

## ***Murdahiya: A New Perspective on Dalit Autobiography***

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### **Abstract:**

Autobiography has been acknowledged as a prominent genre of Literature. these are characterized by the location, identification and expression of 'self'. The emergence of Dalit Autobiography opens up a new dimension to the study of Autobiography in Indian literature as the very act of writing a Dalit autobiography turns into an act of retaliation against long rooted social stigma. Dalit autobiographies are often considered as the 'narrative of pain and pathos'; they are not written by ink but 'tears and blood'. Such autobiographies illustrate the experience of struggle, humiliation, oppression and exploitation, social and religious exclusion of dalits, they are separated by man-made fences, they live on the outskirts of the mainstream societies. Dr. Tulshi Ram's autobiography *Murdahiya* reveals his experience of day-to-day struggle as an individual and he also gives a cathartic picture of the atrocities faced by dalits in a caste-based society. This present paper aims to analyze the pathetic and arduous past of the dalits in a caste hegemonic society and at the same time highlights Dr. Tulshi Ram's struggle to achieve dignity, worthiness and at least the minimal status of human being. This paper also focuses on the transformation of the author from a voiceless passive object to a self-conscious subject.

**Key Words:** Dalits, Untouchables, Caste system, Autobiography, Dalit discourse, Outcastes.

‘Dalit’- The word has a qualitatively different meaning to the socially marginalized compared to what is popularly understood. It was popularized by Dalit Panther Movement which adopted the term as a means of confident assertion, rejecting Mahatma Gandhi’s nomenclature of ‘Harijan’ or children of God. ‘Dalit’ means oppressed or exploited. It describes those who have been traditionally considered untouchables and oppressed by mainstream culture.

Dalit Literature in India received its initial impetus with the advent of leaders like B.R. Ambedkar and other Dalit activists. Dalits were considered ‘avarnas’ and ‘achhut’, thus, not belonging to any of the accepted classes. They were left to live on the periphery as scavengers or carriers of the dead. The Sanskrit word ‘dal’ which means to crush or grind food grains was taken by the two stalwarts of the Dalit movement- Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the term ‘Dalit’ was used to describe the plight of these untouchables.

Dalit literature is one of the most significant literary movements in India. Before this body of literature came out, Dalits were the invisible men and women of India who were compelled to live on the periphery of the society, never entering the vision of the high-class Hindus. “The experiences articulated in Dalit literature have not yet been expressed in any other literature.” (Limbale 31)

In the mainstream body of Indian Literature, there was no significant representation of Dalits and their experiences. The Dalit Panther Movement that modelled itself after the Black Panther Party active in USA of the mid 1960s and 70s played a significant role in defining the social and political orientation of Dalit writings. The contribution of Dalit writing in Indian literature is “...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 came into existence in 1958 with the commencement of Dalit Conference. It was first held in Mumbai and known as Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh (Maharashtra Dalit Literary Society), a movement driven by Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. However, as an identity marker, the term ‘Dalit’ came into prominence in 1972 when a group of young Marathi writer- activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of Dalit Panther Movement writes, “Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrow and struggle of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.” (Dangle 264)

Autobiographical writing constitutes a significant sub- genre of Dalit literature, conveying a first-hand raw experience of the writers who themselves were subjected as persons having no other qualities and distinctions in life except that they were born in upper caste families. The autobiographical writings of the first- generation Dalit writers made the readers aware as to how the life of Dalits really was/is in independent India. Writing autobiographies became a pertinent tool in the hands of the Dalit writers. Critics as well as Dalit writers describes ‘Dalit’ autobiographies as “narratives of pain”.

Dalit writers interpreted their own experiences regarding social injustice in their own autobiographies. Dalit auto-narrative was best suited to the Dalit writers. In recent years many Dalit auto-narratives were produced in different Languages, Daya Pawar's *Baluta: Social Claim* (1978), Laxman Mane's *Upara: The Outsider* (1980), Kishore Santabai Kale's *Kolehatye Che Por: Against All Odds* (2000), Vasant Moon's *Vasti : Growing up Untouchable in India- A Dalit Autobiography* (2001) and Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste* (2003) are prominent Dalit autobiographies in Marathi. Bama's *Karakku* (1992, trans. 1999) and K.A Gunasekaran's *The Scar* (trans. 2009) are autobiographies in Tamil. Kannada Dalit auto-narrative includes Arvinda Malagatti's *Government Brahmane*, Siddalingayya's *Ooru Keri*, Ramayya's *Ma Neyara*, and Govindaraja's *Mamavilledavara Madhye*.

Dalit writers also used autobiographies as a medium of assertion against untouchability- Kausalya Baisantri's '*Dohra Abhishap*' Dr. Jai Prakash Kardam's '*Chhaper*', Om Prakash Valmiki's *Jothan* (1997), Mohanden Namisray's *Apne-Apne Pinjrey* (2002), Surajpal Chauhan's *Thriskrat* (2002) and *Murdahiya* (2010) by Dr. Tulshi Ram.

*Murdahiya* was first published as a series of seven stories in the Hindi Journal '*Tadbhav*' and then in the form of a book by Rajkamal Publication Private Limited in Year 2010. Dr. Tulshi Ram's autobiography *Murdahiya* is an account of the experiences of his childhood struggle, the life he spent in his survival not only in a caste-biased society but also as an individual in a family of 'Chammar' (Tainer). Tulshi Ram's *Murdahiya* presents a very strange picture *Murdahiya* not only talks of dalit community in general but also human sentiments in specific. Although the Dalit autobiography's narrative agenda is the sub-human life of untouchables, their agony and pain and how their suffering results in a provocative voice. In that sense *Murdahiya* is entirely different from other Dalit auto-narratives.

The title *Murdahiya* refers to cremation ground, a small piece of land which has no identity other than the fact that it's a land used to bury the dead bodies but writer gives a different meaning to it. He says "Murdahiya captures all the activities from life till death. The most interesting fact is that, *Murdahiya* never discriminate men and animal. It is savior of both." (self trans. 5)

After Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, *Murdahiya* is an autobiography which is critically acclaimed by both Caste Hindus and Dalits. Inspired by the philosophy of Buddha, Ambedkar and Marx, *Murdahiya* reveals the life of subjugated classes. *Murdahiya* is not only the locale but also the life force for the Dalits of Dharampur. In other words, *Murdahiya* is the depiction of the social, economic and political life of rural people of Eastern Uttar Pradesh which incorporates and voices the history and geography of other villages as well.

*Murdahiya* begins detailing the childhood memories of the author, Tulshi Ram, who was born in the family of 'Chammars' in the year 1949 in a small village named Dharampur in the district of Azamgarh (Uttar Pradesh). At the age of three he had fallen severely ill due to chickenpox and it was his first encounter with the superstition prevailing in the Dalit communities. The family started offering prayers and sacrificing pig to please the Goddess. That was the time he came in touch with untouchability and the caste system of the society he lived in.

The chasm of the discrimination was not only between the human beings but it was among the Deities also. “The Dalits had their own deities who were not worshipped by the Caste Hindus. In our village ‘Chamariya Mayi’ and ‘Deeha Baba’ were two such deities.” (self trans.11)

Due to the effect of chickenpox, my whole body was left with deep black spots and consequently I lost my vision through the right eye says Tulshi Ram. His grandmother, who was very close to him and was a firm believer in ‘Chamariya Mayi’, prayed throughout the day for his good health but she was left dejected: “In India’s superstitious society such people get classified as ominous. I also gained entry to this category at merely three years of age. Thus, I was branded as ‘Ominous’ at home and even outside.” (self trans. 12)

Tulshi Ram expresses his sense of alienation and isolation and he further says that when a ‘bad-omen’ like him is born then by every means he becomes a part of that social sphere where he has to bear the humiliation of the society.

*Murdahiya* also unfolds the superstitions and beliefs of the Indian social system where the life of Dalits was under the control of the Caste Hindus. The astronomical incidents of lunar eclipses and solar eclipse and the date of festivals were considered to be in the control of the Brahmins: “It was a common belief in Dalits that the calendar of Amika Pande has been dropped down by Bramha-Ji from Devlok.” (self trans. 22)

Another incident on which Tulshi Ram focuses takes place in Dalit Basti where the people faced abject poverty. The dalits worked the entire day in the fields of caste Hindus but they did not get enough wages to even take proper meal, people were in great need of money: “In the search of the hidden Treasures people used to sacrifice their children on the advice of the ‘ojhas’ and ‘tantriks’.” (self trans. 27)

When a Dalit-writer writes, he talks about the denial of opportunities and dignity even to live as an ordinary human being. The most significant aspect of this autobiography is the ambition of Tulshi Ram’s father to educate his son. The country was free from the prejudices of upper caste against the education of dalits, but he wanted his son to be educated so that he could read the telegrams. During the rainy days he himself took Tulshi Ram to primary school on his shoulders. It was the beginning of a new era after Independence. The ‘Gandhinian’ concept of removing untouchability was prevailing at that time but the condition of dalits remained the same. Teachers used abusive language to address the students of dalit communities. Names were not their identity but it was the caste that played a crucial role in the formation of one’s identity, like they call Tulshi Ram ‘chamarkit’.

After completing his primary education, a major problem occurred in front of Tulshi Ram. His father did not want him not to continue his education anymore. Now that Tulshi Ram’s father thinks his son is good enough to read the telegrams, he expects his boy to help him in ploughing and harvesting the fields of Caste Hindus but Tulshi Ram’s mind was inclined towards studies. He wanted to continue his education: “A person who had the knowledge of English language was considered great in those days.” (self trans. 85)

Tulshi Ram was in big dilemma but with the help of his grandmother he got admission in next class: “My admission in class sixth seemed a revolutionary episode because from here on my English education started...” (self trans. 101)

The life in Dharampur was not different from any other town in India. There was a popular division between Caste houses and Dalit bastis. Kshatriyas lived in the north of the village, in the middle there was Brahmin Tola and to the south was the dalit basti: “Social boycott, separate bastis, wells and cremation grounds; inability to find rental accommodation; the necessity to conceal caste; denial of admission to public places...” (Limbale 35) The absurdities and class distinctions in Hindu Religion have been very clearly portrayed in *Murdahiya*. The caste (hierarchical) system not only divided people but also water. There were separate wells of Caste Hindus and Dalits. Tulshi Ram remembers an incident of his life which is apt to Limbale’s quote “You Chamaar, get lost from here. How dare you bathe in the pond meant for the high caste?”

*Murdahiya* paints a vivid picture of rural life. The condition of the dalits is the same everywhere in the autobiography. They are socially deprived of the mainstream facilities but in their small spaces they create their own rituals and traditions. *Murdahiya* is culturally a richer text than any other dalit autobiography. The depiction of folk forms, its various colours and the rural life represented in *Murdahiya* cannot be found even in the narratives of Munshi Premchand. Their social occasions were also different from caste Hindus and these activities give relief from boring routine of life.

Marriage in a dalit basti is not less than any festival. On this occasion women make the ‘kohbar designs’ on the walls of their houses and they enjoy by singing folk songs in groups. In these marriages another means of attraction is the folk performance of North India. Tulshi Ram rightly portrays ‘Nautanki’ as the medium of entertainment in the towns and villages of that time. An open space in the village became the performance site and because of the unavailability of electricity in the villages, light was produced by big lantern or petromax. Similar to Tulshi Ram’s narration, even today ‘Nautanki’ usually starts late night after dinner and goes on all night until sunrise. The performers in these Natak Mandlis were also dalits and they played stories like ‘Sultana-Daaku’, ‘Laila-Majnu’, ‘Shirin-Farhad’ in a very fascinating manner.

Tulshi Ram also focuses in his auto-narrative on the progress of Indian Railways which changed the life of all the people of society but it was also the root cause of sufferings of lower caste women because their husbands went to Calcutta leaving their family behind and without knowing the pain of separation. These wives of the labourers consider the Train as their enemy which took their husbands away. This reminds me of a Purvanchal folk song- “Reliya bairan Piya ko liye jaye re! Reliya bairan...”

The book also gives visibility to the idioms and proverbs that were used in rural life. He puts our attention on sarcastic proverb used by Brahmins and Kshatriyas against Chammar- “Bhado Bhainsa Chait Chammar- Inse kabhun lage naa Paar.” (self trans. 105)

Dr. Tulshi Ram remembers that when he was 15 years old and had completed his matriculation in the year 1964, he left his home for further studies. It was the last time when he passed through Murdahiya of Dharampur. Although he was alone at that time, still he had a co-traveler and it was Murdahiya- the life force for dalits of Dharampur. Fifty years have passed and today when Tulshi Ram visualizes the Murdahiya, he envisions a distorted picture, he feels that it has been uprooted from its place. He says that urbanization is at its extreme and it is about to swallow the rural life. Money has become the supreme God and controller. Industrialization and modernization have stolen the innocence of Life.

Dalit auto-narratives are based upon the counter-memories of caste system. Tulshi Ram has not only criticized the Indian caste system for being at the root of many problems of Dalits but also painted a vivid picture domestic village-life, of superstitions and inequality within Dalit Bastis. The voice of agony and revolt is very strong in Dalit autobiographies and the inspiration for revolt is supplied by Dr Ambedkar's force of thoughts. In this context Tulshi Ram's *Murdahiya* is different. The book is steeped in agony but the rage filled voice of revolt presents a picture of human sympathy by coming into contact with the compassion of Buddha.

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