Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze in their recent book, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (2013) underline the fact that inequality of various kinds is a universal phenomenon in all countries of the world. But the inequality based on hierarchical casteism in India has been described by Sen and Dreze as “a unique cocktail of lethal divisions and disparities” (Sen & Drèze 213). Despite a great amount of legislative measures taken up for removing untouchability and casteism continue to exist as a major social disease. Ambedkar’s paper, “Caste in India, their Origin, Mechanism and Development”, written for the anthropological seminar of Dr. A. A. Goldenweisser at Colombia University in 1916, recognized the principal characteristic of caste as endogamy superimposed on exogamy in a culturally homogenous ambience (Rodrigues 239). As observed by him this caste problem was a vast one, both theoretically and practically. He insisted that despite heterogeneous social structure in terms of different ethnic groups in Indian society, the unity of culture had been the basis of homogeneity. This homogeneity of culture intensified the caste problem which was so difficult to explain (*Ibid* 242-243).

The practice of casteism has been continuing without any legal recognition as a social system till today. Though certain measure of social reformation was initiated, they were mostly concentrated on religious reformation than social one. Ambedkar shows that law is not the only sanction which legitimizes social institutions. There are other sanctions of which religious and social sanctions are important to play vital role in legitimizing certain system in society.

Quest for Dalit identity has been a core issue of Dalit literature which was lost in non-Dalit literature for centuries. Transformation of unconsciousness to the state of consciousness of the Dalits is one of the key factors to construct their
identity which urged them to go back to their past socio-cultural historiography. This formed what Benedict Anderson defined as "amnesias" that consistently formed all thoughtful changes in human consciousness. Such forgetfulness, Anderson argues, sprouts narratives. In other words, identity is constructed, though paradoxically, out of and through the remarkable dynamics of forgetting and remembering. The Dalit narratives of historiography as embodied in the writings of Ambedkar carry such evidence of "amnesia", caused by the Brahminic cultural hegemony that has necessitated the Dalit's search for identity and a sense historical continuity. The writings of Ambedkar constitute the core of these narratives (see Ganguly 336).

Amartya Sen in his *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006) says, “A sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence” (Sen 1). He professes that identity can make an important contribution to build up a bond of warm relation with the neighbours, or members of the same community, or fellow citizens, or among the followers of the same religion. This bond, enriched by identity, can help the people of a community to do many things for each other and take them beyond their self-centred lives. Referring to recent literature on ‘social capital’ by Robert Putnam, he says that identity with others in the same social community can make the lives of all better in that community, and a sense of belonging created by identity is thus seen as a resource – like capital (*Ibid* 2).

Janardan Waghmare, a researcher on American Black literature and a famous Dalit critic also emphasises on the importance of identity in his book, *The Quest for Black Identity* (2002):
It is true that the identity of a people is a major and perennial source of their social, cultural and psychological empowerment. Quest for identity is a kind of search for the roots, for reconstructing the history, for seeking the status and for sharing, with equal measure, the national prestige and pride. Rediscovering and reconstructing history is the most essential pre-requisite for identity. (Waghmare xvii)

Despite negative criticism by the postmodern critics, identity remains an important area of research for the subaltern studies in postcolonial socio-political context. The movements of American Blacks such as the Harlem Renaissance, the Garvey Movement, the Black Muslim Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power Movement etc. were, no doubt, meaningful attempts at redefining and reconstructing their identities. Similarly, in Indian context, the Mahar Satyagraha, the Nasik Satyagraha, Manusmriti Burning, the historical Yeola Conference etc. were attempts in asserting the identity of the untouchables in India.

In Indian context the downtrodden group of the stratified society hardly had any place in the mainstream canonical literature which the Dalit writers call as ‘Hindu literature’ and challenge its hegemony through their own writings. (Imtiaz Ahmed et al, 132). It has been felt by the Dalit writers that for centuries Indian society has been the most hierarchal among the known civilizations of the world. The literature of this country has never focused on the plights and sufferings of the untouchables, the lower strata of the casteist society. There are hundreds of Dalit autobiographies written in different regional languages in India since 1950s. There are about more than fifty autobiographies written in Marathi alone during 1975 and 1990. The major autobiographies have mostly been written in the 1970s.

The thesis has attempted to study a set of five autobiographies written by five renowned Dalit writers analysing Dalit representation in their construction of individual and communal selves in the society where the Dalts are the upper-castes’
‘Other’. The Dalit autobiographers, using their myths and culture, have strategically reconstructed their history, voiced against oppressions, and propounded separate aesthetics protesting against mainstream canonical literature.

The thesis has been chapterised into five chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction
Chapter II: Analysis of Dalit Autobiographies
Chapter III: The Voice of the Marginalized: Individual and Community
Chapter IV: Aesthetics and Narrative Techniques in Dalit Autobiographies
Chapter V: Conclusion

Chapter I: Introduction

We find that Dalit literature has been an inseparable part of Indian Literature since 1970’s. The young Panther members started writing against the established norms of Marathi literary tradition. In the course of time, their revolutionary writing gets an impetus as new genre in Indian literature which develops in the way; the Black literature does in America.

The major section of Dalit literature irrespective of forms is autobiographical (in content) as they write out of the authenticity of experience. It is found that the mainstream autobiographies are written to celebrate their ‘self’ achievement at the later part of their life. Significantly, the most of the Dalit autobiographies are written in their early part of life. The questions arise – what are the factors that prompt Dalit writers to write autobiography? Why have the Dalit autobiographies been written in early part of life? How do the Dalit autobiographers perceive their
selves? If the Dalit autobiographies are written to assert identity in Indian literature how do they do it? What kind of aesthetics and techniques do they follow in their narrative writings? These questions problematize the whole discourse of Dalit autobiographical studies.

Dalit literature is known by neither a particular language nor by a geographical area, but after a community belonging to the lower strata of Indian society who have suffered from the thraldom of untouchability for ages. It is a distinct form of Indian literature. Like Black literature, which is known by the name of the race, Dalit literature too has drawn attention of the reader to its specific socio-historic legacies. Thus in the introductory chapter, an attempt has been made to discuss of the concept of the term ‘Dalit’, ‘Dalit literature’, ‘evolution of Dalit literature’, ‘Dalit literary criticism’, and give an ‘overview of Dalit autobiographies selected for the present studies.’

The term ‘Dalit’ is a self-attained term by the untouchables of pre-independent India; and ex-untouchables since 1955. Earlier the untouchables were known by various bureaucratic names such as ‘exterior castes’, ‘depressed class’, ‘scheduled caste’ and socially Tagore’s ‘outcaste’, and Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’. But to Ambedkarite these words were derogatory as to the American Blacks the term ‘Negro’. The untouchables chose to be called as ‘Dalit’ which was no longer stigmatic to them; it was a kind of self assertion as to the American Blacks. They chose to be identified as ‘Black Americans’ and subsequently it was Dr. Martin Luther King who preferred the name ‘Afro-American’ to ‘Black American’.

Literally the term ‘Dalit’ means to split, crack open, crash, and grind and so on. To the question, what the term ‘Dalit’ means the critics of Dalit literature has
shared their views. However, the widely acceptable concept comes from Prof. Gangadhar Pantawane. Eleanor Zelliot refers a letter from Pantawane, a professor of Marathi at Milind College and then at Marathawada University in Aurangabad and founder editor of ‘Asmitadarsh’ (mirror of identity), ‘the chief organ of Dalit Literature’ (Zelliot, 268) where defining ‘Dalit’ Pantawane writes:

To me Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Faith and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. (Ibid 268)

The key here is a radical rejection of casteism, religious legitimization of poverty and untouchability by the untouchable Mahars who have rejected Hinduism and embraced Buddhism with Dr. Ambedkar in 1956. These people do not believe in Hindu faith and Heaven but in humanism of Marxist philosophy. They work for revolutionary change. Pantawane’s definition makes it clear that the Dalits are “low caste Marxist” (Ibid 269). However their way of Marxist revolution towards change of society is not only class including women, tribals, workers and agricultural labourers but also against the socio-cultural hegemony of casteist society which has made them slave controlling all socio-economic and political mechanism by the high caste people.

Arjun Dangle feels that the word ‘Dalit’ traditionally connotes wretchedness, poverty and humiliation. Because of this, the non-Dalit writers pose a question as to why they call themselves Dalits. However, to Dangle the Dalit literary movement do not mean the traditional derogatory sense of the term ‘Dalit’ rather the movement has added a new dimension and content to it.
Dalit literature is often questioned about its literariness, whatness and howness by the mainstream critics of Indian literature. The Dalit writer-critics have defined Dalit literature theorizing from the perspective of Ambedkarite thought. Sharan Kumar Limbale, a Dalit writer-critic expresses his view about whatness of Dalit literature:

By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus. (Limbale 2007, 17)

Arjun Dangle, the editor of ‘Poisoned Bread’, an anthology of Dalit writings, says:

Dalit literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about a change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people. (Dangle, p 1.iii)

Similarly Baburao Bagul, a well known Dalit short story writer says:

Dalit Literature is not a literature of vengeance; Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spread hatred. Dalit Sahitya – first promotes man’s greatness and man’s freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity.” (Prasad, 3)

It is Dalit consciousness which is the basis of Dalit literature that makes it distinct from other literature. Dalit literature though a development of postcolonial Indian phenomena, it can be said that its history is about five hundred years old. Dalit literature conceived in the Indian Bhakti Lyrics during Medieval India when the Bhakti saints tried to establish democratic value by reforming Hindu religion. The most significant part of the Bhakti movement was that the majority saints represented the Indian Lower caste community and protested against the Brahmanic hegemony. However, they have failed for many reasons but most crucial was that their movement was more spiritual than political.
Dalit critics argue that Dalit aesthetics is distinct from Indian traditional aesthetics. They have demanded different yardsticks for literary appraisal of their works. Dalit aesthetics is life-affirming and realistic which very much resembles Marxist aesthetics and theory of criticism. However, it is notable here that Ambedkar was critical towards Marxism.

It is observed that Dalit writers, critics and socio-political activists have demonstrated their opposition towards Marxism as Marxism does not take social disparity into consideration. The militant organization Dalit Panthers was organized on 9th July, 1972 in protest against the oppression of the Dalits by the upper-caste people of Maharashtra. Raja Dhale did not like this arguing his point and disowned the Dalit Panthers and formed an organization called Mass Movement. As a result, Dalit Panthers failed its mission. In this regard Limbale states:

While the cause of Dalit’s economic slavery is hidden in the Indian social order, the ultimate path to liberation will be found only through the convergence of Marxism and Ambedkarism (Limbale 67)

It is noticed that Dalit literary criticism has an ambivalent position regarding Marxism and Ambedkarism. In contemporary Dalit writings both Marxist criticism and Dalit criticism go together despite controversy regarding their way of interpretation of Dalit literature. Limbale writes:

If Marxist criticism developed from Marx’s and Engel’s perspectives on literature, Dalit criticism grew out of Ambedkar’s thought. Marx and Engel did not write extensively about either the form or theory of art. Their position on literature has to be inferred on their writings, which is also true to Baba Shaheb Ambedkar. Many similarities are evident between Marxist literary criticism and Dalit literary criticism. (Limbale 70)
The similarities between Marxist criticism and Dalit criticism are evident in Dalit writings of Maharashtra in 1970s and 1980s.

The present study deals with five selected Dalit autobiographies. Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, which speaks of the author Valmiki’s untouchability as a member of Bhangi community, his struggle for social emancipation. Limbale’s *The Outcaste-Akkarmashi* is all about the plight of being born as an outcaste and illegitimate son of a Mahar mother. Faustina Bama *Karukku* is the first Tamil Dalit autobiography which concerns how the religious conversions fail to address the problem of untouchability, and the hypocrisy of the nuns and superior authorities of the Catholic convent. On the other hand Gaikwad’s *The Branded-Uchalya* is an anthropological elaboration of Uchalya community, their profession, lifestyle, poverty and the author’s engagement as a Dalit activist. Vasant Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchables in India* speaks the historical Ambedkarite movement of the Mahars in Nagpur and author’s participation in it.

**Chapter II: Analysis of Dalit Autobiographies**

The chapter discusses the development of autobiographical literary tradition in India, theoretical conception of identity, parameters of autobiographical analysis, and thematic analysis of autobiographies.

In the context of the Indian literary tradition autobiography as a genre developed from the nineteenth century onwards. In comparison to the Western autobiographical tradition, writing about one’s personal life-story is a relatively recent literary exercise in India. However, Benarsidas’ *Ardhakathanaka*, published in 1641, is considered to be the first full-fledged Indian autobiography. But we begin
to find regular autobiography as a literary genre from the late nineteenth century. Some of the interesting autobiographies published during this period were written by women. One of the remarkable works is *Shaheed-e-Rana* published in 1897 which is an autobiography of a prostitute written in Urdu. Another remarkable work came from Ramabai Sarasvati who wrote *Ramabai: The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1890). Vidyasagar’s incomplete autobiography published n 1891 is a delightful work of unfulfilled possibilities. Narayan Hemchandra’s Gujrati autobiography *Hum Pote* (1900), Ambika Datta Vyas’, *Nij Vrittant* (Hindi 1901), Lala Lajpat Rai’s, *The Story of My Deportation* (1908), Nehru’s *Autobiography* (1936), Subhash Chandra Basu’s *The Indian-Pilgrim* (1948, tr. from Bengali), M.N. Roy’s *Fragments of Prisoner’s Diary* (1941), M.K. Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiences with Truth* (1927), Nirad Choudhury’s *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) and Mulk Raj Anand’s *An Apology for Heroism* (1946) are some of the noted Indian autobiographies.

As has been pointed out by Rajkumar, the Dalit writers termed these autobiographical narratives as *Atmakatha* ‘self stories’ (‘self stories’) or *Atma vritta* (‘self-reportings’) (150). Dalit Literature as a genre emerged as a part of Dalit movement in Maharashtra in the 1960s and later on in the other parts of the country. Dalit autobiography became popular in Maharashtra and subsequently in the other part of the country as one of the significant sub-genres of Dalit literature. When Dalit Marathi poetry aimed at decanonizing literature, Dalit autobiographies attempted to unveil the wretchedness and miseries of the Dalit life and experiences through firsthand accounts. So far there have been more than eighty major Dalit autobiographies written in various Indian languages as well as in English.
Autobiographies emerged as a major literary exercise of the Dalits in the 1950s, much before the Dalit literature evolved into a distinctive genre in the context of Indian literature. The reason could be that the Dalits who gained the opportunity of education and were exposed to the Ambedakarite ideology became aware of the necessity to evolve a sense of Dalit consciousness among themselves and realized the need for the portrayal of their battered souls through writings. In the process they try to attain power from below by reconstructing their identity and social history. The autobiographies turned out to be an emphatic outburst of their smoldering anger taking on the hegemonic paradigms of the Brahminical values glorified in the mainstream literatures.

While selected Dalit autobiographies are analysed in the light of Identity question in Indian literature, an attempt has been made for a brief examination of theoretical positions on Indentity. It is found that Identity has been a major discussion in different schools of criticism, such as essentialism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and post-positivist realist school of criticism. Poula Moya has found major draw backs in the theoirs like essentialism, poststructuralism and post-modernism. According to her postpositivist realists claim that neither essentialist nor postmodernist has been proved to be adequate to the task of explaining the social, political and epistemological significance of identities. The essentialist conception of identity in terms of experience and meaning has failed to explain the internal heterogeneity of groups. The Postmodernists see all identities as arbitrary and having no connection with economic and social structure.

Paula Moya in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and Predicament of Postmodernism*, writes:
“Realists about identity believe that subjectivity or particularity is not antithetical to objective knowledge but is constitutive of it. From a realist perspective, particular (i.e. racial or gender) identities are not something to transcend or subvert but something we need to engage with and attend to.” (17)

Leigh Gilmore makes the following point: ‘Every autobiography is the fragment of a theory’. If the fictive qualities of autobiography have been blurred ever more productively, its theoretical qualities have also come in for increased exploration. The same is true of the autobiographical quality of theory to the point at which the blurring works to make both categories problematic in a productive way.

Laura Marcus, in her general consideration of autobiography, suggests that, ‘Contemporary debates in feminist and post-colonial theory have made autobiography a central topic, but it is now a centre which disperses towards its margins and its borders’

Hornung and Ruhe see the term autobiography as an expedient genre for certain political purposes: ‘Autobiography in its widest definition seems to provide a convenient genre to embrace the crossroad cultures from East and West and to launch an emancipatory political and cultural program’. Gusdorf described the autobiographer as the ‘historian of himself.’

According to Rajkumar, ‘writing autobiography is a political act because there is always an assertion of the narrative self’ (Rajkumar 3). The location of self is an important subject for analyzing an autobiographical text. The identity of a person is determined on the basis of the location to which he or she belongs because the person will undergo the experiences in life accordingly. In order to understand the life-experiences of a person one has to look at several other identity criteria, such as caste, class, ethnicity, language, religion, region, gender etc. Therefore, all aspects
of life, such as, social, political, economic, religious, psychological, philosophical, etc. need to be considered in order to understand how the narrator has coped with his or her life, time and society.

Valmiki’s *Joothan* begins with a narration on the physical demarcation of the living spaces of the villagers which was primarily drawn on the basis of caste affiliation. The caste based segregation of spaces is a real and tangible experience for the Dalits that would get ingrained in their psyche to eventually condition their self-perception. His house was adjacent to Chandrabhan Taga’s *gher* or cowshed and there was a pond that demarcated the boundaries between the villagers of the Tagas, the high caste people and the Chudras, the untouchables. The open space behind the dwellings of Chudras was used as public shitting place without worrying about decency. Through this locational separation of living spaces Valmiki shows how social existence was essentially determined through casteist segregation that forced social division of society in terms of caste identity. Such compartmentalization of the societies is an important characteristic of colonialism as noted by Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. (1963, 39) Dr. B.R. Ambedkar too noted how the untouchables were the ‘Broken Men’ forced to live outside the village (*The Untouchables*, 45). By exposing the segregated settlement of the Dalits and Non-Dalits in the autobiographical narratives, the Dalits autobiographers have underlined how the social living for them has been a perennial experience of segregated existence in a society predominantly governed by the scourge of Brahmanical caste hegemony in the line of western racism and colonial imperialism.
In *Karukku*, Bama narrates how the settlements of the lower castes were demarcated from the upper caste settlements through a series of roads. The roads were the indicators to identify the caste based colonies. The Dalit colonies had further divisions based on their sub castes. The author found it to be a paradox that in a country that is supposedly socialist and democratic that upheld the values like liberty and equality, people lived in settlements with caste based segregation. She writes:

“I do not know how it came about that the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had works to do there. But they never, ever came to our parts.” (Bama 7)

As noted by Frantz Fanon, the Western colonial settlers set up educational institutions, denying educations to their ‘Others’- the colonized. So is the case in the Indian segregated settlements too. The upper castes established educational institutions in their own areas of settlement denying the same to the untouchables. Post Offices, the Panchayat boards, milk depots, big shops, the Church, the schools and all the other social institutions were set up only in the settlements of upper caste people.

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his autobiography *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* narrates the settlement of the untouchables at Maharwardas, a place dwelled by the Mahars which was segregated from the upper caste people of the locality.

Similarly, we come across the description of separate settlements of the untouchables in Laxman Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya* as well as in Basant Moon’s *The Growing Up Untouchable in India*. Uchalyas are a pilferer tribe. Since
the British government branded them as born criminals they were not given any job in any farm or taken for any household work. They never had any permanent settlement; they mostly used to dwell near the stations markets and in other public places.

These autobiographies apart from the experience of physical segregation also reflect upon several other experiences of social oppression that keep haunting their consciousness. These texts share common experiences of their wretched social and personal experiences as untouchables. They attempt to address the issues relating to the problematics of self representation, historiography, social discourse as well as the parameters for constructing their social identity.

**Chapter III: The Voice of the Marginalized: Individual and Community**

Dalit literature is an inseparable part of marginality discourse in Indian context which evolved into an emphatic literary genre of resistance and assertions against the caste based hierarchial social system prevalent in India. The Dalits have created a space of their own through the assertion of their socio-political identity since the 1930s in the colonial era. This movement inspired the literary movement of the Dalits that crystalised with its idiosyncratic forms during the 1970s as an emphatic voice from the margin. When Ranajit Guha formed the Subaltern Studies Group in South Asian Studies in 1982 for writing subaltern historiography of Indian peasantry, Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ evoked considerable critical attention with respect to the problematic of the marginality discourse and its representation.
Marginality is a relative concept as is found in subalternity. Being colonized by both the British imperialists and the parallel domination of Brahminism, the Dalits in India have been reduced to subaltern categories, being perpetually relegated into the periphery as the eternally marginalized without a voice as well as without any agency. In his book, *Slavery*, the noted Dalit activist Jyotirao Phule wrote:

The depressed and the down-trodden masses in India were freed from the physical (bodily) slavery of the *Bhats* as a result of the advent of British raj here. But we are sorry to state that the benevolent British Government have not addressed themselves to the important task of providing education to the said masses. That is why the Shudras continue to be ignorant, and hence, their ‘mental slavery’ regarding the spurious religious tracts of the Bhats continues unabated. (Phule 1991, 1)

Marginality in Indian context presupposes hegemonic powers and their victims. The politics of marginality is understood in terms of culture, religion, caste, and gender. Casteism as a hegemonic ideology, has sustained through a cleverly designed socio-religious structure, what Antonio Gramsci would describe as, ‘permanently organized force’. (Souda 2012, 1-2) Gopal Guru in his essay “Dalits from Margin to Margin” says that the Dalits in India seem to be facing different kinds of marginalization and the most important among them is political marginalization. In literary-cultural, educational, spatial, and technological spheres also Dalits have remained marginalized (Guru 2000, 111-116).

The non-Dalit progressive and revolutionary writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, T.S. Pillai, V.S. Khandkar, and very recently Arundhoti Roy and several others have addressed the pains and sufferings of the Dalits through their literary writings. However, they were often criticised for being superficial in dealing with the feelings and experiences of the Dalits. On this issue D.N. Nagraj argues:
Usually anger, pity, and melancholy are the dominant feelings in the literature on Dalits written by non-Dalits. Many a time even the value system of the Dalit world is interpreted wrongly. In creative writings such baby-sitting for other groups and classes is very awkward. (Nagraj, 1993, 61)

In the autobiographies taken up for the current study women are seen at the centre of Dalit discourse which strongly represent the plight of the Dalit women in the caste ridden society. Dalit women writers have made a potential contribution to Dalit literature. From the very beginning Dalit womens’s writings reflected self-experience of societal indignation. The writings of Dalit male also always speak for women empowerment as observed from Jyotiba Phule’s time to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Muktabai, and Sabitribai, are two of the major examples of women representation in the discourse of Dalit consciousness.

Laxman Gaikwad’s autobiography *Uchallya* portrays the women characters like his mother Dhondabai, grandmother Narasabai alongside his wife Chhabu, sister-in-laws and other women characters like Chandrabhagabai who have influenced him in his construction of ‘self’ and his insights. There has been patriarchal domination over the women of Gaikwad’s community both by the high caste and by his own community males as well.

Limbale’s *The Outcaste* has exploded the patriarchal domination as well as certain values and morality which have been imposed on them. G.N. Devy in his introduction to the autobiography *The Outcaste* writes:

The most memorable element of Limbale’s life story is his attitude to women. There are many women characters in it, and not one of them without a serious complication in her life. There are widows, childless women, deserted women and as the ultimate of all this divine and social justice, Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most blatantly in every

Laxmi Holmstorm in ‘Translator’s Note’ to the Second edition of Karukku writes about the universal characteristics of the question of oppression. Holmstorm writes about Kurukku: “It is precisely because it tells the story of Bama’s personal struggle to find her identity that Kurukku also argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression.” (xiv)

In Karukku there are several stories of patriarchal domination on women. Like brutal police atrocities, use of obscene language to Paraya women intimidating women for forced prostitution after brutalizing their men folks etc. In terms of her personal experience as a Dalit Bama faced patriarchal domination and at the same time she had to face oppression and indignation as a Dalit woman, to her utter surprise, by the high-caste nuns and teachers in her convent and school.

Both Valmiki’s Joothan and Moon’s The Growing up Untouchables in India have particularly underlined how the Dalit women have been subjected to oppression by the patriarchy. Valmiki notes that his sister was not sent to school simply because she was a woman.

Vasant Moon’s The Growing up Untouchable in India also depicts the patriarchal ideology that was prevalent both in high-caste society as well as in his own community. There are numerous incidents of atrocities on women in the Dalit autobiographies which include the account of torture on his mother by Moon’s drunken father.

Most of the Indian Dalit personal narratives are about their decentred, mutilated and subordinated selves as has ben reflected in the texts like Joothan, The
Chapter IV: Aesthetics and Narrative Techniques in Dalit Autobiographies

R.G. Jadhav points out that Dalit literature is remarkably different from other literature primarily because it is associated with different reality and has the proclaimed ambition to turn itself into powerful social narrative than exploring the notion of beauty and pleasure with the fervor of romantic enthusiasm. Jadhav writes:

I think that from the point of view of Dalit aesthetics, the important thing is to achieve aesthetic distance by liberating oneself from extreme involvement in social awareness. It means that the Dalit writers have to realize their total sensibility towards life from the level of art. (in Dangle 2009, 306)

M. N. Wankhade in his presidential addresses in Nagpur Dalit Literary Conference proclaimed, “Friends, The Day of Irresponsible Writers is Over”. He critiqued the romantic orientation of the Indian mainstream writers as the proponents of ‘art for art’s sake’ and argued that such literature had caused a great gulf between people and writing. He writes:

Beauty became the only aim; form and style became of paramount importance and content was thrown to the winds. The notion developed that the writer writes for himself. …The writing that came out of these groups was characterized by escapism, theme of sex and depravity and a sense of meaninglessness of life. (PB, 329)

According to him, beauty is a relative concept and not constant or eternal. Beauty as a concept is related to the thoughts prevailing in respective ages. There was a time kings were the subject of literature and not the common people, but today
the life of the slums and untouchable quarters have become the subject matter of
literature.

For Immanuel Kant the aesthetic experience of beauty is a subjective
judgment. For Friedrich Schiller aesthetic appreciation of beauty is the most perfect
reconciliation of the sensual and rational parts of human nature.

Unlike Kantian or idealist aesthetics, Adorno's aesthetics locates truth-
content within the art object, rather than in the perception of the subject. It speaks of
the wounds societies inflict upon the subjects, the wounds their systems inflict upon
nature, the wounds subjects inflict upon each other, the wounds humans inflict upon
their own bodies and minds and on the process of civilization to become modern,
functional, enlightened beings in control of themselves, the wounds any kind of
philosophical system inflicts upon its own topics and objects by the very language
and terminology it professes. Theodor Adorno, in the context of the postmodern
reality, however, felt that aesthetics could not proceed without confronting the role
of the culture industry in the commodification of art and aesthetic experience.

Peter Lamarque in the essay “Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic
Relation” has suggested that it is necessary to look at Frank Sibley, rather than
Immanuel Kant. For Sibley aesthetics is not exclusively confined to beauty, as it
seemed to be in the 18th century. To speak merely of the "beauty" of literary works
is as anodyne as speaking merely of the "pleasure" they afford (Lamarque 2007, 30).

In this respect the alternative paradigms established by Black Aesthetic can
be noted which has evolved new parameters of judging beauty with their radical
maxim, “Black is beautiful”. 
Indian literary criticism, chiefly propounded by Sage Bharata in his treatise, Natyasastra (c. 200 A.D) considers rasa (sap/juice/taste/supreme joy/mental feeling/aesthetic enjoyment) as the soul of all literature. Indian aestheticians frequently link the theory of rasa with spirituality. Finding inspiration in the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of monism, they have tried to “synthesize all the nine rasas into a single rasa” (Thampi 318).

The questions arise whether Dalit literature can be judged in the perspective of the Indian traditional aesthetics. What the aesthetic parameters are to be followed for the aesthetic judgement of Dalit literary creations.

Darshana Trivedi in her essay “Literature of their Own: Dalit Literary Theory in Indian Context” examines that Dalit literature rejects canonical literature as well as all the established aesthetic norms of literary evaluation. The purpose of traditional literature is to provide aesthetic pleasure i.e. ‘Brahmanand-sahodaranand’. Though traditional aesthetics talks about three basic principles of literature, Satayam (Truth), Shivam (goodness), Sundaram (beauty) it is never realistic. On the contrary, Dalit literature is apparently more realistic, for, man is at the centre of Dalit literature, man is superior to gods and goddesses and even to nation. So Dalit literature is recalcitrant to accept both canonical Western as well as Indian aesthetics.

In this context analogies can be drawn from modern Indian paintings. The figures in Raja Ravi Verma’s paintings represent typical Indian aesthetics where there is no place of subaltern beauty of any Dalit as in Tagore’s painting of dark women as the representation of beauty.
According to Limbale, the concept of beauty which has been propagated by the mainstream critic of Indian aesthetics tends to revolve around the feelings of pleasure and empathy aroused by viewing the object instead of being concerned with the form of an object. However, Limbale criticizes the pleasure centric aesthetic judgment of literature. He says: “If pleasure is the basis of the aesthetics of Marathi savarna literature, pain is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature” (Limbale 2007, 114).

As noted by C.B. Bharti, Dalit women’s beauty cannot be compared with the traditional kind of beauty of Shakuntala. Limable’s autobiography *The Outcaste* narrates an episodic story of author’s love for a Mahar Dalit girl in his neighborhood. He describes the surroundings of his beloved’s house which is typical of Dalit habitation with poor living conditions. He has narrated the beauty of a Dalit girl named Shewanta who he loved in his school life:

Shewanta never smiled wholeheartedly. She had never oiled her hair. At home Shewanta was like an ox harnessed to the oil press that goes round and round in a dark room from morning till evening. It was sheer drudgery. Shewanta’s eyes were as humble as a cow’s. (Limbale 2003, 26).

In *Joothan* Valmiki narrates the episode of Dronacharya’s poverty in which he had to provide flour dissolved in water to his son, Ashwatthama, in lieu of milk. The whole class was listening to the teacher with great emotion to the story of Dronacharya’s dire poverty. This was highlighted by the author of the *Mahabharata*. In all audacity, the author stood up and asked:

So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink *mar*? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives? (Ibid 23)
The whole class stared at him and the teacher screamed, “Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back. (Ibid 23)

This questioning against the hegemonic narrative of Brahminism has been inspired by Ambedkarite philosophy. This philosophical representation of Ambedkar against monopolistic religious description is ‘beautiful and good’ for the Dalits that evokes their Dalit consciousness.

Sometimes the Dalits choose derogatory names for themselves. The names of the Dalit people often bear the reality of society and there lies the beauty of them. In Bama’s Karukku such names are projected for portraying the realistic picture of Dalit society. She writes:

People’s baptismal names, given at church, were one thing; the names we used in the street were quite another. One child’s name was Munkovam, short tempered. A women was called Midday-masala … A certain child who was very dark skinned and plumb was named Murugan-spring pig (Bama 2012, 8).

Gaikwad’s The Branded: Uchalya, gives a searing picture of casteism, superstitions, poverty, police torture, oppression of the Dalits by the high castes and the mill owners.

As noted by William L. Howarth, in his essay “Some Principles of autobiography” the decision of writing one’s autobiography is at least a strategic beginning. He mentions about three key elements of autobiography - character, technique and theme that subsequently guide a writer’s progress. It is the autobiographer’s sense of self, place, history and motives which builds the image or self-portrait of the autobiographer. Unlike the writers of epic poem, sonnet, short story, the autobiographers enjoy freedom in employing techniques to reach to his art objective.
Dalit writings are largely a subversive narrative in its thematic expression and style; the Dalit writers have used language of their day to day use which is colloquial in nature and unrefined. Their uses of such language often arouse laughter among the readers but that is not the negation of Dalit discourse, rather it undermines the hegemony of official discourse. The Dalit autobiographers have used the device of humour in their personal narratives which is often accompanied by pathos.

Since, unlike the traditional autobiographies, most of the Dalit autobiographies narrate their experiences of individual and communal selves from Dalit point of view, it is found that each of the autobiographies narrates a number of episodic stories intertwined with back-stories which make the narratives complex and apparently non linear where time often overlaps. There are several episodic stories which are intertextualized in the Dalit autobiographies maintaining the themes of casteism, untouchability, poverty, starvation, struggle for education, oppression, patriarchy and so on.

The texts often narrate events in subvertive structure of languages using their everyday language, and devices like irony, humour, satire, images and symbols. Through subversive themes and narrative structure, they autobiographies create a Dalit realism.

**Chapter V: Conclusion**

There are various factors and agencies which contribute to the emergence of Dalit literature. However, the immediate credit goes to the writer-activist members of the Dalit Panther groups influenced by the philosophy of Ambedkar. As noted by Debjani Ganguly, Dr.Ambedkar may be considered as the founder of the “Dalit
discursivity”. We find that before the emergence of the Dalit Panthers, there had been several Dalit movements since 1920s under the leadership of Ambedkar. However, after the Gandhi-Ambedkar dispute in the 1930s, which led Ambedkar to make the famed declaration “Gandhiji, I have no homeland”, there has been a proliferation of Dalit historical and creative writings.

Panther groups, on the basis of ideological differences, had been divided in several fractions, but they had been successful in creating a space to represent their culture, will and woe, pains and sufferings through their writings with common literary characteristics for which it has gained recognition as a new form of literary genre in Indian literature.

The Bhakti poets in their accent of protest against social inequality and caste tyranny got due recognition in the mainstream Marathi and also in the literature of other regional languages. Popular entertainment lawani (ballads), pawada (panegyric poetry), and tamasha (folk-dramas) produced by the low castes were anonymous and were never considered a respectable literature.

Dalit literature grew up in its maturity as a distinct literary genre in the post-independent era, the second half of twentieth century. Since the 1970s onward the Marathi Dalit literature has been able to occupy a position in the mainstream Marathi literature and from the 1980s onward the Marathi Dalit writings were extensively translated into different regional languages of India. Subsequently, from the 1990s the Dalit writings are being translated into English and different other languages of the world which made Dalit literature a significant part of Indian literature with considerable global attention.
Autobiographies have always been popular forms of writing mostly having didactic values. The Dalit autobiographies, however, have little to instruct; rather they explode popular myths about human values and dignity. They expose the blatant ugliness of society and the acute human suffering. As noted by Bhogle the Dalit autobiographical narratives are the ‘moving sagas of human sufferings and helplessness’ (see Bhogle, 160). Dalit autobiographies have made a space for the Dalits to struggle against the ascribed 'untouchable' identity which is a fundamental battle for Dalit writers. They attempt to challenge the old definitions with new imaginations, a process which Margo Perkins has called 'rewriting the self'.

Through autobiographies the Dalit writers articulate their cultural and caste discrimination, and focus on the question of otherness, difference, marginality, and aesthetics. Dalit autobiography creates a subversive historiography to voice the protest of the marginalized. Dalit autobiography, therefore, is considered as the most potent and exercised form of fiction in Dalit literature (Devy 272).

In terms of its narrative point of view, Dalit autobiography is different from the mainstream one. A Dalit autobiography is not about glorifying the achievements of life rather it is a protest, a resistance, a means to search for identity, rediscovering the history of their marginalized social status, recovering their cultural history, and to create a cultural capital to carry forward the self-respect movement for establishing hegemony parallel to the mainstream.

The select set of Dalit autobiographers’ identity is a kind of achieved identity rather than an ascribed one (see Ronkin). Bama emphatically challenges all such notions ascriptions pertaining to Dalit identity which left the consciousness of the Dalits fatally wounded. Hugely distorted form image is attached to them to bereave
the Dalits of their self-confidence and self-respect. In her autobiography, Bama mentions that during her school and college days, she and other lower caste students had to face caste discrimination at the hands of upper caste teachers without any reason.

In terms of their narrative technique and aesthetic strategies, there are a number of episodic stories sequencing and juxtaposing the issues of casteism, untouchability, poverty, starvation, struggle for education, oppression, patriarchy and so on. It has already been noted that there is little difference between fiction and autobiography which is based on unstated pact between the reader and the writer, hence the autobiographies are seen to have often employed the identical techniques like that of fiction.

Aesthetics in Dalit literature does not ensure universal pleasure because the one who identifies himself with Dalit experience will obviously rejoice it more than the others. Besides, it certainly pleases the readers who have a sound sense of history and sensitivity towards society. The one who has lived Dalit experiences can think of no other meaning of aestheticism than the one portrayed through Dalit autobiographies marked with counter Dalit aesthetics and an undertone of resistance, assertion and protest. Dalit literature does not believe in Kantian concept of disinterested universal beauty. It criticises the aesthetics of ‘satyam shivam sundaram’. Dalit aesthetics is a counter aesthetic paradigm that rejects the aesthetic values based on the so called universal judgment of beauty.

There are some Dalit writers who, in the postmodern context, emphasises on individuality, and defy the communal identity as it is found in the works of Kavitendra Indu, a Hindi Dalit critic. He claims that Dalit identity is itself tyrannical in its negation of both a person's other identities with regard to gender, class,
occupation, locality, religious, familial etc., and a person's individuality. He further states, “I would like to end with this hope, that you feel that the meaning of ‘I’ is not only Dalit ... !” (qtd. in Beth 571). Later, in an interview he re-emphasized, "I am not a Dalit writer, and I don't want to be! (Ibid 571).

However, the Dalit individuality is inseparable from communal subjectivity. For a Dalit intellectual, his identity is a physical reality as soon as he comes in contact with a member from a high caste in any social situation.

The strategic attempt is needed for legitimate cultural and social capital through Dalit literary and political representation in various academic and political institutions. The introduction of Dalit literary-cultural studies in academic and social institutions has helped the Dalit literature attain a legitimate position. The Dalit intellectuals, social and cultural activists in contemporary India, thus represent an very interesting scenario in which an urgent need is felt to make sense of Dalit reality at an abstract theoretical level. These intellectual efforts also show that Dalit theory might acquire quite a critical mass in the near future.
Bibliography:


