ABSTRACT

1) Introduction: --

This doctoral dissertation attempts to study the selected autobiographies by African-American and Dalit women writers. The agony in the title signifies the miserable plight, inhuman and discriminatory social structure, the class, color, gender and racial bias imposed on the women writers under study, who were born and brought up as the weaker section of the society. In Indian culture, the class and caste ridden social structure and in America the color and racial biased social structure inflicted innumerable inhuman, discriminatory and traumatic sufferings on the downtrodden classes, that is, Dalits in India and African-American in America. In spite of the most unfavorable conditions, some individuals came out of this situation to achieve a better life and respectable status in the society.

The women-writers selected for this study are the ideal examples of the same. The paradigm shift in their lives from the miserable, agonizing conditions to respectable successful positions gives them the right identity. This achievement is like a journey from agony to identity. What is remarkable about their success-stories is that even after achieving their set goals as per their latent talents and perseverance, they did not have any bitterness in their minds about their agonizing past experiences or injustice in the form of exploitations and ill-treatment inflicted upon them by the society nor they thought of taking revenge in any form against anybody. In fact the sensitivity they had cultivated due to their own past experiences helped them to build up the positive attitude of giving back to the society, especially to those, who are still suffering in the similar situations, they had faced in their childhood.

The selected autobiographies, studied as the primary sources are: --

1 Shantabai Dani Ratrandin Amha.... (1980.)
2 Babytai Kamble, Jeenevamache (Our Existence) (1986)
2) Purpose and Justification: --

The researcher has studied the autobiographies of the Dalit and African-American women writers with the purpose of finding out the factors responsible for their success. It has been observed that self-realization was the decisive factor for their own development, empowerment and fulfillment of life. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was the enlightening factor, whose association, teachings through speeches, writings, inspiring leadership and sacrifices for the country and the community were the turning point, sparking the flame of struggle, confidence and fulfillment in their lives. The Buddhist philosophy, which also preached brotherhood, equality, gave equal status to all the sections of the society including every man and woman. It gave these women the confidence, which was like the ‘Eureka’ effect or landing on the moon by Neil Armstrong or by discovery of America by Columbus. It was not a simple change but a unique change happened after thousands of years. This achievement of the journey on the unexplored path for the first time opening the doors to the new horizons and gave confidence to the entire community. It was like the bird set free out of the captivity. The study of the lives of these women writers if emulated, will work as a catalyst facilitating the much-required self and social transformation.

Every religion is teaching brotherhood and equality. All saints from different religions propagate the same idea of love, equality and brotherhood. All the Constitutions including our own also emphasize the need of equality in social, economical and political fields and upholds the principle of equality and dignity for individuals, required for unity, harmony and solidarity of the nation. The scientific
and technological advancement has changed the world, shrinking it into a small village due to Globalization. Then why in the world some communities and classes continue to get exploited and kept away from the benefits of the basic human rights, growth and progress? Is not freedom our birthright? Why being woman is a curse? What is the main cause for the denial, discrimination and the divide? Even today the world is in need of this wisdom and liberation. The best way to learn is to practice and the best way to teach is to live it. By doing we can learn and by being or living the principles in our own life, we can teach. The selected women had lived fully the principle of love and brotherhood and their lives itself is a key to teach the lessons of self-empowerment and social transformation.

3) Why Dalit and African American Women Writers: --

Why Dalit and African – American women writers are selected for this study? These women were subjected to class, caste and gender that is triple exploitations. They are at the lower most wrung of the society. But paradoxically being women, they are also the most important components of the society. If a woman is educated, the whole family becomes educated and healthy and the journey towards the strong nation begins with the healthy family, as per the teachings of Mahatma Phule. The Dalit women writers were among the first to achieve education and identity in their marginalized community. They symbolized the fruits of Dr. Babasaheb’s teachings based on Buddhist philosophy. Their example will serve a special message for inspiring the millions of women not only from oppressed and suppressed classes but also for the entire women world over. ‘If they can achieve, why not I?’ This attitude will continue to spark the flame of realization in the hearts and minds of the women. Even today the world is in search of a permanent and effective solution for eradicating the violence, hatred and wars that germinates in the hearts and minds of the people.

The selected African –American women are victims of colour, racial bias and living miserable life merely as maid – servants doing all sorts of odd jobs for the whites.
After getting the opportunity to educate themselves and by attending the prayer meetings held in the Methodist Church they gained confidence that they are equally good in studies, like Anne Moody, good in singing like Marian Anderson or simply as per Christian belief that they are also the children of God. This thought of brotherhood and equality originated from the spiritual awakening by Jerena Lee, Zilpa Elaw and Foote that they believed Jesus Christ died for the entire world, for all women and men irrespective of class, colour and gender giving them confidence like never before. As per their latent talent and potentialities they pursued their set goals and achieved identity in the society as an educationist, social activists, singer and preachers of the Gospel. This achievements on the part of these women is so out of the world, unbelievable and unimaginable happening that it gave tremendous confidence to the African – American women in particular and also to the other women world over. It was like being born again in a new delightful world.

4) OBJECTIVES: --

The study is carried out in order to find out

i) The miserable plight of Dalit and African – American women writers in their childhood. To find out how these women suffered due to acute hunger, stark poverty and marginalization owing to their caste, color and gender.

ii) What were the social, historical backgrounds prevailing during their lifetime?

iii) How these women writers achieved their goals? What are the turning points and important factors in their lives to change their minds and induce the unflinching, unwavering drive to struggle for achieving their goals?

iv) How they struggle to achieve status, identity and fulfillment in their lives?

v) The commonality and the differences in the lives of these women writers and the factors helping their success for achieving identity, achieving the nobility and to feel oneness with the entire community by going beyond self. The researcher carries the assumption that the journey from ‘agony to identity’ is possible through self-
realization and going beyond self that is the key to self-development and could bring about the social transformation if followed by other women.

The critical and detailed study of these autobiographies was made. Each text was studied in detail with respect to

1. Social and historical background reflected.
2. The agonizing and miserable childhood
3. The struggle to get education or the skill
4. Turning point for self-realization
5. Achieving status and identity
6. The factors helping the realization and identity
7. The nobility and going beyond self
8. The initial resistance and final acceptance by the society
9. The positive and selfless attitude and
10. Feeling of oneness with the community, giving back to the society with the sense of duty and sensitivity.
11. Writing the autobiography to plant the seed of realization for future generation.

5) Methodology: --

i) Extensive literature survey was carried out.
ii) The discussion with experts, academicians, sociologists' thinkers and philosophers was conducted.
iii) The libraries of well-known universities from Pune, Mumbai, Nasik and ASRC Hyderabad were visited for collecting secondary data.
iv) Actual interviews of the living women writers like Shantabai Kamble in Mumbai, Babytai Kamble at Phaltan, Bhavana Bhargave, a very close friend of late Shantabai Dani from Nasik was carried out for preparing short clips, information and data required.
v) The important data and information were collected through telephonic conversations also with the authors and their associates. The extra information was collected and all the doubts were cleared. Number of journals, magazines and articles published on Internet too were referred to.

vi) The rare textbooks of the primary sources, which were not available in India, were ordered on ‘amazon.com’ and obtained by ship mail.

vii) The three Marathi autobiographies were translated into English and then the required matter was considered for the thesis.

viii) The Buddhist literature and the Bible were also referred to for getting the detailed information mentioned in the autobiographies.

This study has been carried out with the assumption that, ‘the journey from agony to identity’ is possible by self-realization, self-empowerment and going beyond self, acquiring the right philosophy or wisdom, which is the key to self and social transformation.

6) Chapterization - The Thesis is divided into five chapters.

6.1) Chapter-1

In the first chapter the meanings of the terms autobiography, biography, its importance as a form of literature, the cause, desire and scope of this study has been explained. An attempt has been made to give the overview of the place, status and scope of autobiography, similarities and differences between novel and autobiography, objections raised by *Andre Mourios on autobiography as not a ‘form of art’ but a ‘work of art’; Why women writers? Why specifically Dalit and Afro-American women writers? The nature of their sufferings, the objective of the study is defined. These writers retrospect curiously and critically and ponder over why this is to me? Why to my people? Keeping in mind the wider scope of the topic,
the discussion is largely based on the views expressed by Andre Mourois in his Art of Biography, Sackville West in her biography of Saint Joan, as well as D. G. Naik’s Art of Autobiography. The study looks at these works from a social point of view rather than the aesthetic one. The outline of the work was planned in the first chapter itself.

6.2) Chapter-2

In the second chapter as per the planning the socio-historic background of Dalit women and their counterpart African-American women writers was studied. This study was made in six sections elaborately by giving the graph of their life journey from ‘agony to identity.’ Their life-stories are described in the existing social, historical conditions prevailing, showing their miserable life, which was full of multiple discriminations. Therefore it was an uphill task or like a ‘battle situation day and night’ as expressed by Shantabai Dani. In spite of all the odds like poverty, acute hunger, superstitions, ignorance, customs and traditions, slavery, inhuman discriminations due to class, caste and color, religious dogmas and social taboos they did achieve their own identity at last that makes them larger than life and they deserve great appreciation and emulation.

6.3) Chapter-3

In the third chapter ‘self-realization’ the turning point in their lives has been described. The meeting, association and influence of Babasaheb, the liberalized positive attitude of the leaders and government, the factors helping them to explore their own potentials like their caring mothers, teachers, and philanthropists like Dr. Ms. Londhe in Shantabai Dani’s life, Patil Sir in Shantabai Kamble’s life, has been highlighted. In the case of Afro-American women the role of Methodist Church and spirituality is decisive. The renaissance period, the requirement of household servants- maids, their roles in the social fabrics slowly brought the Afro-Americans closer to the Whites. The law and supporting leaders like Martin Luther King, Lady
Roosevelt, Bishops and preachers also were the supporting factors. The spiritual awakenings made it possible to realize that Blacks and Whites all are equal children of God. The spiritual awakening and their achievements as well-known preachers gave the Afro-American women their own identity in the society.

6.4) Chapter-4

In the fourth chapter the ‘Identity’ that is the constant struggle to achieve their set goals by the Dalit women writers have been described. Once they were convinced of their potentialities, they could achieve their set goals. Although it was like a journey through the untrodden path passing through the thick forests, the dynamic and able leadership was instrumental in guiding them and to motivate them to achieve their goals that were next to impossible. They could reach the highest altitude after realizing their own ‘aptitude’ after they were charged by the right attitude and perspective of the dynamic leadership of Dr. Babasaheb. In their life they not only achieve excellence and status but they were also accepted by the society. The turning point or the realization, the struggle to achieve the goals, i.e. identity had been focused in the third and fourth chapters.

The African-American women writers also struggled to acquire the identity as singer (Marian Anderson), social activist (Anne Moody), and as the preachers (Jerena Lee, Julia Foote and Zilpa Elaw) The common factors in all these selected women writers is that after realizing their own potential, their latent talent, they overcame the fear and struggled until they achieved their goals. What was more astonishing and pleasant part of their life is they never showed any bitterness but they tried to do something for the next generations to make their journey comfortable. This sensitivity, social responsibility, positive attitude of gratitude, oneness with the community, commitment and consciousness is nothing but going beyond self.
6.5) **Chapter-5**

On the basis of the study carried out in the above four chapters, the important general observations are noted. The observations are discussed with the Guide and they are grouped and classified on the basis of the various factors like

i) Social and historical background
ii) The conditions at the time of their births
iii) The poverty hunger, humiliation existing during their childhood.
iv) The initial achievements in education and other professional skills.
v) The timely help by the parents, teachers, and social activists.
vii) The rejection, discriminations they experienced due to their caste, color and gender.
vii) Their self – realization.
viii) Their struggle to achieve status and identity in the society. Their sustain efforts to pursue their goals and to go beyond the confines of the duties.
ix) The fulfillment of their life and achieving the successful position and also acceptance by the society.
x) After drawing the conclusion from each observation, common theory was developed by their lives helping not only the women writers of future generation in the similar predicament but also for the other women of their community and for women all over the world.

7) **Findings And Conclusions**

In the concluding chapter the researcher points out the similarities and the dissimilarities between the selected Dalit women writers and the African- American writers in the terms of strategies of self- empowerment, social reform and inspiring others to rise against human oppression. The present study leads to the conclusion that these writers have sown the seed of realization. That will empower the self and in turn induce the empowerment in others so this chain will continue through
knowledge empowerment of the self and society through non-violent and peaceful means similar to knowledge management concept. In order to maintain the balance between materials, technological and spiritual advancement, it is their responsibility to realize and pass on the same message to the society through their writings and service to the society. All men and women are born equal hence it is their birthright to live with brotherhood, equality and harmony. They should be honest in writing so that it will reflect the true-life experiences and giving true picture of prevailing social, historical and cultural conditions. Thus the women – writers and other learned women of the society have a role to play as the ambassadors of peace, harmony, and social awakening.