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Contextualising Dalit women's voices: A study of Urmila Pawar and Bama's autobiographies

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Abstract

Since the beginning of resistance against patriarchy, women's issues have become an integral part of public sphere globally. This has been possible due to their constant struggle to understand their own agency that women have got their due representation. However, the issue of Dalit women's representation has not effectively managed to be heard and losing its sheen as it lacks agency owing to the homogenisation of their experiences with the elite ones. In this regard, an independent and autonomous assertion of Dalit women has emerged possibly through writings, particularly; life narratives. Therefore, various Dalit women writers viz. Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama, Gogu Shyamala and others have started registering their presence in the literary world through autobiographies, memoirs, narratives etc. Dalit women writers audaciously expose the society which has objectified them, abused them and stripped them off their identity and has effectively maintained patronising stance. The present article aims to study and analyse the Dalit representation/ voices through Dalit women autobiographies namely Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* and Bama's *Karukku*.

Keywords: Patriarchy, agency, autonomous assertion, Dalit women writers, patronising stance

Introduction

Dalit life writing is an emerging field wherein a writer as an agent expresses various dimensions of oppression through literary means viz. autobiography, memoirs, testimonies, diaries etc. and explicates exigent circumstances suggesting a dire need of human rights for the socially deprived section of the Indian society.

This paper would investigate the intricacies of Dalit women autobiographies which reflect the cultural underpinnings of the modern society claiming to be liberal, democratic and socialist in approach. These writings deconstruct and expose the casteist society shamming to evade the tyranny and cruelties suffered by the Dalit/socially deprived communities. It has fervently happened more so in the postcolonial India. The postcolonial Dalit accounts have outrightly rejected and attacked the glass ceiling and claimed a space of their own. However, one early post-independent autobiography namely, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* by Hazari still had to face the privation of audacity. Hazari is a pseudonym which probably was used to save the real identity. Raj Kumar asserts

Hazari in his autobiography does not spell out neither his original name, the name of his parents and immediate family relations, nor unconventional because almost all the non-Dalit auto-biographers generally start with their genealogy emphasizing their caste or communities. By doing so, they take pride in their birth. (Kumar, 159).

Thereafter, the audacity became more visible, assertive and translucent with every endeavour made towards Dalit life narratives by other Dalit writers like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, the narrated autobiography of Muli, Laxman Mane's *Upara*, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, Bama's *Karukku*, Urmila Pawar's *the Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, Shantabai Kamble's *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and so on. The Dalit autobiographies particularly emphasize on the importance of education to register presence in elite spaces like government offices, bureaucracy and to lead a dignified life.

Interestingly, this could also be seen as a response to adversaries of untouchables to which they also became conscious in the light of colonial rule in India. Kumar writes in this regard that

when the nationalist movement of India was attempting to throw away colonial shackles to achieve freedom, the Dalits during the same time were interrogating the norms, conventions, attitudes and practices of the Hindu society they were part of. (Kumar, 157)

It seems logical then how the struggle for identity and mobilisation continued in the postcolonial phase. However, this remained confined to Dalit men. Their womenfolk still had to wait till late 20th century in order to narrate their life experiences. The first woman Dalit autobiography namely *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* by Shantabai Kamble in Marathi came out in 1990. Dalit literature had registered advancements by leaps and bounds by then wherein Ambedkarite ideas were imbibed by the Dalit writers. A crucial role was also played by the Dalit Panthers movement during 1970s which radicalised the Dalit masses and aesthetics. Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Keshav Meshram, Arun Kolatkar and others pioneered the cause. These developments had a far-reaching impact on the consciousness of the subaltern classes and encouraged the people to write autobiographies. Till the early 1980s, several works by Dalit men namely autobiographies, short story and poetry were published. However, one most important issue that the Dalit Panthers' writings and tradition missed out was of the distinct voice of Dalit women. A Dalit woman primarily remained absent or was encased in the role of either a 'mother' or a 'victimized and sexually exploited being'. Gopal Guru argues in one of his essays namely, "Dalit Women Talk Differently" that Dalit women are in a dire need to talk differently about their experiences. The mainstream feminists have not acknowledged their (Dalit women's) concerns as they considered Dalit women as part of a homogeneous group. Gopal Guru mentions

external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenising the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the Dalits). (pg. 2548)

In that sense, writing on 'self' becomes the most feasible mode of communicating with the masses. The veracity factor makes the narrative authentic. Sharankumar Limbale in his book, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* writes in the context of Dalit literature and the question of preference that

Dalit writers give priority to problems of the society over entertainment of readers. They express their feelings in their literature. They do not create literature with urbane readers in mind. Their effort is to transport the aesthete-readers to their own level of experience. (Limbale, 118)

The reader has to be participatory then and cannot afford to remain passive. In this regard, credibility of the narrative becomes crucial since it is only after knowing the cultural context, hardships, access to material and other challenges that a reader would be able to understand and appreciate the narrative. Thus, he is obliged to look for a different level of orientation.

Dalit women's autobiographies infer instances of maltreatment of Dalit communities through their own accounts. It turns out to be an effective method to critique not only the casteist stance of the elite feminists as an extended form of patriarchy, but also coping with gender issues within their own communities.

In the view of above mentioned issues, two Dalit women autobiographies, viz. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008) and Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku* (2012) exhibit the difficulties of and speak for the marginalised communities as their own.

Urmila Pawar is a renowned Dalit feminist writer, an activist and a prominent voice in Dalit and feminist struggles and; Bama, a Tamil Dalit Feminist is known for her autobiography *Karukku*, highlighting the caste-based discrimination experienced by Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu.

The weave of my life

Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan*, an expression from the local dialect spoken in the villages of Maharashtra forms the background of her life. Originally written in Marathi as *Aaydan* and later translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Maya Pandit in 2008 is a recent autobiography by Urmila Pawar. "Weaving" has various metaphorical significance. Weaving of cane baskets was an important occupation of the women of Konkan region in Maharashtra from where the author hails (Naikar, 3). As the author asserts,

My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of suffering, and agony that links us. (Pawar, 10).

Other than being an impetus for writing for Pawar, the very act of weaving not only spells out their economic status but also the gender-specificity of the occupation within the community. Poverty fundamentally bore many problems for Pawar's community. For instance, she writes

Dalits had the custom of all people eating from one plate, but that was usually because there were few plates in the homes. (Pawar, 17)

The custom was directly linked with the material aspects of their lives. With lesser money, they had limited access to the resources ultimately defining their worldview. Similarly, begging from the upper castes during festivals and eating leftovers and even gobbling on meat of dead animals were part of her community's daily struggle for survival. The story starts with a description of a village where a group of Dalit women start their day with travelling to the town in order to sell firewood and buy salt and fish on their journey home. These women would carry heavy weights on their heads with bundles of wood, grass stacks, ripe mangoes etc. (Rege, 361). They would travel early in the morning, leaving their kids alone and hungry at home. The situation of Dalit women in the village of Ratnagiri brings to the fore the patriarchal culture of the village and disclosing the caste and gender based division of labour leaving traumatizing experiences for the women of her community. Pawar's autobiography can be seen as an intelligent and authentic narrative in which the author weaves the memories of her

childhood, her classmates, her community, her various family members and her husband's family. She brings forth the narrative by weaving all the incidents that occurred in her life and her community. This divulges the daily struggles of Dalits as well as the ways in which dominant castes subdue them. The narrative of *The Weave of My Life* keeps on flashing back and forth between the village and the city. The author recalls her experiences of hunger, poverty, caste discrimination and domestic violence. These harsh experiences are mixed with images of Dalit tradition and culture, wherein disease is warded off with superstition and children's hunger is suppressed with stories (Sen, 42). Pawar negotiates with the trauma of living on the margins by pouring her heart out in a truly incredible narrative.

Acquiring education has always been a distant reality for the Dalits and therefore, one of the chief themes of Dalit literature. The upper castes/ Brahmins hindered the access of the untouchables to public institutions. The caste-driven society believed in maintaining the status quo by limiting the existence of Dalits to serving and performing menial chores. Similar was the case in the village of the author. There was hardly any school for the children of the Mahar community. The upper castes had opened up schools in their houses where the Mahar children were denied entry. Also, wherever the children of the Mahar caste had limited access to the schools, they were humiliated by their school teachers who would partake in maintaining social distance. The author had desired to get educated and was supported by her family. She emphasized that it was because of the support from her family that she got the strength to stand up for her community. Pawar's aspirations were high, despite the difficulties she faced in her life her spirit for education never died. She successfully completed her higher education even after her marriage. Although her husband did not like the idea of her education, he wanted her to concentrate and help her family instead. This reveals the attitude and mindset of her husband. But she did not pay attention and continued to progress in life. In fact, it was because of her education that she joined elite feminist organizations and also got the opportunity of a government job.

In order to escape the caste oppression in her village, she moved to Mumbai with her husband. But there was no end to caste-based discrimination in the city also. She remembers that it was difficult to find an accommodation in the town. They were subjected to indecent abuses and discrimination from the upper-caste. Pawar wanted to do something to uplift the women of her community and she indulged freely in public speeches and events to arouse the minds of others. It was through this participation that Urmila Pawar understood that there was a need for Dalit men and women to come together for the emancipation of the society.

Karukku

Bama is a Tamil Dalit feminist known for her autobiography *Karukku*. It first appeared in Tamil in 1992 and later was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2012. In the Introduction of *Karukku*, Holmstrom goes on to say that it is the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil (xv). She further asserts:

It is also in many ways an unusual autobiography. It grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author's life which drives to make sense of her life as woman, a Christian and a Dalit. (*Karukku*, xvi)

In this sense, the narrative looks like a quest for self-discovery made by the author wherein her journey unfurls the problematics of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and community. In other words, *Karukku* can be seen as a critique of the society and state by exposing the educational system, the church, the bureaucracy and also throws light on the complexities of caste in post-independent India (Nayar, 84). Further, the narrative of the novel has not been arranged in a simple, linear or chronological order and the novel does not follow any conventional style of writing. Holmstrom asserts that Bama's style of writing overturns the style and aesthetics of upper caste Tamils.

Bama breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading. (Bama, xix)

By creating her own style, Bama breaks the mainstream technique of writing. She does not surrender to the conventional manner of writing and transposes the reader to a different world of experience. Also, Bama believes that her experiences and hardships later proved to be the raw material for her work; seeds which germinated in the form of her writing which in certain sense is also associated with *Karukku* where *karu* means seed.

Bama's autobiography is not just the narrative of the self, rather it is a documented history of the women of her community. Her life history is built on her experiences as a Dalit Christian hailing from the Paraya community. The autobiography highlights how conversion failed to save the people of her community from caste discrimination. While Bama was still in school, she came to know the truth of her identity. People of her community talked about untouchability but she could not understand the real meaning of the term. At school, she was asked to shift her seat away from 'upper caste' Christians when they came to know of her identity. While discussing the 'self', Bama also focuses on the exploitation of the people of her community. The upper caste Naickers dominated the people of Parayas on the field and they were made to work endlessly and still remained poor. Not only on the fields, but the Naickers were the ruling class and dominated almost all the spheres of the society.

Bama was worried about the state of affairs within the Church. She said that churches were managed by the upper caste priests and nuns. Untouchability was exercised in the house of the God as well. There was no sympathy towards the Dalit Christians and strict norms were practised against them within the church. People of the lower classes/castes were threatened in the name of religion.

Later on when she grew up, she decided to become a nun and enter the convent. But joining the convent made her witness the bitter realities of life. She realised that the convent did not understand the meaning of poverty and was indifferent to the cause of the Dalits.

And this convent too was not without its caste divisions. From the very first moment I understood the state of affairs...And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings. (Bama, 25)

Thus, she decided to leave the nunnery and her job and joined back her people. At this point of her life when she rejected everything, she decided to write about her life and her community.

The journey of Bama in *Karukku* can be viewed in the light of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Song of Experience*. In the beginning, we see Bama as a young girl studying in the third standard, but towards the end we find her a grown up woman. It is through this journey of her life as a Dalit Christian that she realised that even Christianity could not salvage her community. The idea of conversion failed for Dalits, a mere change of religion did not help Dalits in escaping the harsh realities of caste system. Bama asserts that the idea of a dignified life through conversion seemed a distant dream for Dalit Christians as the harassment, the exploitation continued in the name of religion.

Conclusion

Autobiographies occupy an important space in terms of representing Dalit experiences. They not only reconstruct the thoughts and experiences of Dalit writers but also give them the opportunity to reflect back at life and take courage. Dalit feminist autobiography brings forth a new understanding about the intersection of caste and gender in the Indian society. The Indian caste system since ages has suppressed, humiliated and exploited Dalits. While Dalit men suffer at the hands of upper castes, Dalit women bear the triple burden of caste, class and gender. Through autobiographical writing, these women have striven hard to register their presence in the literary world. Dalit women autobiographies can be viewed as "collective consciousness of a community" wherein the communitarian idea of "we" is emphasized, with which they continue to identify themselves. Apart from inscribing their pain and anguish, they also appeal to understand the socially deprived position of Dalit women. The language and writing style of both the authors does not call for empathy, rather it tends to move ahead of the injustices. Their efforts can be praised for breaking the traditional style of writing and redefining life writing. Thus, autobiographical writing has given a channel to the Dalit women where they can register and appeal for new hopes and ambitions. One needs to understand these two autobiographies from a Pan-Indian perspective. They expose the harsh realities of the society and therefore, should not be treated categorically as merely some works lacking in aesthetics and entertainment value but rather they should be venerated for giving the society a chance to overcome its shortcomings.

Both the autobiographies represent wide array of thought process from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, unlike Pawar, Bama was not a born Hindu and did not convert to Buddhism. She was born into a Dalit Christian family where she experienced caste discrimination within the Church while Pawar was a victim of the Brahmanical regulations which made her reject Hinduism and embrace Buddhism. Both Pawar and Bama have made an attempt towards a social change they have underlined and questioned the social structures and institutions which are responsible for the subjugation of Dalits.

Dalit feminists have been able to carve a niche for their unique expression and register their voices through their writings. They have tremendous potential to transform the world of the oppressed people. Both the writers have

emphasized on education, they feel that it is because of the lack of education that these communities continue to suffer. The access to school, college and jobs was also limited in the lives of both the authors. It is only through their willingness that Pawar and Bama could educate themselves, which made them resist caste-based injustices. Pawar was enthusiastic about being invited as a speaker for meetings and programmes but she was made to wait outside the venue. Bama also rejected everything when she was exploited at her workplace. She claims that it was because of education that she questioned oppression. Further, she wants the people of her community to stand against all injustices and demand an egalitarian society. Their autobiographies are emblematic of the inherent grit and determination Dalit women writers have shown in baring their souls, revealing the trauma of living a peripheral existence and demanding equity as a fundamental human right.

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