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Humiliations Nexus: Marginalized Voices Analysis of Dalit autobiographies of Manoranjan Byapari and Urmila Pawar

Anuradha Tamme, Research Scholar, Supervisor: Dr B. Deepa Jyoti, Department of English Kakatiya University

Abstract

The plight of Dalits under the caste system of India led to the rise of Dalit literature. The popularity of Dalit literature, especially autobiographies, suggests that personal narratives are playing a huge role in excavating the truth regarding the anguish of certain groups in India. People write autobiographies for varied reasons. Some write for the money offered to tell their version of certain events in which they played a major role. Some simply want to set the record straight, while others, like many Dalit writers, want their testimony out there so that others might learn from their experiences. A striking feature of the personal narratives by Dalit writers is that they tend to be accounts of pain and suffering under the vicious caste system of India. Dalit authors have developed this style of writing as a form of resistance against the caste system, challenging the social mores. These memoirs allow them to express their revulsion of the system that condemns them to live in subhuman living conditions. Although the Indian government made extensive reforms and officially banned caste discrimination, the social and political force of the caste system is yet to vanish completely. In *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* by Urmila Pawar and *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* by Manoranjan Byapari, the authors unearth their hardships to avail education, chronicle their struggle with poverty, and the dual oppressions. In addition to that, the authors' factual narratives contributed towards igniting tyrannized minds and augmenting solidarity.

Keywords: Dalit Personal Narratives, Dalits' Education, Double Discrimination, Community consciousness, Breaking stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

Social reformists like Jyotirao Phule (1828 - 1890) and Ambedkar (1891 - 1956) influenced the Downtrodden to educate. They believed that education would assist in emancipation from the caste taboos.

However, poverty and the caste rites like Untouchability and social alienation became barriers to the Dalits' education. The British Christian missionaries helped the marginal in providing education and employing them in Railways and Army. Although, in post-Independent India, Dalits face trouble accessing education. Ambedkar recognized that literacy and enlightenment assists in attaining social justice. The educated Dalits started writing about their turmoil and agony in the form of Autobiographies, biographies, short stories and novels to educate the marginalized and to inspire from their stories. These narratives not only motivate the lower caste communities but also ignite their minds regarding social consciousness and equality. Biswas believed that the Dalit literary movement is "a counter-cultural movement that has been aiming to undo the age-old caste-ridden oppressions against Dalits by representing their lives, deprivations, struggles histories and promoting their culture and liberation." (xxv). Raj Kumar supported this statement and stated that the Namasudra Community (Dalit) writers played a pivotal role in enlightening the oppressed sections by their writing against oppressors. (124) The most important Dalit writer from Maharashtra is Babu Rao Bagul who wrote the seminal work *When I Hid My Caste* in 1963. it unveiled the social status quo of the Dalits. The first generation educated Dalits were inspired by the Black Panthers Movement which was started in 1972. This movement enhanced the Dalit Journals and the publications which in turn contributed to the Dalit Oeuvre from all over India. According to the historian, Ranajit Guha described the Dalit autobiographies as "micro-narratives" which can exhume the "small voices of history." (1-12) *Karukku* is an autobiography written by Bama, from Tamil Nadu; *Eknad Awad's Strike A Blow to Change The World* in 2015 from Maharashtra. *Changiya Rukh*, an autobiography written by a Punjabi Dalit writer Balbir Madhopuri in 2010. All these autobiographies were written in their vernacular languages. The progression in

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the Dalit Literary impact and embracing contributed towards the translation into the International Language English.

The Dalit personal narratives interpret the agony and plights of their communities. (Dangle 19, Limbale 34) Additionally, Joylala Das believed that the Manohar Mouli Biswas autobiography is not only about his self experiences but also it describes his parents and ancestors. He stated that they were their prodigy memoirs. Similarly, Bal researched two Bengal Dalit writers Manohar and Manoranjan and argued that the Dalit autobiographies not only represent the “collective memory”, but also seek meticulous attention from the readers. The Dalit personal narratives were the sources of Dalit historicity. Indeed, Sutadripta Dutta Chaudhury analysed Manohar Mouli Biswas’s autobiography and described that the Dalit literature unleashes the poisonous caste customs and their repercussions on the downtrodden. She also acknowledged that the Dalit literary paradigm was based on Articulation of the chronicles of oppressions; contributes as a new genre of literature in the Bengal. Anowar Analysed Manoranjan Byapari’s autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* and explored the troubles of the Dalits due to Bengal partition and Being Dalit refugees how they surpassed the discriminatory socio-economic conditions. Rege argued that the Dalit autobiographers replaced their self-identity and preferred representing the collective identity. And asserting their communities’ plights.

Similarly, Aswathy Mohan in his research paper *The Rise of the Falcon from the Limbo of Non-Existence: A Reading of Bama’s Karukku* argued that the Dalit Autobiographies should be read the study as “social realities”. While Pramod Nayar (*Karukku*), Sharmila Rege (*Weave of My Life*), Gopal Guru acknowledged the Dalit autobiographies as testimonies. Augmenting their views, in *The Politics of Representation: Revisiting Dalit Feminism in the Context of Dalit Women Autobiographies of Maharashtra*, Aparna Lanjeswar Bose asserted that the “genre” of Dalit personal narratives portrayal of their “Alienation, marginalization and restlessness. By presenting individual pathos, pain, and sorrow they present the collective pathos of their community”.(139) K.Purushotham discussed the role of the Dalit oeuvre in enhancing self-respect among the socially alienated and suppressed groups in Telugu states. Prosenjit Ghosh in his article *Representation of Cultural Marginality in Indian*

Dalit Literature with Special Reference to Sharankumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* opined that Dalit literature emancipates the oppressed from caste manacles, humiliations and social injustices. He acknowledged that it also inspires them to rise from the “ashes of their forefathers like the phoenix”.

(176) However, The above studies did not include Pawar and Byapari’s adversities, how they surpassed the caste customs with the help of literacy and how they employed their memoirs to inspire the oppressed psyches.

The caste system of India is more than just a social phenomenon; it also forms an indispensable part of the country’s political process. The division of society into classes for whatever purpose often begets trouble arising mostly due to economic resources. Guha (2014) indicates that Indian Marxists have proposed treating the caste system like classes. Just as discussed, this brutal system divides the society into castes, with each caste holding a certain status or position believed to be the benefit of the society. This leads to the formation of a system of social restrictions and social stratification. According to Karl Marx, economic conflict often generates social classes that naturally create conflict. Indeed, Byapari and Pawar indicate that people from the upper castes were rich while those in lower castes lived in hopeless poverty at the mercy of the upper caste. Marx observed that when the upper-class continued to oppress the lower-class, the lower class would unite and form a revolution as their common experiences under the control of the upper-class led to the development of social consciousness and a sense of shared identity. Thus, Guha suggests that adopting Marxist ideologies could lead to the end of the caste system. Similarly, the authors appear to indicate that the Dalit experiences of poverty and oppression led to the emergence of movements for the emancipation of Dalits. The experience of Dalit in post-independence India exposes tales of the poverty, violence, oppression, and discrimination entrenched in society.

SOCIO-CULTURAL STATURE OF THE DOWNTRODDEN

To describe the socio-economic status of the Namashudra(Dalit) community Byapari referred to the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s perspective in his essay, *The Claims of Dharma* (1911) as “I went to the village and saw that the Namashudra fields were not cultivated by others. No one reaped their crops, no one

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built their houses. In other words, the cooperation that one human being can expect of another to survive in this world has been denied to them. Our society has judged them as unworthy of receiving that humanity and for no fault of theirs, we have made their lives difficult and unendurable, and are condemning them to this punishing existence every moment of their lives from birth to death.” (9) This vividly illustrates the wretched and trampled existences and their egregious status quo for ages.

Dalit literature offers a historical background of the caste system as an important part of Hindu traditions that were established to dictate the way certain groups go about their lives. Various theories regarding the establishment of the caste system have been put forward. Religious theories are the most common. The caste system is a hierarchical system in which different groups are divided. It is generally held that the system consists of four Hindu varnas

– Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, each representing a body organ of the creator of the world, Brahma. However, this system has another group at the bottom. Below the four varnas, there is one group outside the caste system, the Dalits. The major basic castes were also subdivided into other numerous sub-castes mostly relating to the occupation. Pawar indicates that the groups within the caste system were referred to as the avarnas while those outside the caste system, that is, the Dalits, were referred to as arvanas. As Byapari discusses, in the Indian caste system, the Brahmins are ranked the highest while the Shudra was the lowest in the system. The author delineates that the groups were not allowed to intermingle and if any child was born out of such a relationship, for example between a Shudra and Brahmin, the Shudra might be put to death, while the child has no place in the caste Hindu system and declared “an untouchable Chandal.” (Byapari 8) In addition to that, Dalit women experienced the patriarchy within their community. Christian Novetzkey in his research paper *Twice Dalit: The Dalit Poetry of Hira Bansode*, quoted that Hira Bansode referred to Dalit women as “Twice Dalit”. Which means they were marginalized within the Dalits due to the patriarchal attitudes?

**EMBRACING EDUCATION AS AN ARSENAL FOR
BREAKING STEREOTYPES**

Ambedkar acknowledged that “Education”, alone can liberate the oppressed from such unethical social

circumstances. Though education became a fundamental right for every citizen of India, still the Marginals are confronting difficulties in accessing it. This study examines Urmila Pawar’s and Manoranjan Byapari’s Autobiographies regarding how they underwent the gruesome sufferings to get an education and how education changed their lives after literates. For instance, Biswas' father was illiterate; he recognised the role of education in improving the social condition of the oppressed. Hence he advised that “ The children must get educated” (1). He was from Bengal like Byapari and experienced the repercussions of partition. He assessed how the authors resisted caste discriminations, the role of education in restraining them and how they bestowed social consciousness. Manoranjan Byapari was a Dalit, refugee and one of the poignant writers from West Bengal. His passion for learning and social consciousness motivated him to become a writer. His narrative describes the transformation of his life from a helpless refugee to a community-conscious, reformative writer. On the other hand, Pawar’s autobiography unveils the arduous life experiences since her childhood. She depicted the poor economic conditions and the everyday gruesome hurdles faced by the Dalit women in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. She embraced education as an arsenal to encounter scandals.

Dalit life experiences expressed in Dalit literature is an indication of their catastrophe under society. The personal narratives of Byapari and Pawar are representative of some of the dual oppression and dual marginalization in their lives. Both authors come from a socio-economic background that is rife with violence, poverty, and deliberate discrimination. Living as a Dalit is indeed painful, but it usually leads to greater self-awareness. The ultimate manifestation of discrimination and suffering of Dalits is the issue of untouchability. In post-independence India, the domination of the upper caste in society persisted despite the banning of caste discrimination under the law. Furthermore, the government was controlled by the pinnacle of the social pyramid. Most Dalits were condemned to live in abject poverty, but others were able to move to the middle class following the outlawing of caste discrimination. The authors indicate that individuals from the upper caste are often arrogant and condescending towards Dalits. Pawar illustrates that Brahmin priests often carried out certain rituals for the lower castes but would not enter where they lived but rather performed them on the outskirts of their

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neighbourhood. Similarly, Byapari wrote nearly a dozen novels and more than a hundred short stories, exposing the culture of discrimination that perseveres and is embedded and maintained by the Hindu varna system. She states that her husband strongly acknowledges that women's main work should be household chores and looking after offspring. (240-41) Dual oppression and dual marginalization arise due to different identities of authors; Byapari suffered as a Dalit and refugee while Pawar was hurt as Dalit and a woman. Pawar's womanhood and Byapari's refugee identity exacerbated their suffering as Dalits. Women were silenced by the patriarchal system while refugees, especially those from lower castes, were exploited as they lacked the much-needed connections to prosper.

**RESISTANCE AGAINST TWO FOLD
DISCRIMINATION**

The advent and reputation of emancipator revolutions by the Dalit can be partly attributed to the banning of caste discrimination that allowed many Dalits to gain an education, get jobs, and even move up their social class. Emphasizing this perspective, though Biswas' father was illiterate he recognised the role of education in improving the social condition of the oppressed. Once he advised that "The children must get educated" (1). He was from Bengal like Byapari and experienced the repercussions of partition. His father strongly believed that only education can annihilate the caste mores. In the case of Byapari's life, he endured extreme poverty being Dalit and refugee hence never an opportunity to schooling. When he was twenty-four years old, in his custodial period learned the alphabet, and became a voracious reader. Reading enlightened his mind regarding the importance of writing. He was an undertrial prisoner, hence he could demand a few things for his blood donation. Since he was conscious of the Power of writing, at the cost of his blood he got his writing accessories through which he wanted to awaken his oppressed communities (210-211). Similarly, Biswas too faced poverty and family troubles. He was badly in need of helping his father besides going to school. He states "I Had to help Baba and Jetha on the land to such an extent that I could not concentrate on my studies"(6). Accessing schooling was not an easy thing for the downtrodden children. Their poor economic conditions were the biggest barrier. On the other hand, despite the hardships to get an education, Pawar got an opportunity to attend school and cleared her Matriculation in 1964. Furthermore, she was employed in the Public Work

Department amidst humiliations. She was more conscious and describes the term Dalit with rationalist view as "people who have been oppressed by a repressive social system, and challenge the oppression from a scientific, rational and humanitarian perspective." Education enlightened the oppressed regarding social injustices, enhanced rational thinking. Both researchers Gopal Guru and Rege conceded that the Dalit women testimonies unleash double discrimination, caste and gender respectively. Pawar recognised that education leverages social stature and rationality. Hence, In her memoir, stressed that uneducated status compared with the imprisoned status and Literacy opens the avenue into the world of knowledge. (217) and social consciousness. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, Social Consciousness means, "Awareness of important social issues" and is defined as "caring or concern about important social- issues". Pawar named a few Dalit women who have educated themselves and fought for the community's education. For instance, Jaibai Chaudhary was a Railway coolie. Despite hardships, she got an education through missionaries and became a school teacher. She acknowledged the importance of education in uplifting social status and established a school in Nagpur named, " Choka Mela Kanyashala" for girls in 1924. Furthermore, the Geetabai Gaikwad and Anjanibai Deshbharatar initiated girls hostels for the convenience of the students. (295) Dalit feminists believed only literacy gives them vocal for asserting their suffering. It also assisted in exploring the ignored and erased legacy of the Dalit women in historical movements.

According to Nora, Dalit feminism is considered as a revitalisation of history (15) hence Pawar being a Dalit feminist, with the assistance of Meenakshi Moor wrote a book We also Made History. It was a combination of the Dalit women who fought in the Indian independence but were neglected and not recognised. She tried to unleash the true faces of the Dalit women's revolt and their contribution to their freedom. Prof. K. Purushotham described that the learned Dalit used the literature as a weapon to educate their communities regarding social alienation, trauma, rebellions. They were exploring and embracing the indigenous's, socio-historical root s.(63) Endorsing his view, she noted the transformation of the Dalit women writers like Babytai Kamble and Shantabai Kamble's lives for, not only they emancipated from the marital abuses with the help of education but also they

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even participated in the Dalit reformation movements which targeted to revolt against gender inequalities.

UNLEASHING THE ADVERSITIES AND DEROGATORY STATUS

The plight of Dalits is marked by extreme poverty, violence, discrimination, and lack of governmental support just to mention a few. The UN Refugee Agency report offers a look into the plight of Dalits. One study conducted in rural India indicated the living conditions of this group are much worse than the upper caste group with Dalit families with access to electricity, toilets, and drinking water not exceeding 10% (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada). The report also shows that about half of Dalit children are undernourished. It also shows the literacy rates among Dalit women are about 38% (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada). Dalits are often associated with certain jobs and occupations that are unfavourable if not dangerous with approximately 1.3 million Dalits working as manual scavengers with duties like cleaning human excrement without proper equipment leading to hundreds of deaths each year (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada). Furthermore, the report continues to show that the practices of untouchability still prevail. For example, research conducted in various villages in India shows that 48% of villages denied Dalits access to water sources, 38% did not allow Dalit children to eat with other students in government schools, and 33% indicated that public health workers refused to visit Dalit homes. These statistics represent the tip of the iceberg looking at how the Hindu caste system continues to oppress Dalits.

The theory of Dalit literature posits that the Dalit caste is united under the hegemony of upper castes (Biswas). Dalit writers, therefore, play a huge role in uniting the lower castes by exposing the prevailing dominance of upper castes in society. According to Biswas, education is a prerequisite for any Dalit writer. Education forms a critical part of their lives. He insists that it provides them with self-confidence, thinking power, and intellectual clarity. Both authors speak of their childhood that is rife with various unpleasant issues like discrimination or hunger. For example, Byapari could not attend school. Moreover, poverty led him to move away from his family, arrested in a Naxalite mob case. Nevertheless, he learnt letters in the prison amidst humiliations. On the other hand, Pawar narrates the

discrimination in school where Brahmin teachers did not believe that the Dalits were supposed to learn together with other students from upper classes. Likewise, Bangari Sridevi, a Telugu Dalit woman in her narrative *Why Should I Deny My Caste and My People?* Enunciated that education was a brutal "experience". Teachers from privileged communities were treated Dalit students inferior to the upper caste pupil irrespective of their intellectuality.

(180) Fortunately, Pawar was able to conquer those hardships, attended university and attained Post graduation in the Marathi language. Nonetheless, it is evident that the education and knowledge both authors gained, formal and informal, was instrumental in their choice to use Dalit literature as a form of resistance. Indeed, their account of experiences is representative of the life that most Dalits live. Expressing their concerns regarding the system and the need for intervention motivates others to join in their efforts to fight it.

COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Biswas stated that he wrote his autobiography to express his pain so that others can read and surpass such hideous circumstances when they encounter them in their life. (xx) Similarly, Byapari motto behind writing was to contribute to seeking socio-cultural equality. He was privileged for his community and supported that his community's ancestors were Brahmins because of skipping the Upanayan ceremony they were abandoned as untouchables. (5) With the help of writing, by referring to mythological folklore, he tried to prove that his community was not inferior to the upper caste since his forefathers were of the pedigree of Brahma. On the other hand, Pawar was an Ambedkarite who believed that the downtrodden communities got "self-awareness" through Ambedkar's ideology. He stressed the importance of educating the Dalits. (xii) because the uneducated women internalized the caste hierarchy and never resisted the discrimination. For instance, In *Autobiography of Veeramma* accepted that her caste endured the humiliations because of their karma.

She also accepts the practice of untouchability because of their unhygienic habits. She was irrational and her mind internalized the Brahmanic ideology. Waman Nimbalkar in his translated book *Dalit Literature: Nature and Role*, described the rational ideology and writings of Ambedkar. "Dr Ambedkar with radiant fire in his writings, speeches and action vowed to dispel the darkness and

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brighten their lives.” (56) Hence, she employed writing as a tool for fighting for the Dalit women rights and education. Pawar wrote street plays to educate the lower caste women regarding equality irrespective of gender. (252) Rege in the afterword for *Weave of Life* asserted that the Dalit autobiographies were not individual testimonies but they were collective memoirs. (323) of their horrendous experiences which they relentlessly endured in their lives. (Felman and Laub). Aditya Nigam acknowledged that only Dalits can write their ‘histories’ others cannot produce credible writings without enduring that social bigotry. All these opinions display the paramount importance of Dalits narratives to excavate the true face of social inequality and grievance. Furthermore, Varsha Ayyar in her research essay *Ayedhan(Weave of Our Lives): Caste, Gender, and Feminism in Dalit Women’s Writings in Western India*, stated that the Dalit women Narratives(Autobiographies) ...represents their pursuit of equality and political consciousness inherited from Ambedkar’s Ideology. (23) Similarly Pawar unleashes the inequalities and conveys the importance of political consciousness to resist the caste embarrassments.

CONCLUSION

The texts by Manoranjan Byapari and Urmila Pawar are representative of an emerging attitude of writing in Dalit literature that seeks to expose the outrageous conditions that many people live in. The social and political force of the Indian caste system continues to prevail despite the outlawing of discrimination based on this system. The greatest manifestation of the predominance of the upper classes is the disparity in wealth, subtle and overt discrimination, towards the Dalit. These Dalit acquaintances are behind the formation of movements aiming at their enlightening and emancipation. Karl Marx foresees such a situation. According to Marx, if the upper class continues to dominate the lower classes, the common experiences of people in the lower classes is likely to lead to the development of social consciousness and a sense of shared identity that will unite them against the current system. Proving this both authors, Byapari and Pawar, though ‘untouchable’ documented their grief, struggle, and their eventual role in revolutionary movements. Their narratives provoke solidarity among the downtrodden and serve a paradigm of resistance against social prejudices among the caste victims.

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