



## DALIT WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: UNTOLD STORIES OF ANGUISH

**Dr. M. Sreelatha**

Lecturer in English,

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Govt Model Residential Polytechnic, Karimnagar, Telangana.

### **Abstract**

*The term 'dalit' refers to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken, scattered or humiliated. The members of those menial castes who are considered outcaste, poor, weak and untouchable belong to dalit group. They are physically and socially eliminated from the society because of the impure and polluting works assigned to them. In post-independent India, although many social reform movements were started against untouchability, the discrimination and prejudice against dalits still continue. They regularly face struggles and subjugation from the dominant communities. People belonging to the section of dalit have started taking help of literature to express their plight and confront their subjugation. Many dalit writers like Bama Faustina Soosairaj, Baby Kamble, Daya Pawar and Baburao Bagul raised their voices with their own stories of pain and suffering, narrating the anguish of dalit life in original. The situation of the women in dalit communities is adverse as they suffer from caste discrimination as well as gender discrimination within and outside their community. The aim of the present study is to explore the agony of suppression and distress from the autobiographies of dalit women writers like Bama, Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar.*

**Keywords:** Dalit Women, Discrimination, Resistance towards Suppression.

Dalit literature has become an influential part of Indian literature. Literature written by the persons belonging to the dalit communities or the literature that is specifically written to express the social, economical, historical and cultural aspects of the dalit communities is described as dalit literature. It is the literature of explicit social commitment aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation. Through these writings, the readers are able to get firsthand experiences of dalits condition and sufferings. Dalit literature talks about the art forms and oppression also, thereby it helps the reader to understand the dalits way of life. In this connection Lalmingthani observes, “we can see from reading dalit literature that spans several decades, that the suffering of the untouchables is a never ending chain.”(Lalmingthani11)

Dalit literature first found its voice in Marathi in the 1960s and 70s, and then soon appeared in other languages like Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. Autobiography has become an important literary genre through which writers could share personal experiences of caste discrimination and suppression. Several dalit writers and critics have called dalit autobiographies 'narratives of pain'. They present the existential predicament, psychological dilemma, pain and agony of dalits in a caste-ridden Hindu Community. Dalit, a sub-caste of Hinduism, it is considered as the lowest caste in Hindu society. Dalits have a history of always being ill-treated by the society, “The deprivation of this group is associated with the historical process of economic and social exclusion and discrimination based on caste” (Thorat 1). They have always been excluded from the society, they



constitute of poor landless class of people who have been made to do lowly odd jobs from times unknown and their place in society has not changed for centuries:

Indian Marxism has always seen the dalit problem in terms of land and agrarian relationships. It basically defines the dalit as Choma (hero of Shivaram Karanth's classic Kannada novel *Chomana Dudi* – 1931), the landless labourer. Judging from the reality of rural India, this mode of understanding the dalit problem is really meaningful and vital (Nagaraj 75-76).

During the 1970s, the followers of the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra gave currency to the term 'dalit' as a constant reminder of their age-old oppression, denoting both their state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed. This term has become an expression of hope, an expectation of renewing their past self-identity. Literature found to be one of the most influential tools to emancipate and strengthen these people. A significant number of works, especially autobiographies by dalits have gained prominence in literary scenario. Most of these writers choose autobiographies, so as to show their life sincerely. These works are based on representation of their discriminated life and their resistance towards suppression. One of the important aspects of dalit writing is that they write predominantly the experiences of discrimination, sufferings and exploitation. Dalit autobiographies address various issues related to subaltern section, their protest and effort for political assertion and empowerment.

Some of the influential autobiographies translated to English are Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (The Out Caste), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (A Dalit's Life) and Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiyarukh* (Against The Night). Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, Rabi Singh, Namdeo Dhasal, Dutta Bhagat, Lakshman Mane, Neerave Patel, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi, T.K.C. Vaduthala (T.K.C. Vaduthalayude Kathakal) and Narayan (Kocharayathi) are the other prominent dalit writers. Like male writers, dalit women also have raised their voice through the autobiographies expressing their angst of deprivation, social exclusion and humiliation. Bama Faustina Soosairaj, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kaushalya Baisantri, Kumud Pawade and Janabai Girhe explored their experiences of exploitation, discrimination through their life stories.

Bama's autobiography *Karukku* deals with issues of oppression faced by dalits. *Jina Amucha* (The Prison We Broke), a personal narrative of Baby Kamble visualizes the difficulties of dalit women in a patriarchal community and the feelings and helpless situation of Mahar women in their own society. Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (The Weave of My life) describes the struggle of three generations of women. She highlights the complexities of the life of the dalit community especially of dalit women in her autobiography. *Dohra Abhishaap* (A Double Curse), autobiography of Baisantri depicts the agony she faced inside the home. It is the narrative of her painful experience about the physical, mental and psychological trauma endured by the dalit women. Pawade's autobiographical work *Antasphot* tells about the obstacles created by various socio-political institutions in her life and how she overcame them during her life-journey. In her autobiography *Maranakala* (Death Pains), Girhe focuses on the problems, suppression and oppressions of women of the gokul community. The works



of these writers echo the common idea that the dalit women suffer from the oppression of caste and gender.

The present paper analyses the distressing effects of the caste based social system on dalit women. It also highlights the harsh realities of oppression, violence and discrimination against gender and caste faced by dalit women. The autobiographies of Bama, Kamble, Pawar and Baisantri are considered for the critical analysis of sufferings and agonies as experienced by dalit women.

Faustina Mary Fathima was the real name of Bama who was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. Bama emerged as a writer with the publication of her autobiography *Karukku* (1992) originally written in Tamil and later translated into English (2000). Her works include *Sangati* (1994), *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) and *Vanman* (2003). *Karukku* is the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil. Bama is considered as the first Tamil-dalit woman who depicts the most agonising and miserable life of the dalits through her autobiography. The book describes Bama's life from childhood to adulthood. The first person narrative expresses the traumatic experience of caste discrimination from the stand point of dalit women. Bama expresses her pain and anger through *Karukku*. She voices the stories of tears and sorrow of dalits but along with that she also conveys their resistance and strength.

*Karukku* deals with various themes related to dalits which include their religion, family, education, economy etc. Bama states many examples of discrimination in the book like at one place she describes how her grandmother was given leftover food by upper caste Naicker, they almost threw that food from high distance so that they may not touch hand or utensil of Bama's grandmother. She experiences discrimination not only with higher caste people but also in the Churches. This kind of oppression crushed her spirits and at times she was forced to feel that she and her community is bound to suffer the torment and abuse:

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us (26).

Dalits women are placed at the lowest place in society. They suffer caste discrimination outside their community and gender discrimination both within and outside their community. The pain and predicament of dalit women is more depressing than that of dalit men. Though they work equally as men do but when it comes to pay they are considered weak and are paid less. This kind of discrimination appears at the hands of both upper caste and lower caste men. Even though the dalit women do not lose their courage and prove themselves strong in the worst conditions also. Bama provides an incident in which the courage of dalit women is demonstrated. When there was a quarrel between Paraya community i.e. Bama's community and Chaliyaar community, all the men of Paraya community were either jailed or were hidden themselves in fields. There was not even a single man to be seen in the village except for patrolling police. At that time, instead of



worrying over their problems, the dalit women could attend to their household chores smoothly. They worked and earned their livelihood as well, “As usual, the women went to fields where they worked as day-laborers. On their way, they took gruel to men hiding in the woods, told them the news, and went on. And so the women somehow managed on their own, even without men’s earning” (38). Hence apart from exploring sorrows and agonies of dalit life in general, Bama focuses specially on the strengths of dalit women.

After experiencing subjugation, sufferings and injustices in Hindu society, Bama decides to become a nun. She embraces Christianity in order to put an end to the discriminations, humiliations and injustices. But her problem is not resolved. The situation and attitude towards dalit women is same even in Christianity. The caste and gender based bitter experiences made Bama to lose faith in God. Both Christian and Hindu institutions mocked, marginalized, humiliated, and ostracized her. Bama experienced the discrimination in many places. However, Bama brings out the attitude of upper caste Indian to the world through *Karukku*. Bama’s suffering is the suffering of dalits that remains unchanged throughout India. She comprehends that dalits have been forced to live a life of humiliation, and degradation until death. Bama converted her personal sufferings into words. Her personal experiences of poverty and discriminations are the saddest experiences that form the core of her autobiography *Karukku*.

Baby Kamble’s autobiography *Jina Amucha* was first published in the year 1986 in Marathi. Later it was translated to English by the social activist and professor Maya Pandit and published as *The Prisons We Broke* in 2008. It is considered as the first dalit woman’s autobiography in Marathi. It is a graphic revelation of the inner world of the Mahar community in Maharashtra. In her autobiography Kamble brings out important issues like caste discrimination, women subjugation and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on dalit women to get themselves educated and empowered.

Kamble emphasises on the caste discrimination that was faced by the Mahar community in Maharashtra. They were treated as untouchable servants ‘yeskars.’ They were not even allowed to walk on the road that is used by the high caste people. Her anguish is expressed as, “When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the road side” (52). Kamble depicts the pathetic condition of women. She presents an unflinching portrait of the Mahar women, oppressed by both caste and gender. The situation of women in a dalit family as an important theme is explored in Kamble’s autobiography. They have to experience insecurity, domestic violence and male dominance in the patriarchal family system in India. Male children were given importance and many privileges were offered to them as against the daughters of the same family.

Another aspect of domestic violence that dalit women suffer in their life is poignantly presented in the narrative. Kamble illustrates the authority of husband and the hegemony of in-laws against women when they enter the bride groom’s home. The author writes, “But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves – our very own daughters in-



law! If nobody else then we could at least enslave them”(87). The experiences of social discrimination as suffered by the dalit women are graphically portrayed in *The Prisons We Broke*. Baby Kamble recounts how the dalit women undergo severe caste discrimination in public places and violence in their own houses.

Kamble’s autobiography narrates the experiences of dalit women in terms of insecurities, violence and domination they suffered in patriarchal community whereas Urmila Pawar describes her experiences in terms of education, earning livelihood and the emergence of individual identity in the modern world. Pawar’s *Aaydan* is translated to English by Maya Padit and published as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman Memoirs*. The personal narrative was originally published in Marathi in 2003. The word *Aaydan* in Marathi means weaving of cane baskets. Weaving was the main economic activity carried out by the Mahar community to which the writer belongs. Pawar mentions that her mother used to weave baskets to earn the livelihood which indicate their caste as well as their poor economic condition. She describes in her autobiography the long journey from Konkan to Mumbai, bringing out the struggle of three generations women for a dalit modernity. The complexities of the life of the dalit women in a rapidly transforming society, issues of identity, caste and patriarchy are brought to light. By providing sensitive details of caste discrimination and poverty Pawar reveals the limitations of a low caste person. She writes,

The upper caste girls always used words like ‘Ladu’, ‘Modak’, ‘karanjya’, ‘Puranpolya’. They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times we went on excursions. However, I never asked myself the stupid question, why we do not prepare such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly. (93)

This example gives a sketch of dalit’s internal suffering of pain and pathos. Pawar explores very minute details of oppression and exploitation of dalit with a special reference to women. The humiliation faced by dalits and poor was so inimical that it is a bitter experience even the reader’s sensibility. Pawar narrates a shameful and ignominious situation that she encounters in a marriage celebration. She describes the incident,

Once, I went to attend wedding at my sister-in-law’s place, along with two of my nieces. However, when we three spout girls set down to eat and begun asking rice repeatedly, the cook got angry, “Whose daughters are these anyway?” He burst out. “They are eating like monsters” then someone answered “they are from our ‘Sushi’s family! Daughters of Arjun master!” On hearing this, the host came forward. “Oh! Are they? All right, all right let them eat as much as they want! Serve them well!” The cook returned with more rice but being called monster was not easy to digest and we politely declined. (117)

Pawar describes the experiences of gender discrimination in their own family when her father neglects her elder sister after her marriage. Her father never took care of her sister.



Consequently she died with her suffering and pain. Urmila Pawar feels that for outsiders and society, her father was a reformist but for his own daughters he has patriarchal approach. She also gives the example of Parvati, sister-in-law, who has no freedom in her house and lives a life like a slave.

Pawar portrays the life of exploited and oppressed women who accept the harsh reality of being woman and dalit, exploited both the ways from upper caste people as well as the male counterparts of their own community. There are many incidents of beating the wives at their own homes as well as in front of others. The narration of miserable incident of beating a pregnant woman based on a blind faith is a heartrending as well as startling for the coming generations.

Kaushalya Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishaap* (1999) is an autobiography originally written in Hindi. She is from Maharashtra, an activist of the Ambedkar movement and a founder member of the Bhartiya Mahila Jagruti Parishad. In the preface to her autobiography she says that she chose to write in Hindi because she strongly felt that there was a serious lack of Dalit literature in Hindi. Baisantri's autobiography revolves around the community she was living in. There are various references to her everyday activities and the problems she faced both within and outside the community. It gives a clear picture of the sufferings of dalit women. She narrates the pain and trauma of not merely about herself but also about her mother and grandmother. Her narrative includes the instances of domestic violence and abuse. In her autobiography, Baisantri raises voice against not only upper caste men but also against men of their own community. She depicts the struggle of female from three generations in her family.

*Dohra Abhishaap* means a double curse is written by a dalit woman, Baisantri who expressed her feelings and situation quite openly. The title of her narrative is very significant in denoting the doubly marginalised status of dalit women. Though she is an educated woman but remains a housewife throughout her life and suffers with maltreatment of her husband on one side and caste hatred of upper caste people on another side. Her autobiography describes the agonies she faced during her strained relationship with her husband.

The narrative starts with the details of her family, her life and childhood. She states how her mother had met the daily house hold chores with meagre earnings by taking broken part of rice(khuddi), cleaning hair with clay. Her mother often curses herself for giving birth to five daughters as female child was not liked in any Indian family. This is an evidence of gender discrimination in dalit communities. Her mother often laments on their hardships in upbringing their children. Baisantri remembers her own mother who suffered more than her due to illiteracy, male dominance and bore with so much suffering and torment as a female in her community, how she was married in her infancy and became a widow in adolescence. She also describes how untouchability suffers them and how dalits work hard to make their ends meet, " They were able to manage food grains anyhow for two meals a day. Both males and females used to work in fields...untouchability was practiced very harshly and thus they could not get job in caste households. Only the job of cutting wood and porting heavy good was for them. A painful job was their share often" (15-16).



Baisantri brings to fore the aspect of women's suppression by telling the story of Aaji (her grandmother) who suffered without any of her mistake. Dalit women have no choice in selecting their husband. And afterwards their husbands harass them repeatedly at their will and practice polygamy. She poignantly describes how the life of her Aaji became after her husband's death and how she was brought to her second husband's house at night as 'paat'. It is a custom that supports male ego. As she was a 'paat' wife, she had no right to participate in any pooja or marriage, "As she was brought at night to her husband's house, no married women could see a 'paat' woman. She could not take part in any marriage or puja. Her necklace had an inscribed figure of a woman which indicated she is a 'paat' and other should know it. The widowers could marry a virgin but a widow couldn't. (17)

The evil of untouchability rampant in Hindu society is explored when she was a student in Bhide Kanyashala. The social and economical difference between upper caste people and dalits is also exemplified in her description of social status, "I didn't open my lunch box before the girls. I was shameful of opening my lowly lunch box and lowly food and used to eat facing the wall so that anyone doesn't see me. I felt hungry at the fragrance of their food and used to think when I will have that lunch in my life."(41) She points to the fact how caste hatred and varna system has percolated to dalits and it is only because of this reason they are divided among themselves: I felt shameful that I was an untouchable and due to this I felt very weak...I passed my time in loneliness during interval and before the opening of the school...The Kunbi girls asked my caste. Out of fear I told them I was a Kunbi. They asked if I was a Tilele or a Kaire... I replied I was a Tilele... I had concealed my caste from them but I was fearful of its revelation. (41-42)

She describes that her married life with Devendra was not a happier one. Her married life reveals the behaviour of her husband towards her and his own siblings. He was an egoistic and hypocrite. Her husband, though an ardent worker of dalit cause, is a rude fellow who has feudal mindset towards women and their rights. Devendra is a prototype of countless irresponsible men who are unable to free themselves of their feudal mindset in which wife is only a doll who should remain mute, succumbing and caged in household jobs. Their pride in being the bread earner is evident in most of their actions. Soon she understands the insensitive and uncaring nature of her husband. The disgust and intolerance towards his behavior made Baisantri in filing a request for divorce later as she concludes to lead an independent life free from the clutches and pangs of such relationship where there is no warmth in life.

Baisantri concludes from her own life experience that the women suffer the most whenever suppression and oppression of dalits take place in the society. Hence women should be given top priority. If women want to prosper, they should strive for self-respect by standing on their feet and move forward. They will have to develop strength in them rather than taking help of others. Her autobiography is thus a very strong message to women who suffer in society and family and languish forever.

The autobiographies of dalit women form a significant contribution to dalit literature. They become the tools to understand the consciousness of dalit women. The writings of Dalit



women represent their own experiences, their burning indignation and protest against the caste and gender discriminations prevalent in the society. Many dalit women started awakened and giving literary expression to their sufferings. The voice of dalit women is an intense cry for justice. Their autobiographies reflect a burning desire for freedom from the clutches of caste and discrimination.

#### Works Cited:

1. Bama, *Karukku*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.
2. Baisantri, Kaushalya. *Dohra Abhishaap*. Delhi: Permashwari Prakashan, 2012. Print.
3. Kamble, Baby, *The Prisons We Broke*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008, Print.
4. Lalmungthani, Melody. "From Oppression to Liberation Through Education." *Critical Essays on Dalit Literature*. Ed. D.MuraliManohar. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2013. Print. 10-18.
5. Nagaraj, D.R. *The Flaming Feet and other Essays*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black Publishers, 2010. Print.
6. Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman Memoirs*. Trans. Maya Pandit. New Delhi: Columbia University Press, 2008, Print.
7. Thorat, Sukhadeo. *Dalits In India: Search for a common destiny*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009. Print.

*M. Sreelatha has been awarded Ph. D from Kakatiya University, Warangal. She is presently working as Lecturer in English, Dr.BRA Government Polytechnic, Karimnagar, Telangana, India. She has teaching experience of more than 20 years. The researcher is a recipient of Gold Medal for securing the highest marks in Post Graduation (English Literature). She is also awarded as the Best Lecturer by the State Government of Andhra Pradesh in recognition of her service in teaching in the year 1999.*