

Vol. 8, Issue-VIII (July 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529



Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Weaving a Tale of a Dalit Family: Y.B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Baliah* as a Memoir

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Article History: Submitted-05/06/2017, Revised-25/07/2017, Accepted-28/07/2017, Published-31/07/2017.

Abstract:

Y.B. Satyanarayana's book *My Father Baliah* is a family biography of four generations. The author's grandfather left his ancestral village steeped in casteism and feudalism and took employment in the railways. This crucial event paved the way of education and prosperity in the family. The book is replete with the history of discrimination that the author's father, grandfather and his great-grandfather as well as the Dalits are subjected to. It is about the earnest effort on the part of the author and his brothers to lead a life of dignity and self-respect with the help of their father. The book is a tribute to author's father Baliah and it is written in his memory. At the same time, it describes the plight of the Madiga caste. It also staunchly critiques the acquiescence and internalization of the degrading caste oppression and untouchability by the Dalits themselves. The paper is an attempt to explore the book as a memoir by analyzing certain features of the genre.

Keywords: Education, Casteism, Memoir, Dalit.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson defined memoir in *Reading Autobiography-A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*,

Historically, a mode of life narrative that situated the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant, the memoir directs attention more toward the lives and action of others than to the narrator. (274)

Y. B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Baliah* narrates the story of four generations beginning with Narsiah, his son junior Narsiah, junior Narsiah's son Ramaswamy alias Baliah and one of Baliah's sons Y.B. Satyanarayana. The author, Dr. Y.B. Satyanarayana who hails from a poor Dalit family began teaching first at the Government Junior College and then at a private college. At the age of thirty three, he became the principal of Dharmavant College of Science and Commerce, Hyderabad. He is currently the president of the Centre for Dalit Studies. But the book is not all about his hardship and achievements. It is about the history of the family members who overcame the oppressive caste system and feudalism by dint of their hard work and education. The word 'memoir' (from French *mémoire*: memoria meaning memory or reminiscence) is a collection of memories. Dr. Y. B. Satyanarayana has stated in the Preface of *My Father Baliah*,

This is the story of three generations of my family, and I have woven it together from the memories I have of conversations with my grandfather Narsiah, my father Baliah, my aunt Pentamma and my elder sister Bachamma. Mainly, though the incidents narrated here were recounted by my father after his retirement when, every evening, I would get him a drink and sit by his side while he told me stories about the days when he and my mother struggled to raise us. (xix)

As G. Thomas Couser has suggested, “In everyday life, the term “memoir” is often used interchangeably with “autobiography”, but as the prefix suggests, autobiography must be self-authored, whereas memoir can be written by anyone acquainted with the subject” (8). According to *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*,

To distinguish a memoir from an autobiography one has to accept certain limitations on the former. A memoir, generally speaking, is a narrative of events in which the writer has been closely involved as an actor or direct observer...The virtues of a good memoir are the clarity of perception and memory that it offers when it leads the reader into a historical period, and the fact that it is a personal and largely subjective account of what happened, in contrast to the objective and impersonal story of a historian. (1009)

In *My Father Baliah*, Prof. Satyanarayana records the events in which he gets involved and ‘leads the reader into the historical period.’ In this context the words of Karl J. Weintraub is very relevant here. Weintraub whose scholarship is centred on history and autobiography mentioned that the memoirist “records the memories of significant happenings” with emphasis on momentous and significant events rather than personal characteristics (822-823).

American literary scholar and memoirist Nancy K. Miller regards that the etymological root of the word ‘memoir’ consists of the double act of recalling and recording: “To record means literally to call to mind, to call up from the heart. At the same time, record means to set down in writing, to make official. What resides in the province of the heart is also what is exhibited in the public space of the world” (43). Here Y. B. Satyanarayana has closely observed significant historical events and interpreted those events in the lives of his family members in particular and his community in general. An ardent follower of Dr. Ambedkar’s teachings, he began to take an avid interest in Dalit literature and history in the early 1990s, and started studying the progress of Dalits in various fields. As stated by Sharankumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, “The story of Babasaheb’s life, his work, ideas and message awakened the Dalit society, the Dalit movement and the Dalit writers.” (46)

My Father Baliah is an odyssey of four generations of a dalit family in Andhra Pradesh from despair to success, from suffering to prosperity, from “illiteracy to the highest levels of education that the modern system of education offers; from a hand-to-mouth existence to a life that allows for deep reflection and self-development” (xix). The book is a detailed insight into the world of untouchables and their ways of living and most importantly how they are marginalised from the society. Through this story, the author documents the

inhuman cruelty and nonchalant attitude of the other caste towards the untouchables, especially towards the Madiga caste, the brutality and inhumanity of the caste system on the repressed and the poorer section and also the internalization of this condition among the untouchables themselves. It highlights the exploitation faced by the Madiga caste. As the blurb of the book says,

A book written with the desire to make known the inhumanity of untouchability and the acquiescence and internalization of this condition by the Dalits themselves, Y.B. Satyanarayana chronicles the relentless struggle of three generations of his family in this biography of his father. A narrative that derives its strength from the simplicity with which it is told, *My Father Baliah* is a story of great hardship and greater resilience.

During the late nineteenth century the author's great-grandfather, the senior Narsiah, a Madiga, received a huge tract of land gifted by the Nizam of the Deccan. A chamar by caste, he was gifted fifty acres of agricultural land for making a pair of shoes made from the hide of a young calf for the Nizam. However, he could not retain the land owing to the insurmountable pressure from the landowners. The local Dora only permitted Narsiah to occupy two acres. However, Narsiah is happy with his lot as he succeeded to evade the wrath of the landlord. This situation is not uncommon in lives of Dalits. As S. R. Sankaran has stated in the Foreword of *My Father Baliah*,

I have seen fear writ large on the face of Dalits while in the presence of big landlords, known as Doras in the Telengana area, and have felt the intensity of social oppression denoted by the expression 'I am your slave, I touch your feet' which was the conventional salutation with which untouchables were called upon to address people belonging to the so-called upper castes. (xvi)

Narsiah worked in the fields of the landlord apart from making footwear. He has one son, also named Narsiah by his grandfather. The villagers called him Chinna Narsigadu, or Narsiah Junior who worked for the landlord tirelessly without being paid any wage. When his master's mercy fell on him he received some grain and paddy. The junior Narsiah was married to Abbamma. Six years after his marriage, the family was assailed by many troubles. Pedda Dora died and his cruel, arrogant son took his place. This Dora demanded from Narsiah his two acres of land. When Narsiah refused to do so, they had to face the wrath of the Dora. They were harassed, the water supply to their fields was cut. In the mean time, the senior Narsiah died of cholera. His wife soon followed the suit. This terrible disaster took a heavy toll on the junior Narsiah. He was under tremendous pressure to surrender his land to the Dora. At this juncture his wife had also fallen prey to cholera and breathed her last. The junior Narsiah was devastated at the untimely and unfortunate death of his wife and left the village with his son.

A tall man, walking away from his village with a heavy heart, his wife's body tied to his back, and almost dragging a little boy, his son, in a chilly evening drizzle, towards a distant stream...It was a small village that he was walking helplessly away from...

The man with the dead body on his back came from Harijanwada, the untouchable dwellings in the village. (3)

Narsiah's main concern was for his son Ramaswamy who lost his mother at such a tender age. Narsiah's migration from Vangapalli, in the Karimnagar district of Telengana, his native village proved to be a watershed moment for the Yelukati family. This incident gave rise to a life of dignity with education and self-respect instead of a life of utmost suffering, humiliation and bonded labour. With the help of his maternal uncles, junior Narsiah got a job in the railways. Here the author gave a detailed picture of the world of gangman and pointsman and the heavy, arduous menial jobs that they have to execute to earn their living. He married for the second time on the insistence of his maternal uncles. Ramaswamy's plight became worse. He had to bear brunt of his stepmother's anger though he was very close to his brother and sister, Yelliah and Pentamma. He was also pained to see his father's helplessness and was determined to find a job. Ramaswamy was appointed as a 'box man' at the Bellampalli railway station. Soon he got married to Narsamma. In a few days he was promoted to the post of pointsman. Narsiah was very proud of his son Ramaswamy who devoted his leisure time in reading. However, Ramaswamy was implicated in a case of theft in Secunderabad. One of his friends was caught red-handed while stealing a bottle of liquor from a carton in a wagon. As Ramaswamy was standing by his side, he too was interrogated and was dismissed from service. Seeing his distress, Narsiah implored the higher officials to reinstate his son into the service. Narsiah who had a good reputation in the railway office was able to secure the job for his son with one condition. The assistant personal officer Mr. Franklin proposed that the name Ramaswamy should be changed in order to suppress the incident. Ramaswamy took a new name Baliah Ankus. Thus Ramaswamy came to be known as Baliah and got a new lease of life. He was resolved to do his duty with dedication and not to cause any trouble to his father anymore.

Baliah realised the importance of education and insisted that his children should be educated in order to get job in the railways to put an end to all suffering. Baliah's world revolved round railways. He had the dream of making his children not collectors or bureaucrats but railway officers and stationmasters. Baliah left no stone unturned to get his children educated. He inculcated the same passion in his children and most of his children too imbibed the urge of their father to be educated. They all had a secured childhood though the living condition was appalling. They had to live in a small railway quarter. The ambience was not conducive to education or to acquire knowledge through any media. For ages the Dalits have been deprived of education which is the main reason behind their never-ending agony and plight. Although Baliah learned to read and write a little, his sons are the real first-generation learners in his family. Baliah was determined to help his sons to pursue higher studies at any cost. Along with Baliah his elder son Balraj ensured that the children get quality education. The author Y.B. Satyanarayana, his elder brother Abbasayulu, Narsimlu and Anjiah realized and fulfilled the dreams of their father and their brother Balraj. Despite several odds and adversities, the author Y.B. Satyanarayana pursued higher studies and became a professor, obtained a Ph.D and became the Principal of a college, a post he held until his retirement. As he knew the pain of discrimination against the Dalits, he founded a

voluntary organisation to lend a helping hand to Dalits. The book inspires one to achieve the desired goal overcoming difficulties of all sorts.

According to *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, “[Memoir] usually relates to a certain period in a life, which often coincides with an interesting time in history, a time often of general change” (1009). Here the memoirist Prof. Satyanarayana provided the description of one of the most important events in Indian history –inauguration of Railways.

Railways were laid on a large scale during the late nineteenth century. When the first railway train opened to the public, it was a red-letter day in Indian history: on 16 April 1853 at 3.30 p.m., a train with fourteen carriages carrying 400 passengers steamed out of Bombay station to a twenty-one-gun salute and reached Thane station at 4.30 p.m., covering a stretch of twenty-one miles. This was the beginning of the era of the railways. The Great Indian Peninsula Railway Company, as it was then called, has now turned into the Indian Railways, the world’s largest railway network. The British had three excellent reasons for establishing a large railway network: to develop trade and commerce, to establish a quick and efficient administrative network, and to quickly and efficiently quell any threat to their colony from their European neighbours and co-colonizers. (19)

Y.B. Satyanarayana has chronicled the hardships and struggle of his family- the Yelukatis. He introduced the world of gangmen and pointsmen, hitherto unknown to us. The gangsman and the pointsman are mostly from Dalit community as they had to do arduous and odd jobs considered unsuitable for the upper caste people. “Much manual labour was required to lay the railway tracks through the length and breadth of the country, through thick forests and high mountains, and over surging rivers” (20). Untouchables were recruited in such hazardous jobs because “barring a few sudras, no other ‘touchable’ was ready to undertake them” (20). These workers were called gangmen. Untouchable workers were forced to carry heavy rails on their shoulders through different terrain. Sometimes they became prey to wild animals or poisonous snakes. Fatal accidents were common. When a train hit a cow, the act of distribution of its meat by skinning the dead animal usually fell upon a madiga pointsman. Nevertheless, this system enabled the untouchables to gain access to railway jobs which in turn gave them entry into the railway quarters. They started living alongside the sudras in the same areas, sometimes even the same buildings. The Sudras still tried to maintain untouchability, though. As the author pointed out, “It was a strange situation: untouchables, who were outcasts and segregated in every village, were suddenly living in the same quarters as Sudras!” (20) The environment had changed tremendously. The untouchables were given the opportunity to be educated and they learned many new things. The author has described that railways, in its nascent stage required people in large number to operate the ‘shunting’ process- “the formation of trains by coupling coaches to the engines when required, and detaching them when no longer necessary” (20). A person working this risky and hazardous job is called a ‘pointsman.’ As Prof. Satyanarayana has put in, “He [a pointsman] had to run between the rails, lift the heavy metal chain (weighing more than 100 kilograms) of a stationary bogie, and couple it with the hook of a bogie approaching slowly from the opposite

direction" (21). This uphill task often proved dangerous and caused accidents if the pointsman slipped while running on the tracks or happened to come under the wheels of the moving bogies. In fact, Baliah met with one such accident in Secunderabad. The author described other important happenings associated with railways which gave us valuable information of that age. In 1957 the railways stopped issuing rations and also the supply of subsidized groceries to railway staff. The enormous expansion of the railways and the growth in the number of employees led to this decision on the part of the railways. As a result that the employees suffered a sudden, heavy blow, and the effect was felt in Baliah's family too (115).

In spite of all these downsides, working in the railways provided the family with the opportunity to come out of the clutches of casteism. As K. Srilata has pointed out,

The family is one of many dalit beneficiaries of the British railway system. The railways represent a relatively caste-free space, a space which holds out the possibility of growth. In the railway colony, caste is markedly less-pronounced even though it does not entirely disappear. For one thing, the employees live side by side- the sudras beside the untouchables-something that would be unthinkable in the village. The colony also has schools for the children of the employees.¹

In fact, Dr. Satyanarayana has stated in the preface,

Three generations of my family have worked in the railways and lived in railway quarters. I often wonder where my family would have been had my grandfather not migrated from his village since, among Dalits, progress is visible mostly in the families of those whose forefathers had secured jobs under British India. (xx)

American writer and literary critic William Zinsser pointed out that memoir focuses "on a time in the writer's life that was unusually vivid, such as childhood or adolescence, or that was framed by war or travel or public service or some other special circumstances." (15) Here the writer reconstitutes himself in recalling, remembering and reminiscing about the cities and towns he had lived in childhood and adolescent period. Their life was beset with many mishaps and tragedies like the death of Shama, the infant girl of the family and the suspicious disappearance of Yadagiri, one of the author's brothers (160). The family was saddened by the demise of the author's grandfather:

Life had come to an end for the untouchable from Vangapalli who had not turned back after burying his wife in the village had now bid his final farewell. Had he not joined the railways, the history of their family would have been different. His demise was painful to us. (160)

The author, Y.B. Satyanarayana, his father Baliah time and again reiterated the unprecedented decision on the part of junior Narsiah, the author's grandfather. After his retirement Baliah had gone to Vangapalli to reclaim the inherited land which his father had left behind. He wanted to take up agriculture with the purpose of earning some money. He filed a litigation case against those who had occupied the land. Nonetheless all his attempts

were thwarted and this devastated him. However, the book is not all about sufferings and struggle. It also upholds the bright side of the world of the railway employees.

Had my father not felt the importance of education, had he not been in the railways, we would probably not have seen the days and good fortune that we did. His determination was responsible for us getting an education despite our poverty and social maladies like segregation and untouchability that were quite prevalent in that era. (xxi)

The presence of caste oppression in towns was subdued to a certain extent. Education and employment helped them to get liberty from the clutches of feudalism and caste discrimination. The family had moments of joy and celebration at the success of children. The day the three brothers, Satyanarayana, Narsimlu and Anjiah became graduates was a memorable day for the family. Baliah, author's father took minute care to the overall well-being of the family members. He used to take the family to pilgrimages during the vacations to relieve them from the drudgeries of life. Once he took them to Rishikesh, a pilgrim town in north India. The beautiful memories of the trip- the silly argument among the children to sit by the window in the train, the munching of snacks and meals during train journey, first encounter with the dark tunnel, sightseeing in Delhi by Tonga, visiting temples in Rishikesh left an indelible impression in the author's mind. Again, Baliah took his sons to Bombay once where Abbasayulu worked and also to Rameshwaram, a pilgrim centre in the southernmost part of the country.

My Father Baliah was published in 2011. In the book release function the chief guest and retired IAS officer K.R. Venugopal pointed out, "I look upon it as a source book for the implementation of Right to Education."² He called this book an 'epic story of a Dalit family.' In Rajnikant's movie *Kabali*, he is seen going through this highly inspirational book. Baliah and his children retained their self-esteem through all their lives. They did not budge an inch from their stand when it comes to their self-respect. All along his service period Baliah was known for his strength of character, integrity and sincerity and also for his intolerance of officials who ill-treated the subordinate staff (77). He vehemently objected to officials who addressed their subordinates with contempt and with derogatory terms. For this reason, he was transferred many a time. But Baliah was determined to preserve his self-respect. Baliah also instilled in his children the importance to lead a life of self-respect. To meet the ever increasing expenses of his school-going children, Baliah even worked as a coolie and his wife, the author's mother, Narsamma also worked in the fields to help raise the money. Their mother, in fact, played an important role in educating her children "toiling her life away working as an agricultural labourer in the fields" (163). The author earnestly desired to give his parents a comfortable life and his wish came true by dint of his education and employment.

Nothing could deter Satyanarayana and his brothers from achieving the desired goal as they had the patience, perseverance, dedication and determination to come out of the destructive influence of caste, untouchability and poverty. The author mentions that there was a tremendous change in their lifestyle owing to education. They in every respect looked

similar to people from the upper castes because of their attire and the way they spoke. All these changes were due to education among the Dalit families (186). However, the Dalits cannot evade the caste question altogether. Ramaswamy alias Baliah, unlike his Sudra colleagues, was not allowed to enter the houses of the upper-caste guards. He had to endure the arbitrary behaviour of the wives of railway officials (40). The presence of caste can be felt sometimes when the landlords became aware of the caste of the tenants and compelled them to vacate the house as soon as possible. This created a tremendous problem for the author's family too. As S.R.Sankaran had stated, "the caste system and its attendant social stigma followed a Dalit everywhere-even into the city, necessitating concealment of caste while studying, renting out a house, or even engaged in the office" (xvi). Dalit writer and literary critic Omprakash Valmiki rightly asserts in his book *Joothan* -"When caste is the basis of respect and merit, important for social superiority, this battle can't be won in a day. We need an ongoing struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change." (Valmiki 132)

The book is also a tribute to Dr. Y.B. Abbasayulu, the author's brother. In the mid-1970s, Abbasayulu who was the first doctorate and the first professor in their family went to Australia to present a paper at an international seminar, and their family was ecstatic. Abbasayulu came to the aid of his brothers whenever they were in trouble. The sacrifice of Balaraj is also worth remembering. Though he took job in the railways at the age of eighteen, he took utmost care in the education of his brothers. The author expresses his heartfelt gratitude to the family members, thus paying tribute to his grandfather Narsiah, his father Ramaswamy alias Baliah, his mother Narsamma, and his brothers Balraj and Abbasayulu, his elder sister Bachamma who at one point of time started working in the paddy field along with her mother Narsamma to support her family. She took care of the household chores and even supervised the education of her brothers.

In the front cover of *My Father Baliah* Gita Ramaswamy said, "Quietly brave, immensely enlightening-the colours of Satyanarayana's memories break the boundaries of Dalit narrative." The author wrote this memoir about his father and his family in particular and about the Dalits in general to protect the history of the marginalised people of our country and their inimitable sacrifice. He has also an agenda to disseminate this history among the future generations "who should know about our past in order to create a better future" (xxii). As the author himself said in the Preface, "At another level, this is the story of a community. It has been my lasting desire to show the present Dalit generation- and more so the future generations- how Dalits struggled" (xx). As William Zinsser has pointed out, "Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us. If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own." (6) Dr. Y.B. Satyanarayana's memoir leads us to venture into the quest of identity.

Notes:

1. See Srilata, K.“A Story that has not been told.” *The Hindu*. 3 March 2012. www.thehindu.com/books/a-story-that-has-not-been-told/article2953476.ece. Accessed 24 May 2017.
2. See “Book on struggles of Dalits released.” *My Father Baliah- blogger*. 24 July 2016. myfatherbaliah.blogspot.com. Accessed 25 May 2017.

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