



SIGNIFICANCE OF DALIT WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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ABSTRACT

Dalit autobiographies belongs to the second category. They have portrayed the socio-economic, cultural and political conditions of Dalit Community under the control and influence of Upper Caste Hindu society. Contemporary Indian Society was divided under the wrong notions of 'Purity and Pollution'. Dalits were treated as untouchables and polluters to the High Caste Hindus because they were born in the low caste. They were intentionally kept ignorant and denied to take education and asked to live out of town in separate colonies by high caste Hindus to safeguard their control over Dalits. This paper will engage with the idea of the self as a narrated, social identity, as this is explored and articulated in Dalit women's autobiographical writing. The category 'Dalit' came into use sometime in the nineteenth century to denote the oppressed and exploited 'untouchable' communities of India, traditionally considered so 'impure' that they were 'out-castes'; and yet, simultaneously, integral to defining the system, in being its 'lowest' component.

Keywords: Autobiography, Dalit, Literature, Women, Caste

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature being a new dimension is the primary concept the literature of marginality. It was emerged in the 1960s, starting with the Marathi language, and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangla, and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories, and, most, autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. The term "Dalit" was used for the first time by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in the 19th century. Dalit literature in India over the past many decades has emerged as a separate and important category of literature in many Indian languages. It has provided a new voice and identity to the communities that have experienced discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization due to the hierarchical caste system. Dalit literature has also made a forceful case for human dignity and social equality. The word Dalit is derived from language and, etymologically, it means "ground", "suppressed", "crushed" or "broken to pieces". Hence, by connotation, the term Dalit is used as an adjective or noun to describe the people or communities that have remained down-trodden or at the margins of society throughout India's long social history. The word Dalit was also used later as a Hindi and Marathi translation of the official term "depressed classes" that the British government used to describe what is now called the Scheduled Castes.

Dalit as a term denotes broken or shattered, a community which has been socially segregated across the Indian society according to the caste system, the composition of four castes in the Varna system came into



bring as per different body parts of Brahma, the Brahmins evolving from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas (peasants and traders) from the thighs. Dalits being the neglected and suppressed caste is assumed to have evolved from the feet of Brahma and therefore, occupy the lowest position in the society. 'Caste' was basically meant to serve the so called 'upper' castes.

The origin of caste has been described by different scholars and the most common and well accepted theory is by Ambedkar. Ambedkar's theory is based on the Varna system mentioned in the Manusmriti. According to the Varna system people are divided on the basis of occupation into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Though there is no mention of the fifth Varna (outcastes) in Manusmriti but it clearly explains the concept of mixed castes. According to Manu, the offspring of inter-caste marriages are to be considered the most degraded in the society and are forced to live on the outskirts of a civilization. Varna system showcases a rigid hierarchy which places Brahmins at the top and hence provides them a privileged position. Caste is determined on the basis of occupation. Certain groups are considered suitable for particular occupations, such as the Brahmins who have always enjoyed the right to study the spiritual texts and sanskrit at the same time, denying the right to attain education to other lower castes. The Shudras have always been considered fit to perform only menial jobs, related to cleaning the 'filth' of the society.

Indian women writers have established a permanent place in the arena of literature, because they have written with a woman's point of view and have not imitated the established and stereotypical manners of writing. Most of the earlier Indian women autobiographies are written by educated, high-caste and rich women, especially queens and princess. However in their writings they have not glorified their riches instead have written about the social practices committed on women of their times and thus have expressed a genuine female experience.

The Autobiography of an Indian Princess is one of the earliest writings by an Indian woman. A daughter of Brahma follower Keshav Chandra Sen, who became the Maharani of Cooch Behar, lost her husband early in life. The book is a stepping stone in the realm of Indian women autobiographies as it depicts the inner feelings of most of the Indian women of 19th and 20th century.

It is the autobiography of India's first woman lawyer, who raged a struggle against the suppression of women. Sorabji belonged to Parsi-Christian family. She was inspired to choose her job by observing the plight of women who visited her mother. Her book depicts the gender discrimination encountered by her not only in India but also in England where she went to study.

II. DALIT LITERATURE

One instance of such kind of writing that attests in a very straight-forward manner the plight of a marginalized community are the narratives of the Indian Dalit who, through the writing of their literature, aim at freeing themselves from the cultural and aesthetic manacles imposed by their caste. As Limbale observes, Dalit literature goes back to Dr. BhimRaoAmbedkar(1891-1956), who is considered the founder of the Dalit movement. He was born in the caste of the Untouchables, of which he became its leader during the English Raj. His revolutionary ideas imbued Dalits with self-respect, and this awareness



of their own condition became the main dominant of their literary narratives. The word ‘Dalit’ was first used by him in preference to his own earlier term ‘Scheduled Castes’. His choice of the term Dalit contributed to the formation and visibility of the Dalit identity.

According to Mangalam, after Ambedkar, the Dalit Movement split. Two Dalit writer activists NamderDhasal and J. V. Pawar formed the Dalit Panthers Movement in Bombay in 1972, adding new meaning to the term Dalit. Points out that today Untouchables prefer the use of the term Dalit in order to assert their identity.

Nevertheless, the fight for self-assertion is still today the main dominant of the Dalit: in fighting against all forms of discrimination they not only seek to affirm Dalit identity but also introduce substantial changes in Indian social foundation. Ambedkar’s ideas imbued Dalits with self-respect, and this awareness of their own condition became the main dominant of their literary narratives. With this end in mind, Dalit writers appropriated for themselves, in Ranciere’s words, their “[...] place of work and exploitation [...]” to exercise their “[...] sensory equipment” and go beyond their allocated place in society. Ranciere explains this process as one of “[...] seizing and rending [...]” that highlights the performative quality of narratives: ‘seizing’ experience and ‘rending’ it into some new kind of experience that might help mitigate suffering and turn it into some sort of positive action for the betterment of society.

The term Dalit already points to the desire of this community to problematize their condition of oppression. Although in Marathi it means ‘oppressed or ground down’, this meaning has been superseded by its reference to the “[...] militancy of the Dalit Panthers and their solidarity with all oppressed groups that have been exploited politically and economically in the name of religion”. In turn, the Dalit movement was not one but many and took roots in different parts of the subcontinent.

The writer that concerns us in this paper, Bama, is from Tamil Nadu. In this region, as we have seen, the Adi-Dravida movement stood out and it was foremost in the construction of the Dalit identity. Mangalam points out that it was E. V. popularly known as Periyar, who led the self-respect movement in Tamil Nadu; it criticized the dominance of the Brahminical religion and “[...] its social dimension of buttressing up social iniquity and in humanity” its main aim was to both unify the people of the country and boost their self-respect. Another prominent figure in Tamil Nadu, as Mangalam observes, was JyotheeThassay whose main aim was to fight for social emancipation through education for the Untouchables and an egalitarian Dravidian identity.

Likewise, the term Dalit has been used to refer to the many social evils endured by the community, among them, the condition of Dalit women. Mangalam explains that Ambedkar fought for women’s rights and education. Inspired in these movements, Dalit literature should be understood as the writings produced to communicate to society, both within and beyond the Indian subcontinent, the sufferings of the people who live within the lower rank of the Hindu caste hierarchy. These people have historically been oppressed by the people of the higher strata whose aim is to perpetuate the caste system. Through their writings, the Dalits have started a quiet revolution that aims at giving voice to its silenced members



so that they will not pass unnoticed, and thus change their status from objects of pity to that of agents of their own lives.

III. HISTORY OF DALIT LITERATURE

Though there have been several Dalit writers and poets during the medieval times in 11th-century Kannada poet MadaraChennaih, Dalit saint Kalavee, SantKabir and others, the modern movement for Dalit literature in India began from Maharashtra and in Marathi language in the 1960s when the Maharashtra Dalit SahityaSangh was established as an alternative platform to the mainstream Marathi literature. It was inspired by the ideology of JyotibaPhule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. The movement of the African Americans led by Martin Luther King and activities of black panthers as also the “Little Magazine” movement as the voice of the marginalized proved to be a background trigger for resistance literature of Dalits in India. Even before the 1960s, writers like BaburaoBagul, BandhuMadhav, ShankaraoKharat, Narayan Surve, AnnaBhauSathe were expressing Dalit concerns and issues in their literature. BaburaoBagul (1930–2008) is considered as a pioneer of Marathi Dalit writings in Marathi. His collection of short stories titled JevhaMiJatChorali (When I Concealed My Caste) published in 1963 shook the traditional foundations of Marathi literature with its radical depiction of social exploitation. Subsequently, NamdeoDhasal (who founded an organization called Dalit Panther) further consolidated and expanded the Dalit literature movement in India. Litterateurs like LaxmanGaekwad, LaxmanPawar, DayaPawar, WamanNimbalkar, TryambakSapkale, Arun Dangle, UmakantRandhir, J. V. Pawar, TarachandraKhandekar, YogirajWaghmare, AvinashDolas, Kishore Shantabai Kale, NarendraJadhav, YogendraMeshram, BhimraoShirvale, etc. became prominent voices of Dalit writing in Marathi. Many of the Dalit writings have also been translated into English and published as part of the anthologies of Dalit writings. The movement for Dalit literature has later spread to other languages like Gujarati, Kannad, Punjabi, Hindi, Malayalam, and Bengali. Dalit literature has used all literary forms – poetry, short stories, novels, plays and autobiographies in various languages. Nirav Patel, Joseph Makwan, DalatChauhan, Harish Mangalam, Mohan Parmar, B. N. Vankar, YashwantVaghela, ChanduMaheria, etc. in Gujarati, Bama in Tamil, OmprakashValmiki in Hindi and many more have contributed to the Dalit literature.

UrmilaPawar is a literary personality, known for her short story writings in Marathi literature. She was born and brought up in the Kokan region of Maharastra state. She was born in the year May 1945 at Adgaon village of Ratnagiri District. Today, she is known as a feminist writer and leader of the Women’s lib movement. As a Dalit writer, she has established herself after DayaPawar, Baby Kamble and ShantabaiGokhale as the prominent voice of Dalit literature. Her memoir ‘Aaydan’, which was published in the year 2003 and was translated by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The Weave of my life: A Dalit woman’s Memoir*. ‘Aaydan’ is a weaving of basket by Burud community of Ratnagiri district. Even mahar people were busy in the weaving of basket before plastic entered in their lifestyle.

IV. AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF DALIT WOMEN

Dalit women's autobiographies reflect and discuss various socio-political-cultural issues about the Dalit community. There is no fictional motif in Dalit women's autobiographies. In the narratives of Dalit women the everyday is a very important theme. The day-today private life as depicted in the



autobiographies reveals the dark side of a patriarchal structure. We get a woman's perspective on things—what makes her world, her take on societal evils and her anguish, hopes and fear and also a remembrance of the past.

Dalit men's autobiographies do not mention domestic violence. It is quite evident from Dalit women's autobiographies that this was a major issue among the women. Its complete dismissal in the men's narratives shows their apathy and the complete denial of violence at home. Dalit men like men of all classes and castes thus espouse the beating of wives and the general physical, mental and emotional trauma which the womenfolk have to bear within a household. The Dalit autobiographies are different not just because they reveal different experiences and different world-views but also because they unravel the bigger questions of memory, experience, gender relations and familial structures which are the same across all societies and classes. Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies and most of them have been written in regional languages and that they have hardly been translated into English.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (original *JinaAmucha* in Marathi, translated by Mayais an autobiography of Baby Kamble but an entire community. *The Prisons we broke* gives a shred of evidence for the Casteism in India. The fact that the caste system not only stigmatizes Dalits as untouchables because of their birth and forces them into dirty jobs, but also segregates a large chunk of the population as lower castes and also forces them into various menial jobs by their birth. Casteism has not just killed millions of Dalit but also destroyed generations of these enslaved people by keeping them away from civilization, development and social honour. Millions of people, for generation to generations together were reduced to a level much lower than dogs, cats, and rats. Casteism caused deaths of not only the body but also killed honour, self-pride and the living spirit of a whole race for hundreds of years. Casteism does not kill directly but kills the spirit and consciousness of a person or society. In the early decades of the 20th century, women's writings were regarded as a different form of literature by the male-centric society. The feminine narrative in autobiography raised a great controversy as the autobiography had been the monopoly of males till then. Writing autobiography requires certain potentialities. Depicting of individuality is the prerequisite of writing autobiographies.

The Prisons We Broke is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalit for thousands of years? She notes that after Phule and ShahuMaharaj, it was Dr. BabasahebAmbedkar who provided the intellectual and ideological foundations for a sustained critique of the caste system and that under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, Dalit protest acquired the form and force of a militant political movement and challenged the very foundations of Hinduism. Kamble raises certain important issues like caste discrimination, women subjugation and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on Dalit women to get themselves educated both socially and culturally. Born to an industrial father, the author's —family background hardly keeps her above the miserable poverty. Her English speaking aajas or grandfathers were butlers to European sahibs. As she says: all the people of the maharwada were illiterate except for my aaja. Therefore, she has nothing much to suffer as her people suffer but she had experiences of her community her people who suffer a lot.



The narration deals with her family background, village customs like worshipping local deities, superstitions, Mahars and yeskar duties, school education, experiences of discrimination, marriage customs, experiences of new brides with their in-laws, cooking beef, Dalit culture, exploitation of the upper castes, the influence of movies, the influence of Buddha and finally the arrival of Dr. Ambedkar as Dalit messiah and Kamble's active involvement in Ambedkar movement. The experience of insecurity is one of the major aspects of Kamble's autobiography. The position of Dalit women in a Dalit family, which is full of experiences charred by insecurity, domestic violence, and social violence, is an important theme in her autobiography. The patriarchal system in India made the Dalit women feel insecure and dependant on men.

V. THE DALIT AND NON-DALIT WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Woman from Maharashtra was introduced to education which was her path to literature. The Marathi Autobiographies translated to English are the examples of the two different perspectives of Upper caste women and Dalit women. The critical reading of 'I Follow After' (LaxmibaiTilak) and 'The Prisons We Broke' (Baby Kamble) focuses on the philosophy and way of life of the two streams. The religious conversion and domestic life are observed as theme. But both of them differ in their basic instinct to compose autobiography. The open and close access to their writing deals with feministic argument about masculine influence and the egalitarian principle. For the upper caste woman her family is her world and for the Dalit woman her community is her family. The first argue for self-modification and the second for community upliftment. In short, the study of these two autobiographies is parallel to the individual liberalism and communitarianism.

Mahatma JyotibaPhule was a 19th c. social reformer who took initials to introduce education to women and downtrodden people in India. Once he had asked his students to write essay about their plight as if they were describing it to Queen Victoria. MuktaSalwe, a girl from Mang community has expressed her life experiences which may be considered the first dormant autobiography of Indian woman. No doubt, in the recent past Indian women used to express through the lyrics on the grinding stones in which the grief, emotion, passion, hopes and glorification of their day-to-day life peeped out. This type of autobiographical literature was the initiatives for the main stream autobiographies of women in the early 20th century. After the independence when education reached to the humble huts of Dalit people, the Dalit women also started to express themselves in various literary forms. Marathi Dalit literature has the evidences of such type of writings but we have to wait up to 1980s to see the autobiographical work by these women. Women from Maharashtra are expressing various issues in the autobiographical form. Some exceptional life experiences on the part of the women have attracted the attention towards their autobiographies. Otherwise women's autobiographies have common aspects which revolve around their domestic life. The noteworthy fact is that though the domestic life is the major aspect of their writing; the autobiographies of the main stream women are different than the Dalit women's autobiographies. The basic reason is that the discourse in which they lived was different for both of these women. It affected the total colour of their literary composition. The rift of life pattern is visible in these two types of autobiographies. The grounds for life struggle, its philosophy, and their perspectives for life are totally different.



It is interesting to study an autobiography of a Brahmin lady, who got converted to Christianity following her husband in the contemporary conservative period, in comparison with an autobiography of a Dalit woman, who also got converted to Buddhism following the rational grounds of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Yes, I would like to look at Laximbai Tilak's autobiography *Smritichitre* in Marathi which has been translated in to English under the title *I Follow After* and Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* an English translation of *Jina Amucha*. Laxmibai Tilak was married to a whimsical poet Rv. Tilak. He got converted to Christianity out of the principles of humanity in it. But it becomes very difficult to a Brahmin wife to live the life of 'a wife' whose husband has converted to Christianity. She was sympathized as a widow and was offered with every kind of relief at the sake of her detachment from her husband. She has to undergo terrible psychological crisis while taking the right decision and following the path of her husband. These life experiences and urge for expression made her autobiography interesting. At another hand Baby Kamble was born and grown up as a Mahar girl. She has witnessed and suffered to be a Mahar. Her life experiences are interesting because they are the sagas of sufferings and revolution when the untouchables changed the religion for emancipation. Her autobiography claims to be probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian language.

These two autobiographies have difference in their intensions, inner arguments, and grounds for complexities. The aim of this paper is to compare these two totally different autobiographies. Let's see the difference in more elaborate way. These two women autobiographies from Maharashtra belong to the same century but the authors have completely different perspectives for their lives. The major difference is that the author of the former belongs to upper caste Brahmin family converted to Christianity whereas the author of the later belongs to Mahar caste family converted to Buddhism.

VI. CONCLUSION

The above-mentioned Autobiographies the factual and very pitiable condition of Dalit women that they were victims of the caste system and also victims of being women in the male-dominated society. Women from the upper caste or lower caste there are some similarities that they have to suffer because of their gender. But it is very disgusting and pitiable that for the sake of some material gains humans had and have violating and exploiting human beings. We very proudly say that we are living in the age of information technology and in the age of globalization where we don't consider anybody inferior based on caste. Though the incidents of humiliation, marginalization, and exploitation are happening. Dr. Ambedkar has advised annihilating the caste for the overall growth of the society but in this age, we very proudly celebrates caste, class, and gender except vindicating them which is not in favor of the healthy society and humanism.

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