

THE MARGINALIZED AND STIGMATIZED IDENTITY OF DALITS IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MAHARASHTRA AND TAMIL DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Dalit Literature is mainly the result of socio-cultural changes that took place in Maharashtra in India after independence. Silenced for centuries by caste prejudice and social oppression, Maharashtra's Dalits registered their protest in the form of short stories, poetry, novels, and autobiographies. The volatile surroundings made the autobiographical narratives depict through realistic and effective writing, the inhumanity, lawlessness, and cruelty. The autobiographies were written from the author's direct experiences in life, and they celebrate the fighting spirit in their characters who work against all the odds in life and struggle for marginalized existence in the caste-based society in India. Voicing of issues such as subjugation, oppression, violence, and the transformation of the stigmatized identity is the primary concern of these writers.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, caste, oppression, autobiography, inhumanity, transformation, identity.

In an era when issues relating to human rights have been under critical focus, literary depictions of marginalized groups' experiences have acquired great significance. The recent spurt in Dalit literature in India attempts to bring to the forefront the experiences of discrimination, violence, and poverty of the Dalit. Expression of these experiences has long been silenced, often with the religious and social sanction and relegated to the margins as non-literary. The growing corpus of Dalit texts, poems, novels, and autobiographies, however, seeks to rectify this phenomenon by examining the nuances of Dalit culture. Dalit literature is one of the crucial movements that emerged in post-independence India. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of these so-called 'untouchables' to a self-chosen

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identity as Dalit is a collective struggle waged over centuries. This literary revolution of Dalits is unnoticed outside India but has gained momentum in India. Dalits' lives and experiences are pouring forth in many languages, in Marathi, Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati, and so on. "Out of the shadowy margins of folk culture and the dim memory of an ancient or contested written traditions, then, Dalit literature is moving to new prominence in cultural precincts formerly closed to Dalits- that is, in modern genres." (Shankar 2014). There is no original work available in English, and a little of this is translated, accompanied by review attention in national newspapers and magazines.

The Dalits in India have been marginalized for centuries together in the caste hierarchy instituted by Vedic tradition. The term 'Dalit' came into prominence in 1972, when a group of Marathi writers-activists founded Dalit Panthers- an organization to voice their rights. The Dalits have been considered 'avarnas,' who do not fall within the 'savarna' system based on the four-caste division. The Aryans brought with them or gradually evolved, a religion (Hinduism), a language (Sanskrit), and a new social order and colour (Varna) based stratification system. As Vivekananda said, "Liberty is the first condition of growth. Just as man must have the liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress, and marriage, and in every other thing, so long as he does not injure others." (Bhattacharyya 2018)

In its origins, the ongoing in Dalit literature is, in a general sense, Ambedkarite in inspiration. The pioneering work done by Marathi writers during the Sixties and Seventies was under the profound influence of Ambedkar. An essential document here-a masterpiece of rhetorical statement- is the manifesto of the Dalit Panthers. The Dalit Panthers Manifesto, initially issued in 1973 in Marathi, is broadly humanistic in conception even as it is relentless in its critique of the *Varna -jati* complex and its advocacy of Dalit aspirations. As a group, the Dalit Panthers were short-lived, but their ideas continue to exert a significant influence, often unacknowledged, in the literary efflorescence that followed first in Marathi and then in other languages. Dalit literature emerged into prominence, and as a collective voice after 1960, a fresh crop new writer like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, and Shankarrao Kharat came into being with the Little Magazine Movement. They represent a new, direct, angry, accusatory, and analytic voice in the literature. In Marathi Literature, Baburao Bagul's writings were influenced by the thoughts and writings of Gautam Buddha, Mahatma Phule, and Ambedkar. The extreme poverty, misery, and oppression he experienced in his childhood are evident in his works. His collection of short stories *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I robbed a caste, 1963), *Maran Swast Hot Aahe* (1969) (Death is becoming cheap) broke all norms of conventional story writing in Marathi and altered the face of short-story writing. Sood's *Revenge* (1970) and two novels *Aghori* (1980) and *Kondi* (2000), are a depiction of the miseries, frustrations, and struggles of the oppressed. He was the first writer who associated Dalit Literature with African American Literature and initiated Dalit literature's internationalization.

The Dalits of India are facing many socio-political disabilities. Their human rights are violated. They are subject to many discriminations, subjugation, deprivations, and violence. They are not integrated into the mainstream Hindu society. Curiously, the

bases of this discrimination were not a religion, language, sex, or colour, which generally constitute the common grounds for discriminatory treatment in most parts of the world. Instead, it was “caste” or “birth,” which is unique. *Manusmriti*, the Hindu legal code, too, contains a similar kind of provision. There are many provisions set down to exclude Dalits from places of worship. Heavy punishments, including sentences of death, were to be pronounced for ‘Shudras’ violating higher Varnas’ rights. All the efforts of Dalits for getting an education were strongly and unanimously opposed by the upper castes for social and political reasons. The upper caste was afraid that if the lower caste is allowed to get an education, they will ask for their power share.

“Access to learning was prohibited and Dalits could not enter indigenous schools that taught elementary skills even to lower castes in pre-British India. Though opportunities for education and new occupations that were untied to caste status were opened to the untouchables for the first time during British rule in the mid-nineteenth century, the magnitude of access to such opportunities was limited and only a few Dalit sub-castes, because of their relatively favourable structural location, were able to avail of them. Thus, even in 1961, more than a decade after India’s Independence, barely 10 per cent of the Dalit population was literate.” (Nambissan and Sedwal 2002)

The word Dalit in Marathi means “broken.” It was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century, in the context of the oppression faced by the untouchable castes of the twice-born Hindus. The term expresses weakness, poverty, and humiliation of a particular section of Indian society at the upper castes’ hands. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this helplessness. The upper-caste Hindus treat them as untouchables, and they are not allowed to enter the temples or any other sacred place. Dalit Literature, which looks at the history and current events from a Dalit point of view, has come to occupy a niche in the body of Indian literary expression. It forms an essential and distinct part of Indian literature and politics. The primary motive of Dalit Literature is that it gives a voice to the relentless oppression of Dalits in India’s caste hierarchy and to inspire the possibility of their social, economic, and cultural development. Dalit literature has its roots in the lives of the people who are suppressed, crushed, downtrodden, or broken into pieces. The characters of its literary elements work as manual laborer’s cleaning toilets, streets, and sewers. Therefore, the primary motive of Dalit literature is the protest and liberation of Dalits. The first essential characteristic feature of the Marathi Dalit literature is that it is not originally and essentially an academic exercise. The practice of writing does not aim at achieving an aesthetic performance in literature as an art. It serves purposes of social intervention and accordingly carries strong militant connotations. This holds well in Maharashtra as in other areas of India. Dalit literature deals with the figures of self-assertion and protest, and the ways of a quest and construction of an identity of one’s own, on the part of those who have been denied a full human dignity, and whose consciousness was made to forcibly internalize patterns of cultural depreciation and social subalternity. Another essential feature of the Dalit autobiographical narratives is that they do not isolate the individual from their real historical environment, family, community, and society. The oppression, struggles, assertion, and quest of the identity of the individual who

is the subject-matter of the narrative seem never dissociated from the shape of the social relationships system.

Few are the Non-Buddhist Dalit autobiographies. But all these writers are historical, though differently, each of them in his/her way, in the sphere of influence of the Dalit liberation movement and more precisely of its charismatic leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as much comforting the socio-cultural motivations of the movement as supported by its socio-cultural or even political and organized militancy. It is essential for the right understanding of the Dalit autobiographies to keep in mind this general historical setting. Dalit autobiographies are literary forms of social protest practices. Repressed and ruined human beings break the status of animal servility to which they were reduced by a shout of protest, which signals the birth of a human being. Dalit history aims at correcting flaws in a society. Because “people everywhere live lives which are constituted out of the past” (Cohn 1987), the Dalit movement also acknowledges that Dalits, too, have a past and insist that it be brought to the fore. The Dalit autobiographical narratives’ essential feature is that they do not isolate the individual from his real historical environment, family, community, and society at large. Dalit literature in general and autobiography in particular; insists at length upon the condition and mechanism of oppression of the individuals and their communities, and upon the access to school and education as the essential way towards employment and social mobility in a modern urbanized setting, that is, allowing for an escape from the grip of traditional repressive systems. The oppression, struggles, assertion, and quest of the individual’s identity who is the subject matter of the narrative seem never dissociated from the shape that the system of social relation and history has given him. “The assertion of the individual structurally appears as outcry, denunciation, or assertion of an individual as one from within a given social constellation. Revealing is a challenge to conventions of oppressive silence and allows the Dalit to repossess his or her life.” (Nayar 2006)

Caste, in contemporary India, is crushing oppression and a complicated phenomenon. The oppression of Dalits continues to be subjected, even as they have made significant advances ranging from the routine tradition to deadly assault by physical force. Caste, “the distinctive social institution attributed to India” (Inden 1990), has brought havoc in the lives of Dalits for centuries. They have been treated worse than animals and forced to live on villages’ outskirts under filthy conditions. They were even prohibited from sharing the natural resources like water with the upper caste. Caste continues to be the debilitating disease, which poses a threat to national integrity and solidarity. One approaches the subject of autobiography in two different ways, each with its contributions to make. The first conceives autobiography as a genre or mode, while the second accepts that all self-expression or self-representation is an autobiography. These are logical classes that can be combined in different ways in real discursive practices. For example, an honest autobiography can include References to what other people have said or written about the author (biography), samples of the author’s works (portfolio), and an account of his or her interests (collection). However, the differentiation between these modes may help us to see what kind of material is used in every case. Moreover, these four modes can be

brought in correspondence with actual self-representation genres according to which mode is predominant.

Historically, the question of “Who am I” has been answered in the genre of autobiography (although it has certainly been addressed in many other genres). Autobiography thus can be regarded as a meta-genre for various modes of self-description and self-knowledge. There exist many convergent definitions of autobiography. William Spengemann (1980), who studied the history of this genre in Western literature, wrote an extensive bibliographical review on the study of autobiography. Spengemann has noted that ‘the more the genre gets written about, the less agreement seems to be on what it properly includes’ (Spengemann 1980). Earlier, regardless of theoretical divergence whether it is admissible to take into consideration such literary forms as letters, journals, memoirs, and verse-narratives, people “generally agreed that an autobiography had to offer at least ostensibly a factual account of the writer’s own life – that it had to be, in short, a self-written biography” (Spengemann 1980). Recently, with the exponential growth of research in the field, the boundaries of the genre have extended proportionally until there is now virtually no written form that has not earlier been included in some study of autobiography.

Autobiography, as a literary genre, emerged in post-classical Europe as a product of colonial modernity. It exemplifies the individual’s attempt to construct a unified self by shaping the past, imposing a pattern on life, and making a coherent self out of the fragments of experience. Autobiography has acquired particular urgency in the wake of postcolonial assertion on self-presentation. The claims of history to objective, grand and universal truths have been questioned and contested through the strategic deployment of intensely intimate personal and private counter-truths articulated and expressed through autobiographies or autobiographical narratives. Remarkably enough, in the last twenty-five years or so, autobiography is no more the sole preserve of ‘national’ or ‘spiritual’ heroes. In other words, autobiographies no longer represent or articulate the overarching national aspirations; instead, they offer us the uneasy counter-hegemonic subaltern perspectives, subverting the grand narratives of nationality and spirituality without any aesthetic camouflage.

Consequently, there is an unprecedented rush of autobiographies written from the margins. Autobiographical narratives of mainstream India influenced by European models, explored the personal and private realms of the individual experience in an attempt to realize one’s true self. Dalit writers subvert this notion of autobiography as a narrative of an exclusive private domain of the individual. Dalit autobiography problematizes the relation between the society and the individual, the private and the public, by conceiving the self not merely in private or personal terms. Expression of the Dalit- self demands new modes of narration and signification as it deals not with a unified and coherent self but with a divided, fragmented self/non-self. Significantly, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, elite subaltern male historiographies have inadequately represented the voice of the subaltern female. In Indian literature, a genre that has been thus marginalized is Dalit Writing. Dalit literature, which seeks its proliferation in the Twentieth century, offers this space to the Dalits for defining their individuality and

cultural identity. The arguments in the autobiographies emphasize the multiple themes of suffering, caste /racial discrimination, education, hunger& strife, and Dalit feminism.

Discussion of the Dalit Autobiographies

Indian society has always attempted to ignore the Dalits. In her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, Urmila Pawar relates how Dalits have, for centuries, been “shamelessly exploited by the upper castes, reduced to a status of beasts of burden, extremely marginalized” (Pawar 2009). Pawar recounts three generations of Dalit women who faced untouchability as a great sin. She not only shares her tragedy but also conveys the consciousness among women for a profound change. She says: “There has always been a tendency in our people to shrink within ourselves like a tortoise and proceed at a snail’s pace.” (Pawar 2009). Their state of oppression, their multiform segregation, as well as their voices, have been deliberately kept at a greater distance from the mainstream and thus systematically silenced. Since they have been considered as second-class citizens, their past has been neglected and ignored in a “big and organized move for the dehistoricization of Dalits.” (Narayan 2004) This fact illustrates the widespread discrimination Dalit communities encounter everywhere in their daily lives due to the pervasive and oppressive caste system. The silence imposed from above has been intended to maintain the status quo by stopping members of the lower castes from expressing themselves and eventually questioning and denouncing their situation.

Nevertheless, today, following the Dalit movement’s thrust to assert the identity and rights of Dalits, more and more voices are piercing the traditional silence all over India. Educated Dalit activists realize they have to possess their literature and their history to establish their identity. Literature and history as areas of self- knowledge and modes of expression have proved to be of significant importance for communities in search of recognition by society (Narayan 2004). Both fields are now acknowledged as a powerful means to reveal the plight of Dalits and their inner thoughts and unveil their life conditions. Moreover, Dalits insist on speaking from their perspective and are no longer content to be represented by others (Brueck 2010). By speaking out, they turn from being passive subjects to active agents. Dalit literature has emerged in this context. In quest of recognition, some Dalits have poured their sufferings in the form of writing fiction or poems. Expression of personal views has become essential for them now. Yalan Ati, a Tamil Dalit poet, writes: “The footsteps of my creation lie all ground up in the open spaces where my voice tried to transform into words the anger that rumble around in the ferocity of my frustration.” (Buck and Kannan 2011) by developing its style and concerns and by asserting its inner value, Dalit literature is effectively resisting Brahmanical hegemony in literature and society. Dalits can speak out and expose their stories in a kind of vital outbreath. An instance of this tussle is found in Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, where the Dalits are deprived of their identity. They are called “Oe Chuhre” or “Abey Chuhre” and not by their names. Their caste titles do not designate them, and their names given by the upper caste negate their identity. This brief definition of the self in terms of identity and individuality is challenged

when the headmaster asks the question, “Chuhre ka.” And the narrator has to answer in the affirmative. Valmiki elaborates upon the significance of the name for identification at the end of the autobiography again. He informs the reader that several of his friends and colleagues are upset by his persistence in using Valmiki as his name since it brands him with his caste of origin. Retaining it is seen as a concession to the caste hierarchy, yet Valmiki insists on using it for self-definition as it has become his “badge of identity.” (Valmiki 2003). The above example from Valmiki’s life becomes a metaphor for Dalit literature.

Some Dalit literature, including autobiographies, engages with the complexities of self- definition, cultural identity, and the right to represent the Dalits’ self in life and art. It can be seen that Dalits, over some time, have evolved a culture of their own. Bama’s autobiography *Karruku* deals with religion, recreation, education, etc. The narrative chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamilnadu. Bama (cited in Buck and Kannan 2011) recollects:

Writing like this made me rediscover myself and my identity. Hope sprouted in me once again, and my shattered self was made whole. It transformed me. It freed me from the perplexing cultural crisis brought on by my life in the convent, that life that had eroded my identity. I sank my roots in my own culture once again. Deep within my alienated self, there welled up a sense of belonging to my people and my soil, and it flooded all over me. That is what healed me. That is what strengthened me. That is what merged me once again into the ebb and flow of social relationships. (Buck & Kannan 2011)

Karruku means palmyra leaves, which have sharp edges on both sides. The protagonist’s name is not mentioned, and the events of Bama’s life are haphazardly arranged to give it an original appearance. It provides a very astute example of how young children are socialized into the cultural patterns and their community’s everyday experiences. She describes the games they used to play as children and that they also replicate and discriminate between the ‘high’ and ‘low.’ She writes further:

Sometimes we played at being nuns and priests who came and gave us blows.

Then we play at being married and setting off on a bus journey; the husband coming home drunk and hitting his wife; the police arriving and beating him up. (Bama 2000)

They experience this socialization of young children as both positive and negative. In such autobiographies, we see that even plays and games among the children become symbolic of the everyday pain and suffering of Dalit women. Bama’s *Karukku* participates in a debate over the power to represent the Dalits and determine their identity. Bama’s autobiography narrates the Dalit men and women’s typical pain and humiliation; the community’s attempts to deal with an exploitative cultural order and survive with dignity set them apart from the mainstream. This distinctive experience defines the core of their sub-culture. *Karukku* was first translated in French before it was translated into English. It asserts that class, caste, and gender are important markers for social exclusion. In a colloquium organized by Women’s World (India), a free speech network of feminist writers addressing issues of gender-based censorship; Bama vehemently voiced her opinion, which perhaps sums up the ethos of all works of literature of suffering and resistance:

“I am a Dalit woman writer. The challenge for a writer is to remain rooted. To have experienced pain, hunger, and contempt, my story is my people’s story. Through my writing, I allow the militancy of the victimized persons to emerge. I believe the life experiences of people can be conveyed only in their language. My writing has been called bawdy and immoral. It has broken a lot of taboos. I did not write for publication; my first book, I write for my own healing. I feel satisfaction when a ripple of consciousness surfaces in my community due to my writing. Writing has helped me break down a thousand barriers.” (Abraham 2015, 260).

Bama needs to situate the Dalit woman’s life in context; she does so by directing us to the power of a community’s narrative. Bama’s narratives focus on caste and gender discrimination. Her works embody Dalit feminism and celebrate the inner strength of subaltern women. As an exponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found the voice to raise Dalit women’s suffering through Mariamma. *Sangati* deals with Dalit marginalization, discrimination, humiliation, and oppression of women. It deals with the life of women in the Paraiya community. In *Sangati*, Mariamma, returning from the fields, is accosted by an upper-caste landlord, Kumarasami Ayya. He tries to pull her into a shed, but she escapes. Mariamma is warned by her friends:

It is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you’ll find that it is you who will get the blame; it’s you who will be called a whore...Are people going to believe their (upper-caste landlords) words or ours. (Bama 2000)

Sangati is built around women’s conversations- events are narrated through stories told by women and their experiences. Thus, we see the community’s various experiences through these women’s lens, a feature Paula Richman claims produces a ‘dramatized audience’ that foregrounds the understanding of specific Dalit women (Richman 2008). When Bama’s protagonist admonishes her grandmother for not protesting, the grandmother says: “From your ancestor’s times,” it has been agreed that whatever men say is always right. Bama, citing her own experiences, writes that a single woman finds survival extremely difficult as “all sorts of men gather towards her showing their teeth” (Bama 2000.) In *Sangati*, several lives are narrated simultaneously, connected by the common link of suffering and anger brought about by their victimhood on caste and gender issues. Bama uses a peculiar Dalit dialect, occasionally livened with invectives and slangs to articulate and represent the realities of Dalit women’s existence. As Laxmi Holmstrom, the translator, points out in her Introduction to Bama’s text:

Sangati flouts the received notions of what a novel should be. It has no plot in the usual sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists.’ *Sangati* means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of the interconnected anecdotes. These individual stories, accounts, memoirs of personal experience are narrated in the first person. (Bama 1994)

Dalit women’s narratives challenge their absence in Dalit men’s narratives and voice the concerns shared by women across all strata. These alternative accounts openly criticize the patriarchal structure in their society, thus reflecting on women’s problems with specific Dalit society issues. The hardships faced by these women under the patriarchal

order are thus articulated. Dalit women's autobiographies are very candid about all kinds of exploitation and oppression that these women had to endure both within and outside their society. They also give lucid accounts of their contribution to the larger cause of the Dalit community. Dalit men's autobiographies do not mention domestic violence. It is quite evident from Dalit women's autobiographies that this was a significant issue among women. The day-to-day mental and emotional trauma of women's lives depicted in these autobiographies reveals a patriarchal structure's very dark side.

Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* opens with the hysterical ranting of a woman, Thangam, who has been violently abused. She peppers her account of beatings at the hands of upper-caste men with similar the language of self-abnegation: "I didn't throw mud on anyone's food" & "He measures my rice" (Sivakami 2006) offers multiple voices within the ravings of the abused woman to foreground the Dalit condition. The narrative draws our attention to the ideologies and tensions inherent in casteism and patriarchy. Sexual exploitation runs like a central theme throughout this autobiography. Thangam's anguished voice narrating her troubles is the personal one. Thangam expresses the poor Dalit's inability to go to the court to claim her dead husband's share of land. Sivakami took voluntary retirement from her IAS position to dedicate herself to literary pursuits, which she intends to employ as an agency of social change. The novel is not aimed at glorifying the oppressed. Instead, it unravels the complex web of associations that both the oppressor and the oppressed are entangled in. Thangam, the widowed upper-caste woman, seeks protection and help from Kathamuthu, the respected Dalit leader against her upper-caste tormentors. She is, however, sexually and economically exploited by Kathamuthu, compelled to be part of a polygamous relationship and live as his second wife. Gowri narrates the story in a manner that it ceases to be simply a manifesto. In an interview in Outlook magazine, Sivakami comments: "Mainstream literature has boycotted me because I believe that only Dalits can write about issues concerning them and that only women can write on feminist issues. It is not a question of experience but also a perspective." (Iyengar 2008). Thus, *Grip of Change* questions the structures of patriarchy, heterosexual polygamous marriage, the village council's elders that perpetuate misogyny and curtail female freedom.

While Dalit men are victims of casteism, Dalit women are doubly oppressed as Dalits and Women. They are penalized and brutalized not only by upper caste men but also by men from their community. The subordinate and marginalized status of women is reflected in the writings of Dalit men. In rare cases, when the women are given voice or representation in Dalit men's autobiographies as in Surajpal Chauhan's *Tiraskrit*, the narrative is based on conventional stereotypes. Women's contribution as a homemaker is also absent, and they even fail to acknowledge their efforts. The absence of these women in 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 have hence led to an alternative voice from the women themselves. In *Tiraskrit*, the focus is on the discrimination in a caste society that refuses to acknowledge the so-called lower-class people's achievements. The writer's voice gains prominence in this narrative as he feels deeply hurt, especially when people start questioning his administrative ability

and lose faith in him because of his class. One of the many instances he talks about is when his colleague Venu babu started ignoring him when he knew that he belongs to a lower class. Venu babu did not even bid farewell to him when he left for Hyderabad. Another instance in the narrative is when the author finds the change in behavior of the administrative manager at the State Trading Corporation in Delhi when he knows that the author is the son of a sweeper. The narration is thus mainly a social and political assertion against society in the form of an autobiography. The narration is not about the gradual rise of power in a caste-based community but a cry of protest discrimination. Chauhan describes caste as ‘brahmarakshas,’ a stranded and wandering ghost, in limbo, who follows him wherever he goes. (Chauhan 2002)

Kaushalya Baisantri has a different narrative strategy. In *Dohra Abhishaap* (A Double Curse), published in 1999, she focuses on locality, family, education, and the presence of casteism. She is from Maharashtra and a founder member of the Bhartiya Mahila Jagruti Parishad. In the preface, she says that she chose to write in Hindi because there is a great lack of Dalit writings in Hindi. Baisantri’s autobiography revolves around the community she was living in. There are References to the activities of everyday life and the problems faced by her in society. Although the problems of caste are voiced in her narrative, this is not the prime focus. The focus is the exposition of the social practices prevalent in society. Baisantri’s usage of “we” instead of “I” in her autobiography shows how the individual here is speaking for the community, and hence there is a collective consciousness. As the title reveals, the autobiographies present not only the exploitation of Dalits by upper caste men but also the men of their community. She talks about the abuse & violence that her grandmother (aaji) received from her husband every day. She thus presents a realistic picture of women and the double standards of men who are silent on these issues. Dalit autobiographies are generally based in rural India and experiences on the caste system in Dalit society. In the urban landscape, the discrimination is comparatively less and is often disguised.

Surajpal Chauhan’s autobiography *Tiraskrit* was published in 2002. The title of the book itself reveals its content. The nature of the narratives is an essential tool for differentiating between autobiographical styles of men and women. Chauhan’s *Tiraskrit* mainly focuses on the aspects of life when caste assumed Goliathan proportions. The discrimination in a caste society that refuses to acknowledge the so-called lower-class people’s achievements is the focus of this narrative. The writer has voiced the emotions and sentiments that hurt him because of his low class. People lose faith in him and his administrative capability. There are many instances in the narrative when his friend Venu Babu starts neglecting him when he realizes that the writer belongs to society’s lower-class strata. Venu Babu did not even bid goodbye to the author when he relocated to Hyderabad. The writer gives several instances in his narrative, where people’s attitude changed after knowing his caste. He also narrates his administrative manager’s change in behavior at the State Trading Corporation in Delhi, Shyam Gupta, whose attitude and mannerisms towards the author changed when he got to know that that he was the son of a sweeper. The narration is thus mainly a social and political assertion against society in the form of an autobiography.

A picture of marginalization is presented through bitter experiences and humiliation of Dalits in society. The narration is not about rising Dalits to power but a protest against inequality and discrimination in society. The sentiment against this social evil is so strong that Surajpal Chauhan describes the caste as 'Brahmarakshas,' a stranded and wandering Brahman ghost, in limbo, who follows him wherever he goes. (Chauhan 2002)

Vasanta Moon, in his autobiography - *Growing up Untouchable in India*, is fed and taken care of by the larger when his mother is unable to support and bring him up because of her low income. The 'Samta Sainik Dal' (the political organization of the Dalits that was started by Ambedkar) decides that some family or the other would provide him and his mother and sister with food every night. This food was hot and freshly prepared. The difference in the quality of the food itself is a symbol of status difference that the upper caste communities enjoyed. The Dalits do not deprive him of his dignity and humanity while offering him help. At the same time, the upper castes continuously undermine the Dalits' humanity while assisting them in any way. This necessitates the system of collaborative problem solving and establishing units for help. Moon's autobiography is incredibly rich, with instances of the Mahars' organized social and political groups to pursue equality and dignity. The 'Militant Sainik Dal' took upon itself the task of fighting atrocity against Dalits and organizing them into a group of disciplined and hardy fighters who could wrest power from caste and class elite and invest it in the hands of the marginalized. Many other members of the community opened schools to facilitate the education of Dalit children.

Moon mentions the example of Vithoba Raoji Moon (his paternal grandfather), who, apart from spreading education among the Dalits, was also a well-known social leader of Nagpur and had carried out several welfare measures for the Mahars. Therefore, not the author, but the Dalit Community assumes the central role in his autobiography. Moon's autobiography's original title was 'vasti,' which means community, thus highlighting the Dalit community's importance as a whole. Moon states in the concluding chapter that "in this autobiography of mine Ganya is present, Balya is present, Pandya is there, Janya is there." (Moon 2002). Moon's autobiography retains the sense of the shared experience. She asserts that the narrative is not that of an individual but that of a community that grew up as untouchable in India. The community's strength and agitation allowed Dalits to integrate into the larger structures of society. Moon emphasizes that Dalits were victimized when they were caught alone, but when they were present as a group, nobody harmed them.

Limbale's (Akkarmashi) *Outcaste* focuses on the sexual exploitation of Dalit women and the practice of using girls of Dalit society as dancers in their temple. *Akkarmashi* is sympathetic towards the rising issues of women faced by them in society. This is because Limbale, as an illegitimate child, violates one of the most exalted values of patriarchy-women's sexual purity. As the mistress of the village patil, Masamai's (Limbale's mother) sexuality transgresses the domestic space, and the children born are thus 'outcastes.' Limbale has an ambivalent relationship with his community: while as a man, he is allowed to pursue education, yet his illegitimacy disrupts his smooth integration with his society. He feels insulted whenever his father's name is asked for official purposes. The author defines an outcaste's life as he did not have a sense of belonging or identity. He was born

out of wedlock that his mother had with the chief of the village; therefore, he did not have pure blood, and nobody would accept him. Consequently, the narrative reflects the author's constant battle with hunger and strife.

Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar's *We Made History Too* is path-breaking in its importance. The work aims to record the contribution made by the Dalit women to the Phule- Ambedkarite movement. This contemporary classic deals with Dalit women's lives, daily practices, and prostitution in the Dalit community. It contains an account of interviews from more than forty Dalit women who speak on caste, gender, and politics in India. The project is very appealing since it is a historical reconstruction of an oppressed and unarticulated past of a section of people who have been traditionally and historically relegated to the background. It needs to be understood that such non-fictional work, which is not based on the imaginative resurrection of an exploited existence but a result of the grassroots level of research and documentation, represents a certain kind of intellectual activism. Dalit writing is not just the expression of aesthetic pleasure but is permeated with the awareness of a discriminatory society.

P.I. Sonkamble's *Athavaninche Pakshi* is a narrative that speaks about Pralhad, a parentless child belonging to the backward 'Mahar' community, and his struggle to live a meaningful human life. Education becomes essential in this narrative, even so, crucial that the author begins his book with a chapter on slate and book. Similarly, Daya Pawar's *Baluta* speaks about various incidents from the life of Dagadu, also a member of the 'Mahar' community. Untouchability was practiced, and even the shadow of a Dalit was found to be contaminating. Pralhad did the ancestral work of Dalits, throwing away the carcasses of the dead animals. Both these autobiographies speak about their writers' endless efforts to survive in the hostile, inhuman social circumstances. While dealing with the ups and downs in Dalits' lives, they throw a floodlight on the importance of education in general and in the lives of Pralhad and Dagadu in general. Leibowitz's following remark in connection with Blacks in America is equally applicable to the Dalits in India. He opines that the Whites did not consider Blacks.

"... scarcely more than chattel or animals, to be taunted, manipulated, humiliated at will, and kept in their place at the bottom of society. Crossing the colour line was an offence seldom tolerated and often severely punished." (Leibowitz 1993). Hence, Dalit writers' writings comprise a deep concern for the forces that marginalize and constitute different forms of marginality. The offense of discrimination against lower castes and particularly Dalit is upheld as a part of customs and tradition. "Caste is a system of graded inequality in which there is a scale of reverence and descending contempt. That is, as you go up the caste system, the power and status of caste group increases, and as you go down the scale, the degree of contempt for the caste increases, as their castes have no power, are of low status, and are regarded as dirty and polluting." (Chakravarti 2006).

In the eighties, the Marathi literature saw an autobiography titled *Upara* (1980) by Laxman Mane, who hailed from the Kaikadi community- an itinerant community of basket weavers. This can be said to be the first piece of conscious literature from a person of a de-notified, nomadic community. It traces the life full of the strife of the boy who is the

first one ever to go to a school in his community, his maturing into a politically aware social worker, and his inter-caste marriage that evokes a lot of uproar and agony for both the communities. However, it doesn't carry a specific DNT identity with it; under the influence of the Dalit literature of the day and also classified as a significant work among that, it centers upon the agony of the caste system and the horrible paradoxes therein. The autobiography ends on a note of despair: "the very caste brand that I had been trying to wipe off had now become even more deep and permanent." (Mane 1997)

Hunger plays a very vital role in this autobiography. There is physical and psychological hunger in the life of Laxman Mane. The Kaikadi's have to work hard to earn meals. They sell baskets of cane in villages which are distributed to them; otherwise, they have to beg in the villages, and Laxman was no exception. He, too, had to beg in the town. His mother and father went to the villages to sell the baskets and other articles. Laxman and his sister starved in the hut as there was nothing to eat. Laxman's mother usually received stale food from the villagers, which was their regular meal. Laxman recalls:

I was going to school regularly when we made a halt in a village. I had to go to school in that village. Now I was used to it. I do not mix with the other students. They, too, were not prepared to approach me. (Mane 1997)

If the readers succeed in understanding the sufferings of the nomadic tribals, who have been moving from one place to the other for generations loading their hearth and home on the backs of donkeys, I would feel happy if Upara has achieved its goal... (Mane 1997).

In December 1980, Laxman Mane came up with *Upara- An Outsider*. Laxman Mane describes his aim behind writing the autobiography:

"Kaikadis have their own rules and norms. They have their customs and traditions. They celebrate festivals by taking a loan from the village Sahukar. They offer goats to God for fulfilling their wishes, keeping them and their families in good condition." (Mane 1997)

Kaikadis have to inform the village chief of their arrival in the town and provide all their belongings. They were allowed to live out of towns in huts under the trees. They were treated as untouchables. Anybody who accidentally touched a Kaikadi would bathe again. Women from the villages served them water and food by keeping distance. They were not allowed to attend auspicious ceremonies like marriages, engagements, birthdays, etc. They were denied to sit and speak with the high-class people in the villages. Laxman was humiliated when he went to attend the marriage ceremony along with his friends. He was forced to leave a half-eaten meal because of his birth in a Kaikadi family. Laxman recalls:

"Kaikadis, in a helpless condition, turned towards begging and robbing. They were hungry for food, education, equality, liberty and identity" (Mane 1997). Very courageously, Laxman Mane has narrated all the sorrows and sufferings of a community that was wandering in the darkness of suppression, exploitation, oppression, and marginalization. All the incidents from the autobiography are a picture of the social, economic, political, and anthropological conditions of the Kaikadi community and the Indian society at large. This autobiography indicates the writer's intellectual struggle and the social fervor to bring to the forefront the acute suffering of the oppressed classes, their psychic disruptions, and systematic strive to create space for themselves and their respective cultures and

communities. Kaikadis have their own rules and regulations. They celebrate festivals by taking a loan from the village Sahukar. They offer goats to God to fulfill their wishes, keeping them and their families in good condition.

Laxman Mane depicted the lifestyle, customs, and traditions of the Kaikadi community and Hindu society's structure. Mane's unending struggle started from his childhood, and it reached its peak after his inter-caste marriage. Through this autobiography, Laxman Mane revealed experiences of oppression and marginalization and his strife for achieving liberty, dignity, pride, and status of human beings. The Kaikadi tribe is nomadic. The people from these tribes have been moving from one place to another for generations together, loading their hearth and home on the backs of donkeys, selling baskets made of cane, doing seasonal jobs like cattle tending, and working in farms during harvesting. They have no records of their birth-death. They remember their birth dates as per seasons or important seasons or important incidents. Laxman explained that his father remembered his birth date because he was born on the day when Mahatma Gandhi died.

Laxman realized that education was the only way to overcome all the sufferings, and so he went to school regularly and studied hard. Laxman's father admitted him to school, but his classmates always teased him because of his low caste, clothing, and Kaikadi dialect. But, Laxman went to school regularly, and he never paid attention to the teasing and mocking. He was ignorant about books, notebook, pen, and pencil, as no one from his family and his community had ever attended school. Laxman's oppression was the same in all the villages. His schoolmates always teased him. They never tried to speak to him, and Laxman also didn't feel like talking to them. All Dalit writers gratefully recognize Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the source of inspiration, simultaneously, of their socio-political militancy and literary practice. All the autobiographic explicitly insist on the decisive impact on their lives of the firm directive received from Ambedkar: 'Take education!' they narrate the extraordinary efforts made to attend school against all the odds as the most significant step social protest and personal assertion.⁴ Their biographical performance is in line with these initial efforts as its off-shoot.

For hundreds of years, Kaikadis have been wandering in the darkness of illiteracy. They have their own rules, laws, customs, and traditions. Their disputes are solved within the community Panchayat. If anyone disobeys the judgment of the Panchayat, his complete family is excommunicated from society. "Excommunication meant that nobody would dare to touch him. They are served food and water from a distance, and nobody from the family is neither invited nor permitted to attend marriages". (Mane 1997) No marital relations would be allowed with such a person. This is an example of social exploitation and the Kaikadi Community's tragedy that they are exploited by their community and Hindu society at large. Laxman states:

"Mother had brought lots of bhakari. Three of these were given by the village chief's wife. She had also given the leftovers of the night before. In addition, the women whose baskets mother had mended had given her something or the other which she had packed in the loose end of her sari." (Mane 1997)

The above lines illustrate the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the Kaikadis. They didn't have proper food, no clothes, and no houses. They often ate stale food, which was given to them in exchange for cane baskets. Laxman never received good food like sweets and chapattis. Laxman was always haunted by questions like why he could not take good food like high caste people. Why was he not allowed to attend a school like other children? These questions inspired him to bring education and to achieve all the amenities like high-class people.

“The row was full of Maratha children. Then there came a bearer who happened to be from our village and an invitee to the wedding. As he approached me, he opened his eyes wide, bent down, and thundered. Son of a Kaikadi low caste! Have you taken leave of your senses? Get up and get out!” (Mane 1997)

“There is no denying the fact that the Dalit autobiographies and the majority of those which followed were written by authors not only from those castes marked by the social stigma of untouchability.” (Aston 2001). When Laxman's father came to know that his son had attended the marriage of a high caste friend and polluted the whole ceremony, he beat Laxman very cruelly. Kaikadis believed that they were untouchables and had no right to participate in high-class people's marriages and eat along with them. This is an example of self-exploitation. Kaikadis, in a helpless condition, turned towards begging and robbing. They were hungry for food, education, equality, liberty, and identity. Laxman Mane has courageously narrated the sorrows and sufferings of the community.

Is Tamil Dalit literature different from Marathi Dalit literature?

The analysis of Dalit writings in Marathi and Tamil gives away that this form of literature can primarily be seen through the lens of self-awakening of the Dalit community, their resistance against oppression, and their rejection of standards laid down by the dominant castes. With the new wave of Dalit literature influenced by Ambedkar's ideas, Dalit writers started to search for their identity, which was not limited to the social sphere alone. Dalit writings called for solidarity of the oppressed for achieving a political and cultural identity of the oppressed class.

In this background, Dalit writers attempted to identify themselves with others of their kind and deliberately reject the existing language and aesthetics norms in literature. When Bama wrote the first draft of *Karukku*, she wrote the book in both classical and colloquial Tamil. Still, she later decided to choose colloquial Tamil for her work over classical Tamil, which sent a strong message of rejection of the social norms and the literary norms set by high caste writers.¹

Therefore, the social, political, and cultural agenda of raising the voice of protest against the years of subjugation against the tormentors and the shared objective of exposing and stigmatizing their oppressors united Dalit writers across regional and linguistics boundaries. As a result, Dalit writings appear more similar than different from each other. One of the

¹ DC Books. (2018). *My Life and Writings as a Dalit woman* | Bama Karukku @ KLF 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukDtr03mFuk>

distinct similarities between these writings is the colloquial language, which aptly depicts Dalits' raw and earthy lives. Dalit writers from both Marathi and Tamil Dalit literature believed that their writing's primary objective was a protest and not aesthetic composition, the writing of protest in both languages, therefore, aimed at gaining solidarity of all the Dalit writers. They used their coarse language as a weapon to demolish the traditional norms of aesthetics in literature set by their oppressors. Also, the fear of misrepresentation was common for writers in both languages as Dalit writers tried to have full control of their social and political movement and, therefore, discredited all others who were not Dalit by birth.

The Dalit literature analysis demonstrates that the unity of their social and political movement was strengthened by the occurrence of common themes that recurred in Dalit literature across geographical and linguistic boundaries. Regarding Marathi and Tamil, writers in both these languages described their sufferings like hunger and poverty and others like domestic violence and sexual exploitation. The writers in both these languages believed that education could help them overcome their wretched condition. Both Sharan Kumar Limbale and Kaushalya Baisantri have shared several instances of being treated as second-class citizens in her Marathi writings. Similar painful stories have been shared by Tamil Dalit writers like Bama and Sivakami.

Dalit's writings have also had a common objective of reclaiming Dalit identity by resisting cultural depreciation and social subalternity meted out to their community. Therefore, most Dalit writings in both Marathi and Tamil aimed at propagating the history of Dalits, which had been overlooked by the mainstream high caste literature. The writings of Omprakash Valmiki reminds us that Dalit literature isn't just the narration of suffering to evoke pathos in the reader's mind, but it's also a strong claim for Dalit identity. In his work, he writes how the Dalits are deprived of their identity and are called "Oe Chuhre" or "Abey Chuhre" and not by their names. Similarly, even in Dalit literature, we find instances of Dalit women being referred to as wives, mothers, and Dalit men's daughters.

Unfortunately, male Dalit writers in both these languages failed to capture the pain and gloom in Dalit women's lives. This resulted in the emergence of Dalit women's writings in both languages. Dalit women wrote their life experiences and added a new dimension to Dalit writings that described how they were exploited by men from both high caste and their community. Irrespective of linguistic and regional boundaries, the writings of Bama and Sivakami in Tamil and those of Daya Pawar and Urmila Pawar in Marathi have all described the sufferings humiliation, domestic and sexual violence. Mary, a poor Dalit woman, is raped by an upper-caste individual and is later threatened that she would lose her job on revealing to others about her rape (in Koveru Kazhudaigal (Beasts of Burden), 2019). Similarly, Limbale's (Akkarmashi) *Outcaste* focuses on the sexual exploitation of Dalit women and the practice of using girls of Dalit society as dancers in their temple. Therefore, a strong connection between Marathi and Dalit Literature is the saga of subjugation and their act of exposing the years of oppression against them.

Despite the common agenda of Dalit literature in these two languages, there were still some differences between these two sources because of the settings in which they were written. One of the significant and distinct differences between them was the oppressor's

background in some Tamil writings. While the Marathi Dalit writings mostly centered around Hindu high-class oppressors, Tamil writings also described the discrimination and subjugation meted out by the Catholic Church and its nunneries.

For example, in Karukku, Bama has exposed some discriminatory practices of high caste Christians against Dalits. These included the exclusion of Dalits from church choirs, allocating a separate seating area for them away from high caste Christians, and denying the burial of their dead in the village cemetery.

Another notable difference between Tamil and Marathi Dalit's writings is the absence of Buddhist ideas on Dalit writers in Tamil. While the Buddhist conversion of the Dalits in Maharashtra led to the rejection of Hindu beliefs like a rebirth, system of gods, and caste, we find that Tamil Dalit writers don't limit themselves to just rejection of such Hindu beliefs, but continue their denial of Tamil Christian communities in their quest for creating a pan-Dalit community.

Does Dalit literature in Marathi and Tamil relegate caste to victimhood?

Even though Dalit literature has been there for more than fifty to sixty years now, it's still not included in the mainstream literature. It has remained an ignored or marginalized form of literature. Therefore, studies on Dalit literature are still limited and have not explored many facets of this type of literature. In this sense, all kinds of writings on Dalit literature help increase the visibility of this writing form. Again, Dalit literature analysis is a delicate task as a large number of Dalit writers fear misrepresentation of their voice when they don't speak for themselves. In this background, the present study's bigger purpose was to take a relook at a large number of Dalit writings from across India, especially in Marathi and Tamil. Besides being a means for increasing the visibility of Dalit literature, the larger purpose of this study is to identify the underlying purpose of Dalit writings in these two languages, which is holding the oppressors responsible for the sufferings of caste Dalits, rejecting the standards of aesthetics propounded by their persecutors, reclaiming the identity of Dalits snatched away from them for years and opposing any kind of discrimination on the grounds of caste/class and sexuality. The analysis of Dalit literature in Marathi and Tamil suggests that a high number of autobiographical writings meant that Dalit writers believed that literature could give expression to their sufferings and could help them in sending a message to their oppressor that their actions were not just responsible for their hunger, poverty and abject conditions, but had also deprived them of human dignity. Taking forward the discussion about the bigger purpose of Dalit literature, the present study proposes that this literature shouldn't be relegated to the mere depiction of victimhood to evoke pity, but as Vyas and Panda (2019) describes victimhood in Dalit literature as 'active,' 'authentic' and 'agentic,' this literature, irrespective of the language, unites a deprived community for the larger cause of creating a casteless society. When we look at Dalit literature in Marathi and Tamil collectively, we realize that these writings are not necessarily against the atrocities, and they should not be seen as a protest against Brahminism and caste Hindu. Instead, they should be seen as their resentment

against supremacy and denial of human dignity. Such reading of Dalit literature may not be apparent if we limit ourselves to Marathi Dalit literature that propagates rejection of Hindu culture and laws. However, when seen along with Tamil Dalit's writings, these writings evince attaining dignity, equality, and independence through annihilation of a human being's superiority and supremacy over another of their kind.

Conclusion

To conclude, autobiographical narratives suggest the critical role Dalit writers play as agents. Dalit life narratives explore and indict an atrocious system of social organization. The constant output of Dalit Literature by its representation of the most marginalized lives shook the Marathi mainstream literary tradition to its core. The Dalit litterateurs think that so long as the discriminative caste system exists, there can never be complete freedom, brotherly feeling, and justice established in the nation. Along with the Mahar community, the Tribal and the Nomadic communities also published autobiographies. Dalit literature is more than simple life narratives; it is the angry Dalits' voice with a ray of invigorating hope. (Shankar 2014). Given their oppressive and exploitative existence, the Dalits would readily change their modes of existence with a change in circumstances. The narratives discussed in the paper are concerned with attempts at change and progress, and the pursuit of change itself is a crucial step in the direction of self-empowerment. At the individual level, these autobiographies delineate the staggered and non-linear progress of the protagonists through a more extensive social environment that is hostile to their efforts at self-advancement. Autobiographies have been read as a positive line of development in the growth of the protagonist. The readers felt that the narration of the autobiography is advancing and not society. These autobiographies also reflect that caste remains a powerful force of exclusion. Dalit writers subvert the notion of autobiography as a narrative of an exclusive private domain of the individual. It problematizes the relation between the society and the individual, the private and the public, by conceiving the self not merely in private or personal terms. Expression of Dalit self-demands new modes of narration and signification as it deals not with a unified and coherent self but a divided, fragmented self/non-self.

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