

**DALIT WOMEN THE MOST DALIT AMONG DALITS: REINTERPRETATION OF MARATHI DALIT WOMEN'S TESTIMONIOS**

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Maharashtra is a state to provide a fertile land to give birth many Dalit autobiographies written by both men and women. Numerous Dalit autobiographies have been published in regional languages and in English. Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya: The Branded*, Y.B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Balaiah*, Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, Arvind Malagatti's *The Government Brahmana*, Laxman Babu Mane's *Upara: An Outsider*, Vasant Moon's *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, Balbir Madhopuri's *Changia Rukh: Against the Night*, Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on My Shoulders* etc autobiographies are very famous from Maharashtra.

Likewise some Dalit women writers have also written their autobiographies in Marathi which are also important from different perspectives. Some autobiographies like Urmila Pawar's *Aayadaan*, Baby Kamble's *Jime Amucha* etc have been translated into English, and still there are some autobiographies both in Hindi and Marathi which unfortunately could not be translated due to any reasons also should be given space.

Among such works Janabai Kachru Girhe's life-narrative *Marankala (Deathly Pains)* is a wonderful read which narrates that there is hardly any Dalit woman's autobiography which is not pregnant with the pain of a woman. In these autobiographies, the marginalised status of Dalit women is the main theme. Women have to suffer a lot in their life. When Sharmila Rege talks with Kumud Pawde's life-narrative *Antasphot*, she observes that Pawde tries to call her work a critical narrative rather than an autobiography. Sharmila Rege writes:

*Antasphot*, unlike many of the Dalit life narratives, does not keep to a linearity of life experiences. More importantly, as the first published narrative by a Dalit woman...it proves wrong the usual male-centric criticism about women's life narratives being merely emotional outbursts. (Rege 228)

Dalit women's autobiographies are the saga of the personal agonies in which the subjugated position of women and their suffocated life has been narrated. It is generally seen that Dalit men writers have never mentioned or less mentioned the pains and problems of women. They have taken the theme how the upper caste people have suppressed Dalit men. They have merely described the incidences related to their kiths and kins but they seem to be negligent towards the women in their own community. In this context, when Dalit women writers emerged on the literary platforms, they brought it in front of the society that they are being harassed by the other women of their community, men of their family and the upper caste people. Thus, Dalit women are triply marginalised. Both the autobiographies have one thing in common that these autobiographies are the stories of sorrows, suppression and exploitation. It has been rightly said that, "Despite their differences, male autobiographies project a central consciousness, trace self-development, reflect mobility... (Jain 285) while Dalit women's autobiographies depict the pain of the writer herself and other women of her community.

Urmila Pawar in her memoir *The Weave of My Life* narrates the pain of the women of her community and the discrimination between the upper and lower castes in her school. The women of her community had to cut wood from the forests and then selling wood in the remote market was not as easy task.

Shantabai Dhanaji Dani describes the problem of hunger in her autobiography *Ratrandin Amha*. They had to cook the cheap food in their family. Bhakri, onion chilli powder, and salt was in their food. They had to eat bhakri cooked in the morning.

Urmila Pawar writes in her autobiography how the upper caste girls would bring delicious dishes for their lunch while she could never think about such good food in her home due to her poverty. She writes, "However, I never asked myself the stupid question, why we do not prepare such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly" (93). Pawar writes that at that time people were highly impressed by Ambedkar and the conversion into Buddhism was in practice. Dalit people had also started performing rites and rituals according to Buddhist religion. She narrates how once she went at her sister-in-law's place with her nieces. When they asked rice repeatedly, the cook asks about their identity and when it is told to him by someone he calms down:

'Whose daughters are these anyway? 'He burst out. 'They are eating like monsters' then someone answered 'they are from our' Sushi's family! Daughters of Arjun master!' On hearing this, the host came forward. 'Oh! Are they? All right, all right let them eat as much as they want! Serve them well!' The cook returned with more rice but being called monster was not easy to digest and we politely declined. (117)

Urmila Pawar narrates her school experience that once all her classmates decide that each girl will bring some dish from her home tomorrow. The upper caste girls decide that they will bring something eatable but when Urmila asks them what should she bring, they tell her that she must bring money only. It was said to her because she belonged to a low caste and the upper caste girls would not touch her dish. Urmila writes about it:

They did not allow me to touch anything. However, we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about 'how much I had eaten. (110)

Urmila Pawar writes in her autobiography that she was not good at English and her English teacher would scold her for it. Urmila records her teacher's statement in these words, "This is English, the milk of tigress; it is not easy, like acting in plays." (160). She narrates that the sexual exploitation of Dalit girls is very common. She narrates how her maternal uncle would touch her from an evil intention, "My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband drags me into an alcove and presses me hard." (125). Urmila Pawar narrates her first night experience after her marriage. She gives a frank description of her husband's poverty:

"Never mind! My husband's hands were groping all over my body. The tiny room with its peeling walls, the single iron bed with its creaking iron strips, the smelly, moldy mattress with hard lumps of cotton, the dirty, stained, old bedspread, the flat hard pillow smelling like a naphthalene bag... (183)

Her husband Harishchandra did not like her getting education and taking part in Dalit women's movements, she had to give her salary also to her husband. "When I got my first salary, I could not believe that all that money was mine; that I could spend it the way I liked. Before my marriage, I used to hand over my salary to my mother; now I started handling it over to my husband. If this is not like deliberately offering head for the butcher's knife, what else is it?" (208).

Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot (Thoughtful Outburst)* is also about Mahars's problems in Maharashtra. She narrates how in 1946 Mahars were attacked by the Hindus in Nagpur. Mahars also kept them mentally prepared to retaliate. Situation was so tensed that Mahars also decided to do or die. They collected weapons from each family. The people who did ironworks made weapons for them. Even the children and women were prepared to face any kind of adverse situation.

Every family had knives and sharp instruments for slaughtering fowl and cutting vegetables. The wrestlers and their masters also had swords.... Blades and nails were being attached to sticks. Women were being taught to use the rope hoopla and sticks. Children were given the job of collecting stones and bricks, piles of which were lying at different places in the colony. (Rege 237-38)

Kumud Pawde describes her experience that she had to face many problems in getting Sanskrit as a subject and even after becoming a Sanskrit professor; she has to face many difficulty because the upper caste students and teachers did not treat her like other upper caste teachers.

Shantabai Dhanaji Dani's life narrative *Ratrandin Amha (For Us—These Nights and Days)* is another autobiography that depicts the Abdekar's thoughts that a Dalit woman remains the most Dalit of all. She had to remain under pressure of Dalit and upper caste patriarchs. Dani narrates how even a well-educated Dalit woman remains at the mercy of her husband:

A Dalit woman's husband could impose his male ego on his wife. I am well educated but still a woman born in the Mahar caste after all. Because of the very progressive ideological stand of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar I was able to become president of the SCF of Nasik district. (Rege 113)

Though Bama is from Tamil Nadu yet without the mention of her autobiography *Karukku*, this work will be insufficient. Bama narrates how she faced gender discrimination in the society and in convent school. She tells in an interview, "True. How can I think of my life as one individual's? I am a Dalit and a woman...therefore it is my community which makes me what I am...my story is my community's story" (Mangai 116). Pramod K. Nayar's writes that *Karukku* "highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-independence India" (Nayar 84).

Bama notices that Dalits had to face discrimination in the society. They were not allowed to touch the articles belonging to upper caste people. When she was mere a child, she used to go to school on foot. One day she saw an old man holding a packet of pastry with a string. She could not understand it and when she asks her brother Annan about it, he tells that being a Dalit he cannot touch it. Bama raises question about this discrimination:

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity (Bama 24)

Dalits were not allowed to enter temple and they could not touch the upper caste people. This discrimination is prevalent in Indian society since ancient time. The poor Dalit people did not have sufficient grain and vegetables to cook. Bama writes about it in her autobiography *Karukku*, "Usually in our street, no one cooked at noon. It was only in the evening that people cooked rice, made a curry; at other times it was always kuuzh, millet porridge" (Bama7). In present time also, there are many poor, Dalit or backward class people who do not get sufficient food to eat. Bama writes that even the police would discriminate with them. She resists against this corrupt social system and writes, "Here we are struggling just for this watery gruel. So how will the police or the Government be on our side?" (Bama 31). Bama vehemently shows her wrath at the humiliation and exploitation of Dalits. She thinks that Dalits must not rely upon their fate. She writes that Dalits should come forward to fight against wrong system. She writes, "We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change" (Bama 25).

Baby Kamble's narrative *Jina Amucha* was translated by Maya Pandit as *The Prisons We Broke*. This autobiography has the Ambedkarite discourse. Maya Pandit, the translator of the book, writes in the introduction of the book *The Prisons We Broke*:

Baby Kamble's narration reflects her love for her people without seeming to glorify their terrible condition. Outrage against the inhuman conditions of existence and love for her suffering people originally fused to evolve a self-critical and yet humane and mature tone (xiv).

Baby Kamble criticises the well-educated Dalits who have not imbibed the ideology of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and did not motivate other people also for their upliftment by getting education. She thinks that it is the responsibility of the educated people to work for them as Dr Ambedkar did. She writes that, "Education, prosperity, and comforts should not make me to forget the problems of society" (123). In this autobiography baby Kamble has discussed the position of Mahars from pre-Ambedkar days to the present time. The transformation in their lives due to Buddhism has been one of the themes in this autobiography. "There will be outcastes (untouchables) as long as there are castes and nothing can emancipate the outcastes except the destruction of the caste system" (85).

Shantabai's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* is about the conflict between the upper and the lower caste people. She writes how she faces many hurdles in getting her education. She could not save herself from the sting of the untouchables. When her teacher sends her to her classmate Shaku's home, the latter's mother warns her to stay away just because she belongs to a low caste. Her parents also were not happy at her birth just because she was a girl. Her father did not have sufficient money to send her in a neighbouring village to study.

Though there are many Dalit women's autobiographies in regional languages now but among them Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha (The Prisons We Broke)*, Urmila Pawar's *Aayadan (The Weave of My Life)*, Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarakatha (Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life)*, Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot (Thoughtful Outburst)*, Janabai Girhe's *Marankala (Deathly Pains)* etc are famous. All these autobiographies beautifully depict the miserable plight of Dalit women and their community.

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