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CONFRONTING THE POWER STRUCTURE: A STUDY OF DALIT SELF NARRATIVES FROM HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Babasheb Ambedkar in his speech "Annihilation of Caste" says: You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole.

The above quoted lines of Dr. Ambedkar is the main ideology that constructs the notion of Dalit self narratives. Dalit self narratives focus on the violence of everyday life and emphasized the centrality of caste in the creation of social world. Unlike main stream autobiographies, these autobiographies are not the enlightenment of self but on the contrary these autobiographies problematize the relationship between self and society, private and public. Dalit autobiographies as M.S. Pandian argues, " is a shift from the discourse of causality to the discourse of participation.

The experiences narrated in Dalit autobiographies are not conventional. These autobiographies form a different genre which has no roots in tradition or canon. Each self narrative, though an inscription of c is unique in its description. The present paper is an attempt to explore some well-known Dalit autobiographies in the light of their struggle for human right and their inclusion as a human being in Indian Society.

Key words: Dr. Ambedkar's ideology, main stream autobiographies, Caste structure, unending saga of suffering

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Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery degradation ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief. - Sharankumar Limbale

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in his speech "Annihilation of Caste" says:

You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste. You cannot build up a

Nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on that foundation of caste will crack and will never be a whole. (Ambedkar: 33)

The above quoted lines of Dr. Ambedkar are the main ideology that constructs the notion of Dalit self-narratives. Dalit self-narratives focus on the violence of everyday life and emphasized the centrality of caste in the creation of social world. Unlike main stream autobiographies, Dalit

autobiographies are not the enlightenment of self, but these autobiographies problematize the relationship between self and society, private and public. Dalit self-narratives as M.S. Pandian argues, "is a shift from the discourse of causality to the discourse of participation." (Pandian.40)

The experiences narrated in Dalit autobiographies are not conventional. These autobiographies form a different genre which has no roots in tradition or canon. Each self-narrative though an inscription of unending saga of suffering, is unique in its description. Writers like Sharankumar Limbale, Laxman Mane, Om Prakash Valmiki, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama to name a few, narrate their own experience of atrocities, injuries, subjugation of self due to their lower caste. They represent the quest for human identity which has been denied to them due to their subaltern status. A great deal of Dalit literature is available in the genre of life writing. These narratives seek to capture the authentic Dalit experience through the minute chronicling of the smallest detail of daily life which is crude, impure and uncivil. The anguish expressed in the self-narrative is not that of an individual but of the entire out cast society. As Limbale observes:

"Dalit self-narratives are a new and distinct stream of autobiography. It has contributed to Indian literature fresh experiences, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternative vision a new chemistry of suffering and revolt." (Limbale.37)

Dalit self-narratives are not the expression of pain of any one person, nor is it of just one day. It is the anguish of many thousands of people, experienced over thousands of years. Therefore it is expressed collectively. The Dalit self-narratives clearly show how Dalits have been left out of the Nationalist project. They are treated as "others" underprivileged and not as the part of dominant or main culture.

Dalit self-narratives mainly discuss the dehumanizing effects of caste oppression in Hindu Society. Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography "*Akkarmashi*" documents his struggle against poverty, deprivation and caste violence. In his narrative Dalits have to compete with animals

around them in their struggle for survival. After narrating an incident of stealing "*bhakri*" he writes:

"Bhakri is as large as man. It is as vast as sky, and bright like sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is vaster than seven circles of hell. Man is only big as bhakri and only as big as hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. There would have been no wars, if there was no hunger." (Limbale.50)

Laxman Mane's autobiography "*Upra*" addresses the hegemonic structure of the caste system. He recalls how during his childhood he and his family members lived entirely on his begging and sometimes on leftover food thrown to them by the upper caste. He writes:

I took a bowl in my hand and went from house to house begging for food. Standing in the front of each house, I would call out loudly: "Aunty, throw some crumbs of bhakri into my bowl. I beg of you.... Grandma dear, throw the stale left overs into my bowl for pity's sake. Some women put rotten bread, stale curry and things like that into my begging bowl." (Mane.35)

Throughout this autobiography Mane narrates the retaliatory and undignified attitude of the upper caste with his community. Mane's autobiography ends with a question for which he has no answer. He asks:

"Is the life of nomadic tribes really going to change? Will they change from within? Will our society allow them to change? Will they settle in a particular place and will they accept the new way of life? Will they lead a life as partners of a new culture? Will their humanness be respected? Will their basic necessities such as food, clothes, and shelter be looked after? Will the society accept them as humans? (Mane.12-13)

Omprakash Valmiki's "*Joothan*": *A Dalit's life* also narrates the painful experiences of his community. He like Mane revises the issue of his identity. He writes:

"Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings. They insinuate that I have

imprisoned myself in a narrow circle. They say that literary expression should be focused on the universal; a writer ought not to limit himself to a narrow confined terrain of life. This is my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socio-economic situation is being arrogant. Because in their eyes, I am only an SC the one who stands outside the door. (Valmiki.134)

Valmiki believes that as long as caste system continues in India it cannot truly be a Nation- State because caste generally divides people. Arun Prabha Mukherjee the English translator of *Joothan* comments:

“Valmiki does not, cannot claim the authority to address a Nation collectively. On the contrary he aims to point out the exclusive of people like him from imagined community of the Nation.” (Prabha. xxxviii)

Compare to Dalit men, Dalit women are the most underprivileged group left out at the bottom of the hierarchical caste society for centuries. Dalit women are alienated at three levels-due to their caste, class and gender positions. Dalit women writers are small in number. A few of them have written their self-narratives in Indian languages. There are also few self-narratives available in narrated form. Sumitra Bhave's *Pan on Fire* can be termed as a collection of “narrated autobiographies”, where eight Dalit women narrated their life story. As mentioned in the preface to the book the purpose of this collection was, “to find out a woman's image of herself”.(Bhave. xvii) The eight Dalit women who narrated their life accounts were: Sanjeeta, Chhaya, Rukhma, Rukmini, Mangala, Ashoka, Savitri and Leela. They came from diverse backgrounds and were different from each other in age, education, religion, taste, choice, profession etc. however what is common about them is that all of them lived in various slums of Mumbai and represent a common slum culture. Frances Maria emphasis that, how each one of us can learn from the first hand experiences of these Dalit Women. She writes:

“Thousands of terms papers and books may be written on Dalit women but the writer of the most scholarly papers may be far from

understanding what the life and problems of Dalit are to her. The best way of knowing what a life of Dalit woman is to experience it, to be a Dalit woman; second best is to step into their *chappals* or her bare feet, through her oral history in which she expresses herself in such a way that we can feel and identify with her and vicariously and live through her experiences. The appeal here is not only to the mind but also to the heart.” (Bhave. xiv)

Even though their life stories are short, each one of them makes an attempt to construct a self which is unique in its own way.

Bama's “*Karukku*” throws light on the most agonizing and hapless life of the Dalits. It is a childhood memoir by Bama, which voices the joys and sorrows of her people oppressed by higher caste in India. It is indicative of the unfortunate situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self-awareness and quest for achieving loftier and nobler things in the lives of Dalit women. The journey is tedious, the encounter is painful and the experiences reveal agony. But the process of self-discovery, identification and empowerment has necessarily to be an ordeal. Lakshmi Holmstrom observes:

Karukku was written out of specific experience, the experience of Tamil Dalit Christian woman. Yet it has universality at its core which care all oppressions, disturbs, all complacencies and reaching out all those who have suffered different oppressions. (Laxmi.x)

As a woman and as a Dalit Christian Bama's act of expression can be viewed as a subaltern expression. It came out as a resistance against the ongoing caste and gender oppressions.

The study of Dalit self-narratives are the indicative of the fact that the Dalits still remained “nomad” dwelling outside the boundary of the village. They remained “others”, “outcaste” in the power structure of caste system. Narrativising self for them is a prelude to the creation of humanistic society. Discussing the humanistic perceptive of Dalit literature Limbale rightly observes:

“Dalit literature holds the human being to be its focal point. This literature is a declaration of human freedom. It encourages human liberation, believes in the greatness of human beings and firmly opposes the notions of race, religion and caste. Humanity is the religion of Dalit literature. (Limbale.51)

“I am human, I must receive all the Rights of a Human Being” is the mantra of Dalit literature.

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