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Autobiography: An Emergent Mode for Dalits

Ms Priya Juneja

PhD Scholar, Gujarat University

And

Dr Arvind K Patel

Associate Professor, S D Arts and Commerce College, Mansa

Human suffering is the common theme in literature and art as suffering is inextricably linked with human existence. Man has to undergo the suffering and losses caused by Nature; it may be draught, flood, famine, earthquakes, disease or sudden deaths of near and dear ones due to accidents and so on. But the suffering caused to men by fellow human being is the most terrifying aspect of human existence. Human history is a record of suffering and unspeakable violence caused by man to his fellow human beings.

The roots of such unwanted system exist since the origin of the civilization. In India during early Vedic period, society was divided into four Varnas. This can be considered as the origin of discrimination in developed civilization of ancient India. Discrimination is not only in Indian society but it is also the issue of human society of the world. It can be seen in various forms such as class, caste, race, gender, colour, religion and so on. Roots of such casteism or racism are so profound that even in today's modern, highly educated and well equipped society also its strong impact can be sensed.

Such discrimination was faced by one of the marginalized group and i.e. 'Dalits'. The term 'Dalit' is defined by different writers in various ways. The literal meaning of it is the masses that have been depressed, downtrodden, and exploited economically, socially, culturally in the name of religion, gods, goddesses and other factors.

Dr. Prabhakar Mande has rightly defined,

"Dalit means a group of people whose right to live a human life is denied. By birth, a Dalit has to lead the same kind of life in the Hindu social hierarchy. Any individual who is denied his human values and a respectful human life is a Dalit.

Dalit (Oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes', a term the British used for what are now called the Scheduled Castes. In 1970s the 'Dalit Panthers', the youth activists from dalit community revived the term and expanded its reference to include the scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution.

In India more than one-sixth of its population continues to suffer neglect and humiliation simply because they are born in a depressed class or Dalit castes. The suffering they undergo is man-made and hence more painful and more unfortunate. Today we live in an age of science and technology and we talk of ideals like freedom, equality, prosperity, welfare state and equal opportunities for all. But can we envision an egalitarian society as long as there is a trace of ill-treatment and suppression of one class by the other in the name of caste or creed or religion or colour? For Dr. Ambedkar caste is the monster which crosses our path wherever we turn to. In *Annihilation of Caste* he argues:

"This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform; you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster".

The suffering undergone by the depressed classes went unnoticed until recently as the writers and artists hardly captured the indignities and inhumanities suffered by the untouchables or Dalits. Perhaps they could portray with poignancy and finesse the suffering of human beings placed in adverse and inhospitable circumstances but they could not capture in their writings the anguish born out of the unjust social system based on caste and class iniquities. It is mainly due to the fact that they never suffered that humiliation which the Dalit suffer in a hierarchical social structure. Dalit consciousness is unique one as it can only be experienced by a low caste person who suffers the humiliation and indignity everyday because he/she is born in a Dalit caste.

This realization of victimhood has encouraged the emergence of Dalit literature as a major concern in literary discourse. It has been attributed, "Post-coloniality created its own subalterns, inferior groups, women and Dalits became 'others' within the post-colonial nation

state"(Dutt:13). Dalit literature might be deficient in artistic canons and aesthetics paradigms, but it is essentially a deep felt voice of humanity to enlighten the life of those who have been dragged behind the invisible identity.

The term 'Dalit' and 'Dalit Literature' has been a subject of arguments, controversies and paradoxes. The term 'Dalit' apparently refers to the vision of caste binaries and caste based oppression, discrimination and celebration of the politics of 'otherness'. However most of the thinkers and creative writers related with Dalit literature have categorically expressed their consensus on the inference that Dalit literature is a manifestation of cultural conflict of the socially, economically and culturally deprived groups of society.

Dalit literature is born out of the necessity and urgency to give expression to the agony suffered by these underprivileged classes. It is a voice of protest against the unjust and inhuman social system which perpetuates discrimination on the basis of class and caste. It is not a literature of caste but of a specific consciousness that deprives innocent individuals from their basic rights of self survival, self preservation and self expression.

In order to achieve their basic rights of survival, quest for their identity and protest against the atrocities faced by their community there was only one medium left and that was writing. Through writing they could put forth before the society their voice against the unjust and inhuman social system which had silenced them from time immemorial. In literature we see the struggles and triumphs of various societies in addition to how people respond to them. People's morals and values are often portrayed through literature.

"Literature creates to help language, create a sense of identity and community. Every indigenous community has its own language and literature". (On Literature Umberto Eco. (VintagebooksLiterature/Essays))

For Fourth World people, the past has been one of violence, dispossession and death. Their writings reflect these trials of invasion with passion and persuasiveness and provide an unparalleled view of their histories as lived experiences. Hence, the flesh and blood genre of historical and family realism is very strong in their writings. Dalit writers have given their contributions in almost all genres of literature like poetry, plays, novels, but amongst all the other genres ' autobiography' is the most popular genre of writing among them.

The genre autobiography has been radicalized by Dalit writers. As Limbale claims,

"Every autobiography is a representation of a caste, a group. It gives expression to the group's language, culture, traditions, the injustices of status quo, the suffering of exploitation." (1995, 34)

With its sans polite attitude, the Dalit autobiographies has not only challenged the dominant ideological politics but also sensitized the upper class privileged reader to centuries of their exploitation. 'Autobiography' as a literary genre ascribes group-specific power of expression and empowers the subjugated Dalits to claim, 'we want rights, not pity.'

According to Guy Poitevin,

"Dalit autobiographies are literary forms of social protest practices."

Autobiographical narratives are the best means of self-expression. Suffering and pain, fever and intensity, vigour and zeal come from experience and are expressed best in an autobiography. There is no better authenticity of experience than autobiography as every thought takes birth in the real life situation of the author and is meditated intensely. This is precisely the reason behind it becoming the most popular genre of self-expression.

The Dalit autobiography is a literary form marked by a great quantity of writings equally matched by its quality. The autobiographies depict varying facets of dalit wheels of village life; the experiencing of humiliation and atrocities-- at times, abject submission at other times, rebellion. It expresses the inescapable hierarchy imposed by caste, based on ancient principles of hereditary pollution. It is a moving and eloquent testament to a uniquely Indian life as well as to the universal human spirit. Many Dalit autobiographies focus on the community rather than the individual. Thus, an autobiography also becomes ethnography as it were, but one from within.

Dalit autobiographies were written in different languages as mentioned below:

Hindi: - Joothan (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki, Tiraskrit (2002) by Surajpal Chauhan, Apne-Apne Pinjarey by Mohandas Namishray and Gutan by Rama Shankar Arya.

Marathi: - Akkarmashi by Sharankumar Limbale, Baluta (1978) by Daya Pawar, Upara (1980) by Lakshman Mane, Growing up Untouchable in India by Vasant Moon, Gabali by Dada Saheb More, Uchalya: The Branded (1981) by Laxman Gaikwad, Parched Heart (1992) by Manohar Jilthe, A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies by Arjun Dangle(Ed.), Jind Amucha(our wretched lives) by Babytai Kamble, Choulni Bhint(2001) by Urmila Pawar, Alhavaninche Pokshi by P.E. Sonkamble.

Gujarati: - Purna Satya by B. Kesharshivam, Bhandariyun by Dharma Bhai-Shrimali.

Tamil: - Karrukku by Bama.

English: - Against All Odds by Kishore Shantabai Kale, Outcaste by Dr. Narendra Jadav, Things I Never Imagined(1975) by Balasaheb Suryavanshi, Endless Filth: The Saga of the Bhangis by Mari Marcel Thekae, Viramma: Life of a Dalit(2005) by Josiane Racine and Jean-Inc Racine.

The pace of Marathi Dalit discourse began with P.E. Sonkamble's autobiographical writing about the horrendous experience of caste-based discriminations published in college annuals. The writing paved way for his autobiography Athawaninche Pakshi (1979). Later on, many autobiographies emerged on Dalit literary scene which prepared the ground for this subaltern literature to flourish. It is significant to note that the range of experiences recorded in them is quite wide depicting their feelings of humiliation, sense of defeat and alienation, revolt, and subversion. Both the first and second generation of Dalit writers viz. Shankarrao Kharat, Prof. P.E. Sonkamle, Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Sharankumar Limbale, Keshav Meshram, Lakshman Mane, Kishor Shantabai Kale, Lakshman Gaikwad, Madhav Kondwilkar, Dadasaheb More, Kumud Pavade, and Shantabai Kamble have poured their feelings and outrage against social inequality and injustice meted out to them in their work and have influenced the new generation of Dalit writers. Their autobiographies made relentless efforts to contextualize their individual feeling of subjugation and exploitation with its wider ramification on the whole community.

Arjun Dangle points out that one can see varying facets of the Dalit movement in the Dalit autobiographies. The Dalit autobiographies succinctly explore the struggle for survival, the emotional universe of a Dalit's life, the man-woman relationship, the experience of

humiliation and atrocities and the question of Dalit assertion and identity. Dalit writers exploit the mode of autobiography to highlight the denial of opportunities of even leading life as an ordinary human being.

Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste) published in 1984 is an "unflinching portrayal of 'seamier' side of Dalit life," that of a troubled Dalit narrator who lives outside the boundaries of the village where "there is ignorance, sexism, violence internal rivalry, conflicts, drunkenness and death".(Limbale 2004:13). *Akkarmashi* raises many questions regarding the suffering of the Dalits as well as the slavery, poverty and filthy conditions of their infernal lives. There is depiction of how Dalits were compelled to do certain unhygienic and humiliating jobs like cleaning the latrines, skinning dead animals and removal of the carcasses etc.

Baluta is another autobiography by prominent Marathi writer and poet Daya Pawar which was published in 1978. In it Daya Pawar describes the hard work forced upon the Dalit Mahar community. The book raises a big protest against the established social order and rejects the entire hegemonic tradition imposed by the upper caste people both covertly and overtly. It gives a tragic account of Dagdu, the protagonist who is a staunch follower of Dr. Ambedkar who thinks that the teaching and preaching of Ambedkar can inject the germ of rebellion into the Dalits' mind and cause socio-cultural change. The work brings forth the basic human predicament of Dalits for which the upper caste people are guilty. In other words it becomes a paradigm of social and cultural proliferation in its depiction of the evils of marginality prevalent in Indian society.

Shankarrao Kharat's *Taral Antaral*(1981) has been written at the outset of history of first generation of Dalit autobiographies. The book paved way for many new writers to raise voice against racial discrimination and imposed slavery that Dalit children were subjected to.

Dr. Kishor Shantabai Kale belongs to the new generation of autobiographical writers whose ceremonial work *Kolhatyache Por* or *A Kolhati's Son* (1994) reaffirms the numbing account of humiliation inflicted upon the Dalits by the so-called privileged class. The book records how Kishore the narrator protagonist is deliberately kept out of the caste system because he is the son of a Kolhati Lavani or Tamasha dancer of western Maharashtra. The autobiography

echoes the narrator's indomitable power to wrestle against all social odds and imposition of caste-based hierarchies and discriminations.

Another fascinating autobiography is *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine which was published in 1997. Viramma tells her fascinating life story with the unsentimentality, humor and dramatic sense of a born storyteller: her carefree childhood; her marriage before puberty; giving birth to twelve children 'very gently, like stroking a rose'; adult life as an agricultural worker 'condemned to bake in the sun'; tales of gods and malign forces, like Irsi Katteri 'the foetus-eater', who cast their shadows over her daily life. Viramma as a Dalit woman does not simply bewail and cry her Dalit identity, she seems to celebrate it, and would even like to perfect it. In this remarkable book she reveals the world of an extraordinary woman living at the very margins of Indian society.

The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth(Purna Satya (2002)) is the first Dalit autobiography in Gujarati by B.Kesharshivam and translated by Gita Chaudhuri into English. The author describes the quintessential experiences of the life of a Dalit. The book presents a non-sentimental account of a childhood where friendships exist, sometimes across castes, but discriminations and abuse are constants.

Upara meaning 'Outsider' is an autobiography by Laxman Mane which was published in 1980. A landmark in Dalit literature, it gives a vivid account of the writer's struggle in life within the framework of Hindu society's rigid stratifications. The book is considered an outstanding contribution to Marathi literature for its lively depiction of the life of the downtrodden and forceful style, authenticity of experience and its strong plea for social justice.

Thus with the passage of time, autobiography became an important channel to reach the Dalit communities. It reflects the self of the community on the whole. Susie Tharu considers that the Dalit autobiography is the biography of its community. Dalit autobiographies are considered as the literary forms of social protest and practices. Sarah Beth gives some insightful comments on Dalit autobiography in Hindi. She states that —Dalit autobiography transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. Dalits have used autobiography as a means of assertion against untouchability. The chief concern of writing an

autobiography is to initiate a new movement for holistic social transformation and rebuilding of a homogenized and classless society based on equality, fraternity and liberty.

The presence of the Dalit voice in the public arena is one of the most important contributions of Dalit autobiography. Dalit autobiographies have received global acclaim for their provocative writing and emotional outrage. Moreover, they have foregrounded their discourses with the postcolonial search for individual as well as community space which they have been denied maliciously and grudgingly by the upper caste people. These discourses have sensitized many non-dalit writers and people to look into the serious social problems emanating from class and caste-based discriminations.

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