The Voice of the Marginalized: Individual and Community

“Proud casteman of my unfortunate country!
Throw aside your pride of caste,
Lest on your unwilling head,
Should be heaped the burning insults
That you now shower on other.
You have deprived the outcastes,
Of the common rights of man
With your very eyes
You have beheld their misery
And yet you refused to take them to your heart.
But remember, please do remember
Someday you shall have to be
The equal of them all in ignominy…”

(Rabindra Nath Tagore, in ‘The Great Equality’ published on 5th August, 1993 in ‘Harijan’)

I

Dalit literature is an inseparable part of marginality discourse in India which evolved into an emphatic literary genre of resistance and assertions against the caste based hierarchical 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 crystallized with its idiosyncratic forms in the 1970s raising their voice from below. Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak are some of the formidable theorists of the so called third world origin, who have theorized the
voices of the margins and their influence extending to the field of modern literature, history, politics, language and contemporary feminism. In the wake of Ranajit Guha’s Subaltern Studies Group in South Asia formed in 1982 for writing subaltern historiography of Indian peasantry, Gayatri Spivak’s famous writing “Can the Subaltern Speak?” evoked considerable critical attention with respect to the problematic of the marginality discourse. When Spivak’s question of subalternity emerges with reference to the ‘colonizer-colonized’ dialectic for theorizing postcoloniality and subalternity; Dalit subalternity, on the other hand discarded this binary, and exposes the inner contradictions that it conceals. Alok Mukherjee, a translator in his introduction to Limbale’s Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations (2007), writes:

Limbale establishes the Dalit subalternity not in a colonial structure, but in the caste-based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society. Here, the village becomes the metropolis, and Dalits exist literally on the periphery. Dalit settlements are not only apart from the upper caste Hindu settlements; they are actually outside the boundary of the village. This physical segregation signifies other separations. (in Limbale 2007, 2)

Marginality in respect to subalternity is a relative concept. 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. Mahesh Gavaskar in his essay, “Colonialism within Colonialism: Phule’s Critique of Brahmin Power” (2007) points out that the Phule-Ambedkar discourse has underlined “the fact that just as India went through a phase of British colonialism, it had passed previously through different facets of Indian history leaving Dalits as colonized” (Gavaskar 91).
Mahesh Gavaskar also points out that Phule’s critique of British colonialism has been rather ambivalent. In his book Slavery, Vol-1 (1991), published in Marathi as Gulamgiri in 1873, 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 sate 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, Vol-1, i-ii)

Significantly, Mahesh Gavaskar observes in analysing Phule’s critique of Brahminism that the British colonialism had inadvertently made certain normative and cognitive tools which actually helped the Dalits to fight against the ‘Brahminical Colonialism’ (2007, 91).

In general sense marginality implies a condition not only of physical relagation but also a disadvantaged position in terms of social, political, economic and cultural participation. In other words, marginalized people are socially, economically, politically, and legally deprived and abandoned, excluded or neglected and are therefore vulnerable and constantly lacerated with a sense of provisionality in every sphere of their life-experience. Ghana S. Gurung and Michael Kollmair have analyzed marginality in their article, “Marginality: Concepts and their Limitations”, (2005) by taking two major conceptual frameworks, i.e. societal and spatial (spatial marginality is also referred to as geographical or physical marginality in literature). The societal framework focuses on human dimensions such as demography, religion, culture, social structure (e.g.
caste/hierarchy/class/ethnicity/gender), economics and politics in relation to the access to resources by individuals and groups. In this regard, the emphasis is placed on the understanding of the underlying causes of exclusion, inequality, social injustice and locational segregation of people (Ghana 2005, 10). The spatial marginality is related to geographical remoteness of an area from major economic centres and refers to areas that are difficult to access in the absence of appropriate infrastructure. As a result the people are isolated from the mainstream vis-a-vis the processes of development.

The societal marginality describes the social condition represented by poor livelihood options, where the subject has ‘reduced subjectivity’ or restricted opportunities of participation in public decision-making, less use of public space, lower sense of community status and low self-esteem. Usually, the marginalized people are discriminated against, stigmatized, ignored and often suppressed by the mainstream on the basis of race, gender, age, culture, religion, ethnicity, occupation, education and economy (see Larsen, 2002), which is also known as ‘systematic marginality’ (see Mehretu et.al. 91-92) that is, a socially constructed system of inequitable relations with hegemonic establishment that allows one set of people to exercise undue power over another set on the basis of class, ethnicity, age, gender and other similar considerations. The autobiographical narratives of the Dalits show the position of the Dalits in India as a systematically marginalized entity both in terms of social and spatial marginality.

In the postmodern theoretical context, the concept of marginality has been changed. Now marginality is no longer a concept of excluded, forgotten or overlooked entity. In a sense postmodern notion of ‘marginality’ is no longer
peripheral but central to all thoughts. The poststructuralist thought of marginality has claimed it, on the other hand, as a liberating force. George Youdice writes in his essay “Marginality and the Ethics of Survival” (1983):

Today it is declared the marginal is no longer peripheral but central to all thought. Contemporary post-sructuralist thought has apotheistically reclaimed marginality as a liberating force. By demonstrating that the “marginal” constitutes the condition of possibility of all social, scientific and cultural entities, a new “ethics of marginality” has emerged that is necessarily decentred for a new, Neo-Neitzschean ‘freedom’ from moral injunctions. (Youdice 1989, 214)

Derrida has significantly contributed to the notion of marginality who has propounded that centre is always one and marginality is multiple. The postmodernist deconstructionist, Gayatri Spivak termed margin as ‘the silent, silenced center’ (qtd. in Imran, 2). In her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she takes the position that subaltern cannot speak. She emphatically analyzes and critiques the attempts by most of the marginal, the oppressed categories to speak. In doing so, she first directs her critique against the French thinkers like Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze who believed that if the oppressed is given the chance, and through alliance with politics that builds solidarity, subalterns can speak and know their conditions. On the line of Marxist analysis, Spivak argues that exploitation against the oppressed lies in structural domination which emerged from the international division of labour. Thus the attempts to speak for the subaltern often end up in alienating the Subject further. As such, attempts to speak for other, is often caught in the cycle of (re)production of a dominating discourse and representation of the Other (Ibid 2-3).
Marginality, in the context of Dalits, presupposes the hegemonic powers possessed by the high caste people and their victims. Casteism as a hegemonic ideology has sustained through a cleverly designed socio-religious structure what Antonio Gramsci would describe as ‘permanently organized force’ (in 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 kind of marginalization and the most important among them is political marginalization. In literary, cultural, educational, spatial and technological spheres too the Dalits have remained marginalized (Guru 2000, 111-116). Dalit literature as cultural representation of marginal section of society has assigned voice to one of the most underprivileged and marginalized people of Indian society that had been silent, and unrepresented for centuries in the mainstream literary narratives of India. It was the Vidharbha Literary Conference of 1954 where Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was happy to see the representatives of Brahmin and Mahar Associations who were sitting close to each other among the audience. In his address, Dr. Ambedkar spoke about the necessity of introspection of life values and cultural values in literary works. He appealed to the Brahman Pandits and writers to understand the struggles and suffering of the Dalits through their literature. He said:

We are neglecting our lives, our duties and our culture. If we do a little bit of introspection, we will discover a horrible picture of how our life-values and culture are getting burnt up. Whatever the reasons may be, we will find that we are going on a downward path of degradation. That is why, writers should immediately take notice and should make an effort to conserve the life-values and culture, give them lustre, and make them grow…. Make your pen spread its glow to dispel the deep darkness from the villages ... Try to understand their suffering, their problem and strive to bring about improvement in their lives through your literature. There lies the real humanity. (qtd. in Guy Poiterin, 5)
The non-Dalit progressive and revolutionary writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, T.S. Pillai, V.S. Khandkar, and very recently Arundhati Roy and several others have addressed the pains and sufferings of the Dalits through their literary writings. However, they are often criticized 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)

The Dalit writers feel that only Dalits with their experience and sensitivity can be the genuine Dalit writers representing their life and culture through their writings. The Dalit writers through their narratives represent the subjugated and the peripheral Dalit voice not only of the individual but also of the community. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations (2007) writes:

Dalit writers assert that their literature conveys the life that they have lived, experienced and seen. Since the experience contained in Dalit literature is articulated out of a desire for freedom, its character is collective rather than individual. (Limable 2007, 32)

II

The Dalit autobiographical narratives, unlike the western and Indian mainstream upper caste autobiographies, have recorded the marginalized voice of individual self and the community as well. Most of the Indian Dalit personal narratives are about their decentred selves. One of the most significant aspects of Dalit autobiographies like Joothan, The Outcaste, The Branded-Uchalya, Karukku,
and Growing Up Untouchables in India, selected for the current study, is that the protagonists manifest the decentred selves of their community while relating themselves with the social and cultural affairs of their selves with his or her neighbours. The autobiographers, Valmiki, Limbale, Bama, Gaikwad and Vasant Moon have created a space for the Dalits, the other to the Mainstream high-caste people to represent themselves like that of Morgan, an African Autobiographer, who in her *My Place* transformed the narrative from being an individual to collective or community auto/biography. The ‘self’ of the author in African American and Dalit autobiography, reflects both his/her individual self and the social self. In this connection, Toni Morrison rightly observes:

> Autobiographical form is classic in Black American or Afro-American literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say, ‘my single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative. (Morrison 1990, 327)

Unlike mainstream autobiographies, the protagonists of both Dalit and African American autobiographies narrate certain experiences relating to social, political and cultural issues which are common in the lives of the community members while presenting a portrayal of their own ‘selves’. Here lies the distinctiveness of Dalit autobiographies that the ‘self’ is depicted not only as an individual with a private career but also as a member of community with the sense of deep bond and responsibilities to the other members of his community. Thus the ‘self’ is not detached from its social group because as a member of it he, too, has received similar inhuman and humiliating treatment by the established social structure.
The personal experiences of the narrator and the experiences of any other member of his community are usually the same. The individual achievements of the protagonists often turn into community achievements as it is found in *Joothan*. When Valmiki passes high school examinations, his success in his village was celebrated as a community achievement. Similarly, the failure of the community activities hurts the narrator too. Valmiki expresses his deep concern when the protest of his community against the unwaged labourers fails and the people are brutally tortured. This is how the Dalit autobiographies present the unity of the individual voice and the voice of the community. Thus it is quite natural that the multi-layered experience of pain and suffering led the protagonists to find the communal self in their individual ‘selves’.

Stephen Butterfield in analysing the ‘self’ in African American autobiography observes:

The appeal of black autobiography is in… their sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility. The self belongs to the people and people find a voice in the self. (Butterfield 1974, 3)

Similar sense of shared life of collective experience has been reflected in all the five selected Dalit autobiographies through the articulation of the protagonists. When assertion of identity remains an important agenda of Dalit literature, in Dalit autobiographies, the protagonists’ perception of their own identity is closely bound to that of their caste and community. The author-narrators face personal discrimination due to their stigmatized caste identity. They are also deeply sensitive to the sufferings of the other oppressed Dalits with whom they identify to such a great extent that they seem to experience their pain to be their own. There are numerous narrative accounts of the 'communal' experiences of the pain of untouchability in the Dalit autobiographical narratives. In *Joothan* Valmiki recalls
an instance when the young men in the Dalit basti refused to do beggary (unpaid labour) and the police were called in at the instruction of the upper castes. He writes:

Those who had been captured from the basti were being made to stand like a rooster; a very painful crouched up position. Moreover, they were being beaten with batons. The policeman who was beating them was getting tired. The one being beaten would scream after every blow. This festival of valour was being celebrated openly. People watched quietly, without a word. There was no protest from any side. (Joothan, 38)

Further connection between the individual and the community is revealed as Valmiki’s personal success in education is also interpreted as an achievement for the entire Dalit community. He says:

The high school results were announced in the paper. In those days, they used to publish the names as well as roll numbers. I was very happy to see my name. Pitaji had invited the whole basti to a feast to celebrate my results. The basti wore a festive look that day. It was the first time someone from our basti had passed high school. (Ibid 59-60)

Valmiki’s father repeats that it is his son’s personal responsibility to ‘improve his caste through his individual achievements. Furthermore, Valmiki’s own progress as an individual and the options open to him along with that came his way was largely affected by the progress of the Dalit movement as a whole. Valmiki writes:

Gandhiji’s uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government school had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. (Ibid 2)
Thus Valmiki's entrance into the school system was both an effect of the early success of the Dalit movements, and at the same time his personal success was restricted following the movement's own limitations. Although the individual subject of the Dalit autobiography is portrayed as inseparable from the Dalit community, his individuality is not wholly stifled. Valmiki, for instance, is still able to assert his own personal agency in opposition to the traditions of his community during his marriage by rejecting the community-chosen bride and instead marrying the girl of his own choice, and that too without conforming to the community's traditions during the wedding ceremony at the expense of offending many members of his family.

In *Joothan* the protagonist’s individuality is additionally valued as a counterpart of the upper castes who saw him only as a faceless member of his community. In social context they often have faceless identity. Valmiki’s observations are pertinent here when he writes:

> They did not call us by our names. If a person was older, then he would be called 'Oe Chuhre'. If the person was younger or of the same age, 'Abey Chuhre' was used. *(Ibid 2)*

Limbale’s autobiographical narrative, *The Outcaste* (2011), represents the voice of both individual and collective ‘self’ of the protagonist who recollects the events from his childhood experiences to his grown up age. The various experiences, such as contestation of untouchability, poor condition of living, unskilled labourers assigned to filthy works, rigid customs with superstitious beliefs, lack of education, child labour, suppressed feminine scenario, the bonds with the neighbouring people of the same community, love-hate relationship within the community and family,
exploitation of the upper caste people, Dalit protest against oppression, growing
interest for education, increasing awareness towards Dalit consciousness, quest for
identity and self-respect, involvement in Dalit movement and philosophising the
whole issues of Dalit voice reveal the author’s individuality which is closely tied up
with the affinity to his community.

By the use of first person plural ‘we’ representing the Dalit children of his
school in the opening sentence of the narrative, Limbale looks back at his
‘individual self’ along with his school mates when he experiences untouchability in
school, while using the river water and in visiting the temple. He was teased, and
thrown stone at by the fellow high caste school mates for being one of low caste
Mahar boys. The Mahar children were not allowed to enter the temple but he
happened to be in the middle of the temple, one day, unconsciously while sweeping.
He recollects Parshya’s reckless act of pissing on the sacred icon of Bhutalsidh
temple. However, he felt the guilt for that and sought forgiveness of his entrance
into the temple. Simultaneously, he registers a silent protest against prohibition of
the temple entry as they were also Hindu by faith. He writes:

Though branded as untouchables we too are Hindus by faith. We too are Human
beings. High-caste children from the village may visit the temple, yet we are
forbidden. There is a saying, ‘Children are the flowers of God’s abode,’ but not us.
We are the garbage the village throws out. (The Outcaste 4-5)

In some cases, there had been taboo of untouchability within the family and
in the community of lower-caste itself because of superstitious beliefs. Limbale
describes how his grandmother, Santamai who looked after him, did not like
touching things in the house as she believed that a ghost could follow the footsteps
of the family members returning home. She asked the author narrator to spit before
entering the house. She not only used to sprinkle cow urine on the members of the
author’s family but also forced to gurgle and drink it for good health. However, the
narrator was disturbed by the incident when one of his friends, Arjya, a Mang boy
from an untouchable community, was not allowed water by his grandmother; even
he was forbidden to play with that Mang boy. Young Limbale and Arjya together
went to the river for having water and there too they had to face the dilemma as to
where from they would drink water as certain parts of the river bank were reserved
for certain high caste communities on the basis of hierarchy. There were two
different places reserved for two different castes ‘Mang’ and ‘Mahar’ of the same
homogeneous group of untouchable community. Limbale writes:

Different parts of the river bank were reserved for Mahars and Mangs. Where were
to drink water from? Even water was its own enemy here. No, our minds were not
only divided they were also contaminated. (The Outcaste, 20)

Limbale raised voice against the practice of untouchability on the basis of
pure and impure, which was being followed by the mainstream society for ages, and
also sharply criticised prevalence of similar practices adopted by various
untouchable castes within the same untouchable community. Limbale gradually
becomes aware of how the caste hegemony makes the Dalits to ultimately accept the
normative structure of hierarchical status in the name of castes within the Dalit
community itself. The similar kind of caste antagonism among the Dalits has been
echoed by Valmiki in his Joothan too. He points out how the feelings of caste
differences were operative even among the activists that created differences between
Mahars, Mangs, Chamars and Mehtars (Joothan 109). Vasant Moon has also the
problem of untouchability on the basis of subcastes that existed in Dalit community.
He says that before his birth the subcastes like Ladvanes, Bavans, Zhade-Ghavanes, and Barkes did not take food in each other’s house. He writes:

At public gathering they sat in separate rows. The Ladvans, Zhades-Ghavanes, and Barkes would not sit on the mats of the Bavabes. If by mistake anyone sat down in the wrong place, the subcaste panchayat would do a purification ceremony.

(Growing Up Untouchable in India 6)

The issue, in respect to the experience of antagonistic practice of untouchability between the two sub-castes of Dalit community is both individual and communal. It may be noted that the Dalit autobiographical narratives have addressed the issue of internal casteism within the community itself. When through the process of Sanscritization the lower castes were allowed to have a higher social status by changing their profession, Karma theory, on the other hand, appeased the Dalits to be satisfied with their present tragic condition as a divine curse for the misdeeds committed by them in their previous life. The attempts of reformation by Arya Samaj and the religious preaching of Bhakti movement failed to substantiate a democratic set up for an egalitarian social system. It can actually be said that the practice of untouchability among the Dalits itself is a kind of scourge infected by the grand narrative of caste system based on the religious principles of Hinduism.

The protagonists of Dalit autobiographical narratives speaks of spatial marginality which makes them physically segregated from the mainstream society. Limbale in his The Outcaste recounts that there was a system of separate cup and saucer for the Dalits and high caste people in the tea shops in his village. The people in the village took tea from Shivram’s tea shop without any protest against such separate arrangements. The narrator also makes his point on the marginalization of
their houses. He finds that their “houses were in places that other villagers used as latrine” (*The Outcaste* 76).

The Dalit autobiographer despite being a narrator apparently speaking of the experiences of the self, in essence, is a representative, a collective self, giving a voice to the community experiences. The individual ‘I’ in Faustina Bama’s *Karukku* is closely bounded with collective ‘we’. Raj Kumar writes:

Instead of her individual self coming to occupy the centre stage, she evokes the collective self of the entire Dalit community suggesting that the autobiographical ‘I’ does not have an autonomous life outside the collective ‘we’. Almost all Dalit autobiographers adopt this strategy. (Kumar 232)

Several other distinctive narrative strategies have been used by Bama in *Karukku*. She perhaps deliberately leaves out the names of the persons, places, institutions in order to bring anonymity in her narration. As for example, she has not mentioned the name of her village, her parents, grandmothers, the school teachers, sisters of catholic churches, and the high caste people who exploited her caste people. Instead, she has mentioned the names of a few ordinary people who can, significantly, be found in any Dalit community (*Ibid* 232-233). In this respect M.S.S. Pandian argues:

To name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity. In this case, the shroud of anonymity frees events, persons and institutions from the possibility of individuation and renders them as general. Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities. (Pandian 132)

Thus invoking larger solidarities, Bama tries to draw attention of the readers to the issues of caste oppression with reference to her Paraya community for
centuries. The beginning part of her autobiographical narrative describes the day-to-
day socio-cultural and economic activities of Paraya community which shows the
nature of poverty and their incessant toiling following rabid caste discrimination.
She, along with other members of her family, experienced the same plight like her
other community members. Bama narrates:

More than three-quarters of the land in these parts are in the hands of Naickers.
People of our community work for them, each Paraya family attached to a Naicker
family, as panniyaal, bonded labourers. As far as I have seen, it is only Palla and
Parya communities who work in this way. Other communities don’t have to work so
hard. (*Karukku* 48)

Despite the struggle for livelihood and humiliation received because of caste
stigma Bama, along with her brother, has succeeded in completing education. She
joined a school as a teacher run by nuns. But as time went by she could realize how
the Dalit children were the victims of atrocities in the school. Following her
commitment as an educated Dalit she wanted to teach the Dalit children what they
ought to be taught and reflected upon as to how they should be treated by the nuns.
But they were deprived of that. She made her mind to become a nun and finally she
did. However, she had bitter experience of caste discrimination in the convent too.
She found that there was no love for the poor and the humble in the convent. She
says that the nuns and the priests claimed God’s love as limitless, without any
condition. “Yet”, she writes, “inside the convent there were innumerable conditions
about how you should be and who you are in order to deserve their love” (*Karukku*
106). They openly discussed that the standard of the school would fall if they took
Dalit children. Whereas according to Bama’s observation, “In the churches, Dalits
are the most in numbers alone. In everything else, they are the least” (*Karukku* 80).
She realized the difference between Jesus in the Bible and Jesus in the daily pieties. They taught the Dalits that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives the sinners, patient, tender, humble and obedient, but they never insisted that God is just, righteous, and is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood and never encourages inequality. She writes:

Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business. It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation; we find there is no place for us. (Karukku 80)

Bama finally left the order and consoled herself that there were many people who suffered worse plight than her. After leaving the order she became penniless and realized how her position in the society. This is how she resembles her position with other Dalit women in the society who despite toiling hard could not accumulate a little cash in hand which is very essential to gain some authority, status and prestige. She felt an uncertainty in her life after having left her job and she turned her tragic condition of life into a vantage to look back at the poor people of her community. She writes:

Today I am like a mongrel, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food, and a safe place live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. (Karukku 78)
Autobiographical writing has remained a dominant tradition of narratives which has helped to construct a history of selfhood. This is a paradigmatic narrative through which the subject has learnt to know who s/he is in social, cultural, political, economical, and religious sphere of life. In the second phase of the autobiographical writings, Gusdorf described the autobiographer as the ‘historian of himself’, who locates his account of ‘private motives’ in relation to ‘the objective course of events’. At the cusp of its third period, Karl Weintraub once more insisted that autobiography is ‘an historical genre’. Conversely, however, Marcus suggests that since its inception auto/biographical studies have also extended considerable effort on the project of “rescuing” autobiography from incorporation into history and history-writing’. Throughout its existence, critics have insisted that history focuses on collective experience, often in time-frames which exceed individual life-spans, while autobiography is regarded as the record of more private domains of self-reflexive analysis and feeling (Moore-Gilbert 77). Dalit autobiographies as subaltern testimonies reconstruct their subaltern historiography from below as the narrators find themselves absent in the mainstream chronicle of history.

Prathama Banerjee in her essay, “Caste and the Writing of History” (2010) points out that the history which “we practice today, emerged in India in the second half of the nineteenth century as a colonial-modern form of knowledge that sought to reinvent time, both as concept and as experience” (Banerjee 216). The texts of history written by the early beneficiaries of colonial education, namely the upper-castes and the middle class male professionals, took great pains to make caste into a benign category. Their histories did not acknowledge the caste as a differentiating element. They argued that the caste structure served to keep the Indians together,
despite systematic propagation of economic inequalities. Gandhi himself till the 1940s was one such thinker who believed in Varna system as one of the fundamental historical institutions of Indian civilization (*Ibid* 217).

Other school of Indian historical writings came from the Marxist school. The past was viewed as a successive development in terms of production. The greatest drawback was that the Indian society was viewed from class perspectives where castes are merged with class configuration. By the time Ambedkar wrote on history, he studied textual source materials of Sanskrit literature as a major source for uncovering the nature of Indian past, its social and religious history. Y.S. Alone, an eminent scholar of School of Arts and Aesthetics from JNU, in his essay, “Historicism: Confrontations and Inquiries” (2007) writes:

Undoubtedly, the cultural practices of any society can be read through literature. Therefore, for reconstruction of social and religious history, the study of textual sources assumes importance because each text in itself conceptualized its own world, constructing its own narrative having numerous connotations, which needs to be understood in its own social context and in a historical situation. (Alone 264)

The Dalit writers inspired by Ambedkarite interpretation of Indian historiography have written their autobiography to reconstruct Dalit history with a zeal for identity assertion. As said by Hegel, every history has a final aim that is to be shown philosophically. A history without such aim and point of view would only be a feeble minded past time of the imagination. (in Miller, 455) Miller in his essay, ‘Narrative and History’ (1974), says that every story of a narrative must have an aim and therefore also a history of a people and the history of the world (*ibid*: 455).
Vasant Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchables in India* has been translated into English by Gail Omvedt from Marathi *Vasti* which was published in 1995 and the first English edition was published in 2001 by Rowman and the second edition was published by Vistaar Publications in 2002. Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchables in India* (2002) has been written in twenty nine chapters with titles in episodic manner. Each of the chapters is intertwined with different stories of his self, society, culture, economy, politics, untouchability, exploitation, patriarchy and so on. But the most striking part of Moon’s autobiography is growing consciousness of Dalithood in his community in 1940s and 1950s, and the Dalit movements that came up in Maharashtra in general and in Nagpur in particular being imbued by the Ambedkarite ideology. He recounts the caste atrocities inflicted upon his community in those days and articulates how the Mahars and other untouchable communities organised to put up strong resistance against such social atrocities. He powerfully narrates from his own empirical experiences as to how the high-caste people, with the help of Govt. machineries, skilfully infused fear, sense of inferiority, complexity, trepidation, servility and despair in the psyche of the Dalits. He represents himself as one of the activists of that Dalit movement led by Ambedkar himself in 1940s. With the help of childhood memory Moon historicises the contribution of various Dalit agencies formed during the 1940s and 1950s, also narrates about the valour of the Dalit leaders of his contemporary time. The works of the agencies like Samata Sainik Dal (SSD), All India Schedule Caste Federation, the community activists of his neighborhood, the role of the community wrestlers have been recorded by Moon from Dalit historical perspectives. He provides a clear cut view of the Dalits on Gandhi’s position against the untouchable’s demand for separate electorate proposed by Ambedkar. Gandhi’s stand on the issues of Dalit representation was vehemently
opposed by the Ambedkarites. The protest by Mahars against Gandhi’s policy for the untouchables came to light in 1941 incident of his visit to Chokhamela hostel in Nagpur on the invitation of some Harijan students. Most of the Ambedkarite students and activists of the Samata Sainik Dal opposed the move to invite Gandhi. He recounts how the plans were made by Sandanad Dongre, one of the Ambedkarites, to protest at Gandhi’s arrival in the hostel. The Mahar youths from north and central Nagpur came together. The protesters were spread all around the hostel, on the railway tracks and roads. So the agitating people were led to believe that Gandhi would not be welcome by the organizers. When the followers of Gandhi started shouting slogans, “Long Live Gandhi”, Ambedkarite demonstrators shouted slogans sounding “Mahatma Gandhi Go Back!” which reverberated in the surroundings. The situation forced Gandhi’s car to come to the hostel from behind. To narrate the event Moon writes:

Until Gandhi went on to the stage, everything was quiet inside. But once he rose to speak, some of the Ambedkarite students in the audience stood up and began to shout, “Gandhiji, we have many questions for you”. Gandhiji was standing quietly. He said, “Yes, ask them”. But the turmoil only increased. No one could hear the questions in that confusion. The hundreds of people standing outside on the railway lines began a massive stone-throwing into the hostel. No one would give Gandhi a chance to make his speech. In this confusion, the organizers brought Gandhiji out of the pavilion to protect him. Just as he had came in by the door, so he left. (Moon 2002, 63)

The Ambedkarites’ protest against Gandhi’s arrival in Nagpur was an ideological movement resisting Gandhi’s claim for representing the Dalits of India. The 1942 Quit India Movement of Gandhi evoked huge response when the Textile
Mills were closed down, morning processions were carried out and the young volunteers organized marches singing the song, “This is my India, an unbroken continent!” (*Ibid* 89). But the Ambedkarites did not take part in this historic movement because for them the movement did not really address their cause. To quote Dr. S.K. Paul:

> The upper castes being the early beneficiaries of education first entered into the British revenue administration and later became entrenched in politics. They were nominated to the legislative council representing the landed aristocracy. In such a situation ‘freedom’ for the country had hardly any meaning for the Dalits. (Paul 2008, 24)

Therefore the follower of Ambedkarite ideology rather wanted to initiate a movement by their own. In this context Moon writes, “In those days no caste tension existed. The feeling was that each community should have its own movement” (*Ibid* 90). He has also pointed out the reaction that came from the high-caste people at the refusal of Mahars to do their traditional menial works as a kind of resistance under the leadership of Dasharat Patil, an Ambedkarite at the historic call of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Moon observes how the Hindu-Mahar riot took place against that Dalit resistance movement and the Mahars unitedly fought against the caste Hindus, blind to their thought of Dalits’ traditional works as their duty. However, Moon describes the valour of the Dalit Mahars who fought against the riot sacrificing lives.

Ambedkar has survived as a figure of inspiration throughout Moon’s life. Representing himself as a Dalit activist, and joined Samata Sainik Dal at Nagpur as an active member. As a radical activist, he worked hard with his fellow members for accomplishing the unfinished tasks of Ambedkar. Besides being a student and a Dalit activist, he was also interested in sports like hututu, kho-kho, football, hockey
and cricket. Though he has narrated about his experiences from his childhood life of the basti, Maharpura, to his becoming of a Deputy County Commissioner, his autobiography is not a mere celebration of his self and life as it is found in the narratives of conventional autobiographies. As regards to the material deprivation of his community in their slum life and many social conflicts that his community was subjected to, according to Moon, could have been averted through equal social opportunities. Moon takes note of fraternity that prevailed among the Dalits in his contemporary period, and perceived the quality of love and compassion of his community people. He narrates how the members of SSD provided him food in their houses during his childhood scarcity. Because of their love, he never had the sense of despair what is found in Limbale’s ‘The Outcaste’, Laxman Gaikwad’s ‘The Branded’ and in Bama’s ‘Karukku’. He praised his neighbours as they stood by his side whenever any problem occurred. He gives heroic description of many of the activists who sacrificed their lives like heroes.

Cultural representation is a significant and an inseparable component of Dalit autobiographies. Moon’s autobiography Growing Up Untouchables in India describes the cultural life of the Dalits which was rather vibrant and active. The basic points that he draws on about Dalit culture such as, Dalit fraternity as experienced by him in his community; hard working and courageous nature of the Mahars; interest in games and physical performances like wrestling; He gives descriptions of the songs and customs of his community. He was instrumental in establishing the Das Bhajan Mandal, a cultural organization that used to organize events like the Quawali programmes etc. that became quite popular in Nagpur. These programmes would go on from midnight till seven or eight in the morning wherein the two groups, Das party and Sherkhan party, would engage in musical
combat. The songs and poetry of the Dalits would also narrate the events associated with the Ambedkarite movement. One such song was sung by Ganvir from Indora when the Satyagraha against the Pune Pact took place in 1946 and thousands of people were imprisoned in the Nagpur jail:

The battle of Satyagrahis, O young fighters of India!
When the jail doors opened for your coming
There lentils and bread you got were mixed with grass
When blood flowed in your urine and the heart was crying out,
Thavare Saheb fall sick and he was a strong man,
When the jail doors opened for your coming.

(Ibid 113)

The philosophy of Ambedkarite movement created a sense of bonding among the community members of the basti, the locality where Moon lived. So, when he had to leave the basti as a Deputy County Commissioner he made it a point to visit his basti at Maharpura of Sitabardi region of Nagpur in every one or two months. He writes:

You will find such a group in any community. Our community was a reflection of the public life of Nagpur. The Ambedkarite movement existed in every neighborhood. Mill workers, bidi rollers, labourers, barbers, wrestlers and trainers, singers and balladeers, hymn-singing Varkaris and chanting Kabirpanthi Mendicants, library managers and magazine makers, feast – organizers and play producers. All these various types were found in the Nagpuri life of those days. All were merged in the Ambedkarite movement just as well all rivers merge into the sea. (Ibid 175)
In *Joothan*, Valmiki attempts to recover the history of suppression which never found a place in the narrative of mainstream national history. The brutal repression of the silent protest of the Bhangis against unwaged labor by the high caste Tagas made the poems like Sumitranandan Pant’s ‘Ah, how wonderful is this village life’ (*Joothan* 39) rather inconsequential and ironic as he finds such narratives artificial and a lie. The brutal incident of Ganwai Brothers of Poona who were blinded by some upper caste people created much tension in the Bombay-Poona area. He had experienced the anxiety and tension himself even in the Bombay Ordnance Factory where he was a trainee there. He wrote an essay on the problems in the *Navbharat Times* which aroused a lot of controversy and the government employees who were supporters of Shiv Sena complained against his article to the Principal of the Institute, Shri Desai. As Valmiki was sympathetic towards the Dalits, they began to investigate about his actual caste identity. His sympathy to the Dalits was a crime in their eyes. As an activist he travelled many Dalit villages of Maharashtra and saw that the Mahars became quite an educated lot. In comparison to them the Mangs, the Mehtars and others were still illiterate and in a state of real destitute. He also saw that there was unequal treatment even within the Dalits. Although the activists talked outwardly of forgetting the differences among Mahars, Mangs and Mehtars, yet sub-caste inequality was very much there. They even hesitated to enter into the Mehtar bastis. This was quite disturbing for him. Ambedkar’s message did not reach the Mehtar bastis at all. They had respect for Ambedkar but his followers could not win their minds and hearts. The Mehtars were at the bottom of the social ladder and were even suspicious of the Dalit leaders.

Valmiki has consciously pointed out the anti-reservation protests that had taken place in Gujarat in the 60s. The protesters carried out horrendous violence in
the rural areas. They stood under Gandhi’s statues in places like Baroda and Gandhinagar and fulminated hatred against the Dalits. The hate campaign also spread in some parts of Maharashtra where the Dalits were incessantly harassed in their work places. Valmiki wrote how the Dalits were harassed in the government and semi government work places. He has also written that many fake organizations like *Shoshit Workers Union* were created by the Savarnas and the caste Hindus to orchestrate conspiracies against the Dalits (see *Joothan*, 108).

He notes that how the posters and brochures of Shoshit Workers Union instilled inferiority complex among the Dalits. These materials were also distributed in the Ordnance Factory of Chandrapur where Valmiki worked. However, the Dalit activists resisted the conspiracy as an anti-Dalit agenda of the Savarnas. They organized a huge rally near the gate of the factory and an unanimous motion was passed at the rally to counteract against the conspiracy of the upper castes. Valmiki writes:

> When Dalits stand up to protect their selfhood, they are declared casteists. It is the dyed-in-the-wool casteists who make these declarations against Dalits. It is a move by the traditionalists and status quoists who are always suspicious of Dalits. (*Ibid* 109)

Valmiki was dejected at the failure of the Dalit Panthers party following the differences among the leaders on the issue of synthesizing the ideologies of Marxism and Ambedkarism. Apart from being a sympathizer of the Dalit politics, Valmiki was also a culturally inclined man. Wherever he went, he made a cultural circle for theatrical performances. On the occasion of Ambedkar’s birth anniversary all the Savarna members of his cultural organization disappeared from the scene. This betrayal by the Savarna members was disappointing for him who realized the
kind of feelings the Savarnas nurtured against the Dalits even in an event like celebrating India’s independence and its democracy.

He found the reason as to why the untouchables residing in the town and cities concealed their Dalit Identity through his encounter with Mohandras Naimishray, a poet, critic and journalist who had introduced Valmiki to a publisher. Namishray, in fact, instructed Valmiki not to reveal his real surname to the prospective publisher in order to get a favourable response from him. Further, Namishray also revealed that he could establish a good rapport with the publisher only because he did not reveal his actual identity to him. For Valmiki, it was rather disturbing. He expresses his concern for this fear of revealing caste identity in a society as follows:

The writers, intellectuals and activists in the Dalit Movement have to struggle constantly with their inner conflicts. There is so much fear lurking in the dark recesses of the heart that prevents us from leading normal lives. (Joothan 128)

The crisis of identity among the Dalits and even in his own family, among his relatives has been a matter of constant agony for him which still remains a crucial aspect till the present day Dalit Movement. He realizes, “Caste’ is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, ‘caste’ determines his or her destiny” (Ibid 133). Valmiki argues that despite having a history of great mythologies and chivalry, India has essentially been a fragmented nation. This is why, Valmiki argues, India was repeatedly defeated by the invaders. It is the blind arrogance of the savarnas (high caste) that ensured the doom of the nation. He writes:
All sorts of mythologies were constructed of Chivalry, of ideals. What was the outcome? A defeated social order in the clutches of hopelessness, poverty, illiteracy, narrow-mindedness, religious inertia and priestocracy, a social order embroiled in ritualism, which fragmented was repeatedly defeated by the Greeks, by the Shakas, by the Huns, by the Afghans, by the Moghuls, by the French and by the English. Yet, in the name of their valour and their greatness, Savarna kept hitting the weak and the helpless. Kept burning homes. Kept insulting women and raping them to drown in self-praise and turn away from truth to not learn from history, what sort of nation-building is being dreamt of? (Joothan 134)

Limbale experiences identity crisis in every aspect of his life as both an individual and communal self. His own community people reminded him of his lowliness. In one occasion he was asked to fetch bidi for Shrimantana, a man from his village. The narrator did not comply with the order. Shrimantantan threatened him to drive him away from the village as he did not belong to that village. Limbale recounts:

I am an alien. My father is not Mahar by caste. In the Maharwada I felt humiliated as I was considered a bastard; they called me akkarmashi. Yet in the village I was considered Mahar and teased as offspring of one. (The Outcaste 62)

Limbale portrays a picture of faceless identity of the Dalits in their family and society that has been engendered by the caste violence which is constitutive of Hindu caste system. Limbale’s experience of separation from the family members is no less than the predicament of separation that was found in Afro-American. He writes:
I am twenty five years old now and cannot recognize my own brothers- nor my father. They are all alive. We may not recognize each other even if we happened to travel in same bus. That’s what this journey of life is like. (*The Outcaste*, 91)

He was perpetually disconnected by the fear of his caste identity. He recalls, “If I happened to be going with a high-caste friend and someone greeted me with a ‘Jai bhim’ I felt like an outsider. I was worried that my caste would be revealed” (*Ibid* 104).

Even after independence of the country and abolition of untouchability by constitutional law, the Dalits have remained victims of untouchability embedded with casteism supported by the Hindu religious scripts. This is evident in Limbale’s narration of his difficulty in searching for a rented house. For this, he had to conceal his low-caste identity and lied to be a Lingayat, a member of high caste community for a little space for his stay. The high caste people could not recognize his caste because of his surname. He writes:

> We were ashamed of our past. We hid ourselves as a leper hides patches of rash on his skin. They couldn’t guess my caste on the basis of my surname, so when they became suspicious they kept asking for surname of my in-laws. (*Ibid* 105)

He was critical of the leaders of Dalit movement who nurtured among them the concept of purity and pollution ascribed by the high caste narratives. He suffered from identity crisis even among the Dalits. He was very much annoyed at the expression of purity and impurity of blood by a Dalit activist and to escape from embarrassing situation he did not reveal his parental identity to them. He says, “What would happen if the volunteers of this vast Dalit movement came to know that I was impure? Would they to avoid and ostracize me?” (*Ibid* 106)
All the select autobiographical narratives reveal the crisis of identity that has been faced by the autobiographers in every stage of their life on the basis of caste indignation, is universal in the culture of Indian social system. This is a reality that in India caste plays a unilateral role in determining one’s social position even in the present context of multicultural and pluralistic concept of identity. Valmiki’s friend Kureishi, a police inspector of Chandrapur police station, urged Valmiki to meet the new Commandant of army who was transferred to Chandrapur as both of them were from Mujaffarnagar district, they would be happy to meet each other. However, the manner in which the army Commandant behaved was typical of the Indian cultural attitude deeply rooted in casteism. Valmiki writes:

He was delighted when he heard that I was from Barla. Before we had even sat down, he asked, ‘Barla is Tyagi village. Which caste are you from? I looked at Kureishi whose face had changed colour. The question had been asked conversationally. The moment I said that my caste was Chuhra, he became uneasy. Suddenly all conversation stopped, as though there was nothing left to talk about. (Joothan 115)

Limbale’s *The Ouscaste* exclusively talks about economic, socio-cultural, and political history. Dalits were oppressed socially in the name of caste and religion; they were exploited economically through lesser wages than they deserve. Similarly, the Dalits had no space in political representation as most of the time they had to depend on the decision of the village heads. Limbale narrates the story how Mahar women were being sexually exploited by the high caste Marathas. It was a social practice in Maharashtra and also in other parts of the country that Dalit girls just after attaining puberty were kept by the upper caste as their keep for their gratification. It was almost a customary service for all Dalit families throughout
Maharashtra to offer their daughters to the upper-caste landlords as their concubines. In return these young women were given food and shelter. The children born out of such relations were considered bastasrards because the landlords never acknowledged them as their own children. In many cases these Dalit women had to satisfy the lust of several landlords in their lifetime and therefore they could not name the real father of their children. Their children were often denied school education. They did not have economic security either. They were often ostracized by their own community and were looked down upon as whores of the Patils. For them life turned out to be an incessant suffering, turmoil and perennial abuse.

IV

Bama in her *Karukku* reconstructs the history of the converted Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu who are caught in the web of untouchability and humiliation as Hindus and even after their conversion into Christianity their condition, ironically, remained the same. The religious conversion in India has hardly brought any effective change and remarkable improvement to the Dalit Christians. Bama realized that the high spiritual and moral ideals and the so called principles of humanity fostered by the Catholic institutions got derailed where the inmates like the nuns, sisters, Mother Superiors, Mothers Generals too fostered the Brahminical attitude towards the Dalits. These institutions were, in fact, reflected deep seated hypocrisy in terms of the values that they preached. Bama also narrates the perennial plight of the Dalit children as well as all other members of the community who loiter as a matter of routine in their daily life only to manage the bare minimum to survive. Their children used to live in perpetual malnutrition, who would invariably become labourers with their parents when they are as young as six or even just years old. Like most other Dalit autobiographies, Bama’s *Karukku* also
deals with the social life of the Dalits as well as the brutal police atrocities that a Dalit used to suffer as part of his regular life experience.

Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya* (2009) gives an account of life and livelihood, culture and language of the Uchalya community which was branded as a pilferer community, a community of criminals, and the identity was even officially endorsed by the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 by the Britishers. On the basis of the report of Kennedy, the Deputy I.G.P of Railways and Criminal Investigations, Bombay Presidency, in 1901, the Uchalyas were branded as a criminal Tribe. Gaikwad has very poignantly narrated the story of sufferings of the Uchalya community. His community was identified by several names in different regions. His narration exposes how the people had to be trained to endure beating and kicking so that they could tolerate the torture of the police and the people as well. Gaikwad also recounts how his sister-in-law was sold to a person from a distant place following their despicable poverty. They had to lose their life due to lack of proper medical treatment. The people of this community were subjected to extreme physical torture even for small guilt in the mills and in other places. He also describes various superstitious beliefs rampant in his community. Going to school was a sin for them. Gaikwad was the first school going child from his community of the village, Dhanegaon. The community Panchayat out of superstition took decision to punish the guilt that often turned fatal for the victims. Even his grandfather, Lingappa, was killed following a Panchayat’s decision. At times the Panchayat decisions could be even wildly farfetched like punishing the mother of a bride for the alleged sexual aberration of the grandmother of the bride. Gaikwad felt the dire necessity of education and social awareness for his community. He went to the
villages of his community to carry out awareness programmes while he was still working in a Mill at Latur.

He has described the story of exploitation of the Dalit workers in various mills by the mill owners from the Marxist point of view. He realized how the Mill owners exploited the workers by depriving them from their due wages and he raised his voice against such repressions for which the mill owners through manipulative means suspended him from job. However, he did not surrender easily before the board of management. He filed a suit with the help of a communist advocate and though he was not reinstated in his job but the management was compelled to reinstate some of his fellow workers. Finally, he tried to get elected in the Assembly election from Latur constituency as a candidate of Bahujan Samajbadi Party though he could not succeed in his bid. From his experience of contemporary socio-political scenario, the narrator tries to recover the social history of plights of the Dalits. He writes:

I had learnt my lesson. In this country it is not enough to possess good workers and volunteers to win elections; you must also possess wealth, social prestige and the quality of having been born in one of the higher castes. In addition, you must be well versed in the art of hooliganism, mobocracy and making false promises and assurances. Only with these accomplishments you are fit to enter the arena of politics. (Uchalya 2009, 230)

About the perpetual penury of the mill workers, who were always bogged down by debts, Gaikwad writes:

On pay-days creditors, shopkeepers, liquors-vendors would stand at the gate of the mill, ready to pounce on their preys. If a worker refused to pay, they would snatch away the money from him. Not a single pay-day was over free of violence, one or
the other worker was sure to be beaten in the quarrel over debts and credits. (Ibid 154)

Dalit discourse strongly represents the predicament of the Dalit women in a caste ridden society. It has already been noted that Dalit literature is also a cultural movement of the Dalits. Women act as important agents in cultural transmission. Women are predominantly present in the selected autobiographies of this study. Eva-Maria Hardtmann in her essay, “Dalit Feminism in a Neo Liberal World”, notes that there has been ambivalence in respect to the feminist discourse in India. She writes:

The main reason perhaps is that the concept feminism has been associated with the dominant West and Colonial rule. Thus, when talking about feminism in India one has to put it in the framework of an unequal global world. (Hardtmann 208)

In India the feminist discourse gained specific eminence in the 90s. Indian feminism has been characterized by a sense of class and caste neutrality for the feminists in India look at women, as pointed by Hardtmann as “belonging to one and the same general category and have been put into this kind at Hindu framework. Feminism has accordingly often been used synonymously with ‘general feminism’ within the framework of a ‘Hindu culture’” (Ibid 208). However, Dalit feminists do not see themselves as part at the ‘Hindu culture’. They do not identify themselves with general feminism which they call ‘Brahmani feminism’. The notion of Dalit feminism emerges with the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1995 when in the same year they took part in the Fourth International Women’s Conference in Beijing for building transnational alliances. Ruth Manoroma, one of the members of the NFDW from Bangalore, went to express her
fascination with the achievements of Toni Morison and referred to Dalit women as ‘the thrice discriminated’ on the basis of class, caste and gender (*Ibid* 217).

Culturally, the discourses on the issues of women are perceived from the point of view of sex and gender. Feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses gender as a subject of analysis when reading natural practices and a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive, on the contrary women as emotional or irrational, weak, nurturing, and submissive. This patriarchal view of women is by definition sexist which promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. The belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form which is called ‘biological essentialism’ as it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as man and woman. Feminism distinguishes between the word ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. When ‘sex’ refers to our biological constitution as female or male, ‘gender’ refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine. Feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational and sentimental is rooted in the actual social condition where a woman does not have power; is treated as an object of sex, or a procreating device; has fewer political and financial rights and within these texts because these ideologies are instrumental in continuing women’s oppression (see Lois Tyson, 83-88).

Dalit women writers have made a potential contribution to Dalit literature. From the very beginning Dalit women’s writings reflected their 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, an untouchable girl who read an essay on the problems of caste
indignation and sufferings of untouchables in the school established separately for girls by the great reformer, Jyotiba Phule in 1851 with the help of his Brahmin friends, Gevande and Valvekar, was one of the first major Dalit woman voices against gender oppression. Jyotiba’s wife, Sabitribai, was also one of the first Dalit woman activists and a teacher in her husband’s school who actively took part in the movement for women education. He supported widow re-marriage and gave protection and shelter to pregnant widows and the orphans in his orphanage, the first ever such an institution formed by a Hindu (Slavery, Vol.1 pp. xvii).

From the beginning of the second half at the 20th century Dalit women writers became aware of their status and from that time on there was a proliferation of Dalit women writings that manifested their emotional self. Kumud Pawade, Jyoti Lanjewar, Urimla Pawar, Hira Bansode, Sugandha Shende, Shurekad Bhagat, Asha Thorat, aruna Lokhand, Sushela Mool and Meena Gajbhiye are some prominent names of Dalit women writers from Maharashtra. While speaking of Dalit feminism, Anita Ghosh in her essay, “Dalit Feminism: A Psycho-Social Analysis of Indian English Literature” (2007) writes:

Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst Dalits. She has suffered much and she is still suffering. She must walk through the burning desert of casteism in search of some oasis. (Ghosh 48)

Hira Bansode, a Dalit woman poet, makes an emphatic statement that it is because of casteism that Dalit women are being dishonored and molested. In one of her poems, “Petition”, translated into English from Marathi by Christian Novetzke et al, she lodges a complaint in the people’s court hoping for justice, but she eventually attacks the inhuman game of the oppressors (Novetzke, 293).
M. Swami Margaret confessed in a journal that all these identities that she carries about have significant roles in perceiving herself and the worlds she live in. As a Dalit woman she primarily writes for the Dalit women to address their own concerns. This statement urges for the necessity to define the self of women by themselves, otherwise women will be defined by others for their use and to their detriment. She narrates her first day in CIEFL, Hyderabad. While filling up the challans and forms with the help of some familiar looking young men who came up to her and introduced themselves as members of the Ambedkar Students’ Union which she later joined as one of the members. Very soon she realized that the young men did not consider her an equal intellectual comrade. They rather considered her only as a Dalit woman whose presence was necessary just to present bouquets to the invited guests and speakers in the public events and propose the vote of thanks. Anita Ghosh writes in her essay:

They do not consider her in important decisions and in writings papers. Later she learned that excluding women from their communities was a deliberate policy they followed as they believed women’s presence would cause ‘problems’ and come in the way of serious politics. Women inevitably mean “problems” their sexuality being an uncontrolled wild beast waiting to pounce upon the unassuming Dalit men in the movement. It is assumed that they divert the attention from the larger concerns of the movement. (Ghosh 55)

M. Swami Margaret while recounting her CIEFL experience reveals that she was given a nice room in the Ladies Hostel of the institute which was abandoned for the last couple of years. She was told that the room was abandoned but she did not ask why. Later she came to know that one Dalit woman, named Suneetha, hung in the room after being exploited through continuous sexual abuse and was finally
rejected by a Reddy man when the question of marriage came up. Swami Margaret
on being asked whether she was scared or not after knowing about the fact, she
replied:

The ghost that stared at me was not the thought of a hanging female body but it was
my own body which is Dalit and woman and is as vulnerable as Suneetha’s. *(Ibid
55)*

Anita Ghosh also heard from Margaret’s mother the stories of exploitation
of Dalit women who were used and thrown away by high-caste men. She is critical
of the Dalit ideologies of Katti Padma Rao, Gopal Guru and Gaddhar who seem to
be less sensitive particularly to the Dalit communities. She reviews the stand of
Gopal Guru critically as he maintains that all women are Dalits since the upper caste
women are treated as impure during their menstrual period. Hence, to the argument
of Guru, in such situation the upper caste women are also untouchables. As claimed
by Guru, untouchability is the ideal framework to fight against caste oppression but
Anita Ghosh contests this idea of Gopal Guru, and writes:

*What Gopal Guru, overlooks is that untouchability is a phenomenon that evokes
various notions and images of bodies- bodies that are marked by their caste, gender,
class, age, sexual orientation and other identities.* *(Ibid 57)*

She says that all Dalit bodies do not possess identities. She argues,

*Not all bodies possess even identities. Not all Dalit bodies are one, not all female
bodies are one. They interact with other being caught in a complex web of
intersecting identities. Dalit man, even those identified with the movement, does not
want to see us as intellectuals.* *(Ibid 57)*
Anita Ghosh emphasizes that there is brutal patriarchy within the Dalit communities which repeatedly appears in Dalit feminist discourses. However, the Dalit male intellectuals argue that there is some kind of interrelationship between caste and gender. Kancha Iliah compares the state of the Dalit women and the high caste women and proclaims that in terms of women status Dalits are more democratic than the caste Hindus. He observes that there are oppressive practices like wife-battering prevalent in Dalit families, however, he finds that the beaten up wife has a right to reprimand her husband by screaming and crying foul in public if possible, the women even go to the extent of beating their husbands in return (Ibid 58).

Laxman Gaikwad’s autobiography, Uchallya, portrays the women characters like his mother Dhondabai, grandmother Narasabai alongside his wife Chhabu, sisters-in-law and other women characters like Chandrabhagabai who have influenced him in his construction of ‘self’ and his insights. The narrative begins with Gaikwad’s introduction to his community. His grandmother Narasabai stands as a metaphor of his community who ran the household as his grandfather became thoroughly useless owing to his old age and also for being in the police records. His father was also physically weak. Dhondabai, his mother, did not go for her community profession of stealing. She was not offered any job so she tried to earn her livelihood by selling milk. Gaikward notes how the police went beyond norms while searching for stolen goods and torturing women. Both his grandmother and mother were molested by the police besides physical torture. His father, Martand, beats up his mother on suspicion. In the same way Gaikwad’s wife was beaten up by him on suspicion and at the instigation of his sister-in-law. She was beaten up brutally with raw stick for the first time and felt sorry later on. Next day she went to
her mother’s home with her brother assuring Laxman Gaikwad, “I promise to come back in a week. Please send me now. I remember my mother. I very much want to meet her” (*The Branded* 141).

There has been patriarchal domination over the women of Gaikwad’s community both by the high caste and by the community males as well. The author’s inability to protest against the Panchayat’s decision to punish the bride’s mother by shaving her head clean showed the author’s helplessness before the authority of power. He writes:

> My head went numb with all that I had witnessed. How backward and superstitious could our community be! What a horrible scene was I witness to! On one side was the advanced urban society and on the other, our community *Panchayat*. I found the functioning of the *Panchayat* obnoxious and distinguishing. I mutely watched whatever was happening before me. (*Ibid* 120)

Whatever the decision came from the Panchayat, the mother of the bride had to obey otherwise her daughter would remain a spinster. The mother’s fear is expressed by the author:

> Haunted with fear the bride’s mother came and sat in front of the *Panchas*. She bowed humbly before all the people present. Her husband sat as if he was a cold corpse. (*Ibid* 120)

Limbale’s *The Outcaste* has exploded the patriarchal domination as well as certain values and morality imposed on them. Limbale tries to examine the position of his self in relation to his community, culture and tradition. 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 relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing. (in Limbale 2007, xxv)

As an illegitimate child of a mother, he was ostracized both by the high caste society and also by the Mahar community itself. So he had stayed with his grandmother, Santamai, who was like a godmother for him from his school going life till his getting a job in his youth. In his acknowledgement he says, “My history is my mother’s life, at the most my grandmother’s. My ancestry does not go any further” (Ibid ix).

The author was brought up by his grandmother. He could understand his grandmother’s dream of watching him as an established man in society free from humiliation and starvation. He speaks of her dream on the occasion of morning processions on Independence Days and Republic Days that went around the village. He happened to be in those processions along with other mature boys of his locality. About it he writes:

My granny looked proudly on when she saw me shouting the slogans. She must have felt her dream come true. My granny’s name is Santamai and it was she who brought me up. (Ibid 6)

He narrates about many incidents of atrocities perpetrated on the Dalit female bodies which he learnt from his grandmother, his own experiences in his community life and from other acquainted women of their locality from his young
He depicts Santamai’s divorce from her husband for not begetting a male child; his mother Masamai’s plight at the exploitation of Hanamant Patil, Yeshwant Patil and of her husband Ithal Kamble; Dhandamai’s death at the hand of her son Datty; the story of physical torture on Kondamai by her husband and Masamai’s sympathy to her; the affair of Ambumai and Kacharuajja and the story of abortion of Dhanavva by Devki, a spinster. Limbale realizes how a woman body is a mere consumable commodity for the patriarchs. The author’s mother, Masamai, had to struggle by carrying head loads of woods and finally became a keep of Hanmant Patil. He recounts Ithal Kamble, his mother’s first husband’s remarriage:

A man can eat paan and spit as many times as he likes, but the same is not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost it can never be restored. (Ibid 36)

Laxmi Holmstorm in ‘Translator’s Note’ to the second edition of Karukku writes about the universal characteristics of the question of women oppression:

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. (Karukku xiv)

There are several stories of patriarchal domination on women. Bama’s protest against patriarchy is found in her description of the police atrocities. She writes:

They used obscene language to Paraya women and swore at them. They threatened the women to be ready at night to entertain them as their husbands were hiding themselves to avoid police torture. They winked at them and shoved their guns against their bodies. (Ibid 40)
Men and women of Bama’s community worked hard in the field of the Naickers. Women worked equally as men did. Despite equal amount of labour, women were paid lesser wages than their male counterparts. Bama’s sense of protest against patriarchy was reflected through her question, “Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why?” (Ibid 55).

Paraya community decided not to allow their womenfolk to go for films since they got harassed by upper-caste men. Bama’s father got angry when she took admission in college for higher studies. His resentment was conveyed to Bama through a letter. According to him it would be difficult for him to get her married in his community. Bama faced patriarchal domination and at the same time she had to face oppression as a Dalit woman by the high-caste nuns and teachers in her convent and school. She encountered indignation when her hostel warden contemptuously remarked that she became chubby by having the good food of the hostel; she was humiliated by the constant attack by the nuns at the convent for being a Dalit woman. She also narrates the incident of her being self-confined in the bathroom until the college party was over in order to avoid insult by her fellow students. Both Valmiki’s Joothan and Moon’s The Growing up Untouchables in India perceive Dalit women as subjects of oppression. Valmiki notes that his sister was not sent to school simply because she was a woman. He writes, “My family sent only myself to Sewak Ram Munshi. My brothers were all working. There was no question of sending our sister to school” (Joothan 2). He happened to go to master Brajpal’s house near Devband with Bhikhuram, on his way back to Barla he had to stay at Muzaffanagar as he had missed the last bus. He stayed at Master Vedpal Tyagi’s house at the night. A man and a woman came to Vedpal’s house on the same night.
The author was asked to sleep in the varanda on the bare floor and he saw that the two men sexually exploiting that woman. He writes about the incident:

When I think of that woman, I begin to feel nauseated. What helplessness had brought her to them? Did she come willingly? A woman surrendering to two men, even today my mind refuses to accept it. (Ibid 55)

Similarly, he recounts his experience of travelling by a police jeep with Kureshi and noticed how the police would collect bribes from the prostitutes in the fair of Vani.

Vasant Moon’s The Growing up Untouchable 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 autobiographies which include the account of torture on his mother by Moon’s drunken father; Moon’s step brother, Laxman’s possession of a house after his grandfather Sadaship’s death and forcing Moon’s mother to leave the house for good; the story of the light skinned wife of a Dalit who was chained up by her husband in order to prevent her from running away with somebody else; the narration of police atrocities on the two Ambedkarite girls who escaped after killing two police men etc. make a critique of woman position in Dalit societies. The autobiographers of have shown with equal sensitivity the plight of acute suffering and plight of the Dalit women whose afflictions were double edged, as a Dalit and as a woman.

The Dalit personal narratives juxtapose marginalized position of the individual self and community as well. They are marginalised with physical segregation in terms of their habitation both in villages and towns as well that is found in all the select set of autobiographies. Dalits are marginalized in all spheres
of social, cultural, educational, professional, political and intellectual activities which is systematised through upper-caste cultural hegemony. Gopal writes:

On moral grounds, the relationship between the margin and the core is always of a hierarchical nature. It is dichotomous, in which the core exists only at the cost of the margin. In other words, the existence of a margin becomes the logical requirement of the core. (Guru 200, 115)

The untouchability and torture of the protagonists along with the Dalit students by the uppercaste teachers and students in schools; denial of good jobs and political representation as per their capacity described in *The Branded*; and non-recognition of the Dalit intellectuals as portrayed by Valmiki along with his friends expose a realistic picture of Dalit marginality that exists today. The autobiographies also show how Bama and Limbale’s grandmothers accept their wretchedness as a kind of tradition that has descended for years they have experienced. Gopal Guru in this regard states:

Dalits accept their marginalisation, particularly in two situations. In the first situation they find themselves helpless, frustrated, having lost faith in their ability to comprehend and then confront the marginalisation. In fact, they are forced to defend the marginalised position itself. *(Ibid* 115-116)

The autobiographies describe their trauma of caste violence, and challenge the in-built paradigm of Dalit marginalization which has been theorised through the mainstream scriptural narratives. The narratives of untouchability expose that the Dalit marginality more or less remain camouflaged in the upper-caste psyche which is inherent in the caste system. The Dalit autobiographers through their act of
writing autobiography reconstruct their history. The narratives also present insights into the future of the liberation of the subjugated. Having consciously associated with individual life with that of the community, the autobiographers provide the readers an opportunity to consider their roles in the formation Dalit struggle for their emancipation.