

Life Writing As Resistance: Caste, Selfhood, and Identity Construction in Manoranjan Byapari's Autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life*

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Abstract

Dalit autobiographies are powerful literary representations of caste oppression, social exclusion and resistance in India. *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2018) which is a translated version of the Bengali original *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2012) by Manoranjan Byapari, is remarkable in Bengali Dalit literature for converting a single life narrative into a collective history of the oppressed. Byapari's autobiography describes his life as a Namashudra Dalit refugee in poverty, caste oppression, bonded labour, imprisonment and social marginalisation after the Partition of India. Byapari uses these experiences to expose the structural violence of Indian society. The paper argues that autobiography is a mode of resistance that reclaims agency, reconstructs Dalit selfhood and resists upper-caste historiography and Bengali mainstream literature. Dalit studies, subaltern studies, autobiographical theory and postcolonial criticism use memory, language and narrative as political tools to resist the caste hierarchy. The study also points out how Byapari's autobiography constructs Dalit consciousness on dignity, labour and social justice. Thus, Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* illustrates how autobiography can write history from below and claim Dalit identity.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography, caste, selfhood, identity, resistance, and Dalit consciousness.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, autobiography is an own written story of a life. Dalit autobiography is more than politics. Dalit autobiographies challenge the historical narratives and the omission of caste violence in mainstream literature. Dalit writing is not about beauty, but about dignity, recognition and justice. Manoranjan Byapari is a unique Dalit writer in Bengal because of his life story of caste discrimination, refugee displacement, labour exploitation and social exclusion. East Bengali Namashudra Byapari had to migrate after Partition. He was a child of poverty,

homelessness, hunger, and humiliation. Before becoming a renowned writer, Byapari was a rickshaw-puller, a manual labourer, and a prisoner. *Interrogating My Chandal Life* is not a memoir. This archive captures the experiences of Dalit refugees, who are often under-represented in Partition histories. Dalits, as Byapari shows, were still untouchable, economically exploited and discriminated against even after independence, contrary to elite narratives that celebrate nationalism and independence. His autobiography shows constitutional equality versus social reality. The author recuperates the caste-based slur “Chandal” as a symbol of resistance. Byapari ridicules the building up of the caste society of the past, and he exploits it for political expression. He turns Dalit shame into a celebration of resistance against systemic oppression. Byapari’s autobiography resists the official histories by preserving forgotten events. He rejects romanticism, sentimentality and upper-caste morality in his autobiography. The themes of Dalit hunger, manual labour, displacement, violence, and dignity are central to the narrative. The narration aims to contest the privileged voices of history and to highlight the experiences of marginalised groups. The paper argues autobiographical resistance: *Interrogating My Chandal Life* shapes Dalit identity. Autobiographies convert personal memory into collective history, redraw selfhood beyond caste stereotypes and make writing a political practice confronting Brahmanical power. Byapari shows how autobiography and social critique confront history’s wrongs in literature.

2. Life-Writing as Resistance

In *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, writing is the basic act of resistance. For Byapari, autobiography is not an attempt at literary fame but a way of reclaiming humanity from a social order that systematically denied his dignity. Each chapter is a condemnation of the violence of the caste society. Unlike typical autobiographies that celebrate individual accomplishment, Byapari eschews heroic self-representation. Instead, he focuses on hunger, humiliation, refugee camps, physical labour, imprisonment and poverty. Such experiences expose the structural mechanisms by which caste reproduces inequality from generation to generation. In the narrative, silence becomes speech. Dalits were denied access to the literary institutions and literacy for centuries. By writing his life, Byapari negates this exclusion to assert that Dalits possess the right to tell their stories without the mediation of upper-caste intellectuals. Memory is political in the autobiography throughout. The individual memories turn into collective memories that symbolise the lives of innumerable Dalit refugees whose lives are not documented. Hence, the autobiography serves as an archive of history, preserving a record of experiences that have been erased from official histories. The language of the autobiography is also one of resistance. Byapari does not follow the shine of elite literature. His language is simple, within the reach of all, and rooted in daily life. This stylistic choice is also democratic in that it challenges dominant aesthetic standards that privilege upper-caste linguistic practices. Writing thus becomes an act of survival, of historical recuperation, political assertion and identity formation. The autobiography shows how literature can be used as a weapon against institutional discrimination and for the recognition of Dalit humanity by revealing hidden histories.

3. Caste and Oppression

The omnipresence of caste is the most pervasive theme of *Interrogating My Chandal Life*. Byapari shows that caste is not just a question of ritual discrimination but affects every aspect of social life – education, jobs, housing, movement and relationships between people. Childhood memories tell us that the curse of caste discrimination starts early in life, replete with psychological humiliation apart from material deprivation. Dalit children learn to feel socially excluded before they can understand the ideological roots of exclusion. In schools, villages and workplaces, caste identity is constantly reaffirmed. Partition only adds to this marginalisation. Independence meant equality, but Dalit refugees were displaced and did not know of their social status. They remained economically poor, politically invisible, and culturally marginalised. Byapari demonstrates how refugeehood and caste intersect to create multiple forms of exclusion. The autobiography is about labour, because manual labour sustains survival and, at the same time, reinforces the caste hierarchy. Economic opportunity is determined through the pulling of rickshaws, farm labour, domestic work and prison work. But Byapari rejects the stigma attached to labour and shows work as a source of dignity and resilience. His autobiography also shows the hollowness of democratic institutions. Constitutional equality may guarantee equality of rights, but social practices continue to reproduce untouchability and discrimination. This contradiction is the stubbornness of the caste system despite legal reform. More importantly, Byapari does not portray Dalits as victims. His story is one of resilience, of solidarity, of political awakening, of political education as resistance. The autobiography turns experiences of oppression into the foundation of collective empowerment and identity formation.

4. Selfhood and Identity Construction

Interrogating My Chandal Life by Manoranjan Byapari is about caste oppression, displacement, labour and resistance shaping the self. The autobiography conceptualises Dalit identity as social exclusion and resistance. He writes about his life as a Dalit refugee to offer voice to generations of minority communities whose histories have been erased by Bengali and Indian literature. He writes about his life as a Dalit refugee to offer voice to generations of minority communities whose histories have been erased by Bengali and Indian literature. Namashudra status means respect, education and economic opportunity. Caste discrimination was manifested through a childhood of untouchability, hunger and humiliation. But Byapari refuses Dalit inferiority. The autobiography shows how suffering is the catalyst for political and intellectual growth. Identity refuses social control. The title of the autobiography debases untouchables to inspire dignity and resistance. Byapari discloses his caste for inclusion. Redemption is about Dalit shame and caste ideology. The autobiography says ‘Chandal’ is about resilience, survival and historical continuity and not impurity. The protagonist is Byapari, who has been a refugee, a farmer, a rickshaw-puller, a domestic servant and a prisoner. His thoughts on economy, society and dignity are informed by his experience. His sense of economy, society and dignity was based on life. Popular culture disdains manual labour. This hierarchy is based on honest, permanent, and physical labour. His experiences are a textbook example of how a caste society oppresses Dalits. The Caste exploits the worker. Dalits need it. Status is not identity; productive work is identity. Literacy and education can transform Byapari. Unable to go to school because of poverty and displacement, the author turns to literature to speak for herself and to discover her freedom. Reading and writing help him rethink his life and break Dalit stereotypes. Byapari speaks about

Dalits being absent in intellectual and literary spaces. His suffering is normalised, just like that of so many Dalits who have been erased from history. The politically conscious refugee child writes about literature as a form of oppression. Transformation is not a personal victory but a struggle of identity, of memory, of resistance. Finally, *Interrogating My Chandal Life* politicises Dalit identity. Byapari's memoir challenges the upper-caste representation and claims the history of Dalits. The autobiography encompasses themes of writing, struggle, and collective memory. Byapari's autobiography both affirms and challenges the dominant discourses that empower Dalits.

5. Conclusion

Interrogating My Chandal Life uses autobiography to resist social and political oppression in Bengali Dalit literature. Manoranjan Byapari narrates the story of his life and proclaims Dalit agency against caste, refugeehood and marginalisation. Autobiographies are protests against the historical erasure of marginal voices. Byapari writes about caste discrimination, forced migration, manual labour and social exclusion from the perspective of the marginalised. This study argues that the author's identity is one of resistance rather than victimhood. He has a political consciousness of oppression. Examine the role of caste, class and refugee identity in Dalits' post-partition India. Autobiographies build an alternative history without aestheticism in plain language, fragmentary memories, and truth. Autobiographical writing can uncover histories, re-construct subaltern identities, and subvert caste ideology, as in *Interrogating My Chandal Life*. Byapari turns the hated "Chandal" into a symbol of strength and honour. This is the power of literature to alter society. In his autobiography, the author gives voice to Dalits' hopes for justice, equality and recognition. His autobiography conveys the aspirations of Dalits for justice, equality and recognition. This text has played a significant role in Dalit discourse and exemplifies the power of personal stories on identity, memory and democratic citizenship.

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