

ISSN : 2454-3365

# THE LITERARY HERALD

AN INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ENGLISH E-JOURNAL

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***A Quarterly Indexed Open-access Online JOURNAL***

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**Vol.1, Issue 2 (September 2015)**

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**Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Siddhartha Sharma**

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## Transforming Pain into Resistance : Dalit Autobiographies

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**Abstract:** In the postmodern era plurality of cultures, genders and ethnicities is established with the argument that no particular type should be privileged over others. There should be an equal representation for each class, caste, gender, race and culture. In other words, every literature, especially English literature, hitherto considered hidebound and insular discipline has to articulate the feelings, aspirations, pains and sensibilities of all dispossessed tribes across the globe who have been described by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as the 'Fourth World'. The impact of these ideologies and the expansion of knowledge helped in the blossoming of Dalit literature in all Indian languages. Dalit literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by casteist powers. It is a revolt against dominant ideology and cultural hegemony. Dalit writers have taken to writing autobiography for they see it as the most potent weapon to portray the dreadful and humiliating events of a Dalit's world and thus to dismantle the caste-system responsible for their untouchable status and to rebuild society on the principles of human dignity, equality and respect. Subjectivity in these autobiographies is complicated by the deep connection between the individual self and the communal self. My paper attempts to explore Dalit autobiographies as "narratives of pain" that bind Dalits together into an "imagined community" of fellow sufferers and transform experiences of pain into narratives of resistance.

**Keywords:** Resistance, convergence, hegemony, assertion, dogma, ideological, metamorphosis, patriarchy, agenda, casteism.

## Transforming Pain into Resistance: Dalit Autobiographies

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India happens to be one of the world's largest democracies, but ironically being a caste structured society, it is here we find a large section of people living a life of subjugation and insufferable sadness. The caste or varna system in India has segregated thousands of 'Dalits' from mainstream culture to a subhuman and debased existence. After centuries of suppression, the Dalits are in the struggle for emancipation under the liberation movement spearheaded by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who believed that only education could bring about a change in the oppressed lives of the Dalits. Education gave Dalits a lot of self-confidence and propelled them to fight against their oppressors. Dalits have struggled against the injustices through political as well as cultural means. Dalit literature is one of the major sites of their resistance and creativity.

Bill Ashcroft aptly writes, "Marginality becomes an unprecedented source of creative energy". (Ashcroft *et al* 112). The literature by Dalits in India is a living instance of this phenomenon. Dalit Literature is one of the most important literary movements to emerge in post-independence India. It is a new and distinct stream of Indian literature that has contributed to Indian literature "a fresh experience, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt". (Limbale 37) Dalit literature made its advent in Marathi in 1950s and subsequently spread to many other languages notably Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and English. Until then literature had been the domain of high castes. Untouchables were either mostly absent from literary representations or shown as victims in need of saviours, as objects without voice and agency. Because of Dalit literature the process of social convergence began and the winds of change became brisk. Many dalits started writing and writers emerged from different strata of society. The horizon of Indian literary criticism expanded and readers' taste changed. The significance of Dalit Literature in the larger canvas of Indian literature is clear.

The term 'Dalit Literature' was first used in 1958, at the first ever Dalit conference held in Bombay. However, as an identity marker, the term 'Dalit' came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called 'Dalit Panthers'. The name expressed their solidarity and kinship with 'Black Panthers' who were engaged in a militant struggle for African-Americans' rights in the United States of America. Dalit writing draws its ideological strength from Dr. Ambedkar's struggle and their basic philosophy is that the true picture of a Dalit's pain and anguish can only be captured by a Dalit. In the words of Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit Panther movement, "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society". (Dangle 264). Shankar Prasad Singha and Indranil Acharya rightly observe :

The plight of Black Americans has great resemblance with that of the Indian Dalits or 'untouchable' groups. But the condition of the Dalits is probably worse because caste Hindus seek to justify the atrocities they commit through scriptural sanction and hence feel no qualms of conscience in ill-treating the Dalits. Rather, the whole thing is internalized in such a way by both the oppressor and the oppressed that everyone thinks it as natural. The situation perfectly fits in with the Gramscian idea of hegemony where the Dalits accept their deprivation as a consequence of their karma (Singha and Acharya 1-2).

The early writings of a newly literate community, or a group finding its voice for the first time, have always been autobiographical be they aboriginal, women, black or dalit. Thats why Dalit writers have taken to writing autobiography for they see it as the most potent weapon to portray the dreadful and humiliating events of a Dalit's world and thus to dismantle the caste-system responsible for their untouchable status and to rebuild society on the principles of human dignity, equality and respect. For Dalit autobiography, as for autobiographies of other marginalized groups, the entire life-narrative is based on the idea of the communal identity. The self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self:

Autobiographies are generally written by people who consider their life as one of importance or of significant personal achievement. Dalit autobiographies... are quite different. In these stories, the individual's life acquires significance because it speaks of and for a community. It represents a group experience and is more like a testimony to that experience... Dalit autobiographies are also personal stories, but these stories acquire special significance because they are not, at root,

about the individual. On the contrary, they are important social and historical documents. (Satyanarayana and Tharu 18-19).

Subjectivity in these autobiographies is thus complicated by the deep connection between the individual self and the communal self. One strength of Dalit autobiographies has been their act of exposing the continuation of caste-based discrimination and the power structures and belief systems that support the practice of untouchability. In a Dalit community, like many other marginalized groups, autobiography is not simply a kind of literature but is a form of assertion and resistance in its own right.

In an autobiography, it is a normal trend to glorify the 'self' and boast about the extraordinary quality of oneself. But that changes at the hands of a Dalit writer. When a Dalit writer writes, it is about the denial of opportunities even to live as an ordinary human being. The self becomes the representative of all other Dalits who were crushed down because of their Dalit identity. The entire life narrative gains a representative quality and imparts the true feeling of the sting they have suffered. The protagonist of the autobiography is, of course, the writer himself, but his personal experiences, instead of being mystically unique and individualistic, encompass the general condition of the whole Dalit community. In Marathi, a whole generation of Dalit writers have developed it as narrative of resistance against caste stronghold - Daya Pawar's *Baluta : Social Claim* (1978), Laxman Mane's *Upura : The Outsider* (1980), Laxman Gaekwad's *Uchalya : The Branded* (1987), Kishore Shantabai Kale's *Kolhatye Che Por: Against All Odds* (2000), Vasant Moon's *Vasti : Growing Up Untouchable in India - A Dalit Autobiography* (2001), Narendra Jadhav's *Amcha Baap An Mahi : Outcaste - A Memoir* (2003) and Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi : The Outcaste* (2003) are prominent Dalit autobiographies in Marathi. In Hindi also several autobiographies were written to express the subhuman living conditions of dalits. Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), Mohandas Namisray's *Apne-Apne Pinjrey* and Surajpal Chauhan's *Tiriskrat* (2002) are important Dalit autobiographies in Hindi. Bama's *Karukku* (1992, trans. 1999) is a major Dalit autobiography in Tamil. Prominent Dalit autobiographies in Kannada include Arvinda Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*, Siddalingayya's *Ooru Keri*, Ramayya's *Ma Negara*, and Govindaraju's *Mamavilledavara Madhye*.

The first major autobiography in Marathi by a Dalit writer was Daya Pawar's *Baluta : Social Claim* (1978) which is a transparent account of a sensitive person trying to emancipate himself from the stigma of untouchability. It presents the plight of a migrant and lonely person trying to protect himself from the tyranny of caste as well as the dogma of protest. Laxman Mane's *Upara: The Outsider* (1980) is an account of the life of an activist. It depicts the perennial poverty of the Kaikadi community and the social tensions between the higher castes and the Kaikadis, and most important, the growth of a political consciousness. Laxman Gaekwad's *Uchalya: The Branded* (1987) describes the Bhamta community of petty thieves, or rather the poor ones forced into a life of thieving, to which Laxman Gaekwad belongs and within which he was brought up. The life story shows him passing through a process of ideological initiation that leads him to uplift the community from the social mire.

Kishore Shantabai Kale, in his intense and stark autobiography, *Kolhatye Che Por : Against All Odds* (2000), reconstructs the events of his life as the illegitimate son of a Kolhati tamasha dancer. Abandoned by his mother, neglected and maltreated by his grandparents, uncle and aunts, ridiculed in school and college for his fatherless status, he was tested again and again by life. Fired with rare courage and determination to change his life and be free, he educated himself and went on to become a doctor - the first in his community. Kale's autobiography is not only a dramatic and moving story of an individual's struggle to break free, it also brings to light a world and lifestyle of the Kolhati community of tamasha dancers of Western Maharashtra. Vasant Moon's *Vasti : Growing Up Untouchable in India* (2001) is about his 'vasti' or neighbourhood and a community of people considered to be at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. It reveals a complex yet rich slum culture where Dalits are not seen merely as victims but as a community with strong bonds, striving and struggling to shed their sense of inferiority. It is a narrative not only of poverty and deprivation but also of the final triumph of hope, self-respect and optimism. Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste : A Memoir* (2003) is a multilayered personalized saga of the social metamorphosis of Dalits in India. At one level, it is a loving tribute from a son to his father. At another level, it gives an intelligent appraisal of the caste system in India and traces the story of awakening of Dalit traversing three generations. At still another level, it is reflective of the aspirations of millions of Dalits in India. The book seeks to promote self-respect and dignity among the dalits by making a strong statement for the fundamental right of every

dalit in India to live like a normal human being. *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste* (2003) is the emotionally violent autobiography of Sharankumar Limbale, a half-caste, growing up in the Mahar community and the anguish he suffers from not belonging fully to it. Limbale's autobiography is a frighteningly candid story of his childhood and growth as an unsired person. It is a numbing account of a community at the hands of an unthinking privileged class. The autobiography concludes with a pointer towards the futility of a number of questions involving social ethics for which there are no definite answers.

Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan*, is an account of those experiences that did not find a place in literary representation -experiences like Valmiki's, his birth and growing up in the untouchable caste of Chuhra, the heroic struggle he waged to survive his preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject and recorder of the oppression and exploitation he endured not only as an individual but also as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community. Dalit writers have not only criticised the brahmanical system for all the problems of Dalits but also lashed out at the superstitions and inequality within the Dalit community. Surajpal Chauhan in *Tiriskrat* and Mohandas Namisray in *Apne Apne Pinjrey* have given the account of other side of reality too in which Dalits are also divided according to caste hierarchy- 'Jatavs' see themselves as superior to 'chamars'.

Dalit women are unequal partners and are further down the ladder of caste and subcaste. They bear the burden of patriarchy as well as low caste. Bama's *Karukku* is an autobiographical statement of what it is to be a Dalit and a woman. A Dalit woman is a dalit amongst the dalits. She is thus doubly oppressed by her caste and gender. In Bama's case her position is further endangered by her existence as a dalit Christian. Hence *Karukku* focuses on three essential forces that cut across and sear Bama's life, namely : caste, gender and religion. *Karukku* is a painful journey that is open-ended and many questions are left unanswered. It is not 'a complete success story' like a conventional autobiography. It is rather a revelation of different themes like religion, recreation and education. Through these perspectives, Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the Catholic church itself. The book is about Bama's inner quest for self-discovery and

the resultant courage, which forces her to move away from the life of a nun to live the life of a Dalit woman.

Siddalingayya's *Ooru Keri* is one of the most important dalit autobiographies in Kannada. The remarkable feature of this autobiography is that it is less a record of pain and suffering than of joy and success. The reader perceives the oppression that Siddalingayya and his community go through but the author makes the readers see the power of dalits too. Dalit solidarity and struggle become frequent motifs here. Other notable Dalit autobiographies in Kannada include Arvind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*, Ramayya's *Ma Nagera* and Govindaraju's *Manavilledavara Madhye*.

Dalit autobiography forces society and forces writers of every caste and creed to recognize and reckon with the reality of what it means to be a dalit in India. Any study of a Dalit autobiography provokes a very powerful reaction and opens the door to some serious discussions on what constitutes "good" literature and the role of literature in social justice. It also promotes among the readers a social consciousness by relating it to life. Dalit autobiography is not just a remembering of things past, but a shaping and structuring of them in such a way as to help understand one's life and the social order that shaped it, on the one hand, and to arouse a passion for change in the Dalit reader, on the other. Critics as well as Dalit writers themselves describe Dalit autobiographies as "narratives of pain". It is pain which strings one narrative event to the next, and it is pain that binds individual Dalits together into an "imagined community" of fellow sufferers. Yet the experience of oppression does not imprison Dalits in eternal victimhood, but rather is then used by Dalit community as tool mobilised against this cruel and inhuman social order which supports caste-based discrimination. Dalit autobiography transforms experiences of pain into narratives of resistance. The powerful narrative agenda of Dalit autobiographies contests both the basis of caste-discrimination as well as the institutional claim that caste no longer functions as a social force in modern India. Thus, Dalit autobiographies are not simply the narration of a Dalit's life-story. They are also used by Dalit writers as a means of political assertion.

It is clear then that Dalit autobiographies, like the autobiographies of other socially marginalized groups, serve a very different purpose than those of famous celebrities or historical



personalities. Their agenda is not localized in individualism but links the individual to his entire caste community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression. Consequently, there has been much debate over who is the subject of Dalit autobiography. To some degree, one could say that there are innumerable subjects within the autobiography, all bound by their identity as 'Dalit'. Autobiography is an especially valued form of Dalit literature since, unlike poems, novels or short-stories, it can only be written by a Dalit. Thus, it is through the politics of identity that Dalits have - at least for the genre of autobiography - successfully re-negotiated narrative authority since the nature of autobiography itself means that Dalit identity confers on the autobiographer a kind of uncontested authority to speak. Dalit autobiographers also negotiate the issue of authority to represent the Dalit community by presenting their autobiography not as a result of their desire for personal recognition, but as a response to the requests from the Dalit community for representation. Watching their community continually oppressed by the upper castes, the protagonist of the Dalit autobiography does not experience his pain 'lying down', but rather pain incites him or her to unite with his or her community in a fight against caste discrimination. Similarly, the process of 'reliving' this pain, while writing the autobiography is not viewed as a process of healing or forgetting in order to move on with one's life. It is a way of solidifying individual connection with the larger imagined Dalit community and at the same time contributing to the political assertion by presenting 'facts' of one's life to contest casteism.

Dalit literature is gradually emerging as a discipline of academic study. It is being commodified, published, read and is becoming part of the teaching machine while the situation of most dalits remains unchanged. In the words of S. Anand, "while Dalit tales seem to have become touchable, the creators and protagonists of these tales continue to deal with dehumanizing untouchability, which is reinventing itself in various subtle and crude ways". (Anand 4) Dalit literature represents a powerful, emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Given its overarching preoccupations with the location of Dalits in the caste-based Hindu society, and their struggle for dignity, justice and equality, this literature is by nature oppositional. With the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages into English, Dalit literature is poised to acquire a national and international presence

as well as to pose a major challenge to the established notions of what constitutes literature and how we read it.

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