



PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SELECT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN INDIAN ENGLISH WRITINGS: A HOLISTIC VIEW

Beesupogu Vemaiah

Research Scholar, Regd. No. PP ENG. 0112 ,

Dept. of English , Rayalaseema University, Kurnool Town, Kurnool Dist, A.P. India.

ABSTRACT :

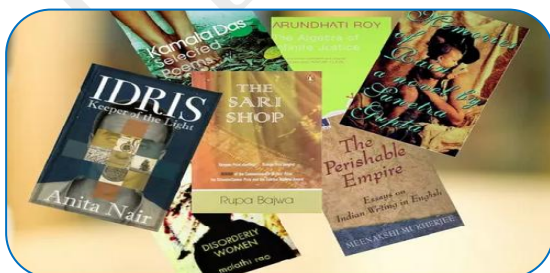
Dalit literature signifies a new dimension of the concept of Marginal literature as used in the general literary canon. Dalit literature is typically Indian not only in its roots but also in its purpose and goal. It is addressed to the entire Indian literary tradition and its fulfilment lies in the total transformation of this tradition. Dalit literature is the postcolonial nativistic movement aimed at the cultivation of creative urges of the masses of numerous castes, tribes and communities condemned for centuries to voiceless existence. Dalit literature is the literature of politics and politics is an integral part of it, though politics could be defined in whatever terms one would like to define it. For, Dalitdom is the product of politicisation, a process that is going on continuously in every organised society.

KEYWORDS : *Dalit literature , postcolonial nativistic , product of politicisation.*

INTRODUCTION:

Dalit literature is a collective term in India. Dalit literature is not one, but many. Almost all the major languages and literatures in India have their past and present of Dalit literary expression. Regional linguistic and literary cultures have given peculiar forms to Dalit literatures in India. Numerous Bhakti-cults in different parts of India during the medieval period enabled Dalits to give vent to their suffering and to protest against the tyranny of the unjust socio-religious order. But it is the modern Indian Dalit consciousness that compelled us to discover that lost tradition of medieval Dalit literary battle cry during the post-Independence period. The past is being researched and linked to the aspirations of modern Dalit creativity. Dalit literature is not only a literature of protest and rejection, but also a literature of reconstruction of the past. Dalit consciousness has inspired intellectuals to probe the entire Indian history and culture from below. This subaltern historical approach has set in motion a process for the true discovery of India. Western orientation is laid to rest and a new image of Bharat is being built up by the scholars inspired by Dalit world-view. Dalit literature is based on the fundamental human values. It believes that man is the measure of all things including arts, literature and culture. Dalit literature subscribes to secular values like individuality, liberty, equality and fraternity etc. but at the same time does not rule out religion. Religion should provide ethical base to human behaviour in social system. Religion should be a principle and not a law. This approach underlined by Dr. Ambedkar neatly strikes the balance between modern secular values and the individual religious faith.

Dalitness in Indian context is not a monotype reality. It is, in fact, a vast plural concept. Dalit unity in India is full of enormous diversity. Woman folk in India is a vast Dalit world in itself. All higher and lower castes and classes have held their womenfolk in Dalitdom. Woman in India is a pan-



Indian Dalitness. Each caste and tribe here suffers from a peculiar sort of Dalit condemnation. Even the converts to Christianity and Islam are condemned to casteist stigma and taboos. Each caste is sandwiched between a higher caste above and a lower caste below. Thus Dalitness in India is multi-layered and becomes an organic part of all the people belonging to mass society. This sort of multi-faceted grass-root reality of Dalitness in India naturally finds its expression in the post-Independence Dalit literatures in India. The foregone deliberations on the renderings of dalit female self question the underlying assumptions regarding the possibility of independent, self-sustaining dalit aesthetics along with a tendency to erase or idolize dalit female in the male dominated world of dalit writings.

Dalit literature with its rustic dialect gave a fierce jolt to the established Brahmanical language and the Sanskrit-suffused ornate literary style. Scorching life experience is the price of Dalit Literature. Anguish, revolt and negativism are the distinctive features of this literature. When anguish leads to revolt, then the will to totally negate is born. Dalit literature has nurtured this will. Shaped out of the philosophies of the three great humans - Buddha, Kabir and Phule - but, altogether new and self-sufficient, Ambedkar's philosophy is at the root of this literature. Dalit literature descended into the field of Marathi literature as a new current of spirited literature that rejected 'all the traditions of literature, and negating the traditional values, it burst forth the new values. In fact this event should have happened long back. Though, first *Satyashodhakas* (truth-seekers) and later Ambedkar *Jalsa* (traditional musical concerts) and *Tamasha* (Traditional folk plays) continued to be produced, there was no significant impact of these on Dalit literature. This does not mean that Ambedkar's philosophy alone and not the Jalsas awakened the masses and the Society. But then the true nature of Ambedkar's impetus has been revealed by the Dalit youth through their respective literature and works. Because of the impress of education and their inborn capacity for literary creation, they have portrayed their own experience in flaming words.

Dalit women are reckoned by men of both upper castes and dalits as emblematic of the honour of family. It leads to their becoming victim of violence both within and outside the caste. Different cases of oppression and degradation of dalits, which invariably take the form of violence against 'their' women as the easiest way to humiliate them, amply illustrate this thesis. Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran in their write up *Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence* take up an incident in Orissa as a specimen to show how due to their vulnerability as women they are taken as inert objects, to be appropriated without any scope for protest or representation in the decisions affecting them. Dalit women at the place under context were reprimanded by their landlords for dressing well. The writers take it as a suitable example to show the mediation of inter caste relations through a redefinition of gendered spaces. The crisis was diffused with a truce between men belonging to two castes wherein it was decided that the women of either castes shall not venture into other's localities in future. The apparent 'solution' to the problem clearly shows that control over women is taken as a proof of the 'izzat' of the caste and woman are supposed to be passive like other material things which are controlled by men. Along with it, the vulnerability of women is used as an opportunity for humiliation and aggression. R.N. Bhagwati, the former Chief Justice of India observed in 32nd Biennial Conference on Status of Women in Our Changing society that, 'Rape and molestation are the new dimensions of Caste war, used as weapons of reprisals and to crush the morale of a section of people' (Massey, 166). Though, admittedly, women belonging to all castes and classes face the dangers of rape and molestation, yet in case of dalit women the possibility becomes manifold because of collocation of social powerlessness with their susceptibility to such attacks due to the particular nature of their daily work.

The body of dalit woman becomes a site for the assertion of caste based pride and domination. In this objectification of female body, she is taken as silent recipient of patriarchal notion of supremacy of males. While it is true that this objectification takes place both for women belonging to upper castes and dalits, in case of dalit females, the muted voice is not only individual but also communal. Their bodies are viewed 'collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of desire and/ or sexuality because of the over determination of this violence as caste privilege' (Rao, 293). Caste in this sense can be seen as patriarchy

codified, in which upper castes and dalits take the characteristics of feminine or masculine respectively. Hence caste operates through its ideology to make the weaker group submit to the rigid code which favours the privileged group. Eleanor Zelliot voices the same correlation between the caste system and patriarchy when she asserts: 'Hierarchy in a social system is reflected in hierarchy in the home. Rights and special privileges for one caste can be translated into rights and special privileges for one gender. The hegemony of caste translates into hegemony of gender through codes of pride, privilege, and self image' (Rao, 215).

One major facet, which has particularly attracted the criticism of dalit women writers, is the portrayal of dalit woman in the writings of male dalit writers. It is quite apparent that the portrayal of dalit women by male dalit writers has been a skewed one. Barring a few exceptions, most of dalit writers prefer to focus on caste atrocities and take women and their struggles as secondary. Another visible undercurrent has been the disjunction between upper caste women and lower caste women in their writings. While the upper caste women are seen as exploitative, artificial and decadent, the lower caste women are portrayed as enterprising, brave and down to earth. The position of Dalit women viz-a-viz their upper caste counterparts is justified on the basis of their inherited Austric cultural norms which are matrilineal and hence advocate more balanced relationship between men and women. For instance, widow remarriage has been a part of life of dalits much before the movement of social reformation was launched in caste Hindus by Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and the practice of Sati, unlike caste Hindus, has never found favour among Dalits. Along with them, there has been greater participation of dalit women in decision making in their homes. Further, unlike upper castes, polygamy has firmer roots in dalits and the custom of giving dowry at the marriage of girls has been nearly absent in them, in place of which the bride price is commonly practiced among dalits. The reason for Dalit women having an upper hand against high caste women in some of these parameters is that a dalit woman has to work along with her male partner to earn a living which gives her financial independence. G.K. Ghosh and Shukla Ghosh in their book *Dalit Women* sum up this situation in these words: 'As wage earner obviously they had better respect since family had to depend at least partly on their income. It is not so in general in respect of women of higher caste wherein they are considered as tool of sex' (Ghosh, 15).

NARENDRA JHADHAV'S *OUCASTE: A MEMOIR*:

Autobiographies are the base-line to understand the varieties and complexities of dalit literature. It endeavours to present dalits not merely as members of one particular caste group, but as all socially and culturally marginalized and suppressed castes and groups, be they scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, nomadic tribes or Muslims. For the practitioners of this literature, dalitism encapsulates the multifacetedness of subjugation and control from 'above' in all spheres of living, be it social, economic, Political and moral. This subjugation leads to denial of freedom, emasculation of the potential human spirit of rising from the surface of ordinariness, and perpetual immobility. Importantly, the autobiographies give out blueprints to try to break this immobility. Every dalit autobiography is the clarion call to break the satanic hand of oppression perpetuated in the name of superiority and inferiority of castes, and thus envisions a future free from discrimination between man and man. If one were asked to sum up the whole meaning of Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* in two power points, these would be: the inhumanity of the Hindu caste system and the indomitable spirit of its victims (represented by Damu, the author's father against this inhumanity. Besides these two focal things, there are some other strands in this book which make it a powerful presence in the area of dalit literature. Here we have the eye-witness accounts of the movement of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar which he launched and sustainingly led for the socio-cultural and politico-economic emancipation of the dalits who suffered untouchability and the related deprivations at the hands of the high caste Hindus.

This book gives very significant glimpses into the condition of dalit women's life. The universal human concerns of love compassion underpin the renderings of various events described in this life account. Its different aspects make it a highly readable, autobiographical real tale of real life sufferings and the victims' real fight against the enemies. Its power as a text flows from the fact that, although it has just three

individuals at its centre, it transcends them in its expansive meaning and takes the whole of the caste system-generated evil in its illuminating sweep. Therefore, at one level we have here the poignancies of individual sufferings, at the other we get here some important sociological insights into the historical context with which it grapples. The English translation, with the title *Outcaste: A Memoir* came out in the 'famous' year of 2003 which saw a sudden spurt in mainstream publishers' interest in dalit literature. The English translation of Omprakash Valmiki's Hindi autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* was published by Samya; from the Oxford University Press came the English translations of Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste* (from Marathi) and Joseph Macwan's Gujarati novel *Angliyat*, and all in a span of a few months.

Narendra Jadhav, a well-known economist and a Dalit, published his autobiography *Outcaste: A Memoir* in English in 2003. Jadhav was born in a Dalit family in 1953 in Mumbai. He studied Economics at Mumbai University and Indiana University, USA. He acquired his doctorate in Economics and also won the award for outstanding contribution to Economic Theory at the Indiana University. His books *Monetary Economics for India* (1994) and *Challenge to Indian Banking: Competition, Globalization and Financial Markers* (1996) were popular works on Economics. Dr. Jadhav is presently the Head of Economics Research of the Reserve Bank of India. He has also served as an international civil servant during his various assignments abroad, including as the Adviser to the Executive Director (India) at the IMF. The book *Outcaste* is an expanded version of the Marathi book and it was first published in French as *Intouchable* (2002) and is also being published in several European languages.

Outcaste was published in the context of globalization and the internationalization of the caste question in 1990s. The new visibility of Dalits and the debate on caste in the global arena created a new interest in Dalits and their literature. Narendra Jadhav says: There is widespread interest in Dalit writing now, all over the world. The upsurge is not because it is politically correct but because people want to know more about the lives of these whom they knew so little. I was amazed at the range of questions about the caste system that were raised during my public interactions in different parts of France.' Narendra Jadhav wrote this book during his four-year sojourn in Washington DC. In his talk with S. Anand, the commentator and publisher in the area of dalit socio-cultural issues, he said that 'the social context which was implicit in the Marathi book has been fully spelt out in the English version'. Here we have the same writer writing both the original Marathi and the English versions.

The basic framework for *Outcaste: A Memoir* is the recollections of Damu, Narendra Jadhav's father, which he recorded after his retirement as an Indian Railway employee. He had difficulty writing even in his mother tongue, Marathi. The author himself says, 'Dada's only education was what he received from life itself' (*Outcaste: A Memoir*, 204). The story regarding the origin of the memoir- framework is interesting. In the decade of the 1960s, Damodar Runjaji Jadhav (Damu), whose all pervading moral grit, courage and determination against all the odds of life is inspiringly present throughout this memoir, retired from his lowly job with the Indian Railway. The old man had trouble adjusting to the post-retirement life, without schedules to meet and work to do. He had been all through his active life a practitioner of the dictum: work is worship. The 'passive' pensioner began to turn his hand to repairing all the gadgets in his house, even those that were, until he got hold of them, in perfect working order. Narendra Jadhav comments as a son who has understood his father, 'Time hung heavy on his hands after he retired. He did not find reading easy. Besides, since he had worked with his hands all his life, he loved 'repairing' things---even things in perfect working condition did not escape his hands' (*Outcaste: A Memoir*, 238). Damu, being formally uneducated but 'literate beyond imagination', full of hard life experiences and the wisdom flowing from them, was persuaded by Narendra, his youngest son, to write his memoirs, to record what he saw, faced, felt and did in his fully lived life. That the old man persevered in this 'literary' task, wrestling with language, testifies to his refusal to accept the supposed and imposed limitations. As we see all through the text of this autobiography, Damu the protagonist is the epitome of positive stubbornness and confidence.

More than 20 years later, the recollections became the framework for an internationally acclaimed autobiography which could be taken as a tribute to an indomitable inspiring father from a son who fulfilled

the father's dreams in full measure. Narendra Jadhav rose to become an advisor to the executive director (India) at the International Monetary Fund and head of economic research at the Reserve Bank of India. When the readers keep the facts about the origin of this memoir at the back of the mind while reading, it becomes all the more enjoyable. Such a remarkable saga of success had its roots in the literary struggles of a virtually illiterate' old man-this 'information' in itself a, as a stimulus, taking the readers on to the path of trying to engage in an empathetic act of reading.

Outcaste: A Memoir has four sections, three of these having Damu and his wife Sonu as the narrators. The one 'Making of the Second Generation' is the author's comments on his father, mother, the caste system and the ways this system should be dealt with. Besides these sections, the book has towards the end, preceding the valuable notes and the glossary, a three page epilogue which contains some candid comments of Narendra Jadhav's young daughter Apoorva who appears to complete the memoir, commenting like a liberated soul. At the structural level more than two-thirds of it alternate between Damu-Damodar Runjaji Jadhav and Sonu-Sonubai Jadhav. For the readers they act as the two perspectives which appear one after the other in their functions to apprise us of themselves and each other. Besides throwing light on each other Damu and Sonu take us deep into the milieu in which they lived. We enter into their minds and the ringside view of the phenomena of the working of the caste system in terms of its effect on those who suffer and remain upright against it. So the book is both a memoir and a lesson for the readers.

Sharan Kumar Limbale' *The Outcaste*:

The Outcaste by Sharankumar Limbale is considered a noteworthy work in dalit writings. Together with the authentic representation of dalit sensibility in it where caste is seen as a collegiums of multiple socio- religious prejudices against the untouchables, the autobiography gives some interspersed pictures of dalit women facing the vicissitudes of life bravely. Though the book has a plethora of female characters, the most important woman character in the novel is Shantamai, the grandmother of the narrator. The narrator is so much attached with her that instead of his mother Masamai, he prefers to live with her: 'Masamai, my mother, always treated me as if I were her step son. I was more attached to Shantamai, my grandmother. Whenever Masamai began to hit me Shantamai would intervene and save me' (*Outcaste*, 42). Shantamai treats him like her own son and undergoes great hardships to bring him up and educate him. Whenever the narrator does something outstanding, she feels proud of him. Very early in the novel when Sharan goes in a procession with other school boys on Republic day, Shantamai feels her dream had come true' (*Outcaste*, 6). Shantamai is an ordinary dalit woman, who has been described in no flattering terms: 'Her mouth smelt foul and her teeth had turned quite black from the herbal powder she used to clean them with' (*Outcaste*, 6-7). She gathers dung for making cakes of dung to sell them. Due to her hard work and constant starvation her skin gets dried up and becomes shriveled. She herself eats bhakarlis made out of the jowar grains washed out of the dung of animals and gives Sharan bhakarlis of the flour collected as alms. Once, when the narrator insists on eating bhakarlis which Shantamai used to eat, he feels nauseated after eating dung infested cereals. Constant hunger and deprivation make Shantamai immune to the stink of dung in the bhakarlis: 'Shantamai ate those bhakarlis as a matter of course, her blackened teeth turning those bhakarlis into pulp. [...] She gave no sign of being assaulted by the stink of dung. She just pushed it into her mouth and it went down her stomach, whereas the dung heaved up in mine' (*Outcaste*, 11). The description, on the one hand, brings out the mute, expressionless love in Shantamai for her grandson whom she gives the bhakarlis made of better flour while she herself eats the bhakarlis made up of grains collected from dung, on the other hand Shantamai's indifference to the smell of dung presents her as a dalit woman who has been treated so inhumanly by the caste system throughout her life that she has now 'naturalized' to the bestial conditions. She shares a very thorny existence with dada, her Muslim partner, and the narrator. It is she who has to bear the burden of begging, sweeping and arranging for the survival of her family. When she quarrels with Masamai on account of the narrator, she leaves the house and starts living at the bus stand with the narrator and dada. Whenever the narrator felt hungry, Shantamai begged Bhakri for him. When Sharan was a little baby, she used to tie him to her back while sweeping the village streets. Her attachment to the narrator is genuine and deep. She has no affectations and is without ostentatious feelings. Her love for the narrator is

laced with candid devotion for him. Once when the narrator brings his friends to her, she gives them whatever she had. Later when only one bhakri is left she gives it to Sharan pretending that she had extra flour in the tin box. After eating it, Sharan discovers that the tin box had no flour but a stone which Shantamai had put there so that he could eat comfortably without any burden on his conscience. When she goes to meet Sharan in the city, despite her poverty she doesn't forget to take beef with her which was greatly liked by the narrator. Another characteristic of Shantamai, which she shares with other dalit women, is her inveterate belief in sorcery and witchcraft. When the narrator picks up coins and jowar from the cremation ground, despite their abject poverty, Shantamai refuses to take the provisions and throws her chappal at him, shouting 'Go and throw that jowar from the corpse into the river' (Outcaste, 12). On the birth of narrator's younger brother, she strictly restricts the entry of children in the house because a ghost could follow their footsteps: 'She asked us to spit before entering the house, nor could we enter the house without washing our feet and she sprinkled cow's urine on us as we entered it' (Outcaste, 19). She makes the narrator drink cow's urine as an antidote against illness. Shantamai is sometimes possessed by a spirit also and her 'shrill shrieks were horrible' (Outcaste, 33); she was cured only when dada would 'remove bits of the soil plaster from the wall and put a mark on her forehead like the holy ash from the temple' (Outcaste, 33). During the onset of Cholera epidemics, Shantamai smears the foreheads of the children with 'ash from the clay stone or dust scrapped from the wall' (Outcaste, 47), this talisman together with a prayer of Goddess Ambabai is taken as a neutralizing agent against epidemics. Shantamai keeps fasts on every Tuesday and Friday in the name of Goddess Ambabai and Laxmi. Though she does not observe elaborate ritualistic paraphernalia, yet the corner of her room acts as her sanctum-sanctorum: 'A corner in our house was reserved for the Goddess Ambabai. Before the image of Goddess was placed a wicker basket. On a peg in the wall in that corner there always hung a seton where Shantamai burned incense' (Outcaste, 51). During the alms days, Shantamai puts kumkum mark on her forehead, wears a necklace of shells and collects offerings from the villagers. She also works as a midwife and helps in the delivery of children. In return for it, she gets some grain and a little money for buying a blouse and bangles. Whenever she comes home after delivery, as a ritual, these angles are to be broken by her. She is a firm believer in Goddess Ambabai and when the narrator speaks disapprovingly of the Goddess, Shantamai gives him warning: 'If you speak ill about Ambabai she will make you miserable. You will die of the insects and worms in your body' (Outcaste, 93). Every year she goes on a pilgrimage to Chivari where she is possessed by spirits and is afflicted with 'tremors till she entered the temple and saw the goddess' (Outcaste, 93). Here it would be pertinent to mention that Dalit goddesses, as opposed to main deities in Hindu Python, are depicted as virgins. This asexuality of Dalit Goddesses brings to fore the matrilineal nature of dalit community and thus 'desexualize(s) them in a particularly anti-patriarchal way, which may even be interpreted as a critique of Hinduism' (Clarke, 72). Their asexuality keeps them outside the influence of Hindu male gods and thus they do not become 'objects of male god's sexual pursuits or subjects that endeavour to manipulate or control the passions of these gods' (Clarke 72).

Other prominent female characters in *The Outcaste* are Chandamai, Vani, Shewanta, Devki, Nagi and Dhanavva who all share the vicissitudes of dalit females in different arena of life. Chandamai is a sister of Shantamai and is very fond of cats. Her cats are a source of quarrel between her and her neighbours. Sometimes this quarrel takes violent forms with nearly everyone taking sides against Chandamai whose cat preys upon their chickens. Vani is one of the younger sisters of the narrator. Sharan mentions her in the incident when he slaps her for eating the skins of the bananas. Masamai defends her and later the narrator finds himself eating those same skins of bananas. This incident is used to highlight the morally driven conscience of the narrator on the one hand, the compulsions of hunger on the other. Masamai's shout of protest against such standards of morality and her insistence that survival is more important than the upper class notions of respectability is an indicator that the parameters of morality and hygiene cannot be uniformly applied on those who live on the margins of the society. Shewanta is the childhood love of the narrator. She has been portrayed in unflattering terms. She is not a soft, fragile, pale princess of fairy stories. She is a girl with ordinary looks who is overburdened with household chores. Yet she arouses deepest

passions in the narrator who seems to love her genuinely. Their childhood romance is not free of the awareness of the stark realities of poverty in which they are sunk. The whirlpool of utter hopelessness and grinding poverty in which they are caught is revealed when the narrator, out of his love for Shewanta, starts splashing water on her and she requests him to stop as she has no other clothes to change into. Despite their mutual love, they are not able to marry because of the narrator's position as akkarmashi and Shewanta is ultimately married to someone else. Though we do not get a direct glimpse of the feelings of Shewanta, yet an impression is felt that in dalits, too, woman remains at object position and is seen as embodiment of honour of the family. The narrator further mentions Shewanta when he goes to city to study where he again meets her. Now Shewanta has become prematurely old and to hide her poverty from him, instead of inviting Sharan to her home, offers him money to drink tea outside. The reflection of the narrator on her untimely disappearance of youth and beauty is a reminder of the loss that dalit women have to suffer in their struggle for survival. The fate of Dhanavva is acutely painful who becomes a victim of the lust of her own father and eventually becomes pregnant. Her father's nonchalance in justifying his act 'I have sown the seed from which she has grown as a plant. Now why shouldn't I eat the fruits of this plant?' (Outcaste, 67) while showcasing a perverted reasoning also brings into focus sexual relations as a way to assert male's dominance over the body and soul of the weak. In this process women become the ultimate sufferers since they have to carry the fruit of conception in their womb thus making it visible and inviting the wrath of the society. Nagi, the narrator's sister, is another specimen of a deceived dalit woman who is beguiled by the sweet vows of upper caste landlords. Despite the narrator's stiff opposition, she develops a love relationship with Nandu, a Patil's son. Later they marry and everything seems to be right until Nandu again marries secretly and Nagi is on the way to become the keep of Nandu. Thus she is a typical dalit woman who has put herself at the mercy of upper caste landlords and gets nothing out of it.

VASANT MOON'S GROWING UP UNTOUCHABLE IN INDIA. A DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Vasanth Moon is another Dalit Marathi writer who gained popularity with the publication of his autobiography *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, the first Dalit autobiography to be published in English. In his book, he talks about his 'Vasti', the neighbourhood, and gives a detailed account of Ambedkar's personal and social life. He gives an account of the life of his community which was regarded as inferior in the Hindu society and relegated to the lower strata of the society. He worked for the welfare of his people like Ambedkar, as the latter was his inspiration since his childhood. In his autobiography, he narrates his life and of poverty in which his community people lived. And he talks about the triumph of his self respect which gave a shape to his own personality. When he was a child, he struggled hard to learn English, but later he edited seventeen volumes of Dr. Ambedkar's Writing and Speeches in English. It was this zeal to learn that made him a Civil Servant. Even after his retirement, he has been very active in Dalit activities. Like Limbale, he has experienced hardships to get education which he has explained clearly in his autobiography. In his autobiography, he demonstrates the cruelty of the caste system and his struggle to get an education. Like Limbale, Moon also reveals the importance of education for Dalits in the Hindu society which helps them to claim their rights and identity in the annals of society. Throughout his autobiography, Moon talks about Ambedkar and the Ambedkarite movement which existed in the community.

Vasanth Moon was born on 22 January 1932 in Maharashtra in the city of Nagpur. From his childhood till the death of his grandfather, Moon lived happily without any problems and difficulties. But with the death of his grandfather and his father's irresponsible behaviour Moon became aware of the poor situation of his family. Deserted by her husband Moon's mother alone struggled very hard to give a better life to her children. In spite of this complex situation Moon's mother encouraged her son to get educated by recognizing its value which can give a decent life for her children. Due to poverty, Vasanth Moon sought help from his classmates who used to give him clothes and food. Moon did not feel shame on receiving help from others in gaining education.

Vasanth Moon dedicates his autobiography to his late mother Purnabai because of whom he

gained character and self-confidence. Having studied up to third grade during that time it was she who gave basic education to her children by realizing the importance of education for Dalits, as a result of which Vasanth Moon came out as a civil servant and a Dalit activist. But his struggle to get education was not a bed of roses, instead he went through many adversities to fulfill his mother's dream and ultimately came out successful.

Vasanth Moon calls his autobiography 'Vasti' meaning neighbourhood which tells the story of his community in Nagpur along with his life history. Moon's 'Vasti' of ancient times is the 'urban slum' in modern days in which he shows clearly the difficulty of a Dalit growing up in modern India. In this regard Rajkumar in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* calls Moon's autobiography as 'a social document which tells us how difficult it is for a Dalit to grow in India' (Kumar 194).

Being born in a poor family belonging to the Mahar community, Moon struggled very hard to fill his stomach. They lived in a village called Sitabardi, but unfortunately his father deserted his family when Moon was just nine years old. This made Moon's mother to migrate to Nagpur where they settled themselves in a slum named Maharpura because Maharpura was full of Mahars. The absence of the father compelled Moon's mother to run the family by doing odd jobs, the earning of which was not enough to meet their everyday requirements, which made them to depend fully on the upper caste neighbourhoods. Lack of financial support made Moon to discontinue his studies for some time and he started begging with his sister in the neighbourhood with the intention of supporting his mother. Moon's grandfather Sadhashiv Lokhare was a man who had grown up in the company of Europeans. It is from them that he imbibed discipline in his life. By observing Europeans Lokhare got the idea of Saheb and he wanted Moon to become a Saheb like the Europeans. He said: 'Vasanth should not even get dust on his feet. He will be a Saheb' (Moon 10). It was his grandfather who made Vasanth learn the English alphabet and it was he who laid the foundation of a better life which was like a dream for Mahars in those days.

Moon also gives an account of his life of poverty and his mother's struggle to fill their stomach. Married to a widower Waman, Moon's mother Purnabai suffered a lot because Waman left her and settled with his first wife's children. Though Moon's father was in good job of that of a driver to a Parsi and was getting 250 Rs per year, his life became miserable due to his drinking habit. Unable to bear this, Moon's mother sent a message to her father saying 'It's impossible for me to live. The children are in danger' (Moon 19). But the real life of poverty started after the death of Sadhashiv and this made Moon's mother to search for jobs for survival. On seeing his mother's struggle, Moon and his sister Malti thought of begging and also tried it out, but the fear of getting beaten up put an end to their idea of begging. But later on he started collecting used tubes from cycle shops and sold them in order to earn some money and support his mother in running the family. Though Moon's family was fighting hard to come out of poverty, they were not successful and were always at the mercy of upper caste Hindus. But in spite of this Moon's mother Purnabai, realizing the value of education got him admitted to Bute School. Regarding the education of Mahars, Vasanth Moon in his autobiography mentions the sayings of older people in the community who said: 'Brahman teachers, rather than encouraging Mahar students, always destroyed their self-confidence' (Moon 83). Earlier the Brahmins discouraged Mahars' education because they were afraid of facing competition from Mahars after getting education. So they tried not to give education to them and used religion as their tool as a result of which Mahars were deprived of getting education. But later Dalits started protesting against the injustice done to them by the upper caste Hindus and demanded their right to education by realizing its value. It is this realization which made Moon's mother to give education to him in spite of her poverty.

Mahars faced discrimination even in getting education. As mentioned in the book, Moon says: 'After passing eighth, most of the Brahman boys would be put in the A class, which was English medium. In the B class were Marathi-medium students' (Moon 85). Like Brahman students, Moon wanted to take science and thought '... if Brahman students took it, why shouldn't I? He even asked his science teacher and expressed his desire to study science for which they discouraged him. This shows

discrimination in terms of education and they were denied their rights to study what they wanted and liked. Not just Vasanth Moon experienced this but Ambedkar also faced the same situation when he expressed his inclination to study Sanskrit. He said 'Though I had desire to learn Sanskrit, I was compelled to leave it on account of the narrow attitude of our teachers'. But later on Ambedkar became master not only in Sanskrit language but in many languages which proved his excellence in the field of education. He is also the architect of the Indian Constitution which is a work of great mastery. If Ambedkar remained like other Dalits by following blindly the laws of upper caste Hindus then he would not have been able to achieve success in his life and become a role model to other Dalits. Vasanth Moon, by following the footsteps of Ambedkar accomplished what he wanted and thereby became a great writer and exposed the problems of his people through his writings. Vasanth Moon was a realist, who in his autobiography tries to put an end to cruelty and injustice prevailing in the society due to the caste system. Moon and his friends disliked to be called as 'Harijans' and even refused to take scholarship from the government which was given to Dalits for their uplift. This particular attitude of Moon and his friends shows that in spite of their suffering, pain, and exploitation they wanted to carve a respectable life for themselves through their own effort and hard work. Throughout his autobiography Moon discusses caste conflicts which existed in his community and the exploitation of Mahars which existed in every field like social, political, economic, religious etc. In his autobiography he gives an account of the growth of a Dalit from a poor boy to a civil servant and explains in detail the hardships he went through to achieve success in his life. He calls Dr. Ambedkar as his inspiration, because of whom his dreams got realized and emerged as a successful Marathi Dalit writer.

CONCLUSION:

All the three autobiographies, *Oucaste: A Memoir*, *The Outcaste* and *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* have some familiar characteristics. In all of them female characters occupy subsidiary positions. In *The Outcaste*, the narrator frequently loathes his birth which put him under the curse of being an outcaste. The target of his tirades against the accident of his birth becomes his mother Masamai, while his grandmother Shantamai remains a shadow character with her helplessness, her simplicity and her love for the narrator. While Limbale largely succeeds in bringing to the fore the pity and terror of being a dalit in his autobiography, the women, though given a large space in the narrative, are not adequately presented. They are seen as complement to the larger dalit society and not as separate beings with their own concerns which might be sometimes at odds or variance with males. Their awareness as females is largely missing from the text and they completely identify with dalitism. The result is that they are largely part of the canvas and disappear in the colour scheme of the picture without leaving a trace. The patriarchal structures in dalit society which add to their woes never become visible in the narrative. These structures are thus conspicuous by their absence and distinguish a female dalit writer's work from those of males. Further, that the majority of the dalit poets have tended to see women as victims rather than victors it is true of most of the dalit writers who may glorify them as mothers and sisters but still neglect their distinct identity as women. *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* gives a very sketchy view of women alongside the narrator's conflict with caste ridden society. Thus in conclusion it can be asserted that in all these three novels, dalitism gets priority over feminism and the images of women in these three novels remain fractured. The alternate aesthetics of dalit reality, while accentuating the 'caste' factor, suppresses the 'female' factor and the result is that women are seen only through a narrow prism, with their sensibilities and sensitivities remaining unexplored.

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