

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## SUBALTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY: CHALLENGING THE CANON

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**ABSTRACT**

The general notion or rule is that autobiography is the story of a person written by himself or herself. The subaltern autobiography challenges this rule. Marginalised literature plays a major role in expressing the sufferings of the marginalised people. It has opened up possibilities and potentialities of creating “new space” in literature. Autobiography of Laxman Mane is chosen to represent and analyse discriminations from a cultural and racial point of view. This analysis attempts to prove that marginal autobiography can be used as a tool to voice the opinion of the oppressed people. When they are not given space in literature they are creating their own space that is the subaltern autobiography.

Mane in his autobiography tells how he struggled in his life. By telling his own life story, he tells the vicissitudes of the whole Kaikadi caste. In *Upa* one Kaikadi's life story speaks for the entire Kaikadi caste.

The sufferings of marginal people will be understood in a better manner when transposed into written form. This process of writing provides a space for marginal writers to voice not only one's own victimization but also of the community they belong to.

Mane's autobiography is the autobiography of many people who belong to a particular caste or gender. Thus it goes counter to the norms of traditional autobiography.

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The general notion or rule is that autobiography is the story of a person written by himself or herself. The subaltern autobiography challenges this rule. It is the autobiography of one single person's life who is a marginalised, thereby it comes to represent the struggles of not only his life but the struggles of the whole sect, caste or gender to which he or she belongs. It is the autobiography of many people who belong to a particular caste or gender. It represents not a single voice but the voice

of a whole community, caste or gender. It is a part standing for a whole. The marginal people by putting out their struggles try to form their own nationalism. When they are not considered as one in the nation, they attempt to form a separate nation for themselves. When the suppressed come to share their opinion they form a separate nation for themselves.

Marginalised literature or minority literature is the literature a minority makes in a

major language. Literature began after World War I to become an object of academic discourse and discussion centred on “defining” literature and placing certain canonical texts within that definition, excluding others. Much work has been done in recognizing those spaces of marginality surrounding Black writing, women’s writing, Dalit writing, and postcolonial writing among others. The exclusion of marginal writings within the literary canon has opened up possibilities and potentialities of creating “new space” in literature.

Man as a potential property has evolved as an intelligent creature in this universe. Since he is gifted with feelings and emotions, he has obtained a biological identity as *Homo sapiens* from the evolution of anthropology. When those feelings are channelised and given a shape, it attains a position in literature. So, it represents the culture and civilization of every race and sect. However, literary anthropology is trying to identify the subjective notions in every work of art which is the centre of literary evolution. At the same time conscious efforts are made to gain predominance over other cultures by means of disintegration and discrimination of caste, gender and strata.

Autobiography as a literary genre consists of subjective notions of particular individual. When it is influenced by socio-cultural factors depicting the oppression of a particular caste, gender or sect to which the writer belongs, it is formally known as marginal autobiography.

Autobiography of Laxman Mane is chosen to represent and analyse these discriminations from a cultural and racial point of view. This analysis attempts to prove that marginal autobiography can be used as a tool to voice the opinion of the oppressed people.

### **Autobiography**

Autobiography is the writing of a life story, from the viewpoint of the subject. Biographers generally rely on a wide variety of documents and viewpoints; an autobiography may be based entirely on the writer's memory. A name for such a work in antiquity was an *apologia*, essentially more self-justification than introspection. John Henry Newman's autobiography is his *Apologia pro vita sua*. Augustine applied the title *Confessions* to his autobiographical work. Such generic expansion calls

in question whether it is valuable, or even possible, to say what “autobiography” is, what it is for, and what its methods should be. Autobiographers may leave out whatever they wish, and include anything from human geography to reproach; they may turn their books into a litany, a confession, an apology, a cathartic act, a collection of anecdotes or gossip, or even into a space to pour out their feelings. Similarly they may choose where to begin or end and the subject's name may not necessarily correspond to the author's as in Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*. The reason for this choice is that some people reveal their lives only when consciously revealing the life of another. Many scholars of the genre, however, feel bound to set limits to the application of the term “autobiography”.

James Olney observes that autobiography has become the focalizing literature for various politically engaged areas of study – Postcolonial Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, Queer Studies, Disability Studies – the genre's closeness to advocacy and apology enabling it to claim visibility of groups minoritized, oppressed or effaced from the historical record. But one of the most important explanations for the critical turn toward autobiography as literature was the shift of attention from 'bios' to 'autos', that is, from the life to the self which is responsible for prominence of the genre and the generation of questions of a philosophical, psychological and literary kind.

The result is the emergence of a plethora of different poetics of the genre which seek to describe how particular group identities function in the discursive creation of the self in autobiographies by Afro-Americans, ethnic minorities, aboriginals, homosexuals, and other long silenced or marginalised groups. Contemporary autobiographers often recognize that the dichotomy of self versus society is too simple, and, as commentators have raised the issues of multiculturalism and identity politics, minority writers have embraced the perplexing question of identity - how group identities contribute to the self, an essential quality, a crucial part of self-definition. So, group-based identity becomes a key term in recent autobiography, in particular, ethnic identity. For those who wish to stress ethnic identity, a shared group history becomes a crucial topic in their

autobiographies and they feel responsible for telling group history as part of their personal histories. In general, ethnic autobiography combines personal history with cultural criticism and thus works as a declaration of personal liberation from the dominant culture; a celebration of the importance of group identity in the shaping of their own identity and at the same time, as a demand for respect and acceptance of their difference.

### **Subaltern**

Subaltern, meaning 'of inferior rank', is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power.

### **Subaltern Autobiography**

Subaltern studies has become a major field in sociology, historiography, economy and literature. Subaltern generally refers to inferiority. It can be both ways – those who are inferior by nature and those who have been made inferior. The second category is the main objective of subaltern studies. Issues surrounding those who have been subjugated to pressure are slowly gaining publicity. Imperialism was a dominant force in India. But it continues to this day in the form of bonded labour, slavery and untouchability. The colonies have disappeared. An internal colonization has taken place, meanwhile, in the name of civilization. One can find people's condition, which can be described 'subaltern'. Tribes, dalits, poor peasants, rural people have all been 'othered' in such an exercise. Subaltern or 'othering' process takes place at all levels be it national, social, political, economical or gender-based. The situation is worse where these 'othered' people have no voice to protest against the tyrannies of the upper classes.

Women like Mahasweta Devi, Medha Patkar fight the social system. The stories of Mahasweta Devi are harsh, crude but realistic. Earlier marginals could not speak for themselves. They had to be spoken of. She acts as the voice of these unfortunate people. She is their spokesman to society. Her works, not only writings, but also activist work has improved the lifestyle of many poor and less fortunate people.

She does not merely write or document the pathetic situation of the 'subaltern communities', but she tries to improve their situation. She engages herself by working among the tribal communities for their welfare and has given them training in various fields for their upliftment. Hence, she fulfills her duties as a writer and a social activist.

Her writings aim at bringing back to the tribes their self-identity. She has deep reverence for the tribal culture and tradition. She wants to bring them to respectability by establishing their identity. They are better than the mainstream society according to her. She tries to improve their economic status by imparting training in various fields. She resents the 'so-called' civilized and educated society because of their selfishness in exploiting the poor tribes.

Mahasweta Devi only acts as the voice of the subalterns. She fulfills her duty as a writer. The struggles of the subaltern, which her writings express, are only her observations on the subalterns. It is not authentic since she herself not a subaltern. Here comes the subaltern autobiography to serve this purpose. It is written by the subaltern himself or herself. It expresses the struggles of his or her own community or gender, which is authentic. It is their sympathy for not others but for themselves. When they are not given space in literature they are creating their own space that is the subaltern autobiography.

### **Search for identity**

Marginalised autobiography paves way for the search for identity of the marginalised. They try to identify themselves in the social structure. They have their own way of life, which should not be degraded. Identity is one of the most contested issues in marginal literature when it comes to autobiography which is all about establishing one's identity the process becomes all the more difficult for a marginal writer to come out of the various boundaries of domination and make his voice heard. The identity, the symbol of voice is not just the author's but of a whole community, caste or gender. Thus it is not a one man's identity we are looking into but the identity of a whole community, sect or gender, which the author tries to represent.

**Voicing the Opinion of Kaikadis**

Laxman Mane in his autobiography tells how he struggled to come up in life. He fell in many pits and came up in life. By telling his own life story, he tells the vicissitudes of the whole Kaikadi caste. He tells how he struggled from his childhood to youth. In *Upara* one Kaikadi's life story speaks for the entire Kaikadi caste.

*Upara* meaning 'outsider', is an autobiographical narrative by Laxman Mane, published in 1980. A landmark in Dalit literature, it gives a vivid account of the writer's struggle in life within the framework of Hindu society's rigid stratifications. The span of life covered in the book is from the writer's childhood to his youth. In Mane's Kaikadi caste the struggle starts from the very birth of a child. It grew worse with his inter-caste marriage and its bitter repercussions thereafter. The book brings the common man, the underdog, to the centre of literary activity and acquaints the readers with varied levels of dark reality.

*Upara* has a pride of place in Dalit literature for various reasons. The author has no pretensions as a writer, nor is he constrained by any pseudo-literary traditions. He writes because he must, and there is vigour of expression everywhere befitting a folk artist. The book is rich with emotional experience at different levels, the love-hate relationship between the author and his father, between his mother and father, between father and relatives, the intense love between the author and his beloved, the mute suffering of both the lovers. The cruelties of life, humiliation and feelings of anger, for aberrance, compassion-the intertwining of all these elements gives the book immense vitality.

*Upara* is considered an outstanding contribution to Marathi literature for its lively depictions of the life of the downtrodden and forceful style, authenticity of experience and its strong plea for social justice.

**Speaking for Kaikadis**

In the very beginning chapter itself Mane keenly explains how tribal life is hard and how those people are ill treated by others. One woman boxed on his ear and scolded his sect totally for his donkeys ruined her haystack."You lazy bum! Your

donkeys have ruined my haystack and you are busy pissing into your own mouth! Oh! You beggars! May you die! You are a plague on our village!" (18).

When his family was shifting from place to place they were tortured by Dagdya Ramushi. His father fell at Dagdya's feet begging him not to force him to untie all his bags for inspection at an odd place in the hills.

He insisted:

"I have to search all your bags. What do I know about you? Beggars that you are! Who knows whether you have stolen anything from someone in the village?" Father folded his hands before him. He took down a hen from a donkey's back and handed it over to him. Jaisingea gave him some money. (29)

Their life is already hard. Besides this they all have to bear the tortures of other people. Since they are considered as criminals they have to give details to the village chief.

Jaisingea and father had gone to the village to inform the village chief of our arrival. It was obligatory for the nomadic tribes to inform the village chief on their arrival. Also they had to give him the details of the number of people, donkeys, fowls, dogs and so on. (32)

He emphasizes how tribal people are degraded when it comes to education."You funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school? . . . If they study who will weave our baskets? Nothing doing! You want to study, huh!" The school master scoffed" (36).

He was allowed to sit only in the verandah while others remained in the classroom.

Tribal people are not considered as human beings at all. The punishment given for his parents for pilfering canes is not beyond justice.

Father was being pushed ahead by a small crowd. Mother was behind him. She had no blouse on. She was wearing father's shirt. Her sari was torn. Father had only his dhoti on. One could see black and blue lashes

over his body. He was followed by four or five rough fellows. Mother was wailing loudly and father was consoling her. (61)

Parumami's case is the worst. Since she was young and beautiful she was raped by four or five men. When Laxman ate in a wedding ceremony he was found out by a person of his village and was chucked out. He said, "Son of a Kaikadi low-caste! Have you taken leave of your senses? Get up and get out!"(107).

The tribes are also people. How will the water get poisoned if they touch the water? Mane unexpectedly fell into the water tank and the bridegroom's father emptied the water tank. Even a girl who loved Mane abandoned him in the name of caste. Later when he loved a Maratha girl his friends hated that and left him.

When he and his wife went in search of a house, no one came forward to accept him as a tenant after hearing his family name.

Thus, we see the sufferings Mane faced in his life are not due to any other reason but only because of being a Kaikadi. Only because of this his life was pathetic. So it is not life struggle of Laxman Mane alone. It is as if all the people of Kaikadi tribe coming forward to tell the struggles faced by them in their life because of being Kaikadis.

Upara is really an outsider who is trying to get in.

### CONCLUSION

An intense reader will find motionless on reading these extracts. However, these experiences suggest a few ideas, which need a place to mention here.

In the first place man's insecurity led him to establish his own dominion by gathering a mass of population. And in the meantime he slowly gains confidence and he starts harassing others by exploiting their insecurity and more than that they are denied opportunities to raise against the strong hands of the upper class people. So, the emergence of these kinds of marginal representations will not only help the marginalised to retain their own identity but also will alarm the nation, about their emergence.

So far we are satisfied with the content. It becomes inevitable for a proper form to convey our ideas through a medium of communication. Since literature seems to be a powerful weapon we

consciously employ analytical method to pour out our agonizing emotions of the past, spectacular expectations about the future for the knowledge of the general public. At the same time for every general issue unless it is universalized it won't be able to reach the unknown frontiers of the world. So this technique is deliberately adopted here in the genre marginal autobiography, to familiarize the suppressed conflicts of our civilization.

The text *Upara* proves that this writer has created a space for himself in literature. It plays a major role in reflecting the torments faced by the people of the same caste as that of the writer. Though a Kaikadi tribe Laxman Mane, in spite of all the difficulties imposed on him though insulted and degraded by others, finally comes up in life. The author tells that he has succeeded in his life thereby encouraging other oppressed people to be victorious.

No one knows what the sufferings of marginal people are. When they are transposed into written form, the sufferings of the marginalised will be understood in a better manner to some extent. This process of writing provides a space for marginal writers to voice not only one's own victimization but also of the community they belong to. The genre autobiography provides not only a literary space to document their painful experience but a cultural space to record the protest of their communities. Thus those who were silenced are voiced through subaltern autobiography.

Mainstream autobiography is the story of a person written by himself or herself. The subaltern autobiography challenges this rule. Marginalised autobiography is the autobiography of one single person's life who is a marginal; thereby it represents the struggles of not only his life but the struggles of the whole sect, caste or gender to which he or she belongs. It is the autobiography of many people who belong to a particular caste or gender. It represents not a single voice but the voice of a whole community, caste or gender. It is a part standing for a whole. The marginalised people by putting out their struggles try to form their own nationalism. When they are not considered as one in the nation, they attempt to form a separate nation for themselves. When the suppressed come to share their opinion they form a separate nation for

themselves. Mainstream autobiography concentrates on the concept of selfhood. In marginalised autobiography the concept of selfhood continues, with the view of the self as a cultural construct instead of a private subjectivity. Thus Mane's autobiography goes counter to the norms of traditional autobiography.

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