

**JOURNEY OF RECLAIMING IDENTITY IN KAUSHALYA BAISANTRI'S
AUTOBIOGRAPHY DOHRA ABHISHAAP**

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India is a land of various hues and colours found in different caste, class and culture. These hues and colours can be seen portrayed in the strokes of festivals, rituals and literature. Every caste paints its distinctiveness through its literature. This literature acts like a window to understand the society and its habitants which somewhere has lost its glory. Literature becomes its pathfinder. The term 'Dalit' refers to backward, untouchable or underprivileged mean persons who are cut or kept disconnected from the society. Since the people from this group were largely involved in doing menial works or jobs, they eventually came to be considered outcasted, poor, weak and untouchable. Being physically and socially eliminated from the society, their living conditions were quite deplorable for them. There was no way for them to raise their voice and fight for their human rights. Even after independence, there is not much change in their social conditions and living standards. Though many social reform movements did take place, but nothing substantial could work against untouchability. The discrimination and prejudice against Dalits continued. The struggles, subjugations and atrocities from high class communities against Dalits were never ending. It is largely felt that it was only literature which could rescue from from this condition.

Dalit section started taking help of literature to express their plight and confront their subjugations. Many Dalit writers like Bama Faustina Soosairaj, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, P. Sivakami, Daya Pawar and Baburao Bagul raised their voices with their own stories of pain and suffering, narrating the anguish of Dalit life in original. The situation of the women in Dalit communities was even more painful. They not only had to fight against caste discrimination, but also against gender discrimination – both inside and outside. There seemed to be no saviour for Dalit women and their woes. It was at this crucial junction that the emancipatory project of a Dalit feminist standpoint came to be approached by upper-caste feminists' scholars like Uma Chakravarty, Sharmila Rege and V. Geetha. In fact, they proved to be exemplary that it is not just about Dalit women's autonomy to question the caste structure. Any woman who can feel the pain and silent suffering of a woman even if she's a non-Dalit feminist, can hold the responsibility to question casteism as much as Dalit women do, *albeit* from their specific standpoints and lived experiences. It essentially doesn't imply that a non-Dalit feminist speaks on 'behalf' of Dalit women and tries to appropriate their struggles. The statement simply refers to the fact that caste as a structure exploits women at different levels. Therefore, not just from Dalit feminist point of view, but from different standpoints of different degrees and measures, they are also the victims of caste hierarchy and not above this oppressive structure.

Savitri Rao Phule, who, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule and friend Fatima Sheikh, was India's foremost Dalit feminist icon in India. She is credited to have fought tirelessly against the feudal caste system and discrimination. The struggles of Dalit women were of greater magnitude largely owing their caste position. They were not only subjugated by the patriarchal set up of their own caste and society, but also largely by the high-class Brahmins. Savitribai Phule and her husband, in such conditions attacked the Indian society. They not only cited the

condition of Dalit women, but also of Hindu widows who were equally suppressed and exploited. The condition of Dalits was more pitiable largely because of the hopelessness for them existing from all quarters and also being marginalised and disposed.

Standpoint Theory is largely responsible for conceptualizing the Dalit feminist point of view. The origin comes from a feminist school of thought born from Marxism. The testimony of the fact is that the production of knowledge originates from social epistemological positions can be traced in the Black feminist standpoint. This was largely responsible to encourage several narratives by Dalit women. This led to produce feminist knowledge from their own standpoints. Dalit feminist standpoint, therefore, refers to a spectrum of knowledge consisting of individual testimonies of marginalised women's experiences within the larger social structures. Her suffering, subordination, and awareness of her rights remained restricted to the caste question. It was observed that women's writing did express awareness beyond the caste question. The concern of caste and gender was the main focus area of the Dalit female mobilization.

The era is broadly widely divided into three divisions:

1. Conversion of 1956
2. Women's Movement of 1975
3. Globalisation of 1990

It was only after 1975, that the idea of women's liberation gained momentum. Dalit women came to realise that she was not a commodity to be used, humiliated and eventually discarded. The focus was not on the mythological or Buddhist studies but on the real-life stories of the oppressed fairer sex in the society. Writers like Rajni Tilak, Urmila Pawar, Bama, Kamble and many more felt the pain and anguish of the women in the society at large. They realised the significance of not so significant considered creation of God. It was through their works that the society by large came to value the intellect, space and dignity of women especially Dalit women. What was largely advocated for Dalit men of the society, was demanded for Dalit women also. Urmila Pawar's works like *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* (2008), *Motherwit*, etc. were picked from the air the Dalit women were breathing. Issues largely covered caste, rituals, and traditions from a feminist perspective. The ideological premises therefore got constructed on these pillars of issues.

Within the backdrop of the ideological differences between upper-caste feminists and Dalit feminists, based on their different approach in addressing and situating 'caste' within the women's movement, the call for a 'Dalit feminist standpoint' by Dalit feminists emerged.

To trace the construction of identities, it requires one to engage with historiography. In India, the non-Brahmin women's histories have often been neglected, which otherwise was populated by masculine and upper-caste narratives of nationalism, imperialism and communalism. That is when the feminist historiography stepped in. Rajni Tilak has also expressed how the mainstream women's movement did not adequately incorporate and invoke the ideals of Savitribai Phule, Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule.

Therefore, re-visioning historiography from a Dalit feminist standpoint brings to light important turns in the women's movement in India—firstly, how Dalit women as subjects were focused on only after 1990s by what was the initial women's movement in India. Secondly, the focus on the engagement with Dalit women's experiences and life testimonies, and finally, Dalit women's agitation to fight their marginalization in literary and political circles due to their doubly-oppressed position, owing to Dalit patriarchy as discussed by Urmila Pawar, Bama, Gopal Guru and Anand Teltumbde, to establish speaking on their own, and for establishing a standpoint varied from each other as well as from the upper-caste's.

Uma Chakravarti in her article *In Her Own Write: From Dalit Feminist Standpoint* (2012), also captures the shift in Dalit women's agency from speaking through interlocutors to publishing and speaking on their own in front of national and international audiences.

The focus of this paper is to analyse Kaushalya Baisantri's autobiography *Dohra Abhishaap* (1999). This work hints at the double curse a woman goes through- one on the account of being a woman and the other on being a Dalit. Kaushalya became the mouthpiece for such oppressed women at the threshold of patriarchal community. Her autobiography is a glimpse into her life, where every moment, minute and days were a struggle to uphold one's dignity and self-respect, in a society which was more attuned to dishonor the women as their right and privilege. Her boldness and stand against this discrimination were not taken too well either by the patriarchs of non-Dalit community and also by her community too. There are number of highlighting features of her work. Firstly, her work is a firsthand testimonial of the mental, physical and emotional atrocities mated to her by her husband and other male patriarchs. Subsequently, it also brings forth the insults and abuses her mother and her grandmother had faced at the hands of their respective husbands. Aaji, as she called her grandmother, had been considered a bad omen for her husband's family, after his demise. Forcibly pushed into a second marriage, since polygamy was much practiced, she was a 'paat'—a woman who had lost her first husband, brought to the house of the second husband at night and who was made to wear a necklace, with an inscribed figure of a woman and to be boycotted from any social or religious participation. She had faced hardships not only at the hands of her second husband, but also his first wife and the family respectively. Aaji was supposedly quite beautiful. This was a reason big enough for her grandfather, called Aajoba to:

Rebuke her, and display his anger towards her. He used to drink and abuse her, to hide his inferiority. Aaji, tolerated it with all patience as she never had the courage to raise her voice against this. (11-12).

Eventually, she left for Nagpur after facing much; lost her son at the age of eighteen and bowed to the forceful marriage of her daughter, Bhagirathi, Kaushalya's mother. Though underprivileged and poverty-ridden, yet she had better husband than her father to her mother. But unfortunately, even Bhagirathi's life could not be devoid of patriarchal influence. Being illiterate and widow with five children, she wanted to give education to her offsprings; but this was somewhat not well digested by high caste people and the society at large. Kaushalya Baisantri, over her journey of writing this autobiography, gives an insight into her family conditions to let the readers understand the intensity of injustice and oppression faced inside outside—her grandfather, her husband and her sons complemented by the male dominant society. She knew very well that opening of her heart in the form of her autobiography, would definitely not be accepted by them, but she knew that this was the only resort to make the outside world aware about the woes of women and that too Dalit women at large. With five siblings and that too girls, she grew amidst the curse of being a girl child, breathed in poverty, where clay and cow dung was binder for their broken walls and roofs, eating broken parts of rice, washing hair with clay, eating beefs and buying eatables from a nearby graveyard made for Anglo-Indians. A lot of first-hand insight into plight of the women was narrated to her by her mother, when she was forced to get married in her infancy, denied education and became a widow in adolescence. Despite all odds and under much hardships, she educated her children for a better tomorrow least realizing that the third generation i.e., Kaushalya and her female siblings, would too face the similar consequences. Her elder sister was married off when in school despite many pleads; bore a child every second year—eleven children—all suffering from illness due to malnutrition and lack of proper medical care. She herself was married to an educated IAS officer Devendra in 1947 who

was literate but uneducated—the mind frame still followed the old dictum of male supremacy over females. Though he worked for the Dalits, but was far from being sensitive towards females of the house.

The right to education was denied by him for his sisters; females had no right to voice their opinion and give suggestions. The trend continued for Kaushalya too when she joined him in his house. (100).

Kaushalya, at a very young age had come to understand quite well that the male domination constructed Aajoba to display his masculinity, since the patriarchal society had given him this permit. She could see the trail in her husband too. What was more perplexing was the fact that Devendra, her husband was quite educated and qualified, yet was an alter ego of the males she had grown up seeing around her. Devendra was only reminded of Kaushalya to satiate his physical urges and the completion of household chores through an unpaid servant- his wife. He could never strike a chord with his children too; deprived his family of the basic necessities. A decorated freedom fighter with no sentiments for the females is what the actual gory picture of Devendra was. The last nail in the coffin came when Kaushalya Baisantri is admitted in the hospital during childbirth and the amount of medical expenses mounts to be more than two hundred. Against this amount, is paid only forty rupees. This was the time, when she decided to file for a divorce which was definitely not only a big step but also a trumpet of breaking free from the shackles of the taboo of being weak, suppressed and oppressed. This was a turning point where like her grandmother, she too decided to fight her own battle and face struggles. Her lineage of living with self-respect and dignity inspired Kaushalya to raise her voice against unacceptable and invalid norms of the patriarchal society.

Kaushalya Baisantri makes effective use of power of the pen to wage a war against unfair and unaccepted male dominance. Through her own narratives of brutalities and sufferings, she had tried to raise awareness about it in her fellow females of that community. The baton had to be successfully passed on as to keep the light of fight for equality on. All the autobiographies and other form of writings, therefore become a tool for Dalit females to break free from the chains of the slavery of caste and sex discrimination.

Each Dalit female writer, with deep profoundness and complicity, brings forth the complex issues of identity, caste discrimination and poverty. There lies the richness of the craftsmanship with testimony of true experiences. The harsh realities of belonging to the lower caste is known and accepted by all the female writers but what emerges is the fact is the battle they have tried to raise against the miserable sufferings and exploitation especially of the females and consequently help them to find a place of dignity and self-esteem in the society. The societal format of writing, in Dalit Literature has no doubt drawn significant global attention and is rightly called Dalit Architectural Style.

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