

Dalit Autobiographies: The Expression of Experiences

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Abstract

Literature is an artistic expression of the relationship between the thoughts and feelings of human mind and the social conditions surrounding it. Dalit literature is a unique entity in itself. It is the creation of specific historical period and social conditions. It rejects the mainstream literary tradition and comes forth with new literary canons of its own. With the change in life and society, it has also changed with regard to its form, content and style.

This kind of literature is an expression of the newly awakened sensibilities of its author and so naturally, it takes quite a new form, making it difficult for the critics to apply the traditional critical canons to it.

Dalit writers have handled almost all the traditional literary genres like poetry, novel, short stories, drama and autobiography. But while handling these genres, they have given them new dimensions as the subjects they treat of and the experiences they write about are peculiar only to the communities in which they are born. The experiences and feelings expressed in Dalit autobiographies are so unique and strange that it is very difficult for these life-stories to accept the traditional form of autobiography. That is why dalit critics like Gangadhar Pantawane prefers the word “Atmakathan” (self-narrative) to that of “Atmcharitra” (autobiography) and thus refers to the life-story of a Dalit writer. These critics have rightly pointed out that generally an autobiography is written when the author has lived most of his life and reached such a point of his life that there is a very little possibility of happening something substantial and dramatic in his life. On the contrary, Dalit self-narratives are being written at the middle or early middle-age of the author. At this point, his life is not like a pond but an over-pouring stream that flows on and on and goes on affecting his present in the context of his past and future.

Introduction

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2.2 A General Estimate of Dalit Autobiography

A detailed study of these autobiographical writings brings out certain common characteristic features of their own. These features are:

2.2.1 The Self

In an autobiography, a writer looks back into his past at a certain point in his/her life and creates the character of his/her own 'self' with the help of his/her memory. From the study of a Dalit autobiography, one comes to know about the character of the author; how he faced the difficulties and resolved the conflicts of his life and with what stuff his personality is formed. Yet while narrating the experiences of his life, the author gives an objective analysis of his "self" and it is due to such objectivity and disinterestedness that his autobiography successfully creates the image of his "self" in conflict with oppressive social and cultural conditions.

The difference between the mainstream autobiography and Dalit autobiography is that Dalit autobiographers write their autobiographies not only to sketch the image of their "self" but also to make the readers aware of the disgusting and distressful conditions of their lives. These writers intend to tell the readers how the cruel and inhuman social order crushed them and made their lives sorrowful and unbearable under the dominance of false orthodoxy and social and religious customs. So, naturally, in Dalit autobiography, the "self" of the author reflects both his individual self and the social self. In this connection, Toni Morrison rightly observes. :

Autobiographical form provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say, "My single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative."²

The narrators while presenting a portrayal of his/her own "self", narrates certain experiences, which are common in the lives of all the members of his community. The "self" is depicted not only as an individual with a private career but also as a member of his community with ties and responsibilities to the other members of his/her community. His personal experiences and the experiences of any other member of his community are usually the same. The 'self' in Dalit autobiography has no private/personal existence of its own, but is a part and parcel of its community. Naturally, such an autobiography presents a harmonious combination or integrity of the personal voice and the voice of the people.

The experiences in dalit autobiographies throw light on the character of the "self" of the author and help the readers to understand different stages in the development of his "self". Similar personal experiences are found in many Dalit autobiographies like *Amcha Baap Aani Amhi*, *Akkarmashi*, etc.

2.2.2 Identity Crisis

The identity crisis at the societal level is found in Dalit autobiographies. Dalit intellectuals were unable to assimilate themselves with their community as they had advanced in their lives and at the same time they were not allowed to enter into the established social order by the upper-caste Hindus. Thus, they were confronted with utterly intricate tug-of-war situation between two extremes - Dalits and Caste Hindus - which seemed to be unlikely to be sorted out gracefully. This kind of identity crisis is not found in the mainstream autobiographies as their writers belong to the same established class.

2.2.3 Untouchability

Mainstream autobiographies lack in the genuine descriptions of slavery and untouchability. Though some of them describe these inhuman social institutions, they are a lopsided and superficial portrayal of reality. This is not the case with Dalit autobiographies. These autobiographies are the first-hand accounts of the ill-treatment of the Dalits at the oppressive hands of the upper caste Hindus in India. They were regarded not as human-beings blessed with certain human qualities like love, loyalty, tenderness, and honour but as a mean creature.

In India, Dalits were not legally enslaved like in the Caribbean countries, but their plight was worse than that of the slaves. Until recently, they were denied the right to education; they were forced to live outside the village walls. The public places and temples were closed for them. The monster of segregation was all powerful, discriminating among the people on the basis of their castes. The people of lower classes were treated as if they did not belong to the human race. The evil custom of untouchability was practised and it was believed that the mere touch or even the shadow of a Shudra spoils the sanctity of a Savarna. Though the practise of untouchability is a legal crime in independent India, it is found to be practised in some parts of the country in one way or the other. All these horrors, naturally, have crept in Dalit autobiographies and made the outside world aware of the deplorable conditions of Dalits in India. For instance, Shantabai Kamble draws a picture of the practice of untouchability in the sacred places of education, where Dalit children were forced to sit outside the class-room and the teacher strictly keeping himself away from their touch. She writes:

Patil Master was the teacher of Standard III. He forced us to sit outside the classroom. He did not let us touch either him or the other upper-caste students. He used to punish us from a safe distance with a cane. While checking our homework, he used to make us put our slates on the floor and after checking, he put them down. Only then we were allowed to take them back. He did not like to be touched by us.³

2.2.4 Family

In the mainstream autobiographies as well as in Dalit autobiographies, the narrator provides all the details about himself, his parents, his brothers and sisters and also his close and distant relatives. But an intensive reading of the autobiographies brings out the fact that there is one important difference between the mainstream and Dalit autobiography.

In Dalit autobiographies, it is seen that the members of their communities are relatively intimately connected with each other. However, these familial ties are not that much intimate as that of the established classes. The reason behind it seems to be the fact that everybody from these families is so exhausted by the intense struggle for life that at the end of it, they are left with little desire or energy to think about others.

2.2.5 Hunger

The monster of hunger appears in all its ugliness and horror in Dalit autobiographies. To face and overcome the monster of untouchability, they have to die, virtually, thousands of times during their lives. To earn their bread, they have to do all those things, which they did not want to. The Savarnas in Indian society used to exploit the Dalits by making them work the whole day just for a piece of bread. Naturally, the autobiographies of Dalits are replete with incidents of hunger in which the narrators present the portrayal of the monster and make the world aware of their sad plight. As the writers of the mainstream autobiographies belong to the class of “haves”, the

question of bread rarely occupies any space in their works. Consequently, most of these autobiographies do not deal with “hunger” as a major thematic concern of their writing.

2.2.6 Religion

The autobiographies of these oppressed people are the eye-witness accounts of the horrors of their lives. We often consider the temples as the only place where we could get mental peace and solace. But the Dalits were not allowed to enter the temples. Now on their conversion to Buddhism they think that they can get mental peace and solace in Ambedkar’s ideology and the Buddhist scriptures.

The problem of religion with Dalits in India is multi-dimensional and more complex. Dalits are being exploited for hundreds of years in the name of religion. So naturally, Dalits feel disgusted with such religion, which separates one human being from the other. Though most of the narrators in Dalit autobiographies are Hindus or Neo-Buddhists, they regard religion as a destructive force, which has exploited them and made their lives unbearable. So, their autobiographies present ironic accounts of different rites and rituals, beliefs and convictions of Hindu religion.

The approach of the mainstream autobiographers to religion is contrary to that of Dalit autobiographies. For, they are the “advantaged” people and such have been the real beneficiaries of the discrimination created in the name of religion.

2.2.7 Work

As religion has played an important role in leading these oppressed classes towards poverty, hunger has become their constant companion. To quench this hunger, they were compelled to work almost like slaves. It does not mean that the Dalits looked upon “work” as a hateful thing; on the contrary, their autobiographies present “work” as a partial solution to the problems created by the system. In most of the Dalit autobiographies, the writers have expressed their positive attitude towards “work”, which helped them prevail over their adversaries and accomplish their goal.

2.2.8 Resistance

The Dalits were forced to work beyond their physical capacities, starved, whipped, and sexually assaulted, which compelled them to resist their exploitation. There are a number of Dalit-narratives in which the narrator resorts to resistance to keep him safe from the brutal hands of the upper castes. The resistance is regarded not only as one of the means to keep the dalits safe from the upper castes, but it is also regarded as a virtue born of self-respect of the Dalits as human beings.

The Dalits are being exploited physically, mentally, and socially by the upper-caste Hindus. Naturally, they resist their oppression. But it is not so vehemently reflected in Dalit autobiography as in the other forms of Dalit literature. There is a conflict in most of these works but it does not take the form of violent resistance. There are a few autobiographies like *Akkarmashi* in which the narrator writes about the conflict between the Dalits and the Savarnas. But the nature of this conflict does not take the form of direct physical violence. The resistance in Dalit autobiography appears in the form of “denial”. These writers vehemently deny all the traditions and taboos, which were forced upon them by Hindu religion and society, and at the same time, rely on the weapon of silent endurance, which was more effective than the violent resistance in the given circumstances.

2.2.9 Education

The lack of education in the lives of Dalits is one more aspect of their autobiographies. The narrator speaks of education as one of the most important elements in his life, which takes him further to fulfil his dream of freedom. These autobiographers tell the readers how the Whites and Caste Hindus take every possible step to ensure that the light of knowledge would never enter into the dark ghettos of their victims. Here education is looked upon not only as a means of success for the individual authors like that of the mainstream autobiography, but also as a means to improve the situation of their community.

2.2.10 Language

Language is a very distinctive aspect of Dalit autobiography. These autobiographers prefer to use their day-to-day spoken language to the standard language of the mainstream autobiographies. They tend to express their unique experiences of exploitation in their own languages, as it can only afford to give proper flavour and authentic touch to their experiences. The use of standard language would otherwise prove an exercise in futility to concretize the true feelings and experiences of Dalit autobiographers. As the spoken language dominates in these autobiographies, the writers enjoy freedom with the rules of grammar.

To sum up the discussion, the above characteristic features form a set of aesthetic norms that helps the Dalit writers to construct their psycho-social self in their autobiographies. A close evaluation of Dalit autobiographies shows that the psycho-social self of their authors was constantly in conflict with brutal social, cultural, political and religious institutions of their times. It is so, because this 'self' was a kind of threat to the smooth functioning of these institutions. Therefore, these institutions of established classes always tried to create as many obstacles as possible in the path of the 'self' of their victims and attempted to divert them away from positive growth.

To overcome these impediments and ensure its proper growth, socio-cultural consciousness in the minds of the authors takes recourse to various means of self-protection including the weapon of protest. That is why this new set of aesthetic norms is at the heart of Dalit autobiographies. These norms are instrumental in serving readers to have a close look at the 'socio-cultural consciousness of the writers during its various developmental stages. Therefore, while writing their autobiographies, Dalit writers usually employ more of these norms rather than those of the mainstream autobiographies. In fact, their autobiographical writing is their reaction against the partial aesthetics of mainstream autobiography. Thus, these writers have tried to develop their own aesthetics, which considers 'human being' as 'human being', no more, no less. This new aesthetics treats Dalit autobiography as the product of specific social conditions in the lives of their authors. That is why this aesthetics of protest developed by these writers can be better studied and understood with reference to the various norms and parameters discussed in the preceding pages of this chapter.

The autobiographies of these oppressed people are the accounts of how they were exploited at the brutal hands of various social, cultural and political institutions like untouchability, patriarchy, education, family, religion, law, culture and literature and how they came to understand their oppression and also how they revolted against their oppressors and their oppressive measures.

Expressive aspects of protest include the use of Dalit vernaculars and also the narrative techniques used by them in their autobiographies. A close scrutiny of these autobiographies reveals that they are interspersed with a variety of vocabulary items, which are unknown to the mainstream autobiography- the taboo words, the swear-words, the obscene or vulgar words and expressions, etc.

References:



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