

**Dalit Identity in Dalit Autobiographies: A Study of a Selected Autobiographical Extracts****Dr. Asim. I. Twaha**

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**Abstract**

Autobiography forms a genre which focuses on an individual: all about the individual's experiences, personality and feelings. "Autobiographies are generally written by people who consider their life as one of importance or of significant personal achievement." (Satyanarayana and Tharu 18). The paper is an investigation into a few randomly selected extracts from different Dalit autobiographies published in Arjun Dangle's 'Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature'. Through the investigation of the selected texts, an attempt will be made in this paper to draw generalisations regarding the characteristics of Dalit autobiographies. The paper draws on its perspective from the ideas and views discussed and manifested in Dangle (1992), Mukherjee (2003), Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013), and Beth (2007).

**Keywords:** authenticity of experience, Dalit autobiography, Dalit identity, caste discrimination, Mahar

**Introduction**

Autobiography may be defined as "a biography written by the subject about himself or herself" (Abrams and Harpham 27) or "a memoir about the life of the writer" (Seidensticker 46). Autobiography forms a genre which focuses on an individual: all about the individual's experiences, personality and feelings. "Autobiographies are generally written by people who consider their life as one of importance or of significant personal achievement." (Satyanarayana and Tharu 18). The present paper attempts a study on Dalit autobiography with reference to a few randomly selected excerpts of Dalit Autobiographies published in 'Poisoned Bread' edited by Arjun Dangle.

The term 'Dalit' can be translated as oppressed, downtrodden, depressed (Omvedt and Eleanor 2). The term 'is now used by politicized Untouchables in preference to any other designation' (Zelliot 1). Dalits have a long history of oppression at the hands of the upper caste population. Under the leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and his sincere initiatives that the Dalits started to take active part in raising their 'voice against the upper-caste persecution' in 1920s (Twaha 83). "The movement of Dalit literature gained ground for the first time in Maharashtra in 1960s" (Bhongle 158). It "brought a new perspective of looking at Indian literature. It is a perspective which is given by the Dalits or lower caste and downtrodden people" (Twaha 99). Although there was literature produced by Dalits, or lower caste people, that literature, however, was rejected by the upper caste literatures simply because the latter could not accept Dalit heroes or characters playing decisive roles in literature. Baburao Bagul asserts that "the (Hindu) writers who have internalized the Hindu value-structure find it impossible to accept heroes, themes and thoughts derived from the philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar" (Dangle 282). Dalit literature produced by Dalit writers "represents a new thinking and a new point of view. It poses the question of the representation of dalit and lower caste life ('heroes, themes and thoughts' from dalit society') as a critical public issue" (Satyanarayana and Tharu 8).

With the history of a painful past, the genre autobiography becomes an obvious choice for the Dalit writers. Highlighting Dalit writers' objective to portray the authenticity of their experiences, Bhongle (159) writes, "The entire Dalit literature tends to be autobiographical because the Dalit writer refuses to soar high with the wings of imagination; he prefers to write out of the authenticity of experience". As against the "mainstream critics who say that autobiography is not a literary genre", Dalit writing suffers from 'lack of imagination' and is 'nothing but reportage', "Dalit writers point to the authenticity of experience as the most important characteristic of Dalit writing" (Mukherjee xxxvi).

### **Methodology:**

The present paper studies a few randomly selected English translated extracts from Dalit autobiographies published in Arjun Dangle edited 'Poisoned Bread': Shankarrao Kharat's 'A Corpse in the Well', Daya Pawar's 'Son, Eat your Fill', Shantabai Kamble's 'Naja Goes to School-and Doesn't', and Kumud Pawde's 'The Story of my Sanskrit'. Through the investigation of the selected texts, an attempt will be made in this paper to draw

generalisations regarding the characteristics of Dalit autobiographies. The paper draws on its perspective from the ideas and views discussed and manifested in Dangle (1992), Mukherjee (2003), Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013), and Beth (2007). Further, to develop an insight into different contexts relevant to Dalit Literature movement in general and the selected texts in particular, a methodological study of secondary sources, such as books and journal has been undertaken.

### **The extracts in brief:**

In this section of the article, the content of the selected texts will be sketched out briefly. In the text 'A Corpse in the Well', Shankarrao Kharat recalls one of his childhood experiences in the course of which his father, whom he called, *Anna* was about to lose his life while performing his village duty. Anna, as part of his village duty, was to keep a watch of a dead body that was found in an abandoned and ruined well. After guarding the body for the entire night, he was forced by the constable and the village chief to take it out from the well in the afternoon next day. When Anna expressed his reluctance to do so by saying, "Constable, the Mahar's village duty is only to guard the corpse. How can we touch it? What would the heirs of this corpse have to say?" (Kharat 75). Finally, Anna had to succumb to the demands of the Constable and the village chief and get into the well where he was almost beaten by a poisonous snake. After getting the dead body out of the well successfully, he accompanied it to a 'doctor about eight miles away for a postmortem'. During the entire incident, Anna did not take even a single morsel of food into his mouth. The autobiographical excerpt also contains a thought-provoking discussion between the author and his father on various topics of *Maharhood* and the inhuman treatment of Mahars by the upper-caste section of the society. When the author as a child offers to relieve Anna from his duty so that the latter could eat the *bhakri* given by his wife, Anna retorts vehemently, 'No! No village duty for you. It's bad enough that we have to endure it. Once you're saddled with the village duty, you'll be stuck with it for life! That's the tradition! That's our doom! You go home. I'll eat when it's time!' (Kharat 74)

In the next selected extract 'Son, Eat your Fill' by Daya Pawar, the author looks back on his past life in *Kaavakhana* in Mumbai. He, together with his mother, father, grandmother, and his uncle used to live in a very congested 'ten-by-twelve room' which was equipped with an indoor tap and a common latrine. Through the story readers come to experience how old

Mumbai looked like and the wretched life of the Mahar population in the city. Kaavakhana, where the author lived in a ‘horseshoe-shaped tenement’, was the dwelling place for criminals, gamblers, and prostitutes. The male members of the Mahar community living in the area worked as porters, labours in mills and factories, whereas the females used to “collect rags, papers, broken glasses, iron and bottles in the street, bring them home, sort them out all night, and go and sell them in the morning” (Pawar 79-80). Some women washed saris of prostitutes and cook ‘bajri bhakris’ and ‘barbaat’ for them. Pawar minutely describes the life he witnessed, how in monsoons they had to place vessels and pans to collect the water dripping from the ceiling, how even after fearsome quarrels they would mix again like nothing had happened, how the author enjoyed the day when he was taken to Pila House by Dada and Tatyia to buy him ‘a woollen jacket and pants and shiny black boots’ and so on. Through the story Pawar informs us about his *Aji* (grandmother)’s occupation as a worker in the ‘dogs’ dispensary’, and about her past life in which fighting with all odds she came to Mumbai with her two sons after their father’s death.

Through the text ‘The Story of my ‘Sanskrit’, Kumud Pawde tells the story of how she has confronted various challenges from the society and individuals in her attempts to learn Sanskrit. From the very beginning though she excelled in Sanskrit and was appreciated for her knowledge of Sanskrit, her ability to learn it and to teach it, the young Kumud as a child was hurt by the expression of the mothers of her Brahman friends who would “warn their daughters, ‘Be careful! Don’t touch her. Stay away from her. And don’t play with her. Or I won’t let you into the house again.’” (Pawde 99). The extract abounds in Pawde’s varied experiences in her journey towards excellence in Sanskrit: how she announced her decision to do MA in Sanskrit after she completed matriculation with Sanskrit as a subject, how she passed BA with praiseworthy marks and eventually passed MA. It was quite common for the author to receive expressions like, “These Mahars have really got above themselves.” (Pawde 100), “Even these wretched outcastes are giving themselves airs these days — studying in colleges.” (Pawde 103), “She’s having fun and games at the expense of a scholarship. Just bloated with government money!” (Pawde 103), and so on. However, through out the narrative, Pawde expresses her gratitude to her teachers Gokhale Guruji and Dr. Kolte who were from the upper caste. Even after her completion of MA in Sanskrit with distinction, she did not get a job for two years. The extract ends with a scathing revelation that she could get a job only because she was married to an upper caste person with the title Pawde: “the credit

for Kumud Somkuwar's job is not hers, but that of the name Kumud Pawde. I hear that a woman's surname changes to match her husband's — and so does her caste." (Pawde 106).

Shantabai Kamble's 'Naja Goes to School-and Doesn't' acquaints the readers with two stories: one about herself and another about her niece. In the first part of the text, we read how she was deprived of her studies even after receiving scholarships and doing good in school only because of her poverty. In the story, Kamble speaks of how she was an unwanted girl child of her father and how her father started to consider her 'a fortunate girl' only after 'two sons came after her' (Kamble 93). In the second part of the extract, Shantabai reports about her elder sister's daughter, Gomi's story. Gomi, harassed by her mother-in-law, returns to her mother's place. At her mother in law's instruction, Gomi's husband comes to take her back but Gomi was not sent back by her family members.

### **Discussion:**

In the current section, the selected texts will be discussed and analysed in terms of various features that provide Dalit autobiographies a distinctive flavour. As rightly put by Satyanarayana and Tharu (18), "Dalit writing has given new life to autobiography". Mainstream autobiographies focus on individual's life and experiences, whereas in Dalit autobiographies, individual's life becomes significant as it 'speaks of and for a community'. In Shankarrao Kharat's text, although the text focuses on the author as a child and his father, the story speaks loudly of the miserable living condition of the Mahars. At the very outset of the text 'A Corpse in the Well', while telling his own story the author gives the reader a general idea about the village duty Mahars are destined to perform. Kharat begins his story, "I knew clearly the dangers of village duty. It was a perpetual noose around the neck of a Mahar! My father was crushed flat by this duty" (73). Further in the text, there are collective references like 'they will have a grudge against us Mahars!' (75). In the next text, 'Son, Eat your Fill' by Daya Pawar, referring to the pathetic life conditions of the Mahar community living in the slums of Mumbai, the author says writes, "The Mahars' living conditions were wretched. In each little cubby-hole, there were three or four sub-tenants" (Pawar 79). Alluding to the village duties to be performed by Mahars, Aji reports in the text, "If anyone in the village died, we had to go from village to village, come rain or shine, and give the news. These were the jobs of the Mahars" (Pawar 83). In the autobiographical text by Pawde as well, we get to know how Mahars are treated with discrimination in the society; readers are

informed how the common Indian people believe that Mahars “should consider themselves guilty of a crime if they even heard the sound of this [Sanskrit] language” (Pawde 98). Although Kumud’s learning and completing MA in Sankrit in spite of being a Mahar marks the “beginning of a progressive way of thinking in independent India”, her remaining jobless for more than two years even after the completion of her MA puts a question mark on such progress. Finally, only after getting married, her husband’s surname Pawde enables her to become a professor. In Shantabai Kamble’s extract, besides caste discrimination, gender inequality is also reported. The author as a child, instead of being called by her name Naja, was called as ‘Mahar’s daughter’ by her friend’s mother. Domestic violence is reported in the two texts by Pawar and Pawde.

Dalit autobiographies, though evolves around individuals, draws their significance as important social and historical documents. All the texts selected for the study establish this point. The wretched life condition of the Mahars has been reported in the all the texts. We get references to Village duty of Mahars; how in the name of village duty Mahars are made to do inhuman activities: be it Anna in ‘A Corpse in the Well’ or Aji in ‘Son Eat your Fill’. The social prevalence of violence against women among the Dalits finds expression in Pawar’s and Kamble’s texts. Pawar, while recalling his childhood life in the Mahar community of Kaavakhana, refers to domestic violence against wives, “However much a drunken husband belaboured them, they would look after him, even pander to his addiction.” (79). Shantabai Kamble also reports normalization of domestic violence against women in the society. Referring to the so-called reformers from the lower castes, Pawde laments, “When people like these, wearing hypocritical masks, are in responsible positions in society, it does not take even a minute for that society to fall” (105). Historical references to Indian Prime Minister Pandit Nehru, Maharashtra Chief Minister Yeshwantrao Chavan in ‘The Story of my ‘Sanskrit’, to the case fought in support of Mahar *vatan* in ‘A Corpse in the Well’, to the horse drawn trams in Bombay, etc. all serve historical evidence to the life reported in the stories.

Sarah Beth in her article, referring to Omprakash Valmiki and Surajpal Chauhan, wrote about two objectives Dalit autobiographers keep in mind while writing, i) to ‘contest the basis of caste discrimination’ (Beth 3), and ii) “to expose the reality behind the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India”.

Autobiographical extracts selected for the current study stand loyal to the objectives. Regarding the first objective, Kharat as a child, unable comprehend the privilege attached to the upper-caste people, asks his father the following question,

“Anna! The constable will come after his meal. The village chief has also filled his belly. Then why can’t you too eat your bread? Why must you remain hungry?” (Kharat 74).

In ‘The Story of my Sanskrit’, the author describes her birthplace as ghetto which is surrounded by the houses of caste Hindus. She says, “The people in our ghetto referred to them [‘caste Hindus’] as the Splendid People. A small girl like me, seven or eight years old, could not understand why they called them ‘Splendid’. And even as today’s mature female with learning from innumerable books, I still cannot understand it.” (Pawde 99). When she is discriminated by the upper-caste mothers of her friends on the ground of her caste, Pawde expresses her disgust in the following words,

“In fact, it was I who didn’t like to sit next to those girls. For, from my childhood, my sense-organs had been sharp and vigorous. My sense of smell, in particular, had sharpened beyond limit. Though, of course, the nose that conveyed it was broad and misshapen. The sour smell, like buttermilk, that rose from the bodies of those girls! I couldn’t bear the smell of *shikakai* mixed with the smell of their hair. Their bad breath, too, was unbearable. And, in spite of all this, they found me disgusting?” (Pawde 100).

The texts chosen for the study satisfies the second objective as well; they were written in and about Post-independence India when she had already a functioning constitution that abolished ‘caste-based discrimination in government jobs, public schools, transportation, etc’. In such an India, there supposed to be no racism irrespective of towns and villages. After going through the selected texts, however, this notion is severely damaged. The way Kumud Somkuwar failed to get a job unless and until (thanks to her ‘intercaste marriage’) she turns Kumud Pawde is proof enough of the ubiquity of caste discrimination in post-independence India. Kharat’s father is seen being tortured at the hands of the constable (who is supposed to treat everyone equally) only for being a Mahar. Further, in ‘Son, Eat your Fill’, the Mahar community is found living among criminals, gamblers and prostitutes.

Delineation of the pain of experiencing caste discrimination as Dalits constitutes another trait of Dalit autobiographies. Readers from lower-castes could immediately relate to these



experiences since they too are subjected to such discriminations since they are born; this in turn helped in generating a Dalit identity across the marginalised castes. Hence, Dalit autobiographies are political assertions of the Dalit identity. In the selected texts, besides being perpetually discriminated by the upper-caste people for being Mahars, as has already been discussed above in this paper, we see many characters being victimised for their caste identity: Naja stops school halfway, Aji migrated to Bombay from her village, Anna almost dies, and Kumud fails to get a job ‘despite reservations provided by the Government’, and so on.

Dalit autobiographies underline “spatial exclusion as a prominent method through which discrimination is practiced in rural India” (Rawat and Satyanarayana 19). In Pawar’s piece, he observes, “They say that the names of people’s ancestors are preserved in the books of the *pandas* and other Brahmins at places of pilgrimage. But would my ancestors have gone to such pilgrim centres? If they went at all, they would have gone to Khandoba<sup>1</sup> at Jejuri.” (Pawar 84). In ‘Naja Goes to School-and Doesn’t’, Naja is stopped at the entrance of her Brahmin friend Shaku’s house by Shaku’s mother, ‘You daughter of a Mahar; stay there. You’ll trample the *rangolis*.’ (Kamble 92). Kumud Pawde refers to her birthplace as ghetto as opposed to the places resided by ‘splendid people’.

### **Conclusion:**

The analysis and the discussion based on the selected extracts from four Dalit autobiographies enable us to explore that Dalit autobiographies distinguish themselves from traditional autobiographies. In the latter, the focus is on the experience, personality and feeling of an individual, whereas in Dalit autobiographies, it is the collective and communal identity of the community that provides significance to the individual. Therefore, the collective and communal Dalit identity is highlighted in Dalit autobiographies. In pre-independence India, the writings by the Dalit writers were rejected by the upper-caste writers in the pursuit of building a homogenous national identity (Twaha 111). As a reaction against the ‘complacent, self-congratulatory tradition of Indian writings’, Dalit writers took to writing autobiographies. In order to assert the strong existence of the Dalits, Dalit writers started writing autobiographies and they made communicating the authenticity of their experiences through their writing their prime objective. As such, Dalit autobiographies

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<sup>1</sup> Khandoba is a deity visited by all communities irrespective of caste, including Muslims.



become a vehicle of passing on the experiences of pain and suffering that every Dalit has to undergo in their day-to-day social intercourse with the upper caste population. All the texts reported in the article, tell of the wretched life of Dalits which, in effect, is successful in creating a collective identity among the lower caste people. Apart from questioning the basis of caste discrimination, Dalit autobiographies are found exposing the continued practice of such discrimination in independent India.

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