

## Portrayal of Women in Select Autobiographies

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### Abstract

Dalit literature forms an important, yet distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and negativism, as it is intimately linked with hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as ‘untouchables’, are unfortunate bunches of social, economic and cultural inequality. Dalit is a self-designation for a South Asian group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables (outcastes) or of low caste. Dalits are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over South Asia and speak various languages. It is impossible to differentiate between Dalits and the various other caste groups on the basis of phenotypes or genetics. The caste system is a social construct among South Asian people and has no genetic basis. Dalit literary movement therefore is just not a literal movement but is the logo of change and revolution where the primary aim was the liberation of dalits. Indian Dalits during post Independent India had sought new avenues of liberation, which was to later turn into an integral part of the Dalit theology.

Dalit autobiographies represent life-stories of the Dalits where the ‘ordinary’ or ‘representative’ Dalit individuals use their narratives to raise their voices for those who are silenced by caste oppression for generations together. Hence the construction of subjectivity in Dalit autobiography reflects its writer’s desire to re-establishing links with the Dalit community. It is in this sense that Dalit narratives will be viewed as a means for writers to re-establish a feeling to connection to a community. Through the process of narrating their life-story with a focus on their Dalit identity, Dalit writers are able to form a powerful group which can then assert itself against the main obstacles they still face.

The paper focuses the oppression portrayed in the three autobiographies of Narendra Jadhav;s *Outcaste*, Limbale’s *The Outcaste* and Vasant Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchable in India*

Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit Consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it. That is its implied value. The nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits -in the past and even at present-in the framework of the *varna* system. A feeling of rebellion is invariably accompanied by an extreme psychological commitment. As Dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary. The nature of Dalit consciousness is obviously not subjective. It is true that pains and pleasures are lived and experienced by individuals alone but the sufferings of the Dalits are common and are attributable to common reasons. Hence their content is essentially social.

The Dalit point of view constitutes a clear diagnosis of a particular social reality and a sanguine hope for its desirable transformation. The Dalit sensibility shows a deep

concern for the Dalit point of view and an outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view. A Dalit point of view would not necessarily lead to an insight into Dalit life but the latter definitely presumes the existence of the former. Now a Dalit point of view could be held by an orator, an essayist or a social worker. It is expected to be presented logically; It must be convincing and it must reflect itself in the personal behaviour of its protagonists; but a thought, even when presented excitedly, is after all, a thought. It has to be set forth consistently; it must stand to reason or at least appear to do so. A Dalit writer is bound to have a Dalit point of view; but this is not enough for a literary artist. It is essential for him to experience a Dalit insight of his own, through it. This is true of any point of view. A Marxist view, for instance, would not necessarily produce a Marxist work of art. That cannot come into being unless the view is transformed into the artist's vision. What one mean by the transformation of a Dalit point of view into a Dalit insight is thus an important question and is vitally related to great literature. It is evident that a point of view is not synonymous with life itself; it is an intellectual cartograph of an aspect of life, which it illuminates and elucidates. There is as much difference between a Dalit view and a Dalit vision as there is between having a look at the map of a city and actually living in that city.

Autobiography became an important channel to reach the Dalit communities. It reflects the self of the community on the whole. Susie Tharu considers that the Dalit autobiography is the biography of its community. Dalit autobiographies are considered as the literary forms of social protest and practices. Sarah Beth gives some insightful comments on Dalit autobiography in Hindi. She states that, "Dalit autobiography transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. Dalits have used autobiography as a means of assertion against untouchability." She observes that Dalit autobiography contests both the basis of caste-discrimination as well as the institutional claim that caste no longer functions as a social force in modern India. It can be understood that Dalit autobiographies contextualize within certain larger socio-historical processes. This suggests as to why autobiography became an important genre, and why Dalit writers articulate this specific narrative agenda. Sarah Beth considers that Dalit autobiography has given the Dalit writers a way of uniting with a larger 'Dalit community to create a powerful group which can be used to fight against caste discrimination.

Dalit autobiographies represent life-stories of the Dalits where the 'ordinary' or 'representative' Dalit individuals use their narratives to raise their voices for those who are silenced by caste oppression for generations together. Hence the construction of subjectivity in Dalit autobiography reflects its writer's desire to re-establishing links with the Dalit community. It is in this sense that Dalit narratives will be viewed as a means for writers to re-establish a feeling to connection to a community. Through the process of narrating their life-story with a focus on their Dalit identity, Dalit writers are able to form a powerful group which can then assert itself against the main obstacles they still face.

Dalit writers emphasize the 'experience of discrimination' and 'Dalit identity' as two necessary criteria for both writing and critiquing Dalit autobiography. Autobiography serves as a means for Dalit writers to reclaim narrative authority over the construction of the Dalit itself. While dominant Indian society has identified Dalits as 'inferior' and

'polluted/ Dalit writers through their autobiographies re-write selfhood in their description of their life and the life of their community.

Dalit literature is the literature of regional protest against its counterparts. Arjun Dangle illustrates the influence of the Dalit Panthers movement on the Dalit literature. He states that between 1972 and 2000, under the influence of the Dalit Panthers movement, writers drawn from the Dalit communities of Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Tamilnadu began to write about caste and caste related themes. As some Dalit autobiographies have been translated into English and French, Dalit literature in India got a momentum. He states that Dalit literature and its emergence can be traced in several other Indian languages in the 1980s and 1990s.

There has been a sudden spurt in the publication of the Dalit writings. Dalit writing is being translated and published not only in English, but in other European languages too. Three important texts: Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* in English, Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, translated from Marathi into English, and Joseph Macwan's *Angaliyat*, translated from Gujarati were published by Penguin and Oxford houses in the year 2003. Jadhav's *Outcaste*, Bama's *Karakku* (1999) and *Sangati* (2004) were translated into French. It is significant to note that the Dalit writers, Bama, Jadhav and Kishore Shanthabai Kale (author of *Against All Odds*, an autobiography) were invited to *Les Belies Etrangères* in 2002, a literary festival in France, attended by 17 other Indian writers. It needs to locate this new interest in Dalit writing in the context of the internationalisation of the caste question in the 1990s.

The new visibility of Dalits and the debate on caste in the global arena created a new interest in Dalits and their literature. The present view about Dalit literature in India is a matter of not only looking for the space to exist, survive and struggle for identity but also to reconstruct the forbidden history of the community through their oral narratives. In the process of exploring the history of suffering from caste discrimination, particularly in the realm of education, politics and gender, the important questions are re-visited in the following chapters through the autobiographies of Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), Narendhra Jadhav's *Outcaste* (2003) and Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* (2000).

#### **Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir*:**

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 Markets* (1996) were popular works on Economics. *Outcaste* was published in the context of globalization and the internationalization of the caste question in 1990s.

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.

*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 bhakarīs made out of the jowar grains washed out of the dung of animals and gives Sharan bhakarīs of the flour collected as alms. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

#### **Conclusion:**

All the three autobiographies, *Outcaste: 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. *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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