Dalit Autobiographies: An Analysis

The only impurity is in the fire elements.

There is only one system in the world.

Then who is pure and who is impure?

The cause of pollution is the creation of the body

In the beginning, at the end, there is nothing but pollution.

No one knows anyone who was born pure.

Chokha says, in wonder, who is pure?

(Abhanga-11, by Chokhamela; qtd. in Zelliot 2005, 5)

I

Autobiography has remained a significant segment of Dalit literature since 1960s and 70s. The Dalit writers termed the autobiographical narratives as ‘self stories’ (Atmakatha) or ‘self-reportings’ (Atma vritta) (Kumar 2011, 150). Dalit literature, as a genre, has emerged through the Dalit movement in Maharashtra in the 1960s, and later on in the other parts of the country. Similarly, Dalit autobiography also became popular in Maharashtra and subsequently in the other provinces as one of the significant sub-genres of Dalit writings. When Dalit Marathi poetry aims at decanonizing literature, Dalit autobiographies attempt to unveil the wretchedness and miseries of the Dalit life and experiences through first-hand accounts. Till recently, there have been more than eighty major Dalit autobiographies written in various Indian languages as well as in English.
A large part of the Dalit literature is autobiographical in form. It may be noted that their poetry, novels, critical prose writings, theatrical dialogues etc. are in confessional mode. The ‘confessions’ are mostly made to invoke the painful experiences that the authors have gone through in a caste ridden society. Dalit writers mostly prefer to write out of authenticity of experience instead of soaring high with the wings of imagination (Bhogle 158). Many of the poems and novels elaborate the personal life and individual experiences of writers themselves with a realization that other members of their community also suffer in the same way.

The emergence of Dalit autobiography opens up a new dimension to the study of autobiography in Indian literature. Dalits are marginalized entities and were denied education for quite long time by the society infested with casteism and social hierarchy. After being educated, some of them took writing as a weapon for self assertion and as an act of protest. Rajkumar emphasizes that “writing an autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against different forms of oppression” (Kumar 2011, 5).

The genre, autobiography has flourished as a post-capitalist literary emergence which is generally believed to have the aim to record an individual’s achievements and attainments. But this act of recording one’s self achievement is not applicable in case of the Dalit autobiographies. Instead of celebrating the self, the Dalits narrate a life of pain and suffering of their collective lot.

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 Ambedkarite 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 emphatic outbursts of their smouldering anger taking on the hegemonic paradigms of the Brahminical values glorified in the mainstream literatures. The Dalit autobiographies also play a significant role in reconstructing the Dalit cultural historiography in the postcolonial context of Indian literature.

The Dalit autobiographies are characterized by some specific features that differentiate them from the other Indian autobiographies. Firstly, most of the Dalit autobiographies are written in the early part of the respective author’s life. Secondly, the identity assertion is one of the key features of Dalit autobiography with an emphasis on caste, class, gender, ethnicity, language, region etc. Thirdly, the Dalit autobiographies are largely recollections of their wretched experiences as social pariahs and veritable outsiders. Fourthly, by defying the existing norms imposed by the mainstream codes, the Dalit autobiographers mobilize resistance. By writing autobiographies the Dalit writers raise voice against all forms of oppression. Fifthly, through the writing of autobiographies the Dalit writers try to rediscover and reconstruct their socio-cultural history of dehumanizing oppression and exploitations in every sphere of their life.

According to Raj Kumar, “writing autobiography is a political act because there is always an assertion of the narrative self” (Ibid 3). Autobiography is a narrative that involves remembrance, but this act of remembrance is not a random act but a process of selective recollection. The process involves, what Maurice
Halbwachs has described as communicative memory which is socially communicated and relates to a group. As Halbwachs pointed out, the recreation of memory by itself does not preserve the past, it is preserved by society’s contemporary frame of reference in respective era leading to the, what he called, ‘concretion of identity’. The autobiography has evolved into a major discourse that has provided the crucial trajectory for the concretion of Dalit identity and its social location (see details in Aasmaan).

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, several identity criteria in terms of location, such as - caste, class, ethnicity, language, religion, region, gender etc. can be put to test. Each of these criteria has to be thoroughly examined while studying an autobiography so that we are able to understand the person’s affiliation to a particular universe of meaning and experience, and its world view. On different locations the experience of lives may be different. 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. So without going through the locations of individuals the act of generalization of life experiences may lead to wrong interpretation of the autobiographies and the authors (Kumar 2013, 3).

II

Paula Moya points out in the introduction to Reclaiming Identity (2001) that the concept of identity has been a major topic and widely discussed by the feminists,
anti-colonialists, scholars of ethnic and race studies; by the theorists of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, queer theory and cultural materialist thinking for decades. However, to her, the discourses on identity have often been not free from debate and inconsistency. She writes:

…much of what has been written about identity during this period seeks to delegitimate, and in some cases eliminate, the concept itself by revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations. (Moya et al. 1-2)

Moya explores how the debates around identity and multiculturalism have been developed in particular contexts of history, as various notions of group and cultural identities were formed amidst contentious fields of social changes.

Essentialism, a controversial theoretical position in terms of identity theory, refers to a set of characteristics or properties which are common to a given entity. These sets of characteristics are the essences that characterize a substance or a form. The Essentialists consider these characteristics as the fixed traits of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or other markers. They do not allow variations of these traits among individuals or even over time in multi-cultural social spaces. The problem is that if essence implies permanence and inalterability, essentialist thinking tends to agree with political conservatism and militate against social change. But in many ways essentialist claims also have contributed useful rallying-points for radical politics, including feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial struggles. In a culture imbued with essentialist modes of thinking, an ironic or strategic essentialism can sometimes be politically advantageous (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essentialism). In the context of the Dalit discourse, it
has largely been the assertion to resist the essentialisation of their individual and social identities.

Paula Moya underlines various limitations of the problematic of essentialist tendencies. Firstly, the essentialist has a tendency to posit with one aspect of identity as the sole cause or a determinant for the construction of social meanings of an individual’s or community’s experience. However, the major contention is that the identities are constituted differently in different historical contexts. As for example, a slave woman in antebellum America might experience her “womanness” differently from a middle class housewife living in Victorian England. So contrary to essentialist’s view, identity category is neither stable nor internally homogenous. Secondly, the instability and heterogeneity of identity categories lead to a range of additional problems turning it impossible to determine the processes of identity formation with unified or monolithic concepts.

The French poststructuralists’ view on the concept of identity is exemplified by the way deconstruction has been applied in social and cultural theories. The theory of deconstruction asserts that our experience of ourselves and our world is produced by the language we speak. Since our language is unstable and ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies, we ourselves are unstable and ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies. To the deconstructionists, the self-image of stable identity that many of us have is really just a comforting self-delusion which we produce in collusion with our culture, as culture also wants to see itself as stable and coherent when in reality it is highly unstable and fragmented. In reality, we don’t have identity as the word implies that we consist of one, singular self, but in fact, we are multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties, and intentions. The deconstructionist thesis about
the arbitrariness and indeterminacy of linguistic reference led many U.S. literary theorists and cultural critics to understand the concepts of experience and identity as similarly indeterminate and therefore epistemologically unreliable. The questions on the very concept of identity raised by the postmodernist critics can be briefed in a related set of ideas: such as (i) objectivity is impossible, (ii) we cannot know the external world, (iii) identities are untenable, (iv) experience cannot yield genuine knowledge, and (v) universal moral ideas are baseless (Tyson 259).

The postpositivist critics of identity find that identities are evalutatable theoretical claims that have epistemic consequences. Our conceptions about which we are as social beings influence us and in turn are influenced by our understandings of how our society is structured and what our particular experiences in the society are likely to be. However, the point to be considered here is that our different views about how our society is structured and where we and others fit into that totality (society) are not all equally accurate. Moya says, “Identities are thus not simply products of structures of power; they are often assumed or chosen for complex subjective reasons that can be objectively evaluated” (Moya 9).

The postpositivist realists claim that neither the essentialist nor the postmodernist parameters are adequate frame of references to explain the social, political and epistemological significance of identities. According to them, identities can be both real and constructed. When the identities can be politically and epistemologically significant, on the other, they are also variable, nonessential, and radically historical. To the realists, subjectivity or particularity is not antithetical to objective knowledge but is an important component of it (Ibid 12-17).
III

Autobiography has been recognized as a distinct literary genre and as such an important testing ground for critical controversies ranging from the ideas of authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. Autobiographical writings are traced back from Plato’s time and have expressed itself in the form of a genre since Rousseau’s *Confession* was written. Now it is a popular form in the West as well as in the East. The postcolonial study includes the autobiographies of both the third and the fourth world writers, such as the Afro-American, the Indian Dalits and all the other subaltern autobiographical narratives.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to analyze select Dalit autobiographies to examine how the Dalit writers narrate their social location and assert their identities through their writings. In this regard five prominent Dalit autobiographies have been chosen covering three linguistic communities, the autobiographies are - Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (2003), Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste-Akkarmashi* (2007), Faustina Bama’s *Karukku* (2001) Laxman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya-The Branded* (1998) and Vasant Moon’s *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* (2007).

The potentiality of autobiography as a literary genre has been widely accepted. The Oxford dictionary defines ‘genre’ as “a kind or style especially of art or literature, e.g., novel, drama, satire” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English 1990, 491). Todorov in his article ‘The Origine of Genres’ (1976) elaborately discusses how genre existed in the good old days of the classics – ballads, odes, sonnets, tragedies and comedies. He, however, observes that the modern writers ‘no longer respect the separation of the genres’ (Todorov et al. 159).
Todorov claims autobiography as another genre which he described in terms of two identities; firstly, the author with the narrator and secondly the narrator with the main character. The first identity, i.e., ‘author with the narrator’ separates autobiography from the novel as a genre. In brief this, identity separates the entire ‘referential’ or ‘historical’ genre from the genre of ‘fiction’ (ibid 168). To him autobiography as a genre involves a speech act that codifies both semiotic properties of narrator-character identity and pragmatic properties of author-narrator identify that one claims to tell the truth and not the fiction. In this way this speech act is extremely widespread outside literature. To become a literary genre, the speech act which is the base of the identity of the genre has to undergo numerous transformations.

Raj Kumar, a major critic of Dalit personal narratives, claims that defining autobiography is not an easy task because today’s definition might get changed tomorrow following ‘shifting priorities in literature and society’ (Kumar 2011, 10). In Greek, however, ‘autos’ denotes ‘self’; ‘bios’ ‘life, and ‘graphe’ ‘writing’ (Smith 1). When all these words are taken together in order, it would mean ‘self-life-writing’. The term offers a brief definition of autobiography, nevertheless.

Philippe Lejeune speaks of four essential elements of autobiography, such as prose as the medium, real life as the subject matter, author as the narrator, and retrospective as the point of view. This is a normative definition of autobiography which suggests some boundary lines to be followed while writing an autobiography. But by going through a number of autobiographies it is seen that all texts do not necessarily follow the guidelines as proposed by Lejuene. They are diverse in themes and structures and demand a complex strategy of reading. Estelle Jelinek
prescribes that a good autobiography should have certain qualities. Firstly, it must centre exclusively or mostly on the author and not on others. Secondly, it should be representative of its times. Thirdly, the autobiographer should be aware of her /his self and seeker of self knowledge. Fourthly, he or she must aim to explore and not to exhort. Fifthly, his or her autobiography should be an effort to give meaning to some personal mythos, etc. (in Kumar 2011, 11).

Estelle Jelinek’s attempt to define a good and bad autobiography is not necessarily an attempt to homogenise the entire discussion of autobiography into two groups. Because in the context of heterogeneous socio-cultural experiences of individuals, the autobiographies will definitely be different from one another. Thus over the years different aspects of autobiographies have generated different responses among the critics.

Literariness of autobiography is a debatable issue. Since Dalit writers are writing autobiography as an important genre, it is pertinent to examine how far these autobiographies can be accepted as a genre of literature. Paul De Man in his critical essay, “Autobiography as Defacement”, defies autobiography as a literary genre. He states that the study of autobiography is based on a set of problematic and restrictive assumptions. To his view, it is a mistake to imagine autobiography as a literary genre since the very idea of genre presupposes historical and aesthetic classifications like novel, the epic, the lyric etc. He also focuses his attention on the difficulty of supposed distinction between autobiography and fiction as autobiography demands verifiability of events which is not the case for fiction. He says that autobiography is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs in some degree in all texts. Autobiography takes place when a text involves two
persons constructing their own identities through the reading of each other (McQuillan 74-76). Generally, confessions, journals, memoirs, meditations, and self portraits are often recognized as different forms of autobiography. The elements of autobiography are present in fiction, poetry, and even drama and they have been read as forms of autobiography albeit in dramatized forms. K. Satchidanandan in his article, “Thinking of Autobiography” (2001) says that the border between fiction and autobiography is particularly thin as they often employ similar techniques. The difference between the two genres depends on the unstated pact between the reader and the writer. It is autobiography when the reader suspends disbelief and promises to accept the author’s work as truth and the moment the trust is broken, the border becomes blurred and autobiography becomes fiction. (Satchitanandan 201-202)

Roy Pascal in his ‘Design and Truth in Autobiography’ argues convincingly that autobiography is a unique literary form offering its readers a complex set of interpretative problems. But Pascal’s sensitive analysis of the genre is spoiled by his rather insistent value judgments. To him the ‘true’ autobiography tells us not only the remembered deeds and thoughts but also brings forth both for the author and reader ‘a spiritual experiment, a voyage of discovery’ (Howarth 363). William L. Howarth in his essay, “Some Principles of Autobiography” (1974), proposes a simple analogy between an ‘autobiography’ and a ‘self portrait’. Each of those single quoted words suggests a double entity, expressed as a series of reciprocal transactions. According to him, the ‘self’ thinks and acts and it knows that it exists alone and with others. A self portrait as an entity is space and time, illusion and reality, painter and also the model, and each of these elements places a demand, yields a concession. On the other hand, a ‘self-portrait’ is even more uniquely transactional.
In Aristotelian sense autobiography is a literary art as it is a conscious verbal construct written for specific purpose – a purpose which helps to shape the work, and without which there would be no work. A particular autobiography can be better or worse as literary art in relation to how well or poorly the autobiographer shapes his or her materials to achieve the inherent purpose or organizing principle.

Autobiographies need to be studied as a whole work of art, as noted by Barret John Mandel. Literary critics still tend to concentrate on isolated beauties in an autobiography rather than on the work as a whole because, as Charles Neider believes, “One of the ironies of art is that it is possible to win a war and lose the battles, and… it is more tragic to lose the battles than the war” (qtd. in Mandel 217). To his argument a war is won because its battles are won.

There are certain limitations for an autobiography to become literature. Firstly, the materials used in autobiography must be the content of his or her own life. Secondly, the autobiographer must limit himself or herself casting retrospective glances back over history while a writer of fiction is free to create a world that might even never have existed in the way it is depicted. Thirdly, the autobiographer must write with fidelity to the spirit of the truth. It is certain that every autobiographer explicitly or implicitly professes that he or she will speak the truth at least what has been selected to make public. These three limitations differentiate an autobiography from a fiction. Despite these limitations autobiographer has much freedom in its choice of organizing principle, form and devices of representation which can have much literary elements to consider autobiography as literature (Mandel 219-220).

Autobiography has been a well established literary genre for a long time in the west which can be traced back to Plato’s time in the fourth century B.C. An
important period of Plato’s life is described in his *Seventh Epistle* (fourth century BC). As noted by Raj Kumar there are also sources which tell us that some of the early Roman rulers like Lutatius, Catulus, Sarus, Rutilius, Rufus, Sulla, Caesar had left behind some accounts of their military achievements (Kumar 2011, 8-9).

The confessional mode of writing underwent great changes in Europe when Christianity became an established religion and the continent lost its earlier novelty. This happened during the Middle Ages and especially during the Renaissance when non-confessional and secularly oriented autobiographical accounts of life began to appear. In the course of time autobiographical writing has developed into a unique and autonomous genre describing its author’s life.

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. As noted by Raj Kumar, there existed several self-narratives from the ancient times. 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 in 1891 is a delightful work of unfulfilled possibilities. Narayan Hemchandra’s Gujarati autobiography *Hum Pote* (1900), Ambika Datta Vyas’, *Nij Vrntant* (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 (Ibid 43).

The critical studies of the autobiographies/personal narratives have been slow to emerge in India. The reasons are obvious. The literary critics in India have not felt drawn to this, otherwise, important genre. The few Indian autobiographies which have widely drawn attention of the researchers are Gandhi’s, Nehru’s and Nirad C. Chaudhury’s. They individually represented different world views, but socio-culturally they belonged to a common category, i.e., they were from the upper caste and were quite privileged to have an audience worldwide. Since their autobiographies were available in English from the very beginning, the critics working on autobiographies naturally picked them up to evaluate their lives and writings. In recent times there have been a considerable number of critical studies on Indian upper caste women’s autobiographies. On the other hand, the Dalits, who have been raising their voices for quite some time through their respective personal narratives were rarely heard of and thus systematically neglected in the academic circle and subsequently have been deprived of critical attention.

IV

Raj Kumar in his Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity (2011) emphatically states that the anti-colonial movement in India led people of the upper caste to write autobiographies. These autobiographies are mostly
written to celebrate their ‘self’. But in the beginning of post-independent period, the Dalits started writing autobiography as an act of self-assertion and resistance against caste oppression and social neglect. He says, “The writing of autobiography was used by the members of this oppressed group to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against caste and class oppression” (Kumar 157).

The Dalit autobiographers have documented their experiences of pain and sufferings, both physical and epistemological, through various social processes of deprivation, caste segregation, untouchability, denial of education, abject poverty, forced child labour, exploitation of Dalit women, physical and mental persecution, dehumanisation of their body and so on. These experiences alert the Dalit autobiographers and their community to struggle for self respect and social emancipation through education and assertive articulations. Slowly but steadily the Dalit consciousness emerged to address their experience of social exploitation as well as physical and epistemic violence. The Dalit autobiographers have made it a point to record these experiences of oppression and deprivation through their attempt to reconstruct their individual as well as social history. The assertion of Dalit identity is a recurrent theme of their autobiographies as a strategy to resist the normative codes of the mainstream values and make a critique of the hypocritical stance of the high caste people, the hierarchies prevalent in the social structure, and the Brahminical and of the castiest ethics that essentially govern every aspect of social order. Thus the Dalit autobiographies are formidable examples of subaltern narrative of the self.

Omprakash Valmiki, in his preface to the Hindi edition of *Joothan*⁶ (Translated as *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*, by Arun Prabha Mukharjee, 2003) says that
his autobiography expresses those ‘experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations’ (vii). He notes that in the process of writing this autobiography, a lot has remained unsaid as he could not manage to record them all. It is quite clear that he has taken recourse to selective remembrance as a strategy in recording his experiences which is not only mere act of writing but a project for self-representation. His autobiography narrates his childhood experiences in the village that was situated at the outskirt, at the periphery of the village boundary; his painful school life and his growing up as one of the Chudras, an untouchable caste. The autobiography also records how Valmiki came in contact with several people while he was a trainee in various ordinance factories. Through those new acquaintances he got the opportunity to display his creative faculty in theatre that inspired his own interest in dramatic performances and creative writing. During his stay in Jabalpur he was actively involved with writing and Dalit activism. Significantly, his autobiography also addresses the issue of identity crisis of the Dalits both as an individual and part of a community.

Realization of physical segregation of the Dalits from the mainstream high caste society has been one of the central themes of Dalit autobiographical narratives. 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. Valmiki’s 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 Chuhras, the untouchables. The open space behind the dwellings of Chuhras was used as public shitting place without worrying about
decency (*Joothan* 1). Through this physical separation of living spaces Valmiki shows how social existence was essentially determined through the 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 the essay, “Concerning Violence”, included in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. (1963, 39) Dr. B.R. Ambedkar too noted how the untouchables were the ‘broken men’, and forced to live outside the village (*The Untouchables*, 45). By exposing the segregated settlement of the Dalits and the non-Dalits in the autobiographical narratives, the Dalit 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.

Bama’s *Karukku* (2001) begins with the narration of compartmentalized settlement of the lower castes which 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, such as, *Nadars, Koravars, Chakkiliyar, Kusavar, Palla, and Paraya* (*Karukku* 7). Bama describes that at the entrance of her village there was a small bus terminus from where the buses did not go further as if the ‘entire world ended there’ (*Ibid* 6). Beyond the bus stand, there was a stream that ran in full spate during rainy season that turned into a stinking shit-field when the stream was dry. The stream marked the boundary line of the narrator’s colony. The physical description of the habitation reveals the marginalized and segregated status of the lower caste groups of Bama’s community.
However, the upper caste settlements were beyond the streets of the Thevar, the Chettiyaar, the Aassari and the Nadar. The author-narrator found it to be a paradox that in a country that is supposedly socialist and democratic that upheld the values like liberty and equality, but ironically people actually lived in settlements with caste based segregation in the same country. 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. (*Karukku* 7)

As noted by 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 the upper caste people. This physical segregation of the Dalits from the non-Dalits suggests the separation of the other. The works the Dalits do; the life they live; the food they eat; the garments they wear are different from the upper caste Hindus. They draw water from a separate well, and the even the space for cremation is also separate. As rightly noted by Alok Mukherjee, “Dalits are the upper caste Hindu’s Other” (in Valmiki 2003, 2).

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his autobiography, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2007), narrates the settlement of the untouchables at Maharwada, a place dwelled
by the Mahars, which was segregated from the upper caste of the locality. There was a peculiar turn of events in the life of Limble. His grandmother, Santamai, quarrelled with Limble’s mother, Masamai, and left the house along with young Limble to live by the Maharwada bus stand braving cold and rain.

Similarly, we come across the description of separate settlements of the untouchables in Laxman Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya* (1998) as well as in Basant Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (2001). *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 or market places. The author suffers identity crisis when it comes to location of ‘self’ in comparison to his counterparts in established mainstream society. He opens up his autobiography with the discourse of segregated identity that his memory goes back to the experience of his childhood as, “No native place. No birth date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born. In *Uchalya* community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur” (*The Branded* 1). He further writes:

> It is there that I grew through childhood and youth. I still remember our hut. It was nothing more than a low, hay thatched roof. All of us had to crawl on our hands and knees to get in or out.” (*The Branded* 1)

Basant Moon in *Growing up* describes the slum dwellings constructed by the Municipality board at Nagpur where his family, along with other untouchable Mahars, used to live cutting away from the mainstream upper caste inhabitations. As he describes, “At the east end of the settlement stood a very long apartment building,
beyond that lived a mixed colony of Brahmins, Marwaris, Bengalis, and Madrasis” (Growing Up Untouchable 2).

Most of these autobiographies begin with the description of the segregation of the Dalit dwellings from the upper caste colonies, which itself distinguishes these writings from the other mainstream Indian autobiographies. This segregation is questioned by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his The Untouchable (1948) where he speaks of the ‘Broken Men’ who are the conquered tribes and are not allowed to live in newly established settlement by the conquerors. They were allowed to live outside or at the border of the settlement to “watch and ward for the settled tribes and the settled tribes agreed to give them food and shelters” (Ambedkar 2008, 45). The settled tribes forced the ‘Broken Men’ to live outside with the strategy that they should live on the border of the village to meet the raids of the hostile tribes. The practice of segregating the ‘other’ has been an act of consolidating power and to subjectivise them. As Foucault argues, ‘where there is power, there is resistance’. For its existence power depends on the ‘multiplicity of points of resistance’ (in Barry Smart 70). The Dalit autobiographies reveal how the upper castes exercise the power through the plurality of ‘subjectification’ of the untouchables by denying them education, employment, and shelter. The ultimate form of power politics of upper castes is to segregate the societies in order to protect its own constituencies of power. The experience of subjectivisation is not only physical but also social and epistemic for the Dalits in India whose subjectivisation has been justified on the grounds of their perceived impurity.
Untouchability has been one of the most fundamental issues that made writing about it a collective imperative for the Dalits, and the Dalit autobiographies have invariably focused upon this social blight. For the Dalits, the very act of writing itself has turned into an act of resistance against the mainstream social norms. Gandhi’s initiatives for the apparent emancipation of the Dalits from untouchability by renaming them as ‘Harijan’, apart from giving some symbolic solace, could not assure the Dalits any freedom in real terms from the socially sanctioned stigma of lowliness. Gandhi’s idea of Dalit emancipation was more political than social. In fact, Gandhi supported caste system till 1922 which was later aggressively opposed by Ambedkar. Ambedkar quotes Gandhi on this issue:

I believe that if Hindu society has been able to stand because it is founded on the caste system. Caste has a readymade means for spreading primary education, caste has a political basis. Caste can perform judicial function. I believe that interdining or intermarriages are not necessary for promoting national unity. (qtd. in Thorat 5)

However, in 1925 Gandhi became critical of caste system and says:

I gave support to caste because it stands for restraint. But at present caste does not mean restraint, it means limitations. Restraint is glorious and helps to achieve freedom. But limitation is like a chain. It binds. There is nothing commendable in castes as they exist today. They are contrary to the tenets of the Shastras. ...This is not a condition of elevation. It is a state of fall.” (Ibid 5)

Ambedkar was instrumental in instilling the sense of Dalit consciousness in Om Prakash Valmiki who later, through his writings, tries to resurrect the Dalit historiography and their representation. He has been thoroughly critical of Gandhi’s
role and methods for the so called Dalit emancipation though it was largely accepted by society. Valmiki argues in Joothan:

From text book to the media of communication, they were all beating the drums about Gandhi. ... After reading Ambedkar I had realized that by naming the untouchables ‘Harijans’ Gandhi had not helped them to join the national mainstream, but has saved the Hindus from becoming minority. (Joothan 72)

Valmiki’s Joothan depicts the ‘untouchable self’ of the author which has been a perennial existential experience for him since childhood, and even after his becoming an established author. Paradoxically, it was the school where he encountered the reality of untouchability as he came in contact with other high caste children there. As one from the Chuhra community, untouchability became part of his day to day experience. He recounts that before he got admitted in the government school, untouchability was officially declared an offence, a legal crime in 1955 in independent India, but in terms of real experience, it remained the same with hardly any difference whatsoever. He writes:

Gandhiji’s uplifting of the untouchables resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others from the class, that too on the floor, the mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. (Ibid 22)

For Valmiki being mocked at as ‘Chuhreka’ by the fellow students as well as by his teachers of the school was part of his daily encounter. He was invariably taunted by his schoolmates no matter whether he was in neat and cleanly dressed or shabbily clad. So, the author himself and his friends from the Chuhra community
were inevitably in ‘no-win-situation’ (Ibid 3). Despite Valmiki’s achievements in school he would be a victim of social ostracization but his fate would hardly change in the given circumstances. Valmiki writes:

During the examination we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from away high up lest our hands touch the glass. (Ibid 16)

Valmiki experiences untouchability outside his school too. He narrates such an experience as he happened to accompany Bhikhuram, who used to run errands for the teachers of Barla Inter College. They made a trip together to their teacher Brajpal Singh Tyagi’s village to bring a sack of wheat. On their arrival at Brajpal’s house an elderly man offered him to sit on the cot where he was lying on. After a while both Valmiki and Bhikhuram were served food by them. However, after their lunch when the elderly person came to know about their caste he became so angry that he took out a stick from underneath the cot and began to beat Bhikhuram while hurling abuses on them. The author experienced how merely by coming to know about their caste people would instantly change their attitude towards them. Valmiki writes:

The hollowness of this hospitality had been exposed. It is the guest’s caste that entitles him to respect. How did we have any entitlement to hospitality? My apprehensions had turned out to be correct. Somehow we managed to escape their wrath. (Ibid 52)

The experience of caste indignation and untouchability together formed one of the most wretched aspects of the Dalit identity that was tangibly experienced by
the Dalit autobiographers as well as by their community. Faustina Bama writes in *Karukku*:

When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is. (*Karukku* 13)

For Bama the experience of untouchability was part of her childhood reality. She had experienced it right from early childhood when she accompanied her grandmother to Naicker’s house where her grandmother worked as a maid-servant and drudged from morning till evening by doing the chores like sweeping the cowshed, picking up the dung and dirt and return to bring home the left-over rice and curry of previous evening. Bama also noticed that the Naicker lady doling out the left-over in her grandmother’s vessel from a safe distance so that her vessel did not touch the vessel of the pariah’s lest it got polluted (*Ibid* 16). In school, the high caste children and teachers spoke to the students belonging to Bama’s caste with contempt; they were always looked down upon as the wretched pariahs of society and were often instigated to commit misdeeds. She notes, “If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, ‘It must be the Cheri children who did it’” (*Ibid* 18). For her, the stigma of untouchability was so pervasive and insidious that she faced it everywhere - inside schools, in the buses and even in the convent which she joined and which she eventually renounced.

Sharan Kumar Limbale’s autobiography, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2007), narrates harrowing experience of untouchability that degenerated into a social evil that hugely affected education in schools, social transactions and relationships. The autobiography begins with the description of how untouchability remained a strong
and constant preoccupation among teachers and students of high castes even during the events like school picnic. He refers to the sitting arrangement of the students in the picnic where the high caste students were allowed to sit along with the teachers under a banyan tree while the Mahar students were asked to sit under another tree. He writes:

Boys and girls from the higher caste like Wani, Brahmin, Marwari, Muslim, Maratha, Teli, Fishermen, Goldsmith and all the teachers, about hundred or so sat in a circle under a banyan tree. We, the Mahar boys and girls, were asked to sit under another tree. The high-caste ones said a prayer before eating, which didn’t make any sense to us. (*The Outcaste* 2)

The book, *The Outcaste* narrates numerous instances where the narrator was ill-behaved in the school by his classmates and teachers and was treated with insolence as untouchable. During rainy seasons the school would move to Shivapa Tali’s mansion and sometimes in the Marwari mansion, but the Mahar students were allowed only to sit at the entrance and not inside the room. The narrator could understand the reason for that. He writes:

There were so many caste factions in our school. The umbilical cord between our locality and the village had snapped, as if the village, torn asunder, had thrown us out of it. We had grown up like aliens since our infancy. This scene of alienation increased over the years and to this day my awful childhood haunts me. (*Ibid 5*)

Outside school, in the day to day social life also he had faced untouchability. He saw the Brahmins used the upstream of the river bank for water and washing clothes; the downstream by the Kumbies and Shepherds; and the lowest stream was for the Mahars. There were many other instances of untouchability like barber’s
denial to cut the narrator’s hair, pouring water into author’s hand by the old mother of Kaka, the stepfather of the narrator, from a safe distance and the restrictions imposed on them to take water from Narayan Patil’s well etc. which illustrate the deeply rooted practice of untouchability that was so indignantly prevalent in society.

Laxman Gaikwad in the beginning of his autobiography, *The Branded: Uchalya* claims that he was born casteless in an Uchalya Community, a tribe which was notified by the British as perennial criminals under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 and subsequently amended from time to time. He states:

> The community in which I was born has ever been rejected-ostracized by the caste ridden hierarchy among which it has been fated to live. For hundreds-nay-thousands of years this man-forsaken community, denied its innate humanness by all and sundry, has been forced to live a life no better than that of a godforsaken animal. *(The Branded vii)*

The sinister ostracization of the author and his tribe by the high caste was justified by the existing hierarchical caste order. Gaikwad writes that he was admitted to school and coincidentally in his lane some children fell ill, suffering from loose motion and vomiting. Tulsiram, one of his neighbours, and others charged Martand, the author’s father, for that epidemic as they alleged that the epidemic broke out because his son, Lakshya, the nick name of Laxman Gaikwad, was admitted to school. Even the community Panchayat too resolved that Martand must stop his son from going to school otherwise he would be excommunicated from society. Subsequently his teacher, Kulkarni, came to their lane and asked Tulsiram as to why the other people of the village were not afflicted with cholera despite the children from those villages kept going to school. In his reply Tulsiram
said, “Their caste have a right (sanctioned by religion and tradition) to learn, to read, to write but we are not so permitted.” (Ibid 18) They believed they did not have the religious sanction to go to school which the upper castes had. There are numerous other descriptions of casteist discrimination and untouchability experienced by the narrator since his childhood days.

Kunbi women’s act of removing flour from the grindstones before an untouchable worker touched it and the villager Patil’s refusal to eat flour and salt from author’s community as it was a taboo for the high caste people etc. unfold incidents of untouchability that the Pathrut community of the author subjected to. His father Martand worked as a servant in a high caste Chamle household. He saw that his community people were not allowed to take water from the common village wells. They were given water from a distance by the high caste villagers so that there was no physical contact with a Pathrut. The author recounts his life of untouchability lived in Dhanegaon. He was mocked at by Maratha children who would insult him by taunting, “lichiman Tata crab-curry khata?” (Ibid 115) Gaikwad recollects:

If I happened to touch anybody’s vessel he purged it in fire or touched a cow to wash way the taint of my touch. I had to speak with respect and humility with even a one year old child. This village had forced me to a slave’s life. (Ibid 115)

However, a little difference is there in case of Vasant Moon’s experience of Dalit life. He doesn’t have bitter experiences of untouchability in his day to day life and school life like that of Valmiki, Limbale, Gaikwad, and Bama. But his Growing Up Untouchable In India: A Dalit Autobiography (2001) narrates the plight of untouchability and low esteem of his community that he experiences through the
sufferings of his mother. He recounts how his mother, Purna, while searching for job to survive with her son and daughter, was refused by every Brahmin household in the neighbourhood because they would not keep her as a maid servant in the Brahmin colony as she happened to be from Mahar community. Most importantly, Vasant Moon’s Dalit identity is asserted through his community’s experiences rather than his own as an individual. He shows a complex relationship of his individual pain with the sufferings of his community. He learns from uncle Kundalik how Mahars were not allowed to work in the weaving department as they were not supposed to touch the thread.

Valmiki recollects the dire situations that he along with his wife, Chanda, experienced on account of his surname which was embedded with untouchability. To some, his surname which was written deliberately after his caste name was attractive; for few it was significant; to some others it was a courageous act; and for his relatives and well wishers it was a foolish antic. However, to the author writing caste name as his surname is an act of self-assertion. He mocked at the educated Dalits who began to use their family gotra as their surname with a little change for fine-tuning. This is how the Dalits tried to overcome the crisis of untouchable identity. He writes:

…They find that the easy way out. Behind all such acts is the anguish of identity crisis, which has come about as a reaction to the blatant inhumanity of casteism. Dalits want to join the mainstream of society after getting an education but Savarna prevents them from doing so. Discriminates against Dalits. Thinks of them as inferior beings. Doubts are cast on their intelligence, their ability, their performance.

(Joothan 126-127)
Valmiki realizes how the Dalit intellectuals are frightened of their caste name and because of that they are hiding their caste identity. He understands that concealing identity is not the solution of the Dalit issues. He professes that the “writers, intellectuals and activists in the Dalit movement have to struggle constantly with their inner conflicts” (Ibid 128). There has always been deep seated fear in the hearts of the Dalits for they are prevented from leading a normal life because of their caste identity. He argues that caste has been the basis of respect and merit, important for social superiority and this battle against casteism cannot be won in a short span of time. To win this battle, the Dalits need a continuous conscious struggle.

VI

Violence is inherent in hierarchical caste system which is sanctified by the religious belief of Hinduism. Dilip Menon in his book, *Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, (2011) has noted that Gandhi’s non-violence was never actually the central theme of any major Hindu religious text. Gandhi had constructed and invented it in order to engage with the presence of day to day violence. Gandhi was critical of C.F. Andrews for insisting that nonviolence as the core of the major texts of Hindu scripts. Gandhi argued, “I see no sign of it in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, not even in my favourite Tulsidas” (qtd. in Menon vii). To Gandhi, violence was constitutive of Indian society, particularly in the maintenance of a hierarchical Hindu order. Menon makes a significant observation that in the present social context, that caste violence is looked as negligible and the communal violence continues to be a matter of serious concern. The interwoven violence against the Dalits and the adivasis becomes the object of ‘reportage’, and ‘communal violence’ the object of ‘theorizing.’ (Ibid viii)
Menon raises a pertinent question as to whether the Dalits have the right to life in modern India. It is undeniable that there is internal violence within Hindu society. The deployment of violence against the ‘internal Other’, the Dalits, is historically prior to the ‘external Other’, the Muslims. In academic discourses, it is often discussed that the Dalits have been given opportunities by affirmative action and they have improved a lot, whereas there are many poor non-Dalits who need to be provided the same opportunities through constitutional provisions. In making such hypocritical arguments the inherent plight of the Dalits as a constitutive element of Hindu social system is unacknowledged. This is what Menon would call ‘blindness of insight’. He writes:

That Hinduism – as religion, social system or way of life – is a hierarchical, inegalitarian structure is largely accepted, but what goes largely unacknowledged in academic discourse is both the casual brutality and the organized violence that it practices towards its subordinate sections. (Menon ix-x)

Subsequently, the so called affirmative action, taken up by some of the states in favour of the Dalits, often proved futile in their states in ensuring an effective social change and emancipation. The violence exercised by the Brahmins on the Dalits in maintaining the caste hierarchy in society is very much present but it remains invisible as it has been ingrained and internalized within the rubrics of social system. Menon writes:

The issue of the use of violence in the maintenance of caste hierarchy does not appear as an issue in the text. Yet again, this remains the central occluded fact of Indian society: so present, yet so invisible. (Ibid xvi)
Dalit autobiographies have created a discourse for narrating the experience of violence like that of the other socially oppressed groups such as the African-Americans and women. Through caste system and untouchability the lower strata of Indian hierarchical society has always remained perpetually oppressed in every sphere of social, economic, political and individual life resulting in poverty, child labour, exploitation of the Dalit women, and physical and mental persecution of the Dalits in general.

The practice of untouchability supported by the caste politics of Manu in Manusmriti led the Dalits to undertake lowly and servile works, and most of the time it also forced them to go workless. Valmiki, in Joothan, recollects the poor condition of his family where everyone did something or the other odd works yet, they could not manage two decent meals a day. They did all sorts of works for the Tagas, the high caste people, including cleaning, working in their farms and doing general labour. They often had to work without any wages. Nobody had the courage to protest against such oppression of unpaid labour, they only received contempt and humiliation from the Tagas. Their only identity to the Tagas was that they were Chuhras. Chuhras were not seen as human beings rather a thing to use. They were dehumanised and reduced to mere commodities to serve the high castes. The utility of Chuhra community lasted till they had use value and exchange values for the bourgeois. In Valmiki’s words, “their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away” (Joothan 2).

When the young men of Valmiki’s basti refused to work for the Tagas without wages, they were brutally tortured by the help of the police. The police captured the men from the basti and thrashed them publicly. The people watched the
event mutely without any protest. The women and children of the basti howled loudly as their men were captured by the police for no reason. Valmiki writes, “No one had the courage to ask the head constable why he was being beaten. What crime had been committed?” (Ibid 39). All these physical torture was perpetrated to create fear-psychosis among the low caste Bhangis as a consequence of their denial to work for free for the Tagas, in effect for defying the orders of the rich high caste villagers.

The representation of the author himself as a forced child labourer in the field of Tagas and his mother’s engagement as a worker in cleaning the cowsheds along with the other from among the community in exchange of ‘Joothan’, the leftover food, brings forth the terrible dimension of inhuman social oppression that was actually experienced by the Dalits of Valmiki’s community. All the protagonists of the selected autobiographies directly or indirectly had to work as a child labour to support their family. In Outcaste (2007) Limbale narrates how he had to collect cow-dung with his grandmother and had to help his mother to bring the raw materials to brew liquor at home and serve it to the customers as a child labour. Similarly, in Uchalya (1998) Laxman Gaikwad had to go to the field with his grandfather for collecting grains from the rat holes; while the author of The Growing Up had to collect the abandoned iron metallic pieces and sell them to fill his stomach; in Karukku Bama had to work in the field, especially of the Naikar’s family with her grandmother and other children. The protagonists of the Dalit autobiographies invariably had to spend a major part of their younger life as child labourers.
Apart from the description of economic exploitation, the narratives of sexual exploitation of the Dalit women by the high caste landlords are evident in the autobiographies. Limbale, in *The Outcaste*, narrates how the high caste village heads exploited the Dalits to deprive them of their livelihood. They treated the Dalit farm labourers as their commodities, as mere objects usable for their materialistic gains. They even did not hesitate to destroy the family life of the Dalits working in their farm by using their wives as whores. Limbale writes:

People who enjoy high caste- privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. (*The Outcaste* 38)

And it is because of this kind of lust of the Patils, the protagonist of the autobiography had to suffer a life of outcaste with a perpetual crisis of identity. He became an outcaste in his own community for being an illegitimate son of his mother. He reveals the extreme immorality of Hanamanta Patil who had destroyed the happy married life of Ithal Kamble and his wife Masamai, the mother of the author narrator. Hanamanta helped Ithal Kamble during hard times with a hidden intention to establish an illicit relationship with his wife. As a consequence of this the caste council of the *Mahars* forced Masamai to divorce Kamble. Then after she was kept as a keep of Hanamanta Patil, and the narrator of *The Outcaste* was born of this illicit relationship. Soon after she became pregnant and gave birth to a child, she was thrown out of the house. Later on, she became a keep for another Patil, Yeswantrao Sidramappa Patil. This is how she became an object of sheer lust gratification for the Patils and her beautiful married life with Ithal Kamble was completely ruined.
There are several stories of sexual exploitation of Dalit women in *The Outcaste*. One of the stories was told to the narrator by Dammunna who had exposed the hypocrisy and tyranny of the high-caste people against the Dalits:

Once, a Dalit youth dared to look lasciviously at a high-caste woman from the village. This was considered a serious crime. Suppose she went back and told the people in her house? The whole village turned against the young man and attacked the Maharwada. Later the whole village went to court against young Dalit men who were sentenced to imprisonment for a year. When they returned after serving their term, everyman’s wife had had a baby. The Dalit women had been raped when their husbands were in prison. (*Ibid* 71)

Police atrocities were day to day events for the Dalits. In *The Branded: Uchalya* (1998) Gaikwad’s community being branded as a ‘criminal tribe’ under the provision of Criminal Tribe’s Act of 1871, had to suffer social ostracization as well as police atrocities. They tried incessantly to come out of their community profession of pilfering but they were denied any work by the high-caste people. Gaikwad writes:

Nobody would offer work to my Father, Martand, as we are known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals. They would not employ my mother, Dhonabai, even as a farmhand. (*The Branded* 2)

Thus his community was isolated socially and physically from the mainstream Hindu society. They had no other option for their livelihood except theft. In this context Dr. Ambedkar’s statement on isolated social castes is apt here:

Classes or social groups are common to all societies but as long as the classes or social groups do not practise isolation and exclusiveness, they are only non-social in
their relations towards one another. Isolation and exclusiveness makes them anti-social and inimical to one another. (qtd. in Thorat 60)

Laxman Gaikwad describes how his family and his community were subjected to extreme police atrocities. His grandfather, Lingappa, was a skilled thief of his community and the Nizam recorded him as the most notorious and dangerous thief for which no one dared to cross his path. But once in a drunken state he attempted to cut the knot of a dhoti tied around a stranger’s waist. In cutting the knot with a blade, he cut a nick on the stranger’s body from buttock to waist. The man screamed loudly as it was bleeding profusely from the wound. The police caught Lingappa and dragged him to his hut beating him severely all the way to search for the stolen goods. The narrator’s mother Dhonabai had already hid herself in the woods as she heard the approaching thud of the police. The police snubbed his grandmother as a whore and grabbed her by hair and thrashed her all over. He writes, “The police were beating whosoever their eyes fell upon – women, children. They squeezed grandmother’s breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods.”(The Branded 2)

If anyone from the author’s household or tribe wished to leave the place, he or she had to obtain a permit from the police – often bribing the police for that purpose. To pay the bribe for the permit they had to sell their cattle in the market. They had to show the permit to the police and tell them where they were going, and even then they could not stay at that place for more than three days. As the author was a child, except him everybody had a pass. If they travelled without a pass they were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up and brutalised. The police set free only after extracting exorbitant amount from them. The police atrocities were common and frequent incidents for the author’s family and his
community. Even author’s mother was not spared from molestation by the police. She had to sell the whole flock of sheep to bribe the police to free her sons from the cruel police beatings and torture. The narrator would wet his shorts at the horrendous site of police violence. He was, therefore, unwilling to accompany his brother on stealing trips. Gaikwad writes:

The police would beat us making false allegations of thefts, even when in fact, no thefts had been committed. The police themselves were responsible for creating conditions in which we were left with no option but to steal. *(Ibid 62)*

Being isolated from the mainstream society and because of the police atrocities, his family and community were forced to suffer from extreme poverty. He writes:

We never saw comfortable days in our household. It was always poverty and a wretched, grovelling life. Only on major festival days did we prepare *chapatis* out of hardly a quarter kilo wheat. That too under the haunting fear of the evil black magic of a sorceress. *(Ibid 84)*

The Marathas in the town of Kawatha exploited the people of Uchalya community following the ignorance of his community. They charged hefty interest rate of ten percent per day. So, whatever they earned from thieving trips had to be paid to the money lenders against the interest but the principal amount remained ever untouched. The police inspectors-in-charge of the areas also took large amount as bribe from the community. The money brought from outside went into the pockets of the people like the money lenders, the police officers, the proprietors of gambling dens, and the liquor vendors of the places like Kawatha, Salgara, Bhadgaon etc. where the Uchalya community resided.
In *Karukku* Bama narrates how the police inhumanly tortured the people of Paraya community, on the dispute over a cemetery. Police brutality was so barbarous that a young man died in police custody and his father could not weep at the immature death of his young son. Bama notes the plight of a Paraya father in her lines:

At the dead of night, between ten and twelve, the father came disguised in a *saree*, saw his son, and stood silent, stunned, and unable even to cry out loud. On his way home, they had been stopped by the Police. (*Ibid* 43)

**VII**

The autobiographical narratives not only recount the events of plight of the narrators as individual and community simply by using memory since their autobiography is part of a political act, in their writings, they register their protest against all kinds of oppressions. The protagonists of the autobiographical narratives describe the selective events of the past and construct an alibi in their present in search of identity. It has already been noted that, for Dalits, writing itself is an act of assertion of identity. However, in all the select five Dalit autobiographies, several devices, such as challenging the mainstream narratives of justifying casteism, questioning the value system, criticising political hegemony, mocking hypocrisy of the high caste social norms, protesting against violence etc. have been employed and manoeuvred to assert Dalit identity in the mainstream literary representation.

Valmiki’s father courageously confronted the school headmaster to protest against the teacher who forced the young Valmiki to sweep the school compound while he was in class four. This resolute and courageous protest of his father against injustice turned into a decisive event in his life. He would recall how his father
alluded to the neglected hero of Indian epic, Ekalavya, “Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?” (Joothan 6). Declination of accepting ‘joothan’, the scraps, by Valmiki’s mother and protesting humiliation meted out to her by Sukhdev Singh symbolically represent the core issues of politicised Dalit consciousness in his autobiography, Joothan. When a teacher was delivering his lecture on poverty of Dronacharya as he had to feed his son flour dissolved in water, the whole class responded to the subjective deliberation of the teacher with great emotion. Valmiki’s question in the class was why the author of the Mahabharata did not write a single word about the miserable life of the Chuhras who had to drink starch to survive, the teacher ordered him to stand in rooster pose as a punishment for criticising the epic. The author says, “I too have felt inside me the flames of Ashwatthama’s revenge” (Ibid 23). The protest against the established tradition of Brahiminic hegemony creates a desperate strive for identity. Valmiki writes:

The more active I became in the Dalit movement, the more suspicious people around me got, as though I was working to destroy their hegemony. Most of these suspicious people were Savarnas. I began to notice the effects of this surveillance among my fellow employees too. (Ibid 112)

Gaikwad represents the Pathrut community which is treated as a low caste and an untouchable community. Gaikwad was a follower of Marxist ideology and struggled for the labour class. As a leader of the factory workers he saw the plight of the labourers caused by the exploitation of factory owners. He fought for justice for the workers for which he was forced to leave his job. His growing consciousness about abject poverty of his family and community’s wretchedness disturbed him
inwardly and made him develop protest against the inactiveness of democratic government and inhuman attitude of the high-caste people. He writes:

Even now I often wonder why if Bharat is our country, we are discriminated against, why our race is branded and treated as a thieves’ community. If all Indians are brothers and sisters, why are not my brothers given jobs? Why do we not get land, decent houses? If we are all brothers, why are my brothers forced to resort to thievery in order to feed our people at home? (The Branded 62)

In *Kurukku* Bama perceives that her Paraya community, along with other low caste people, were exploited by the high caste people. Naicker is a land owning caste in Bama’s village. The Parayas worked in the field of the Naickers from morning till evening and each Paraya family worked for the Naickers almost as bonded labourers. Only the Pallas and the Parayas had to work this way as they had to strive for foods. She writes:

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her around, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. (*Kurukku* 16)

Bama’s other grandmother served as a household servant for the Naickers and for that she had to get up at the dawn and leave for Naicker family to work the whole day. But in return she brought home the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening. Bama brought to the notice of her reader how the socio-economic exploitation rooted in casteism has transgressed from domestic domain to the academic and charitable institutions. The students of Dalit community were tormented and humiliated by the high-caste teachers in schools. She experienced
such atrocities in educational institutions from her childhood till her college life. She points out that almost three quarters of the children in the school were Pallars and Parayas, but still the school and the Priest’s house were all at Nadar’s street. She recollects how the Paraya children were used for menial works of the teachers’ houses. She writes:

> Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn’t hesitate to use for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher’s house; we watered plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school. (*Karukku* 18)

When Bama admitted in class nine, she had to go to the high school at a neighbouring town where she stayed in hostel and experienced contemptuous scolding by the warden-sister for no reason whatsoever. Bama, to her chagrin, noticed how the Sisters used to publicly ridicule the lower caste children, “These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grew fat” (*Ibid* 20).

However, Bama never concealed her caste as advised by her mother. She had to undergo mental persecution by the retorts of teachers in the name of her caste as she would never hesitate to reveal her low caste identity. Bama realises the reality of caste discrimination in society. She writes:

> In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Whatever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy ... this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. (*Ibid* 26)
Bama experienced caste tyranny even within the convent. On the completion of her B.Ed. curriculum she joined a school as a teacher. She wanted to serve the students of her community and poor children by entering a convent as a nun. But soon she realized that there was rampant caste discrimination within the convent which was a great shock to her. She remembers how the nuns had to take vow that they would live in poverty and work for the betterment of the poor. She was disillusioned as she could see the real difference between the convents’ proclaimed principles and the actual practices of the authorities in the institution. The convent she entered did not even care to glance at the poor children and it only wished to serve the children of the wealthy (Ibid 77). She writes:

Before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a shame. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty. When the bell rang, there was always food of all kinds. By turns, at each meal there was meat, fish or eggs. There was always an abundance of fruits and variety of vegetables. There was comfortable room to live in. Each room had a bedstead, a fan, table and chairs and drinking water. (Ibid 77)

Bama experienced the hatred against the Dalits nurtured by the nuns and sisters in catholic institutions. They were so much biased in their thought of Dalit reality constructed by the Brahminic narratives. So the Dalits to them were subjects of contempt. Speaking ill of the Dalits was a normal practice of the nuns and the sisters. Bama quotes a conversation of the sisters that she heard in the convent, “How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves knew their place (115). Even if they had to speak something ugly or unpleasant, they categorized them as Harijan. Through such social attitudes, Bama shows the
polarised position of the non-Dalits and the Dalits as “us” and “them.” The hierarchical Brahminic world view of the church people disillusioned Bama’s perception of the supposed farsighted world view of the egalitarian Christian institution. Finally, she could not tolerate the mental torture in the convent and walked out of the order after three years of bitter experience.

To the Dalit writers, autobiography, in realistic sense is not ‘about’ the mere facts and events related to the achievements and failures of their personal life. It is about a political act by their choice to interpret them from Dalit point of view, and make sense of these events to assert Dalit identity. In doing so, they have not only described various themes of oppression as analysed above, like, segregation, untouchability, exploitation, patriarchy etc that they experience in the culturally hierarchical society as subversive narratives, they also have used subversive structure of language. To quote Bama’s opinion in an interview with Manoj Nair justifying her style of language is apt here:

Some critics cried out that a woman should not have used such coarse words. But I wrote the way people speak. I didn’t force a literary language on myself ... My ambition is to communicate the dreams and aspiration of my people who have remained on the fringes for centuries in Indian history. (qtd. in Kumari 74)

The language used by the Dalit autobiographers is mostly colloquial in nature with the phrases used in their day to day life which may be called as ‘Dalit style of language’. This subversiveness of Avarna (Dalit) narratives overturns the decorum of the Savarna (mainstream) aesthetics creating a platform for Dalit identity.