



## EXAMINING THE TRANSFORMATION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SPACE FROM THE CENTER TO THE MARGIN: A DALIT PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Opening the literary space for the voices from the margin has historically been a painstaking task since for a long time it had remained confined to the privileged groups. A noticeable transformation in the function of literature has been observed when the marginal voices break into the literary arena. Autobiography becomes one of the most preferable literary genres for the marginal voices as it provides ample space to represent their lives through lived experiences. Firstly, the paper, through a historical study of autobiography, sheds light on how autobiography grows up being a literary genre and how as a literary space it is reoriented by the marginal voices such as African Americans and Dalits. Secondly, the paper analyses how autobiography which starts as an act of celebrating the achievements of White dominant self is molded into a space for self-assertion and representation of community culture by African Americans. Finally, the paper examines how autobiography flourishes as a literary genre in colonial India under the influence of the British education and remains confined to the dominant upper castes as an act of registering self-achievements in history, until the Dalit voices use the very literary space for self-assertion and community expression.

**Key words:** autobiography, narrative, space, center, margin, African American, Dalit

### Introduction

Unlike the modern autobiography which, according to Rockwell Gray (1982), has been a "mere self-display" of a "highly differentiated individual personality", its early

form carries a religious agenda of scrutinizing one's soul by acknowledging their faults and mistakes committed in the course of their lives. In other words, the idea of putting one's own life on the pages begins as an act of "religious confession" in the West (31-32). Bhikhu Parekh

(2006) takes the investigation a step further as he claims that the traces of autobiographical writings can be recognized with the Egyptian kings' descriptions of their own achievements which were meant to be inscribed on their tombs. Not only Egyptian kings but there are also examples of Roman statesmen such as Lutatious Catulus, Scarus, Rutilious, Rufus, Sulla, Caesar and others who noted down the accounts of the achievements of their lives to create a favorable view among their contemporaries and set examples for their successors. Plato's "Seventh Epistle" (one among the thirteen letters written by Plato during 4<sup>th</sup> century BC) is one such example wherein Plato describes an important period of his life. But Parekh comes to an agreement with Gray as he states that the practice of writing about one's own life rather than their selective achievements only starts early in the Christian tradition. St Augustine's *Confessions* (AD 397-8) is the best known confessional writing, though there are men such as Justine the Martyr, the Bishop of Poitier, Gregory of Nazianus and Hilarius who have similar kind of works in their name. Though published much later in comparison to St Augustine, Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1789) can be included in the same catalog. W. P. Scargill's *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister* (1834) is considered to be first autobiography as Scargill first uses the word 'autobiography' with reference to the book on his life.

### Locating the Tradition of Autobiography: East Vs West

The tradition of writing autobiography is primarily considered to be a self-conscious and Western phenomenon. In his essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" Georges Gusdorf describes that the autobiography is predominantly found in the Western culture and "expresses a concern peculiar to Western man" (29). Arnold Krupat (1981) defines "autobiography as a term to denote a particular kind of self-written life is an invention of comparatively recent date" (307). In

other words, autobiography is a recent development in comparison to the other forms of writings, which revolves around the 'self'. The 'self' emerges as a subject of discourse in the West with the philosophical interventions of Descartes, Hume, Kant and Hegel which influences autobiographical writing to develop into a literary genre. Though there were traces of autobiographical writings such as inscriptions, diaries, confessions and memoirs which existed much before the 'self' became a conscious point of discourse in the West, it would not be baseless to say that the proliferation of autobiography as a literary genre is significantly influenced by the school of thought that believes in the centrality of 'self'. But in comparison to the West, the social, cultural and philosophical scenario, in this context, is quite different in India. There is a fundamental difference between the Western and Indian philosophical perception of 'self'. The conception of 'self' in Indian philosophy is "morally constituted by the tradition of renunciation" which does not believe in the celebration of material achievements of self "but rather aspires towards self-effacing moral qualities". In contrast, "the western self is driven by the need to demand recognition from other" (Guru 158), and thus proclamation of the material achievements of 'self' has been one of the integral aspects of Western culture.

Except the difference in philosophical roots, the 'community' culture of Indian society which believes in the concept of 'Vasudeiva Kutumbakam' (a Sanskrit phrase taken from Vedas which means 'the whole world is a single family') has always been a powerful force in Indian society that holds every individual together without giving ample space for the growth of individualism. Hence, there is little scope for the growth of autobiography in such cultures where the individual "does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community"

(Gusdorf 29). But in the West, since the concept of 'self' had already evolved prioritizing the existence of the free individual, claiming the 'self' as a way of seeking recognition from the 'other' had become a part of western tradition. It is important to note that the 'other' always plays an important role in sensitizing the 'self-consciousness', precisely because, as Hegel puts it, the "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel 111). Hence, 'self' as a consciousness exists with the existence of 'other' and demands to be acknowledged by the 'other'. With such a self-conscious culture and philosophical tradition, 'self' comes to focus in the Western world being a thinking and attention seeking subject, which provides a platform for the growth of autobiography as an act of self-assertion and often as the celebration of self. Similar socio-cultural atmosphere comes much later in India, after the arrival of the British which is seen as the dawn of modernity in India. Indian society goes through a major socio-cultural transformation under the colonial rules. With introduction of British education, opening of railway and industrialization, which are considered to be founding steps of modernization, Western culture starts gradually to influence Indian society. The concept of the independent individual and claiming his/her personal identity comes as one of the manifestations of modernity, in India. Therefore, Gopal Guru writes, "In India, writing autobiography is a modern phenomenon" (158).

The act of writing autobiography was started by the privileged White Man for glorification of his achievements, with an anticipation of being immortalized in the pages of history. Judith Okely in her essay "Anthropology and autobiography Participatory experience and embodied knowledge", states that "In the Great White Man tradition, the lone achiever has felt compelled to construct and represent his uniqueness, seemingly in defiance of historical

conditions, but actually in tune with the dominant power structures which have rewarded him" (7). In short, Autobiography in the hands of White Man is not merely a means of proclamation of his achievements, rather the act itself is an exhibition of the privileged state of being in power, in a given social order.

For a long time in the West, the domain of autobiography remains confined to and dominated by the White Man only, till the slave narratives such as Frederic Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) come into picture, wherein Black authors narrate their experience as slaves under their racist White masters. For the first time in history, Blacks voice their own experience not essentially as a signature of Blacks coming to power, but as an act of unmasking the brutality of slave tradition set by the dominant as well as hypocritical White society. The extreme physical violence meted upon the Black folk portrayed in these slave narratives, intends to pose a strong subversive resistance against slavery by creating a consciousness about its detrimental effects in the society. Harriet explains, she pens down her experience not to gather sympathy from the readers but to "arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse". What is path-breaking here in the African American autobiographical context is the autobiographical space which was used by the dominant individuals for a long time as to claim and celebrate the individual self, is now used by the voices from the margin to represent the community. So, the African American writers not only made their space in the autobiographical sphere where they could speak through their own experience but also redefined autobiography where the community was represented through.

### Journey of Autobiography from Center to Margin

Apart from broadening the scope of autobiography by readjusting the individual space into a space of community representation, African American writers used autobiography as a literary space where they could expose the religious hypocrisy of White Christian society. Douglas's first autobiography (*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave*) has number of moving anecdotes in which the White masters who were recognized as great religious personalities for their everyday long prayers to Lord Christ, very often whip their slaves, almost for no reason, till they bleed profusely and their bodies become numb in pain. They suffice their wretched deeds with religious justifications but do it in regular intervals to create fear and obedience among the slaves. For instance, Douglass, while talking about Mr. Hopkins, a slave owner who is highly respected in the white community for his religious activities, describes, Mr. Hopkins "always managed to have one or more of his slaves to whip every Monday morning. He did this to alarm their fears, and strike terror into those who escaped" (75). Christianity in the hands of white masters is used as shield to cover all the extreme physical as well as mental violence perpetrated on the black folks, wherein the White masters always find a religious justification to it. Jacobs in her autobiographical narrative explains how the White Christian clergy men indoctrinate the slave hood while baptizing the slaves. Jacobs recalls a White clergy man called Mr. Pike who teaches Christianity to the slaves and during the prayers he repeats certain lines such as, "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ" (76). The White masters are positioned in the place Christ so that they will not be questioned for their any unkind deed and their orders will be followed as the wish of Lord Christ. To condemn such a hypocritical practice of

Christianity by the white masters, Douglass writes,

"I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, – a justifier of the most appalling barbarity, – a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, – and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection" (74).

Depiction of such incidents, which autobiography provided space for, is primarily intended to expose the religious hypocrisy of White Christian society as well as pose a subversive resistance through which the African Americans show the White community their racist faces. Interestingly, religious indoctrination of slavery and White supremacy in the context of race is comparable to the subordination of Dalits and Upper-caste hegemony in the Indian caste context by the fact that the origins of caste are found in Hindu religious text such as *Manusmriti*, though caste is much more complex and multilayered in comparison to race. This is one among the many other dynamics that brings Dalit literature and African American literature to a common ground of analysis. Tracing down the autobiographical tradition from the center to a margin and establishing a connection between African American autobiographical narrative and Dalit autobiographical narrative, to a large extent, is encouraged by the same proposition.

Autobiography in African American literary context evolves being one of the most successful literary genres to deconstruct the stereotypes that have been thrust upon them. Douglas, for example, aptly uses his autobiographical narrative to crack down the stereotype constructed by the Whites that the Black folk don't like or don't trust the people of their own color. Douglass, in this context, writes,



"It is sometimes said that we slaves do not love and confide in each other. In answer to this assertion, I can say, I never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellow-slaves... I believe we would have died for each other" (82).

Being reoriented by African American writers, autobiography in the West begins to provide space for voices from the margins to speak for themselves and claim their own identity.

The tradition of autobiography in India, which is largely influenced by the Western culture with the arrival of the British, has gone through a similar journey. In pre-modern India, since Dalits were denied education and their lives were considered trivial, writing an autobiography, for a Dalit, was out of question. Therefore, almost all the early Indian autobiographies such as Banarasidas' *Ardhakathanaka* (1641), Lal Bihari's *Day's Recollections of My School Days* (1873-76), Lala Lajpat Rai's *The Story of My Deportation* (1908), Surendranath Banerjea's *Nation in Making* (1925), M.K Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiment With Truth* (1927), Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936), Mulk Raj Anand's *Apology for Heroism* (1946), Nirad Chandra Chaudhari's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) are written by influential upper caste Hindus. Though Banarasidas' *Ardhakathanaka*, which is considered as the first Indian autobiography, is written in Hindi in verse form, upper caste autobiographies flourish in English in colonial India, mostly as an act of documentation and celebration of their eventful lives and achievements, and in many occasions, it appeared as an act of resistance against colonialism.

In comparison to Indian upper caste autobiographies, Dalit autobiographical narratives came quite late and unlike upper caste autobiographies, Dalit autobiographical narrative stood strongly against casteism in India. The first two Dalit autobiographical

narratives, which were published at the same time in 1939, were Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa* and Rettaimalai's *Jeeviya Saritira Surukkam* which is considered as the first Tamil Dalit autobiography (Ravikumar xi). Following Ambedkar, Hazari's *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951), D. P Das's *The Untouchable Story* (1985), Balwant Singh's *An Untouchable in the IAS* (1997), D. R Jatava's *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) and Shyamlal's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001), are some of the Dalit autobiographical narratives that are originally written in English. More than the Dalit autobiographical narratives which are written in English, the autobiographical narratives that are written in Indian languages such as Marathi, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada became popular and later got translated into English targeting a wider readership: Laxman Mane's *Upara* (Marathi: 1984, translated as *Upara* in 1997), Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (Marathi: 1984, translated as *The Outcaste* in 2003), Narendra Jadhav's *Amcha Baap Aani Amhi* (Marathi: 1993, translated into English as *Outcaste: A Memoir* in 2003), Vasant Moons *Vasti* (Marathi: 1995, translated as *Growing up Untouchables in India* in 2001), Omprakash Valmiki's *Akkarmshi* (Hindi: 1997, translated as *Joothan* in 2001), Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* (Marathi: 1998, translated as *The Branded* in 1998), Aravinda Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* (Kannada:1994, translated as *Government Brahmana* in 2007), Siddhalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* (Kannada:1996, Translated as *Ooru Keri* in 2003), Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* (Punjabi: 1997, Translated as *Changiya Rukh: Against The Night* in 2010) and K. A Gunasekharan's *Vadu* (Tamil: 2005, translated as *The Scar* in 2009).

Apart from the Dalit male autobiographical narratives, there are a few Dalit women autobiographical narratives which are written from a Dalit feminist point of view along with the caste issues, are translated into English. Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (Marathi:

1986, translated as *The Prison We Broke* in 2008), Bama's *Karukku* (Tamil: 1992, translated as *Karukku* in 2000) and *Sangati* (Tamil: 1994, translated as *Sangati: Events* in 2005), Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (Marathi: 1893, translated as *The Weave of My Life* in 2009) are some of the women's Dalit autobiographies to bring on the board. Therefore, one can safely say that an important section of Dalit literature is available in the form of autobiographical narratives not merely because they are considerable in number but because Dalit autobiographical narratives bring in Dalit culture, history and most importantly the lived-experience as an element of Dalit aesthetics.

### Difference between Autobiography and Autobiographical Narrative

I prefer to use the term 'Dalit autobiographical narrative' instead of 'Dalit autobiography' for certain reasons. Firstly, the traditional definition of autobiography, as James Cox states it, "a narrative of a person's life written by himself." (145) is not applicable to all Dalit autobiographical narratives because every time the subject is not necessarily a 'He' as it is mentioned in the quote. And at the same time Dalit autobiographical narrative does not exclusively refer to the written texts, because some of the Dalit autobiographical narratives are orally narrated to persons who have translated them into written texts. For instance, *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (19987) which has multiple authors such as Viramma, Jean-Luc Racine, Josiane Racine. The very Dalit autobiographical narrative is the representation of the life story of Viramma, a Tamil Dalit old woman who describes her life story to Josiane Racine in Tamil, their shared first language. It was first published in French as *Une vie paria. Le rire des asservis, Inde du Sud* (1995) and latter translated into English. Similarly, James M. Freeman's *Untouchable: An Indian Life History* (1979) is an account of Muli, a Dalit man, who narrates his life to Freeman in his mother tongue Odia. Both the books are written from the first person perspective making 'I' as the subject.

Therefore, the addition of the term 'narrative' to autobiography allows the Dalit autobiographical narrative to be more inclusive by extending the autobiographical space to the oral narrative. Secondly, many Dalit autobiographical narratives are about particular episodes of their lives which do not fit in the conventional understanding of autobiography. For example, Ambedkar's autobiographical narrative *Waiting for a Visa*, having six sections, is a very short document wherein Ambedkar, through some of the select incidents of his life, tries to expose the fact that, caste in India not only practiced among the Hindus but also among other religious communities such as Muslims and Parsis. Ambedkar writes "a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi...a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Mohammedan" (Ambedkar 12). Perhaps for the same reason, Ambedkar found Buddhism as a safe religious and spiritual abode which resulted in his conversion into Buddhism. The intention of bringing such an autobiographical narrative into discussion is to suggest that the implication of the term 'narrative' in addition to autobiography certainly allows us to include such writings which compile a few but important incidents of a person's life. Thirdly, the rise of Dalit autobiographical narratives is largely influenced by the slave narratives and therefore, there are noticeable similar characteristics between Dalit autobiographical narratives and slave narratives. Though it is rare to find direct references of slave narratives in Dalit autobiographical narratives, the very fact that Dalit Panthers organization (1972) was influenced by the Black Panthers Party (1966) is a substantial proof that not only Dalit autobiographical narratives but the Dalit literary movement as a whole is influenced by African American social struggle and literary tradition. Dalit Panthers was a social organization established by the Marathi Dalit poet and activist Namdeo Dhasal, later joined by Raja Dhale and Arun Kamble who published

poems, essays and pamphlets against casteism and exploitation of Dalits.

Finally, the reason of using the term 'Dalit autobiographical Narrative' is to refer the narrative formation of Dalit community, its culture and history in the Dalit autobiographical narratives. Though the Dalit autobiographical narratives describe the lives of the individual authors, they represent the whole Dalit community, its culture, problems and atrocities faced by the community. Therefore, the author becomes the representative of the whole community and her/his autobiographical narrative becomes the narrative of the Dalit community. Many times, the voice of the individual narrator "I", in the Dalit autobiographical narratives turns into the collective voice "We". While describing his miserable Dalit life in the Maharwada, in his autobiographical narrative *Akkarmashi*, Limbale's voice turns into collective "We" as he writes, "We are the garbage the village throws out... The umbilical cord between our locality and the village had snapped, as if the village torn asunder had thrown us out of it" (5). Here the story is not of a Dalit individual, rather the story is of the whole community. Aravind Malgatti, one of the wellknown Kannad Dalit writers, in his autobiographical narrative *Government Brahman* which is considered to be the first Kannad Dalit autobiographical narrative, makes it clear that his experiences as a Dalit are not specific to himself, rather every other Dalit must have similar kind of experience. He deliberately says, "...I cannot resist saying that these experiences are those of every ordinary dalit" (1). Likewise, in the foreword to her autobiographical narrative in Marathi *Jina Amucha*, Baby Kamble makes it clear that she is writing the community history in it. Therefore, she states, "I am writing this history for my sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and my grandchildren to show how the community suffered because of the chain of slavery and so that they realize what ordeal of fire the Mahars have passed through" (quoted

in Kamble xiv). By bringing the community history into the autobiographical framework, the Dalit autobiographical narratives extend the individual narrative space to a collective narratives space as well as represent a community identity.

### Conclusion

This study which tries to trace down the progress of the autobiographical tradition from center to the margin and from the West to the Indian context tries to trace the noticeable transformations in the function of autobiography with the intervention of marginal voices. Firstly, autobiography no more remains confined to the dominant White Male as it started with, but with the rise of marginal voices such as African Americans and Dalits, the terrain opens up a space for the margin. Secondly, autobiography which was used as a space for the representation of recognized individuals becomes a space through which a community is represented along with the individual. Thirdly, autobiography in the hands African Americans and Dalits is not used as space for celebration of self, rather a forum where they assert their marginal selves and deconstruct the negative stereotypes thrust upon them by the dominant groups. Finally, the advent of African American and Dalit autobiographical narratives bring in a number of oral narratives which helps in reviving the oral tradition and breaks away from the absolute authority of the written texts in the sphere of literature.

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