

Voicing the Unheard: A Comparative Study of Selected Autobiographies and Transcribed Texts by Dalit Women



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Abstract

Indian society is based on the unique phenomenon of caste system. Caste inequality and hierarchical thinking affects the life of the Indian. Mostly it affects those who are called untouchables or dalits. Dalits are considered the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. Dalit women face the worst atrocities as both: being women and being dalit. In spite of constitutional guarantee of civil rights dalit women continue to be victim of social discrimination in India. News papers are full of stories showing that dalits who stood for election were beaten and dalit women were raped and ill-treated. Although dalit women are given some rights for their defense, yet they have no security of life despite all the legal protection. Though a lot of literature has been written so far about the condition of dalit women yet their lives have not been evaluated through the medium of autobiographies and they are shown on the pity of a man. Hence this article is an attempt to show the lives of established dalit women through the lens of autobiographies and compares them to the dalit women of villages from Bundi district who struggled to remove the caste discrimination and violence against their families and achieved their rights.

Keywords: Dalit, Autobiographies, Established Women, Village Women, Transcribed Texts and Violence Etc.

Introduction

India is a country of several cultures. Like a rainbow the Indian culture has its colors and its attraction, yet the people of India are affected by the deep rooted caste system. In spite of social changes brought about by education and technology the age old conservative mindset regarding caste and social hierarchy still remain unchanged. The exploitation and ill-treatment of the lower castes or untouchables by the elite upper classes has led to protest in many forms. Dalit literature is one such form of protest: - it is an expression of dissent and protest of the dalits against this behaviour of the upper classes. It is also a collective voice that echoes the rising awareness and the struggle for their rights and dignity.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this paper is (1) to introduce the basic notions of dalit literature and culture. Examine and have a basic understanding of the dalit cultural world amidst conflicts and to show glimpses of their system of belief and (2) to highlight the difference between autobiographies of mainstream dalit women writers and of unknown dalit women belonging to villages who in spite of their illiteracy struggle to empower their families and communities.

Review of Literature

Dalit literature is a special and challenging field in Indian literature. To write about the dalit women's pain is not everybody's cup of tea. Shantabai Kamble's *Maya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (1986)¹ is considered the first autobiographical narrative by a dalit woman writer. Though Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916)² and Mahatma Gandhi in a weekly journal *The Harijan* (1932)³ raised the voice against this yet even today the dalits are not free from the chains of social stigma. Om Prakash Valmiki in his '*Dalit Sahitya ka Saundryasastra* (2003) calls dalits as "suppressed and crushed human beings."⁴ Urmila Pawar in her autobiography *Aayadan* (2003) translated by Maya Pandit as *The Wave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* (2009) exposes the grief of the dalit women.⁵ Baby Kamble in *The Prison We Broke* (2009) a translation of her Marathi autobiography *Jina Amuchu*

(1986) breaks the cell of caste.⁶ In *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (2009) translated in Hindi by Ashok Kumar as *Pita Se Mile Sapne*⁷ shows the American president Barack Obama's painful experiences of his life which he spent in abject poverty. Regional language like Marathi, Tamil, Rajasthani have the credit of a major portion of Dalits literary output. Gradually the popular and representative works have found more readers through translation in English as well as other prominent languages. *Bandit Queen* (1995)⁸ movie directed by Shekhar Kapoor is a real life story of Phoolan Devi, a notorious bandit of the Chambal ravines. Prem Chand Gandhi in a quarterly journal "Anbhe Sancha" (dec.2008) published by Dwarika Prasad Charumitra glorifies the dalit as "a flower of the slum."⁹ Rajender Mohan Bhatnagar, a prominent dalit writer argued in favour of dalit saints to raise the awareness of the dalits in his book *Dalit Sants* (2015).¹⁰

A Comparative Study

Indian caste system is based on four classes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The Shudras are considered the people of the lowest caste. According to *Vedas*: to serve for the three Varnas is the duty of shudras.¹¹

These shudras are regarded as dalits. These people are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalized in every sphere of life. These people are also regarded as untouchable, *Achoots*, *Bhanghis* or *Harijans*. In Indian society some communities are at the lowest rung of social hierarchy like: the dalits, the poor and the women. Dalit literature is given expression through a wide range of literary genres. It is a literature of entire dalit communities as well as an individual. Many writers, thinkers, social reformers and political figures have contributed to the dalit socio-literary movement like Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Govindrao Phule. Exploitation of the weak class by the strong is as old as mankind itself. Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict between two opposite forces like the exploiters and the exploited, the colonizers and the colonized, the powerful and the powerless. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and a great struggle of lower castes against the higher classes commonly known as Savarna or Brahmin. If a woman belongs to the dalit community her suffering is triple fold: being woman, being dalit and being illiterate are the conditions of absolute powerlessness. History could be changed into Her story if we pay them their regards in the making of society. In India many people contributed to raising the level of the dalits. Gautam Buddha and Mahveer Swami are the pioneers among them. In 19th century Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj attempted to reform the condition of the dalit women. Giani Ditt Singh, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and Mahatma Gandhi made great efforts to remove untouchability. Om Prakash Valmiki, Sushila Takbhore, Baby Kamble, Anita Bharti, Kaushlya Baisantri tried to bring about reforms by writing about dalit women. The same thing happened in

other places of the world. Virginia Woolf, Kate Millet and Simone De Beauvoir wrote about the down trodden and exploited people.

Seen from the male gaze, women are considered as an object of pleasure and no more than a laborer at home and work. An ideal conduct and surrender to male authority is expected of them in every stage of their lives. Adjectives like 'doll' 'nightingale' 'Devi' etc are misleading because in reality their lives are tales of unending suffering and exploitation. Many literate women like Shanta Bai, Anita Bharti, Rajat Rani, Meena Kandasmy have given expression to their painful stories, Anita Bharati wrote *Chilkki* (2014) and shared her experiences of suffering.

Dalit women in this context are doubly victimized they are not free from the exploitation from the men of their own caste as well as men of upper castes, however not much work has been done to show this contribution of the dalit women in the development of their communities and families. Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Kaushlya Baisantri, Sushila Takbhore and Anita Bharti — are established women authors whose autobiographies disclose the sufferings of dalit women. These autobiographies break many social barriers. In this paper I chose these four established dalit women writers and compared their autobiographies to the oral narratives of the four dalit women of Bundi district who raised the level of their families, these women played a very important role to raise the awareness as well as economic and social condition of their families and established themselves as an ideal for the other dalit families of the villages. I interviewed the village women of Bundi district (Rajasthan) and collected data from them with the help of a comprehensive questionnaire. I gave titled their stories as *Rampyari a Foundation Stone*, *Gulab who incensed Her Family*, *Biography of Nathi and Jyanabai: Mother of an S.I.* In these stories I came across not only about the sufferings and sorrows of the dalit women but also their lively and rebellious culture, passion for life, truth, enjoyment and about their sacrifice. I orally recorded their experiences and examined their role to make their families and community strong against upper classes. I found many striking similarities among them like poverty, suppression, exploitation and lack of means. These dalit village women were illiterate and lead unknown lives, yet they never yielded against their oppressors. Rampyaribai, Nathibai, Jyanabai and Gulabbai made efforts for the better of their families and they got success. Their conditions were different from the established women writers because untouchability is practiced more in villages and next they were illiterate.

A study of selected autobiographies of women writers and transcribed texts of poor, illiterate dalit women interviewed for this study shows us the shocking picture of the conditions in which they lived. Mary Fatima Rani who writes under the pen name Bama says in her work *Karukku* (1992) that: I do not know when such

atrocities will ever end.¹² Sushila Takbhore, an established dalit women writer faced many atrocities in her life at the hands of her husband. She discloses the sorrow of a dalit woman in her autobiography *Shikanje ka Dard* (2012):

Men always think their wives as slaves and torture them without any proper reason..... Talkbhore ji always wished me to do whatever he liked and used to beat me on a slight mistake.¹³

Rampyari, a dalit village woman interviewed for this study shares her experience as:

It was the month of June, farmers plough their fields before rain and their wives help them a lot. My husband was at his work in the field. He ordered me to bring meal about ten o'clock. I had many works to do before going to field. I finished them and was ready to go to the farm; in the meantime an upper caste lady arrived at our doorstep. She wished that I should go with her for some work. I could not deny as we had borrowed money from her husband. She ordered me to clean the whole yard of her house. When I reached home after cleaning the yard it was two o'clock. I started my journey without taking meal, but as I reached the farm, my husband show his anger and beat me without knowing the reason of getting late. I was helpless.¹⁴

Kaushalya Baisantri makes an attempt to do away with the caste system in *Dohara Abhishap* (2010). People taunt her like this when she goes to school on riding a bicycle:

Fie! fie!, the daughter of a Harijan is going to school on a bicycle. It is shameful.¹⁵

We can find similarity in the pain of Gulabbai, dalit village women, who share her experience about the village teacher:

His remark for the students of the lower class was, "If you will be literate, who will do the work of Hali (labourer)?"¹⁶

Urmila Pawar, a prominent writer of Marathi literature exposes in her autobiography *Aayadan* that: they paid us by throwing money from some distance. Perhaps our touch might pollute them.¹⁷

Jyanabai, another dalit village woman interviewed for this paper discloses her trauma when they were invited for the dinner by the upper caste. She says:

They did not offer us food till the end of the function. Our children wept to see the food items, but we could do nothing. We allowed at the

last and they offered us only *curry* and *Puries*.¹⁸

Dalits are considered the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. In spite of constitutional guarantee of civil rights dalit women continue to be victim of social discrimination in India. This social discrimination is indeed a regular and daily experience for dalit women. Women do not get equal wages at working places. They get physical, sexual and mental exploitation. In villages, untouchability is found much more prominently than the cities therefore their sufferings exceed that of the dalits in the cities. For each slight wrong deed they are beaten. They bear exploitation and still do not disclose their pain due to further humiliation. Dalit women face the worst atrocities as both: being women and being dalit. News papers are full of stories showing that dalits who stood for election were beaten and dalit women were raped and ill-treated. Although dalit women are given some rights for their defense, yet they have no security of life despite all the legal protection. Though a lot of literature has been written so far about the condition of dalit women yet their lives have not been evaluated through the medium of autobiographies. Hence this article would throw light on the lives of dalit women through the lens of autobiographies and compares the established dalit women and village women of Bundi district who struggled to remove the caste discrimination and violence against them and to achieve their rights.

Conclusion

The pain and suffering of dalits are not only personal out pouring of their authors but also inspirations for thousands of dalit people who face abuse, discriminations and neglect because of their caste. Bama in her autobiography *Karukku* writes about the pain of dalit women. It would be better to change her words like this: among dalits it is the village women who suffer the most. The transcribed texts are helpful to view the sorrows and sufferings of the dalits village women in the different parts of the country. Women in India have always been given a subordinate position in society.

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