



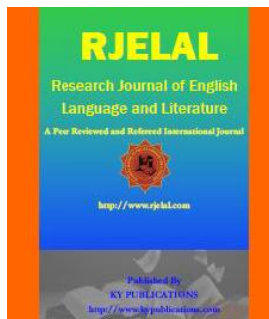
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## CONTRADICTING MONOLOGUE: DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS A COUNTER DISCOURSE

SHOWKAT AHMAD NAIK

Ph. D Research Scholar  
Central University of Punjab, Bathinda



### ABSTRACT

Dalit Autobiographies, a recent offshoot, introduces a new world of experience in Indian literature. It widens the range of expressions and makes use of the Dalits who have been excluded from the mainstream Indian society and discriminated, exploited, humiliated and marginalized on the basis of low caste status. Dalit represent the marginal section of society who are denied access to the worldly affairs and due to the caste system and other distinct historical happenings Dalits, considered impure and unskilled were denied education. With the passage of time they began to articulate their identity and dignity in speeches and writings. They became aware of the impact of the caste system and started reacting against the monologue framed by the upper class people through counter discourse literature I-e autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies represent the communal life rather than individual life and are concerned with pathetic condition of fellow Dalits. Dalit Autobiographies act as a counter discourse in Dalit Literature because through their autobiographies the writers try to prepare a platform for Dalit communities so that they can express their anger with the help of their writings. Dalit autobiographies are mainly concerned with the pathetic condition of the Dalits and through these autobiographies they alert the fellow Dalits to struggle for their rights, which have been and are denied to them by the so called upper castes.

**Keywords:** Dalits, Autobiography, Exploitation, Caste System, Discourse

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### INTRODUCTION

Dalit Autobiography, a recent offshoot, introduces a new world of experience in Indian literature. It widens the range of expressions and makes use of the Dalits who have been excluded from the mainstream Indian society and discriminated, exploited, humiliated and marginalized on the basis of low caste status.

Dalits are the people who are known as untouchables, separated from the rest of society. Dalits are the masses that have been depressed and

exploited, socially, politically, and culturally on the name of religion, god, goddess, and other factors. They are called with different names in different parts of the nation such as Outcastes, Depressed Class, Untouchables, Ex-Untouchables, Harijans etc. Thus, we can say that Dalits represent the marginal section of society who are denied access to the worldly affairs.

The term Dalit is defined by different writers in different ways. According to government of India act 1935, Dalits are the people:

Who occupy a low position in Hindu social structure; their representation in the governmental services is inadequate; they suffer from social and physical isolation from the rest of the community; and there is the general lack of educational development amongst the major sections of this community. (qtd. in Thorat 2)

There is no escape for Dalits from the fate in rural and semi-urban Hindu society where caste system rules the roots. On the basis of this status they were made to bear extreme kinds of disabilities in the form of oppression for centuries which made them almost lose their humanness. Prof. Aravind Malagatti opines:

The people who are economically, socially, politically exploited from centuries, unable to live in the society of human beings have been living outside the village depending on lower level of occupation, and unable to spell out their names, lived as untouchables are regarded as Dalit. (qtd. in Kargi 17)

Due to the caste system and other distinct historical happenings Dalits, considered impure and unskilled were denied education. But with the passage of time they began to articulate their identity and dignity in speeches and writings. All writers Dalits and Non-Dalits became aware of the impact of caste system in India. They started to produce research articles, poems, drama, short stories, novels and other genre about the exploited social life from Dalit perspective and this literature was named Dalit Literature.

Dalit literature attempts to expose the experience of Discrimination, poverty and human rights violation against Dalits in contemporary India. The phenomenal growth in Dalit literature came in front when Dalit began to give voice to their experience. These voices question the previously set ideologies, practices and institutions that are responsible for their vulnerable condition. As Arjun Dangle opines that:

Dalit literature is that which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words Dalit is not a caste but as realization and is related to the experiences, joys and

sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society...Dalit means masses exploited and oppressed economically, politically, culturally and socially in the name of religion and other factors. Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of the people will bring about a revolution in this country. (Dangle 2-3)

Dalit literature is thoroughly saturated with humanity's joys and sorrows and recognizes the human being as the centre and supreme and leads them towards revolution. Life of Dalits is portrayed by both Dalit and Non Dalit writers in different genres. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, in her introduction to Joothan, says, "Autobiography has been a favorite genre of Dalit writers" (Mukherjee 25).

There are several theories about autobiography. It is commonly used for life writings and coined by Robert Southey in 1809. An autobiography is the written document of a person's life written by the person himself. Philip Lejeune defines Autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own experience, his own existence focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (Lejuene 4).

The important role of autobiography is to organize a life story and reflect the past in order to the better understanding of the present. Roy Pascal views that, "Every experience is a nucleus from which energies radiate in various directions. Here in any worthwhile life there is a dominant direction that is not accidental; therefore, ultimately the life is a sort of a graph linking the experiences" (17). An Autobiography consists of various elements like:

1. Depiction of Self.
2. Memory.
3. Truth and Experience.
4. Confessions.
5. History.
6. Selection of Incidents.

Therefore, to write an Autobiography one should have worthwhile life and that popular personality should have great experiences to create impact on a vast community. Autobiography not only discusses about writers incidents but also about their

experiences. It is a true representation of experience and achievement of popular man's life but Dalits, Tribes, Women who are at the margin of the Indian society also write autobiographies and in these autobiographies they don't follow the conventional norms and principles.

Dalit autobiographer gives more importance to communal life rather than individual life. They are concerned with pathetic condition of fellow Dalits. The writer has some common grounding with the behavior of people because similar incidents occur in social life of both. In a literary work the writer responsively convey social behavior which he or she experience in his or her real life. Regarding the feature of Autobiography Dr. Johnson says:

The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth, the thought it may be objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartially may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passage of his own life, as from him that delivers the transaction of author. (qtd. in Prasad 236)

Eleanor Zeliot discusses two close ways for understanding of Dalits in India. She tells that the first way is to carefully examine statistical records of violence and discrimination against them and the second id to examine Dalit Autobiographies. This in mainly because that they not only depicts the real world of unique practices of social exile, insults, humiliations, caste discriminations economic, political and sexual exploitation but also the dreams, aspirations and struggles of Dalits (Zeliot 113-115).

Dalit Autobiographies portrays the contemporary situation of the deprived, disabled and offers an account of poverty and exclusion of Dalits. The oppression, struggle, assertion, deprivation of economic power and social welfare, benefits by reservation policy and quest for identity of the individual are the subject matter of Dalit Autobiographies.

Dalit autobiographies are different from the mainstream autobiographies because, they focus on the ordinariness of Dalit life instead of their

uniqueness. It helps to establish themselves as representative of their own community. It is different in theme, content, writing style and most important the incorporation of ordinary language. Subjective narration is used in Dalit Autobiographies. This helps to raise consciousness in Dalits and make them aware about human rights which are denied them from centuries by so called upper class castes. Dalit autobiographies are mainly concerned with the social and economic condition of Dalits. Dalit writers depict the life of those people who faces the cruel reality of society because they are neglected from economic and social power. They expose the difficulties of life they face through the whole journey. Through their autobiographies they want to start a revolt against the injustices, atrocities and violence inflicted against them.

Certain prominent examples of Dalit autobiographies which depict the plight of the Dalits in a very ardent manner are *Joothan: An Untouchables Life* by Omprakash Valmiki, *Government Brahmana* by Aravind Malagatti, *Murdahiya* by Tulsi Ram, *Ooru Keri* by Siddalingaiah, and *The Scar* by Ganusekaran.

*Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki describes that one can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste. With this statement Valmiki in his autobiography highlights the rigidity of the caste system in India that has resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the lesser caste to which they belong. The title of this autobiographical account, *Joothan*, encapsulates the pain, the humiliation and the poverty of the untouchable Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh, to which the author belongs. The untouchables or the Dalits who were social outcastes not only had to rely on the *Joothan* of others but also had to relish it. The treatment meted out to them was worse than that to the animals. Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory, demonstrating how his present is deeply scared by his past in spite of the distance he has traversed to become one of the prominent authors in Dalit Literature.

*Ooru Keri* by Siddalingaiah eloquently articulates the evils of exploitation and their

outcome. He reveals the experiences of day-to-day caste struggles, discrimination, poverty, and identity crisis. His determination, creativity, and courage helped him to outwit the brutality of caste system. Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* portrays his life-long struggles like poverty, caste atrocities, and treacheries in the village Magadi of Karnataka.

In his autobiography he depicts the separated spheres of Dalits and the Upper Class people. "Ooru", the decent settlement of upper caste people where Dalits were not allowed to move freely. It has all facilities like shops, schools, and government offices. Usually, it is separated by road, pond, bushes, and men made walls. "Keri" is the colony where Dalits live, is geographically separated from the main body of a village. Socially, it is set off from the mainstream society. Siddalingaiah's childhood was submerged into poverty. His family belongs to farm labourers and gets low-income, sometime nothing. Going to day-school was a matter of social, political, and economic privilege during his childhood. For instance, Dalit students, including the author, had not been allowed to sit along with upper class students in the class room.

*Government Brahmana* by Aravind Malagatti explores experiences of Dalits who are forced to face atrocities, humiliation, discrimination, and exclusion from social, religious and economic activities. He also explores the cheap condition of the Dalit women and also shows how they are forced to perform the sanctioned role and are exploited to fulfill the lustful desires of the upper caste people.

*The Scar* by Gunasekaran unfolds deep pains and sufferings of his life and Dalit community in Southern Tamil Nadu. In his Autobiography he shows how Dalits were deprived to live their lives in hygienic environment and were never allowed to eat full meals or decent food. He shows how Dalits were marginalised from the main stream and deprived of social, political and economic affairs. Gunasekaran remembers his pathetic condition in his village and his memories are experienced testimonies. He depicts how the magnitude of the caste superiority has devastated his boyhood and psychological humiliation has made scars in his life.

Another Dalit Autobiography *Murdahiya* by Tulsi Ram illustrates the experiences of struggle, oppression, exploitation, marginalization and agonies of Dalit communities at different spheres of life. This Autobiography deals with the discrimination of Dalits and their struggle for achieving pride, dignity, liberty and status of human being.

#### Conclusion

While concluding we can say that Dalit Autobiographies play a significant role in the Dalit Literature and act as an opposing medium for contradicting the constructed monologues framed by the upper class people because through their autobiographies they try to prepare a platform for Dalit communities so that they can express their anger with the help of their writings. Dalit autobiographies are mainly concerned with the pathetic condition of the Dalits and through these autobiographies they alert the fellow Dalits to struggle for their rights, which have been and are denied to them by the so called upper castes.

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