Journal of Higher Education & Research Society
A Refereed International
ISSN- 2349 0209 VOL- 6/ ISSUE- 1 APRIL 2018

MIGRATION AND MODERNITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPICAL NARRATIVES BY DALIT WOMEN

- **Pratibha**

This paper would discuss the modalities, through which Dalit women in the autobiographical narratives depict the tropes of migration and modernity in order to negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity in the process of inculcating political consciousness, articulating female sexuality and represent Dalit patriarchy as well as verbalize their marginalization.

Keywords: *caste and gender, migration and modernity, autobiographical narratives*

Journal of Higher Education & Research Society
A Refereed International
ISSN- 2349 0209 VOL- 6/ ISSUE- 1 APRIL 2018

MIGRATION AND MODERNITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPICAL NARRATIVES BY DALIT WOMEN

- **Pratibha**

In *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Nicholas Dirks expounds that the changes accrued with modernity in India were overdetermined by the colonial experience. The census classifications at the beginning of the twentieth century in particular empowering Indians (who were recruited to participate in one way or another in the construction of colonial knowledge) to receive new forms of knowledge largely within the framework of colonial Orientalism and late colonial state practices, enabling the basis for new forms of social mobilization and progressive/emancipatory politics to emerge in the political dynamics of colonial society. Debjani Ganguly in, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds*: *Postcolonial perspective* (2005), attempts a postcolonial scrutiny of caste and names Ambedkar, 'modernity's interlocutor for Dalits' (130) with reference to his engagement with colonial modernity and Indian nationalism.

Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1986) in Marathi, translated by Maya Pandit into English, titled *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) is considered a milestone in Dalit literature as it is probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman. Regarded a socio-biography, for depicting the history of Mahar community's oppression, the text documents the life of the community in the pre-Ambedkar era and the transformation it experienced with the emergence of political consciousness under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar. The text thus ushers in Dalit feminist perspective in Dalit counterpublics and literary discourse. Kamble sketches a touching portrait of the sub-human existence of Mahars, succinctly conveying the indignities that they were subjected to and their servile mentality, before the awakening of political consciousness stirred by Ambedkar. She recalls that the entire village was mired in dreadful superstitions and the *chawdi* the place for exchange of views would often resound with woes and tales of possessions by gods, goddesses, ghosts and spirits. But around 1930s, with the emergence of Ambedkar in national political arena and the unleashing of his emancipatory self-assertive ideology for the depressed classes, the *chawdi* became the site where the conflict between tradition and modernity got played out as newspapers like *Daily Kesari*, *Daily Sakal*, *Bahishkrut* and reports of Ambedkar's public meetings began to be read out in public. Kamble recounts her community's first encounter with Ambedkar. The first meeting, was organized on the *Pournima* night in the month of *Chaitra* in Jejuri, at the time of *jatras.* Devotes of God *Khandoba* had flocked this *jatra* from various places walking several miles. Mesmerized by Ambedkar's western education, fair complexion and European attire - people gaped at him in sheer amazement and listened to his speech with rapt attention. Later they vigorously discussed Ambedkar's thoughts,

personality and qualities. The text captures the emergence of early Dalit political subjectivity and recreates a speech by Ambedkar espousing the central principles of his political ideology, 'Educate, Agitate and Organize' in the following words:

> You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance! Generations after generations have ruined themselves with superstitions and what have you got in return from this god? From now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god. Teach them good things. Send them to schools. . . . When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving. . . . Our women have had a major role in being superstitious, but I'm sure they will now give up these superstitions and take a lead in educating their children. . . . My dear poor brothers and sisters do not eat carcasses any more. Don't clean the filth of the village. Let those who make filth clean it themselves. Let us teach them a lesson. This, slavery which has been imposed on us, will not disappear easily. For that we need to bring about a revolution. . . . I appeal to you my mothers and sisters, be the first ones to step forward for reform. (64-65)

The depiction brings into light the emphasis Ambedkar had placed on women as the 'gateways to the caste system' and the key arbiters of political radicalization of the depressed classes thereby redressing the widespread misrecognition about Ambedkar's contribution to the Women's movement in Maharashtra, whose founder Jyotiba Phule is widely acknowledged whereas much ignorance continues to exist regarding Ambedkar's role (Rege 44).

The evolution of autobiography in Europe as a distinctive genre has been coterminous with Modernity as it typifies the individual's attempts to construct a unified self by the "shaping of the past, imposing a pattern on life" and constructing a coherent self out of the fragments of experience (Pascal 9). It would be pertinent to mention here that, in the *Afterword* to the book, Gopal Guru opines that the text 'offers us an insight into the possibility of understanding the tension between tradition and modernity' as autobiography as a genre is driven by the need to demand recognition from others and written with the precondition of articulating a need for self affirmation (158-163) whereas In Hinduism 'limited value' is attributed to individuality, as it is 'morally constituted by the tradition of renunciation'. Thus the act of writing an autobiography itself is an act of resistance to negation of their identity as voiceless by Dalit authors against mainstream upper-class and upper-caste Hindu representation, because it positions them as the storyteller. Despite proliferation of Dalit autobiographies, Dalit women who have been active agents in Dalit political movements have not been given any corresponding space or representation in Dalit literary sphere as majority of prolocutors of Dalit assertion continue to be men and the discursive interrogation of caste in literary representation continues to be androcentric. The engagement with representation of 'female body,' as the site where the intersectional ideologies of caste, class and gender collude remains obfuscated. Their narratives remain marginalized. Moreover, Rege points out that; ' [t]he Dalit Panthers made a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of 1970- but in both their writings and

their programme- the Dalit women remain encapsulated firmly in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimized sexual being' . . . [t]he issues of sexuality and sexual politics –which are crucial for a feminist politics remained largely within an individualist and lifestyle frames,' without a challenge to Brahmanism have resulted in lifestyle feminisms (336-337).

Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) translated from Marathi into English by Maya Pandit and published as *The Weave of My Life* (2008), generated tremendous controversy from within and without the Ambedkarite movement, for the discussion of women's sexuality; an issue that had been hitherto rendered non-existent in the autobiographical narratives by both men and women Dalit writers, which were trapped in the proclivities of criticism of purity/pollution rubric of Brahmanism or the espousal of emancipatory project of progress and modernization. Pawar's text with its sexually charged language is also remarkable for highlighting the role of language as a medium that; both gives a voice and takes it away. It reveals how the subject is constructed as well as dissolved into words. The choice of words itself then becomes a political stance. For instance, in her narrative she points out that while reading the book *Before and After Childbirth* she realized that the writer abstained from using sexual terms for female body parts: 'Once the umbilical cord is cut, the baby which has come out becomes free (out of what?). Sometimes the baby gets in a horizontal position inside (where exactly inside?) Sometimes one arm or leg comes out. (out of what?) (211)'. The lines are indicative of obliteration of female body in the realm of representation, so much so that the figure of woman features only in disembodied form or in absence, for the purpose of upholding the norms of modesty as the mention of female body parts invokes connotations of shame. Pawar's public discussion of matter considered 'private' invited immense criticism, but by questioning the entrenched ideologies of caste, modernity and patriarchy from a feminist perspective, the text exposed the fissures and contradictions within the 'collective consciousness' of Dalit community, which is decidedly masculine.

Migration as a motif features vividly in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* describing her long journey from the Konkan to Mumbai. The recollection of cumbersome journey appears early in the novel when Pawar narrates that the women of her village had to regularly make exhausting trips with burdensome bundles filled with firewood, grass, rice or semolina, long pieces of bamboo, baskets or ripe or raw mangoes on their head to sell things at Ratnagiri. These disgruntled women who had to undertake such perilous trips across an extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain, as their village lay in a remote corner of the hills regularly cursed the *mool purush*, who had chosen this particular village, Phansawale, in the back of beyond, for his people to settle. Gajarawala has argued that Dalit texts give meticulous depiction of village geography, to address the politics of location in order to delineate the correlation between space and power and the cost of transgression, therefore in dalit narratives 'location is a driving force and the passing of time is processed spatially' (184). Further the novel delineates a detailed narrative of how Dalit men, women and children encountered modernity- the school, the city, the family, the bureaucracy, activism, society, religion- bringing in to focus new times and spaces. Pawar eventually left

Konkan for Mumbai, where she fought for Dalit rights and became a major figure in the Dalit literary movement. In 1970s Urmila Pawar promoted to the post of Branch Manager through reservation policy but she couldn't get respect as the juniors used to give to the male officers. She narrates the rampant gender discrimination in the following words, 'the moment a man was promoted, he immediately became a 'Bhausaheb' or 'Raosaheb'. But women remained simply, 'Bai', without the 'Saheb' even after their promotions! Besides I was a dalit! 'Why should she expect to be addressed as Bai Saheb?' (235). Thus making a significant departure from the orientation adopted by other Dalit autobiographies, the text presents 'a complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who also goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective' (Pandit xvii).

Migration is a common trope in Dalit narratives as Laura Brueck has pointed out that Hindi Dalit autobiographical literature is customarily marked by certain normative spatial switches such as – description of childhood at village Dalit *basti*, caste discrimination and humiliation at the village school, migration to college in a nearby town, obtaining emancipatory outlook through education and settlement in the city symptomatic of liberation from their lives of oppression and beginning of Dali activism. In *Karukku*, Bama shifts from narrating a story about the nearby temple, to describing how caste affected her education, to a commentary on the caste system, reverting to her childhood in the end. She voices the disillusionment she felt when she moved to college and realized that the hypocrisy of the nuns and priests who had propagated the superstitions and entrenched casteism in her village in the name of religion. All the rituals and religious believes she had once held 'began to seem meaningless and just a sham' (Bama 102). It is also important to note, however, that even though Dalit authors write about a sort of escape from their village, they never completely escape caste discrimination. The move to the city in search of higher education or jobs, brings 'neither financial nor emotional fulfillment' to the narrator, argues Gajarawala (184). Furthermore, they realize that in urban spaces caste manifests in covert forms and segregated of residential and professional space along caste lines continues as Dalits get confined the filthiest and most demeaning work in industry and Dalit families ghettoize in the most insalubrious neighborhoods. With respect to caste, it is clear that concerns involving caste taboos regarding commensality, one's culinary choices, the societal interactions and interplays etc., have significantly mellowed down. However, it would be naïve and dangerous to just casually remark that caste as a system of inter-relationship has lost relevance in the urban areas. R.K.Mukherjee has espoused that with respect to caste and migration there exists an urban-rural continuum. In India as elsewhere, migration to urban areas is associational; migrants shift to the city with kin or generally, crave kinship for practical and emotional assistance on immediate arrival (Vatuk 194). Their decision to live nearby or within one residential colony or cluster is influenced by these kinship linked associations. These colonies or clusters are classified as Dalit localities unique in their identity in contrast to other colonies. As in rural India their residential localities transform into ghettos of the general

framework of the city, the upper castes avoid visiting such localities and Dalits continue with their truncated existence.

Works Cited:

Bama, Faustina. *Karruku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Chennai: Macmillian India Limited, 2000. Print.
Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001. Print.

Ganguly, Debjani. *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspectives*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2005. Print.

Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Trans. Maya Pandit. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2008.Print.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013. Print.

---. "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position" Deshpande 335-343.
Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life*. Trans. Maya Pandit. Kolkata : Stree, 2008. Print.
Pascal, Roy. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960. Print.
Brueck, Laura R. *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature*. India: Primus Books, 2017. Print.
Gajarawala, Toral Jain. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. Print.
Vatuk, Sylvia. *Kinship and Urbanization: White Collar Migrants in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972. Print.