

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: MALIKA AMAR SHAIKH'S MEMOIR AS DALIT FEMINIST RESISTANCE

Laxmi Mariba Badge¹

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, MS, India

&

Prof. Dr. Shubha Mukherjee²

Professor, Department of English, Guru Nanak Khalsa College, Matunga, Mumbai, MS, India

Abstract

Malika Amar Shaikh's memoir I Want to Destroy Myself (2016) interrogates the intersections of caste, gender, and Dalit politics through the radical lens of feminist resistance. The memoir is translated from Marathi by Jerry Pinto, it records Malika's troublesome marriage to Namdeo Dhasal, the co-founder of the radical political group called Dalit Panthers. It exposes the patriarchal paradoxes and binary embedded within progressive anti-caste movements. It encapsulates its paradox of marital life and the tension between self-annihilation and self-assertion through the life story of Malika. Further the wish to have self-destructed is accounted for through domestic violence, childbirth, and emotional anguish experienced by the author. This paper analyses Malika's journey from personal trauma to become a radical critique of Dalit militancy, challenging its gendered hierarchies and reclaiming agency through autobiographical transcending the patriarchal boundaries. The paper highlights the way in which I Want to Destroy Myself disrupts the male chauvinism of revolutionary Dalit politics. Dhasal as a poet glorifies militancy, but in his personal life he lacks the same militancy. This hypocrisy laid bare through his relationship with his wife. The fragmented narrative style of the memoir, silence and suffering both mental and bodily are the tool to present agonizing experiences by Dalit women. The harrowing childbirth experience contradicts the collective promise of liberation with the solitary struggles of women compel readers to confront the unspeakable. I Want to Destroy Myself emphasizes on emancipation of Dalit women their resistance and rejects the romanticization of revolutionary martyrdom. It asserts the right to selfhood. Malika redefines resistance literature and demands gender equality in radical politics, especially among Dalits.

Keywords

Dalit Feminism, Resistance, Patriarchy, Caste, Gender, Dalit Panthers, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The feminist maxim 'the personal is political' reverberates intensely in Malika Amar Shaikh's memoir. *I Want to Destroy Myself* represents the conflict between the personal and the political spheres of one's existence. Her life is dominated by patriarchal violence. It was there within and outside the Dalit Panthers movement. It registers voice against both caste-based and gendered oppression in the society. The memoir situates itself within the realm of Dalit literature and poses a serious question of gender equality to the male-dominated. As Drishadwati Bargi mentions that the memoir critiques the "ascetic, subjective, and personalized revolutionary militancy" of Dalit Panther leaders like Namdeo Dhasal, exposing its gendered limitations (Bargi, 298).

I Want to Destroy Myself reflects the contradiction between self-annihilation and self-assertion. Bargi further says that the memoir is "a literary and conceptual exploration of the refrain



of self-destruction,” which is mediated through “agonizing descriptions of domestic violence, physical pain, childbirth, and romantic experiences of love and sensuality” (Pinto, 297- 298). Malika’s attempt at writing transmutes her self-destructive instinct into a radical resistance. She experiences all the tortures of domestic violence, subjugation, secondary status and dejectedness in a love marriage. Through *I Want to Destroy Myself* (2016), Malika presents a searing account of a Dalit woman’s struggle against the oppressions and exploitation due caste and gender discrimination, and political marginalization. She exposes the patriarchal contradictions within revolutionary movements.

This research implements a qualitative textual analysis approach under the lens of the feminist literary criticism and Dalit studies. The primary analysis of Shaikh’s autobiography is supported by secondary references from scholars Dalit studies and Feminism on literary and political dimensions of Dalit movement and literature. The study contextualizes *I Want to Destroy Myself* within the socio-political landscape of Dalit Panthers movement through the critical framework of caste and gender dynamics.

Dalit feminism questions dual oppression of caste and gender, highlights the plight of dalit women marginalized even within anti-caste movements which are working against the binary in society and on contrary it itself is creating a binary for Dalit women within Dalit community. *I Want to Destroy Myself* illustrates the intersectionality of caste and gender within Dalit community. Malika's description of her body as suffered, hungry, filled with rage and pain echoes the physical and mental violence perpetrated by caste hegemony and patriarchy. They are exploited, muted, denied equal status, marginalized, underrated, subjugated and considered secondary in all the decisions of life. Malika through depiction of Dalit revolutionary movements narrates the struggle and challenge it has posed to Brahmanical oppression, however she underscores the gender hierarchy with Dalit Communities through her life and her mother in laws’. Namdeo Dhasal’s poetry, as Bargi observes, glorifies destruction and rebirth—a “bloodless but no less painful” internalized violence (300) — yet his personal life perpetuates the very oppression he rhetorically dismantles. Malika provides Dhasal’s life in different ways from a romantic lover to a sadist husband who practices alcoholism, infidelity, and neglect his wife. She exposes the hypocrisy of Dalit movement and lays bare its failure to liberate their own women. Her memoir represents Dalit women’s testimonies that dislocate the ‘male-stream’ accounts of Dalit politics (Writing Caste/Writing Gender).

Poetry, Autobiography and Memoir have been at the center of Dalit writing as these genres narrate the authentic experiences in literature and bring the readers close to the author. For Malika her memoir is an act of defiance. As Jerry Pinto mentions in his introduction, Malika’s memoir resists the suppression of Dalit women’s voices within anti caste discourse of Dalit revolutionaries. He mentions, “I did not enjoy translating *Mala Udhvasta Vhaychay*. It would often leave me feeling somewhat in danger of Collapse. There is section in which Malika Amar Shaikh, not yet twenty, finds herself with a baby in a rented room in Lonawala (Shaikh, 10).

Malika focuses on her body such as her venereal disease becomes a site of resistance. Unlike Dhasal’s abstract revolutionary ideals, her memoir grounds struggle in the visceral: childbirth, hunger, and domestic abuse. Pinto expresses his agony as he mentions, “I read this section and wept for the young woman with the endless meals and floors and nappies, for the boils and also for the kindness of strangers” (Shaikh, 10). The memoir’s fragmented structure is also symbolic in nature. It symbolizes that the women in Dalit communities deal with a fragmented life and are alienated from the mainstream struggle against which the Dalits are fighting. The women’s life account is filled with disconnectedness, fragmented narration of the past, emphatic tone, emotional silence and a sense of a decline in one’s own strength. They imitate the fractured identity of a Dalit woman navigating patriarchy. Chapter 8’s harrowing childbirth scene at Nair



Hospital, where nurses mock her pain. With contemptuous laugh one would say: ‘Now you’re crying now. How did it feel when you were taking it in? Comments of the sort (Shaikh,108). Her experience juxtaposes the collective promise of Dalit liberation with the solitary suffering of women. She asks questions:

Should women accept these euphuisms that have been obviously invented by men? Should we not question them? What happiness can a woman find in such suffering? Why should she be lured down unfamiliar paths, paths that lead nowhere? Why must be content herself with fine shining promises that will never be fulfilled? (Shaikh, 112)

This fragmentation, as Bargi suggests, is not artistic failure but a literary strategy of “solidarity earned rhetorically through the play of remembering and forgetting that denudes the self of certainty and language (Bargi, 318).” This disintegration is forcing readers to confront the unspeakable.

Malika’s marriage to Dhasal represents the tension between preaching and practice of revolutionary ideas. Dhasal publically urges anarchistic demolition of repressive structures; however his marital life duplicates the stinking rich that he criticizes publicly. Malika disassembles this hypocrisy with the assertion: “We should no longer believe that it is our duty to live in the shadow of our husbands and endure, with our magnificence of spirit and our ability to sacrifice, whatever is meted out to us. Whereas the husbands on the other hand do not reciprocate with the same fidelity. “The man-woman relationship in the entire community seemed to be terribly unjust and unfair to women. Every man seemed to have two or three wives and a mistress on the side. Many had abandoned their first wives for one reason or the other” (Shaikh, 184).

She provides a staunch criticism on the romanticization of radical masculinity that the Dalits practice like the upper castes. The whole journey of Dhasal from an exploited to a ferocious revolutionary is contrasted with Malika’s silent endurance of venereal disease and childbirth. Dhasal’s pain is aestheticized as militancy, Malika’s is dismissed as domestic triviality. This binary reveals Melucci’s “paradoxical movements” (76), in which revolutionary politics misappropriates dominant discourses by revealing their paradoxes and contradictions.

I Want to Destroy Myself is aligned with Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature*, presenting the personal suffering with a political discourse. Her “self-wounding” (Bargi, 313) - writing as peeling away one’s skin as destroying oneself becomes resistance. Malika represents gendered labor disparities. Dhasal’s engagement in public life and activism is celebrated and on contrary her domestic chores such as- cooking, childcare, household work are neglected. Chapter 7’s account of selling magazines to feed her family underscores this inequity. It presents her silenced labor disrupts revolutionary narratives. “I would make a nice big pile of Soviet land magazines and sell them. From proceeds, I would buy tea, sugar, wheat and the other necessities of life. That is how the Communist Party and the Communist countries often came to our aid.”

Malika defies male-dominated Dalit autobiographies. Unlike Dhasal’s poetry that anonymizes grief. She emphasizes her pain and agony by articulation out loud. Bargi argues the memoir “foregrounds the tension between the self’s desire for transcendence and separation from the collective for the sake of revolutionary transformation of the given world and its unavoidable embeddedness in the world it longs to transform” (Bargi, 303).

Malika unflinchingly records the cruelty and endurance she experienced at the hands of her husband. Hypocrisy is that he publicly championed anti-caste revolution and privately he obligates his wife to surrender to patriarchal structures that he ostensibly fought against. She describes him as a “scripture-quoting Mahar,” underlining his hypocrisy by his adherence to Brahmanical gender



stereotypes. Jerry Pinto underscores this hypocrisy with the contradiction in his introduction to the memoir. He says, “Her only companion is a male chauvinist who, as an Ambedkarite has probably followed Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar into Buddhism, but cannot help quoting Hindu scripture at Malika” (Pinto, 10).

This binary unveils the duality of practice and preaching, it is further exemplified by Raj Gauthaman calls this process as “internalization of neo-Brahmanism” by urban Dalit elites (30). On one hand he advocates caste annihilation and on another hand his treatment to his wife Malika reflects the same oppression he counters in the panther movement. It demonstrates how the patriarchy is deep rooted, even the revolutionary like Dhasal cannot renounce it. Her discouragement becomes intense as she mocks Dhasal’s hypocrisy, “Oh, that’s wonderful. You’re using the very scriptures that turned you into an untouchable... as examples to me? So do you want women to sacrifice ourselves? In your speeches you deride Hindu mythology but, in your own home, you seek to victimize women by using the example of Sita?” (Shaikh, 126-27)

Malika emphasizes the discord between public discourse of the revolutionary movements and private conduct of revolutionaries or the leaders. Gender oppression perseveres even within radical movements. It is deeply rooted in the social and personal conduct that denies the right to articulate to women. The women are victimized, subjugated and always put to the periphery and the men take the center. On one hand Dalit movement denies Hindu myths in public and gives the same examples as epitome for the code of conduct.

Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality offers a decisive standpoint in understanding Malika’s plight. As a Dalit woman, she conquers a distinctive spot where caste and gender oppression intersect. It sets her suffering obscure to both mainstream feminism and Dalit politics. There are universal experiences which are experienced by women of the oppressed classes across the world. The tortures of black women’s experience the same agonizing experienced Indian Dalit women experienced. They are suffering at the hands of caste politics and gender politics at one and the same time. This multidimensionality of their plight is argued by Crenshaw, “The multidimensionality of Black women’s experience [is distorted by] a single-axis analysis... This framework imports its own theoretical limitations that undermine efforts to broaden feminist and antiracist analyses” (Crenshaw, 139).

Correspondingly, Dalit women’s experiences are also subsumed under larger narratives of caste or gender, not the both. Malika disrupts this erasure by centering her “wounded self” (Bama, x) a self-scarred by betrayal, loneliness, and systemic violence. She further reveals that the Dalit men emasculate them with caste oppression, by affirming domination to reclaim a sense of power. The assertion of masculinity is rightly explained by V. Geetha as, “Symbolically emasculated [by Savarna patriarchy], Dalit men assert their ‘hyper-masculinity’ over Dalit women, whom they perceive as socially and politically inferior” (Geetha, 108).

The binary on infidelity is also crucial to understand. Malika narrates Dhasal’s infidelity and abuse: “That he should cheat on me was a thought too terrible to be contemplated. How could he have descended to this level? Neither I nor my love was so cheap” (Shaikh, 119). Her agony underlines the double betrayal; she was betrayed by both her husband and the movement that vowed her liberation.

Creative writing has always been considered as an expression of the inner urge especially autobiographies and memoirs and for Malika too it becomes an act of resistance. She resists her personal pain in contrast to the public protest by narrating her life story. Her memoir is distinct in way as it is a raw and unapologetic, “I have peeled away the skin of my life and served it up to you. Some may say this fruit is inedible but that doesn’t matter... It is more important for me to present this very different world of experience in which I lived, telling the story from my point of view and from the point of view of all women who have been exploited” (Shaikh, 14).



She articulates her life in such a way that the hegemonic voices would not like it. Her way of expression aligns with Sharmila Rege's assertion that Dalit women's autobiographies challenge "communitarian control on self" by exposing internal hierarchies (Rege, 132). Malika refuses to romanticize her suffering and subverts patriarchal expectations: "If this was supposed to be the height of fulfilment of femininity, I had nothing to say; I only wanted to spit at it". (Shaikh, 109) Her memoir works as a counter-narrative that archives and documents the silence of a Dalit woman intersecting the ideals of revolutionary movement. Malika Amar Shaikh's, *I Want to Destroy Myself* is a radical testimony of 'the personal is political' as her life testifies to the inseparability of personal and political struggle. The gendered contradictions within the Dalit movement are exposed. She compels a reassessment of liberation politics through an intersectional lens. Her memoir not only critiques Dalit patriarchy but also paves a path to resistance through writing, self-assertion, and unflinching honesty. As Shaikh declares, "but every woman should be proud of herself and her individuality and should be able to express those needs" (Shaikh, 156). She reiterates the urgent need for a Dalit feminist praxis—one that centers the most marginalized and dismantles all hierarchies, both within and beyond the community.

Conclusion:

I Want to Destroy Myself is an exemplary work of self-expression and transformative text in Dalit feminist literature that dismantles the romanticized narratives of revolutionary movements while unveiling the agony of marginalized women. Through her unflinching memoir, Malika exposes the paradox and contradictions of Dalit militancy; its radical public rhetoric versus its private endurance of patriarchal oppression. Her marriage to Namdeo Dhasal becomes a microcosm of contradiction which has engulfed her life. She reveals the unspoken reality of revolutionary masculinity how often it imitates the very hierarchies it seeks to overthrow. Her narrative arrests the essence of her critique, challenging the gendered expectations of self-annihilation imposed on Dalit women. The memoir's power lies in its visceral portrayal of suffering such as childbirth, domestic abuse, and systemic neglect. They are rendered through a fragmented narrative style that mirrors the cracked identity of a Dalit woman under patriarchy. Malika forces readers to confront the unspeakable realities of caste and gender violence. By centering her body as a site of both oppression and resistance, she subverts the abstract idealism of Dhasal's poetry, grounding liberation in material struggle. *I Want to Destroy Myself* transcends personal testimony and offers a manifesto for Dalit feminist resistance. Malika rejects the sacrificial ethos of militancy and asserts the right to selfhood and voice. Her memoir induces calculation with the limitations of radical politics, demanding that liberation movements address their internal hierarchies. It offers a design for feminist solidarity that refuses to romanticize agony. By transforming personal torture into political critique. Malika redefines resistance literature and shapes world for Dalit women's stories in the canons of revolutionary history.

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