

Dalit Selfhood: Deciphering the Social Discourse in Dalit Autobiographies

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Abstract

Literary texts always attempt to mirror and decipher the contemporary social codes and thereby literature is always used as a tool to understand the prevalent social miles. Dalit literature, likewise, raises voices of dissent against the hegemony of upper caste and yield space for the socially marginalized. Many Dalit writers have written their autobiographies outpouring the unrest which they suffer socially, politically and economically. Though written in literary structures, these texts can be discovered as social treaties formulated purposefully to fill the lawna of mainstream social - historiography. The present paper is a humble attempt to depict that literary autobiographies penned down by the Dalits not only paint the Dalit world faithfully and wholly but they are the authentic documents to understand the concepts of caste, class, oppression and religious apartheid in Indian social context as well. In order to support the issue, many Dalit personal narratives have been used as primary sources. Attempts have been made to understand the relationship between the individual self and the self of the Dalit community.

Key Words: *The Dalit, Autobiographies, Self, Upper Caste Hegemony, Apartheid*

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Introduction

Dalit communities, in various historical phases have produced literary works such as poems, stories, fiction pieces and autobiographies representing the caste oppress⁹, social atrocities and untouchability prevalent in the socio – system of India. Since medieval period, many bards and poets belonging to the so – called “law” sections of the society authored and sang ‘dohas’ and ‘abhangas’ in the local dialects of ordi⁶men and women to challenge the canonized varna system and Brahmanicalliterature. Amongst these poets and singers have been Namdev, ChokamelaKabir, Ravidas, Sena, Tukaram and so on. Many such writers composed their works during Mogoul and colonial periods also. Despite these many writers, it is only as late as 1960s and 1970s that Dalit Literature is considered as an independent genre in India. This literature is a byproduct of the cultural conflicts. In order to receive- create a world based on social and class equality, the Dalits have used the medium of literature as a weapon. They have tried to write in alternate paradigms and in Non- standard dialects too to reject the superficial authorised versions of literary assertions.

Dalit creative writers, opposite to non – Dalit ones attempt to write about their lived experiences. Their attempt is to use the vehicle off literature initially to express the centuries old struggle which they have endured and then assert their rightful claim as writers no less than the non – Dalit ones. Thus a Dalit writer is persistently engaged in the task of deconstructing and reconstructing the social and cultural system and subsystems. The principal premise is that the mainstream literature of India is not a mirror to society as it does not represent two third of the Indian population and is exclusivist in nature. Dalit writers add that since the social, economic, politically and literary melieu in India is dominated by the upper – caste communities, the creative representations in form of artifacts and literary pieces of such melieu can not be walled true representation. Rather upper - class authorities have used art to emancipate and exercise their own coercive powers. The dominant section have used all means of representations such as history, social documen⁹and literature to suit their vested interests and to perpetuate their control over the down trodden. “All knowledge that is about the natural world is historical knowledge and therefore rests upon judgement and interpretation. This is not to say that fact or data are non existent, but the facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation for interpretation depend very much on who the interpreter is , who he or she is addressing , what his or her purpose is, at what historical moment, the interpretation takes place.” (Said, 27)

Dalit writers, through their literary discourse have challenged the literary and Cultural traditions since centuries. But it is only after political independence of the country from the imperial power that many Dalit writers have worked like social activists and have involved themselves to empower the otherwise atunated sections. More and more Dalit writings are coming out every day. In post colonial India, Dalit Literature can be taken as a “strong rejoinder to Sanskritisation - which has been viewed as the principal means of assimilation of the Dalit community into a Nation The Dalit writer choose to narrate his self on his own terms, out of the fragments of his leftover existence.” (Ramakrishnan, 73)

The vitality of the Dalit Literature is two fold. As a social document, this literature is an acumen to spotlight what the Dalit has suffered. It brings forth that ‘caste’ as a taxonomic identity is very different from that of a lived experience. The next major function successfully performed by this body of literature is that it dares to present new literary tropes, patterns and tradition which is altogether different from the ones in established kind. ArjunaDangle, a famous Dalit writer, states, “..... A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thought and principles and it is these thoughts or principles, which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base that a tradition gets is subject to these existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always tries to establish a convenient tradition that does not damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tied to this tradition. In fact, all over traditions so far, whether religions, social, literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful.” (Dangle,83). Therefore whether the Dalit wrote, they coined themselves and in the process invented their own literary traditions and rejected what is called the canonized literary conventions. What started as mere outpouring of pain and humiliations transcended gradually as unchallenged art works of great aesthetics.

The most popular genre of Dalit Aesthetics is the autobiography. Though the Dalit authors have come out with creative works belonging to many genres yet the Dalit autobiographies expose the sham of social, historical and literary discourses in the most scathing manner. They reveal how all the damages created by the upper caste people suit their own parochial interests. Both the Dalit male writers like Om Prakash Valmiki, Laxman Mane, LakshmanGaikwad, SharankumarLimbale and female ones like Sumatra Bhave, Bama, ShantibaiKambl and Urmila Pawar are powerful voices voicing the collective suffering and humiliations of marginalized communities in Indian nation. “They provide an alternative epistemology and a cosmology that can critique the self sufficiency of world views articulated by mainstream literary works.” (Ramakrishnan, 63). One can make use of these literary

documents as social treaties in order to understand and evaluate the unjust social, economic and political institutionalized set – up. The narratives are not the bio-briefs of one person or writer, the discourses of Dalit autobiography elevate from the Private self to the self-assertion of the Dalit as an identity. All lived experiences may it be hunger, violence, insults, degradation, exploitation or imprisonment do not relate to one's personal self. They reveal the intensity of pain and suffering borne by the Dalit as a larger community.

Most of the Dalit authors, when begin their writing, paint the cruel living conditions against which they are their community members are forced to live and they draw attention to the scarcities that they suffer as they have been devoid of their fundamental needs and due to hunger, poverty and lack of resources, they live the life of non-humans. For instance, Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography '*Joothan*' describes the same kind of subliminal existence "on the one side, there was the garbage, on the other, our hunger. The junk was sold by weight. I felt our hunger should be weight instead of the junk, then we would know how much it weighed. Perhaps we should weigh not only our hunger and stomachs but ourselves too. (Valmiki, 74). Such state of a life full of hunger and poverty is depicted by Sharankumar Limbale also in his personal narrative *Abbarmashi*. He writes,

"Bhabri is as large as a man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the Sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as Bhabri, and only as big as hunger. A single stomach is like the whole earth There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting? If there was no hunger what would have happened to sin and virtues, heaven and hell, this creation of God? (Limbale, 50).

Such representation of the struggle for survival is not at all conceivable in any mainstream discourse. It shows how 'caste' is integrated to the essential being of a human being. Such shattering and pathetic voices of woe can not be made by ones who have not experienced these troubles. Being born in a low castes, cite the Dalit authors, imply that one must know how to, I've with hunger and poverty on the one hand and caste based humiliation on the other. Bama, a popular female Tamil Dalit writer observes

"In this society if you are born into a low castes, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste differences does not disappear. Whatever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy (Bama, 23).

The Dalits suffered apart from poverty and hunger, at the hands of oppression at the hands of upper caste people who take advantage of their economic and social conditions and attempt to treat them unjustly in every sphere of life. Balwant Singh's *An Untouchables* in the ISSUE vividly speaks about this imperial tendency lying within Indian social order.

“The Hindu society is a society of defeat and degeneration and it can inspire no confidence in the mind of a sensible human being. Hindu society is a society of distinctions which have sought to be imposed upon the so called untouchables. It is a society of meanness and a storehouse of degradation. The inhumane treatment given to the so called untouchables by the Hindu fanatics is much worse than given to any coloured African by the Government of South Africa. Every conservative Hindu house is a South Africa for the poor untouchable who is still being crushed under the heels of Hindu imperialism (Singh, 201).

The untouchables, the Harijans, the Dalits, the Schedule castes – all these common nouns have been given by the mainstream authorities to a majority of citizens of India. These phrases taxonomically refers to a group without referring to the pain which these community members give to the referred human beings. Caste as an taxonomical entity is entirely different from the caste as a living experience. Hindu caste order with its malpractice and ugly expositions marginalize a major group and this group suffers cruelty and dehumanization endlessly. They are denied of their human rights. Dalit literary writers, in this way, emerge as social reformers who by their writings assert the rightful Selfhood of the Dalits. These writers fight against the social tyranny as a reformer. Laxman Mane's *Upa* asks several such issues.

“I Will they lead a life as partners of a new culture? In the areas of power, wealth, prestige, philosophic thinking, arts, will this stream of nomadic tribal so merge into the body of a larger human culture after effacing the stigma of *Upa* from their forehead? Will their humanness be respected? Will their basic necessities such as food, clothes and shelter be looked after? Will the society accept them as human?” (Mane, 12-13).

Instead of the individual self of the Dalit writer, the self of the Dalit community occupies the center stage in Dalit literary discourse. The writers like reformers of socio-political and economic establishments draw the attention of the readers to the caste based apartheid featuring in Indian society since prehistoric times. The sole aim of the authors is to impose confidence and energy in the Dalit class and to make them ready to demand their shares in the society. “We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings, we must dare to stand

up for change. We must crack all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal.” (Bama, 25).

E. V. Ramakrishnan states that Dalit autobiographies can be viewed as “A strong rejoinder to Sanskritisation - which has been viewed as the principal means of assimilation of the Dalit community into the nation..... the discourse of Dalit autobiography resists the elitist nature of the nation state by strongly foregrounding the collective experiences of shame, humiliation and violence” (Ramakrishnan, 73). Dalit writers through their literary weapons aim to fight for and strengthen the Dalit social reformist movements so that a total transformation becomes achievable for the marginalized sections. They bring out that there is always a hope in the future. The caste oppression may create hurdles and demoralize the Dalit - self but real achievements are possible with strong will and solidarity. These written accounts encourage the age-old wall of restrictions and silence.

Dalit autobiographies, thus, is a forthright documentation of a community's self. These writings are fiercely condemn the established BrahmanicalHinduism which has given no place to Dalits in the social system. By presenting the cultural conflict, these texts question the Hegemony of Hindu social, political, economic and literary codes. Being socio – literary charters, one can look at these texts as authentic portrayal of the condition of the Dalits in Indian society. The harsh struggle for existence, the routine zed humiliation, the economic suppression - all depicted in these narratives are true reflections of the Dalit world. Arundhat Roy observes “I do believe that in India, we practice a form of apartheid that goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. And it is as important for colonised people to write their own histories” Dalit activists have become a pan – Indian phenomenon, so it is vital to revisit Dalit personal narratives to analyze and critique the Indian social - system.

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