



# DEPICTION OF TRAUMA AND SUFFERING IN SELECTED DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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## Abstract

Dalit literature is relevant to understand the nature and society of the Gujarat and Maharashtra in India. The present paper strives to study B. Kesharshivam's *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* and Namdeo Nimgade's *In the Tiger's Shadows* from the praxis of the hegemonic social and political forces by the distinctiveness of the other discourse, which ignores the struggles, trauma, and literary sufferings of the Dalit people. Trauma and Sufferings are not only simply representing in dalit autobiographies but also associating with the social movement that brings to change as an assertion of hopes and ambitions of the society in which Kesharshivam and Nimgade express their experiences in the most realistic way by using their sensitivity. Dalit autobiographies in Marathi and Gujarati come out a spate during the social-political movement of Dalit literature itself such as B. Kesharshivan's *The Whole Truth and nothing but the Truth* and Namdeo Nimgade's *In the Tiger's Shadows* explain issues of trauma, struggles, and sufferings through their characters being Dalit in the society.

**Key Words:** Dalit Autobiography, Trauma, Self-identity, Otherness, Communities

Dalit literature is the literature of the oppressed it reflects the lives of the people of the marginal society which have been at the lowest strata in the country. It was the literature of the Dalits of Maharashtra first of those who were locked down even by the other workers. Dalit is a Marathi word for the 'spurned'. The term was first used for the untouchables in 1930. The form emerged and gained its authority in India only after 1960's. Dalit literature become widely known to people through the struggles of the oppressed

and the work as their only motive for the society. Though this Dalit literature came through the inability of the people for fighting against the Brahmins and those who discriminated them. It was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who wanted to firstly fight for him and then the whole society belonging to the same class in which he belonged.

Caste system had existed through many ages, as India had remained a fragmented society. Almost One-fourth of the population of the country constitutes of the so called depressed classes named by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Then the Dalit literature emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which introduced the writers, poets and activists involved in to bring out their experiences and the sufferings in the literature form it was the Dalit movement of the Maharashtra which was for the social, political and economic justice to the Dalits or the untouchables (depressed classes). Then some writers also introduced their writing in the autobiography which widened on the situation and the process which led to the emergence for a distinct Dalit consciousness as a parallel ideology.

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is related to the spirit of revolution connected with struggle. It is a rebel against the caste system, recognizing the human being as in focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for the consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness as an important part of Dalit literature, differs from the consciousness of the other writers. Dalit literature marks its importance as unique because of this consciousness.

Dalit literature is an act of self a self-writing. 'Dalit literature is the writings of the Dalits. (Meaning oppressed or broken) it was already used in the 1930's as a Hindi and Marathi translation of the 'depressed classes', a term used by British now called the scheduled castes. In 1970's as the 'Dalit Panther' introduced the improved term and extended its reference so far to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, Women and all those being exploited politically, Economically and in the name of the religions. So as to say Dalit is not a caste rather than it became a symbol of change and revolution.

The origin of Dalit literature is marked through Ambedkar. 'His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the

literary expression of this awareness.’ By the 1970s, a sufficient corpus of Dalit literature had developed so that, according to Dangle, ‘thinking Dalit critics began to theorize on Dalit literature and its role.

In the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dalit literature got impetus in Maharashtra. People like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarao Kharat were already creating Dalit literature even before it came into existence in the 1960’s. It grew out of a progressive movement called Magazine a kind of rebellious manifestation of the educated youth of those days against the establishment. It was the movement of the blacks in the distant land of North America which inspired this youth, their black literature and the Black Panther movement became the role model for them. And this protest gained its first expression in the form of a new literature called Dalit Literature, Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided understanding on the questions of Dalit identity. With it subaltern communities also rejected the levied sub-human status on to them by the Hindu social order and found a new name together with the perspective ‘Dalit is dignified’.

Dalit movement was the movement led by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar for the liberation of the untouchables from the Brahman hierarchical system of the Hindus which kept untouchables or Dalits at the end of the order and looked as lower than the humanity. Autobiography is interpretation of the experience, the second reading of experience. It is thus a creative process as it has the potential for self-reflection. Autobiography as a genre is mostly dependent on the self for the purpose of writing and narrating self.

Dalit autobiography is one of an important part of Dalit literature. It mirrors the individual’s private, social, public, political and moral life of a writer. It signifies the private life of a person. However, it portrays individual achievements, personal experiences, oppression, imprisonment and struggles. Though autobiography differs of the mainstream writers from a Dalit autobiography as the Dalit autobiography reflects more of the writer than the mainstream which confines to the author’s life or hardships faced by him and the happy moments passed by the author, yet it is represented in the first person. Dalit autobiography is the reflection of the trauma and wounded psyche of Dalits and Dalit community. Moreover, Dalit autobiographies focuses on the pre-Ambedkarite era to represents the history of agony.

Dalit writings are autobiographical in nature, which expresses anger against injustice. Dalit autobiographies explained self, society, and the community rather than individual emotions.

Further, through the literature writing the Dalits tried to throw away the heavy inequalities and struggles they had to face in their lives. The trauma Dalits had to face has been expressed so delicately and clearly in a very straight forward way that these writings become a tool of resistance. The writers very clearly exposed the irrationality of those who believed in the theory of caste and discrimination. The degradation and horrendous misbehavior is counterattacked through Dalit writings. Moreover, Dalit expectations are profoundly expressed in the writings, as it is the plea that they should be treated as human beings.

Trauma in other words refers to the state of mind which results from an injury. It can be read as an articulation of trauma. It is a shocking and damaging experience. Though childhood trauma is a terrifying experience in the autobiography. Though childhood experiences of the children over the world of the marginalized communities would be different from the children of the other privileged communities. As they are disregarded from the first through economic, or racial or regional grounds. They might be African-Americans, or children of migrants they face traumatic experiences. In India Dalit children face discrimination and exploitation being lower-caste untouchables.

Dalits are the people who have been exploited in the name of religion, caste, god and certain other factors through centuries. The term 'Dalit' came to be used in the contemporary times for untouchables, who have been exploited and subjected to horrible acts holding to the social stratification of Indian society. They were always considered as lower sections of the society and their situation is dubious and unpredictable. They were denied access to the education because the caste hierarchy did not permit them. The caste dominance was much more that they were politically powerless, socially untouchable, culturally inferior and economically backward. Thus, they represented as the marginal section of the society.

Dalits have been living a life of animals in caste-based society for many centuries. They live outside or at the boundary of the village. They have problem when they need drinking water which was not easily available to them and they have to go miles to fetch water as they were not allowed to draw water from common wells. They were strictly prohibited to use the public property. Their dead body cremation



was at different place than the upper castes. It shows how the discrimination was in the psychology of upper castes that they did discrimination even after the death of the lower castes. The caste system was so deeply rooted among the Indian society.

Namdeo Nimgade, a committed Dalit activist recounts the experiences of caste discrimination and episodes of childhood painful memories. Nimgade's autobiography is also somewhere the history of the Dalit movement. He introduces the events in his childhood that he has to stand at the hot verandah and learn lessons from the window at school because he belonged to the lower caste the traumas of living in an oppressed class society which is full of struggles and pain is never-ending and unforgettable. After school he struggled for getting admission in the college in the city and also there he was discriminated by the college students being a Mahar (untouchable). Nimgade have to earn money for the family and take out his college expenses with his studies. As he was so much inspired by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar he had the desire to study more and become educated and make untouchable people and the lower caste be aware of their potential to live their lives better, he gets graduated from Nagpur. In 1950's He studied in the Indian agricultural research institute in Delhi, afterwards he also pursues his Ph. D in soil science from university of Wisconsin in 1962 being the second Dalit to get a Ph. D doctorate from an American university, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the first person from India (an untouchable) who pursued the Ph.D. degree from abroad.

The author Nimgade was born in the era when there many political, social movements took place. Some of them made difficulty to to the lives of the people from lower sections. The Mahars were considered unworthy of even being touched by higher caste people. Touch polluted them, though they had to work hard for the landlords or they are being bonded landless laborer's. Nimgade's grandfather was a bonded landless laborer who worked for a high-caste landholder. Their tasks included removing animal waste, cleaning animal stalls, gathering and chopping firewood and even conveying important messages to neighboring villages because there were no post-offices around there. They lived as bonded laborers. Another thing was when their masters family celebrated any occasions like weddings or birth, this laborer got busier as they had to work more, in any marriage they had to parade by bullock carts. They had to run

barefoot in torn and tattered clothes. They had to compete with animals as the curse of untouchability. It was inhuman and very painful but somehow “necessary”. This shows the social and physical discrimination among the lower caste people was much prevalent at that time.

B. Kesharshivam is a notable Gujarati writer has many literary works in Gujarati literature. B. Kesharshivam is the pen name of B.S. Jadav which he coined by combining his parents’ names and placing Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s first initial in front. Through reading B. Kesharshivam’s autobiography *The Whole Truth and nothing but the Truth* (translated from Gujarati Purnasatya) one can experience that the genre boundaries are the reader can experience that the genre boundaries are breached by dwindling the ‘I’ – an outcome of the conventional distinctiveness- and by replacing it by the collectivity of the Dalit population. The autobiography conveys the aspects which have depicted like marginalization, casteism, untouchability and oppression by the author which he faced during his life.

*The Whole Truth* is a life story about author's childhood, growing up as an untouchable, the struggle that he waged to survive the ordained life of physical and mental torture, and his transformation into a speaking subject. It is about the persona that was compelled to internalize patterns of cultural depreciation and social sub-alternates. In this book, he becomes a speaker of the domination he endured not only as an individual, but also as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community. The first part of the autobiography ‘Growing Up’ deals with the author's childhood memories while in the second one ‘At Work’ there are recollections of his service life in government offices, mostly in the state of Gujarat. During his period in service he realized that there were two ways to show one's performance in job – to work hard and to keep the superior happy. He came to know how people perfected the second method.

B. Kesharshivam describes the quintessential life experiences of the life of a Dalit. In the sixty years after independence, many believe that so much has changed for Dalits. The author himself, born and raised in poverty in the Dalit Moholla of Kalol in north Gujarat, passed the Gujarat public service examinations to become a mamlatdar, a revenue officer, and finally a class I officer who held many significant postings including controller of the household to the governor of Gujarat. Yet, as he says, ‘At every step-in life I was made aware of being a Dalit.’ Being a Dalit is a curse for him. (*The whole Truth*) The autobiography brings the issues of the caste, untouchability, and segregation which prevailed in the

Indian society. Autobiography of Kesharshivam also brings out the social and cultural traditions of a community. And the life of a suffering of one's life and being a Dalit makes the suffering worse. Dalit autobiography though portrays pain, this autobiography too depicts the pain from a viewpoint of the community, and it focuses on the autobiography *the whole truth and nothing but the truth* as the testimony of Dalit Mohalla in Gujarat.

The autobiography describes his life from the beginning with his life as a child who plays in the dust of the bone meal factory, where he later works, going on to labor with his parents in the 'cotter's mill', the book presents a non-sentimental account of a childhood where friendships exist, sometimes across castes, and discrimination and abuses are constants. The second part of the autobiography relates to his working life, his struggles on behalf of the Dalits and the tribal population against a backdrop of continuous discrimination. The author questions the imposed norms and realities, so as through he forces the readers to confront themselves.

Further he says, though the country was being under subjugation, but he was subjugated by the society too. The political slaves were privileged because they were not denied the sense of touch. But Kesharshivam was subjugated by the society too. Thought the political slaves were well-off not being denied the sense of touch. But Kesharshivam's case was different from it that nobody would dare touch him. His condition was worse than that of an ordinary slave. As from the time he was in the womb it has been decided that he was going to be born with a curse of being a Dalit. This has been the case with every Dalit community of the states.

Hence, the Dalit literature is the result of the Dalit movement which led to the evolution of writers from the oppressed class of the society and also the result of the establishment of the form of Dalit autobiography. It led to the writings about the Dalits by also the non-Dalits which added them to relating to the community. These both the autobiographies present the struggle and suffering led by the Dalits or untouchables. The autobiography *in the tiger's shadow*, the author reflects on the community of the Dalits or Mahar's of Maharashtra who have been exploited physically, mentally and socially which leads to its effect on one's society and its people in certain ways. Also it suffocates the living of the individual because of his ongoing struggle from childhood throughout his life. The autobiography *the whole truth and nothing but the truth*, reflects the community and the situation of the Dalits in the Gujarat that which they have to

struggle for their survival and also suffer the discrimination by the upper castes. Their struggle leads to their whole life, which neither decreases but increases.

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