

A Brief Note on Dalit Women's Autobiographies

Mr.Ningaraju.R

Research Scholar, DOS in Sociology, Manasagangothri,
University of Mysore, Mysore.

Abstract

This essay focuses on autobiographies by Kaushalya Baisantri and Surajpal Chauhan to look into the diverging ways in which Dalit life-narratives written by men and women vary in terms of emotions, the nature of the narrative and a sense of family and community. It charts the ways in which Dalit autobiographies differ from other forms of writing, but more importantly how this mode of narration accommodates a wide range of social concerns. The plight of women and their depiction through the autobiographical genre not only reveals the differences in the psyche of males and females but also shows the limits and the scope of a single mode of narration. I have used Surajpal Chauhan's Tiraskrit and Kaushalya Baisantri's Dohra Abhishaap as case studies to highlight this duality in the mode of representation of Dalit women in Dalit writings. The essay also seeks to show how the literary medium and the power of the word helped Dalit women to articulate their grievances and demand redressal for their grievances.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography, Baisantri, Surajpal Chauhan, Testimonio, Tiraskrit, Dohra Abhishaap.

Men and women have different stories to tell and also sometimes different modes of narration. This essay tries to highlight the way Dalit women have been represented very differently in autobiographies of Dalit men and Dalit women. I have used Surajpal Chauhan's Tiraskrit and Kaushalya Baisantri's Dohra Abhishaap as case studies to highlight this duality in the mode of representation of Dalit women in Dalit writings.

With the emergence of feminism as a social movement to reckon with during the 1970s, a new platform for giving voice to the women's experiences came into being. Most of the feminists of this period were upper caste, educated women. They aimed at establishing equal economic, social and political rights for women. At the same time, middle class women were trying to gain gender equality through measures such as getting the right to property and equal wages for similar kind of work. They also questioned the prevalent patriarchal system in India. The development of Indian feminism can be seen in three phases. First, when European colonialists came to India and started raising their voices against many evil customs in Indian society. Second, at the time of the Indian national movement when leaders like Mahatma Gandhi merged the women's movement with the movement for independence; this was also the time when many autonomous women's organizations started coming up. Third, during the post independence period, when women started demanding parity with their male counterparts in the workplace and at home. While doing this they universalized the experience of women without considering differences based on class and caste. They believed that because all women go through similar mental and physical trauma so they also share similar experiences. This perception became the base on which they started thinking that every woman's suffering was essentially the same. This, however, gradually resulted in a fragmentation within the so-called dominant feminist strand as feminists failed to recognize that a Dalit woman's experience is very different from an upper caste woman's experience. This led to either no representation or marginal representation of Dalit women's voices. As pointed out by Sharmila Rege (1998), "there was thus a masculinization of and a savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood."

Rege argues that Dalit men representing Dalit women put forward their own views on behalf of Dalit women. Similarly, when upper caste women talked about oppression they considered Dalit women to be similar to themselves and talked about a generalized victimization of womanhood. As argued by Rege in her book, Writing Caste Writing Gender (2006), according to these women a caste identity can be transcended by the

larger identity of sisterhood among all women. This kind of theorization of experiences is problematic because the actual experiences of different sections of women in society are very different. A Dalit woman is doubly cursed as a woman and as a Dalit.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a new wave within feminism. There was a rejection of universalization of experiences of women belonging to different castes and classes. This led to an emphasis on the independent identity of Dalit woman. Gopal Guru (1998) in his article 'Dalit women talk differently' argues that in order to understand Dalit women's need to talk differently it was necessary to delineate both the internal and the external factors that had a bearing on her constitution. According to Guru, Dalit women justified the case for talking differently on the basis of both external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenizing the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (patriarchal domination within the Dalits). There was a strong feeling among Dalit women that upper caste educated activists could not represent their grievances in their entirety as they were not the ones who actually went through the trauma of being a woman and moreover a Dalit woman. There was a gulf between upper caste women and Dalit women which was not easy to cross.

According to Guru the independent and autonomous assertion of Dalit women found its first expression in the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in Delhi. NFDW was launched by Dalit women themselves in 1995. The organization committed itself to fulfilling several tasks to bring about a positive change in the lives of Dalit women. Measures were taken to effect immediate action against caste discrimination and for developing leadership qualities in them to help them lead their own movement through self-empowerment. In its Draft Declaration on Gender and Racism drafted by NFDW in its conference held at Durban, South Africa in 2001, the Federation resolved to fight the specific oppression of women from marginalized groups. It called upon the government to review and reform national laws related to violence against women, to gather statistical information on the status of Dalit women, to offer them protection, to redistribute land to women from marginalized groups, and to work alongside the international community on issues of discrimination.

In its draft declaration on gender and racism drafted in February, the Federation resolved to fight the specific oppression of women belonging to marginalized groups. Apart from Dalit women, and taking up the obvious social exclusion of women at various levels, the NFDW asserted that "Descent based discrimination based on caste results in the violent appropriation of and sexual control over Dalit women by men of the dominant castes, evident in the systematic rape of Dalit women and the perpetuation of forced prostitution in the name of religion through the devadasi system" (Kannabiran 2001).

The "reinvention of revolution (Rege 1998: 91)"¹ and the mushrooming of several organizations such as the Shramik Mukti Sanghatan, the Satyashodhak Communist Party, the Shramik Mukti Dal and the Yuvak Kranti Dal not only provided a platform for raising their voices and sharing their experiences but also accorded them a central position.

When we look at the struggles of the Dalit women's movement we find a clear similarity with the movement led by black American women. Both of them were in a more or less similar situation where either their interest was represented by others or they only had a token appearance in other Rights movements. Like Dalit women, black women were doubly oppressed, because they were women and because they were black. Though they had played an equal role in the movement for liberation from slavery they never got a similar status as men even after slavery was abolished. Elements of patriarchy had a strong hold on the minds of black males and they demanded a secondary and subservient position for women. The movement which started against racial discrimination gradually started serving only the interests of black men. It is generally assumed that since white women initiated every movement against male domination, black women had no interest in liberation. But this is not the complete truth as it is

quite evident that they were no less aware of sexist oppression.. They suffered more than any other group of females. Scholars have tried to put rather more emphasis on their struggle against racism and not enough on their participation in the women's movement. As bell hooks argues "while White women's organizations could concentrate their attention on the general reform measures, Black women had to launch a campaign to defend their 'virtue'" (hooks 1981: 165). In this way we can see that Indian Dalit women suffered a fate similar to that of their black counterparts. They had little influence while struggling for their rights and rightful social position.

Within this context of dissatisfaction and disillusionment, various Dalit women's autobiographies started coming out during the 1990s in languages such as Marathi, Tamil and Hindi. These women writers were amongst the few Dalit men and women who had managed to move out of their villages and gained education. These autobiographies not only talked about the life of an individual but they also represented the past and at times even the present of their own communities and their lived experiences, both individual and collective. In these autobiographies therefore there is more emphasis on experiential emotion (bhav) rather than on language (bhasha).

There is a debate among scholars regarding the appropriate terminology for these personal narratives. Some scholars are hesitant to call them autobiographies and prefer to use the term 'testimonio' instead. A testimonio is a narrative in a book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the protagonist or who is a witness to the event he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience (Beverley 1992: 92–93; Rege 2006). In a testimonio it is the self presenting itself in a collective mode.

M.S.S. Pandian in reference to Bama's Karukku argues that Dalit life narratives violated the boundaries of the genre by depleting the 'I'—an outcome of bourgeois individualism—and replacing it with the collective of the Dalit community. Bama's Karukku, instead of talking about herself, gives a voice to the whole Dalit community. This according to Pandian is a violation of the genre's boundary because it is inclusive of a whole range of textual strategies. Sharmila Rege has a similar take on this. She argues, "dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and provide the context explicit or implicit for the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, caste struggle and resistance" (Rege 2006: 13). She too believes that they violate the boundary of the genre.

While looking at these personal narratives we are not dealing with this debate directly but the issues at large are important for us to have a deeper understanding of this topic. Personal narratives are very different from each other. Similarly, upper caste women's autobiographies have to be read in a specific context. The upper caste women did not enjoy the same rights as their male counterparts. They could not even be remotely critical of them. Their stories are symptomatic of this bias. They move away from the conventional narratives of women wherein the focus is on women as wives, daughters, mothers, etc. For instance, Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan is very different from M.K. Gandhi's The Story of My Experiments with Truth. While Valmiki's narrative is characteristic of pain, Gandhi's narrative has spirituality and morality as its main strand. Similarly, upper caste women's autobiographies have to be read in a specific context. Their authors had neither the same rights as the upper caste men nor the same rights or freedom as their own men. Their stories are symptomatic of this bias. They move away from conventional narratives of women wherein the focus is on women as wives, daughters, mothers, etc.

While Dalit men are victims of casteism, Dalit women are doubly oppressed as Dalits and as women. They are penalized and brutalized not only by upper caste men but also by men from their own community. The subordinate status of women and their complete marginalization is clearly reflected in the writings of Dalit men. In rare cases when the women are actually given a voice or representation in Dalit men's autobiographies as in

Tiraskrit, the narrative is based on conventional stereotypes. The comments are invariably on their moral character and the depiction is always that of mothers or wives engaged in quintessential roles that society designates for them. Women's contributions in the running of the family and their efforts at earning a livelihood are completely absent. This selective amnesia by Dalit males shows that men are not ready to acknowledge Dalit women's contribution to the family, the community and the Dalit movement at large. The absence of these women in the men's narratives is not only deliberate but also calculated. These men refuse to accord their women equality even in literary representation. The silencing and stereotyping of the women has hence led to an alternative voice from the women themselves.

Dalit women's personal narratives not only challenge their absence in Dalit men's narratives but also voice the concerns shared by women across all strata. These alternative accounts openly criticize the patriarchal structure in their society thus reflecting on women's problems with specific issues in a Dalit society. The hardships faced by these women under the patriarchal order are thus articulated. Dalit women's autobiographies are very candid about all kinds of exploitation and oppression that these women had to endure both within and outside their society. They also give lucid accounts of their contribution to the larger cause of the Dalit community.

Dalit men's autobiographies do not mention domestic violence. It is quite evident from Dalit women's autobiographies that this was a major issue among the women. Its complete dismissal in the men's narratives shows their apathy and the complete denial of violence at home. Dalit men like men of all classes and castes thus espouse the beating of wives and the general physical, mental and emotional trauma which the womenfolk have to bear within a household. In the narratives of Dalit women the everyday is a very important theme. The day-to-day private life as depicted in the autobiographies reveals the dark side of a patriarchal structure. We get a woman's perspective on things—what makes her world, her take on societal evils and her anguish, hopes and fear and also a remembrance of the past.

However, it is important to bear in mind that this remembrance is selective. Remembering is as much about forgetting. Each individual is engaged in a myriad activities in his life. But what makes it to the autobiography and what does not is as much about remembering as it is selective amnesia. We choose to forget. While the men might choose to forget their own immoral behaviour as perpetrators of violence at home, they project themselves as the victims of caste and class politics. However, the women while focusing on domestic violence may not focus enough on the complicity of other womenfolk, especially the elderly, in the same acts. The autobiographies are different not just because they reveal different experiences and different world-views but also because they unravel the bigger questions of memory, experience, gender relations and familial structures which are the same across all societies and classes. Dalit autobiographies help us to think about the genre itself and its deployment by the two sexes.

Dalit life-narratives of men and women vary in terms of emotions, nature of the narrative and a sense of family and community reflected in these narratives. A comparison through Kaushalya Baisantri and Surajpal Chauhan's autobiographies reveal these differences. Kaushalya Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishaap* (in Hindi: A Double Curse) was published in 2002. She is from Maharashtra, an activist of the Ambedkar movement and a founder member of the Bhartiya Mahila Jagruti Parishad. In the preface to her autobiography she says that she chose to write in Hindi because she strongly felt that there was a serious lack of Dalit literature in Hindi. Surajpal Chauhan's autobiography *Tiraskrit* (in Hindi: Spurned) was published in 2005. He is from Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh and is currently working in Delhi. The title of his book is suggestive of its content. Chauhan has also authored many books like *Dhoka* (Betrayal) and collections of short stories such as *Harry kab aayega*, *Kab hogi wo bhor* and *Santapt*.

In Tiraskrit, the content revolves around various instances when the Dalits missed out on opportunities or felt left out because they belonged to a lower caste and class in society. There is a voice of resistance against deprivation and inequality. They look for self-respect and dignity for the Dalits in society so that they can lead a normal life, a life in which their caste is not the prime marker of their identity.

Baisantri's autobiography revolves around the community she was living in. There are various references to her everyday activities and the problems she faced both within and outside the community. Though the caste bias is attacked, that is not the prime focus of this autobiography. She talks about her family and the other people living around her which give us a clear picture of a Dalit community. The focus is on the way they live, their culture and prevalent social practices. Baisantri's usage of "we" instead of "I" in her autobiography shows the way the individual here is speaking for the community and hence there is a collective consciousness. Dalit autobiographies are generally based in rural India where the authors spent the early part of their lives and first experienced discrimination based on caste. Subsequently there is a shift to the urban landscape where the discrimination is comparatively less and it is often disguised and not blatant. Untouchability and class hierarchization as well as bias did exist in society but under the veneer of pseudo-equality.

The nature of the narratives is an important tool for differentiating between the autobiographical styles of men and women. Chauhan's Tiraskrit mainly focuses on those instances of his life when caste assumed Goliathan proportions. The discrimination in a caste society which refuses to acknowledge the achievements of the so-called lower class people is the central locus of this narrative. The writer's hurt is vocalized in this novel, especially when people start questioning his administrative ability and lose their faith in him all because of his class. One of the many instances which he talks about is when his colleague Venu babu started ignoring him when he got to know that the author belonged to the Valmiki caste. Venu babu did not even bid the author goodbye when he was transferred to Hyderabad. At another place he narrates the change in the behaviour of his administrative manager at the State Trading Corporation in Delhi, Shyam Gupta, whose attitude and mannerisms towards the author changed when he got to know that he was the son of a safai karamchari (a cleaner and sweeper). The narration is thus mainly a social and political assertion against society in the form of an autobiography. Through bitter experiences and general humiliation and hurt, an image of victimization and marginalization is evoked. The narration is not about the author's gradual rise to power in a caste-based society but instead a cry of protest against this discrimination. The sentiment against this social evil is so strong that Surajpal Chauhan goes as far as describing caste as a brahmarakshas, a stranded and wandering Brahman ghost, in limbo, who follows him wherever he goes (Chauhan 2002: 57).

Kaushalya Baisantri's autobiography has a different narrative strategy. The focus is on the locality, the environs, family, childhood, education and on the looming presence of casteism. The narration is not merely about herself but also about her mother and grandmother (aaji). The focus is also on larger issues affecting women. She talks about the ordeal meted out to Dalit women at home be it physical, mental or psychological. So the narrative form is that of agitation against not only upper caste men but also, and more importantly, against men of their own community.

The picture which emerges from Baisantri's autobiography is that of Dalit women under double oppression as both women and Dalits. Her narrative abounds in instances of domestic abuse. She talks of the violent beatings that her aaji received at the hands of her husband almost every other day. Exploitation at home, which even today is a lived reality for a large number of women, seldom finds a mention in the works of upper caste women. Propriety demanded that most upper caste women desist from writing such scandalous narrations which might bring dishonour to their families. Such skewed logic was not adhered to by Dalit women who freely expressed the shoddy treatment that they

got at home. Most male Dalit writers' focus on discrimination in society is based on class and caste but when it comes to acknowledging their own guilt and their own double standards at home, their accounts are eerily silent. While the focus on one kind of exploitation is apt and necessary, the brushing aside of the exploitation at home is shocking and appalling.

Discussions in the two kinds of narratives about family and community also help in pinpointing the differentiated narrative strategies. Chauhan's narrative is about discrimination at the hands of the other castes. A change in attitude—of friends and colleagues alike and its essential link to the author's caste makes him bitter and question the inequalities in society. While he does talk about his family and the various social customs which were prevalent in his community, the information is quite insufficient to create the picture of an entire community and their everyday life. He gives an instance when he was extremely happy to accompany his mother to pick up Joothan from Radhe Lodhe's daughter's wedding (Chauhan 2002: 17). While the references to his wife and his mother are there, they are not mentioned struggling in their roles in the family and in society at large. In comparison, Baisantri's autobiography has a large narration about the family.

Baisantri is quite often absent from her own narrative when she talks about other people. While the story is ostensibly about her she locates it in the familial context. Her larger concern is shedding light on her mother's struggles in bringing them up and ensuring that they got educated. In a way she traces the difficulties that different generations of women in her family faced. She talks about her grandmother and the problems she had to cope with in bringing up the author's mother. The narrative is not merely about a personal struggle but instead it is about a struggle of three generations which she has been a witness to. She places herself and her education within a Dalit context. But being a woman does not mean an inclusion of the narratives of her female siblings and an exclusion of the male. Her father's life and travails are also detailed. Her description of her childhood, however, focuses on the pains that her aaji and mother had to undergo to help her grow up, give her an education, to earn money of their own and to live their lives on their own terms and teach the daughters/granddaughters to follow in their wake. Details about various social customs like widow remarriages, eating pork, and the everyday struggle of the community around the author help in generating a visual image of an entire community.

The contrasts in emotions in the two kinds of writing are equally important to determine their general tenor. Chauhan expresses anger and agitation against upper caste values and customs. The note of despair is also a call for equality and self-assertion. It is a narrative of pain, resistance and political assertion. Baisantri's narrative does talk about caste based discrimination and inequalities but her agenda is to highlight the plight of many other struggling Dalit women like her. There is also a strong emotion of anger directed against all men not only from other communities but also from her own.

The subject in Dalit women's autobiographies is thus not "I" but "we". Autobiographies like Joothan and Tiraskrit almost completely silence the women. Here the "we" is the male. In Joothan the only reference to the author's wife is when he talks about the marriage proposal. His wife, as he mentions her, received a theatrical award and refused to use the name 'Valmiki'. Similarly, in Tiraskrit there is barely any reference to the author's wife. He mentions a 1987 incidence when his wife accompanied him to the village and an old man refused to give them water after learning of their caste. His wife was deeply agitated. The second instance is when his wife befriends a man. Sarah Beth in her article has pointed out that Tiraskrit is a complex case since the examples of women exhibiting their own agency are interspersed in the narrative with derogatory comments questioning the moral character of 'women' in general. In both the autobiographies there are no insights into the characters' own reasoning, nor are the

different circumstances and restraints faced by Dalit women in general given in the narrative.

Baisantri's autobiography with its narration of women across three different generations questions the double standards in society. The demand is to bring the female voice back to the narrative and look for ways for her empowerment. These women were either represented within the patriarchal set up or occupied secondary or no position at all. The women were commodified and exploited as they were considered not to be at par with men; the lack of representation despite a general sense of injustice harbours a despondent narration. While domestic abuse, be it mental, physical, psychological or verbal, was finally recognized there is still a lack of fair representation of Dalit women. The contribution of women to the household economy is also overlooked.

Every section of society has its own specific concerns and any mode of writing focuses on one aspect or the other. Autobiographies which claim to give an honest account of the lived experiences also have an agenda and are written as per a given structure. Discussions of Dalit men's and women's autobiographies show that though the agendas are different, this genre of writing can still accommodate different concerns. The plight of women and their depiction through the autobiographical genre not only reveal the differences in the psyche of males and females but also show the limits and the scope of a single mode of narration. More importantly, memory and representation create a new dialectic in these two forms of narration. While men choose to remember their humiliation and clamour for self-respect in society, women vocalize their concerns over the double exploitation. Representation itself raises questions of authenticity or alleged authenticity; imagination or perception; and reality or actuality.

An autobiography with its claim of genuine remembrance and retelling can also have a counter-claim of genuine forgetting and omission as is evident from the treatment of women in male autobiographies. It was not in the writings of the upper caste or Dalit women but in the writings of the upper caste men that the upper caste women had been valourized, the middle class marginalized and the Dalits victimized. Dalit women not only questioned their victimization but also spoke for the upper and the middle class women who met the same fate at home. Dalit women not only questioned their victimization but also spoke for the upper and middle class women who met the same fate at home. The circle, as we can see, is complete. The subalterns, in this case Dalit women, are championing the cause of women as a whole. The call is not merely to break stereotypes and demand self-respect but also to highlight the differences accorded to the problems of men and women and the lopsided progress of the Dalit movement itself; a movement which is precariously balanced on the sandstone of double-standards.

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