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SELECT DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES : A CRITICAL APPROACH

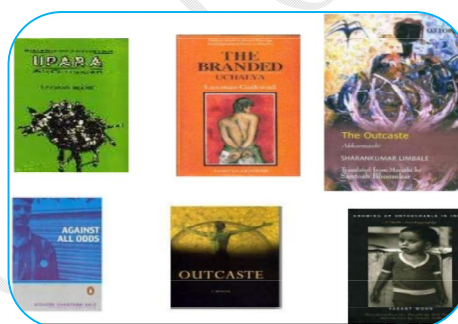
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ABSTRACT:

The question of power has always been in the background while defining their predicament: the power to define the future of their caste/race; the power to have a say in the running of the country; the power to change the very structure of society; the power to choose an Ideology that will help not only a particular caste or race but all those who have not been at the receiving end. Dalit and Bahujan have political connotations but have not acquired the force that comes with political power. Their prominent leaders fear that the reality of caste or race will be ignored if they subordinate it entirely to class formation. At the same time they know that their situation is related to power which is concentrated in the hands of the whites or superior castes. When Ambedkar talked of widening the area of their struggle, he had this aspect in mind.



KEYWORDS: Dalit and Bahujan , class formation, superior castes .

INTRODUCTION

In India, the history of the Dalits has always moved towards assimilationism, although the other strain was not altogether absent. Although Ambedkar identified Dalit exploitation and caste discrimination with Hinduism which sanctioned the *varna* system, he was at best a social reformer. When his efforts to find the rightful place for the Dalits within the Hindu fold failed, he decided to reject Hinduism and embraced Buddhism along with a large number of his followers. But it is not considered a break with

Hinduism by many thinkers as Buddhism is taken as an offshoot of Hinduism.

Ambedkar was aware of the consequences of the lies of caste created in the past but he doesn't present them in dramatic terms. He wanted to knock out the support that provided sanction to those lies. 'The power of the privileged classes rests upon lies which are sedulously propagated among the masses. No resistance to power is possible while the sanctioning lies are accepted as valid. While the lie, which is the first and the chief line of defence

remains unbroken there can be no revolt. Before any injustice, any abuse or oppression can be resisted, the lie upon which it is founded must be unmasked, must be clearly recognized for what it is.' The cultural consequences of the manipulation of lies of their existence have been immense. The worst of it was that their creative power was destroyed and along with it the springs of human life. In literature, as in life, they began with a zero image of themselves which meant the repression of their self-hood. Since they could not represent

themselves, they were represented by others but only marginally. Such representation was not ideologically neutral; in fact, it only reaffirmed the attitude of the mainstream culture towards them, although not without general human concern. But this concern was devoid of specificity of their existence. Their specificity seemed of no consequences. When the oppressed found their voice and began to make sense of the chaos of their life, the first thing they did was to rehabilitate their specificity in their imaginative creation. This process also gave them an insight into the pretence, the ambivalence and the duplicity of the dominant culture. Thus their literature acquired a different tone, subverted the accepted attitudes and invaded the imagination of their readers in the manner mainstream literature never did.

Literature for them becomes an act of analysing and remaking of their lives. It is no longer a mysterious phenomenon unrelated to the problems of their existence. It is taken as a historical category and as a part of a larger discourse in which knowledge and power cannot be separated. For this reason it is a rationally precise and imaginatively coherent expression of problems that confront them in their daily lives. It plays a definite role of consciousness raising and initiating a process of change. In this sense it is a continuation of their struggle in real life. In fact, it is now part of a larger social and political churning taking place throughout the world in which issues based on social hierarchy, race, caste and gender are challenged in the framework of social justice and social well being. There is interrelatedness of literature and social and political processes which can no longer be put in separate categories unrelated to each other.

Ambedkar's aim was to eradicate the caste system and untouchability, for which he gained huge knowledge that was hard to be challenged by others. He entered politics to hold the reins of power and was on writing spree too due to which he is called the Father of Dalit Literature. Though Ambedkar did not write anything new, he was the reason behind Dalit Literature's emergence in its new form. This was achieved by his new ideas, his attitude towards life and his struggle to reclaim self respect for his people. Arjun Dangle in his book *Poisoned Bread* explains what Dalit Literature is and who Dalit writers are saying: Dalit Literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (Dangle, xii)

The term 'Dalit Literature' was first used at the first Conference of Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society in Mumbai that was attended by people including social activists like Phule and Ambedkar. Historical records of Dalit Literature consider Madara Chennaiah, 11th Century cobbler saint, as the first Dalit writer. Madara Chennaiah, who lived during the reign of Western Chalukyas, is regarded as the father of Vachana poetry by some scholars. Another poet who finds mention regarding the Dalit literature is Dohara Kakkaiyah, who was a Dalit by birth and whose six confessional poems survive even to this day. Madara Chennaiah raised his voice against the caste system through his Vachanas. It was the first sign of the struggle of Dalits against the caste tradition that dates back to the period of Chennaiah. Similarly, the 12th Century Dalit saint Kalavve challenged the upper caste through his poetry. Dalit poet Chokamela, a 14th Century saint in Maharashtra, belongs to the Mahar caste that was considered untouchable in India. He was born at Mehunaraja, a village in Deulgaon Raja taluka of Budhana district. He lived at Mangalvedha in Maharashtra. Being the first Dalit poet in India, Chokamela had the hereditary task of removing dead animals from people's home and farm and disposing them outside the town. They were forced to live outside the town in a separate settlement. Along with Madara Chennaiah and Chokamela, Ravidas, a 15th Century poet, was active in his struggle against the practice of untouchability. He was not only a poet, but a socio-religious reformer, humanist and thinker. He was against the caste system and rejected the tradition of reaching the Supreme Being through a Brahmin mediator.

If one traces the history of the Dalit Literature, it is said that till the last quarter of the 19th Century, Dalits had no literary records of their own. Though there existed writers like Shambaku and Ekalavya in the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharatha' respectively, the two great epics of India, Valmiki,

the composer of the Ramayana, and the medieval period writers like Chokamela and Rohidas, nobody left behind any kind of literature to be referred to by their successors due to the upper caste domination.

But Dalit Literature took a new dimension with the emergence of writers like Phule and Ambedkar. Prior to them, there were writers like Baburao Bagul, Shankarrao Kharat and Bandhumadhav, who had created Dalit Literature in their own way. Baburao Bagul was the pioneer of modern literature in Marathi. His first collection of stories 'When I had Concealed my Caste' created a stir in Marathi literature because of its ardent portrayal of the cruel society and the caste system. It was with the publication of his first collection of stories published in 1963 that a new momentum in the history of Dalit Literature in Marathi was brought about. Even to this day, the work is seen by many critics as an epic that depicted the life of Dalits in a realistic way. But he registered his protest in the history of Dalit Marathi literature with the publication of his second collection of stories called 'Maran Swasta Hot Ahe' (Death is Getting Cheaper) published in 1969. This particular collection of stories is now regarded the important landmark in the history of Dalit writing in India. He was also a radical thinker of the Dalit movement. The Dalit Literature emerged with the intention of voicing the experiences of the oppressed. It was Dr.B.R.Ambedkar who gave a strong support to Dalits by encouraging them to struggle for reclaiming self respect and identity. Arjun Dangle writes: "However, through his struggle against untouchability and socioeconomic inequality, he liberated the Dalits in India from mental slavery and abject wretchedness, thus giving them a new self-respect" (Dangle xxiii).

NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH PROBLEM:

Autobiography is an account of a person's life written by him or herself. The term autobiography appears to have been used by Southey in 1809. Autobiography speaks not only about writers and incidents but also their experiences. Roy Pascal defines, 'Autobiography is historical in method, representation of the self in and through its relation with the outer world'. It is clear that an autobiography is the true representation of the extraordinary, renowned and popular men's life, achievements and experiences. But in case of Dalits, ordinary men and women, who do not hold any prominent position in the social history and politics write autobiographies. Moreover, it is important to see why the 'community' is given more importance than the 'self' in the Dalit autobiographies.

Dalit autobiography is a flourishing form in Dalit literature. The entire universe of Dalit culture and feeling seems to have descended into autobiography. Innumerable aspects of individual as well as social experience reveal themselves. Although it is not possible to write about each individual autobiography, if one decides to evaluate Dalit autobiography in brief, one can say that Dalit autobiography is the imprisoned voice of the third generation of the Ambedkarite movement. It can be seen standing up against subjugation, humiliation and atrocities. There are a few autobiographies at present in regional language. Many are to be translated. All of them are the expressions of uncontrolled aggressiveness and breast-beating of typical Dalit lives.

There is a need for intense exploration of Dalit autobiography in order to bring out the real image of India in general and providing completeness to Indian writings in English.

OBJECTIVES:

The research is planned to highlight mainly the following objectives:

1. Who are the Dalits and what is Dalit culture?.
2. Exploration of agony of untouchability in Indian social system and its cultural, social and economic effects.
3. New values of criticism and aesthetics in portraying individuals.
4. Repetition in the presentation of human experiences in different forms
5. Uniqueness of Dalit autobiography as outpouring of human struggle.
6. Narrative techniques in portrayal of Dalit autobiography.

As in case of 'dalit,' the term 'dalit woman' has also been a victim of fierce debate regarding who is really a dalit woman? Is birth in a particular caste can be the sole criterion to determine the eligibility

for being called a dalit? Can imaginative participation and a strong sense of empathy with the downtrodden be insufficient to feel the pain and humiliation which the burden of being born in a particular caste brings in. There are staunch votaries of both these points of views.

METHODOLOGY:

The research has been methodically classified into six chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction:

Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Caste System

This chapter is planned to focus on the etymological definition of the word 'Dalit', Marginality, Caste system, canon formation of Indian Writings in English. The ancient Hindu literature was conspicuously Brahmanic and excluded vast majority of India. It draws attention to the inherent lacunae in *Manusmriti* which excluded, whereas the sudras derived their origin from the solar race, as Dr. Ambedkar's research revealed. It also focuses on the background need of Dalit literature as a social responsibility and its various themes, narrative techniques and major writers.

Chapter 2:

Dalit Autobiography: An Exploration of Human History

The autobiography became important channel to reach the Dalit communities. It reflects the self of community on the whole. This chapter is aimed the succinct historical survey of Dalit literature in India in various states and Dalit autobiography its emergence, need of the hour for self assertion and self reliance, development, movements, major concern and ideology.

Chapter 3:

Outcaste: A Realized Saga of Ambedkar's ideology:

This chapter provides how Ambedkar's ideology has been manifested in the family story of the author NarendraJadhav. Written in the form of a memoir, **Outcaste** bears testimony to the success of a Dalit family in the course of a single generation. It is a story of the metamorphosis of Dalit in the context of the social movement led by Ambedkar. It emphatically presents the Dalit identity in cosmopolitan terms and global context.

Chapter -4:

The Outcaste (Akkarmashi): A Treatise on Human Nature

Limbale describes the life a man who suffered not only through this caste system but also through the pain of not even being allowed into the caste system: he was an outcaste, below everyone else. The one thing that controlled his life from the time he was a child was hunger; he knew that a man was no bigger than his own hunger and that there was no escape from it. Not only did he physically suffer from his deep, insatiable hunger, his entire life he lived under the curse of not having 'pure blood.' Because his mother had him out of wedlock with the chief of the village, he belonged nowhere and no one would accept him. In the end, he found his salvation in Buddhism. His entire life he had watched religion tear people and families apart, and he wanted no part of it. The Outcaste clearly shows how the lives of India's lowest citizens are completely controlled by the society around them. It's a beautiful picturization of human nature manifested through caste system.

Chapter 5:

Growing Up Untouchable in India: A Unique Indian Life

There is much in Vasant Moon's extraordinary story of his Vasti, his childhood neighborhood in India that would probably be true of any urban ghetto anywhere in the world. But there is much that is peculiarly and vividly Indian. In this first autobiography of a so-called Untouchable, we learn about the inescapable hierarchy imposed by caste, based on ancient principles of hereditary pollution. We see the unmatched importance of the heroic Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for India's awakened and newly ambitious

Dalits. We feel, viscerally, Nagpur's heat and the joy brought by the monsoon. Vasant Moon's *Vasti*, the first Dalit autobiography to be published in English, is a moving and eloquent testament to a uniquely Indian life as well as to the universal human spirit.

Chapter 6:

Conclusion: Dalit Autobiography A Pilgrimage of Mankind

This chapter summarizes all the five chapters and defines the future direction for Dalit literature. It also applauds the contribution made by Dalit writers on Indian writing in English.

To conclude, Dalit autobiography may be said to centre on man. Its history of the last 25 years or so may be seen as the pilgrimage of mankind toward a brave new world bereft of suffering, suppression and exploitation.

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