

ASSERTION OF IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF SELECT DALIT WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract:

Dalit literature has been established and popularized in the early 1970s in India depicting radical thinking of oppressed, subordinated and subjugated Dalits by orthodox upper-caste people with relation to power and history. The word Dalit means 'oppressed' or 'broken' which has been used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed castes', a term British used for what is now called as 'Scheduled Castes'.

*In the literary domain, many Dalit writers and translators have contributed to the proliferation of Dalit literary aesthetics and movements. Dalit autobiographies have been written as an emergent model of Dalit discourse with the collective consciousness of their assertions and perceptions about the exploitation and violence faced by them due to caste-based discrimination. Therefore, the research paper will analyze, by taking into consideration, the select Dalit women's autobiographies such as Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* (1987), Urmila Pawar's *Weave of my Life* (1988), Bama's *Karukku* (1992) in the light of three-fold discrimination faced by Dalit women, that is, gender, caste, class, both within their own community as well as outside in the society.*

It will further explore the autobiography as a genre adopted by Dalit writers and depict the reasons of Dalit women for the existential search for identity that is denied to them maliciously by society even in contemporary times. The paper will draw attention towards differences in the representation of Dalit women's issues in Dalit male writings and upper-caste female writings. Last but not least, the research will discuss the discourse that initiated a new feminist movement of Dalit consciousness and how it transformed the hegemonic Indian feminist movements.

Keywords: *Dalit women, autobiography, oppression, exploitation, Dalit literature.*

Introduction

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, the Indian literature has witnessed an emerging pattern of expression and dissent in an unprecedented manner and scale, from the marginalised section in society known as 'Dalits', who were relatively subdued by now out against the discrimination and oppression of all kinds. Aesthetics of Dalit literature is a new horizon encompassing new compositions, new challenges, new appeals, new sensibilities, and liberation of the exploitation. It is an attempt in critically analysing the position of dalits in society and creating equality-oriented, humanitarian, and liberal environment. The most exploitative, unbearable, and torturous aspect of Hindu social system is caste division of society. The Hindu society is divided into four *varnas* such as *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *shūdra*. Those who were beneficiaries of *varna* system put forward a theory that the *varna* came from the parts of Brahma's body (creator of human civilisation). Therefore, it is said that *Brahmins* came from Brahma's head, *kshatriyas* came from his shoulders, *Vaishyas* from stomach and *shūdras* from legs. Those born in *Brahmin varna* are treated as superior to all other *varnas*. There are people outside this *varna* system and they are known as untouchables and in contemporary times as 'Dalit'

which literally means 'crushed ones'.

The agony manifested in Dalit literature is not imagined, but a lived experience and the expression of this experienced pain becomes a quest for construction of Dalit identity. Dalit women have contributed to the corpus of Dalit literature in their own ways. As Sharmila Rege writes in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* that, "Dalit women's testimonies, offered counter narratives that challenged the selective memory and univocal history both of the Dalit and women's movement."ⁱⁱ The paper will address and analyse the select Dalit women's autobiographical narrative translated into English, their assertion of identity, their attempt to delineate the feeling of protest and anger at the humiliation and discrimination suffered by them and lastly draw a comparison between autobiographies of Dalit men and Dalit women.

Dalit women writers of India have performed the twin task of not only presenting but re-presenting their life and concerns as they have been denied social, cultural and literary space and have usually been presented by the upper-caste writers as submissive and passive figures. Reclaiming one's voice and writing are some of the first step towards carving an identity of one's own in literature. The kind of efforts that Dalit women are narrating in their stories are creating responsiveness in society and it may be considered they are getting sensitized towards the evil pervading in society.

Dalit women writers' major goal is to carry forward the issues concerning their situation in society and exposing the neglect of writers who claim to write for the marginalisation. One of the scholars of Dalit studies mentions in her research article that, "they voiced their discontent with the traditional Indian feminism that usurps the right to speak on behalf of all women without taking into consideration their concerns of caste and class. They also feel alienated from dalit male writers who ignore the plight of women and seem uncritical of dalit patriarchy that further oppresses Dalit women."ⁱⁱⁱ

Autobiographical tradition in Dalit literature

The tradition of autobiography in India has a long history but looking from the context to dalits, it has emerged in an increasing number in the late 1960s and 70s. The genre autobiography is an effective mode of self-narration and expression in order to bring the microcosms of the world of subjugated and exploited people around us.

The autobiographical tradition of writing tries to narrow down the gap between the writer and the reader as compared to any other genre of writing. It is both expressive and reflective and has liveliness of a tale as well as the power to amuse and provoke. Dalit autobiographical narrative is not just the account of one person, rather, it narrates the account of whole caste. Thus, the definition of autobiography or autobiographical narrative which is the individual self is not realised in the same manner in Dalit life narratives. As Gopal Guru states in his book *Cracked Mirror* that, "Dalit life narratives are socially illuminating, politically subversive and aesthetically interesting. These narratives not only traces individual journey but collective journeys, they indicate a movement from Dalit individual to Dalit community. They can be treated as the signifiers of historically and culturally specific understanding of memory, experience and identity."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Dalit literature has flourished in the early 1970s when Dalit Panthers Movement emerged with the motto to addressing and protect the marginalised section of society in the whole country. The movement borrowed its moral support from the writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit literature is a radical thinking and sensitization of subordinated and subjugated social groups with relation to power and history. Dalit writers have questioned the mainstream literary theories and prejudice representation of Dalit characters in the writing of upper-caste writers. Thus, Dalit literature contains the feeling of rebellion and seeds of protest against age old caste system, humiliation and exploitation.

The male Dalit autobiography or autobiographical narrative has succeeded in creating a rebel against the caste system. The work has exposed many accounts of unspeakable horrors, inhumane treatment, and exploitation of the dalits by the so called orthodox upper-caste. As most of these

autobiographies are written as a consequence of an age-old socio-economic oppression, as a result of which, there is a sharp tone and straightforwardness in the way they address the situation and circumstances. This has become a symbol of distinctiveness, rebelliousness, and protest in contextualising Dalit literature in Indian literature. The initiatives of non-Dalit reformers have paved way for many Dalit movements and organisations, but, the movements initiated by reformists like Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar have influenced and inspired Dalits to fight for their rights and dignity.

India has witnessed a new social movement with the coming of nineteenth century. Eleanor Zelliot while analysing this new form writes that “the fourteenth century bhakti movement, the nineteenth century reform movement, and the twentieth century ability of women to create meaningful literature are part of the background of the emergence of Stri Dalit Sahitya”^{iv}

Dalit women employing the strategy of narrating personal lives constituting the economic exploitation, sexual violence and caste discrimination that they have experienced signify their servitude and silenced voice in the past. Dr. Raj Kumar succinctly puts:

Dalit women have invariably been shown as the victim of the lust of the higher caste men and never as rebels to fight against the injustices perpetrated upon them. Even in the novels of Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Sivaram Karanth, Gopinath Mohanty and U. R. Ananth Murthy, to name a few, Dalit women are either molested or raped by the upper-caste men... by portraying such pictures in their works, these writers have definitely gained sympathy for the victims but such routinely kind gestures from the progressive writers are not enough.^v

Through Dalit women's autobiographies, one can get the access into the socially paralysed and discriminated class of a community wrestling against all sorts of exploitation, gender discrimination, and deprivation at the hands of orthodox upper-caste. They are the victims of the exploitation and oppression in context to class, caste, and gender. There are several Dalit women writers who have written autobiography, autobiographical narrative, poems, short stories, novels essays underlining the links between caste and gender oppression. Some of them are Urmila Pawar, Bama, Kumund Pawade, Jyoti Langewar, Hira Bansode, Surekha Bhagat, Daxa Damodar, Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Gogu Shyamala, Jupaka Subradra, M.M. Vinodini, Challapalli Swaroparani, P. Sivakami, Veeramma, to name a few. This paper deals with these select autobiographical narratives of Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar which reveal the infernal living conditions of Dalit women. They record the grim sense of human existence, harassment, and delineation of social despair due to caste-based division of Hindu society.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

Even though there are numerous autobiographical accounts available in the Marathi Language, Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1986) is translated into English in 2008 as *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit. The translator writes in the introduction to Kamble's narrative that, “her narration reflects her love for her people without seeming to glorify their terrible condition. Outrage against the inhuman conditions of existence and love for her suffering people are organically fused to evolve a self-critical and yet humane and mature tone.”^{vi}

In her autobiographical narrative, she is more concerned with the age-long perils of exploitation and oppression of the entire Dalit community at the upper-caste hands. She is not much talking about the hardship of her own life. Kamble highlights how “caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women... she shows the remarkable dignity and resilience of Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community.”^{vii} She portrays the grim reality of gender, caste, and class-based exploitation that Dalit women have suffered due to their lower-position in caste driven society.

Kamble is narrating from the perspective of a Dalit woman who is marginalised and subverted in an uncongenial atmosphere in her memoir. In an interview with Maya Pandit, Kamble says, “I wrote about

what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering... Woman is the sole and easily available creature for subjugation."^{viii} She describes incidences of protests and rebel shown by Dalit women in particular and how the Dalit community is influenced by the ideology and speeches of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Gopal Guru, eminent political thinker and social scientist, in the Afterword to *The Prisons We Broke* says:

Dalit women's testimonies could be seen as the political imitative to engage with the Dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy. Dalit women's personal narratives are a kind of protest against the exploitation by the state on one hand and market on the other. Dalit women's autobiographies are also the statement of protest against their exclusion from the Dalit public-sphere, literary gathering, academic gatherings, publishing sphere and other spheres of recognition, like political parties.^{ix}

Dalit women's autobiographies or autobiographical narratives have questioned the genealogy of Indian feminism where the position of caste has not been articulated and drew attention to the complex relationship between feminism and caste history. She has represented the Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal structure within Dalit society. She has critically analysed the oppressive forces working within Dalit community which are restricting Dalit women to raise their voice and formulate a distinct identity other than their caste identity. Moving beyond literary paradigms, the narrative of Kamble spells out the tenants of the Ambekarite project, which is not an abstract one but brought to the centre stage of political modernity. As Anupama Rao puts in her book:

The autobiography maps the journey of dalits, who were history's losers to create a crucial space of alterity not through ameliorative logic of a reformed Hinduism but by existing from Brahmanical fold through conversion to Buddhism.^x

Therefore, these discourses have initiated a new literary feministic movement and sensitized many Dalit women writers to raise their voice against the social evil emanating from class and caste-based discrimination.

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*

Urmila Pawar has written her autobiography in the Marathi language published as *Aydan* (1988) and it is translated into English in 2003 by Maya Pandit. The 'weave' as a metaphor runs throughout the narrative. Her narrative revolves around the system of education in India, employment struggle and involvement in women's movement. Her work transverses a range of positions, representing "graded marginality and a complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who also goes on to transcend the caste identity from the feminist perspective."^{xi}

Pawar's autobiography portrays the inhuman condition of the dalits, but it moves forwards where caste identities morphed into a larger human identity influenced by Buddhist philosophy. She redefines the category of Dalit in her work, as she says:

Dalit! How are we Dalit now? They asked angrily. We had to make an elaborate explanation: Dalit does not mean socially oppressed people. It also signals rational, secular people who have discarded the oppressive system an concepts like God, fate and caste system.^{xii}

The memoirs present a detailed account of the community along with Pawar's journey to emerge as a feminist, thereby the issue of 'difference' to the centre stage. The articulation of resistance occurs through the mapping of hurt and humiliation across various structures and practices. The physical hardship of dalits has been documented and specifically of Dalit women in great detail, when Pawar writes in her memoir:

Women were compelled to make the journey to the market for they had to sell their wares for survival... women who went to collect oysters and crabs in the middle of the creek, bending down in knee deep water and returned with their hands bruised and bleeding. Some of them were

drowned while bending in deep water and did not notice the water level rising.^{xiii}

Her autobiography is embedded with incidences of caste and gender discrimination. Sharmila Rege describes in her essay that, “Dalit life narratives are testimonies, which forge the right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the official forgetting of histories of caste operation, struggles and resistance and hence the narrative demands new modes of narration and significance.”^{xiv}

Bama's *Karukku*

Bama Faustina Soorairaj is one of the prominent names in the Dalit academic circle. She is born in 1958 in Puthupatti village in Tamil Nadu, India. To escape the stigma attached to being Dalit, her grandfather converted into Christianity. At the age of twenty-six, Bama had taken the vows to serve as a nun in a Church, but eventually, she was disappointed when she experienced the discrimination that she had endured on the grounds of caste and patriarchal domination in the Church.

Bama's first writing *Karukku* (1992) records her childhood memories, originally written in Tamil and later, translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2001. Bama's literary work has established a distinct voice in Indian literature. She has a given voice to the miseries and exploitation faced by her own caste, especially, Dalit women who are oppressed by both upper-castes as well as by own Dalit men. In the afterward of her autobiographical narrative *Karukku* she says, “there are thousands of difficulties which beset a Dalit woman living on her own, yet the truth is that in her position as an independent woman, there are many opportunities for her to spend her life usefully and especially, to work for the liberation of dalits.”^{xv} *Karukku* means Palmyra leaf whose edges are sharp like a saw. She finds a great similarity between her life and Palmyra leaf as she describes in the preface of the book:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many cutting me like karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these taken together.^{xvi}

Bama portrays the painful journey of the bitter reality of Dalit Christians of Tamil Nadu who are discriminated in Hindu society as well as in Catholic Church. She begins narrating caste oppression faced by her grandmother who used to work in the fields of Naicker families (upper-caste). Even the small children of Naicker families used to call and order her grandmother by her name. After the dawn, when she used to go to the Naicker houses to sweep and collect the dung and in return, she would get leftover food from the plates of upper-caste. The interesting aspect to notice in her narrative is the internalisation of caste system in the minds of Dalit. Her grandmother defends by saying in the text *Karukku*:

These people are the mahajans who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper-caste from generation to generation, haven't we bear lower-caste? Can we change this?^{xvii}

The advice of Bama's elder brother has a great impact on her. As she is ill-treated in school because of her lower-caste (parayar), she remembers her elder brother's advice that education is the only way to attain equality. If she will study and make progress in her career, then, she can throw away all the humiliations.

Bama finds that wherever she has gone, there is a painful memory of her caste and untouchability. She begins to wonder, “what did it mean when they call us parayar? Had the name become obscene? But we too are human beings.”^{xviii} Even the financial assistance from the government is a humiliation rather than help, as it singled out her caste identity and suddenly “a titter of contempt among the other students”^{xix} can be seen.

When Bama was young, she continued to hide her caste identity as she thought being born in the low-caste is a humiliation and degradation. She has depicted the courage of Dalit women who lived and earned their livelihood when their husbands were run away because police were arresting Parayar men

over skirmish against Chaaliyar community. Further she portrayed the misbehaviour and harassment that Dalit women have to undergo in the hands of police. The police so called protectors of the law would use an obscene language, shoved their guns against the bodies of Dalit women and threaten them that since their husbands were away, they should be ready to entertain the police at night. Even with this level of exploitation, Dalit women stood and united against oppressive forces in protecting themselves and their husbands.

The position of girl child in Dalit community is similar to Dalit in Hindu society. Due to poverty, the girl child cannot go to school, and stay at home, collecting the firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores. Bama's father was against her education and disapproved of her becoming a nun. Bama wanted to help her community and joined the Convent as a nun. But sooner she realised that the nuns working in the convent oppressed the children of Dalit community studying in the school and treated them with contempt. Therefore, she realised that religious conversion does not mean upliftment or emancipation in a Dalit's life and decided to give up nun as a profession and worked towards the betterment of Dalit women. *Karukku* is thus an autobiographical narrative of inner strength and vigour of Dalit women who have enormous strength and vigour to bounce back against all odds. She has faced the truth of the caste system boldly and encouraged other Dalit women to break the silence and stand dauntless against their oppressors. She says:

If it is difficult even to find a means of living, there is also another great difficulty, the difficulty I found in moving about in the outside world, alone. If a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather toward her showing their teeth.^{xx}

Conclusion

Dalit women have articulated differently in their narrative focusing their sexuality, political awareness, self-assertion, experience of profession, violence, and suffering within the community. Shweta Singh in her essay writes:

While Dalit men are victims of casteism, Dalit women are doubly oppressed as Dalits and as women. They are penalized and brutalized not only by upper caste men but also by men from their own community. The subordinate status of women and their complete marginalization is clearly reflected in the writings of Dalit men. In rare cases when the women are actually given a voice or representation in Dalit men's autobiographies as in *Tiraskrit*, the narrative is based on conventional stereotypes. The comments are invariably on their moral character and the depiction is always that of mothers or wives engaged in quintessential roles that society designates for them. Women's contributions in the running of the family and their efforts at earning a livelihood are completely absent. This selective amnesia by Dalit males shows that men are not ready to acknowledge Dalit women's contribution to the family, the community and the Dalit movement at large. The absence of these women in the men's narratives is not only deliberate but also calculated. These men refuse to accord their women equality even in literary representation. The silencing and stereotyping of the women has hence led to an alternative voice from the women themselves.^{xxi}

In most of the narrative written by Dalit women, they have restlessly tried to find out the meaning in the meaningless existence of life. The awareness of the self and the ultimate rebel against all odds are the common and inevitable experiences found in all of the Dalit women's autobiographical narratives. Moreover, they focus attention on the need for basic human values like solidarity, fidelity, and liberty for their existential claims like the identity of self and individuality.

Notes

ⁱ Sharmila Rege, "Caste and Gender: The Violence against Women in India." Jogdand, P.G. *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2013, p. 75.

- ii Shweta Singh, "Representation of Dalit Women in Dalit men's and women's Autobiographies", *The Delhi University Journal of the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, 2014, p. 102.
- iii Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 67.
- iv Eleanor Zelliot, "Stri Dalit Sahitya: The New Voice of Women Poets", *Image of Women in Maharashtrian Literature and Religion*, Edited by Anne Feldhaus, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 69.
- v Dr. Raj Kumar, *Dalit personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation, and Identity*, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010, p. 219.
- vi Baby Kamble, *The Prison We Broke*, Translated by Maya Pandit, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2008, p. xiv.
- vii Ibid, p. xiv.
- viii Ibid, p. xv.
- ix From the Afterword in Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*, Translated by Maya Pandit, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2008, p. 160
- x Anupama Rao, *Gender and Caste*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003, pp. 208-209.
- xi From the Introduction to Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, Translated by Maya Pandit. Maharashtra: Bhatkal & Sen, 2015, p. xvii
- xii Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, Translated by Maya Pandit. Maharashtra: Bhatkal & Sen, 2015, p. 325.
- xiii Ibid, p. 2.
- xiv Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*, Delhi: Zubaan Publications, 2004, p. 13.
- xv Refer to Bama's *Karukku*, Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 167.
- xvi From the Preface of Bama's *Karukku*, Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. xiii.
- xvii Bama's *Karukku*, Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 14.
- xviii Ibid, p. 13.
- xix Ibid, p. 19.
- xx Ibid, p. 102.
- xxi Shweta Singh, "Representation of Dalit Women in Dalit men's and women's Autobiographies" *The Delhi University Journal of the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, 2014, p. 42.

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