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AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN DALIT LITERATURE AND MOVEMENT

PANDAGA SRINIVAS¹, SIRIPURAM SRINU²^{1,2}Research Scholar, Kakatiya University

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ABSTRACT

Dalit writers interpret their own experiences regarding social injustice in their own autobiographies. This genre of literature is best suited to *Dalit* writer. There are many *Dalit* Autobiographies produced by Dalits in post-independence period. For instance, Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Untouchable*, Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, P. V. Sonkamble's *Athvaniche Pakshi*, Laxman Mane's *Upara* and so on. Even *Dalit* women presented their experiences rather more finely than *Dalit* men writers. They are: Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*, Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan*, Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* and etc. Thus, *Dalit* literature is produced on large scale after the *Dalit* reform movement created awareness in them and it mostly comes out in post-Independence period. Therefore, *Dalit* writers have their literary foundation with ideology and publish numerous journals. They also have a number of political organizations supporting them.

Autobiography is a very influential genre through which *Dalit* writers have portrayed a realistic picture of the *Dalit* world. The *Dalit* autobiographies were first written in the 1930s. Regarding to the origin of the *Dalit* autobiography, Ravikumar, in the Introduction of *Dalit* Autobiography *The Scar*, remarks that: "At the national level, Ambedkar and Rettaimalai Srinivasanare are the precursors of the *Dalit* autobiographical form as per research indicators at present." 2009

Key Words: Dalit, Autobiography, Social, Reform, Political, ideology.

Autobiography has remained a significant segment of *Dalit* literature since 1960s and 70s. The *Dalit* writers termed the autobiographical narratives as self-stories or self-reportings (*Atma vritta*) (Kumar 2011, 150) *Dalit* literature, as a genre, has emerged through the *Dalit* movement in Maharashtra in the 1960s, and later on in the other parts of the country. Similarly, *Dalit* autobiography also became popular in Maharashtra and subsequently in the other provinces as one of the significant sub-genres of *Dalit* writings. When *Dalit* Marathi poetry aims at decanonizing literature, *Dalit* autobiographies attempt to unveil the wretchedness and miseries of the *Dalit* life and experiences through first-hand accounts. Till recently, there have been more than eighty major *Dalit* autobiographies written in various Indian languages as well as in English. One of the most important and momentous feature of the postmodern age is the emergence of *Dalit* literature from the outcaste people. The history of Indian literature could experience a major literary force from *Dalits*. This literary force's writings challenge Indian mainstream literature which, in fact, did not articulate the socioeconomic, political, educational cultural and everyday problems of the underprivileged people.

Dalit literature narrates the trauma, discrimination, pain, personal experiences of poverty, segregation, violence, assertion, protest and strategies of survival of *Dalits* in India. The *Dalit* writing is the

mirror of Dalit lives in the hierarchical caste based society of India. Thus, Dalit movement and its development led to the Dalit literature, simultaneously.

Dalit panther movement has Maharashtra during 1970s has taken the tremours of protest to all the corners of India. The educated and active participants of Dalit Panther movement made writing literature as a weapon. Dalit writers from Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, etc. emerged and exposed the atrocities perpetrated over them. Dalit writers were influenced by the writings and struggles of Dalit icon Dr. B. R Ambedkar. It was a militant protest that attacked the main stream literature of India which has never dealt with the problems of the Dalits.

The writings of Dalit poets and novelists like Namdeo Dhasal, Mahadev Devanpur Laman Gaikwad and Joseph Macwan reflect the anguish of the Dalit community. Most of their writings reveal the exploitation, segregation and protest. Moreover, the literature of the Dalits challenge the tone and centralization of existing main stream literature and thus, the Dalit writers tried to decentralize such literature with a powerful literary movement by adopting their own style of genre that created alternative aesthetics and linguistics possibilities in the history of Indian literature.

Dalit literature has become a forum and a medium of expression of the daily experiences of the Dalit people who have been looked down at, marginalized, socially, economically and politically neglected by the upper caste Hindus of India. Dalit literature not only reflects everyday experiences of the marginalized people but also it depicts how Dalits are attempting to be identified. It asserts the harsh realities of Hindu caste system and strengthens the Dalit literary force and movements. Dalit literature is considered by well known Dalit authors like Sharan Kumar that it is a burning cry which talks about the marginalization of Dalits for thousand years.

The literature of the Dalits is the mirror of the age old caste Hindu society. The traditional reader of the already existing literature may be shocked by the Dalit literature as it reflects the callous social realities. The traditional reader may not enjoy the Dalit literature as he is used to enjoy the arts and literature that is romanticized by the traditional writers. Dalit literature has got many proponents and opponents as it is written in everyday language of the Dalits. More than this, it has an aggressive nature, a character of refusing inequality and revolutionary character, and mixer of the Marxist and Ambedkarite ideology. In the modern age of Indian literature, Dalit literature has occupied a prominent place where it transforms the preferences of the people and became reason to discuss the special strata. Literary contributions to Dalit literature has risen up because of its revolutionary ideology. It is indeed a voice of the common man who revolts all these inhuman oppressions.

It is proposed that Madara Chennaiah, an 11th century cobbler-saint is the first Dalit writer who lived during the reign of Western Chalukyas. Some scholars regarded him as the father of Vachana Poetry (Free Verse). Next to mention is Dohara Kakkaiyah who contributed confessional poems. Bhakti movement in India fought for rights of Dalits in Medieval period that rejected caste system. Dyanaeswar, the 13th century poet was excommunicated into Dalit status for composing commentaries on existing Puranas and Epic Literature. Another contemporary of Dyanaeswar, Ekanath fought for the protection of the rights of Dalits in society and rebelled against suppression and exploitation during the Bhakti period. 14th century Dalit poets Chokhemela and Raidas born in a family of cobblers rose to the level of priests and championed the cause of Dalit movement. The 15th century Saint Sri Ramananda Raya proclaimed that all castes in Hinduism have equal status including Dalits. His poetical speeches marked the spirit of Resistance and reformation in existing systems of practice. Due to isolation from the rest of the Hindu society, many Dalits continue to debate whether they could be considered Hindus or not. As far as the history is concerned, Gautama Buddha, Mahaveera rejected caste system and their preaching eventually became independent religions of Buddhism and Jainism. But Bhakti movement of medieval period actively encouraged the participation and inclusion of Dalits in many social activities. Bhagavat Ramanuja Charya of Sri Vaishnava cult established Sri Visistadvaita sampradaya giving top priority to Dalits in day-to-day heavenly rituals. Out of Twelve Alwars of which all Sri Vaishnavas regularly adore as a part of their tradition, three Alwars are from Dalits. In 19th century, Brahma

Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna mission bluntly rejected caste system and embraced Dalits in their activities. In 1936, the last king of Travancore in Kerala issued temple entry proclamation for Dalits. A famous Sikh reformist 'Satnam' movement was founded by Guru Ghajidas. Other reformists like Jyothi Rao Phule, Narayan Guru Ayyankali of Kerala, Jyothi Dhass of Tamil Nadu worked for emancipation of Dalits.

The word 'Dalit' is found in several Indian languages. According to Molesworth's *Marathi-English dictionary* (of 1975), Dalit means "ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally." It is derived from Sanskrit 'dal' which is again borrowed from Hebrew. 'Dal' in Hebrew may be used in two senses: 'it may refer either to physical weakness or to a lowly insignificant position in society.' And when it is used in combination with another Hebrew root-word 'anti', it describes an economic relationship. It is clearly indicated by Harvey Perkins as:

Dal is derived from a verbal root which recognises that poverty is a process of being emptied, becoming unequal, being impoverished, dried up, made thin.... So there is social frailty (and those suffering from it) are easily crushed and have not the means to recover. (29)

Thus, the Dalits are people who are broken, crushed and torn apart so much so that they are unable to rise and better themselves. The name expressed their feelings of solidarity and kinship with Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for African-Americans' rights in the United States of America. The name found a ready acceptance among untouchable communities all over India. This was the first time they had been able to name them, as a collectivity, rather than be named by others. Dalit is a political identity, as opposed to a caste one. It expresses Dalits' knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that oppresses them. As Bishop A.C.Lal said in his address to the first Dalit Solidarity Conference meeting in 1992 in Nagpur, a place of immense symbolic significance since it was there that Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism on 14 October 1956: "The word 'Dalit' is a beautiful word, because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers. It is a beautiful word because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations and groanings of the entire cosmos" 1995. Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit Panther movement writes:

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (264-65)

For centuries, the Indian society has been the most hierarchical among the known civilisations. The literature of this country, until very recently has never focussed on the problems of 'untouchables' or the so called 'Dalit.' They were never mentioned because the pen has, by and large, been in the hands of those who wielded power. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a few upper-caste Hindu writers who attempted to portray the lives of the untouchables tended to be driven either by a zeal for social reform or by sentimental compassion. The works of these writers can be termed as 'emotionalistic' literature. Seldom did anyone touch an untouchable character realistically, like an ordinary human being full of vitality and hope as well as despair. For a long time, both in pre-independence and post-independence India, the low castes did not have any formal education which would stimulate them for a genuine literary movement to protest against the monopoly of the established literature. It is only in the post-independence era that some educated 'untouchables', who tasted the fruit of modern education, realised the need for an alternative mode of thinking and launched a new literary movement. The movement started in Maharashtra, the home town of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, who throughout his life fought for the rights, liberties and equalities of the downtrodden. The Dalit Panthers formed in 1972 was a movement against the caste system of Hindu. Their manifestos include all the revolutionary parties seeking to destroy the Hindu Varna System. Its declared enemies were the landlords, capitalists, moneylenders. The movement gave rise to Dalit Sahitya. This movement gave rise to Dalit literature which embodies the agonising trauma of the lives of India's Untouchables, from first hand experiences. The following questions loom around when we talk of Dalit literature: What is Dalit literature? What are its ideological concerns? Who is a Dalit writer? What are the aesthetics to be taken into account? Limbale's answer to some of these questions is:

By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by a Dalit writer with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is too obvious to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus. (19)

Protest in literature is a kind of evolution. It is a course of change and the need for reform. Dalit literature is a literature of protest. And a Dalit writer is one who writes with the experience of his community, the pain of his past burdens subverting the history, revitalizing the denigrated spheres of language and creating an alternate vision of the future. Raising the consciousness of the Dalits, and recovering their self-respect and challenging the traditional Hindu values are the Dalit writers' expressed goals. Though Dalit writings seem to be revolutionary its central concern is promoting equality, freedom and justice. Dalit protests can be perceived in two ways: first, as an ideological effort to counter the hegemony of the caste-Hindus, often led by Brahmins, who continue to wield the political control, reinforce economic domination and exercise cultural hegemony over the original inhabitants through the caste system. In this process Dalits rebelled against the exploitative character of Hinduism and the institution of caste and expressed their ideological protest through literature, in the form of poems, dramas and novels. Second is their refusal to perform traditional duties. The disobedience assumed two forms, one an organized planned and overt protest and the other an unplanned, unorganized and covert protest. The emergence of an alternative literature was not without its historical antecedents. The initial protest movement in India was the Buddhist revolt in sixth century BC, though eventually it lost its radical orientation and was co-opted into 'Dasavatara' model of appropriation of reactionary elements into Brahminism. Since the medieval period the Telugu-speaking region of South India and Deccan witnessed the development of Bhakti movement. The Bhakti saints articulated, in unequivocal terms, the inequalities and injustice suffered by the lower and untouchable castes due to the 'Varna' system. The medieval Bhakti tradition raised certain themes and issues regarding the miseries and sufferings of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. By and large, the themes of the Bhakti tradition reappeared in the Dalit literary tradition during the colonial period. Bhakti movement led to the growth of literary traditions among non-Brahman scholars such as Vemana and Potuluri Veerbrahmam. Vemana was one of the earliest saint-poet to question societal exploitation in the guise of religion and caste was his unconventional philosophy. In the Telugu literature of the modern times, issues relating to caste and caste oppression are addressed by wide range of writers from the nationalists and liberal scholars drawn from the upper castes. The literature that was generated during the social reform movement centred on various evils that had loomed large in Andhra society. The nationalist literature that emerged as the Bhavakavita movement often reflected the problems centered on Dalits, more in poetic than in prose form. This literature was deployed to serve social and political purpose. Gandhian movement inspired many writers in Andhra to build a united and coherent anti-colonial movement simultaneously creating a space for untouchability as a subject in their literature. Gandhian framework in tackling with the problem of untouchability was based on the premise of internal reform and self-purification. It aimed at arousing the latent good will of the Caste-Hindu public opinion by taking up issues like opening schools for Harijans.

Conclusion:

Dalit autobiographies are recollections with a motive. They are no mere chronicle for archives of social history. Events are retained selectively. In all their biographies, the self is narratively reconstructed in a performance of identification. Each narrative is a remake of life through a travelling back which originates in a decision to break away with the prescribed socio-cultural models of interpretation. This decision originates in a will to henceforth exist for oneself. The alienated self is done away with. We find that the narrative reconstruction is nothing less than a creative assertion of one's identity. In Valmiki's *Joothan* we witness that the past is re-visited, re-composed, re-assessed and recognised in the light that it finally shines at the moment of fulfilment. In both *Joothan* and *Karukku* we find the enemy within the caste and religion. Such literatures thus speak about "live and let others live." The projection of *ahimsa* can be brought in by abstaining from hurling irrational and fanatical words. The voice of minorities can be beautifully brought out by arousing the minds of the readers through empathic elements.

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