



LIFE-NARRATIVES FROM THE MARGINS

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Abstract

Contesting canonical generic expectations of writing an autobiography as a retrospective, chronological narration of a coherent subject having an identical relationship of author, narrator and protagonist, present paper explores the experimental forms employed in the Life-narratives from the margins-*Changiya Rukh: Against the Night* by Balbir Madhopuri (2011), *The Outcaste: Aakarmaashi* by Sharan Kumar Limbale (2007), *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* (2004) and *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma, Josiane and Jean Luc Racine (1997). Their formal and stylistic innovations in marginal life-narratives signify a promising departure from traditional literary representations of 'Others', provides a critique of existing canonical narratives in the Indian context. They also provide an alternative epistemology which challenges the views articulated by canonical literary life-narratives. It draws the attention towards the lively re-evaluation, re-introspection and re-definition of Autobiography as genre in 21st century.

Keywords: Re-evaluation, Margins, Autobiography, Form, Others

The very famous notion of 'autobiographical pact' formulated by Philippe Lejeune, defines, "classical autobiography is retrospective, chronological narration of a coherent subject at the end of life, where its coherence marked by the verifiable self-identical relationship of author, narrator and protagonist" (1). The traditional form of portraying 'I' in autobiography is based on the chronological story of a mature, self-aware person's life from birth, early childhood to becoming a successful personality through

array of unique accomplishments and perspectives in life.

Contesting these traditionally imagined generic expectations of writing an autobiography, present paper is an attempt to locate politically, socially as well as culturally marginalized narratives of people from the margins. It highlights the significance of autobiography as genre which provides a space, the locale to voice the unvoiced-unheard forms of self-life narratives/writings within Indian context.

Smith in her essay "Self, Subject, and Resistance: Marginalities and Twentieth-Century Autobiographical Practice" brings to light the limited discourse of traditional way of writing autobiographies which is unable to define life from the margins. She asserts, "The splitting of "I's"-into narrator, narratee, and the ideological "I"-guarantees the obfuscation of distinctions between factual and fictional "lives".... textualization of the signature ultimately erases "life" outside the text. Since there remains no self, no author/ity, no truth outside discourse, traditional autobiography loses any special status" (17).

There is a significant difference between forms of self-life-writings by marginalized people and the ideological norms of canonical autobiographies. The mainstream canonical autobiographies are generally Christianized versions of sophistication and mannerism of western culture. Such practices lack any space to marginalized non-Christianized forms of self to confess. Therefore, present paper explores the experimental forms employed in the Life-narratives from the margins-*Changiya Rukh: Against the Night* by Balbir Madhopuri (2011), *The Outcaste: Aakarmaashi* by Sharan Kumar Limbale (2007), *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* (2004) and *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma, Josiane and Jean Luc Racine (1997). The forms of self-portrayal in these life-narratives question the canonical status of the autobiographer as Metaphysical, Cartesian rational entity who is from elite class of mainstream culture.

Pascal defines the status of autobiographer as, "I believe the best autobiographies are by men and women of outstanding achievement in life" (10). Similarly, in Gusdorf views, the tradition of autobiography appeared relatively late in the field of literature and even then it was "peculiar to western man" or to westernized men like Gandhi. According to him autobiography is a marginalized literary genre, which can be traceable through "a series of

masterpieces....Autobiography is not possible in place where the consciousness of individual life has not yet evolved, that is, where the individual perceives himself only in terms of the society or group to which he belongs and in which he is embedded" (28-29).

Such claims of authoritative unitary atomic core which has well-defined boundaries of inner and outer self and the authoritative elite status of classical autobiographer are the focal point of the present paper. Twomey, Tish Eshelle emphasizes on, the cultural specificity of the Western understanding of autobiography in context to Native American Autobiography. She argues that:

autobiography is a wholly foreign concept to the traditions of story-making characteristic of Native groups. The differences between Native autobiographies and their Western counterparts raise an array of problematic questions, not only about the conventions of autobiography as a literary genre, but also about the notions of self-hood and identity that characterize the people who write autobiographies In order to understand these early writings it is necessary not only to separate them from the conventional expectations of the generic Western autobiography but also to distinguish between literary and rhetorical notions of genre itself .(22-23)

This implies that the nature of marginalization varies in different settings. The religious, ideological system like patriarchy, political economy of a country and the overall socio-cultural system has its impact on the marginalization of specific group or an individual. The concept of marginality focuses on the process of 'Otherisation' by hegemonic forces so that to categorize people in the name of gender, class, ethnicity, nation, region, caste and tribe.

Mittman emphasizes the lively re-evaluation of the genre. The classical norms as

per 'autobiographical pact' of autobiography in a retrospective, chronological narration of a coherent subject and at the end self- identical relationship of author, narrator and protagonist, as Mittman declares, "has been replaced by fragmentary explorations of interstices, edges, incoherences... overarching concern with critical processes of generic re- vision, ... with its allusion to referentiality itself as rhetorical topos" (208).

Recognizing the paradigm shift in the understanding of autobiography as genre in 21st century, the selected life-narratives are replete with social and cultural flavor peculiar to India. All are translated versions of their life-narratives like *Changiya Rukh* (first Punjabi Dalit autobiography), *Viramma: The Life of an Untouchable* (Pariah-Tamil), *Aakarmashi: The Outcaste* (Marathi), *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K.Janu* (Malyalam) are few examples of regional texts which highlight the problem of caste, class, culture, tribal and ethnicity in the Indian context. It highlights autobiography as genre being a widely divergent subject in its focus, forms and thus reveals 'shifting,' 'limits,' 'fragments' in its boundaries.

The titles like *Changiya Rukh*, *Aakarmashi*, *Mother Forest*, *Viramma* of life-narratives are unified metaphorically to each-other. Their voice is double-edged, symbolizes an accent on collective suffering, experiences of humiliation on day-to-day basis and community formation provides a critique of existing canonical narratives in the Indian context. They also provide an alternative epistemology and social world that can critique the views articulated by canonical literary life-narratives. These narratives have carved a separate locale/space to highlight different forms of marginality and challenge various discursive fields with universalizing, hegemonic tendencies to essentialist categories.

The practices like caste system, patriarchy, race has made everyone subject to and subject of defined qualifications/categories.

Smith draws attention to various phenomena marking subjectivities related to the relation of centers and margins. She cautions against miming the conventional style of portraying self in autobiographical writings, a totalizing practice to romanticize marginality. She emphasizes that:

.... my margin of visibility is not necessarily your margin, even if we are both women, or black, or lesbian. Each of us, in our manifold positions in discursive fields, inhabits margins and centers simultaneously. These competing marginalities and centerings even change position on us as we move through different experiences: a marginality in one locale becomes a centering in another. Let us, then, not insist on stable centers and stable margins but recognize constant instabilities, constant rumblings at the edges, boundaries, borders, horizons-to multiply metaphors. (16)

Thus form of the selected life-narratives for the present paper seeks attention towards their lives to be re-interpreted, re-visited, and re-evaluated by the literary world. The persistent question about their authorship, forms, varying degrees, recorded documents, edited, rearranged, collaborated sometimes co-authored forms, need an elucidated discussion on the topic of representation of self in life-narratives from the margins.

The life-narrative of Balbir Madhopuri, *Changiya Rukh (Against the Night)* guided by the principles of Dalit literature, sets one of the finest examples to highlight Dalits' plight in collectivity. For Dalit writers like Madhopuri, it is their social responsibility to express their consciousness (emotion) and commitment of an activist. Therefore, dalit writers do not follow the guidelines of the dominant grammar as well as aesthetics of mainstream writings. According to Kaushalya, "Dalit language goes against the established codes of standard language, pure,

classical, divine and cultures'- the academic languages. The so-called decency is the most suffocating term for the Dalits and it does stifle the Dalit voice . . . They should deliberately overstep what they are permitted to write, by the rules of the dominant grammar" (100).

Originally written in Doabi Punjabi dialect, the form of *Changia Rukh* as a life-narrative portrays a saga, testimony of a Punjabi Dalit man, with the overview of the local colours of Punjabi life. He prefers to use the typical and unusual rural words that represent the culture and traditions of his Doabi (spoken in Dawaba region of Punjab) regional dialect. Madhopuri's narrative also reflects Punjabi culture through folk songs and idioms like "Lak hile mijazan jaundi de" (the beauty's hips sway, as she passed by) (CR 43). In a way this typical rural Punjabi dialect makes the narration fresh, enriched with cultural aroma of Punjabi flavour in Indian context.

The language, content, slangs and abuses in the dialogue of the characters become vocal in the text. *Changiya Rukh* locates a life from the margins, through a set of different narrative strategies. This autobiography voices tale of individual life but also make attempt at history-writing by providing accounts of his Dalit community through lenses of individual and collective experiences of the author. With this *Changiya Rukh* as a native literature adds the attention towards significance of regional literature. It opens space for articulating Dalit voices at the regional level in vernacular languages.

The use of ordinary language in literature is opposite to the aesthetic rules of the mainstream literature. As Devendra Kumar Gora says, "The mainstream literature's artistic norms are elite in nature and controlled by elites"(163). The local/regional form of autobiography, adds new dimensions to regional literature of India by making the lowest of the low, vocal in it.

Similarly, Akkarmashi symbolizes the most significant part of Limbale's life that is

search for identity. In his own motherland, Maharwada Limbale felt humiliated, embarrassed and rejected as he was considered bastard; "they called me akkarmashi" (Akkarmashi 62). Therefore, title *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste* is used as a weapon against his fractured identity and social slavery, poverty, religion and caste system in Indian society.

Since present paper explores the forms of autobiography as genre, Limbale's life-narrative highlights the significance of autobiographical forms to locate the lives from the margins. The events, incidents and experience of Limbale's life of twenty seven years portrayed as an expression of his mother's agony and an autobiography of a community. This autobiography has been written at the age of twenty seven an unconventional endeavour which challenges the traditional / canonical norms of writing an autobiography.

According to Roy Pascal, autobiographies written by young men, "are not very satisfactory" (10). Similarly, Philip Dodd cites Virginia Woolf's example, endorses the idea that the writers, "who choose this mode of writing, should be of middle age. ...Virginia Woolf confessed in her diary that she was forty when she found that she had a voice of her own" (21).

Could it mean that the form of autobiography is most apt at ripe age of its writer or to be of a particular age? But there is no other literary form which has criteria of an age limit for its writer to achieve recognition or even to indulge in creativity. This implies that only an aging person is eligible to retrace the life moments, which one has re-lived through the autobiography as a literary genre. But western/canonical/conventional style of an individualistic and assertive personality seems out of place in Indian context especially in life-narratives from the margins like *Akkarmaashi*.

The form of life-narratives from the margins shows its distinctness through the portrayal of their autobiographer/narrator/protagonist or heroes. They claim that in mainstream literature the hero has always been an ideal person represents aristocratic class, upper castes that are being idealized as civilized, warriors, with some extraordinary characteristics. On the other hand the marginalized/untouchables have been portrayed as savage, thieves, slaves, servants or people involved in menial work. But in *Akkarmaashi* as a dalit narrative all marginalized dalit women, love-children, common man dalits are the heroes. In the beginning of his autobiography, Limbale confirms that his autobiography is not only the story of his personal difficulties, struggles and trauma but of his family and community as well.

Dalit Autobiographical Studies has been established as a distinct field of study yet in this field the significance of the forms of Dalit autobiography in Indian context is least explored. *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste* analysed from this perspective provides an insightful analysis of form of Dalit autobiography and aesthetics employed in it. Limbale's life-narrative highlights this gap as it has addressed the key concept of identity through its distinct form of representing - dalit history, theme, aesthetics and culture in collective discussion.

In Indian context the term 'Dalit Literature' includes only the writings of the untouchables and does not include the writings of non-Dalits about the Dalit issue. The main focus of Dalit literature is to highlight the process of 'identity claims' of those who were kept outside the four-fold Hindu social order. In this whole process dalit women and issues related to their identity which is oppressed in the name of caste, class and gender are pushed to the margins. Therefore it is very important to locate Dalit women writings in Indian context. The life-narratives from the margins especially of women aim at establishing their identity by questioning the assumptions of the dominant

caste groups as well as to disclose patriarchy rampant in dalit communities.

Dalit women face marginalization in society, but even in literature they are pushed to the periphery. Dalit male writers have put forth an exaggerated and romanticized impulse of Dalit women: "The romanticizing impulse towards dalit women, creating a false aura around them, is a result of search for dalit distinctiveness in male dalit writers" (Singh 58). Thus, Dalit women become Dalits in relation to Dalit men within their own Dalit community. This highlights, marginality as a process of making excluded one voiceless, powerless who is dispossessed of history, heritage, culture and identity. This exclusion gives the excluded one a minimal space that too on its periphery. There is no access to power, centre, Law of the Land, Law of the Father in terms of patriarchy.

This is how Viramma's Life-narrative *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* and C.K Janu's life-narrative *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story* become exceptional voice, a proclamation to protest, to resist and to condemn marginalization in the name of sex, caste and economic dependence. Their life-narratives become political, legal and socio-cultural critique where women attain meaningful proportions in phallogocentric society. These life-narratives question not only the hegemonic, heterosexual, patriarchal, normative regimes but also put forth an alternative form, a confident sense of the self with their unique identity, worldview and perspective into existence.

Viramma, narrates the story of her life over a period of ten years to Josiane Racine. This text is a result of an oral conversation thus, a new form of life-narration i.e. oral life-narrative. Viramma's life-narrative is more than an autobiography, a living testimony of the painful journey presented with exclusive uniqueness. Viramma's narrative offers the readers a first-hand glimpse of the lived realities of woman from the margins therefore having a striking difference from the autobiographies written by dalits or non-dalits. As a collective

experience this narrative shares the situation and struggle for identity of Dalit women, their alienated social status, their gendered victimization, inability to express their raw narratives.

Anderson emphasizes the role of Autobiography in Identity formation:

The idea that autobiography can become the text of the oppressed articulating through one's personal experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalized group is an important one: autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition. (104)

Viramma's identity is doubly marked as Pariah, a Dalit and a woman in patriarchal society. In her life Mannikhamma her husband and Arbon, her son played a vital role to justify their caste and patriarchy. Issues like education for Dalit women, taking side of her daughter to get married to boy of her choice, young girls of her community who has started taking care of themselves to look beautiful every single aspect of women emancipation is a welcoming sign for Viramma.

The primary objective of including this text in the present paper is to understand the very act of ghost writing. Oral narration stands in direct opposition to canonical/conventional texts in many aspects like purpose, focus, motivation, ideology, aesthetics and their experiences. In its oral narration an exceptional potential has been showcased to describe hardship with humour by the protagonist. Viramma clearly envisioned a locale/space for victim like her to consciously use their lower caste identity to advantage.

Depiction of Viramma's tone, slang, language and abuses with pictorial description of social taboos through sexually charged words mocks patriarchal expectations of femininity.

Dalit women sing songs which are satirical and full of resistance towards their oppressive executioners.

An analysis of songs especially those specific particular to women will "provide the best grass roots perception of women within a patriarchal system" (qtd in Nisha 187). For Viramma identity is all about her mother tongue, culture and her woman-being, a dalit. Thus, language plays a powerful medium with all the ingredients to make any voice, unique in flavour.

Its narration, language and experimental form are altogether different from academic versions of conventional autobiographies. Viramma's colloquial form of language violates the notions of Tamil standard, language which are defined or expected form of any language. Thus language, to borrow Seamus Heaney's description of Joyce's language is a "native weapon" (qtd in Tymoczko 35) rather than a source of humiliation. This adds to the exclusiveness of the genre of autobiography.

Similarly, discovering new ways of self-portrayal and exploring marginal location, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* involves in the thinking about the world of tribals the 'Others' in Indian context. *Mother Forest* is based on Adiya tribal community in Kerala. Adiya tribes' culture, customs, rituals, tradition and taboos made their identities different from the main stream society. Their identity is deeply rooted in the culture and tradition associated with land. For them land or landscape is not an object for survival but it is the matter of their identity. They are a part of it. Forest for CK Janu is like her mother, without which she has no existence herself. "No one knows the Forest life we do. She is mother to us. More than a mother, because she never abandons us" (MF 5).

In the name of development Government exploited the limitless resources of their 'mother' forest. Similarly, the manipulative jenmis (the landlord's), through crooked means,

snatched the tribal land, indebted them for bottle of arrack, toddy or some good tobacco or sari. Tribals became the bonded labours (the vallipani) either for Jenmis, civil society or political party workers. Janu has narrated the commodification of their lives, their Mother 'forest'.

Since present paper is focussed on the form of autobiography, it is significant to explore methodology employed in the present text which is orally narrated. Oral narratives of the people from the margins like Janu women are important to be given space in literature. To reject entirely the discourse of oral life-narratives propagates marginalization of subaltern illiterate strata of society who are politically and culturally excluded from the mainstream society. *Mother Forest* as an oral-narrative offers a way to open up to critical scrutiny the process of transformation of the narrated life to inscribed text.

Janu during her oral narration of her life used the first person plural 'We' instead of 'I' the first person singular. For her community 'protest', by raising 'Voice' or celebrating her community's unique identity is the only survival. For tribals, literature as a cultural context is not for pleasure or joy but to express their identity in the literature. The construction of the self in Janu's life-narrative differs from usual subaltern autobiography in this sense.

According to Janu they never reject or disclaim their identity but bravely, loudly proclaim it. It is the difference from the mainstream society is the root of their identity and self and they celebrate it.

"Celebrating the self....Articulation, narration becomes the only tool to survive. That is why the autobiographical attempts of the subaltern women become survival literature. They fight against all odds, ... to celebrate their "self." ...This celebration, is however, part of their strategy to survival, survival not only of themselves but also of their communities.

The communal self is narrativised and rejuvenated rather than the individual self. (Dhanya 105-6)

This text creates a new definition, new form of colonization that is internal colonialism in the name of development. There is a significant role of collaborative texts as intermedial exchanges to highlight the gap between politically, socially and culturally marginalized subjects with mainstream narrative forms of autobiography. In this way the collaboration of narrator, writer, translator form the platform to *Mother Forest* to raise voice against the marginalization, a weapon against encroachment of their language, culture, tradition and land. Thus this text is unique in its form, the way its translators represented adivasi people from the margins, and the combination of both form and content to create a contemporary, politically important picture of adivasis.

Conclusion

Life-narratives from the margins- *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night, The Outcaste: Akkarmashi, Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu and Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* challenge the homogenizing generic expectations regarding the form and content of autobiography. Mere adherence to conventional western practices like 'autobiographical pact', in elite man style, is inadequate and thus challenged. In these life-narratives emphases have been shifted to evolving subjectivities, new strategies; newer forms of confessional genre are being employed by life-narrators from the margins. As per traditional norms they are not full-fledged autobiographies but their experimental strategies claim a different platform, a potentially diverse horizon by being non-linear, ruptured, fragmented, oral, collaborated, mediated and collectively disappropriated narratives of the self. Life-narratives from the margins represent a promising departure from traditional literary representations of marginalized people. It locate

these marginalized people to express and translate the community struggles at the grass-root level with their distinct voices a heterogeneous practice to portray self in 21st century.

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