
Reclaiming History: A Study of Dalit Autobiographers' pain, voice and subjectivity

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Abstract

There are many Dalit autobiographies like *Upara* (1980) by Laxman Mane, *The Grip of Change* (2006) by P. Sivakami, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2002) by Baby Halder, *Balutha* (1978) by Daya Pawar, *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste* (1991) by Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Joothan* (1997) by Omprakash Valmiki. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008) by Urmila Pawar, *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt and *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav. All Dalit autobiographies present fierce attacks and suppression due to marginalisation caused by the caste system. This paper examines the intersection of class, caste, gender, and subjugation, as well as the success stories of writers. These autobiographies exemplify how a casteless society transformed into a better place to live. This work analyses caste and truly inspires the voiceless to speak for themselves and register their subversive voice through their works. This paper is divided into two parts: one is about individuals who cover their desolate experiences of life. The other aspect concerns social documents that have witnessed the transformation that has taken place over the last few years. The intersection of gender, caste, and class suppression marginalises Dalit women in the economic, political, and social domains. Thus, the present research paper focuses on Dalit women characters and Dalit male characters, especially Jadhav's autobiography and the changes they experienced in their lives due to the emergence of Dalit consciousness.

Keywords: Dalit autobiographies, intersection, voiceless, transformation and Dalit consciousness

Introduction:

In this paper, a brief introduction of the term Dalit, Dalit movements in India, Dalit autobiographies, the structure of caste and gender hierarchy with an analysis of intersectional oppression on the basis of caste, gender and class. It covers the literature review, interpretation, resilience, strength of the individuals and aims and objectives of the study have been discussed. These personal narratives are used as a method of achieving power and

support to advance humanitarian ideas. The role of Dalit writings is to encourage the community and move their steps towards progressive forces and the enlightenment of their people. In the article, Dr. Mishra states that Dalit literature is not fictional like mainstream metaphysical theories. The realism and originality have become the hallmark of Dalit literature. Mishra claims that anubhava (experience) takes precedence over anumana (speculation).

In Maharashtra Dalit Panther Movement (1970) started after the influence of the Black Panther movement in the USA. They demand justice for society. The Self-Respect Movement (1925- 1940) was advocated by Periyar E V Ramasamy. He challenged the dominance of upper caste people and uplifted rational thinking and inter-caste marriage. The Dalit Buddhist Movement (1950- 1960) was promoted by Ambedkar for the conversion of Dalits into Buddhism. The Dalit Human Rights Movement (1990) was started with an agenda to empower women.

In *Upara: An Outsider* by Laxman Mane, the wretched plight of the Kaikadi community is shown. This autobiography reflects how this community is disadvantaged at different levels with the ignorant attitude of the Kaikadi people acting as a barrier to their growth and how Kaikadi women are treated as mute beings.

In the case of Punnappa, he mortgaged his wife to Dharmea for four years because of a two-hundred-fifty-rupee loan from Dharmea. He refuses to return to his wife. This objectification of women makes the lives of Kaikadi women more miserable. Women are taken as mere objects. Goswami examines that in the autobiography (*Upara*) the author undergoes different circumstances of living on the razor's edge of time, which results in miserable conflicts. (Goswami, 131)

Kimberle Crenshaw has introduced the idea of 'intersectionality' which shows the interconnection among class, gender, race, and other oppressive issues. It studies how multiple oppressions intersect and give various experiences to an individual. Crenshaw uses this term to describe the suppression of African American women in her work. She explains the pain of black writers which is equal to that of Dalit writers. Africans are indifferent to Americans because of their colour. Dalits are distant from the upper caste people because of their caste.

Kaikadi women like Parumami, Pingla Joshi's wife, the wife of Punnappa and many other Dalit women suffer from intersectional oppression. Like when Parumami takes a bath, boys gather around her. One day, Parumami was combing her hair, and her husband made her fall and hit her face. He treats his wife as an object. He says "I'll cut you into pieces.... Don't you dare be smart with me! (Mane, 82) The wife of Pingla Joshi sacrifices a lot throughout the text. When she brings herbal plants when Joshi falls ill, he insults her,

"Bloody where! You brazen bitch! I'll get your mother screwed by a donkey." (Mane, 86) The incident of Punnappa, where he mortgaged his wife. All these examples of how being a female, they are tormented by the intersectional suppression of their husbands, outsiders who forced them to live a poor and dependent life.

Mane beautifully explains the incidents of their dependency on upper-class people, where he goes with his mother to collect provisions, "Mother would make me sit in somebody's Veranda. Some women would give me pieces of bhakri and curry. Mother and I would eat them. Then we would drink water poured by the women in hollows of our hands joined together" (Mane, 60).

The strength of the autobiography is depicted through Shashi, who symbolises hope for future generations. She is an honest and strong lady who supports her husband in the toughest times. She subverts the ritual that the upper-caste woman cannot marry a lower-caste man. She accommodates in the Kaikadi community very smartly and confesses her love for Mane. She expresses her anger regarding caste hierarchy by saying "I thought that we Marathas alone were insanely proud of our ninety-six generations of Maratha lineage, but what I witnessed just now appears to be even worse". (Mane, 186)

The autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2002) by Baby Halder, showcases how education can transform the life of a maid who strives for social and personal liberation. Halder's autobiography is "metamorphosis from an unreflecting, passive woman, unquestioningly submitting to what life dealt out to her, into a writer capable of graphically evoking all the searing, suppressed memories that made up her life" (Reddy, Foreword viii). The intersectional oppression begins with Halder's mournful memories of childhood, abandonment by her mother Ganga, poverty, her wish to study, her bad relationship with her father and her struggle in taking care of her siblings, physical abuse from her husband, his violent attack at night and taking care of her children single-handedly.

Simone De Beauvoir defines women as those who themselves consider masculine power to be superior to feminine and it is the males who can rule and dominate the whole world. She says that it is the responsibility of females to create their own space and become independent. (Beauvoir, 609)

Baby got married at the age of twelve. Shankar (her husband) becomes very violent. One day, he hauled her from the friend's home and beat her harshly. Baby writes "He... roughly caught me by my hair and started kicking and beating me. Then he began to shout and curse: "You bitch, I told you not to go there and you won't listen". Curses and blows rained down upon me. People walking past on the road could see what was happening, but no one stopped him.... I lay on the ground, quietly, with my child in fear. (Halder, 75)

Kamble in her autobiography, writes that Dalit women are taken as animals without their tails. Men make them feel inferior and destroy their creativity, reasoning and ability to think. (Kamble, 149)

Hooks elaborates that caste and class distinctions among women are so embedded in the patriarchal society that women are defeated, become ignorant and fail to recognise their values and behavioural patterns. (Hooks, 4)

Halder refuses to accept the prejudice, old stereotypes, dominance, strict gender roles and patriarchy. All the troubles of Halder turn her into a dynamic and independent female. She writes "...come what may, I would make sure that my children had a good education." (Halder, 106). Rathee states that this autobiography *Aalo Aandhari* which means Light and Darkness, is an influential reflection on the gender and class issues from the subaltern point of view. (Rathee, 23)

Palanimuthu Sivakami was the first Dalit Tamil novelist. She writes *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, which was later translated into English as *The Grip of Change* (2006). In this autobiography there is a contrast between two women, showing two different worlds, one of muteness and one that makes 'others' hear her voice. Thangam and Gowri play significant roles. Thangam maintains silence and Gowri is a strong woman who denounced the vicious practice of patriarchy in society. She stands against her own father (Kathamuthu) when he molests Thangam. Rao observes that the subjugation of Dalit women is marginalised in terms of social and economic structures; they are oppressed as women first, then as Dalit women, and as women who perform all menial work. (Rao, 11).

Fr Leo Sequeira proclaims that in order to feel the pain in the life of a Dalit woman, the best way is to experience it first. She elucidates that in the feminism of mainstream literature, the authenticity and contribution of Dalit women writers are missing, which is why they created their literature. (Sequeira, 122).

The intersectional oppression of caste, class and gender is depicted through Thangam. She is a widow, childless and molested by her master (Udayar). Because of the difference in class hierarchy, she remains silent in front of her master. Sivakami writes " He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field." (Sivakami, 7). She surrenders her body to the 'other'. Sivakami says, "I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice" (Sivakami, 7). Lanjewar emphasises that within the Dalit community, Dalit women are considered as Dalits in relation to Dalit men. They can be referred to as double Dalits because they bear the burden of both caste and gender exploitation. (Lanjewar, 188- 200).

Gowri is educated. She is resistant and asserts her voice against her father when he rapes Thangam. Gowri says, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" (Sivakami,

93). Her transformation into a confident and independent girl makes her constantly talk about women's liberation with Kanagavalli and Nagamani. Gowri insists "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man" (Sivakami,124). Kulshreshtha remarks that the Indian woman, after centuries of recession in social life, is now motivated to reach the mainstream of social interactions and revive her rightful place. (Kulshreshtha, 5)

Coming Out as a Dalit (2019) by Dutt is another successful story of a Dalit female. She talks about how her mother was abused by her alcoholic father. Her mother wants to educate her children, which signifies a double hindrance of being a Dalit woman in a patriarchal and caste-based society.

Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste* (1984) elucidates the inhumanity associated with caste-related encounters and their eminence in the construction of Dalit identity. Limbale is an illegitimate child, which makes his life more troublesome. Limbale writes, "I was born out of the sexual exploitation of Dalit women by caste Hindus." (Limbale, 7) There is a depiction of a Dalit woman who is exploited by her landlord, Hanmantha Limbale. Limbale's mother (Masamai) is forced to become the 'keep' of Hanmantha. Limbale expresses his pain for a woman in his words "Masamai caught between bread and lust" (Limbale, 64). The intersectional oppression of Masamai from the upper caste (by Hanmantha), poverty and torture from her own community make her more depressed.

Limbale conveys another message "To be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse." (Limbale, 37) Sohini in *Untouchable* (1935) by Anand is sexually assaulted by Pundit Kalinath (priest) inside the four walls of the temple, when she was cleaning the courtyard. Her brother (Bakha) says, "So beautiful! So beautiful and so accursed! I wish she had been the ugliest woman in the world!" (Anand, 57). No one speaks for the victim; their caste makes them mute forever. Limbale asserts "Every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak, they violate their women. What of the exploited woman? She has to carry the rape in her womb. That rape has to be borne, fed, and reared. (Limbale, xxiv). Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) describes that there is no history of subaltern. They cannot speak for themselves. They are even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak 287). Spivak desires subalterns to speak for themselves instead of waiting for others and intellectuals to speak for them.

Limbale by awakening his self-respect, accepting Buddhism, overcoming the sad memories of his childhood, and standing alone within and outside the community shows Limbale's strength. This narrative witnesses the transformation of his identity as an outstanding scholar. Limbale says "I was a Dalit who had become a Brahmin by attitude" (Limbale, 107).

Outcaste: A Memoir by Jadhav was published in 2003. In this autobiography, Jadhav conquers the world. The autobiography splendidly explains the background of Jadhav's family. Sonubai and Damodar Runaji Jadhav had six offspring: Dinesh, Leela, Narendra, Trusha, Sudhakar, and Janardhan. Narendra Jadhav was the youngest child, and his brother Janardan was fifteen years older than him. When they resided at Juna Wadala, a slum area, his father worked in the railways. That building had no light except a veranda, and no washroom, but one had to go outside, to a small room where nearly nine members stayed together. Jadhav recalls the early days of the slum, where he was the leader of his gang. Damu remembers how an incident pushed him to feel that he was a Dalit. One day, he is walking with his father and feels thirty in a hot sunny day and is told not to touch the water that is under the tree. When Damu tells the other man to give his son water to satisfy his thirst. He shouts at Damu, "Son of a bitch!"You think you can take this from my hand?" (Jadhav 46).

Jadhav emphasized the fact that the upper castes deliberately and shrewdly design Yeskar's duty to oppress them economically and humiliate them psychologically in public places. In the olden days, every three months on a rotation basis, it was the duty of every Mahar to do a yesker (village helper). Damu is performing his role as a village Yesker. One day, Damu was asked to take care of the woman's body floating in the well and was not permitted to inform his wife about his absence from his home. He feels hungry and exhausted and wishes to go home to eat something. He notes a voice "Hey Damu Mahar, I have been looking all around for you, where have you been wandering around, you son of a ..." (Jadhav 3)

One more instance is there in the landlord's house, when there is a wedding feast, Sonu is rebuked for contaminating the sweets in front of guests, but unluckily, the sweets were made by Sonu only. Heerabai shouts, "Eh, you bloody Maharin, what do you think you are doing?" (Jadhav 47). This incident shows the concept of purity and pollution that is entrenched in the minds of the dominant class. The intersectional oppression of Sonu from Heerabai (upper caste), the impatient attitude of Damu, and her financial crisis multiply her trauma.

Damu immediately took the firm decision to quit the village with his wife and settle in the city. Sonu claims to be with Damu in every possible way. She says, "His determination has surprised me. There was no turning back – I was going to walk with him together, through rain and sunshine." (Jadhav, 26) Sonu signifies a true companion that every successful man wants in his life and woman empowerment, that how a woman changes a life of man in a better way. She acts as a reinforcement for Damu, who pushes him to work and move forward. Damu's refusal to follow the chain of the caste hierarchy leads the whole community close to freedom.

Damu started working in the Railways and textile mills to meet his needs. Whereas Sonu supports her family by selling fruits. Damu and Sonu never went to school. But they put all their efforts into getting their children to study. Damu's sole aim is to transform their children's lives and make them capable of understanding their worth as human beings. Dinesh becomes an administrative officer in Municipal Cooperation in Mumbai and contributes nicely to the poor people. Jayavant was an IAS officer and had a very good reputation in his work. Whereas Narendra Jadhav is a versatile personality who not only promoted untouchables but also the whole nation. He is a matchless policymaker in the Indian economy. He is the best Vice Chancellor of Pune University. His unbeaten quality of leadership made him the best social thinker whose toil makes India a better place to live in. The critical analysis of the text *Outcaste A Memoir* (2003) was given by the former PM Dr Manmohan Singh, he says that like the life stories of former Rashtrapati the Late Dr. K R Narayanan and the life of Ambedkar, Dr. Jadhav's story is also about change. Progress, enlightenment and hope. He motivates all social activists and political leaders to read the life experiences of Dr Jadhav in his autobiography and his treatise on 'Re-Emerging India' for shaping our political and social vision. (par.1)

Dalits considered education and self-respect as a crown for their upliftment. Dr. Jadhav emphasizes the approach to transform their toil towards independence, justice, gaining respect and power through exposure and education rather than wasting time and energy on worthless undertakings like violence, and fighting to enter the temples of Hindus. Damu is an inspiration to all the Dalit families in India. He says

If Babasaheb was doing so much to improve the lot of all Dalits, the least I could do was uplift at least one family- my own. I vowed to give my children the best possible education and raise them with the spirit of public service. Yes, that would be a mission. (Jadhav,146)

In *Voices of Minorities and the Marginalized in Indian English Language* (2012), Singh asserts

A striking feature of Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste- A Memoir* is the treatment of Indian villages. They have been portrayed as centers of untouchability and caste atrocities.....A common complaint against the author is that _village and nation are abandoned as a site of struggle for Dalit emancipation in the *Outcaste* (Kumar 98-99)

In Jadhav's family, among all four generations, Apoorva stands alone and fights for all young Dalit girls. Narendra visualizes the younger generation of Dalits to create a bright future and resilience by keeping in mind the struggle of ancestors and Dalit consciousness. The daughter of Jadhav, Apoorva, stays in the USA and feels that the burden of caste is outdated. Apoorva and Narendra Jadhav, without any shame, affirm their belonging to the Mahar community and firmly accept their identity as Dalit, along with conveying their

consciousness as skilled citizens. Apoorva smartly carries pride in her identity as a Dalit and pays respect to her ancestors, giving satisfaction to Jadhav. A protesting spirit can be sensed in Damu, Jadhav, Sonu, and Apoorva. In the Epilogue of the text, Apoorva states

Now, I think I know who I am. I am just Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion, or caste. My ancestors carried the burden of being a Dalit and bowing down to demeaning tasks even after India's independence. I have the torch they lit for me, and nothing can stop me. (Jadhav, 263)

Sonubai is a Hindu and Narendra Jadhav is a Buddhist whereas Apoorva being a free soul is not aware of the dissimilarities of these religions. The thoughts related to Dalit and untouchability filled the minds of Indians only. The classmates of Apoorva call her Indian rather than an outcast. Narendra Jadhav is happy with her daughter's sense of self-esteem for her identity, individuality, and respect for her ancestors for their huge sacrifice regarding physical and mental liberation and overall Dalit social history. Jadhav marries an upper-caste girl, and her name is Vasundhara. Damu also supports Narendra Jadhav for this marriage. The mother of Vasundhara was not happy to accept the reality of the marriage of her daughter to a Mahar boy, Narendra Jadhav. The problem of caste arises here, and she advised Vasundhara

Education has nothing to do with it. He may be good, but he belongs to a low caste. If you marry him, our family's reputation and position in society will be reduced to nothing. We came from a well-respected, conservative family. My daughter will marry one of our own castes. I don't want to see you with her again (243)

Jadhav puts the main emphasis on values like sincerity, humanity, purity, generosity, acceptance, creativity, compassion, dignity, discipline, and accountability hold very little importance in Indian society and entry to the temple on the basis of social ranking, money, power, social status, indifferent attitude, cold behaviour, discrimination based on creed, caste and colour are more prominent in the present time.

Khan opines about the success story of Jadhav, "There are signs of hope and optimism in Dalit literature, affirming the identity and assertion are worthy social and cultural projects which need not be abandoned because of some temporary setbacks" (10).

The whole story of this memoir is summarised by Singh in such a way

If one were asked to sum up the whole meaning of Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* in two power points, these would be (i) the inhumanity of the Hindu caste system and (ii) the indomitable spirit of its victims (represented by Damu, the author's father) against this inhumanity. (Singh, 24)

Unless the caste system is demolished, untouchability cannot come to an end. Many Dalit women writers narrate their mental, physical, economic and social suppression with an outburst for justice. These women are triple marginalised from their own men, upper caste men and upper caste women. Their own family members and society work simultaneously to control their lives. Every Dalit woman centers in their writings on sufferings done to them by their own men. The writings of Dalit males include discrimination from the upper caste people. Let us put all our efforts into making our dream of a casteless and classless society true by becoming optimistic, keeping a broad perspective, and removing all prejudice against Dalits. It is the responsibility of the current generation to sustain the light lit by the blood and tears of their forefathers and to speak for themselves rather than waiting for intellectuals to speak for them.

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