

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)

UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Dalit Autobiographies as Narratives of Resistance

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Article History: Submitted-31/07/2017, Revised-02/09/2017, Accepted-03/09/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

The paper is a humble attempt to investigate into the relevance of Dalit autobiographies in identity formation and self-assertion and how these writings not just provide an alternative political/ economic/social history of India but also catalogue a history of Indian emotions that is inclusive of discrimination, negligence, rage, resistance and retaliation and many other social evils. The process involves a long tiresome process of documenting one's life to depict the same. The basis for such writings is solely experiential reality rather than romanticized accounts. Therefore they are stark, brutally honest, naked expressions of the self, and come across as heart rendering expressions of a suffered and eventually emancipated soul. This realism makes the readers a part of the entire narration process. Autobiographies more than any other genre serve as a tool of mediation between the Dalit writers and the Dalit communities. It's based on the notion of one for all and all for one. The idea is developed and delivered keeping in view several Dalit autobiographies that boldly answer in affirmation Gayatri Chakraborty's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?"

Keywords: Dalit autobiographies, emotions, humanitarian rights, identity formation, narratives, realism, resistance, subaltern.

Autobiographies have long been narratives of the self/ identity formation and specifically such narratives by Dalit writers have been brought to a center stage in the recent years which would have otherwise been lying on the periphery of the literary belt. Dalit autobiographies in particular are essential modes of literary expression more than any other form of writing in a post-colonial era as this. It greatly varies from the autobiographies of a historical individual or a well-known personality. As a marginalized section of the society they have been long denied any kind of public debate rendering them completely voiceless and therefore powerless. Dalit writers have therefore chosen autobiographical accounts as a means of self-assertion against untouchability, elitisms and Brahmanism focusing on lived situations and experiential reality rather than delving into imaginative accounts. "Taking the lead from Ambedhkar's theoretical basis of the Dalit identity; literary writers and activists began to narrate the Dalit experiences." (Purushottam, Raghavulu, 65)

The concerns described arrays from the denial to basic humanitarian and civil rights such as access to public appearances, clean drinking water, equal participation in resources, economic and social inclusion to graver issues such as self-assertion, identity formation. The idea has been

to spread awareness not just among the ruling classes but also in the Dalit communities to make the latter aware of their lack and the subsequent rights. Many Dalit communities had naturalized their living conditions as the way of the world and the order of the fate. “The teachings of Ambedhkar sharpened their sensitivity and made them outward looking, articulate and assert their expressions.” (Purushottam, Raghavulu, 65)

Many autobiographical narratives like Limbale’s have emerged as an institutional space against the mainstream intellectual literary writing that has been monopolized by caste and class conventions till 1980. They are also seen as an account of political struggle in which the voice of the marginalized figure contests the institutionalized narrative of the dominant intellectual group. “DALIT LIFE is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find a room in literary creations” (Valmiki, vii), writes Omprakash Valmiki in his Preface to *Joothan*. What sets apart Dalit autobiographies from other Dalit works is the fact that the writer/ narrator is himself a victim of the humiliation and discrimination rather than being a mere onlooker or a spectator and thus acts as a direct link in the social, political and cultural organizations between the Dalit communities and the urban spaces.

To understand the emergence and traits of Dalit autobiographies one needs to trace its topology “from antiquity across modernity to post modernity” (Singh 77). Autobiography like the genre of the novel is not rooted in the Indian tradition but emerges from the Western Catholic tradition of confessions. St. Augustine’s *Confessions* originally written in Latin was the first text to qualify the definition of an autobiography. In India and many of the non- Western nations, self-narratives like Babur’s *Baburnamah* or Ghalib’s *Dastambu* are rendered in verse. It was with Gandhi and Nehru’s autobiographies that the genre in prose began in India and Dalit autobiographies were the first literary texts in a postmodern era to carry forward this tradition. However, two things stand in common between the autobiographies of the East and the West. They both grapple with the essential issue of “Who am I?” and employ writing as a cathartic process to heal themselves of the rage and anger of the past.

Sarah Beth in her essay writes, “For the Dalit community like many other marginalized group, autobiography is not simply a kind of literature but is a form of assertion and resistance in its own right”. (Beth 2) Dalit autobiographies mark a difference from the rest of the autobiographies for it challenges and breaks the institutionalized norms and form of content of the mainstream autobiography. For instance, most of the autobiographies share a deep relationship with the idea of memory and the approach is quite hesitant in the Western works. Memory is often associated with images such as an attic, a cave or the act of peeling of an onion. Grunter calls it a “rear view mirror”, often taking interchangeable positions and asking rhetorical questions with words such as “could be”, “probably”, “Did I...?”. However, this kind of a self-doubt never finds its place in Dalit autobiographies and the narrator can recapitulate well the past incidents of his life that burn him with rage and frustration. The unreliability of memory is not problematic among the Dalit autobiographies where they establish their works on “collective memory “or what we term as “cultural memory”. Moreover, the emphasis is largely on content

and life tale narrated with utmost precision rather than on skill and imagery employed in the language.

These autobiographies catalogue a sort of urbanization and emancipation through education. From very small Dalit communities they move on to occupy urban middle class spaces in the metropolitan cities where they can produce as well as consume various urban amenities, cultural benefits and participate in the literary circle. The participation in production and consumerism is a very post-modern phenomenon. It gives them a position as well as the power to question and contest dominant structures of control generated exclusively by the upper castes. It poses questions as to what it means to be a middle class citizen and how far is the constitution implemented that gives equal rights to all its citizens. They serve as a kind of moral boost to the Dalit movement giving them a voice and a platform that they have been denied since ages. Margo Perkins point out how autobiographies function also as an actual site for power struggle, as a means for political assertion. Speaking specifically of autobiographies in Marathi of which *Akkarmashi* stands as a brilliant example, it hints at the ongoing Dalit movement in Maharashtra with much zest and vigor. Instances such as renaming the university, gaining self-esteem through education and even reservation came as a cultural shock to many Hindus who have been enjoying prestige and position without revolt through centuries. Many of them mark a difference of opinion between Gandhi and Ambedkar. They are highly critical of Gandhi and his patronizing attitude to the untouchables seeking a change of heart in the upper ruling castes. Such an approach was considered highly impractical and the romanticization of the term 'Harijan' was met with cold responses. Most of the Dalit autobiographical works hold the view that by naming them as untouchables Gandhi wasn't allowing them into the mainstream but preventing Hindus from becoming a minority. Ambedkar on the other hand with his violent and assertive methods coined the term Dalit which was readily accepted by the SC Federation.

One of the major highlights of the Dalit autobiographies is to expose the continuation of caste based discrimination, hegemonic power structure and a deeply entrenched belief system that seeps the deep seated segregation further down into the social structure. It subtly tears off the notion that caste and class no longer functions as a dominant force of existence in a modern India. Untouchability was legally abolished in 1950 by the clause laid down by the Constitution of India. However, it still persists as a social stigma. Valmiki's accounts of the attitude of the people such as that of the school faculty or the police inspector are all hints to this continuing social stigma. Dr. Sharan Kumar Limbale in an interview with *The Hindu* speculates how the discrimination has taken a completely different shape in the recent times. From being individualistic, it has become collective and the Dalits are still struggling to counter a social stigma that the society attaches to them. Even after gaining positions of power such as officers, ministers or professors their work and inclusion is met with cold responses. Even in the metropolitan cities such a Bombay people were reluctant to include the so termed untouchables in their social order. Surajpal Chauhan in his *Tiraskrit* gives a personal life incident of 1987. He describes how he and his wife had gone to a village where they asked for water from a zamindar.

Initially he agreed but soon learning the caste identity of the family, he is enraged and shuns them with degradation and humiliation. What bothers the zamindar is the fact that the marginalized have come to occupy spaces/ outlook and activities of the hegemonic upper caste as well as urban spaces. This is a marked difference of Dalit autobiographical works when compared to *Peeling of an Onion (1996)* in which the narrator witnesses “a collective failure of his generation of German to utter the word ‘why’” (Singh 79)

Dalit autobiographies for a well-known fact speaks and demands for the entire community. The narrative voice despite being of the self ‘I’ represents communal pain like the narrator of Grunter’s *Grass* who replaces the self ‘I’ with the collective ‘we’. Baby Kamble resonates this communal tie with the very title, *The Prisons we broke* (2008) However, the question arises as to who is the subject of the autobiographies. Clearly, it is not localized into individualism but extends out to the entire caste community with the hope for gaining wider audience, recognition and power against similar experiences of oppression. The focalization shifts from individual to the writer’s friend’s family and neighbours and eventually to the entire community. There is a clash between the two identities, one of the marginal self which the Dalit community extends out to the writer and the other in which the narrator is a part of the urban town. The Dalit autobiographer represents the voice of the entire Dalit community. The narrator is of course the writer himself but his accounts are not unique or individualistic but representations of the entire community. The individual is inextricably linked to the community; the growth of the individual is the growth of the entire community generally brought in through education’s emancipatory force and therefore in *Joothan* it is Valmiki’s personal responsibility to “improve his caste through his personal achievements” (Valmiki 56). The writer moves away from their community not only in the physical sense but also in a social, economic one through education and adoption of the urban middle class lifestyle. Therefore, these texts can be seen as an attempt to restore that sense of belongingness with the ‘bastis’ where they had spent their tender years. The first half of almost all the Dalit autobiographies are the reflections on the tender childhood years, the young salad days spent in turmoil and conflict both with the external as well as the internal world. The kind of a frustration, desperation, fantasies as well as hopes can be traced in Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a young girl (1947)* written with the same childhood innocence and aspirations.

Another prominent feature particular to the Dalit autobiographies that sets it apart from that of the West and even the rest of the Indian self-narratives is their usage of marginalized mythological characters representing them in a complete positive light. There is a feeling of sympathy and oneness with those who are presented as worthless by the mainstream writings. Therefore in *Akkarmashi* the narrator constantly identifies with Karna, the suta-putra and Eklavya, the tribal boy glorifying their pitiful and deprived states. As an alternative stream of thought, it attempts to reconstruct history in a completely different light. While the mainstream writings lack experience and empathy to comprehend the social nuances of Dalit lives, Dalit autobiographies are anxious and restive and “refuse to employ the received categories of social

knowledge and in constant search for social selfhood”(Punalekar, 222). S.P. Punalekar evokes the point as to how there is an apparent divide in the Dalit movement. One section considers Ambedkar’s movement complete and the question of cultural disparities unsolvable and tries to locate identity crisis in the social and economic complexities of the society. The other section considers the mission half complete and considers the identity issues pervade deep down into the social and cultural traditions of the day and the economic and political complexities as insufficient to solve such ethical issues. Dalit autobiographies subscribe to the latter and are essential to expose out the cultural and ethical realities of today’s world.

There is a high focus on factuality of experiences and its authenticity. However, “certain images from the memory are selectively enlarged whereas others are allowed to lie dormant“(Singh 81). This is a peculiar feature of all autobiographies both from the West and the East. Time exists as a fluid entity, going back and forth in time and space depending on the faculty of memory. There exists contraries of “remembering and forgetting, both of which can be natural or intentional, chronological or selective. But it is linked to the human tendency of boasting one’s position and success and hiding one’s shame and disgrace.”(Singh 81) With this arises a question as to what extent is the writer honest to the audience and to himself.

Vandana Pathhak in her essay entitled “A critical study of Marathi Dalit Autobiography translated into English” suggests how autobiographical writings provide a psychological insight into the writer’s psyche and mindset. The language of such texts is extremely lucid and free flowing, devoid of any unnecessary expressions and imagery that hint at the very simplicity and lucidity of their lives and community. Rosy Singh draws a point that Dalit autobiographies as being very young and recent in the Indian literary belt, might not have a stature of a great literary genre, less vivid but are essential to be read and appreciated as “acts of assertion” (Singh 84). Their purpose is to record Dalit history with the minutest of detail and truth. Writers such as Gopal Guru hint at the fact that the Indian tradition celebrates the renunciation of the self rather than the glorification of it. They even share an uneasy relationship with the “other”, the other here being the Hindu religion, scriptures, gods and goddesses.

Such narrations, as Vandana Pathak puts it have widened the institutional space through which Dalit writers can enter the literary public arena. Unlike the autobiographies of famous personalities and historic figures, Dalit autobiographies stress on their ordinariness of life rather than the uniqueness which build up a sense of communal and self-identity. The individual’s voice contests the voice of the institutionalized dominant groups. However, when we compare such works to the mainstream autobiographies such as that of Nehru, the idea of community for the latter extends out to the entire nation whereas for the Dalit writers, the community building is limited to their ‘bastis’. Nehru’s self-narration was written in the heat of anti-colonial imperative with the task of regeneration of the lost prestige and power and the latter in the wake of changing social climate. With such a unifying force, the Dalit writers are able to raise a Dalit consciousness or a Dalit ‘Chetna’ among the readers as well as among those who have undergone similar trauma.’ Chetna’ is a kind of theoretical tool that sets the boundaries of Dalit

literature as a growing genre as well as to launch a specific Dalit criticism. Alok Mukherjee's 2004 translation of Sharankumar Limbale *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* re-enforces the idea, "By Dalit literature I mean writing about Dalits, by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness (chetna)." (Limbale 1). The account of suffering and pain of the Dalits cannot be explained or understood by any other except the Dalit themselves who have undergone such a trauma. In the author's preface to the Hindi edition of *Joothan* he writes, "The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine" (Valmiki vii). These autobiographical works bind the individuals "into an imagined community of fellow sufferers" (Beth 3). Their enslavement becomes a voice of resistance, describing a journey from muteness to voice and eventually to freedom of the self. For instance, the first chapter of Nehru's autobiography entitled "Descent from Kashmir" showcases how, unlike the Dalit works, the narrative voice laments the loss of prestige and power of the ancestral past and craves for the golden era gone by. Many autobiographies revolve around the glorification of the self but in a Dalit narrative far from the glorification of a self, there is a search for its existence.

To conclude, it can be understood that Dalit autobiographies are not merely tropes for self-assertion, identity formation and urbanization. It's an attempt to catalogue a history of Indian emotions. This section of humankind has long been erased from the face of our society and therefore the Dalit autobiographies not just showcase the erased /ignored history of the Indian worldview but also that of Indian emotions that's inclusive of rage, negligence, retaliation, discrimination and assertion. It provides a completely new, alternative perspective to viewing Indian history.

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