

## TALES OF OPPRESSION: DALIT LIFE NARRATIVES IN BLOOD

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### Abstract

*Dalit Literature is the result of a resistance movement initiated by the so called Untouchables. Earlier Dalits lacked voice, representation and unity and therefore, upper caste writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand and Tagore tried to incorporate certain Dalit characters into their writings. But, since these writers by the virtue of their caste, belonged to the elite category where social sufferings and systematic oppressions were not meant for them, somehow could not do justice to their Dalit characters. Henceforth, in the late 1960s and 70s, Dalit writings by the Dalit writers started making its mark in the world of literature in the form of poems, stories and articles. Their writings were smeared with retaliations; accounts of the atrocities inflicted by the caste Hindus and prejudiced Brahmanical Hinduism. The research paper will discuss the emergence of Dalit Literature due to the misrepresentation or underrepresentation by the non-Dalit writers and how the Dalit life histories of suppression and hardships differ from those of celebratory (Nehru, Gandhi and saints) ones.*

**Key words:** Dalits, Autobiography, Resistance, Caste, Hinduism, Humiliation, Identity, Self.

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**L**ife history or autobiography is an art of formulation of the self in the society. The genre of writing self histories and their popularity in India dates back to the narratives of prominent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru; who unquestioningly had a wide audience. Personalities like Gandhi and Nehru belonged to the elite classification of the Hindu caste hierarchy and thus were privileged in many unsaid ways. The availability of education, power, monetary assistance and social acceptability played significant roles in the overall development of their beings and consequently the success of their autobiographies. Therefore, the researchers and critics concentrated their analysis on such celebratory autobiographies and later broaden their choices by including Indian upper caste women's autobiographies as well. While on the other hand, the contributions from the Dalit writers went unseen and unheard. Such a discrepancy can be justified by understanding that, first, the language of the elite was English, and hence it was easier for the society to relate with the language. While secondly, Dalit Literature is the construction of Self which is placed at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. Dalit Literature is the literature of resistance, oppression and identity. It is a genre of systematic analysis with a history of three thousand years of repression, humiliation, oppression and dehumanization. Before Dalit writers became active, the image of a Dalit was a problematic phenomenon in the Indian literature.

Before Dalits began writing their own histories and narratives, they were mere characters in the works of Non-Dalit writers. Therefore, there was a misrepresentation of the Dalit identity since they were shown through a Non-Dalit lens. One of the prominent writers who gave 'space' to the Dalits or the outcastes in his narratives was Premchand. He grasped the dynamics of communalism and came to be known as a progressive writer because most of the Urdu stalwarts those days were the result of glorious Ganga-Jamuni tejhij of United Province. Thus, Premchand along with his Gandhian ideas initiated the caste discourses through his works. Yet, Premchand's

caste characters do not do justice to his narratives. Therefore, it would not be unfair to say that Premchand used stereotyped images of Dalits and day today idioms against them in the Hindi heartland to strengthen the plots of his stories. In this way, rather than helping the cause he might well have hurt the issues of Dalit awakening in the Hindi heartland. The fact is that no Dalit awakening ever seemed to matter for Premchand otherwise that would have been reflected in his writings. Many Dalit writers have opposed Premchand for being rhetorical and insensitive towards Dalit issues and blamed him for denigration of Dalit characters, particularly citing the example of his story 'Kafan'. Thereafter, many upper caste 'experts' joined in a debate blaming the Dalits for being caste minded and 'insulting' an author who brought Dalit issues in Hindi literature. That might be true that Premchand and his likes brought Dalit characters in Hindi writing but question here is in what form?

Therefore, the misrepresentation of the Dalit identity and consciousness became a prime reason for the Dalits to write their own histories. Most Non-Dalit writers use common idioms to project their view point. On certain occasions, they try to show 'pity' on a Dalit character yet at no point their hero is a Dalit rebellion in true sense of Dalit revolt against the brahmanical hierarchy. Non-Dalit's Dalit is a victim of exploitation, most downtrodden who must not be touched and whose very shadow is polluted. One may conclude that these Dalits are basically poor 'Harijans' of Gandhi and upper castes have to involve them into their work. Such writers can be seen as successful story tellers who wrote for Gandhian Era. These caste Hindu writers try to picture a utopian village for their readers, for which they had to include the untouchables as they too form a part of the society, statistically. Even with the rigid and cruel social order; they miserably fail to provide a ray of hope to the untouchables.

The non-Dalit writers follow a very prejudiced pattern while dealing with their untouchable character. For example, in Premchand's narratives, the zamindars are addressed as 'Thakurs' while the Brahmins enjoyed respectful name like 'Pandit Ghasiram'. The halo of sanctity attaches to a Brahman of good status irrespective of his means and personal character and is reproduced by the honorific title of 'Maharaj' or 'Baba', by which he is generally addressed. In 'The Thakur's Well', Gangi, the Dalit girl is compelled to draw water from a Thakur's well secretly, as the water in the well for the Dalits got contaminated. It is worth noting that the idea of 'Thakur' meaning not just 'lord' but also the 'supreme deity', is reinforced by

the irony of the protagonist's name, Gangi, with its imminent suggestion of Ganga, the Ganges, whose water, according to Hindu mythology, is the holiest in the world. Similarly, in 'Deliverance', the malnourished Dukhi (meaning 'sad'), the untouchable, dies after being physically tortured by a roly-poly village priest, Ghasiram. And, most importantly, 'The Price of Milk' is a story of a sweeper mid-wife, Bhungi and Gudar. 'Bhungi' the word itself means a lowly caste born sweeper and 'Gudar' means the tattered, shredded bits of clothes. Therefore, such writers in the naming of their characters, very artfully, used those words which are either ironic and sarcastic or perfectly apt for the characters. They humiliate their Dalit characters by naming them as Bhungi, Dukhi, Chikhuri, and Ghisu (which means 'eroded' from the short story 'The shroud').

The Dalits are stereotyped as dirty, meat eating, drunkards and rustic. For example, in 'The Shroud', Ghisu and his son, Madhav, reflected a waste life, depending solely on loans and collecting money from the 'soft-hearted' zamindars through flattery and begging. The story centers around the arrangement of a shroud for Madhav's wife who dies during a child birth. Ghisu and Madhav were able to beg five rupees from the caste Hindus for her funeral preparations, which they eventually squander to quench their toddy thirst. "They get drunk and delirious, having rationalized to themselves that providing pleasure for the feeling living is a better way of spending money than getting a shroud for the feeling-less dead." (Nepoy 20). At the end, both of them "started to dance, they jumped and sprang, fell back, twisted, they gesticulated, they mimed their feelings, and finally they collapsed dead drunk." (Rubin 194). Doubtlessly, the likes of Ghisu and Madhav represents the outcastes of the society whose oppressed lives make them fatalistic, callous, and indifferent to life and pain. Their struggle for existence and for recognition has resulted in complete demoralization. They have realized that starve they must; and if starve they must why should they work hard. At least they have the satisfaction that nobody is exploiting them. It is this outlook on life which makes them idle, carefree and careless, brutal and ruthless. The claws of Hinduism and caste hierarchies have wounded them so badly and deeply, that no hope for betterment or survival remains.

Earlier the Dalits lacked voice, representation and unity. Therefore, few writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand and even Tagore tried to incorporate certain Dalit characters into their writings. Raj Kumar rightly observes:

but, because both Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand and several other progressive writers by virtue of their birth and education stood outside the arena of suffering of the untouchables and other underprivileged classes, the representation made by these writers of the poor and the downtrodden were bound to be different from the self-representation of the poor. (143-4)

Therefore, in the late 1960s and 70s, Dalit writings by the Dalit writers started making its mark in the world of literature in the form of poems, stories and articles. Their writings were smeared with retaliations; accounts of the atrocities inflicted by the caste Hindus and prejudiced brahmanical Hinduism. The Dalits, who acquired education, began targeting the caste system and its hypocrisies through their writings; the very tool that was denied to them by the four fold caste system. Soon Dalit writers started calling Dalit literature as ‘Hindu literature’ as the literature stood against the hegemonic structure of the Brahmanic Hinduism. As Baburao Bagul in *Poison Bread* believes,

The established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. “Dalit” is the name of total revolution; it is revolution incarnate. (294)

Thus Dalit writers believed in humanitarian freedom; recognition based on a person’s worth and labor, rather than on the caste strings.

The introduction of autobiographies has changed the face of the Dalit literature in the recent past. The autobiographies give us a firsthand experience of the narrator’s life, along with a critical insight of the lives of rest of the characters, especially non-Dalits. It is, as noted, ‘a shift from the polished biographies and autobiographies of the “great and famous” towards the investigation of more marginalized and subaltern sections of the society.’ (Blackburn 3) It is important to note that the Dalit writings were primarily written in the different Indian languages like Marathi, Malayalam, Hindi and Telegu and not in English. As the Dalit literature began getting popularized, the increase in the readership led to its translation in English and other foreign languages. As understood, autobiographies are selective recollection of events and

experiences. It should be seen as heroic task when a Dalit decides to write his own story. In a country where Dalits are rendered voiceless, it takes a lot of courage to step into the Hindu caste society and shout back at them through these writings. These writers critiques the caste hierarchies that take place within the society and assert the fact that all men are humans and baseless discriminations based on caste, class, gender and Vedic scriptures should be abolished. In most of the cases where Dalits attempt to talk, their voices and essence are at once silenced by the dominant caste or state. 'Thus life histories are a way of rescuing or recovering the voice "buried".' (Blackburn 15)

Henceforth, writing became a powerful weapon for the Dalits to narrate their own stories in their own languages. The Dalits were highly influenced by their Mahar leader B R Ambedkar, who through his writings and political activities argued the case of the untouchables from the margins of the villages to the round Table Conferences conducted by the British empire. He thus inspired many others to write about Dalits and spread awareness and education among the untouchables and the weaker sections of the society. By the beginning of post-independent period, writings and guidance from leaders like Ambedkar and Phule were able motivate the young Dalits to acquire education in order to overthrow the practice of untouchability and caste discriminations. The very fact that today we have a plethora of Dalit literature, where most of them are autobiographies, denotes the tremendous awakening in the Dalit society due to law, science and knowledge where poverty and caste system earlier paralyzed its masses. Hence, majority of the Dalit works express their repugnance for and resentment against the established crooked social system in their writings.

Autobiography is the sacrifice of the attachment towards self as it demands the courage of producing the truth and facing the consequences. The Dalit personal narratives have women in their absolute nakedness, poverty and helplessness who are always the easier targets for the caste Hindu men; diseased and hungry children who are abhorred by the upper castes for their lowly belonging and; toiling and poor men, who in order to make ends meet, work as low wage workers and are circumstantially forced to feed their over populated families inedible delicacies like cow dung, picked up waste from the upper caste colonies and stale stinking pieces, to survive. But, these narratives also have women who are dauntless, self-respecting and voiced human beings; children who have understood that only education and revolution will change

their savage existences into respected ones and; men who learn to unite together to overthrow this barbaric social structure.

The Dalit autobiographies thus portray not an individual but the entire Dalit community. The agonies, pain, poverty and sufferings of the grounded depressed caste are perfectly painted in these narratives. These are the books of anguish and anger. The presentation of Dalit pain gives an entirely new dimension to the non-Dalits, who probably have a vague idea of but never seen in the literature. But caste, like other human institutions, has its good points which ought to be recognized. It forms a bond of social and religious union among its members and stimulates a corporate spirit which would otherwise often be lacking. Thus the essence of caste based society is not the exclusion of one caste and inclusion of another, but it is primarily and interaction of all the castes at a harmonious and congenial platform. And for such a change and realization, one has to question certain notions that are rooted in the old structures of the society in the name of caste. Though the structural crisis is inevitable once the lower castes refuse to abide by the older rules, but eventually, such an awakened consciousness will leave the society in a more humane and compassionate state. As rightly said:

Socio-Anthropological study of the Dalit autobiographies is the need of the hour. Then only one can understand the power of expression of a Dalit, because expression of words itself is a strong weapon to fight against the social justice. We have to examine a question that what is the reaction of the so-called elite class, who are responsible for the hunger and exploitation of the Dalits? Are they serious about the impact of Dalit writings? Do they feel guilty? (Murali 110).

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