dalit women. According to her both the movements started around the same period and followed a one-point agenda; Dalit Panthers pursuing the cause of Dalit men and the mainstream women's movement fighting against patriarchy, assuming all women to be savarna.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gopal Guru. “Dalit Women Talk Differently.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548–50.

<sup>15</sup> Datar, Chhaya. “Non-Brahmin Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is It a More Emancipatory Force?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 41, 1999, p.2965.

Madhukar Toradmal, a non-Dalit dramatist, appears to be different from Ratnakar Matkari and Jaywant Dalvi since he describes a Dalit female character, Gaya in the play, *Zhunj* as a victim of the caste struggle rather than only class discrimination. In *Zhunj*, the sexual attack on Gaya is the result of the clash between Dalit and upper caste students on a college campus mentioned in the play. She is humiliated by upper caste students in order to incite Dalit students on the campus. When she becomes so irritated by comments on her, passed by upper caste students, she slaps Anil Deshpande, one of the upper caste students. In order to take revenge upon Gaya, he tries to sexually assault her when she is alone at her home.

### **3.3.4 Victimization as Provocation**

Thus, after looking at the sexual assault on Gaya, Toradmal wants to emphasize that Dalit women are victimized in order to humiliate and provoke Dalit men during the clashes between Dalits and upper castes. It is observed by Chhaya Datar in her article, *Non-Brahmin Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is It a More Emancipatory Force?* (EPW: 1999) In this article, she says that Dalit women are humiliated and sexually assaulted by upper castes to humiliate and incite Dalit men, especially during the clash between them.

It was the natural mandate of the women's movement  
to bring out the patriarchal aspect in rape  
incidents against dalit women (particularly  
mass rape) carried out to humiliate and  
provocate Dalit men <sup>16</sup>

Thus, non-Dalit dramatists appear to be different from each other in portraying Dalit female characters as victims of sexual violence. In *Lokkatha 78* and *Purush*, they are described as

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<sup>16</sup> Datar, Chhaya. "Non-Brahmin Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is It a More Emancipatory Force?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 41, 1999, p.2965.

victims of class discrimination as these plays blur the distinction between caste and class of Dalit female characters by placing them along with upper caste female characters, Savitri and Ambika, who are also sexually assaulted in these plays. Both Ratnakar Matkari and Jaywant Dalvi ignore caste identity of victims of sexual assault. On the other hand, Madhukar Toradmal, in the play *Zhunj* (Mumbai:1982) does not reckon the class identity of a Dalit female character, Gaya as the only reason behind the sexual assault on her. He represents her as a victim of caste violence between Dalit and upper caste students as she is humiliated by Anil Deshpande, an upper caste character, to incite Dalit students.

Dalit dramatists differ from non-Dalit dramatists because they do not represent Dalit women as victims of sexual violence but instead, they depict them as victims of physical violence especially during clashes between Dalits and high castes. They are also different from non-Dalit Marathi dramatists such as Ratnakar Matkari and Jaywant Dalvi in respect to emphasizing the caste identity of Dalit women responsible for physical violence against them. These differences between non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists are evident in Marathi plays such as *Wata-Palwata* (Pune:1997) and *Bamanwada* (Pune:2007), written by Datta Bhagat and Ramnath Chavan respectively.

In *Wata-Palwata*, Datta Bhagat has portrayed a Dalit female character, Shewanta as a victim of violence between upper castes and Dalits. Like all other above-mentioned Dalit female characters, she does not appear on stage and has been introduced by Dalit male characters.

### **3.3.5 Silencing of Activist Dalit Women**

Shewanta is introduced by Kaka, a Dalit character in the play. He pities her condition as a poor widow and therefore he wants to help her by enrolling her name in a teacher training programme. As Kaka mentions that she has cleared the matriculation but does not have a

teacher training certificate to be a teacher in a school. Kaka asks Satish and Dasrao Joshi, who are teachers, to help her so that she may have her own economic resources.

After the introduction by Kaka, Shewanta appears in the conversation between Satish and Arjun after her death during the demonstration. Satish holds Arjun responsible for the death of Shewanta because he blames Arjun for organizing demonstration without considering its consequences. According to Satish, it is because of Arjun's badly prepared demonstration, Shewanta loses her life during the demonstration, when it turns violent. Arjun responds to his allegation that she is killed because she is a Dalit. He says that upper caste characters kill her in order to provoke Dalits to be violent during the demonstration. Thus, like Dalit women who are either humiliated or sexually assaulted in order to provoke Dalit men, Shewanta is killed during the demonstration, organized by Arjun to fight against the impartiality of the government in allocating homes to rehabilitate flood-affected people.

### **3.3.6 Untargeted Violence against Dalit Women**

A similar example of victimization of a Dalit female character is noticed in *Bamanwada*, a Marathi Dalit play written by Ramnath Chavan. In this play, a Dalit female character, Aai gets physically injured when she finds herself between Dalits and upper castes who were pelting stones at each other. She comes from a village to an urban area to meet her son, Bhalchandra Sathe, who has got a government job and married an upper caste character, Shashi. She does not find the place where he resides in the city, therefore she wanders in the city in search of the address. She finds that her son is residing in Brahmanwada, a place where people belonging to Brahmin caste live. Before, she finds the place, she finds herself between Dalits and upper castes pelting stones at each other and receives a severe head injury. Though she receives medical treatment at her son's home, she succumbs to the injury.

Though it is not overtly mentioned that she is injured because of her caste identity, it seems that she might have been targeted because of caste markers which are easily identified in case of Dalit women. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) has pointed out such caste markers in case of Dalit women. When addressing a conference of All-India Depressed Classes Women, he emphasized that depressed classes women should give up customs like putting on copper and brass ornaments. He also asks Dalit women to use bangles and wear saris like upper caste women so that their caste may not be easily identified. (Pawar & Moon, 2008:122-23) As the term, the Depressed Classes is referred to formerly untouchable castes in India, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar addresses Dalit women and asks them to give up customs which are used as caste identity markers. It is such caste identity markers that might have made upper castes to identify Aai as a Dalit woman and injure her in order to drive her away from upper caste area.

### **3.3.7 Women Absentee Characters in Plays**

Though Dalit dramatists Datta Bhagat and Ramnath Chavan describe Dalit female characters as victims of violence between Dalits and upper castes, they probably are distinct from each other in how these female characters are represented in the above-mentioned plays. In *Wata-Palwata* (Pune:1997) Shewanta, a Dalit female character does not appear on stage throughout the play. She has been mentioned in the conversation between male characters like Kaka, Satish and Arjun. Bhagat is like Matkari and Dalvi in this respect because in their plays also Dalit female characters who are victims of sexual violence do not appear on stage.

### **3.3.8 Voice of Women on Stage**

On the other hand, Aai, a Dalit female character in *Bamanwada* (Pune:2007) appears on stage and tells Shashi, her daughter-in-law how she is injured when she is searching for the address of her son. She gives voice to her own injuries, inflicted on her because of caste violence in the play. Moreover, it is her presence on stage and encounter with other characters, especially

upper caste female characters, appears to distinguish her from other Dalit female characters who are sexually exploited as mentioned above. Aai is the only Dalit female character in all the selected Marathi plays who encounters upper caste female characters and it is her encounter with them appears to bring out the differences between Aai and upper caste female characters.

The difference between Aai and upper caste female characters, Mai and Ramakaku is evident in the play, *Bamanwada*. Aai is an illiterate woman belonging to a rural area where she works as a wage labourer. She comes to Pune to meet his son, Bhalchandra Sathe who has married Shashi, a Brahmin woman and a daughter of Mai and Taty, owners of the Brahmanwada. Sathe is living in Brahmanwada because Shashi's parents do not want her to stay outside the *wada* because they do not want other people to know about their inter-caste marriage. For this reason, they do not mind the presence of Sathe in Brahmanwada.

However, the presence of Aai in the *wada* annoys Mai and Ramakaku because they regard it to be a threat to their status of upper caste. Especially Mai believes Brahmanwada to be a symbol of her status as an upper caste woman because it has been given to her ancestors by the Peshwas for their bravery in the battle field. As Aai belongs to the *Mahar* caste, a formerly untouchable caste, Mai says that she does not want to convert Brahmanwada into Maharwada, a place away from the upper caste locality where the *Mahar* caste live. It is noticed in the following conversation between Mai and Shashi, her daughter.

Mai: Now your mother-in-law (Aai) is staying in the *wada* and tomorrow your brother-in-law and sister-in-law will come and stay here. Where will I go when they come here to stay.

Shashi: You don't need to go anywhere. It is your *wada* and you can stay here. Even my in-laws understand this.

They are clever enough to know this.

Mai: I do not know if they are clever but I do not want to see Brahmanwada to be converted into a Maharawada.<sup>17</sup>

(Act III Scene I)

### **3.3.9 Violence of Supposed Cleanliness**

Despite Mai's opposition to the presence of Aai in the *wada*, Shahi does not listen to her and keeps Aai with her. In order to drive Aai out of the *wada*, other female characters like Ramakaku and Radhakaku who are tenants do all the ill informing about the behaviour of Aai, which they consider to be unhygienic, especially her spitting in the corners. Mai becomes so annoyed by the complaints from tenants that she threatens to commit suicide if Aai does not live the place. Aai becomes so upset with the treatment she receives from upper caste women that she stops going out of the room in which she lives with Shashi. She remains confined to her room till her death due to an injury, inflicted on her during the caste violence. Thus, upper caste female characters, Mai and Ramakaku in *Bamanwada* behave in a discriminating manner against a Dalit female character, Aai, because of her caste identity which they identify in her language and her approach towards cleanliness.

### **3.4 Education and Dalit Women**

Dalit women are represented as either uneducated or partially educated by both non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists. Since, non-Dalit dramatists portray them off stage, they seem to be least worried about describing Dalit female characters in detail. As a result, they do not mention whether they are educated. They are limited to representing them as just victims of caste violence, especially of sexual assault perpetuated by the landlords. Dalit dramatists represent them as either uneducated or partially educated in order to compare them with upper caste

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<sup>17</sup> Chavan, Ramnath. *Bamanwada*. Pune: Shivam Prakashan, 2007. p.103

women who are educated. The representation of Dalit women as an uneducated or partially educated lies in the low literacy among Dalit women. (Jogdand, 2013:171)

In *Lokaktha 78* (Mumbai:2000), and *Purush* (Mumbai:2006) Marathi plays written by non-Dalit dramatists, Dalit female characters are described off stage as absentee characters and they are represented as victims of sexual violence, perpetuated by upper caste men. In both these plays, non-Dalit characters inform audiences about sexual assaults on Dalit female characters when they converse with each other about the sexual assaults.

As they are limited to the description of sexual assault, they do not pay attention to the educational status of Dalit female characters in the plays. The roles assigned to Dalit female characters as victims of sexual violence might have made upper caste characters ignore the educational status of Dalit female characters, a Dalit girl and Maya Gawai in *Lokkatha 78* and *Purush* respectively.

*Zhunj*, a play by Madhukar Toradmal, a non-Dalit dramatist is different from *Lokkatha 78* and *Purush* as far as the description of a Dalit female character, Gaya, is concerned. In *Zhunj*, Gaya also does not appear on stage like Dalit female characters in *Lokkatha 78* and *Purush* but unlike these plays, she is introduced by a Dalit character, Ram. He informs his father, Professor Gaikwad about a sexual attack on her by an upper caste character, Anil Despande. In his account of sexual assault on her, he says that she is harassed by upper caste students in the college. In the conversation between Ram and his father Professor Gaikwad, it is noted that Gaya is a college student belonging to the *Chambhar* caste, one of the formerly untouchable castes.

The play, *Zhunj* also differs from *Lokkatha 78* and *Purush* because it represents an uneducated Dalit woman through a character, Rakhma. Being an uneducated Dalit woman, she is seen speaking a language different from the language spoken by other Dalit characters who are

educated. The difference is noted when they converse with each other. In the conversation, it appears that educated Dalit characters speak a language like the language, spoken by upper caste characters in the play.

### **3.5. Dalit Patriarchy and Dalit Women:**

Dalit women are also victims of Dalit patriarchy which is reflected in the dominance of Dalit men in political and literary circles. It is found that Dalit women are not given important positions in political and literary functions, and even if they are given space, they are allotted space, which is relatively not so important in comparison to space given to Dalit men. Further, literary output of Dalit women is also dismissed by Dalit men as mean and unworthy. Dalit women are denied space by Dalit men because they are using the mechanism, used by upper castes to suppress Dalits.

It is not only in the political arena that Dalit women face exclusion. In the cultural field, for instance, Dalit women have criticised their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene. Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of Dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in dalit literary conferences and institutions.<sup>18</sup>

The suppression of Dalit women is evident in Marathi Dalit theatre as there is hardly any play, written by both non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists in which Dalit women are represented as an educated social activist. They are represented as victims of caste discrimination, especially at the hands of Dalit men.

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<sup>18</sup> Gopal Guru. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, p.2549

## **Conclusion:**

Dalit women are represented in Marathi Dalit theatre as a contrast to upper caste women as they differ from each other in respect of caste, class, education and language. They are also shown as victims of epistemic and systemic violence since they are either obstructed to enter public places because their language is not considered to be suitable for public places.

As far as brutal violence is concerned, they are either sexually assaulted by upper caste men or assaulted during anti-caste demonstrations to instigate Dalit men. In comparison to upper caste women, they are represented as either uneducated or partially educated. They also stand in contrast to upper caste women as far as Dalit patriarchy in Marathi theatre is concerned because it is dominated by Dalit men when it comes to the portrayal of Dalit life.

It is noticed in this chapter, non-Dalit and Dalit dramatists are seen to be confronting each other in terms of identity of Dalit women. Non-Dalit dramatists are influenced by the perception of Dalit women as a class whereas Dalit dramatists as a caste identity. The debate between them is caused by how women are perceived by the Dalit Panther Movement and liberal feminism in 1980s as these movements. The former considers caste identity of women to address violence against Dalit women while the latter looks at them as a class identity. Dalit dramatists take into account the Dalit Panthers' perception of Dalit women. However, non-Dalit dramatists consider liberal feminism in 1980s.

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