



DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN EVOLUTION OF INDIVIDUAL SELF

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The present paper aims to discuss the dalit autobiographies and their evolution. Autobiography appeared first in the west in the 18th century. It represents more about private, social, public, political and moral life of a writer. Nevertheless individual achievements, personal experiences, oppression, imprisonment and struggles of an author occupy core part in autobiography. But the difference between autobiographies written by mainstream writers and dalit autobiographies is significant. Unlike autobiography written by mainstream writer, dalit autobiography is not confined strictly to the author's life or hardships faced by him and happy moments passed by the author though it is narrated in first person. It is the reflection of traumas and wounded psyche of dalits and dalit community. Moreover dalit autobiographies focus on the Pre-Ambedkarite era and therefore, do adequately represent history of agony. But it is copiously found that, dalit scholars argue against dalit autobiography thinking it as a process of 'digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past.' Manohar Jadhav opines that autobiographies are the revivals of memories of a hateful past and usually have the description of three generations. Middle class dalits and dalit politicians do not prefer dalit autobiographies as they are not ready to mingle undesirable past into the cultural present. Initially, Dalit literature itself is autobiographical in content. Most of the dalit writings are autobiographical in nature, expressing anger against injustice. What was considered vulgar in Brahmanical code has now found its rightful place in dalit autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies interpret self, society and conflict within these two and give more importance to the society and the community rather than individual emotions. They summon truth from the past about poverty, helplessness along with resistance.

Dalit autobiographies, instead of depicting in first person 'I', lay more stress on the collectivity of dalit community. Narrator is the protagonist and he/she is the witness to the events narrated. N. S. Suryavanshi's *Things I Never Imagined* (1975), Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978) mark the raise of dalit autobiography. There are many autobiographies which vary in length but not in content. Monotonous voice is found in all dalit autobiographies. Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste : A memoir* (2003), Bama's *Karukku* (1992), Vasant Moon's *Growing up*



Untouchable in India (2001), Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003), Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* (2007), Baby Kamble's *Prisons we Broke* (2008), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) are some of the best examples of dalit autobiographies which spit fire against existing Hindu norms. *Baluta* (1978) by Daya Pawar is perhaps the first dalit autobiography which shook the upper caste people. *Baluta*, the autobiography in Marathi traces the origin of autobiography, that is, the diary of Kalappa Yashwant Dhale written during the period 1911-28 that describes exploitation and its resistance through education. Pawar gets the diary from Dhale's family who had kept it carefully for over seventy years.

The experiences described in dalit autobiographies have no models earlier. Sharankumar Limbale's *Outcaste* is originally written in Marathi entitled *Akkarmashi*, is a brutal description of poverty which follows dalits every moment. Though his father is of upper caste, his mother belongs to a lower caste Mahar community. Sharan is, therefore, extremely marginalized throughout his life. By reading *Akkarmashi*, readers experience dehumanizing impact of caste oppression in the social system. It depicts his struggle against poverty, deprivation, discrimination and caste violence. Limbale's family rarely enjoyed a square meal. Hunger and poverty were closely associated with Sharan Kumar's childhood days. Even Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* contains severe poverty the author has experienced. He used to eat gruel in which worms float. Hunger and poverty are the common elements of dalit autobiographies and irreducible facts of dalit life. Dalits have determined to get education in order to overcome poverty. Dalit autobiographies are in the nature of protest against the caste system and disparity which are prevalent in Hindu society. *Athvaninche Pakshi* an autobiography by Sonkamble is the heart rending portrait of an orphan. As the experiences of all dalits are similar, one can notice similar sense of awareness of atrocities. Dalits never lived harmoniously with their surrounding people and they are always in a state of conflict with their neighbours. Another painful event one can notice in dalit autobiographies is that dalits compete with animals around them for their survival, and their habitation is always on a dunghill. The caste system strictly limits mobility of lower castes and confines them to the ghettos. Dalit autobiographies centre on caste and delineate the absence of relationship between individual and society.

Laxman Mane, who belongs to a nomadic tribe, writes in his autobiography *Upara* (1997), about the distance between his Kaikadi community and the middle class



Maharastrians. He could not understand Marathi language spoken in school where his father enrolled his name, but he knew only 'Kaikadi dialect. As they move from one place to another place, his father would request the teacher in new place to enroll his name. Mane witnesses the extreme humiliation of his parents by the caste Hindus. Shankar Rao Kharath in his autobiographical narrative *Taral Antaral* describes one incident where a constable forces his father to remove a bloated dead body from a well. Laxman Gaikwad depicts in his autobiography, *The Branded, Uchalya* (1998) the torture given to dalit boys and girls, and thus they are trained to withstand physical torture. Autobiographies interpret repulsive experiences of exclusion of an individual and his community. There are the records of out-castes who are living in seclusion outside village bounds, on pavements, village outskirts as well as those who are living in forests and on hills. Siddalingayya, a Kannada writer, in his *Oorukeri* (2003), describes how he used to stay in a graveyard. When one of his friends is told by Siddalingayya's mother that he is in the grave yard, he mistakes that Siddalingayya had passed away. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) describes how his family members dry leftover *poories* for the rainy season. Dalit life and leftover food are inseparable. Omprakash was allowed to sit in the classroom only after sweeping the classroom. Dalit autobiographies are not only a quest for true self, but depict violation of social and moral code.

Self recognition is the main motto of dalit autobiographies. There are many incidents which ultimately threaten the stability of the 'self'. Writers make query regarding the dominance of the upper caste and trace out the evolution of an 'individual self' as well as depict the collective suffering of the community. In Sonkamble's *Athavaninche Pakshi*, one can notice the wounded psyche of a young boy from a backward area. *Growing up an Untouchable in India, a Dalit Autobiography* by Vasant Moon, translated by Gail Omvedt from Marathi, is the first dalit autobiography to be published in English, portrays the author's childhood days. There is hunger, deprivation, cruelty and pollution in dalit autobiographies.

In the early decades of 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 pre requisite of writing autobiographies. But in India, there is not much scope for depicting the 'self'. It is a recent phenomenon. In Maharashtra, women have written autobiographies more than men.



This tradition of writing autobiographies probably commenced with Ramabai Ranade in 1910. *Amchya Ayushatil Kahi Athvani* (1910, The Memories of Our Life Together) by Ramabai Ranade, is the first full length autobiography in Marathi by woman and it has been observed that around 1975 more than thirty-five autobiographies by women were published. They contain mostly life sketches of the writers themselves. Laxmibai Tilak's autobiography *Smritichitra* (1930, Sketches from Memory) has been widely applauded for its articulation of pain. Autobiographies by upper caste women are not in direct speech. On the contrary, they are in the indirect speech form. Caste rarely appeared in these autobiographies but, it does appear in dalit women's autobiographies. They probe into the evil practices of dalit community, and writer gives criticism of the community from within. The life of Brahmin women, in fact, is different from that of dalit women as their life is filled with rituals, customs and so on. *Amar Jiban*, a life story of Rashundari, reflects the life of Brahmin women.

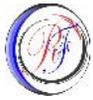
There is a rich treasure of dalit women autobiographies in Maharashtra. Efforts of Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar in creating consciousness among dalit women are praiseworthy. Appearance of dalit women in male autobiographies like sacrificing mother, pain enduring and suffering wife motivated dalit women to write about their own life experiences. Dalit women have acquired remarkable confidence to write about their own life narratives, as they have been in public spheres right from the early decades of 20th century. Kumud Pawde, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Shantabai Dani, Mukta Sarvagod and Baby Kamble are some of the notable dalit women writers who have indited their life stories. Conflict between self and community, triple exploitation, humiliation, starvation, Ambedkarite movement and resistance against patriarchy are the recurrent themes of these autobiographies. Mukta Sarvagod's autobiography *Closed Doors* (1983) portrays how the writer has been influenced by Dr. Ambedkar's humanism. Baby Kamble's autobiography, *Prisons We Broke* (2008) describes tension between tradition and modernity. Through autobiographies, dalit women writers recapitulate their mental and physical trauma, their marriage, problems as housemaid, brutalization, dehumanization, despair and agony in an artistic manner and argue that dalit feminist problems are understood only by dalit women, as dalits' problems are understood only by dalits and not by non-dalits. Dalit women narrate bitter experiences, pains with realization that other dalit women also must have suffered the same. Shantabai Kamble's autobiography *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (1988) elaborates



struggle for identity and growth against rural background, while that of Prof. Pawade's *Antaspot* (1981) is set in an urban educated ethos. Shantabai Dani's autobiography *Ratradin Amha* (1990), give a detailed account of her active participation in Ambedkarite movement. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* gives particulars of author's struggle to balance her official and familial chores. *Karukku* is the first Tamil dalit autobiography written by Bama, a dalit Christian woman, is a narrative of atrocities committed on dalit Christian women.

Dalit studies have paid scant attention to the dalit women's issues. In autobiographies written by dalit women one can perceive patriarchal hegemony within and outside dalit community. Moreover they mirror the miserable conditions and subjugation of dalit women and explore new world of experience which is unknown to the world. The violence inflicted on dalit women by high caste men and women on one side, and by dalit men, their husband and other relatives like father, brother, father-in-law, brother-in-law, on the other hand, is conspicuously depicted in dalit women's autobiographies. Even novels have autobiographical touch in the narration. Emotions, violence, bewilderment, rage and poverty take prominent place. Dalit women's autobiographies without poverty, caste humiliation, triple exploitation, fear, gender discrimination would be false one.

Dalit women's autobiographies which sprang up in the last two decades of 20th century, react to the privileged dominance of males, emphasizing socio-psychological condition of dalit females and generally end with the description of social relationships. Childhood days are elaborated in such a way that there is not much distinction between private, public and social life. But the depiction of later years is full of discrimination and humiliation. Dalit women writers make literature a tool for reclaiming their brutalized selves and affirming their identities. These autobiographies describe different periods of society. Different phases of Ambedkrite Dalit movement, participation of dalit women in the movement, their struggle for survival, the man-woman relationship, humiliations, atrocities and degradation of dalit women form the core part of dalit women's autobiographies. These autobiographies have enriched Dalit literature as well as regional literature. Shantabai Kamble, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, Mukta Sarvagod, Shantabai Dani and Bama have enriched dalit women's writings through their autobiographical narratives. These autobiographies give a close view of female experiences. They are, therefore, the statements about real patriarchal society and writers' struggle for female autonomy.



Dalit women's autobiographies portray the conditions that tore dalit women's lives to pieces brutally. Author hopes for a new culture where equality and brotherhood prevail instead of inequality and injustice. Thus, these autobiographies reflect the anguish of the whole community and quest for self identity. Elaboration of dalit community and use of first person to convey the trauma, pain, struggle of the author is efficacious. They are socio-historical narratives which fabricate awareness in readers' mind about dalit women's existence. Hurt memory plays a pivotal role which never allows them to erase their painful experiences. In the autobiographies of dalit men, women are scarcely remembered as sacrificing wives, mothers and daughters. As against to these, dalit women's autobiographies depict the struggles of dalit women. Dalit women's autobiographies recall their past and reconstruct history. The household, food, hunger, community, castes, culture, labour practices, humiliation, violence, resistance, collective struggles are widely found in dalit women's autobiographies.

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