

Quest for Identity in Dalit Men's Autobiographies

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Abstract- Dalit autobiographies as a genre is new and different from the other traditional autobiographies that already exist in India and other parts of the world. These autobiographies have taken up the question of dalit identity and explored the emergence of dalit literature and its aesthetics which detail both socially and historically how dalit identity has been formed and how it has been lived out. Autobiographies have been the perfect medium for dalits in order to express themselves. Dalits remained silent for centuries. It can be said that the beginning of writing dalit autobiographies is a kind of resistance because dalits are very willing to use this opportunity to assert their identities through their autobiographies.

Dalit autobiographies have taken up the question of Dalit identity and explored the emergence of Dalit literature and its aesthetics which detail both socially and historically how Dalit identity has been formed and how it has been lived out. Dalit literature is replete with the pain, agony, oppression, exploitation and suffering of Dalit community. This literature calls for freedom from slavery, change in the social system, appeal for equality and quest for identity of Dalits. Dalits want to make their own identity beyond their caste identity in the upper caste dominated society.

Dalit autobiography as a genre is new and different from the other traditional autobiographies that already exist in India and other parts of the world. A new initiative is needed to understand and rehabilitate Dalit autobiographies. No critical tradition has been evolved to evaluate these autobiographies. The present research work is an effort towards understanding of Dalit autobiographies and the theme of quest for identity in these texts. I critically analysed a few selected

Dalit autobiographies, which are available in English translation. I tried to study the history of various other traditional autobiographies to get the knowledge of their dynamics.

The emergence of Dalit literature was the result of Dalit movements. It was symbol of the arrival of a new vocal community. Dalit literature is a voice of the hopes and aspirations of such people who were once faceless, voiceless and nameless under the tyrannical caste system. Now these people are able to speak and assert their identities as political and social subjects. In meantime, their fight for dignity, self-respect and identity has given them a new kind of vocabulary by which they are expressing themselves. They are writing their own life stories and history of their own communities. Thus Dalit writers are writing a revolution, keeping in mind a new egalitarian society which will be classless and casteless. A.K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu write, "They are critiquing and rearranging the field of dominant culture and the politics of the upper castes by unsettling the boundaries, frames, figures and ideologies" (65).

Dalit literature initiates that Dalits have now become speaking subjects. Dalit writers have been regularly and systematically writing a new literature with new themes and vocabularies. They are in to support of Dalit emancipation and freedom for those who are exploited and discriminated in the name of class, caste and religion. They have also been making a new aesthetics which is based on the ideas of dignity, identity, self-respect, equality, liberty and human freedom. To Make their voice audible, Dalit writers have experimented with most of all literary forms: autobiography short stories, novels, drama and poetry.

The novel, compared to Dalit autobiography and poetry began to be used by Dalit writers much later. Autobiography has been the best medium of expression for Dalit writers. It is autobiography through Dalit writers started expressing themselves. Autobiographical writing create an important segment of Dalit literature. Almost all autobiographies are stories of personal feelings and exploitation of the Dalit writers most of Dalit literature is in form of autobiography. It is very unfortunate that the autobiographies writing by Dalits and other marginalized people have been

equally and systematically neglected by the upper caste writers as well as the readers. Dalit writers are struggling hard in quest for identity and human dignity.

The upper caste educated men and women have confined themselves to the autobiographies written by the upper caste people. They do not seem to be willing to pay attention towards Dalit autobiographies. This is because these Dalit autobiographies challenge the hegemony of a society which is based on caste, ethnicity, class communal groups and other forms of oppression and exploitation. Dalit writers want to make a new form of social order which will be based on equality, fraternity and social justice. They want to make their own identity beyond the caste identity.

Autobiography has not been a traditional literary form of literature in India. We find the texts that narrate personal lives in confessional mode from the nineteenth century onwards. Autobiography as a genre has its origin in the west. Confessions written by saint Augustine is considered to be the first autobiography. It was written during the fourth century AD. This autobiography deals with a spiritual journey of a man who thinks himself a sinner under the Christian morality. He therefore, prays to god to save him from damnation. This spiritual autobiographical form changed with the arrival of Rousseau's confessions in the eighteenth century. His autobiography is about facing many difficulties in his daily life and how he made efforts to defeat them by using various tactics. It is true to say that with Rousseau began a tradition of introspective presentation of the self which is going on even today.

The tradition of writing on autobiography began very late in India. The beginning of the concept of writing about the self in India was very slow. This is the reason that the arrival of the autobiography as a literary genre was very late. Now there are so many autobiographies in India, but there is rarely any critical method or tradition to evaluate them. Indian autobiographies are also complicated in structures and forms because of the caste society.

The most of Indian autobiographies have been written by the upper caste people who have a public figure. These autobiographies are record of their glories and achievements. A few Indian

autobiographies have been successful in drawing attention from the readers and researchers are: Mahatma Gandhi's *An autobiography or the story of my Experiments with truth* (1927), Pt JawaharLal Nehru's *An autobiography* (1936) Nirad C. Chaudhuries *An autobiography of an unknown Indian* And KamlaDas's *My story* (1976) Gandhi, Nehru, Chaudhari and Kamla Das personally express different world views. But socio-culturally they represent a common category the upper caste people.

The upper caste Indian women's autobiographies compared to the upper caste Indian men's autobiographies, emerged much later. Women's autobiographies emerged towards the last decades of the nineteenth century because they had not got right to be educated. Like women in the other countries of the world, Indian women are circumscribed because of the various historical economic and socio political reasons. Women have to bear more burden in comparison to men due to a patriarchal Indian society even to day. The upper Indian women articulate in the form of writing those experiences about which they cannot speak publically. Thus, it can be seen that the upper caste Indian women tend to privilege a private self.

The emergence of Dalit autobiographies is a histories beginning because Dalits in India were unable to speak about themselves publically. They had no rights to get education. This is the reason that they remained silent for centuries. After independence, some of Dalit got modern education and started expressing about themselves in public sphere. It can be said that the beginning of writing Dalit autobiographies is a kind of resistance because Dalit people are very willing to use this opportunity to assert their identities through their autobiographies. A large number of Dalit autobiographies show how Dalit people are breaking the barriers of silence to make their new identities.

It is important to note that there are so many differences between Dalit men's autobiographies any Dalit women autobiographies. For example, while Dalit men rarely speak about Dalit patriarchy in their writings, Dalit women are very open to write about patriarchal exploitation they face both outside and within their own houses. The autobiographies of Viramma Urmila Power Baby Kamble

and Bama show how Dalit women have to defy a number of traditions to assert their own individual identities in the male dominated society. In their autobiographies, Dalit men deal with various forms of class and caste exploitation in the hands of the upper castes. They also deal with many type of deprivation they have to face only because they belong to lower caste society. The voice of protest can be heard against the exploitation and discriminations in their autobiographies. They have also raised their voices for the restoration of the identity, dignity and self respect of Dalit people who have been kept prohibited from basic human needs and rights for centuries. This is very clear in the Laxman Mane and Sharan Kumar Limbale.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit life* (1997) is a major Dalit autobiography written in Hindi. This autobiography is not only the life story of Valmiki but also of his entire chuhra community. Which has been suffering the caste based exploitation and discrimination for ages. Caste was the only identity of the whole Chuhra community. They were known how Valmiki struggled a lot right from his childhood to get education and government job. He has portrayed the social attitudes and issues of the upper caste people towards Dalits.

Valmiki views that untouchability was in practice in the villages. The upper caste people did not like to touch the Dalit people because they were considered to be polluted. They were inferior even to animals. He writes.

Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and caste or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The chuhraas were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and through them away. (Valmiki 02)

Omprakash Valmiki has skillfully interwoven the Dalit movements with human identity and dignity in his autobiography. When he discusses Dalit protests and revolution, he is very true and truthful towards Dalit suffering and discriminations. It is not easy for Dalits to make their individual

identity in the upper caste dominated society. Valmiki condemns the cowardice attitude of Dalits who hide their caste and surnames in order to look like the upper castes in the society.

Upara: An outsider by Laxman mane shows the authenticity of his experience and his strong appeal for identity, dignity and social justice. Mane Narrates pains and sufferings of the Kaikade people who were wandering in the dark life of exploitation of Laxaman Mane but also of his community. Kaikadu is a nomadic tribe which do not have fixed residence and income. They are unable to cook food daily. The people of his community were their living by collecting canes and by making baskets from canes. They live on the outskirts of the villages in very dirty conditions. Mane is in search of identity, justice, humanism and social rights to fight against discriminations and exploitation of Dalits. He describes the retaliatory, ambivalent and undignified outlook of the upper caste people with whom the Kaikadis came in contact with for their livelihood. He always opposes those evil practices which lower human dignity and identity. Mane's efforts are going on to make his own identity beyond his caste identity. He along with other Dalits will be known by his profession and achievements, not by the name of caste.

Babuta by Daya Pawar exposes the hypocrisies of Indian caste society. The autobiography gives a true depiction of the pervasive cruelty of the caste system and also the distinctive frankness with which Pawar wrote about himself. The book depicts the life of the village slums, chawals, brothels and gambling dens where the poor and the outcaste found means to earn their livelihood. Babuta is a victory of story-telling, social commentary, self reflection and self-identity of the author. Daya Pawar establishes his human personality and self identity through this autobiography. Babuta gives a heart touching portrayal of the lives of the people from the mahar caste, who had been treated as brids and beasts and less than human beings for many centuries. The autobiography is not only self-expression and historical record of Pawar's life, but also a vehicle for him and other Dalits to assert their identity. The author's life story swings between the urban squalor of Kawakhana in Mumbai and rural Maharwada. With his efforts, Pawar was able to create a new identity of a writer

and a guide to his mahar community. It was education that gave him a new identity in place of his caste identity.

Sharankumarlimbale also exposes the hypocrisies of Indian upper caste society through his autobiography *The Outcaste*. The autobiography reveals and condemns the heinous form of the caste system and its makers who do not even recognize Dalits as human beings. The question of an individual as well as the communal identity. The issues like hunger illegitimate relationship, slavery, social injustice, self –identity and caste discrimination is in the centre of this autobiography.

Limbale deals with the questions of identity of a young man who is an illegitimate child born to a Dalit mother by an upper caste man. His search for identity is more intense and passionate. The writer is an intelligent and sensitive personality who searches his identity in a caste bound social environment. The birth identity of the autobiographer is a source of dual pain and suffering for him. Limbale confronts the confusion regarding the truth of his identity through his commitment to assert his Dalit identity. He does not accept his father's identity as a Patil, on the other hand he accepts his mother's identity as a Mahar. His caste identity followed him wherever he went. Behind his crisis of identity, helplessness and poverty, Limbale is successful to create a new identity of a dignified and respectful life.

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