

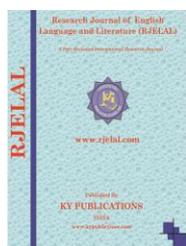


## MODERNITY AND DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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### Abstract

The modernist approach in Dalit autobiographies were present from the beginning of twentieth century they replaced the traditional ways of interpreting the society and the world with Modern perspectives and this understanding of the various social and cultural practices led to the awakening of the consciousness. Dalits since time immemorial were kept away from literature and education but they got a chance to study and write because of modernity. Modernity helped them to bring their immense pain and stories of shame and humiliation they faced in their lives in form of autobiographies.

Dalit made sure that their presence in social activities gets recognized in form of their autobiographies and this was the process of embracing a new world of equality and liberty. They had to face many struggles in order to survive and just have a respectful life which is captured in these four autobiographies **My Father Baliah** by Y B Satyanarayana, **Government Brahmana** by Aravind Malagatti, **Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit** by Manoranjan Byapari, **A Word with you, World** by Siddalingaiah. These autobiographies are a result of modernity and undoubtedly it was modernity that first provided them the opportunity to communicate their unheard stories. This paper examines impact of modernity on Dalit's by studying the four autobiographies mentioned above.

**Keywords:** Dalit Autobiographies, Modernity, Experience, life history.

The modernist approach in Dalit autobiographies occupied a place from the beginning of the twentieth century by replacing the traditional ways of interpreting the society and the world. Modern perspectives and understanding of the various social and cultural practices led to the awakening of consciousness. Dalit since time immemorial were kept away from literature and education but they got a chance to study and write with the influence of modernity and they started to write about the immense pain and stories of shame and humiliation they faced as Dalit. Their autobiographies are a result of modernity and

undoubtedly Modernity provided them the chance of writing and communicating their unheard stories of struggle.

Modernity is always a new change that tends to disagree with tradition. Dalit being part of traditional suffering, justified by caste, they were surprised to see the new world of liberty and freedom. Each author explains what happened with them when they attempted to embrace modernity. They were restrained by new and aggressive challenges never ever found in Indian history; because this phase of modernity was the result of British raj and post war development. The

experiences of Dalits' lives with the modern world were traumatic as well as life changing because of the social stigma assigned to them in the form of castes which led them into a dilemma; whether they should live in their oppressive old society or embrace the modern opportunity provided by modernity. One can understand how in this autobiographies the Traditions compel Dalit's to accept all the atrocities but how modernity gives them a chance to escape from age old practice of caste discrimination.

Factually, Dalit are the natives of this nation. Another name for work culture is Dalit. They consume food only after doing hard work. Dalit is responsible for the beginning of the culture of civilization. Thus the umbilical cords of this land are they are the custodians of the true culture of this nation. The anguish that was concealed for centuries exploded in the seventies and it is a historical record. It is significant that earlier generations writers of Dalit literature wrote in the early part of the 20th century.

Dalit movements throughout India made sure that their intention of active participation in social activities gets recognized. And In this process of embracing a new world of equality and liberty, the Dalit had to face many struggles which are captured in these four autobiographies *My Father Baliah* by Y B Satyanarayana, *Government Brahmana* by Aravind Malagatti, *A Word with you*, *World* by Siddalingaiah, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* by Manoranjan Byapari. The experiences of Dalit lives with the modern world become different from others because of the social stigma assigned to them in the form of castes which led them into a dilemma; whether they should live in their oppressive old society or embrace the modern opportunity provided by Modernity.

Traditions compel us to accept all the atrocities but modernity gives a chance to escape from the age-old practice of untouchability and discrimination. Critics and scholars have often mocked or ridiculed modernity, calling it the reason for the breaking down of the so-called society and community structure in the Indian villages. But My

*Father Baliah* by YB Satyanarayana shows us emancipation of the Dalits by modernity, British rule and the employment provided by the railways.

In his autobiography Satyanarayan pays tribute to three generations of his family from 19th to early 20th centuries. Satyanarayana's family belonged to Madiga caste in Andhra Pradesh. And his great-grandfather Narsiah got a grant of 50 acres of land by the Nizam of Hyderabad, whom he gifted a pair of beautifully made shoes. But he only got two acres, out of those 50, because the local landlord did not like the idea of an untouchable being the owner of such a large land.

But when Narsiah lost his family because of cholera he seeks employment in railways with the help of his maternal uncle with his son. Employment in the railways reflected caste system of the society, wherein the low-paying and dangerous jobs were given to the untouchables and the Dalit's because the higher caste would not do it. This is when Narsiah gets a job as a 'point's man' in the railways and starts educating his eight sons and grandsons towards making them professors and principals in schools and colleges.

Satyanarayana writes about how important education was for his father Baliah and the way he uses it to better his family's lifestyle by knowledge. Satyanarayana also talks about his father wanting all of his children to become station masters in the railways because that was the highest post for him in the world. We see Baliah struggling and sacrificing a great deal of his life to achieve the dream he had for his children and family.

The entry of the Britishers into India led to the culturing of democracy. Their casteless outlook more or less supported the principle of equality for all people belonging to different castes and religion. This atmosphere of the railway colonies gave the Dalit and the underprivileged groups of the society access to railway schools which helped them reach the dreams they never even imagined they could achieve— his family produced four doctorates which is a very big achievement for a Dalit family. The book is a memoir of a son about his beloved father; it gives us a great account of a Dalit family and to study the effect of modernity and education had on

caste system. It offers a first-hand account of the effect of the railways on helping Dalit's break their caste barriers and how it helps them to come into the mainstream. The effect of modern British institutions such as the army helped the Mahar community and gave them various facilities. However, the contribution of the railways as another institution which broke traditional caste barriers has not been studied enough and is yet missing from the libraries.

Satyanarayana's autobiography does not make you feel sorry for the characters rather you feel courage the characters seem how while facing the problems and all the atrocities to reach their goals set by their loving father. It is a book that talks about overcoming adversity. In terms of Dalit literature this autobiography is a hope and role model to many Dalit's who refuse to confine themselves to the clutches of untouchability and discrimination it gives them to dream and work hard to achieve the dream of equality to form their own identity.

The words used in the autobiographies provide a picture of their revolt which is a sign of modernity. Autobiography is a genre through which Dalit writers have shown a very true image of the Dalit world. **Government Brahmana** is a translation of Aravind Malagatti's autobiography; it won him the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award. His autobiography is in a series of memories from Malagatti's childhood as well as his adult life.

The author reflects on particular events from his childhood when he was just a student he comes across how the cruelty practiced by caste Hindu society on untouchables is considered as more of a norm. He talks about how an innocent child is isolated in school just because one comes from an untouchable background. Dalits are required or rather forced to perform tasks that are considered as filthy and dirty because the higher castes won't do it on their own and still the untouchables are denied the access to common lakes and well. They are not allowed inside markets or shops, the things they buy even though by paying the money their purchases are thrown at them. While reading these autobiographies cutting their own hair is very

common not because they can't afford to go to a barber but because no barber would touch them or their hair in fear of getting 'polluted' just because they belonged to an untouchable community. The food that they consume may not be that nutritious because they do not have access to them. Their staple food is dead rotten animals. He talks about how a relationship between a higher caste and lower caste was not considered possible. Arvind Malagattii in his autobiography talks about how the reservations and modernity helped the Dalit's to come into the mainstream and help them to achieve a sense of identity and moreover gain employment.

**A Word with You, World or Ooru Keri** talks about the struggle of Siddalingaiah who as a Dalit starts his journey towards modernity. It is a Dalit's encounter with the modern world. His life is formed and shaped in his 'keri' outskirts of a village meant for the untouchables; and 'ooru' is the heart of village. 'ooru' has all the access to the modern element, and it can communicate with the whole world, unlike 'keri' which has nothing. The so called untouchables of 'keri' find salvation by working for the 'ooru' dwellers. Because of which the untouchables never even hoped beyond 'ooru' or 'keri'.

Siddalingaiah's- **A Word with You, World** describes his painful struggles with poverty, hunger, and humiliations in the village Magadi of Karnataka. It focuses on the identity crisis of the author at various stages of his life. It is about the author's birth stigma and continuation of that stigma through untouchability. These autobiographies have found their expression with great struggle and sacrifice. As it has been mentioned several times that education, which is the root cause of Dalit identity, has played vital role in Dalit's lives. In his autobiography he talks about his painful childhood and his youth a constant struggle but he still emerged as a new, confident, educated Dalit from a very humble background.

He remembers when he was younger, how his father was unable to find work in Magadi, causing the family to move finally to Bangalore. All through his childhood growing up with hunger,

suffering, and humiliation at odd jobs while studying and this was the beginning of his Dalit introspection. He emerged as a student leader in the 1970s, a period when Dalit rights issues had begun to trigger conflict with upper classes. Although he was both a teacher and an activist, it was his autobiography that would be most influential, shaping the literary thinking of the time. We can see how his life would have been if he had not turned towards Modernity.

Next work "Interrogating **My Chandal Life**" is an English translation of Manoranjan Byapari's "Itibritte Chandal Jivan". This autobiography talks about Byapari's traumatic childhood in the refugee camps of Dandakaranya and West Bengal. Then his escape from his home to escape starvation, in search of work as a teen boy around the country, only to face further humiliation and exploitation. In Kolkata in the 1970s, as a young man, he gets caught up in the Naxalite movement and gang warfare. His life changes significantly when he starts to learn alphabet in prison at a age of 24—this draws him to a unique world of knowledge and books. Byapari in his memoirs, he talks about the fear he had for the public spaces like the trains, social gatherings, prison and life as a jail inmate strengthened Byapari's position in terms of literacy and education.

Byapari sees jail as a mirror to society. We see that at one-part jail reveals torture at the hands of the Naxalites; on the other, it provides education for Byapari. By the time he leaves the jail, he is a completely changed man. Byapari's new perspective makes him uncomfortable in his old society. Education and literacy inspires newly educated Dalit refugee towards starting a new modern life filled with opportunities to grow. After serving his time in prison, he starts pulling rickshaw and that is where he meets writer Mahasweta Devi. And she encourages him to write the autobiography. It is the modern thinking and the influence of modernity that we are able to read the experiences of Dalit through their writing which would not be possible in past. This is a result of modernity in every sense because a person belonging to a chandal caste a Dalit who had no access to books or education happening to be

involved in naxal moment goes to jail only to get educated to learn is a very unique experience.

Railways, Education System, Constitution, Reservations, Equality all these are results of modernity and this affected the life of Dalits. This is what led to the rise of many educated Dalits occupying better positions in every field. They are the new elites they are representing all the underprivileged children belonging to Dalit community showing everyone what they can do if they are provided a little encouragement and support.

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